

Tensions soar as EU lifts arms embargo

US-Russian peace drive faces uncertainty; Moscow vows to continue arms supply to regime

AGENCIES

Disputes between Russia and the West over arming warring sides in Syria yesterday dimmed prospects for peace talks that were also clouded by disarray among President Bashar al-Assad's political foes.

The European Union finally agreed Monday to lift its embargo against arming Syrian rebels, after tough talks that exposed sharp differences between Britain and France, champions of the move, and their more reluctant partners.

However none of the 27 European member states intends to send any arms to the rebels in the coming months, for fear of endangering a US-Russia peace initiative for Syria.

As Western nations debate what action, if any, they should take on Syria, Assad's main allies - Russia, Iran and Lebanon's Shia Hezbollah group - have been closing ranks behind him.

Russia, which has protected Assad diplomatically since the Syrian uprising erupted in March 2011, said it would deliver an advanced S-300 air defence system to Damascus despite US, French and Israeli objections, arguing that it would help deter "hotheads" intent on intervention in the conflict.

Moscow also accused the European Union of "throwing fuel on the fire" and directly damaging the chances of convening a peace conference by letting its own arms



embargo on Syria expire.

"We think this (S-300) delivery is a stabilising factor and that such steps in many ways restrain some hotheads... from exploring scenarios in which this conflict could be given an international character with participation of outside forces," Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei

Ryabkov said.

The S-300s can intercept manned aircraft and guided missiles and their delivery could improve Assad's chances of retaining power. Western nations criticise such arms deliveries in much the same terms as Moscow assails weapons supplies to rebels.

COMPLEX WAR GAME

CNN ONLINE

There's more to the Syrian civil war than rebels versus the regime. Syria's neighbors in the Middle East also have a stake in the conflict, which many analysts say has become a proxy for regional rivalries and competing interests.

Iran: Syria is believed to be Iran's main conduit to Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, the proxy through which Iran can threaten arch-enemy Israel with an arsenal of short-range missiles.

Iran could lose that link and a major ally if the al-Assad regime falls to a Sunni-dominated opposition. The al-Assads are Alawite, an offshoot of Shia Islam.

Saudi Arabia: Two of Iran's biggest rivals, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are backing the Syrian rebels because they and other Persian Gulf monarchies fear the spread of Iran's influence in the region.

There is an element of sectarianism there as well. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are both led by Sunnis; Sunnis make up most of the Syrian opposition. Iran is the region's leading Shia power. Syria and Saudi Arabia also have long historical animosity between them.

Israel: Israel conducted airstrikes inside Syria in early May, a US official confirmed, stressing that Israel is concerned about Syria transferring powerful weapons to the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah. It is committed to do anything to prevent that.

Turkey: Relations between Turkey and Syria have all but collapsed since the Syrian uprising began and refugees started flooding into Turkey and other neighboring countries.

Turkey now backs the Syrian rebels with logistical support, hosting opposition groups and allowing shipments of weapons and ammunition to cross its borders.

Gunmen kill polio worker in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

Gunmen shot dead a female anti-polio worker in northwest Pakistan yesterday, police said, the latest in a series of deadly attacks on vaccination teams.

The two attackers on a motorbike opened fire on the team as they went to administer polio drops on the edge of the city of Peshawar where the military has been battling home-grown insurgents with links to the Taliban.

No one has claimed responsibility for the killing. But last year the Pakistani Taliban banned polio vaccinations in the tribal region of Waziristan, alleging the campaign was cover for espionage.

Meanwhile, attackers shot dead a lawyer and his two sons aged 12 and 15 in Karachi in a suspected sectarian attack, police said, the latest in a wave of violence against Shia Muslims.

Survey predicts grim picture for Congress ahead of 2014 polls



HINDUSTAN TIMES ONLINE

A sluggish economy and an untamable rise in prices can be sufficient reasons for public ire to turn against any incumbent government. In the case of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), there are more reasons than just the economy and prices. One, of course, is its long tenure—it is only the third government since Independence to be in power for nine years running.

