

Bombing, mortars kill dozens in Damascus

Opposition meets in Cairo to mull dialogue offer

AFP, Damascus

A powerful car bomb exploded yesterday close to ruling party offices in Damascus, killing over 50 people and causing widespread destruction in the Syrian capital's deadliest attack for more than nine months.

The bombing, which rocked the city centre and sent thick smoke scudding across the skyline, was followed soon after by a mortar attack on a nearby military headquarters.

The attacks came as the opposition umbrella group, the National Coalition, was meeting in Cairo to discuss proposals to hold conditional talks with President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Sirens rang out, and machinegun fire was also heard, as firemen rushed to the scene to douse the flames.

A police official told AFP the car bomb exploded at the 16 November Square near

the Al-Iman mosque, where the ruling Baath party's head offices are located.

State television said the blast, which left a large crater in a road, killed 53 people and wounded dozens, making it the bloodiest in the capital since twin suicide bombings left 55 people dead on May 10, 2012.

Meanwhile, Syria's main opposition National Coalition was meeting yesterday in Cairo, with discussions centered on an offer by the group's chief to hold direct talks with the Syrian regime, a delegate said.

"The meeting of the Coalition has begun and will last two days," delegate Khaled Nasser told AFP. "The agenda is long and among the issues to be discussed is the initiative of Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib."

Coalition chief Khatib has offered to negotiate with officials of President Bashar al-Assad's regime who have no "blood on their hands" -- naming Vice President Faruq al-Sharaa as a possible pointman for the talks.

SYRIA CIVIL WAR

US drone strikes kill 4,700 worldwide

Says US GOP senator

AFP, Washington

A US senator has said an estimated 4,700 people, including some civilians, have been killed in the contentious bombing raids of America's secretive drone war, local media reported Wednesday.

It was the first time a lawmaker or any government representative had referred to a total number of fatalities in the drone strikes, which have been condemned by rights groups as extrajudicial assassinations.

The toll from hundreds of drone-launched missile strikes against suspected al-Qaeda militants in Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere has remained a mystery, as US officials refuse to publicly discuss any details of the covert campaign.

But Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, a staunch supporter of the drone raids, openly cited a number that exceeds some independent estimates of the death toll.

"We've killed 4,700," Graham was quoted as saying by the Easley Patch, a local website covering the small town of Easley in South Carolina.

"Sometimes you hit innocent people, and I hate that, but we're at war, and we've taken out some very senior members of al-Qaeda," Graham told the Easley Rotary Club.

Graham's office did not dispute his reported remarks but suggested that he had not divulged any official, classified government figure.

Iran warns West against nuke pressure

AFP, New York

A top Iranian envoy said Wednesday that increased Western pressure over his country's nuclear program could end hopes for a negotiated settlement.

Ahead of key new negotiations in Kazakhstan on Tuesday, Iran's UN Ambassador Mohammad Khazaei said that his country wants talks, but hit out at Western tactics of sanctions along with engagement.

Khazaei, Iran's senior diplomat in the United States in the absence of formal ties between the arch-rivals, warned that more sanctions could doom talks over Iran's nuclear drive, which the West and Israel worry is a cover to build an atomic bomb.

"More pressure can only beget more distrust, leading Iran, in turn, to lose hope in a negotiated settlement," the envoy said at the Asia Society in New York.

"As long as pressure is on Iran, as long as there is a sword on our neck to come to negotiations, this is not negotiations,



Mohammad Khazaei

therefore Iranians cannot accept that," added Khazaei, whose country denies that it seeks a bomb but has rejected UN Security Council demands to halt uranium enrichment.

Khazaei said President Barack Obama's administration declared "economic war against Iran."

He also stressed that Iranian leaders had welcomed recent US calls for diplomatic talks.

Such meetings should require "mutual respect" between the United States and Iran and "discarding the two-track policy of pressure and engagement."

Negotiators from Iran, the United States, Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia will hold their first nuclear talks in eight months in Almaty, Kazakhstan on February 26.

Four rounds of UN sanctions against Iran and unilateral sanctions ordered by the United States and European nations are hurting the Iranian economy.

China cultural revolution murder trial sparks debate

BBC ONLINE

The trial in China of an elderly man accused of murder during the Cultural Revolution has sparked online debate.

The man, reportedly in his 80s and surnamed Qiu, is accused of killing a doctor he believed was a spy.



The cultural revolutionary young Chinese

The Cultural Revolution, launched by Mao Zedong in 1966, was an era of violence against intellectuals and other alleged bourgeois elements.

