

UN to conduct major humanitarian mission

AFP, Homs, Syria

The UN said yesterday it will conduct a major humanitarian operation in Syria, where nearly two years of conflict have left staggering daily death tolls and ravaged the economy and infrastructure.

"It has to be a big UN humanitarian operation in Syria. That is what the people expect of this mission," said John Ging, the director of operations for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Accompanied by the senior emergency operations officials for eight UN agencies, Ging travelled to Daraa in the south, Homs in central Syria, and Talbiyah, a nearby town besieged by the army for months.

All these cities are in the throes of civil war. "We did not come here just to express our sympathy, our empathy, our solidarity. We came here to make a difference,

and the people of Syria will be the judge. It's action not words. That is our challenge," he told AFP.

The anti-regime revolt, which broke out in March 2011 as a peaceful uprising and morphed into an armed insurgency under brutal repression, has left more than 60,000 people dead, the majority civilians.

Even as the windows of his office rattled amid the fierce bombardment against nearby Sultaniyeh district, a holdout of the rebels, provincial governor Ahmad Mounir

Mohammed said he regretted the UN's delay.

"We are pleased to welcome you, even if you have arrived too late. This delay should be attributed to political issues because otherwise I am sure you would have acted more quickly," he said.

The governor explained he was referring to the hostile policies of Western governments towards the regime.

CIVIL WAR IN SYRIA

French, Malian troops enter Malian town

AFP, Mali

French and Malian troops yesterday entered the central Malian town of Diabaly, which has been the theatre of air strikes and fighting since being seized by Islamist fighters a week ago, an AFP journalist witnessed.



A convoy of about 30 armoured vehicles carrying some 200 French and Malian soldiers moved into the town at about 9:00am, without meeting resistance.

French soldiers from the 21st Marine Infantry Regiment as well as parachutists

and Malian troops entered the town after reconnaissance flights by Gazelle helicopters, said an AFP reporter with the soldiers.

They had set out at dawn from the town of Niono, which is 60 kilometers south of Diabaly in Malian government-held territory.

Army commanders expressed fears that Islamists fleeing the town had planted landmines.

After heavy fighting in Diabaly over the past week there was uncertainty over whether all the Islamists had fled the town.

French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said on Sunday that Diabaly, which is 400 kilometres north of the capital Bamako, had not yet been retaken by the Malian army.

"Everything indicates that the evolution of Diabaly will be positive in the coming hours," he added.

On Saturday the Malian army patrolled the periphery of the town, where the situation was "not very clear," according to a French officer based in Niono.

Obama urges end to political name-calling



REUTERS, Washington

President Barack Obama urged Americans yesterday to reject political "absolutism" and partisan rancor as he kicked off his second term with a call for national unity, setting a pragmatic tone for the daunting challenges he faces over the next four years.

Obama's ceremonial swearing-in at the US Capitol was filled with traditional pomp and pageantry, but it was a scaled-back inauguration compared to the historic start of his presidency in 2009 when he swept into office on a mantle of hope and change as America's first black president.

With second-term expectations tempered by lingering economic weakness and the political realities of a divided Washington, Obama acknowledged the difficult

road ahead even as he sought to build momentum from his decisive November re-election victory.

"We cannot mistake absolutism for principle, or substitute spectacle for politics, or treat name-calling as reasoned debate," Obama said as he stood in the wintry cold atop a giant makeshift platform on the Capitol steps overlooking the National Mall.

Looking out on a sea of flags, he spoke to a crowd of up to 700,000 people, less than half the record 1.8 million who assembled four years ago.

Obama arrived at his second inauguration on solid footing, with his poll numbers up, Republicans on the defensive and his first-term record boasting accomplishments such as a US healthcare overhaul, ending the war in Iraq and the killing of

Osama bin Laden.

But battles are looming over budgets, gun control and immigration, with Republicans ready to oppose him at almost every turn and Obama still seemingly at a loss over how to engage them in deal-making.