But, more important, it has been a tenure marked by a series of nation-rocking scams and corruption charges against its ministers and officials—phenomena that have been exacerbated by the ubiquitous reach of mainstream media as well

as the explosive growth of social media, particularly in a nation where as much as 65 per cent of the population is under 35. Not surprisingly, the HT-GfK survey captures this strong anti-incumbency mood that is visible across India's regions, ages and economic categories.

However, the most remarkable finding of the survey is not that there is a nation-wide sentiment that is working against the Congress, but the fact that this is leading to a consolidation in favour of the BJP. This is the most worrisome signal for the Congress (and its allies) as it has always believed – or at least hoped – that the BJP, caught in its own internal mess, would not be able to mobilise anti-incumbency in its favour.

The findings of this survey sharply question that premise. Substantially more people believe the BJP would be more capable of handling the seven issues that emerged as the key concerns of the electorate, including price rise, corruption, job creation, and law and order. This offers the BJP the window to project itself as the national alternative to Congress.

How would this sentiment work on the ground if parliamentary elections were to be held today? In states and regions where the BJP is present, it will straightaway translate into votes. It would mean that the voters may distinguish between the state and national elections; for instance, the BJP may not do as badly in Karnataka in 2014 as it did in the recent assembly election.

However, all social forces against the BJP would gravitate towards the Congress in the event of Modi emerging as potential prime minister, the poll suggested. Moreover, if the simmering leadership war in the BJP goes out of hand, that also will benefit Congress.

'Tragedy' Pakistan has nukes but no power

Says PM-elect Sharif

AFP, Lahore

Pakistan's incoming prime minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday admitted it was a "tragedy" that a country with a nuclear arsenal was crippled by chronic electricity shortages.

Years of mismanagement, underinvestment and corruption in the power sector have led to Pakistanis suffering blackouts of up to 20 hours a day in the blistering heat of summer, when temperatures reach up to 50 Celsius.

Sharif vowed to build new power plants to tackle the problem, which acts as a huge drag on the economy, shaving up to four percent off GDP according to the Planning Commission, but he warned there would be no quick fix.

In a speech marking the 15th anniversary of Pakistan's first successful nuclear weapons test, Sharif – who was prime minister at the time – said it was shameful that the country struggled so badly just to keep the lights on.

"It's a tragedy that a country with atomic weapons is deprived of electricity and has no electricity for even 20 hours a day. How can a country develop in such a situation?" he said.

The hated power cuts, known euphemistically as "loadshedding", were arguably the single biggest voter complaint in the runup to the May 11 general election, which Sharif's party won – a far bigger daily concern than Taliban violence.



PTI comes second in Pak vote share

AFP, Islamabad

The party of cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan won the second largest number of votes in Pakistan's general election, data released Monday showed, despite finishing third in terms of seats.

Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party polled 7.7 million votes in the May 11 election to win 28 national assembly seats, but the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) which led the outgoing government took 32 seats with only 6.9 million ballots.

Turnout at the election, which marked the first time a civilian government had completed a five-year term and handed over power at the ballot box, was 55 percent, the election commission said – up from 44 percent in the 2008 poll.

NEWSIN brief

Iraq attacks kill 16

AFP, Baghdad

Attacks killed 16 people in Iraq yesterday, officials said, as the cabinet discussed how to curb violence that has left over 500 dead this month and raised fears of all-out sectarian conflict.

As of yesterday, 519 people have been killed and over 1,300 wounded in May, making it the deadliest month in at least a year, according to AFP figures. The attacks come a day after a wave of violence, including bombings in Baghdad that mainly targeted Shiite areas, killed 58 people and wounded 187.

Libya assembly chief quits

AFP, Tripoli

Mohamed al-Megaryef, the president of Libya's top political body, resigned yesterday to comply with a new law banning Gaddafi-era officials from government jobs.

Megaryef was Libya's ambassador to India in the 1980s under the regime of now slain dictator Muammar Gaddafi before he defected to become a leader of the exiled opposition for three decades.

The GNC passed the law on May 5 under pressure from gunmen who had surrounded the foreign and justice ministries for days to press the government to sack Gaddafi-linked officials.

China hacks US weapons systems plans

BBC ONLINE

Chinese hackers have accessed designs for more than two dozen US weapons systems, a US newspaper has reported.

