

March deadliest in Syria war

CNN ONLINE

The brutal civil war in Syria claimed more than 6,000 lives in March alone -- making it the deadliest month since the conflict began a little more than two years ago, the opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported Monday.

The group said 6,005 people were killed in Syria last month. That's more than all the deaths that occurred in the first nine months of the war.

"This will become the new normal, and the death toll figures will continue to rise," said Rami Abdel Rahman, the head of the observatory.

"If the fighting continues as it is and there is no political solution for transition. Syria will be the new Somalia or Afghanistan, and we will never attain democracy in the coming years," he says.

The tally, which CNN cannot independently verify, does not include people who are held in detention centers or who have been kidnapped by rebels. Their fate is unknown.

In all, some 62,554 people, the opposition group says, have died in the conflict so far.

The United Nations has put the figure higher. In February, it said more than 70,000 people are believed to have been killed.

March's documented death toll, the observatory says, includes 298 children, 291 women, 1,486 rebel fighters and 1,464 government soldiers.

The actual death toll is probably higher, Rahman said.

Kim tones down hostile rhetoric

US deploys warship off Korean coast

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea's leader appeared to tamp down hostile rhetoric that had threatened impending war with the United States and South Korea in a key speech published yesterday that implied the isolated country was shifting its focus to development.

Pyongyang has launched relentless verbal attacks and threats against the United States and South Korea since new UN sanctions punishing it for its February nuclear test were adopted and during military drills by the South and US forces.

But the speech delivered on Sunday by Kim Jong-un focused on how nuclear capability supported economic development although it accused the United States of seeking to drag North Korea into an arms race in a bid to hinder its economic improvement.

"It is on the basis of a strong nuclear strength that peace and prosperity can exist and so can the happiness of people's lives," Kim said in the speech delivered to the central committee meeting of the ruling Workers Party of Korea and published in full yesterday.

Threats from North Korea have prompted the United States to beef up its forces on the peninsula and station a warship off the Korean peninsula overnight.

The decision to move destroyer USS John S McCain and the oil rig-like SBX-1 are the first of what may be other naval deployments, according to the CNN.

North Korea had cut off hotlines between it, the United States, South Korea and the United Nations and threatened to close a joint economic zone it runs with the South. It put its missile forces on full alert and threatened US bases in the Pacific and on the mainland.



Italy's political limbo drags on

AFP, Rome

Italian President Giorgio Napolitano yesterday hosted experts from two working groups aimed at finding common ground for bickering political leaders who have failed to form a new government as Prime Minister Mario Monti's cabinet limps on.

Elections in the eurozone's third largest economy more than a month ago resulted in a three-way split between Pier Luigi Bersani's centre-left, Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right and a new protest party led by former comedian Beppe Grillo.

Talks have proved inconclusive and Napolitano on Saturday said he was setting up two working groups -- one for political reforms, the other for economic ones -- as a way of trying to forge an agreement at least on a few fundamental reforms.

Jolie opens school in Afghanistan

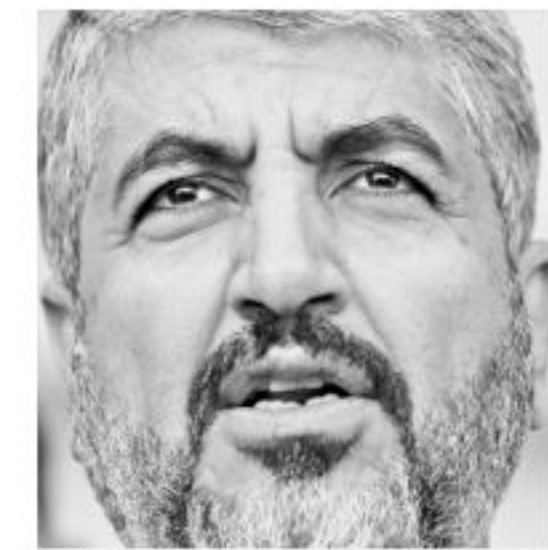
PTI, Los Angeles

Hollywood star Angelina Jolie has opened a school in Afghanistan through her foundation The Education Partnership for Children of Conflict.

The 37-year-old actress has funded the girls only educational establishment, which caters to between 200 and 300 students, just outside of Kabul and hopes it will be the first of many schools she sets up.

