

SYRIA crisis

Merkel hits out at Russia, China

German Chancellor Angela Merkel hit out at Russia and China over their stance in the Syrian crisis, saying in an interview published Saturday that their action weakened the United Nations. "It is very regrettable that Russia and China have refused for some time to come to a common position (with Western partners) on the Syrian conflict. This considerably weakens the role of the United Nations," she said in an interview with regional daily Augsburg Allgemeine.

Arabs to meet on Syria today

Arab foreign ministers will meet in Cairo today to discuss Syria, Arab League deputy chief Ahmed Ben Helli said yesterday, as the United States appeared to be readying a strike on the country. The meeting had been scheduled for Tuesday, but was advanced "in light of rapid developments in the Syria situation and based on the request of several Arab states," Ben Helli told reporters.

Iranian delegation heads to Syria

A delegation of Iranian MPs left for Syria and Lebanon yesterday to examine the situation there and "condemn the use of chemical weapons by terrorist groups," parliamentary officials said. The three-member delegation, headed by the president of parliament's influential foreign policy committee, Allaeddine Boroujerdi, is expected to meet Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, one official said.



Demonstrators march in protest during a rally against a possible US attack on Syria in response to alleged use of chemical weapons by the Assad government, in Lafayette Park in front of the White House in Washington, DC yesterday.

LOOMING US STRIKES ON SYRIA Arabs divided, powerless

Divided over a conflict they failed to resolve diplomatically, Arab countries are powerless observers of possible US strikes on Syria not designed to achieve what most of them want - President Bashar al-Assad's downfall. "The Arab countries are weak, preoccupied by their own internal affairs. Some of them care little about what will happen in Syria," said Emirati analyst Abdelkhalq Abdallah. "They are angry at the attitude of the international community which (they feel) has betrayed the Syrian people, but also by the fact that an Arab country is being targeted in unilateral strikes, without UN approval." The Arab League, which suspended Syria's membership in November 2011 and gave its seat to the main opposition group, has squarely accused the Assad regime of carrying out a chemical weapons attack in Damascus last week that killed hundreds. US Secretary of State John Kerry cited the pan-Arab body on Friday among a list of allies "ready to respond" to the chemicals weapons attack. But influential League members, including Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon and Tunisia, have expressed opposition to foreign military intervention in Syria. For Ibrahim Shaqieh, an expert on international crises at the Doha Brookings Centre, "this confusion reflects the state of shock that still exists throughout the entire Arab world" since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Like the governments, meanwhile, the opinion of the Arab public is equally torn, Shaqieh added. "Sentimentally, the Arabs reject foreign

interventionism in the affairs of their countries, but logically they accept such interventionism," he said. As proof of this, he mentioned the fact that possible Western military intervention in Syria has not provoked any large-scale protests in Arab capitals such as was witnessed when the Iraq war began 10 years ago. The Gulf monarchies led by Saudi Arabia alongside Qatar is the main supporter of the Syrian opposition, "would prefer decisive action which puts an end to the regime of Bashar al-Assad," according to Abdelkhalq Abdallah, the Emirati analyst. By contrast, the role of Arab states in any US military operation in Syria would be "only of a logistical nature," said Mustafa al-Ani, another analyst at the Gulf Research Center. Bahrain is the home base of the US Fifth Fleet, while Centcom, the US command responsible for 20 countries in the Middle East and Central Asia, has a regional headquarters in Qatar, which also hosts the largest US air base in the Middle East. "The United States needs no one at the military level. But it is extremely important for them not to be alone at the political level," said Bruno Tertrais, an analyst at the Foundation for Strategic Research. He said the Americans, like their French allies, would emphasise the support of Arab countries for military intervention, "because everyone wants to avoid giving the impression that this is a Western operation against Syria." But in the event of any strikes affecting the civilian population, "the reaction on the Arab street will be negative," said the Emirati analyst.

'CHEMICAL ATTACK' US evidence fabricated, says Syria

Damascus said Friday that a US intelligence report concluding that the Syrian regime used chemical weapons in an onslaught that killed close to 1,500 people was "entirely fabricated". "What the US administration describes as irrefutable evidence... is nothing but tired legends that the terrorists have been circulating for more than a week, with their share of lies and entirely fabricated stories," a foreign ministry statement read out on state television said. A US intelligence report released on Friday concluded the regime had launched a chemical onslaught in the suburbs of Damascus last week, killing 1,429 people, including at least 426 children. US Secretary of State John Kerry said that the report gathered evidence from thousands of sources and that the intelligence community has "high confidence" that the regime was responsible for the attack.

Obama mulling the least bad option

Among the most enduring urban legends about high-level policy-making in the US government is the proverbial memo with three options: 1. do nothing; 2. do everything; 3. find a middle ground and muddle through.

And yet in truth, Barack Obama really does have only three options in Syria. It appears that the president, rightly the avoider-in-chief when it comes to Syria, has chosen option three, the least bad alternative. And here's why.