Designs for combat aircraft, ships and missile defences were among those compromised, a Pentagon paper found, the Washington Post reported. The Washington Post report comes as Australia discloses Chinese hackers stole floor plans for the new headquarters of its domestic intelligence agency.

Malaysia boat capsizes; 23 missing

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Twenty-three people are missing in remote Borneo after a boat overloaded with holidaymakers heading home for a festival capsized yesterday in treacherous rapids on a jungle river, Malaysian police said.

Police sources told AFP the boat's capacity was just 74 passengers but that 181 people had been rescued after the yesterday morning accident.

Fresh sectarian unrest rocks Myanmar

AFP, Yangon

Houses and mosques were set ablaze by mobs in a town in eastern Myanmar after a Buddhist woman was allegedly "torched" by a Muslim man, authorities said yesterday, in a fresh bout of religious violence.

An ethnic Shan-Muslim man was arrested after he "torched" a woman selling petrol, a police officer in the Shan State capital of Lashio told AFP under the condition of anonymity.

A town official confirmed the arrest of the Muslim man who he said had "torched" a woman with petrol.

A curfew was imposed late yesterday to disperse angry mobs of local people – including Buddhist monks – who had "destroyed some houses and mosques", the official added, also declining to be named.

Last year up to 140,000 people – mainly Rohingya Muslims – were displaced in two waves of sectarian unrest between Buddhists and Muslims in western Rakhine.

Human Rights Watch has accused Myanmar's authorities of being a party to ethnic cleansing over the violence, which killed some 200 people and saw mobs set fire to whole villages.

Myanmar's reformist President Thein Sein this month vowed to uphold Rohingya rights, while opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi on Monday made a rare intervention in the incendiary issue to condemn a ban on Rohingya having more than two children in strife-torn Rakhine.



These frame grabs taken from AFPTV footage shows rescue workers breaking away bits of a pipe to remove a newborn baby boy stuck inside in the eastern province of Zhejiang, China. The newborn baby was rescued from a sewage pipe in a Chinese apartment building after being flushed down a toilet, state media said, provoking online outrage. It reported that the infant was in stable condition. No one has come forward yet to claim the child.

Acute malnutrition hits school performance

Warns Save the Children in new report

BBC ONLINE

UK charity Save the Children released a new report yesterday saying that a quarter of the world's children are at risk of underperforming at school because of chronic malnutrition.

Missing out on a nutritious diet could severely damage a child's ability to read and write, it said.

The study found that malnourished children suffered irreversible damage; they grew up smaller and weaker, and their brains might not develop fully.

The charity said tackling malnutrition should be a priority for G8 leaders.

They will meet in Northern Ireland next month.

The report – Food for Thought – is based on studies of thousands of children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam.

Their study suggests that children aged eight who are stunted due to malnutrition were 19% more likely to make mistakes reading a simple

sentence like "the sun is hot" or "I like dogs" than those with a balanced diet.

They could earn as much as 20% less in adulthood, and the global economic impact of malnutrition could be up to \$125bn (£83bn), Save the Children said.

"Poor nutrition is driving a literacy and numeracy crisis in developing countries, and is also a huge barrier to further progress in tackling child deaths," said Jasmine Whitbread, Save the Children International's Chief Executive.

"A quarter of the world's children are suffering the effects of chronic malnutrition, putting millions of young lives at risk."

The UK government is holding a special nutrition summit in London on 8 June, ahead of the main G8 gathering, which is expected to look at issues such as food security and the need for more African countries to have their own national nutrition plans.

World leaders attending that summit must "face this crisis and tackle the scourge of malnutrition for good", said Whitbread.

ODDLY enough

'Eye mouse' for physically challenged

TNN, Mangalore

Four final-year electronics and communication engineering students hve Mouse", an input device for people whave developed an "Eo are unable to move their hands.

Students and teachers of Institute of Technology (SIT) in India developed the device.

The students developed an application and installed it on a webcam-connected computer. The com-



puter is connected to a light-dependent resistor circuit that is fixed to a chair. Once a physically challenged person sits on the chair, the computer turns on and the webcam captures the person's eyeball movements. The user has to just stare closely at the folder or icon, and within few seconds the folder opens.

Through eyeball movements, the cursor can be moved on to any folder.