

# Assad denies ordering gas attack

AFP, Washington

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has denied he was behind a chemical attack last month and called on lawmakers to reject planned US military strikes warning of possible retaliation. CBS television said yesterday.

"He denied that he had anything to do with the attack," CBS veteran correspondent Charlie Rose said, after earlier interviewing Assad in Damascus.

Assad's rare interview with an American network is to be aired on CBS on Monday.

Meanwhile, after talks with Arab League ministers in Paris, Kerry said they had agreed that the Assad regime had crossed a "global red line" with the alleged attack on August 21.

Kerry said a number of Arab countries were willing to sign a statement agreed by 12 countries of the G20 that called for a reaction to the alleged attack, and that they would make announcements in the next 24 hours.

# Britain sent poison gas agents to Syria: Report

MAIL ONLINE

British companies sold chemicals to Syria that could have been used to produce the deadly nerve agent that killed 1,400 people, The Mail on Sunday revealed yesterday.

Between July 2004 and May 2010 the Government issued five export licences to two companies, allowing them to sell Syria sodium fluoride, which is used to make sarin.

**1 SODIUM FLUORIDE SOLD TO SYRIA**  
Sodium fluoride - chemical symbol NaF - has many benign uses and has been sold to Syria for cosmetics

**2 FLUORIDE IS ADDED TO OTHER CHEMICALS**  
Combined with dimethylmethylphosphonate, phosphorus, alcohol, carbon, hydrogen and oxygen to make sarin

**3 SARIN INSERTED INTO ROCKET...**  
Gas can be delivered via a Bashar 3 rocket system, or by canisters that break open upon landing

**4 ... WITH HORRIFIC EFFECTS ON CIVILIANS**  
Exposure to sarin causes eye damage, breathing problems, loss of consciousness, shaking, and coma... leading to death

The Government last night admitted for the first time that the chemical was delivered to Syria - a clear breach of international protocol on the trade of dangerous substances that has been condemned as 'grossly irresponsible'.

The sales were made at a time when President Bashar Assad was strongly suspected to be stockpiling the chemical weapons that have caused an international crisis.

The UK firms delivered sodium fluoride to a Syrian cosmetics company for what they claim were legitimate purposes. But intelligence experts believe President Assad's regime uses such companies to divert chemicals into its weapons programme.

Thomas Docherty MP, a member of the Commons Arms Export Controls Committee, said: "These are very disturbing revelations uncovered by The Mail on Sunday regarding the provision of sodium fluoride to Syria. At no time should we have allowed President Assad's regime to get its hands on this substance."

"Previously we thought that while export licences had been granted, no chemicals were actually delivered. Now we know that in the build-up to the Syrian civil war, UK companies - with the backing of our Government - were supplying this potentially lethal substance."

"While the last export licence was issued in May 2010, these licences are obtained prior to manufacture and the industry standard is for four to five months to pass before the chemicals are delivered."

"So we are looking at late 2010 for the British supplies of sodium fluoride reaching Syria. The Government has some very serious questions to answer."

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills refused to answer questions regarding how much sodium fluoride was bought and sold - or which companies were involved.

# Chem weapon is wider issue than Syria

Says UK foreign secy

AFP, London

British Foreign Secretary William Hague yesterday called for a strong response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria, saying the issue went wider than the conflict in the Middle Eastern country.

Hague said that although the British parliament had rejected joining military action against Syria, he backed anticipated US-led air strikes.

US Secretary of State John Kerry was due to arrive in London yesterday for talks with Hague as part of a swing through European capitals to drum up support for action on Syria.

"I do believe very strongly that the world must stand up against the use of chemical weapons. The risks of not doing so in my view are greater than the risks of doing so," Hague told BBC television. He added: "This issue is about chemical weapons, which is a bigger issue than Syria."

# Pope hits out at 'war to sell arms'

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis yesterday lashed out at what he termed "commercial war to sell arms" as he led mass prayers in Saint Peter's Square for Syria.

