

# US aid to rebels will fuel more violence

*Says Russia; regime accused of new massacre*

AFP, Damascus

Syria and its ally Russia yesterday denounced a US pledge to provide direct aid to rebel fighters, saying it will fuel more violence in the nearly two-year war that has killed at least 70,000 people.

The opposition, meanwhile, accused Syrian regime forces of carrying out a new "massacre" at a village in the northern province of Aleppo, with 72 people executed and burned in a raid this week.

On Thursday, the United States said it would provide direct aid to the rebels in the form of food and medical assistance, but not the weapons they hoped for, as well as \$60 million in funding for the political opposition.

US Secretary of State John Kerry announced the aid package alongside Ahmad Moaz al-Khatib of the opposition National Coalition, after talks in Rome of the Friends of Syria group of Arab and Western nations.

Kerry said the goal was to give the opposi-

tion the means to control areas it has seized, to prove to President Bashar al-Assad he cannot "shoot his way out" of the conflict.

The move is a significant shift in US policy but falls short of rebel demands for Western backers to supply the rebellion with weapons or non-offensive military equipment, such as vehicles and body armour.

Russian said the decision would backfire and encourage "extremists".

"The decisions made in Rome as well as the statements, both in letter and spirit, give direct encouragement to extremists to take power by force, despite the unavoidable suffering of ordinary Syrians," said its foreign ministry.

Also on Thursday, the European Union renewed wide-ranging sanctions against Syria's regime while leaving the door open to providing technical assistance, including training, to the opposition.

The United Nations says the conflict has cost the lives of at least 70,000 people and uprooted hundreds of thousands.

# Zionism a 'crime against humanity'

*Turkey PM's remark stirs row*

AFP, Ankara

Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan came under withering criticism from Israel, Washington and the United Nations for comments branding Zionism a "crime against humanity".

The storm surrounding the comments is likely to dominate Friday's visit to Ankara by the new US Secretary of State John Kerry, who is due to hold talks there on the Syrian crisis.

Erdogan has often attacked Israeli policies in blistering language over recent years, sending relations between the once close allies into free-fall.

On Wednesday, he told a forum organised by the UN in Vienna that: "As is the case for Zionism, anti-Semitism and fascism, it is inevitable that Islamophobia be considered a crime against humanity."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described the comments as "a dark and mendacious statement, the likes of which we thought had passed from the world". Washington said the "characterisation of Zionism as a crime against humanity... is offensive and wrong".

Ties between Ankara and Israel reached a low point after Israeli commandos raided a Gaza-bound Turkish aid flotilla in the Mediterranean in May 2010, killing nine Turks on board.



# 63 Rohingyas rescued off Indonesia

AFP, Idi Rayeuk

Fishermen in western Indonesia rescued more than 60 ethnic Rohingya asylum-seekers from Myanmar found adrift in a wooden boat, police said yesterday, in the second such arrival this week.

The vessel with no engine had 23 children on board and was found drifting off the eastern coast of Sumatra island.

Fishermen in Sumatra rescued 121 Rohingya on Tuesday, with one claiming Thai authorities had shot at them and taken their food and petrol supplies to sabotage their boat as they crossed Thai waters. The UN considers the Rohingya one of the most persecuted minorities in the world.

# Blasts kill eight in Iraq

AFP, Diwaniyah

Bombings in Iraq, including two car bombs at a sheep market, killed at least eight people and wounded dozens more yesterday, security and medical officials said.

The blasts came a day after at least 26 people were killed and more than 60 wounded in a series of bomb attacks in the Baghdad area and shootings in northern Iraq.

Violence in Iraq is down significantly from its 2006-2007 peak, but attacks still occur almost every day.



This picture shows Pope Benedict XVI boarding a car on his way to the heliport at the Vatican. Pope Benedict XVI has become the first pope to resign in over 700 years, telling a tearful crowd of faithful that he will now be "a simple pilgrim" as cardinals yesterday begin preparing for a conclave in the Sistine Chapel to elect his successor.