When Obama raised his right hand and was sworn in by Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts, it was his second time taking the oath in 24 hours - but this time with tens of millions of people watching on television.

The president beamed as chants of "Obama, Obama!" rang out from the crowd.

Obama had a formal swearing-in on Sunday at the White House because of a constitutional requirement that the president take the oath on January 20. Rather than stage the full inauguration on

a Sunday, the main public events were put off until Monday.

A second inauguration marked another milestone of political passage for Obama, the Hawaiian-born son of a black father from Kenya and a white mother from Kansas. An electrifying speech at the 2004 Democratic convention as a little-known Illinois state legislator lifted him to the national stage, putting him on a rapid trajectory to the U.S. Senate and a few years later the White House.

Obama, 51, his hair visibly grayed over the past four years, sought to reassure Americans at the mid-point of his presidency and encourage them to help him take care of unfinished business. His wide-ranging speech touched on a variety of issues, including climate change and Middle East democracy uprisings.

People attend the presidential inauguration on the West Front of the US Capitol, inset, US President Barack Obama is sworn-in during the public ceremony by Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts as First Lady Michelle Obama, daughters Sasha and Malia look on during the inauguration on the West Front of the US Capitol in Washington, DC yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

Russia arms sale record high

AFP, Moscow

The world's number two arms exporter Russia said yesterday it had sold a record \$15.2 billion (11.4 billion euros) in weaponry last year while expanding its list of clients to more African nations.

"The export volume of military products reached \$15.16 billion," news agencies quoted Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation chief Alexander Fomin as saying.

"Our plans have been fulfilled by 111.8 percent."

Fomin said the figure was preliminary and would be updated by early February.

Pak to probe PM investigator's death

AFP, Islamabad

The Pakistani government has appointed a retired judge to probe the death of an officer who was investigating corruption allegations against Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf.

Kamran Faisal was found dead on Friday in the government hostel where he lived in Islamabad with colleagues from anti-corruption watchdog the National Accountability Bureau (NAB).

According to the initial findings of an autopsy,

BJP demands home boss's apology

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's main opposition BJP yesterday demanded an apology from Home Minister Sushilkumar Shinde for accusing the party and its spiritual fountainhead RSS of promoting Hindu terrorism in its training camps.

Shinde quickly clarified he had only stated what has been appearing in the media and his reference was to "saffron terrorism".

Taliban attacks Kabul police HQ

AFP, Kabul

Nato troops joined a fight against a Taliban suicide squad that stormed a Kabul police headquarters at dawn yesterday, killing three police officers and unleashing a stand-off that lasted for more than eight hours.

The Taliban claimed the attack, which turned into the longest stand-off between the insurgents and security forces in Kabul since a major co-ordinated raid on the capital lasted 18 hours in April last year.

Chavez getting stronger, says VP

AFP, Caracas

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is "gaining strength" and entering a "new phase" of cancer treatment in Cuba, his anointed political heir said Sunday, as doubts about his health mount in Caracas.

Vice President Nicolas Maduro said in a statement that the absent leader's "vital signs and organ function are stabilizing, he is conscious and gaining strength for the next stage."

But Maduro's remarks did not go far to address speculation among Venezuela's political foes that Chavez -- who has not spoken publicly since December 10 though he usually is ubiquitous in state media -- is unable to speak or dead.

Chavez designated Maduro as his deputy before flying to Cuba for a fourth round of cancer surgery on December 11. Opposition members have demanded Chavez speak to the Venezuelan people in state media if he is able, but he has not.

The last thing anyone who knows Chavez would believe him capable of is a long silence, his opponents contend.

The Venezuelan government has been releasing only minimal information on the condition of Chavez, a 58-year-old former paratrooper who first came to power in the oil-rich country in 1999 and won another six-year term last October.



Nicolas Maduro

GERMAN STATE POLLS Merkel's coalition loses

BBC ONLINE

Chancellor Angela Merkel's centre-left opponents have won a narrow victory in polls in Germany's Lower Saxony state.