Some have questioned why one man is on trial so belatedly when so few officials

have been brought to account.

Prosecutors say that in 1967 Qiu, from Zhejiang province, strangled the doctor with a rope.

Charges were filed against him in the 1980s and he was arrested last year, Global Times reported.

Mao's 10-year Cultural Revolution was intended to produce massive social, economic and political upheaval to overthrow the old order.

Ordinary citizens - particularly the young - were encouraged to challenge the privileged, resulting in the persecution of hundreds of thousands of people who were considered intellectuals or otherwise enemies of the state.

The BBC's John Sudworth in Shanghai says the topic of what went on during the Cultural Revolution remains highly sensitive in China and public discussion of it is limited, but that the trial has caused fierce debate online.

"Such a trial is to make an individual the scapegoat for the party and state," one user said on the Weibo micro-blogging site.



Yemeni protesters call for southern independence during a demonstration on the first anniversary of the ouster of autocratic leader Ali Abdullah Saleh in Aden yesterday. Yemeni police shot dead four people in clashes with protesters who had gathered at a square in the southern port city, Fathi Ben Lazraq, a member of the Southern Movement.

Nato to bid farewell to Panetta

AFP, Brussels

US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta will get a fond farewell from his Nato colleagues at a two-day meeting beginning Thursday, as the alliance faces a difficult withdrawal from Afghanistan and looks for a new supreme military commander.

Panetta, 74, had expected to bow out earlier but his replacement, Chuck Hagel, has had a rough ride so far in the US Senate which has delayed a vote on President Barack Obama's nominee over parts of his otherwise distinguished record.

The United States will in due course nominate another person for SACEUR and the process will go forward as normal.

NEWS IN brief

Egypt passes electoral law

REUTERS, Cairo

Egypt's Shura Council, the upper house of parliament, adopted yesterday an electoral law as amended by the Constitutional Court, clearing the way for President Mohamed Mursi to set a date for lower house elections.

Mursi is expected to ratify the electoral law by February 25 and announce voting will be held in about two months' time to choose the lower house, which was dissolved last year after the court ruled the original law used to elect it was unfair.

Continue strike paralyses India

AFP, New Delhi

India's public-sector banks and many government offices were shut Thursday on the second day of a general strike called to protest against the government's planned pro-market reforms.

Eleven unions called the strike in protest at the measures which they condemn as "anti-poor" and likely to cost jobs and raise prices.

While the impact of the stoppage was patchy and felt mainly in heavily unionised state institutions, analysts said it underscored

Myanmar holds peace talks with rebels

AFP, Bangkok

Myanmar's reformist government on Wednesday held peace talks with a federation of ethnic groups to try to resolve issues including the conflict in the northern state of Kachin.

The United Nationalities Federal Council, which was formed by about a dozen ethnic groups including the Kachin, met Minister of the President's Office Aung Min and other officials in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai.

Court postpones Nasheed's trial

AFP, Male

A Maldivian court Wednesday postponed the trial of opposition leader Mohamed Nasheed, who has taken refuge in the Indian embassy, as New Delhi sent an envoy to try to end the political standoff.

The court postponed the hearing scheduled for Wednesday after police said they were unable to arrest the former president and bring him before the magistrate, according to Nasheed's party.

Pakistan accuses envoy to US of blasphemy

REUTERS, Multan

Pakistani police registered an accusation from a businessman yesterday that the country's ambassador to the United States had committed blasphemy, a crime that carries the death penalty, in connection with a 2010 TV talk show.

The accusation against Ambassador Sherry Rehman is the latest in a string of controversial blasphemy cases in Pakistan, a largely Muslim nation whose name translates as Land of the Pure.

According to Pakistan's blasphemy laws, anyone found to have uttered words derogatory to the Prophet Muhammad can be put to death. Those who are accused are sometimes lynched by mobs even before they reach court.

Rehman has already faced death



Sherry Rehman

threats from militants after calling for reforms to the country's anti-blasphemy law, according to court documents.

Two politicians who suggested reforming the law were assassinated.

The case against Rehman was brought by businessman Muhammad Faheem Gill, 31, who said that the comments Rehman made about the law on the Pakistani talk show in 2010 were blasphemous.

"I've been trying to get this case registered for the last three years, ever since I saw that TV show," Gill told Reuters. "I've even gone to the highest court. I'm glad that action will finally be taken now."

Gill went to the Supreme Court with his complaint after police refused to register it. The court ordered police in the central Pakistani city of Multan to investigate.

