

Syrian town under heavy army shelling

BBC ONLINE

There has been an upsurge in fighting in the strategic Syrian town of Qusair, both sides in the conflict say.

The army, which began an offensive to recapture Qusair last Sunday, says it has now launched a three-pronged attack on the rebel-held town.

The rebels say they are under heavy bombardment from Lebanese Hezbollah militants, who back Syria's government. Meanwhile the main opposition group has said it will attend a peace conference only if the Syrian leader steps down.

The international conference, which Russia and the US are attempting to convene, would take place in Geneva next month.

A general view shows delegates attending the 50th African Union Anniversary Summit in Addis Ababa yesterday. The Organisation of African Unity (OAU), established amid the heady days as independence from colonial rule swept the continent in 1963, was replaced by the AU.

PHOTO: AFP



African Union celebrates golden jubilee

AFP, Addis Ababa

African leaders yesterday opened extravagant celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the African Union, with the continent's myriad problems set aside for a day to mark the progress that has been made.

African Union Chairman and Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn told leaders as he opened the celebrations they should seek to "create a continent free from poverty and conflict, and an Africa whose citizens enjoy a middle income status."

Today's 54-member AU is the successor of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), established in 1963 in the heady days when independence from colonial rule was sweeping the continent.

"While our founders met for the formation of the OAU at the dawn of the independence period 50 years ago, it is fitting that we are meeting here today at a time when Africa is rising," Hailemariam added, speaking in the AU's modern, Chinese-built headquarters in the Ethiopian capital.

African leaders were joined by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and US Secretary of State John Kerry, while French President Francois Hollande and China's Vice Premier Wang Yang were expected to attend celebrations later.

NEWSIN brief

Swedish riots spread beyond capital

AFP, Stockholm

Riots in Sweden spread beyond the capital yesterday, the sixth straight night of unrest that flared in Stockholm's immigrant-dominated suburbs and has sparked a debate over integration in a country long seen as an oasis of peace.

Cars and buildings were torched overnight in the medium-sized towns of Oerebro, Uppsala and Linköping, though tensions showed signs of easing in Stockholm's suburbs.

Ecuador's Correa starts 3rd term

BBC ONLINE

Ecuador's President, Rafael Correa, has been sworn into office for an unprecedented third term in the capital, Quito.

The left-wing leader and ally of the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has a high popularity rating and this party controls Congress.

Correa first took power in 2007 and will serve what he says is his last term until 2017.

A number of leaders from the region and Europe attended the inauguration.

Correa was re-elected in February with more than half of the votes, and recent polls suggest his approval rating stands at around 90 percent.

Philippines militant clash kills 11

BBC ONLINE

Seven marines and at least four militants were killed as troops fought Abu Sayyaf militants in the southern Philippines, the military said yesterday.

Nine other marines and a number of Abu Sayyaf fighters were wounded, a local military commander said.

A firefight broke out near the coastal town of Patikul in Sulu province as troops tracked the militants, he said.

French army begins Mali withdrawal

BBC ONLINE

France has begun a key stage of its military withdrawal from Mali, four months after sending troops to push Islamist rebels out the north.

A convoy of dozens of lorries left a base outside the capital, Bamako, on its way south to Ivory Coast.

France began withdrawing some of its 4,000 troops from the country in April.

They plan to gradually hand over to the Malian army and a UN peacekeeping force, which will deploy in July ahead of planned nationwide elections.

Maoists kill 17 including Indian Congress leader

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA FROM New Delhi

At least 17 people, including senior Congress leader Mahendra Karma, were killed and 20 others injured when heavily-armed Maoists ambushed a convoy of party leaders inside a dense forest in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh yesterday.

Among the injured is former union minister VC Shukla. The Maoists also kidnapped Chhattisgarh state unit Congress chief Nand Kumar Patel and his son Dinesh after attacking the convoy of Congress leaders in Darba Gati Valley near Jagdalpur, headquarters town of Bastar district, police said.