Joile plans to fund more schools by selling her own self-designed accessories collection, the Style of Jolie, to retail stores for the first time with 100 per cent of the profits going to her new foundation, The Education Partnership for Children of Conflict.

"Beyond enjoying the artistic satisfaction of designing these jewels, we are inspired by knowing our work is also serving the mutual goal of providing for children in need," Jolie said.



Meshaal gets new term as Hamas leader

REUTERS, Gaza City

The Islamist Palestinian Hamas group re-elected the relatively pragmatic Khaled Meshaal as its leader yesterday, despite past criticism of him by hardliners in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip.

A diplomat in the region said Egypt and Qatar had lobbied strongly on behalf of a reluctant Meshaal before the vote in Cairo by about 60 Hamas leaders who had met through the night.

Born in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Meshaal, 56, has lived in exile for decades and, like his Hamas comrades, rejects Israel's right to exist. But he played a vital role in indirect, Egyptian-mediated talks between Israel and Hamas to secure a truce that ended an eight-day Gaza war four months ago.

And Meshaal drew criticism last year from Hamas's Gaza-based leadership over what some officials saw as a personal initiative to heal a rift with Western-backed Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, whose rival Fatah party lost control of the Israeli-blockaded enclave in a brief civil war in 2007.

Nasheed gets relief in Maldives

Trial against him stayed by HC

PTI, Male

In a major relief for former president Mohamed Nasheed, the Maldivian High Court on Monday stayed temporarily the trial against him in an abuse of power case till it decides legitimacy of the bench of the lower court.

The temporary injunction was granted after Nasheed's counsel challenged the legitimacy of the bench, asking the High Court to declare the composition of the Hulhumale Court bench unlawful.

The High Court order comes three days ahead of Nasheed's hearing at the Hulhumale Court over the arrest and subsequent detention of Chief Criminal Judge Abdulla Mohamed during his term, Haveeru daily reported.

The composition of the three Judge bench of the Hulhumale Court by the Judicial Service Commission (JSC) has been up for much debate recently and is also being probed by the Parliament's Independent Bodies Committee.

Opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) has maintained that Nasheed's trial is a "politically motivated sham" designed to disqualify him from the upcoming presidential election slated for September 7.

WAR CRIMES IN RWANDA

France orders first trial on genocide charge

AFP, Paris

A French court has for the first time ordered a Rwandan to face trial over the country's 1994 genocide, a judicial source told AFP yesterday.

Pascal Simbikangwa, a former Rwandan army captain arrested on the French island of Mayotte in 2008, is facing charges of complicity in genocide and complicity in crimes against humanity but can still appeal the decision in an attempt to avoid the trial.

It was not immediately clear if his lawyers would file an appeal.

Simbikangwa, a former intelligence officer under Rwanda's Hutu government, was arrested under an international arrest warrant for his alleged involvement in the genocide, which killed some



800,000 people, mostly ethnic Tutsis, over three months.

France in early 2010 set up a new unit to try cases of genocide and crimes against humanity involving suspects detained in France.

Two investigating magistrates from the unit ordered the trial on Friday following a request from prosecutors in early March.

France has repeatedly refused to extradite genocide suspects to Rwanda, fearing they would be denied a fair trial, but has sent some to Tanzania to face trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.

Simbikangwa, born in 1959, is accused of being a member of the Akazu, an informal organisation of Hutu extremists believe to have planned and implemented the genocide.



PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian teacher speaks in class at a school in Gaza City yesterday. A law banning mixed sex schooling in the Gaza Strip has come into force, the education minister for Hamas, which rules the Palestinian territory, said on April 1.

'Gate to hell' discovered in Turkey

ANI, Washington

Italian archaeologists have uncovered a "gate to hell" from ruins in southwestern Turkey.

Known as Pluto's Gate-Ploutonion in Greek, Plutonium in Latin-the cave was celebrated as the portal to the underworld in Greco-Roman mythology and tradition.

According to historic sources, the site was located in the ancient Phrygian city of Hierapolis, now called Pamukkale, and the opening was described as filled with lethal mephitic vapors.

Greek geographer Strabo (64/63 BC-about 24 AD) wrote that this space is full of a vapor so misty and dense that one can scarcely see the ground and any animal that passes inside meets instant death.

The finding, announced this month at a conference on Italian archaeology in Istanbul, Turkey,

was made by a team led by Francesco D'Andria, professor of classic archaeology at the University of Salento.



