

Maduro blasts 'devil' Obama

AFP, Caracas

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro took a swipe at Barack Obama on Saturday, calling him the "grand chief of devils" after the US president declined to recognize his contested re-election.

"Coming out of Central America, Obama let loose with a bunch of impertinent remarks, insolent stuff... He is giving an order, and his blessing, for the fascist rightwing to attack Venezuela's democracy," Maduro alleged in an address.

But "we are here defending our institutions, peace, democracy, the people of Venezuela... and we can sit down with anyone, even the grand chief of devils: Obama," Maduro said.

The socialist's harsh attack recalled diatribes from his predecessor the late Hugo Chavez aimed at former US president George W Bush, whom he also called a devil, among other insults.

Israel strikes Syria again

Damascus vows retaliation; Egypt, Arab League condemn attack

AGENCIES

Israeli strikes hit a military target outside Damascus yesterday, the Jewish state's second reported raid on Syria this week, with residents saying the attack felt like an earthquake and turned the sky red.

A senior Israeli source said the aerial assault hit Iranian weapons destined for the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, which is allied to the Syrian regime.

And a diplomatic source in Beirut told AFP three sites were targeted -- a military facility, a nearby weapons depot and an anti-aircraft unit in Sabura, west of the capital.

The official SANA news agency said Israel had targeted the military research centre at Jamraya, northwest of Damascus, without giving details on casualties or damage.

The Israeli strike "opens door to all possibilities," said Syria's Information Minister Omran al-Zohbi at a press conference broadcast live on state television.

Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal al-Mekdad called the attack Sunday a "declaration of war" by Israel.

In an interview with CNN, he said the attack represented an alliance between Islamic terrorists and Israel. He added that Syria would retaliate against Israel in its own time and way.

The Israeli strikes were staunchly condemned by Egypt as a "violation"



Large explosions were reported at Mount Qassioun, a military site, near the Syrian capital of Damascus early yesterday.

PHOTO: MAIL ONLINE

of international law while the Cairo-based Arab League demanded UN Security Council intervention to stop such Israeli attacks.

Residents of the upscale Damascus neighbourhood of Dumar said the earth shook violently and turned the black night sky red.

"It was like an earthquake, the sky was yellow and red," said 72-year-old Najwa.

Video footage uploaded to YouTube appeared to show a series of missiles lighting up clouds, blazing fires and an explosion producing an orange fireball that momentarily fills the screen.

The powerful blast sent up towering clouds of smoke illuminated by burning debris.

If confirmed, the attack would be Israel's second this week against targets inside Syria and the second time it has targeted the Jamraya facility, after a January 30 raid that Israeli

officials implicitly acknowledged.

On Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delayed his departure on a trip to China by two hours, reportedly to attend a security cabinet meeting.

Israel has frequently warned that it would act to stop the transfer of advanced weapons systems or chemical weapons to Lebanon's Hezbollah with which it fought a devastating war in 2006.

Britain warned of the risk to the region posed by the Syrian conflict, which is now in its third year and has killed more than 70,000 people.

US President Barack Obama, speaking after the first reported attack this week, said Israel was justified in protecting itself.

The rebel Free Syrian Army reacted cautiously, saying their country was already under daily attack by regime aircraft.

S Arabia allows girls to play at school

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia has given girls at private schools the right to play sport, the education ministry said yesterday, in a step aimed at easing restrictions on women in the ultra-conservative kingdom.

The ministry directive published in Saudi newspapers says that private schools for girls have been told to "put into effect a number of rules to regulate sports".

The measure appears to have left out the majority of students at state schools.

The ministry has, however, requested the schools ensure girls wear "a covering and decent outfit" for sport activities in "suitable areas".

The issue of Saudi women in sport came under the spotlight during the 2012 London Olympic Games, when the Muslim kingdom bowed to pressure and sent female athletes to compete for the first time.

Saudi women remain banned from driving, and have to cover from head to toe, among other restrictions.



A young protester holds a sign during a demonstration in favour of gun regulation outside of the 2013 NRA Annual Meeting and Exhibits in Houston, Texas on Friday. More than 70,000 members of the nation's premier gun rights organization have vowed to resist any resolution against guns.

PHOTO: AFP

Pak women face battle for the right to vote

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Fears over the safety of women voting in next week's elections in Pakistan are rising after letters have been circulated in regions of the country warning men not to allow their wives, sisters and daughters out to the polling stations.

