

NEWS IN brief

DR Congo peace accord signed

Regional African leaders yesterday signed a deal aimed at bringing peace and stability to the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo after years of unrest. Eleven countries in the Great Lakes region -- including those accused of stoking trouble by backing rebel groups -- signed on to the accord at a ceremony in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa

N Korea honours nuclear scientists

North Korea has awarded state medals and other honours to thousands of scientists and workers behind its recent nuclear test, state media said. State decorations, medals and other benefits were given to 11,592 scientists, technicians, workers and other officials for their contribution to the February 12 atomic test, the Korean Central News Agency reported Saturday.

US plans \$16b Gulf spill settlement

US authorities plan to propose a \$16 billion settlement to British energy giant BP for civil claims related to the disastrous 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, The Wall Street Journal said. The April 20, 2010 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig, operated by BP off New Orleans, killed 11 people and spilled hundreds of millions of gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico in the four months it took to cap the well.

Maldives denies deal with Nasheed

The Maldivian government yesterday denied any deal to allow former president Mohamed Nasheed to end his refuge at the Indian embassy in the capital and resume election campaigning without fear of arrest. Presidential spokesman Abbas Riaz said Nasheed walked out of the embassy on Saturday afternoon of his own will and there was no agreement with an Indian mediator who rushed to the Maldives last week to resolve a tense

US condemns Scud attack in Syria

Invites opposition for talks; 110 killed

AGENCIES

The United States condemned a Syrian army Scud missile attack that killed dozens of people on Friday in the city of Aleppo, and invited the Syrian opposition for talks on finding a negotiated settlement to the conflict.

Three surface-to-surface missiles fired by Syrian regime forces in the northern city of Aleppo have left 58 people dead, among them 36 children, a watchdog said yesterday, updating an earlier toll.

A State Department statement said the attack on a district of Aleppo and other assaults such as strikes on city blocks and a field hospital were "the latest demonstrations of the Syrian regime's ruthlessness and its lack of compassion for the Syrian people it claims to represent."

The statement, released on Saturday, could help placate the main Syrian opposition

grouping, which turned down invitations to visit Washington and Moscow to protest what it described as international silence over the destruction of the historic city of Aleppo by government missile strikes.

Almost two years since the start of the revolt against President Bashar al-Assad, rebels have wrested large swathes of Syria from the control of Assad's forces but the areas remain the target of army artillery, air strikes and, increasingly, missiles.

The decision by the Syrian National Coalition to spurn the invitations and to suspend participation in the Friends of Syria conference of international powers has put peace initiatives on ice.

At least 110 people were killed Saturday nationwide -- 46 civilians, 35 rebels and 29 soldiers, the Observatory said.

The almost two-year conflict has cost the lives of more than 70,000 people according to the UN.

Padma Bridge

FROM PAGE 20 Muhith said a decision on Malaysia's proposal will be made by this month.

There have been differences of opinion between Malaysia and Bangladesh over the project's financing. Initially, Malaysia said \$2.9 billion would be required to complete the project but now it says \$3.8 billion will be needed to build the bridge, he said.

"Apart from it, there are even bigger differences which I will disclose after the government makes its decision on the proposal."

The minister said the government will resume the project's work from where it stopped in September 2011. Of the five pre-qualified bidders, one will be dropped for being blacklisted and the

remaining four will be offered the job of the bridge's construction.

Muhith said some people doubt whether the pre-qualified bidders will take the job if the project is implemented with the government's own resources. A foreign currency account will be opened to dispel the doubt.

"There is no doubt about the availability of funds".

He said the country's image abroad will be brightened if the bridge is constructed with the government's own resources.

The World Bank and other donors will be informed about the process of the project's implementation, said the minister.

Asked whether the government will ask any donor

to participate in the project, Muhith said the government would welcome investments from any development partner. But they have to join the project by August, as the bidders will be awarded contracts by that time.

On the project's financing, Muhith said the size of the country's annual budget is around Tk 2 lakh crore and it will not be difficult to set aside Tk 5,000 crore a year for the next five years.

Muhith said he will hold talks with WB President Jim Yong Kim in Washington on February 27 to strengthen the country's relations with the WB, Bangladesh's largest development partner, following the snags over the Padma bridge funding.

DARFUR TRIBAL CLASHES UN sounds alarm after dozens killed

AFP, Khartoum

The UN yesterday expressed deep concern over the latest deadly tribal violence in Sudan's Darfur region, which has hampered assistance for tens of thousands of people forced to flee earlier fighting.

Residents in the North Darfur town of El Sireaf said an Arab militia firing heavy machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades burned houses and killed more than 50 people on Saturday.

Official media reported a toll of 60.

"We are deeply concerned by the violence," Damian Rance of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) told AFP.

"It's affected our ability to run a humanitarian operation."

Voting starts in Italy

AFP, Rome

Italians fed up with austerity went to the polls yesterday in elections likely to be won by the centre-left, as Europe held its breath for signs of fresh instability in the eurozone's third economy.

The elections are Italy's first since billionaire tycoon Silvio Berlusconi was ousted in 2011 during a wave of financial market panic and replaced by former top European commissioner Mario Monti.

The most likely winner is the Democratic Party and its leader Pier Luigi Bersani, who says he will stick to reforms but also do more for growth as Italy endures its longest recession in 20 years.

"I am voting for the Democratic Party. I don't want us to end up like Greece," said Alessandro, a 63-year-old manager, as he cast his ballot in Milan.

But the scandal-tainted Berlusconi, a three-time prime minister who is also a defendant in two trials for tax fraud and having sex with an underage prostitute, could come a close second.

In third place, according to the polls, could be a new protest party led by comedian turned activist Beppe Grillo who has channelled growing social discontent and anger at traditional politicians.

Polling stations close at 2100 GMT on Sunday and open again for a second day of voting at 0600 GMT today, closing at 1400 GMT.

Exit polls are expected immediately after the close and preliminary official results will begin trickling through later on Monday and perhaps into Tuesday.



Oxford in uproar over union motion to boycott Israel

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Students at Oxford University will this week vote on a controversial motion to boycott Israel, after a tumultuous week that has seen hate mail, accusations of racism.

The Oxford University Students' Union (OUSU) meets on Wednesday to decide finally on a motion backing the boycott of Israel, its companies and institutions. The motion, which would be tabled at the National Union of Students conference in Sheffield in April, calls on the student body to join the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement, in protest at Israel's treatment of Palestinians and its

hindrance of attempts to create a Palestinian state.

Both the proposer and the seconder of the motion have received threatening emails: The seconder has withdrawn his support and the proposer has requested that her name not be publicised.

The BDS movement urges a boycott of Israeli exports, including vegetables, fruit and Dead Sea beauty products, and of firms that do business in Israel, such as Caterpillar, security firm G4S and waste management company Veolia. Some BDS supporters have also disrupted cultural events involving Israeli performers.



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