The "gate to hell", which is a cave that sits atop Pamukkale's famous travertines, was filled with lethal mephitic gases, according to ancient texts.

"We found the Plutonium by reconstructing the route of a thermal spring. Indeed, Pamukkale'

springs, which produce the famous white travertine terraces originate from this cave," D'Andria told Discovery News.

site revealed more ruins once it was excavated. The archaeologists found Ionic semi columns and, on top of them, an inscription with a dedication to the deities of the underworld-Pluto and Kore.

D'Andria also found the remains of a temple, a pool and a series of steps placed above the cave-all matching the descriptions of the site in ancient sources.

According to D'Andria, the site was a famous destination for rites of incubation. Pilgrims took the waters in the pool near the temple, slept not too far from the cave and received visions and prophecies, in a sort of oracle of Delphi effect. Indeed, the fumes coming from the depths of Hierapoli's phreatic groundwater produced hallucinations.

D'Andria and his team are now working on the digital reconstruction of the site.

Featuring a vast array of abandoned broken ruins, possibly the result of earthquakes, the

UN passes arms trade treaty

AFP, United Nations

The UN General Assembly yesterday adopted the first-ever treaty to regulate the \$80-billion-a-year conventional arms trade.

Member-states voted by 154 votes to three, with 23 abstentions, to control a trade worth \$70bn (£46bn) annually.

The treaty went to a vote after Syria, Iran and North Korea blocked its adoption by consensus.

Russia, the world's second-biggest exporter, was among those who abstained from the vote in New York.

The treaty prohibits states from exporting conventional weapons in violation of arms embargoes, or weapons that would be used for acts of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes or terrorism.

It also requires states to prevent conventional weapons reaching the black market.

The assembly had heard from member-states' ambassadors objecting to, or supporting, the draft.

Syria's Bashar Jaafari said his country did not object to regulating the international arms trade, but opposed the draft because it did not refer to the arming of "non-state terrorist groups".

Some of the countries behind the draft treaty, he said, were "fully engaged in supplying terrorist groups [in Syria] with all kinds of lethal weapons".

NEWS IN brief

Fonseka's party wins recognition

PTI, Colombo

Former Sri Lankan Army chief Sarath Fonseka's political party has won recognition from the country's election department, ending his long battle with the poll body.

Fonseka's Democratic Party has been registered under the Flame Torch symbol, the Elections Department said.

Cyprus finance minister resigns

AFP, Nicosia

Cypriot Finance Minister Michalis Sarris resigned yesterday, saying one of the reasons was that he had been chairman of Laiki Bank, whose failure was a major contributor to the island's near financial meltdown.

His resignation was accepted by President Nicos Anastasiades, presidential spokesman Christos Stylianides said.

Nigeria ethnic violence kills 19

AFP, Kano

Weekend attacks on three communities in volatile and ethnically divided central Nigeria have left 19 people dead and displaced some 4,500 others, a local official said yesterday.

"19 people including women and children were killed by gunmen we suspect to be Fulani herdsmen in attacks on three communities on Saturday night through Sunday," local government official Kumai Badu told AFP.

Venezuela starts poll campaign

BBC ONLINE

The official election campaign to replace the late President Hugo Chavez was getting under way in Venezuela yesterday.

On Monday, opposition candidate Henrique Capriles accused acting president Nicolas Maduro of unfairly using state media in his campaign. He is trailing Mr Maduro in the opinion polls for the election on 14 April, the first without Chavez for 15 years.

FOREIGN LABOUR CUTS

S Arabia deports Yemeni workers

AFP, Sanaa

Thousands of Yemeni workers have been expelled from Saudi Arabia after it imposed new labour constraints affecting millions of expatriates in the oil-rich kingdom, an official said yesterday.

The new regulations introduced by the Saudi labour ministry aim to reduce the number of foreign workers to create jobs for millions of unemployed Saudis.

"Thousands of Yemenis had to leave Saudi Arabia. They were victims of an arbitrary application of the new regulations," a Yemeni government official told AFP.

He said workers saw their residency permits torn into pieces by Saudi government representatives.

Under the new rules, foreigners are allowed to work only for their legal sponsors in the kingdom while their spouses cannot take up jobs.

Around one million Yemenis live in neighbouring Saudi Arabia, transferring around \$4 billion annually to their impoverished nation, according to non-official estimates.

Sanaa formed a ministerial commission last week tasked with working with Saudi authorities to soften the impact of the new rules, the official said.