

Syria death toll crosses 110,000

AFP, Beirut

More than 110,000 people have died in the conflict in Syria since March 2011, a rights watchdog said yesterday, days after alleged gas attacks near Damascus shocked the world.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the toll since the beginning of the 29-month uprising now stands at 110,371 people, with at least 40,146 civilians killed including nearly 4,000 women and more than 5,800 children.

The group doctors and lawyers on the ground throughout Syria, said 21,850 rebel fighters had also been killed. On the regime side, the group reported the deaths of at least 27,654 army soldiers, 17,824 pro-regime militia.

The figures are a testament to the levels of violence wracking the country, which has been ravaged by a civil war that began with peaceful demonstrations calling for regime change.



People demonstrate against a US-led strike on Syria in downtown Los Angeles on Saturday. The US Congress will begin to debate a possible military strike against Syria during the week beginning September 9 after President Barack Obama said he would seek the authorization of Congress for any such action.

PHOTO: AFP

War, never again

Pope asks all faiths to join prayer for peace in Syria

REUTERS, Vatican City

Pope Francis yesterday invited people of all faiths to join him and the world's Catholics in a day of prayer and fasting on September 7 to end the conflict in Syria.

Addressing tens of thousands of people in St. Peter's Square, he issued a long, impassioned appeal for peace in Syria and across the Middle East, saying God and history would be the judge of those who promoted violence or prevented peace.

Francis condemned the use of chemical weapons, blamed by Western powers on Syrian government forces, but added: "War, never again".

The United States and France are considering military action against Damascus in response to the chemical attack but Francis urged the international community to make every effort to bring about peace based on "dialogue and negotiations".

"Violence never leads to peace, war leads to war, violence leads to violence," he said.

The pope asked the 1.2 billion Roman Catholics around the world to pray for peace in Syria and observe a day of prayer and fasting on Saturday. He said he would lead a special prayer service in St Peter's Square on Saturday between 7 pm and midnight.

The pope invited other Christians, members of other religions and all "people of goodwill" to join the Catholic initiative in any way they saw fit.



Obama took Syria decision alone

AFP, Washington

After staring deep into his political soul over Syria, Barack Obama blinked.

Stunning his advisors, his opponents, and the rest of the world, Obama chose to rein in his own power, and asked Congress to authorize a military intervention he had been set to wage alone.

Senior aides say Obama took the momentous decision alone on Friday evening, then explained it in a heart to heart with his chief of staff Denis McDonough.

Before then, the spin had been that Obama had the legal and moral right to strike President Bashar al-Assad's regime to punish a horrific chemical weapons attack.

But Obama was out on a limb -- potentially defying public opinion and the United Nations, deserted by America's best friend, Britain.

By stopping at the brink, Obama will face claims he is weak, does not make good on his threats and presides over a feckless foreign policy.

But acting alone would have repudiated one of the central principles that got him elected -- the idea that imperial presidents should not plunge into foreign quagmires with their authority unchecked.

In 2007, Obama, a former constitutional law professor criticized ex-president George W Bush for endless, unaccountable wars. "The President does not have power under the Constitution to unilaterally authorize a military attack in

a situation that does not involve stopping an actual or imminent threat to the nation," he told The Boston Globe.

But six years on, Obama was on the cusp of ordering cruise missile strikes in Syria, while bypassing Congress, on the basis of a fragile case that last week's attack posed an immediate threat to US security.

At the heart of Obama's decision was his presidential legacy, aides said.

The president, who brought US troops home from Iraq, and is doing likewise on Afghanistan, wants to leave office having led his country away from permanent war.

The president, who maintains he did have the constitutional authority to act alone, has effectively called the bluff of critics who demanded he give Congress the chance to debate Syria.

Obama did not seek authorization for the operation which ousted Muammar Gaddafi in Libya -- and faced a firestorm of criticism from Republicans over the subsequent attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, alone.

The president appears to have calculated that while he could go to war without a UN mandate -- to do so without the endorsement of Congress and defying war weary public opinion, would be a political step too far.

Senior aides said however, that one factor easing Obama's decision had been that he was assured by General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that delaying action would not reduce its effectiveness.



UN CHEMICAL PROBE Wait for results may take up to 3 weeks

AFP, The Hague

The analysis of samples taken by UN inspectors in Syria probing alleged use of chemical weapons could take "up to three weeks," the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons said Saturday.