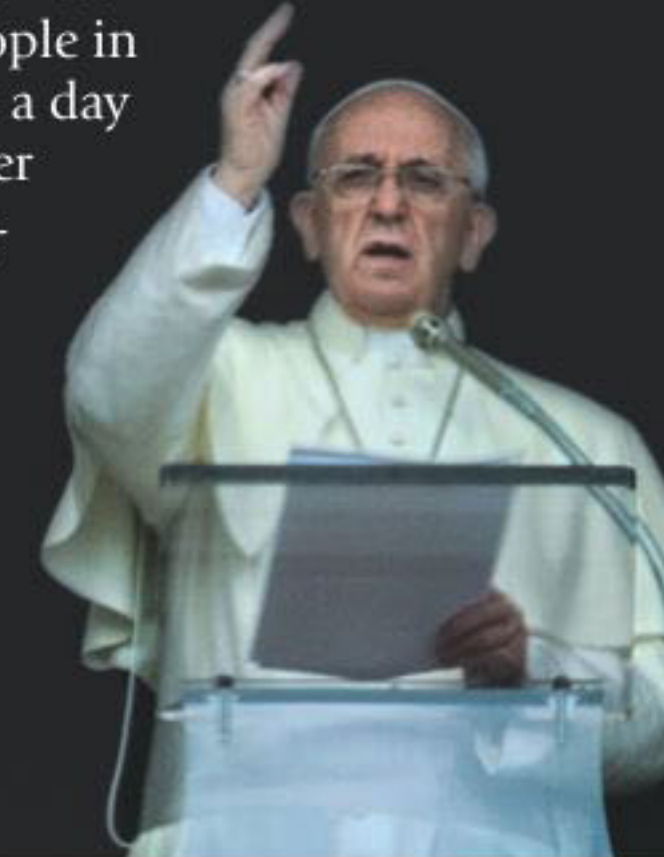
The leader of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics called for his followers to "say no to violence in all its forms, to the proliferation of weapons and their illegal trade."

In a departure from his prepared text, the pope asked what were the reasons for wars such as the one raging in Syria and mentioned "commercial war to sell arms."

"There is always the doubt whether these wars here or there are wars for real problems or wars to sell arms," he said.

The call came hours after Francis addressed an estimated 100,000 people in St Peter's Square in a day of fasting and prayer aimed at encouraging peace in Syria.

"The violence and devastation in Syria should stop immediately," he said, calling for peace in Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon as well.



# NEWS IN brief

## Russians vote in key Moscow polls

AFP, Moscow

A top critic of President Vladimir Putin yesterday faced a Kremlin-backed incumbent in a hotly contested Moscow mayoral poll, the first time an opposition leader has been allowed to stand in a high-profile election.

In the Russian capital's first mayoral election in a decade, Muscovites had to choose from six candidates including current pro-Kremlin mayor Sergei Sobyenin and main opposition candidate Alexei Navalny. Opinion polls indicate Kremlin-backed Sobyenin, 55, will win a majority in Sunday's poll.

## MERS virus kills 3 in Saudi Arabia

AFP, Riyadh

Another three people have died in Saudi Arabia after contracting the MERS coronavirus, the health ministry said yesterday, bringing the kingdom's total fatalities of the SARS-like virus to 47.

Saudi Arabia is the country worst hit by MERS, which has killed 47 in the kingdom. Authorities have urged the elderly and chronically ill Muslims to avoid the hajj this year and have cut back on the numbers of people they will allow to perform the pilgrimage.

## WikiLeaks to stay in politics: Assange

DPA, Sydney

Julian Assange yesterday declared that the WikiLeaks Party's showing in Australia's parliamentary elections had been a "great result," despite winning less than 1 per cent of the vote.

WikiLeaks Party picked up just 57,445 Senate votes or 0.62 percent Australia-wide on latest counts. "We are the second largest vote count for the new parties after Clive Palmer's party which had a billion bucks behind it," said a philosophical Assange, describing it as a "good outcome." "The WikiLeaks Party will continue for sure."

## Opposition loses poll appeal in Cambodia

AFP, phnom penh

Cambodia's election committee yesterday handed victory in hotly disputed polls to the ruling party of Prime Minister Hun Sen, prompting the opposition to say it will boycott parliament and stage further protests over allegations of widespread fraud.

The ruling party took 68 seats to 55 for the opposition, according to the country's election committee.

# Communal clashes kill 21 in Uttar Pradesh

## Army summoned; shoot-at-sight ordered

REUTERS, Lucknow

The Indian army was called in to contain communal violence pitting Hindus against Muslims that killed at least 21 people in northern Uttar Pradesh state.

Fresh rounds of violence erupted in far-flung rural pockets of the state yesterday.

The state administration clamped shoot-at-sight orders in a desperate attempt to quell the tempers running high on both sides following a "mahapanchayat" organised by the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) on Saturday.

