

Iran will support Syria 'to the end'

AFP, Tehran

Iran will support Syria "until the end" in the face of possible US-led military strikes, the chief of Iran's elite Quds Force unit was quoted yesterday by the media as saying.

Iran is Syria's main regional ally and some analysts believe a wider goal of US President Barack Obama's determination to launch a strike against the Damascus regime is to blunt Tehran's growing regional influence and any consequent threat to Washington ally Israel.

"The aim of the United States is not to protect human rights ... but to destroy the front of resistance (against Israel)," Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani was quoted as saying.

"We will support Syria to the end," he added in a speech to the Assembly of Experts, the body that supervises the work of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

He did not elaborate on the nature of the support and Iran has constantly denied allegations by Western powers that it has sent military forces to prop up President Bashar al-Assad's embattled regime.

A year ago, the chief of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Mohammad Ali Jafari, said that members of the Quds Force foreign operations unit were in Syria but only to provide Assad's government with "counsel and advice".

Iran's Defence Minister Hossein Dehqan, meanwhile, ruled out sending troops or weapons to Syria.

"The Syrians do not need us to provide them with weapons because they have a defensive anti-aircraft system themselves," he was cited in the local media as saying.



US President Barack Obama walks away after being welcomed by Russia's President Vladimir Putin at the start of the G20 summit in Saint Petersburg yesterday. Russia hosts the G20 summit hoping to push forward an agenda to stimulate growth but with world leaders distracted by divisions on the prospect of US-led military action in Syria.

PHOTO: AFP

Pentagon may take charge of arming Syrian rebels

AFP, Washington

Washington is weighing expanding support for Syrian rebels by having the Pentagon take charge of arming the opposition instead of a clandestine effort by the CIA, officials said Wednesday.

"It's under consideration," said a US official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"If and how (it would be done) are both questions being discussed," the official told AFP.

The Wall Street Journal first reported the possible change on Wednesday.

After concluding in June that the Syrian regime used sarin gas in a small-scale attack, President Barack Obama's administration decided to start supplying weapons to the rebels through the Central Intelligence Agency.

But after another alleged chemical weapons attack on a larger scale, the administration is looking at ratcheting up support for the rebels, two US officials said.

Lawmakers have complained that promised weapons have yet to arrive, putting the opposition at a disadvantage against President Bashar al-Assad's heavily-armed forces.

Obama's deputies at hearings Wednesday and Thursday acknowledged the holdup, while suggesting the administration was open to additional assistance for the rebels.

Although the administration was focused on possible strikes to "deter" Assad's regime from employing chemical weapons, it was ready to examine how to provide more help to the opposition, General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told senators on Tuesday.

Chemical attack a possible 'mistake'

Says German intelligence

AFP, Berlin

German intelligence believes the Syrian regime was behind last month's chemical attack but that the large death toll may be the result of a dosage "mistake", news site Spiegel Online has reported.

Spiegel cited secret briefings to lawmakers reportedly given by the director of Germany's BND foreign intelligence service, Gerhard Schindler.

Schindler reportedly said that the August 21 attack appeared to stem from Syrian government forces, although there was no absolute proof.

The BND chief said that only President Bashar al-Assad's military and not the rebels had substances such as sarin gas and the capability to fire them using 107-millimetre calibre missiles, of which it has a significant stockpile.

But Schindler said the heavy number of casualties, which the United States has estimated at more than 1,400 people, pointed to a possible mistake in the dosage.

Obama's Syria plan passes first hurdle

US Senate panel okays strike; key defection hits Assad regime

REUTERS, Washington

US President Barack Obama's effort to win legislative backing for military strikes against Syria passed its first hurdle on Wednesday when a Senate committee voted in favour, but the narrow margin of victory showed the depth of US caution.

In a possible sign of internal unrest in Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's ruling Alawite sect in the shadow of a likely US intervention, Syrian opposition figures said General Ali Habib, a former defence minister, had defected. Syria denied the report.

Washington and Syria's main backer, Russia, remained publicly at odds as Obama tried to build his case for military action over chemical weapons before flying to Russia for a G20 summit hosted by President Vladimir Putin on Thursday.

Putin said US congressional approval without a UN Security Council resolution would be an act of aggression, and

accused US Secretary of State John Kerry of lying by playing down the role of the militant group al Qaeda with rebel forces.

With Obama focused on building international support, administration officials kept up their campaign of persuasion in Congress, where deep US scepticism about going to war was reflected in a House of Representatives hearing.

Still, after much jockeying over the exact wording, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved a resolution authorizing the use of military force in Syria in a vote that avoided party lines, with Democrats and Republicans on both sides. The action cleared the way for a vote in the full Senate, likely next week.

The committee voted 10-7 in favour of a compromise resolution that sets a 60-day limit on any engagement in Syria, with a possible 30-day extension, and bars the use of US troops on the ground for combat operations.

The administration is trying to balance the views of many in Congress who want a narrowly defined resolution against hawks such as Senator John McCain, who has pushed for a broader resolution that would allow direct US support for rebels.

The Senate committee adopted amendments proposed by McCain with policy goals of degrading Assad's ability to use chemical weapons, and reversing support for rebel forces and reversing battlefield momentum to create conditions for Assad's removal.

The authorization still faces significant resistance in Congress, where many lawmakers fear it could lead to a prolonged US military involvement in Syria's civil war and spark an escalation of regional violence.

The full Senate is expected to vote on the resolution next week. The House of Representatives also must approve the measure.