The convoy was returning from the party's "Parivartan" rally around 5:30pm (IST).

Joint Secretary (Naxal management) in the Indian Home Ministry MA Ganpathy confirmed the incident.

Most of the victims were Congress leaders and workers, he said, adding that four to five of those killed in the attack were personal security officers of the Congress leaders.

At a late night press conference,

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Raman Singh of the BJP put the number of dead in the Naxal attack at 16 and did not give any figure for the injured.

Eighty-four-year-old Shukla underwent an operation in Jagdalpur hospital for the three bullets he had received in the attack to be taken out of his body.

Raman said the condition of Shukla was stable.

Besides Karma, former Congress lawmakers Goal Madhavan and Udaya Mudaliyar were also shot dead and prominent woman tribal leader Phulo Devi Netam was wounded.

Karma, a former home minister of the state and founder of "Salwa Judum" (anti-Naxal operation by vigilante groups), was surrounded by about 100 to 150 Maoists and gunned down, said police.

The Maoists had put up road blocks to stop the Congress leaders' convoy by felling trees before triggering a landmine blast that hit one of the vehicles in the convoy and opening fire.

After carrying out the attack, the ultras set nearby trees on fire.

MIDAIR SCARE UK fighter jets escort Pak plane

TNN, London

A scare ran through Britain's security establishment on Friday when a Pakistan International Airlines pilot sent out an emergency call alarmed by two men trying to barge into the cockpit.

Both the men were arrested after the plane was escorted by Royal Air Force fighters and diverted from Manchester to the isolated Stansted Airport.

PIA Flight PK709 from Lahore with 297 passengers on board sent out a signal specially meant for on-flight emergency, just 10 minutes before it was to land at Manchester. The incident, coming just two days after a British soldier was viciously killed in Woolwich in a suspected terror attack, was alarming enough for authorities to scramble RAF Typhoon jets to divert the PIA Boeing 777.

LONDON SOLDIER KILLING 'Security services tried to recruit suspect'

AFP, London

An alleged friend of London soldier murder suspect Michael Adebolajo was arrested at the BBC after telling the broadcaster that British security services had tried to recruit his friend.

Abu Nusaybah told BBC television on Friday that Adebolajo was asked by the M15 domestic intelligence agency if he wanted to work for them.

He said Adebolajo had snubbed their approach.

The BBC said Abu Nusaybah was promptly arrested on their premises after giving the interview.

Scotland Yard police headquarters said Saturday that counter-terror officers had arrested a 31-year-old man in London on suspicion of the "commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism".

It is understood the arrest was not directly linked to the brutal murder of soldier Lee Rigby, who was hacked to death in the street Wednesday outside the Royal Artillery Barracks in Woolwich, southeast London.

Adebolajo, 28, and Michael Adebowale, 22,

who remain under armed guard in hospital after being shot by police at the scene, were known to the intelligence services but were reportedly assessed as not posing a deadly threat.

Abu Nusaybah said he first met Adebolajo in early 2002 and was struck by things his friend said to him roughly six months ago.

The murder suspect claimed he had been picked up by Kenyan forces and physically assaulted in detention there.

Abu Nusaybah said after Adebolajo returned from Kenya, M15 agents repeatedly called at his home.

Adebolajo was basically being harassed by M15, this is something that he specifically mentioned to me.

His wording was: 'They are bugging me -- they won't leave me alone.'

"He mentioned initially they wanted to ask him whether he knew certain individuals."

"But after him saying that he didn't know these individuals and so forth, what he said is they asked him whether he would be interested in working for them."

"He was explicit in that he refused to work for them but he did confirm that he didn't know the individuals."



