

'Syria death toll above 100,000'

More than 100,000 people have now been killed in the Syria civil war, UN leader Ban Ki-moon said Thursday as he appealed for new efforts to convene a peace conference.

The UN chief and US Secretary of State John Kerry told reporters before talks at the UN headquarters that there could be no military solution to the 28-month-old conflict.

While Syrian activists say the death toll is well over 100,000, the UN had been more cautious. One month ago it said about 93,000 had died.

But on Thursday, Ban said: "More than 100,000 people have been killed, millions of people have either been displaced or become refugees in neighboring countries."

"We have to bring this to an end. The military and violent actions must be stopped by both parties, and it is thus imperative to have a peace conference in Geneva as soon as possible."

The United States and Russia vowed in May to press for a follow-up to a peace conference held in Geneva last year, which set out a transition plan.

However, divisions between Syrian opposition groups and diplomatic hurdles thrown up by President Bashar al-Assad's government have blocked efforts to call a new meeting.

Syrian National Coalition president Ahmad Jarba is in New York on Thursday and was to hold talks with Kerry ahead of a meeting with UN Security Council envoys on Friday.

Kerry said there are "enormous levels of suffering, suffering that is growing by the day, which requires all of us to work even harder to try to bring about peace negotiations."

He added: "There is no military solution to Syria, there is only a political solution. That will require leadership in order to bring people to the table."



A picture taken on Wednesday shows derailed cars at the site of a train accident near the city of Santiago de Compostela. Inset, a rescue worker carries a wounded children. At least 78 people died when the train derailed in Galicia in northwestern Spain. The train which carried 238 passengers originated in Madrid and was bound for the northwestern town of Ferrol.

PHOTO: AFP

Mideast talks could resume on July 30

AFP, Jericho

Middle East peace talks could restart on July 30 in Washington, Israel's Regional Development Minister Silvan Shalom said yesterday.

"We hope talks will begin next week, possibly on Tuesday, but this hasn't been decided 100 percent," he told a news conference in the West Bank city of Jericho at the inauguration of an industrial park.

"If there's no change at the last minute... I think there's a good chance talks can resume next week in Washington," he said.

Separately quoted by public radio, Shalom said he did not imagine a "scenario where the Palestinians refuse to restart talks. That would be an affront to US Secretary of State John Kerry".

Palestinian presidential spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina said his side was still awaiting a formal invitation from the US.

"We are ready to go to Washington and are committed to what was agreed on with Secretary Kerry," he told AFP.

"We are waiting for the invitation for our delegation to go to Washington."

Kerry announced last week that Israel and the Palestinians would begin negotiating in Washington, after a three-year halt in direct peace talks.

On Monday, the White House said that preliminary talks between Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erakat and his counterpart, Israeli Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, could begin in the next few weeks.

It expressed "cautious optimism" over the chances of their success.

Israeli public radio, meanwhile, said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was "urgently" ask his government on Sunday to approve a draft bill that would require a referendum on a future peace deal with the Palestinians.

Egypt army issues 48 hrs ultimatum to Islamists

US halts delivery of F-16s as country set for rival rallies

AGENCIES

Egypt's army gave the Muslim Brotherhood until Saturday afternoon to sign up to political reconciliation, a military official said on Thursday, after the army issued a veiled threat to use tougher tactics against the group.

"We will not initiate any move, but will definitely react harshly against any calls for violence or black terrorism from Brotherhood leaders or their supporters. We pledge to protect peaceful protesters regardless of their affiliation," the official said, saying they had 48-hours to comply.

Earlier, the army signalled it would change its strategy for dealing with "violence and terrorism" after protests it has called on Friday. In a statement posted on a Facebook page affiliated to the army command, the military said it was ready to turn its guns on anyone involved in either.

Military chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi

on Wednesday called for mass rallies today to give him a mandate to tackle surging violence, fanning fears within Morsi's Muslim brotherhood of a military crackdown.

The Brotherhood and allied Islamist groups had denounced Sisi's call as "an announcement of civil war" and said they would press on with their own demonstrations.

Egypt's military yesterday insisted it was not targeting backers of ousted president Mohamed Morsi in calling for a mass rally to counter 'terrorism', amid outrage from Islamist protesters and concern in Washington.

The military statement came after the chief of Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood defiantly called for a "stand" against the coup that toppled the president, with Islamists planning a protest today to rival the army's call.