"The evidence collected by the team will now undergo laboratory analysis and technical evaluation," said the group. "These procedures may take up to three weeks for completion in a systematic, orderly and objective manner."

The 13 inspectors left Damascus early Saturday and drove over the border to Lebanon after completing their probe into a suspected chemical weapons attack on August 21.

Congressional approval rarely sought by US presidents

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama's decision to seek authorization from Congress before striking Syria is a rare example of the White House ceding ground to the legislative branch of government.

While the US Constitution gives Congress the power to declare war, the last time that a formal declaration was adopted was in 1941, when the United States entered World War II.

Since then, a succession of American presidents have unilaterally initiated military strikes or land invasions on numerous occasions without Congressional approval, invoking their constitutional authority as commander in chief.

The War Powers Resolution of 1973, initiated in response to the deeply unpopular Vietnam War, in theory requires the President to seek authorization from lawmakers for any military intervention lasting beyond 60 days.

President George W. Bush sought and received authorization under the resolution before launching the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

But most presidents have acted as if the

1973 act, which President Richard Nixon unsuccessfully attempted to veto, is unconstitutional.

In December 1995 for example, President Bill Clinton ordered the deployment of 20,000 troops in support of the NATO peace-keeping force in Bosnia-Herzegovina following the Dayton Peace Accords.

Clinton's decision came despite Congress's failure to agree on several draft resolutions supporting or prohibiting the intervention.

Clinton ordered air strikes without Congressional approval in 1999, hitting Yugoslavia for 78 days in the Kosovo conflict.

Military operations in Somalia (1992) and Haiti (1994) also took place without Congressional approval, as well as cruise missile strikes on Afghanistan and Sudan in 1998 following the twin bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

More recently in March 2011, Obama justified military intervention in Libya on the grounds of a UN Security Council resolution despite Congress' request that it be consulted.

DELHI GANG-RAPE VERDICT

Outrage grows in India

AFP, New Delhi

India's opposition yesterday said it would seek tougher punishments for juveniles after the first verdict in the New Delhi gang-rape case saw a teenager sentenced to three years' detention, sparking widespread anger.

The rape and murder of a 23-year-old student by six attackers on a moving bus last December sparked nationwide protests and led to reforms that mandated longer sentences for adult sex offenders.

Sushma Swaraj, opposition leader in the lower house of parliament, said she would introduce a bill this week to amend the law for juveniles.

"This meagre punishment of just three years does not do justice," Swaraj wrote on Twitter.

"The sentence must commensurate with the gravity of the offence irrespective of the age of the offender," she added.

On Saturday a juvenile court in New Delhi sentenced the only under-age suspect in the gang -- who was 17 at the time of the crime -- to three years in a correctional facility.

This was the maximum sentence under

Indian law, which treats all under-18s as children and seeks to reform rather than punish them.

"TRAVESTY: December 16 teen rapist 'gets away' with murder," a headline in the tabloid Mail Today read, summing up the mood.

The convicted teen will spend about 28 months in a juvenile detention centre, having already spent about eight months in custody awaiting the verdict.

"He can watch TV, play games while doing time," the Hindustan Times reported, while pointing out that police sources had earlier described the teenager as "the most brutal" of the six attackers.

The Times of India said the gang-rape victim had "been denied justice" by the juvenile court.

The attack on the young woman brought simmering anger about endemic sex crime in India to the boil, and turned her attackers into public hate figures.

But despite soul-searching and a new law toughening sentences for rapists, sex crimes have continued unabated, with almost every day bringing news of a new grave offence.



Firefighters spray water to put out flames during a joint disaster prevention drill in Chiba yesterday. More than one million Japanese took part in a national disaster drill yesterday as the country assessed its emergency readiness in the wake of a massive quake and tsunami in 2011.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

India to give Rs 5,000 cr aid for Bhutan

PTI, New Delhi

India on Saturday reiterated its commitment to Bhutan's socio-economic development as it announced an assistance package of Rs 4,500 crore for the neighbouring country's 11th Five Year Plan.

In addition, India will also contribute Rs 500 crore to a special Economic Stimulus Package (ESP) devised by Thimphu to facilitate loans for private sector from banks and enhance youth employment.

Yemen PM escapes assassination bid

AFP, Sanaa

Yemeni Prime Minister Mohamed Basindawa escaped unharmd as gunmen opened fire on his convoy in the capital on Saturday, a security source said.