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan volunteers walk as they distribute balloons to residents during "We Believe In Balloons", an art project promoting peace in Kabul yesterday. After a day of explosions and gunfire, residents of Kabul woke up to be greeted by a public art project in which volunteers handed out 10,000 neon-pink "peace" balloons. Organised by Yazmany Arboleda, a 31-year-old conceptual artist from the United States, the project was an unusual attempt to bring a dose of creativity and fun to a city wrecked by decades of war.

Neuron growth cuts memory space

BBC ONLINE

The reason we struggle to recall memories from our early childhood is down to high levels of neuron production during the first years of life, say Canadian researchers.

The formation of new brain cells increases the capacity for learning but also clears the mind of old memories.

The findings were presented to the Canadian Association of Neuroscience.

An expert at City University in London said the mouse study called into question some psychological theories.

Neurogenesis, or the formation of new neurons in the hippocampus - a region of the brain known to be important for learning and remembering, reaches its peak before and after birth. It then declines steadily during childhood and adulthood.

Dr Paul Frankland and Dr Sheena Josselyn, from the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto and the University of Toronto, wanted to find out how the process of new neuron generation impacted on memory storage.

They carried out their research on younger and older mice in the lab.

Dr Bettina Forster, from the cognitive neuroscience research unit at City University in London, said the research showed a clear link.



Mosque blast kills 12 in Afghanistan

AP, Kabul

Authorities in eastern Afghanistan say explosives transported by suspected Taliban fighters accidentally detonated while they were stopped at a mosque, killing 12 people.

Local official Qasim Desawal said yesterday that four civilians and eight militants died in the blast during evening prayers the night before in Ghazni province's district of Andar.

He said that the Taliban had apparently stopped at the mosque while travelling and the explosives they were carrying went off while they were inside.

The Ghazni explosion was on the same day as Taliban fighters supported by a suicide car bomb attacked a compound for international aid workers in the capital. Kabul police on Saturday raised the siege death toll from two to four, including a 6-year-old child, two compound guards and one policeman.

IRANIAN PRESIDENTIAL POLLS Candidate vows to resist West

AP, Tehran

Iran's top nuclear negotiator, a candidate in next month's presidential elections, on Friday vowed to pursue a policy of resistance against the West if elected.

Addressing his first campaign rally in Tehran, Saeed Jalili said his priority in foreign policy will be to expand Islam's influence in the world and counter "arrogance," a reference to the US.

Jalili is considered one of the most hard-line of the eight candidates approved by the Guardian Council, Iran's election overseers, to run in the June 14 race.