Meanwhile, Putin again questioned

Western evidence. He accused Kerry outright of lying when, in urging Congress to approve strikes on Syria, Kerry played down the role of al Qaeda in the rebel forces.

"He is lying and knows he is lying. It's sad."

Briefing members of Congress in Washington, Kerry played down concerns that any US military strike over chemical weapons might provoke a clash with Russia. "Foreign Minister (Sergei) Lavrov has made it clear ... Russia does not intend to fight a war over Syria," Kerry told a hearing of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Habib, the former defence minister, had been under house arrest since he resigned in protest at Assad's crackdown on demonstrators in 2011. He managed to reach the Turkish border late on Tuesday with Western help, Kamal al-Labwani of the Syrian National Coalition told Reuters.



Onlookers and recovery workers look gathers at Sheppey crossing bridge after over 100 vehicles piled up in a major road traffic accident in Sheppey, Kent, southeast England yesterday. Over 100 vehicles were involved in the collision in thick fog on the bridge in southeast England yesterday, leaving eight people seriously injured and 60 with minor injuries, police said.

PHOTO: AP

Australia's focus will be Asia: Abbott

AFP, Sydney

Australian election frontrunner Tony Abbott yesterday vowed Asia will be his main foreign policy focus if he assumes office, as an influential media group turned on incumbent Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

The conservative Abbott is on track to win tomorrow's poll.

His first travel priorities would be Indonesia, China, Japan and South Korea, he said in an interview with the Sydney Morning Herald, the flagship paper of Fairfax Media whose chairman Wednesday declared his support for the conservative.

Jack Nicholson 'retires from acting for memory loss'

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Reports claim that Jack Nicholson has retired from acting due to memory loss. Radar Online and Star Magazine say the 76-year-old, three-time Oscar-winner is no longer considering scripts, though he will continue to play an active role in public life.



One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, 1998's As Good As It Gets and the best supporting actor prize for 1984's Terms of Endearment, Nicholson holds the record for the highest number of Oscar nominations for a male actor: 12. According to US reports, he will continue to appear at the annual

awards ceremony if invited as a guest presenter of prizes, as he did earlier this year when handing over the best picture gong with Michelle Obama, and will likely be courtside on a regular basis to watch his beloved LA Lakers basketball team.

Nicholson has not been seen on the big screen since 2010.

As well as best actor Oscars for 1975's

Neither Nicholson nor his representatives have so far made any public comment on the reports of his retirement.

Wrestling for peace

Japan diplomat's unusual bid for peace in Sudan

AFP, Khartoum

In the thousands of years of Sudanese Nuba wrestling history, there had never been anything like it: A barefoot Japanese diplomat in a tight-fitting blue singlet stepping onto the sandy pitch to take on Sudan's toughest.

Four times this year, Yasuhiro Murotatsu has challenged the Sudanese. Four times he has lost. But "Muro" is not giving up.

He says his wrestling diplomacy highlights this "precious culture" and can help unite a divided country.

The Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan state are home to a linguistically and religiously diverse group of people collectively known as "Nuba".

Wrestling is central to their farm-based society, but for more than two years a more modern form of combat has devastated the region.

Non-Arab rebels from South Kordofan have joined with other insurgents from Darfur, in Sudan's west, in rising against the Arab-dominated regime which they complain has marginalised the regions.

"Sudanese wrestling can be a symbol of a united Sudan," says Murotatsu, 33, a Japanese embassy political officer who tries to spend one hour a day training for his bouts.

"That's why I am fighting. This is very important. I will be very happy if all tribes... come to Haj Yousef to support Sudanese wrestling. This is my intention," he said



before his latest match at the stadium in the Khartoum district.

More than one million people in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states have been displaced or severely affected by fighting in the area, the UN says.

Far away, the people are fighting and dying in Sudan's wars but here in the stadium where wrestling matches take place, fans from different parts of the country have come together in joy.

"I think this wrestling can have a role in ending racism in Sudan," said Mutasim Ahmed, who is from North Kordofan and is a regular spectator.

A Darfur native, Abdurrahman Tajideen, said he supported local boy Mudiriya, who is from Nuba, because "he is representing Sudan."

The widening appeal of the sport to people like Tajideen from other ethnic groups means it could help bring peace to the country, and the Nuba region in particular, said wrestling fan Hafiz Sulaiman, a Nuba.

Kenya mulling ICC pull-out

BBC ONLINE

Kenya's parliament is holding an emergency session to debate leaving the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Analysts say the motion is likely to be passed, making it the first country to cancel its ICC membership.

The ICC has charged both President Uhuru Kenyatta and Deputy President William Ruto with crimes against humanity, which they both deny. Ruto's case is due to start next week.

The ICC said the cases will continue, even if Kenya pulls out.

The charges against both Kenyatta and Ruto stem from violence that broke out after disputed elections in 2007.

They were on opposite sides during the 2007 election but formed an alliance for elections in March this year and analysts say the ICC prosecutions bolstered their campaign as they portrayed it as foreign interference in Kenya's domestic affairs.

Kenya's parliament is dominated by the pair's Jubilee coalition.

The motion, tabled by majority leader Adan Duale, said Kenyatta and Ruto were "lawfully elected" and the government should take steps to "immediately" withdraw from the Rome Statute, which established the ICC.

Legislation to this effect should be tabled in Kenya's parliament within 30 days, it added.

ICC spokesman Fadi El Abdallah told the BBC's Newsday programme that Kenya's withdrawal would have no bearing on the cases against the two men.

The ICC was set up in 2002 to deal with genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression.

The court has been ratified by 121 countries, including 34 in Africa.

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Obituary

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