In an increasingly fraught and violent runup to the 11 May vote, leaflets are appearing stating that it is "un-Islamic" for women to participate in democracy.

Now a group of young female activists are planning to challenge what they call the government's inability to protect women's right to vote by organising their own protection teams at individual polling stations in tense and volatile Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, one of the four provinces of Pakistan, formerly known as the North West Frontier Province.

Saba Ismail, 23-year-old founder and director of Aware Girls, a peace group for and led by young women to train girls in leadership skills, said they already planned to monitor 30 polling stations with volunteers who would support women who came out to vote and hoped to reach many more.

Malala Yousafzai, the 15-year-old activist for girl's educational rights who became an international figure after being shot and badly injured in a Taliban assassination attempt last October, was one of those trained by Ismail's group.

"For the 2008 elections, many polling stations were torched and women were told it was vulgar for them to cast a vote. This time we want Pakistan to have a free and fair election and for women to be able to vote in secret, not be told who to vote for by her family.

"Recently on Pakistan TV we had three female politicians in the studio for a debate. They were asked questions like 'Should women really be allowed to work because they take more time to come to the office because they put make-up on?'"

Ismail said she was disappointed at the resurgence of the extremists' campaign to stop women voting. Her group has had to move offices twice because of threats made against it.

"War means men get angry and their aggressive behaviour is taken out on the family," Ismail said. "For women they are used not as a way forward for peace but as a strategy, a means to produce more soldiers for more war. In Pakistan women have internalised all into their minds that they are lesser beings. But I believe change will come," said Ismail.

Blasts target Pak secular party office, rally; 5 killed

AGENCIES

Pakistan's Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) was observing a day of mourning yesterday after three people were killed and over 45 injured in two back-to-back blasts near its party office in the port city of Karachi last night.

The first blast struck near MQM Unit 153 office in the city's Azizabad area, also home to the party's headquarters, while the second one tore through the same area about 30 minutes later.

The second bomb proved deadlier as it went off when the rescuers, law enforcers, volunteers, and media persons were thronging the blast site.

Meanwhile, a roadside bomb exploded at an election rally in southwest Pakistan yesterday killing two people, officials said

as violence continued ahead of historic polls on Saturday.

The remote controlled bomb went off when Sarfraz Dombki, an independent candidate for a provincial assembly seat, was leading a rally in Sibi, 160 kilometres southeast of Baluchistan province's capital Quetta, senior administration official Aziz Jamali told AFP.

Pakistan will elect its new government for the next five years in polls on May 11. The election of the national and regional assemblies will mark the first time a civilian government has completed a full term and handed over to another, in a country that has been ruled by the military for half its existence.

Campaigning has been marred by Taliban threats and attacks, which have killed 66 people since April 11, according to an AFP tally.

MALAYSIA POLLS

Ruling coalition takes early lead

REUTERS, Johor Baru

Malaysia's ruling coalition won the early results yesterday in an election that could weaken or even end its 56-year rule, with the majority of seats yet to be decided as it faces an opposition pledging to clean up politics and end race-based policies.

The ruling Barisan Nasional (BN), or National Front, won a string of parliamentary seats in its traditional stronghold of Sarawak state on Borneo island. But the opposition retained economically important Penang state as its leader Anwar Ibrahim sought to build on his alliance's stunning gains in 2008.

With less than a quarter of parliamentary results confirmed in the Southeast Asian nation, the National Front



Anwar Ibrahim



Najib Razak

was leading with 37 seats to the opposition's 13, according to the country's Election Commission. A count by the independent Malaysiakini website gave the seat tally as 29 to 21 in favour of the coalition.

Either side needs 112 of 222 parliamentary seats to form a majority, although Prime Minister Najib Razak is under pressure to win back the two-thirds majority that the BN lost in the last national election in 2008. Final results were expected by early on Monday.

The coalition is expected to win, but opinion polls showed a tightening race with Najib struggling to translate strong economic growth and a deluge of social handouts into votes.

The Election Commission estimated about 80 percent of 13 million voters -- or more than 10 million people -- turned out, which it called a record high. Malaysia has a total population of 28 million people.

Anwar was a former deputy premier until his ouster in a 1998 power struggle and six-year jailing on sex charges widely viewed as trumped up. He later brought his pan-racial appeal to the once-divided opposition, dramatically reversing its fortunes.

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