Do nothing

This isn't really an option. Forget the fact that the president a year ago drew his own red line against Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons. Disregard the reality that this is reportedly the largest single deployment of chemical weapons since Saddam Hussein used them against the Kurds in 1988; dismiss the fact that 100,000 Syrians have died in this civil conflict; and the president is accused of fiddling, Nero-like, while Syria burns.

Just focus on the events of the past five days in Washington. What has been emanating from administration officials both on and off the record is the most well-advertised and telegraphed military action in the history of modern warfare. All indicators rule out this option.

Do everything

From the beginning, senators John McCain and Lindsay Graham and a whole host of liberal interventionists and neoconservatives outside the government have repeatedly called for a more robust policy on Syria, even suggesting that the president, by not acting sooner, enabled all of this misery to unfold.

They have not called for boots on the ground but for extensive use of no-fly zones, the use of US air and missile power to degrade the regime and military support for the opposition.

President Obama has wisely and willfully avoided this approach.

Syria is in the throes of a brutal civil war.

The opposition is composed of more than 1,000 disparate rebel groups, the most effective allied with al-Qaeda and other Sunni extremists. A victory of the latter would be a blow to US interests. Ousting al-Assad won't be cheap or easy. It took eight months to get rid of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, and he had no weapons of mass destruction, no serious air defenses or military capacity and no credible allies.

Muddle through

The option the US is likely to undertake -- focused more narrowly on trying to deter the Syrians from using chemical weapons again and degrading al-Assad's military capacity in the process -- is far from ideal. Although I think the administration's military actions will be far more devastating



than the limited strikes being talked about, it is unlikely to change the arc of the battlefield balance.

There are other downsides, too. After the attack, sooner or later, al-Assad will commit some other horror that may require lengthy US response.

To be sure, there are real risks in acting on option three, and Obama most assuredly is a reluctant warrior. Indeed, in view of the parliamentary opposition to British Prime Minister David Cameron's willingness to join the US, he may be a lonely warrior, too. But he's going to war with Syria nonetheless. Al-Assad's apparent use of chemical weapons, the president's own words and those of others in his administration leave him no other choice.

'Want them to attack sooo much'

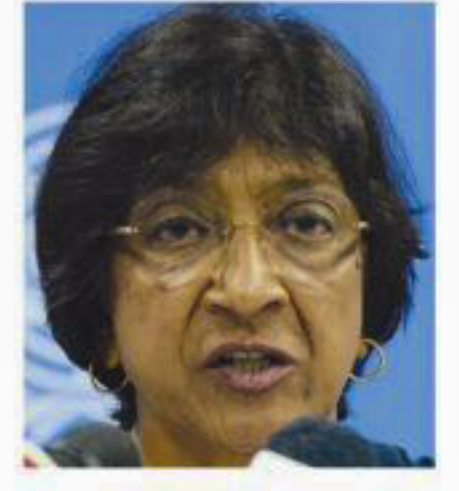
To Assad supporters, it is a bold piece of defiance, worthy of his father, showing the US what Syria has in store for it should it attack. To opponents of the regime, it is alarming proof that 11-year-old Hafez al-Assad takes after his dictator dad. Either way, a Facebook posting, purportedly by Bashar al-Assad's son, has provoked a significant reaction. In the post, subsequently deleted along with the account, "Hafez Assad" dares the US to attack. He writes: "No one has soldiers like the ones we do in Syria ... America doesn't

have soldiers, what it has is some cowards with new technology who claim themselves liberators ... I just want them to attack sooo much, because I want them to make this huge mistake of beginning something they don't know the end of it." The fact that his profile said he had graduated from Oxford University and played for Barcelona football club raised suspicions that the account was fake, but the New York Times said it was "liked" or commented on by several accounts that appear to belong to the children or grandchildren of other senior figures in the Assad administration.

Sri Lanka becoming more authoritarian

UN rights chief attacks Colombo's rights records

UN human rights chief Navi Pillay yesterday warned that Sri Lanka was becoming "increasingly authoritarian" with rights activists apparently suffering growing harassment from security agencies. "I am deeply concerned that Sri Lanka... is showing signs of heading in an increasingly authoritarian direction," Pillay told reporters at the end of a week-long visit to probe war crimes in the country. Pillay said it was "utterly unacceptable" that rights activists who spoke with her during her fact-finding mission had subsequently faced harassment by the police and the military. "This is over the top," she said in the capital, ahead of her departure later in the day. "You don't invite a person like me and



then do this type of thing. This type of surveillance and harassment appears to be getting worse in Sri Lanka, which is a country where critical voices are quite often attacked or even permanently silenced." She also urged the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse to de-militarise the former war zones in the country's east and north, following the end of an ethnic war in 2009. Pillay began her visit last weekend after Colombo appeared to drop its public hostility towards her and the UN rights body, which has adopted two resolutions against the island in as many years. She had publicly called for a war crimes investigation into what the UN calls "credible allegations" that up to 40,000 civilians were killed during the final stages of the separatist war.