PHOTO: AFP

# EGYPT CRISIS Opposition refuses to meet Kerry

AFP, Cairo

An Egyptian opposition head said he and colleague Mohamed ElBaradei have turned down invitations to meet Secretary of State John Kerry when he visits Cairo because of US pressure.

Hamdeen Sabahi, a leader of the National Salvation Front (NSF), said late Thursday that he and ElBaradei objected to Washington's call for the opposition to reconsider its boycott of Egypt's parliamentary election in April.

Kerry is expected in Egypt over the weekend.

An aide of another NSF leader, former foreign minister Amr Mussa, said Mussa would also not attend a meeting with Kerry.

The opposition has sought to ratchet the pressure on Islamist President Mohamed Morsi with a combination of street protests and a boycott of the upcoming election.

# Shocking brutality

AFP, Pretoria

South Africa's police commissioner yesterday suspended eight police officers accused of dragging an immigrant taxi driver behind their patrol car and killing him, prompting an international outcry.

Twenty-seven-year-old Mozambican taxi driver Mido Macia was filmed being manhandled, handcuffed and dragged by a police van through the streets to a police station east of Johannesburg.

Just over two hours later he was found dead in custody. A post mortem found the cause of death was head injuries with internal bleeding.

The Independent Police Investigative Directorate has opened a murder investigation.

South African President Jacob Zuma earlier condemned the killing as "horrific, disturbing and unacceptable".



# British PM faces 'crisis' after by-poll defeat

AFP, London

The Liberal Democrats yesterday hung onto the southern England parliamentary seat of Eastleigh, dealing a heavy blow to Prime Minister David Cameron whose Conservative Party were beaten into third place.

The election was billed as a straight battle between the Conservatives and the Lib Dems, their junior coalition partner, but the anti-EU UK Independence Party (UKIP) capitalised on voter disillusionment to claim second place.

Senior Conservative David Davis earlier warned that a loss for the party would place serious doubt over Cameron's leadership of the party.

The returning officer announced



shortly after 02:00 GMT that Lib Dem candidate Mike Thornton had secured 13,342 votes, 1,771 more than UKIP representative Diane James. Tory nominee Maria Hutchings limped in third with 10,559 votes.

The victory handed embattled Lib Dem leader Nick Clegg a much needed boost.

The election was sparked by the resignation of disgraced former energy minister Chris Huhne, a Liberal Democrat who has pleaded guilty to trying to avoid a speeding fine.

Some 58 percent of the 79,000 residents eligible to vote turned out to choose the winner from the 14 candidates, who had campaigned incessantly since the election was called following Huhne's resignation on February 5.

# Americans had to know the 'true cost of war'

*Manning reveals why he leaked secrets to WikiLeaks*

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Bradley Manning, the soldier accused of the biggest unauthorised disclosure of state secrets in US history, has pleaded guilty to being the source of the leak, telling a military court that he passed the information to a whistleblowing website because he believed the American people had a right to know the "true costs of war".

Sitting at the defence bench in a hushed courtroom, Manning said he was sickened by the apparent "bloodlust" of a helicopter crew involved in an attack on a group in Baghdad that turned out to include Reuters correspondents and children.

Manning said: "We were obsessed with capturing and killing human targets on lists and ignoring goals and missions. I believed if the public, particularly the American public, could see this it could spark a debate on the military and our foreign policy in general [that] might cause society to reconsider the need to engage in counter-terrorism while ignoring the human situation of the people we engaged with every day."

In a highly unusual move for a defendant in such a serious criminal prosecution, Manning pleaded guilty to 10 lesser charges out of his own volition – not as part of a plea bargain with the prosecution. The charges to which the soldier pleaded guilty carry a two-year maximum sentence each, committing Manning to a possible upper limit of 20 years in military prison. But the plea does not avoid a long and complex trial for the soldier, that is currently scheduled to begin on 3 June.



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