Basindawa was travelling in an armoured car when the gunmen in a four-wheel drive opened fire before fleeing, the security source said.

Strike hits Cambodia war crimes court

AFP, Phnom Penh

Some 100 staff at Cambodia's war crimes court for former Khmer Rouge leaders went on strike over unpaid wages on Sunday in a fresh blow to the UN-backed body.

The tribunal's 250 Cambodian workers, including judges and prosecutors, have not been paid since June, amid cash shortages and delays that caused United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Wednesday to appeal for international donors to step in.

Brotherhood chief 'suffers heart attack'

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

The spiritual leader of Mohamed Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood has suffered a non-fatal heart attack in jail, the country's state newspaper has reported.

Mohamed Badie, the Brotherhood's 70-year-old Murshid -- or supreme guide -- is one of hundreds of senior Brotherhood officials currently detained in a brutal state crackdown on the organisation that began on 3 July, the day Morsi was ousted as Egyptian president.

State broadsheet al-Ahram reported on Saturday that Badie had suffered a cardiac arrest while in prison, but that he has since recovered. State news agency MENA denied a report that Badie had died, but Brotherhood spokesmen did not respond to immediate requests about his health.

Sherief Abuel Magd, a longtime Muslim Brotherhood member and a friend of Badie's, said he could not confirm the report. But he claimed that any injury to the group's leader would not impede the Brotherhood's long-term future.



Soldier found after 45 years in Himalayas

AFP, Shimla

The body of an Indian soldier who died in a plane crash 45 years ago has been found in the Himalayas and will be given a military funeral, the army said yesterday.

A team found the soldier's body, still wearing a uniform with personal identification documents in the pocket, on August 22 -- more than four decades after he and 97 others died when an army transport aircraft crashed in February 1968.

The man, identified as Jagmail Singh, came from Meerpur village in Haryana state south of the Himalayas, an army spokesman said.

The remains were recovered at an altitude of 18,000 feet (5,400 metres) on the Dhakka glacier in Himachal Pradesh state.

Trekkers stumbled upon the wreckage of the plane in 2003 after finding the partially frozen body of a soldier on the glacier in a particularly remote stretch of the Himalayas.

The Himalayas have long been an icy graveyard for those who disappear in them.

A 1999 expedition to Mount Everest discovered the frozen body of British mountaineer George Mallory, who vanished in 1924 as he tried to reach the world's highest point.

Iraq violence kills 800 in August: UN

REUTERS, Baghdad

About 800 Iraqis were killed in August, the United Nations said yesterday, condemning a wave of violence in the country that has reached levels not seen since 2008.

Most of the 804 killed were civilians, targeted in shootings and bombings mainly claimed by the Iraqi wing of al Qaeda. More than 2,000 people were wounded, the UN figures showed.

The number of people who were killed last month was however lower than in July, when the UN reported that there were 1,057 victims, the highly monthly toll since 2008. Violence in Iraq was at its height in 2006-2007 when the number of people killed per month sometimes exceeded 3,000.

Nearly 5,000 civilians have been killed and 12,000 wounded since the beginning of 2013, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) said in a statement.

In August, Baghdad was once again the most affected governorate, accounting for more than a third of those killed nationwide, the UN said.

Since 2008 violence has decreased and a rise in oil revenues has helped to boost the economy. But eighteen months since US troop withdrew, bombing campaigns have increased.

UN rights chief 'prejudiced'

Says Sri Lanka state press

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's state-run media yesterday accused UN human rights chief Navi Pillay of being "prejudiced", a day after she warned that the island was becoming "increasingly authoritarian".

Pillay ended a fact-finding mission to the country to probe allegations of war crimes Saturday by saying Sri Lanka was a place where the rule of law had eroded and the independence of the judiciary was undermined.

"She came with a prejudiced mind and she is leaving with a prejudiced mind," the Sunday Observer said in a front-page article headlined: "She hasn't changed a bit."

"She probably thought of the visit in some way as an opportunity to give credence to her preconceived judgments, and nothing else," the paper added.

The rights chief accused military officials of harassing and intimidating priests, journalists and other civilians as punishment for meeting her during her visit.

"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 said.

The government did not immediately respond. Pillay's visit was marred by personal attacks against her by government activists, including three government ministers. She told reporters Saturday that President Mahinda Rajapakse had personally "apologised" to her for the abuse.