A curfew was imposed in three districts.

Briefing the media, Muzaffarnagar District Magistrate Kaushal Raj Sharma confirmed 21 deaths in the clashes so far. However, locals claimed that many more were killed in the rural areas. Illegal firearms, iron rods, swords, knives, sticks, bricks and stones were used in clashes.

"We have arrested 52 people and seized weapons. Efforts are on to identify the others involved," said Sharma.

An army contingent of up to 800 was

dispatched to the area on Saturday night, as armed gangs of Jats, a group practising Hinduism, stormed a mosque and a village with Muslim residents, the state's principal home secretary RM Srivastava said.

The violence erupted on Saturday following a meeting attended by Jats in Muzaffarnagar district, 140 km northeast of New Delhi. Police said 10 people died, including a journalist and photographer, and about 35 were injured.

The Jats are demanding the rescinding of charges against members of their community in connection with a communal clash last month in which three people were killed.

Arun Kumar, a senior police official, said tensions were fuelled by an online video purporting to show the killing of two Muslim youths last month.

Local media said about 50 outbreaks of communal tension have occurred in populous Uttar Pradesh since the region's Samajwadi Party came to power last year. More than 25 people have died.

# Zardari quits office

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari stepped down yesterday, leaving his official residence after a record five years in power overshadowed by worsening security and a weakening economy.

The 58-year-old widower of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto was treated to an honour guard from the armed forces and shook hands with staff before leaving the plush presidential palace.

He was driven away in a black luxury saloon car from the sprawling residence at the foot of the lush green Margalla hills on the outskirts of Islamabad.

Never popular and always shrouded in controversy, Zardari -- once jailed for 11 years for alleged corruption -- is now likely to split his time between Pakistan and Dubai.

He retires six years after his wife's murder, having presided over the only civilian government in

Pakistan to complete a full term in office and hand over to another at the ballot box.

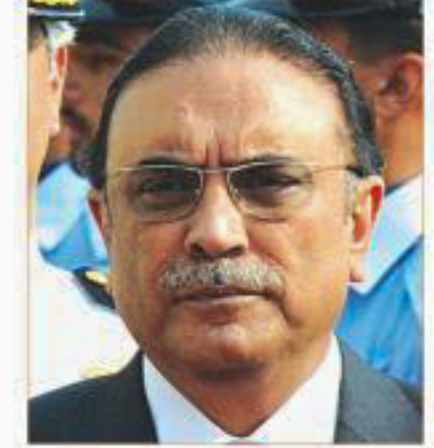
His successor Mamnoon Hussain is to be sworn in today.

A businessman and close ally of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Hussain's low-key persona and lack of personal power base will put him in stark contrast to Zardari.

Zardari is going to Lahore, hoping to open a new era for his Pakistan People's Party, which suffered a humiliating electoral defeat to the Pakistan Muslim League-N in May.

The PPP ran a rudderless general election campaign and has been thrust into its greatest crisis, suffering a crushing electoral defeat without a Bhutto at its helm.

Zardari said in an interview broadcast on Saturday that he would not run as prime minister in future and would instead reorganise the party by shuttling around the country.



# Amr Mussa to head Egypt charter panel

AFP, Cairo

Former presidential candidate and opposition leader Amr Mussa was elected head of Egypt's 50-member panel that has been tasked with drawing up a new constitution.

The panel was named a week ago by interim president Adly Mansour to draw up a revised constitution in the wake of the ouster by the army of former president Mohamed Morsi on July 3.

A disputed constitution drafted under Morsi was approved in a December 2012 referendum with only a 33-percent turnout.

The election of Mussa, former Arab League secretary general and foreign minister under ousted president Hosni Mubarak, came during the panel's first session.

The panel comprises 50 figures drawn from a wide array of political strands. However Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood has refused to take part.

The new panel has 60 days to submit a final version of the revised constitution to the interim president, who in turn has 30 days to announce the date of a referendum.



Demonstrators are held back by riot police near Guanabara palace in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on Saturday. More than 100 protesters interrupted a military parade in Rio held to mark Brazil's independence day and were dispersed with teargas.

PHOTO: AFP

# Taliban attack Afghan intelligence bureau

## 4 officials, 5 attackers killed; 150 civilians injured

AFP, Maidan Shar

At least four Afghan intelligence agents were killed and dozens of civilians were wounded yesterday when a group of Taliban militants attacked an intelligence bureau in central Afghanistan, officials said.