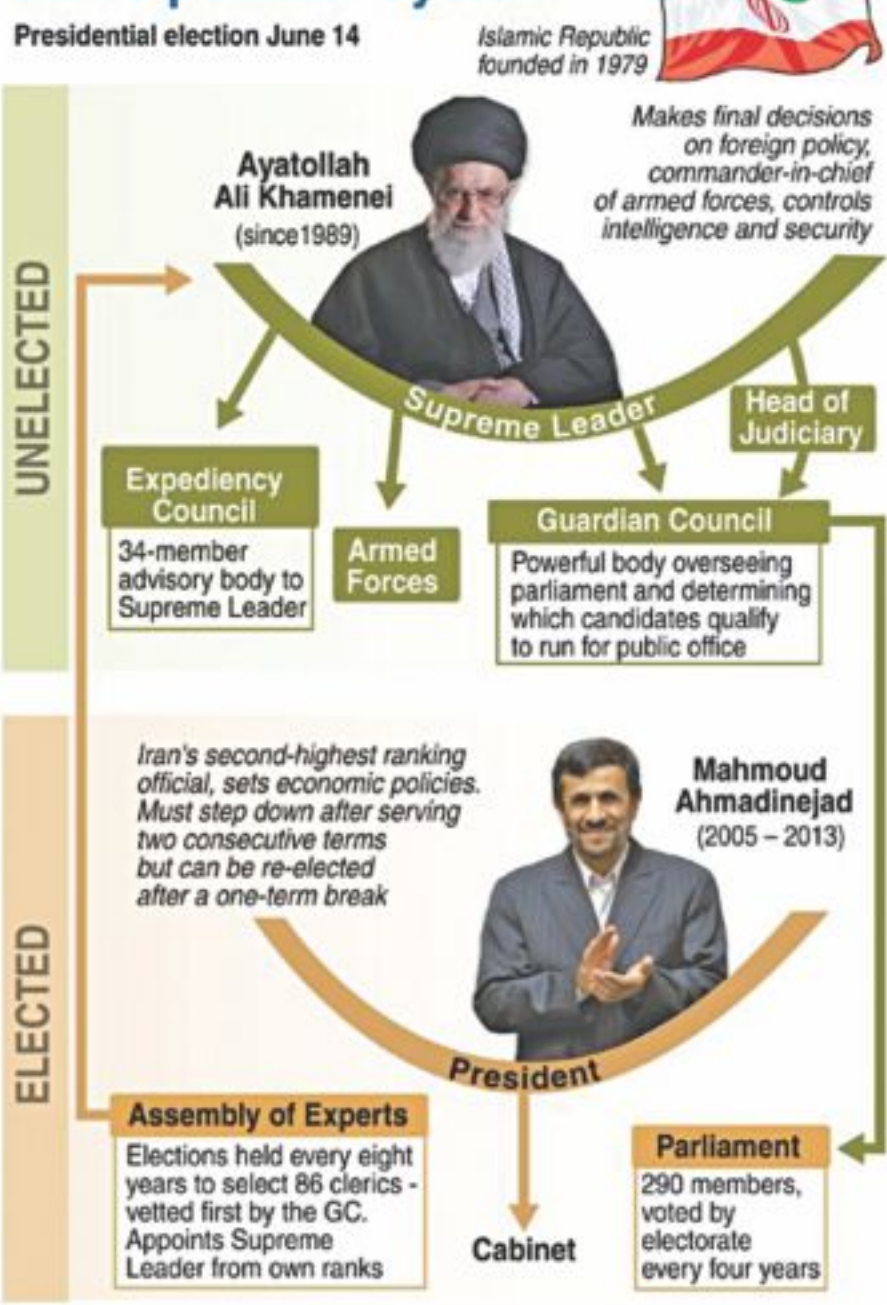
He is believed to draw much of his support from the Basij, the paramilitary branch of Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guard. Several prominent Basij figures and other hard-liners attended the rally. Jalili's campaign slogan is "Resistance and Progress".

Jalili said he is seeking to revive the revolutionary policies of the 1979 Islamic revolution that brought clerics to power.

"We are seeking to dry up the roots of the Zionist regime, the capitalist and communist systems. Instead, we promote the Islamic system," Jalili said, echoing policy statements made by the Islamic Republic's late founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Jalili said compromise brings misery and devastation. As Iran's top nuclear negotiator, he has opposed compromise with the world powers over the country's disputed

Iran's political system



nuclear programme.

Jalili has received the backing of several conservatives who backed President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in his 2005 rise to power. Ahmadinejad lost conservative support in 2011 however when he was perceived to challenge Khomeini's successor, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has final say on all matters of state in Iran. Jalili has cast himself as a die-hard Khamenei loyalist.

ODDLY enough

Italy's cheese banks



STAR DESK

Cash-for-cheese sounds more like a joke than a serious financial agreement, but in some regions of Italy it's a reality.

The famous Parmesan is so precious that some banks are willing to keep the cheese as collateral against loans to local producers.

The Credito Emiliano bank has hundreds of branches and thousands of employees around central and northern Italy.

Its central offices look like those of any other banking institution, with cameras watching every angle, security doors to lock down the place and even a big vault in the back. Only you're not going to find too many diamonds or hard cash stored in there.

Instead, there are hundreds of thousands of Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese wheels, neatly placed on giant shelves.

The bank takes the Parmesan from local producers in exchange for a cheap loan, and charges a 3 percent interest.