Police said they were planning largescale reinforcements to secure

today's rallies, amid fears they will turn into a massive showdown in the streets between Islamists demanding Morsi's reinstatement and an array of opponents, including the military.

The fugitive leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohamed Badie, urged Egyptians to peacefully make a "stand for freedom and legitimacy, and against the bloody coup," in a statement yesterday.

The United States said on Wednesday it was "very concerned" by military chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's call for a rally to justify a crackdown on what he called "terrorism and violence."

After Sisi's comments, Washington, which has close ties with Egypt's military, announced it would suspend a delivery of F-16 warplanes.

The decision appears to underscore deepening US concern about the course taken by the Arab world's most populous country, reeling from violent street clashes following Morsi's July 3 overthrow.

Khodorkovsky case not political: EU court

REUTERS, Strasbourg

A European court yesterday ruled Russia had a legitimate case against ex-oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky and business partner Platon Lebedev over alleged tax fraud, rejecting suggestions it had been political motivated.

But the European Court of Human Rights found that their trial had been unfair and that their 2005 sentencing to a remote jail near the Arctic Circle was unjustified.

Khodorkovsky, a staunch critic of President Vladimir Putin and once Russia's richest man, was arrested in 2003 and handed alongside Lebedev 13 years jail on charges of multi-million dollar tax evasion and money laundering.

"Charges against two Russian business executives had a sound basis, but the hearing of their case was unfair, and their placement in remote penal colonies unjustified," the Strasbourg-based court said.

Judges from the court ordered Moscow to pay 10,000 euros (8,646 pounds) to Khodorkovsky in damages.

The punishment, which in December was reduced by two years allowing the two men to walk free in October 2014, was seen by supporters as a politically-motivated act of revenge.

Thirteen people have been freed so far as part of an amnesty for Russia's jailed entrepreneurs intended to correct failures in Russia's legal system, which has often seen entrepreneurs jailed on trumped-up charges.

However it applies only to those who have been convicted once and agree to repay damages - ruling out Khodorkovsky, who was convicted of fraud again in 2010.

ODDLY enough



Australia gifts Prince George a baby crocodile

AFP, Sydney

Australia's tropical Northern Territory yesterday presented an unusual gift to Britain's new royal baby, Prince George, -- a crocodile hatched on the day his conception was announced.

The tiny reptile, named George after its recipient, was unveiled by Adam Giles, chief minister of the outback province, who described it as a "unique gift".

"(Its) egg was hatched on December the 3rd, the same day that Kate and William announced to the world that they were expecting a child," Giles told reporters.

Giles said he hoped the gift would lure the prince and his parents to northern Australia for a visit.

Third in line to the British throne, Prince George was born in London on Tuesday, triggering global fanfare including in Australia, where Queen Elizabeth II is

French PM's name poses problems for Korean media

AFP, Seoul

Visiting French Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault presented South Korean media with a novel headache yesterday: how to transcribe his name.

The daily Chosun Ilbo, the country's widest-circulation newspaper, chose Korean script that signifies "erotic" while Yonhap news agency also used a translation that means "difficulty".

The French embassy in Seoul, which issued a statement on the arrival of the head of the French government in Korean, chose a neutral translation by omitting the letter "r".

Last year Ayrault left Arabic-language media in a similar, though slightly more embarrassing, quandary. Transcribed into Arabic from the French pronunciation of his name, "Ayrault" refers in several Arabic dialects to the male



This picture taken on Wednesday shows Song Xiaomei crying after her home was destroyed by the recent earthquake in Minxian county in Dingxi, northwest China's Gansu province. At least 94 people were killed, China's official news agency reported citing local authorities, with 1,000 more injured and 51,800 homes collapsing.

George Bush goes bald to support leukaemia boy

BBC ONLINE

Former US president George H W Bush has shaved his head to show support for a boy who has leukaemia.

A Secret Service agent in his security detail has a two-year-old son who is losing his hair as a side-effect of treatment for the cancer.

The 89-year-old Republican lost his greying locks earlier this week at his coastal home in the state of Maine, said a spokesman on Wednesday.

Bush acted after he saw other agents in his detail had shaved their heads. A Bush spokesman identified the toddler only as Patrick.

Bush and his wife, Barbara, lost their second child, four-year-old Robin, to leukaemia almost 60 years ago.

The security detail have launched a website to help pay for Patrick's medical treatment.

Bush, whose son is former president George W Bush, was only himself released from hospital in January, two months after his admission for a bronchitis-related cough.