Indian activists shout slogans as they demand the death of a juvenile, convicted in the December 2012 gang-rape of a student, in front of a juvenile court in New Delhi yesterday. The three-year sentence of the teenaged rapist who brutally assaulted a student of Delhi has caused new protests in India.

NEWS IN brief

Quake kills four in China

A 5.8-magnitude earthquake hit a remote part of southwest China yesterday near the popular tourist area of Shangri-La, killing four people and injuring several others, state media said. The earthquake in Yunnan province on the border with Sichuan province sparked landslides, blocked roads, cut off communications and toppled or damaged tens of thousands of homes in the mountainous area.

US drone kills 4 in Pakistan

A US drone yesterday killed at least four militants in a missile strike targeting a compound in northwest Pakistan's tribal belt, local security officials said. The attack took place in the village of Heso Khel around 35 kilometres east of Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan which is a stronghold of al-Qaeda-linked militants.

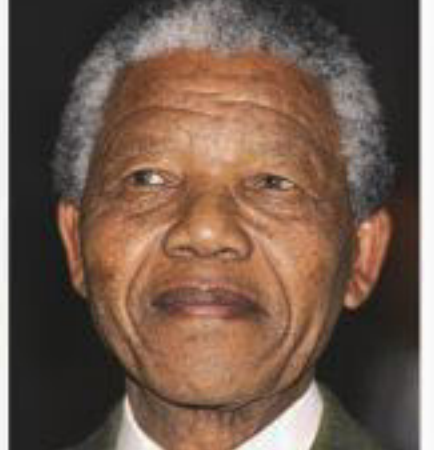
5 more 'rebels' killed in Kashmir

The Indian army yesterday said it has killed five suspected rebels in northern Kashmir, near the heavily militarised de facto border dividing the disputed Himalayan territory between India and Pakistan. The suspected militants were infiltrating from Pakistan into Indian side when they were killed, an army spokesman said.

Mandela still in hospital

S Africa says his release report false

South Africa's presidency yesterday denied reports that Nelson Mandela had been discharged from hospital and had returned to his Johannesburg home. "Madiba is still in hospital in Pretoria, and remains in a critical but stable condition," President Jacob Zuma's spokesman said in a statement, denying reports from several news organisations that he had left the facility. "At times his condition becomes unstable, but he responds to medical interventions."



Mandela was rushed to hospital on June 8 for a respiratory infection and has remained in critical condition for most of the time since. The global icon has received an outpouring of messages of support including prayers from clergymen and the general public. Mandela became South Africa's first black president in 1994, after leading talks that ended the white minority rule. He only served a single four year term as president, stepping down in 1999.

China chemical leak kills 15

An ammonia leak from a cold storage unit at a food company in China's commercial hub of Shanghai killed 15 people and sickened dozens yesterday, the city government said. The leak sickened 26 people, who had been sent to hospital, with six in critical condition, the Shanghai government said in a statement. The accident occurred shortly before midday in the northern district of Baoshan due to a leaking pipe linked to a refrigeration unit owned by a seafood company, media reports said. More than 200 firefighters were deployed to the scene, using water to disperse the liquid ammonia and its fumes, the Xinmin Evening News said. The government did not say whether the company's workers or people living in the urban area nearby were affected. Liquid ammonia used in refrigeration can destroy lung tissue, potentially resulting in death, and cause chemical burns on the skin, according to concerned sources.

6 killed in new Egypt protests

Thousands of supporters of ousted Islamist president Mohamed Morsi marched through Cairo and cities across Egypt on Friday to demand his reinstatement, in the movement's biggest show of defiance since hundreds of protesters were killed two weeks ago. Although most marches passed without major incident, a security source said there had been at least six deaths, and police fired teargas at protesters in Cairo's Mohandiseen district. 50 more were injured in the clashes, officials said. The army-backed government, which has shot dead hundreds of supporters of Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood since he was toppled by the military on July 3, had warned that forces posted at key intersections since morning would open fire if protests turned violent. The cabinet issued a statement after the protests saying that anyone who disregarded the curfew would face legal consequences.

Stop using embassy to ridicule politicians

Ecuador tells Assange

Julian Assange has been told to stop using the Ecuadorian embassy in London to poke fun at Australian politicians as part of his Senate election bid, it has been reported. The South American nation's president, Rafael Correa, chastised Assange after a video appeared online in which the WikiLeaks founder - along with Juice Rap News - ridiculed Tony Abbott, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. "We have sent him a letter: he can campaign politically, but without making fun of Australian politicians. We are not going to allow that," said Correa. Assange appeared wearing a comedy wig and bandanna emblazoned with the Australian flag in the video. He also performed a cover version of John Farnham's 'You're the Voice'. Tensions between Assange and his Ecuadorian hosts were heightened during the Snowden affair, with diplomats saying that they felt that the WikiLeaks founder was trying to steal the limelight. According to Agence France-Presse, Correa said: "The rules of asylum in principle forbid meddling in the politics of the country that grants asylum."