The Social Democrats and the Greens won a single-seat majority in the state, a region of eight million people in north-western Germany.

Merkel called the defeat "painful". It makes things difficult for her ahead of national polls in September, said the BBC's Steve Evans in Berlin yesterday.

The leader of Merkel's coalition partner offered to resign.

Merkel remains very popular in national polls, but she has suffered a series of setbacks in state polls as she aims for a 3rd term.

Algeria hostage death toll rises to 80

REUTERS, Algiers

Algerian forces have found the bodies of two Canadian Islamist fighters after a bloody siege at a desert gas plant, a security source said yesterday, as the death toll reached at least 80 after troops stormed the complex to end the hostage crisis.

Algerian Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal gave details yesterday about the siege near the town of In Amenas, which left American, British, French, Japanese, Norwegian, Filipino and Romanian workers dead or missing.

Much remains unclear about events after the jihadists staged the attack last Wednesday. However, an Algerian newspaper said they had arrived in cars painted in the colors of state energy company Sonatrach but registered in neighboring Libya, a country awash with arms since Muammar Gaddafi's fall in 2011.

The Algerian security source told Reuters that documents found on the bodies of the two militants had identified them as Canadians, as special forces scoured the plant following Saturday's bloody end to the crisis.



Abdelmalek Sellal

China media urge Obama to ease distrust

AFP, Beijing

Chinese state media said yesterday they were "cautiously optimistic" that in his second term US President Barack Obama would improve ties strained by distrust and fear.

The commentary by the Xinhua state news agency came ahead of the ceremonies for Obama's second inauguration and after Beijing criticised Washington's position in an escalating territorial row between China and Japan.

"The lack of strategic trust has become the main obstacle to a mature China-US relationship," it said.

The US showed distrust, it said, by offering "covert support" to Japan over the islands.

King 'content of character' quote inspires debate

AP

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

This sentence spoken by the Rev Martin Luther King Jr has been quoted countless times as expressing one of America's bedrock values, its language almost sounding like a constitutional amendment on equality.

Yet today, 50 years after King shared this vision during his most famous speech, there is considerable disagreement over what it means.

The quote is used to support opposing views on politics, affirmative action and



Martin Luther King

programs intended to help the disadvantaged. Just as the words of the nation's founders are parsed for modern meanings on guns and abortion, so are King's words used in debates over the proper place of race in America.

As we mark the King holiday, what might he ask of us in a time when both the president and a disproportionate number of people in poverty are black? Would King have wanted us to completely ignore race in a "color-blind" society? To consider race as one of many factors about a person? And how do we discern character?

For at least two of King's children, the future envisioned by the father has yet to arrive.

Myanmar-China pipeline to open in June

AFP, Beijing

Oil and natural gas pipelines linking China and Myanmar -- Beijing's "new strategic channels" -- are expected to be finished by the end of May and could be operating soon after, state media reported yesterday.

Gao Jianguo, the head of the project under the China National Petroleum Corporation, told the official Xinhua news agency that the 1,100-kilometre-long pipelines should be completed by May 30 and could become operational in early June, "barring insurmountable barriers".

Chinese ships near disputed islands

AFP, Tokyo

Three Chinese government ships entered waters around islands at the centre of a dispute with Tokyo yesterday, the day after China rebuked the United States for comments seen as supporting Japan.

Japan's coastguard said the maritime surveillance boats were sailing in and out of waters around a chain of Tokyo-controlled islands known as the Senkakus in Japan, which Beijing calls the Diaoyus, for nearly nine hours.

The three boats all left the waters by 3:45 pm (06:45 GMT) and were sailing away from the islands, the coastguard said.

China has repeatedly sent ships to the area since Japan nationalised some of the chain in September, a move that triggered a diplomatic dispute and huge anti-Japan demonstrations across China.

Beijing has also sent air patrols to the archipelago in the East China Sea, and in recent weeks both Beijing and Tokyo have scrambled fighter jets, though there have been no clashes.