India's mission to Mars in 2013

AFP, New Delhi

India said yesterday it will send a \$70 million space mission to Mars this year to study the red planet's atmosphere.

The unmanned Mars orbiter mission, to be launched in October by the Indian Space Research Organisation, will undertake a 300-day journey to the planet to collect data about its climate and geology.

"The space programme epitomises India's scientific achievements and benefits the country in a number of areas," President Pranab Mukherjee told lawmakers in a speech opening a new session of parliament in New Delhi.

Kerry warns against cuts to US diplomacy

AFP, Virginia

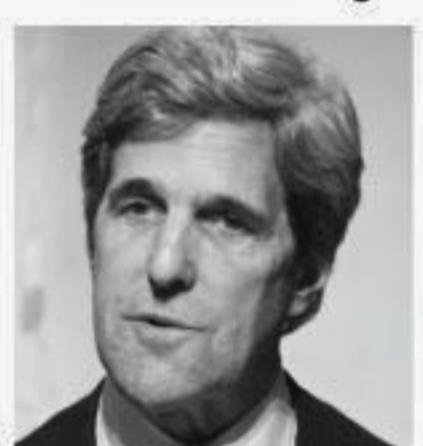
Secretary of State John Kerry warned Wednesday against "senseless" spending cuts to diplomacy, saying the United States needed robust engagement to remain an "exceptional" nation.

In his first speech since taking over as the top US diplomat, the former longtime senator focused on the latest fiscal showdown between the White House and Congress and the threat of massive automatic spending cuts on March 1.

Declaring that "deploying diplomats today is much cheaper than deploying troops tomorrow," Kerry said: "In many ways the greatest challenge to America's foreign policy today is in the hands not of diplomats, but of policymakers in Congress."

"My credibility as a diplomat working to help other countries create order is strongest when America at last puts its own fiscal house in order -- and that has to be now," Kerry said at the University of Virginia.

"Think about it: It's hard to tell the leadership of any number of countries that they have to resolve their economic issues if we don't resolve our own," he said.



John Kerry

China's Bo Xilai stages hunger strike

REUTERS, Beijing

Disgraced former senior Chinese leader Bo Xilai is refusing to cooperate with a government investigation into him and has staged hunger strikes in protest and at one point was treated in hospital, sources with knowledge of the matter said.

Almost a year after Bo's fall from grace under a cloud of lurid accusations about corruption, abuse of power and murder, the government has given no definitive time frame for when he will face court, and has not even announced formal charges.

Bo was ousted from his post as Communist Party chief in the southwestern city of Chongqing last year following his wife's murder of a British businessman, Neil Heywood.

Before that, Bo, 63, had been widely tipped to be promoted to the party's elite inner core. His downfall came after his estranged police chief, Wang Lijun, fled briefly to a U.S. consulate last February and accused Bo's wife, Gu Kailai, of poisoning Heywood. Gu and Wang have both since been convicted and jailed.



Bo Xilai

French hostages found safe in Cameroon

REUTERS, Paris

Seven French hostages kidnapped in Cameroon have been found alive in a house in northern Nigeria and are safe with Nigerian authorities, French television reported on Thursday.

The hostages, four children and three adults, were captured by Islamist militants this week while on a tourist excursion to the Waza national park near the Nigerian border with Cameroon.

It was the first case of foreigners being seized in the mainly Muslim north of Cameroon, a former French colony.

White House vows to fight trade-secrets theft

BBC ONLINE

The White House has vowed to fight foreign theft of US trade secrets, a day after a report linked China's military to prolific cyber-theft.

The administration's strategy document warned that such activity threatened US economic and national security.

The US says it has repeatedly raised concerns with China about cyber-attacks and stolen trade data.

China's military says Tuesday's report by a US-based security company was flawed and lacked "technical proof".

The White House strategy document unveiled on Wednesday urges greater co-ordination among different government agencies.

It also calls for the private sector to be better informed about the risk of trade-

secrets theft and for stepping up intelligence and law enforcement efforts.

"We will continue to act vigorously to combat the theft of US trade secrets that could be used by foreign companies or foreign governments to gain an unfair economic edge," said the strategy document.

"Trade secret theft threatens American businesses, undermines national security, and places the security of the US economy in jeopardy". Such actions, it said, "put American jobs at risk".

The plan was unveiled by US Attorney General Eric Holder and by Victoria Espinel, the administration's Intellectual Property Enforcement Co-ordinator.

Tuesday's detailed report by Mandiant identified a Shanghai high-rise used by China's military as the probable home of hackers to whom it attributed multiple attacks on US companies.