He was the 41st US president, and served one term in office, from 1989-1993.

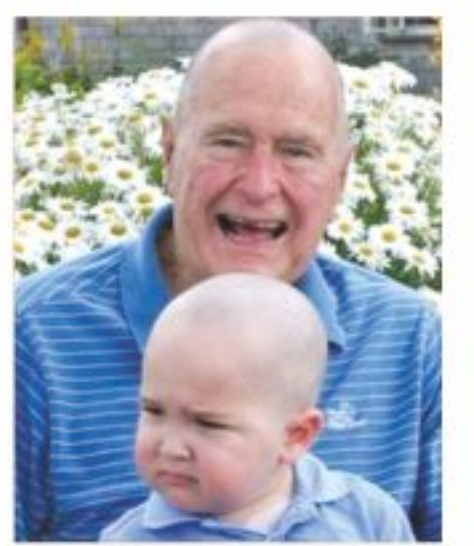


PHOTO: AFP

US House backs NSA's phone surveillance

BBC ONLINE

The US House of Representatives has narrowly voted to continue collecting data on US phone calls, in the first legislative move on the programme.

In a 205-217 vote, lawmakers rejected an effort to restrict the National Security Agency's (NSA) ability to collect electronic information.

The NSA's chief had lobbied strongly against the proposed measure.

The vote saw an unusual coalition of conservatives and liberal Democrats join forces against the programme.

The details of the NSA dragnet were made public by Edward Snowden, a former contractor for America's electronic spying agency. He is now a fugitive, seeking asylum in Moscow.

The rejected amendment would have blocked funding for the NSA programme which gathers details of every call made by or to a US phone, unless the records were

part of a specific investigation.

It was introduced by Michigan Republican Justin Amash, who warned during Wednesday's debate that the proposal's critics would "use the same tactic every government throughout history has used to justify its violation of rights: fear."

"They'll tell you that the government must violate the rights of the American people to protect us against those who hate our freedom."

Despite the White House's lobbying against the amendment, a majority of House Democrats - 111 - voted for it. Eighty-three Democrats voted against.

Among Republicans, 94 voted for the Amash amendment and 134 against.

"We've gone overboard"

Before Wednesday's vote there were fierce exchanges on the House floor during what was the first sustained legislative debate on the NSA's reach since Mr Snowden's revelations.

SNOWDEN ROW: US sends letter to Russia

AFP, Moscow

Russia has received a letter from the United States spelling out its position over intelligence leaker Edward Snowden whose month-long stay in a Moscow airport has led to new tensions in diplomatic ties, the justice ministry said yesterday.

"On July 24, 2013, the Russian justice ministry received a letter from US Attorney General Eric Holder which explains certain aspects of the US position on the issue of ex-CIA employee Edward Snowden's status," the ministry said in a written statement sent to AFP.

"The document does not contain requests about extradition or deportation," said the statement without providing further details.

China charges disgraced top politician with graft

REUTERS, Jinan

China charged disgraced senior politician Bo Xilai with bribery, abuse of power and corruption yesterday, paving the way for a potentially divisive trial that President Xi Jinping will want smoothly handled as he pushes major economic reforms.

Bo, 64, could appear in a court in the eastern city of Jinan in Shandong province within weeks, capping the country's biggest political scandal since the 1976 downfall of the Gang of Four at the end of the Cultural Revolution. He has not been seen in public for 17 months.

Xi, who formally took power in March, will be eager to put the Bo scandal behind him and have unstinted support from the Communist Party as he embarks on an ambitious rebalancing of the world's second-largest economy.

But the trial of Bo, a charismatic and well-loved leader to some and a power-hungry

politician to others, could sharpen rifts. Bo's ouster exposed deep disagreements in the party between his leftist backers, who are nostalgic for the revolutionary era of Mao Zedong, and reformers, who advocate faster political and economic reforms.

Bo committed serious crimes and will be indicted on the charges of bribery, embezzlement and power abuse, state news agency Xinhua quoted the indictment as saying. He had been informed of his legal rights and interviewed by prosecutors, it said.

Bo, as a civil servant, took advantage of his position to seek profits for others and accepted an "extremely large amount" of money and prop-

erties, Xinhua said. Bo is certain to be found guilty. His wife, Gu Kailai, and his former police chief, Wang Lijun, have both been convicted and jailed over the scandal, which stems from the murder of British businessman Neil Heywood.



Bo Xilai