Six attackers armed with guns and suicide vests attacked a National Directorate of Security (NDS) building in Maidan Shar, the capital city of Wardak province south of the capital Kabul, provincial spokesman Attaullah Khogyani told AFP.

"Five attackers and four intelligence officers were killed in the ensuing clash. Thirty civilians were wounded," he said.

The first attacker was killed when he smashed his explosives-laden vehicle into the gate of the bureau, opening the way for the other five to enter the building, he said.

The fighting lasted an hour, ending only when all the militants were dead.

An AFP reporter said he had seen the bodies of five militants at the scene.

Doctor Ghulam Farooq Wardak, an official at Wardak central hospital, said more than 150 people -- mostly civilians -- were wounded.

# Why did you write nasty things?

## Taliban fighters told Sushmita before killing her

IANS, Kolkata

The militants who barged into the Afghan home of Indian author Sushmita Banerjee and later shot her after asking why she wrote nasty things about them, the victim's in-laws told her Kolkata-based relatives on Saturday.

The slain author's younger brother Gopal Banerjee said her body was buried on Thursday morning as per Islamic traditions in Sharan city of Afghanistan's Paktika province.

"I managed to talk to my sisters' in-laws in Afghanistan over phone today (Saturday) around 2.30pm. I spoke to her husband Jaanbaz Khan and one of his cousins over Jaanbaz's mobile," Gopal Banerjee said.

"He seemed very upset at what had befallen him. I could hardly talk to him. But I had detailed conversation with his cousin, who said the killers were Taliban militants," Banerjee said.

"The cousin told me that when the killers barged into the house, they started beating her. They were saying, 'Why have you written all these nasty things about us?'"

Sushmita Banerjee defied her family to marry Afghan businessman Jaanbaz Khan, with whom she fell in love in Kolkata. She stayed for years with him in Afghanistan, before coming back to India. In 1998, she wrote the best-selling memoir "Kabuliwalar Bangali Bou" (A Kabuliwala's Bengali Wife), offering a vivid description of the suffering of women under the Taliban.

Gopal Banerjee said: "The cousin told me that the militants tied up Sushmita's in-laws when they started protesting. They later abducted her."

Banerjee's bullet-riddled body, with some of the hair ripped off her head, was found on Thursday morning.



# Nato airstrike kills at least 10 civilians

AFP, Asadabad

At least ten civilians have been killed in a Nato airstrike on a pickup truck carrying women and children in eastern Afghanistan, Afghan provincial officials said yesterday.

ISAF said 10 enemy forces had been killed in a precision strike in the Wattapur district of Kunar province Saturday, but that they had received no reports of any civilian casualties.

Kunar Police Chief Abdul Habib Sayedkhal told AFP the airstrike hit a pickup truck carrying the women and children as well as four armed insurgents.

Civilian casualties in Nato operations have long been a source of tension between the Afghans and US-led Nato troops.

# MALDIVES ELECTION

## Nasheed faces tricky run-off

AFP, Male

The ex-leader of the Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed, faces a tricky run-off after failing to win a majority in presidential polls he hoped would seal his return to power 18 months after he was toppled.

Nasheed was the clear winner of Saturday's first round but analysts said he would be disappointed in failing to pass the 50 percent threshold and would now face an uphill task to seal his comeback in the second round of voting on September 28.

The Elections Commission yesterday formally announced the run-off between Nasheed, who secured 45.45 percent of the popular vote on the honey-moon islands, and his nearest rival Abdullah Yameen, who garnered 25.35 percent.

The two other candidates, both of whom have been fiercely critical of Nasheed, could now prove a major stumbling block to the climate change activist's hopes of storming back to power after his ousting in February 2012.

Nasheed has maintained he was the victim of a

"coup" after a mutiny by the security forces but Saturday's vote passed off without violence.

Nasheed's Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) said it "preferred" an outright victory on Saturday, but was prepared to face the next round of balloting even as parties scrambled to form new coalitions.

A spokesman for incumbent President Mohamed Waheed, who suffered a humiliating defeat receiving just 5.13 percent of the vote, said he was already planning to back Yameen, half brother of former strongman president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.

Maldivians came out in force on Saturday, forming long queues outside polling booths under bright sunshine.

Regional power India and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon had called for free and fair elections to end a year and a half of political turmoil on the tropical archipelago.

