

SYRIA CRISIS

Geneva peace talks set for December 12

AFP, Damascus

A long-delayed peace conference on Syria's bloody conflict will be held on December 12, a Syrian newspaper said yesterday, as mortar shells and two blasts killed three in Damascus.

The date was reported as the head of Lebanon's Shiite group Hezbollah, which backs Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, said his forces would continue to fight alongside the regime in Syria.

The Syrian daily Al-Watan, citing diplomatic sources in Paris, said that US Secretary of State John Kerry had told his French counterpart Laurent Fabius that UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon would announce the date on November 25.

The newspaper said a source in the Syrian government declined to confirm the report, and an adviser to the president of the opposition National Coalition also said a date for talks had not been finalised.

"The organisers of Geneva II want the conference to be held before the end of the year," Munzer Aqbiq told AFP.

"Dates have been proposed around mid-December. These are not official dates. They are proposals which must be discussed."

The international community has for months been trying to convene a Syria peace conference dubbed "Geneva II", but proposed dates have come and gone with no progress.

The regime has said it is willing to attend the talks but that President Bashar al-Assad's departure from office will not be on the table.

The opposition has been divided over going to any such conference, but said this week it would attend under certain conditions including Assad's departure and exclusion from the transition process.

But Syria's Information Minister Omran al-Zohbi slammed the opposition's conditions.



Typhoon victims are given food as they wait for an opportunity to board an army plane to evacuate the hit zone area at Tacloban airport, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

US aid arrives in Philippines

UN admits failure; mass burial held

AFP, Tacloban

A huge US aircraft carrier arrived off the coast of the typhoon-hit Philippines yesterday, offering hope of a dramatic uptick in aid to destitute survivors as officials buried scores of rotting corpses.

The USS George Washington, with 5,000 sailors aboard, headed an eight-strong flotilla of US vessels bearing badly needed equipment, supplies and expertise for the thousands left homeless and hungry by one of the strongest storms in history.

But almost a week after Super Typhoon Haiyan swept through the country's central islands, killing thousands and leaving a lawless security vacuum in its wake, desperation was still apparent and many of the dead remained unburied.

"I do feel that we have let people down," conceded United Nations humanitarian aid chief Valerie Amos, who had visited the shattered city of Tacloban on Wednesday.

"Those who have been able to leave have done so. Many more are trying. People are extremely desperate for help," she told reporters in Manila.

Around 110 corpses were interred in a mass grave yesterday before heavy-digging machinery broke down, Tacloban mayor Alfred Romualdez said.

Meanwhile, President Barack Obama urged Americans to donate generously to their former Asian colony.

Ships and planes from Asia-Pacific nations and Europe are also converging on the Philippines, bearing food, water, medical supplies, tents and other essentials to a population in dire need of the basics of life.

CRACKDOWN ON ILLEGAL WORKERS

Fresh clashes in Saudi Arabia kill 1

CNN ONLINE

A Sudanese national was killed and 17 others injured in the Saudi capital during ongoing clashes over a visa crackdown, the Saudi Press Agency reported.

The death Wednesday came after two people were killed and 68 others injured Saturday in clashes between police and foreign workers, the Saudi Press Agency said.

Saudi authorities began rounding up thousands of illegal foreign workers last week after the expiration of an amnesty to formalize their status.

The crackdown is mainly concentrated in Manfouha, a district of the capital city, Riyadh.

In light of Saturday's clashes, a police spokesman urged workers without proper documents to surrender at a shelter in Riyadh until they could be deported.

Most of the workers impacted by recent police raids are African migrants.

There are no official numbers yet on how many migrants are affected by the government crackdown. Images from Manfouha show dozens of migrants waiting for buses and taxis as they prepare to leave the neighborhood.

Al Maena said many Saudis welcome a crackdown on illegal immigrants, but there are questions about who will fill their jobs. "Most of the jobs that are being done are menial jobs," he said. "They are drivers. They drive septic tanks, they do work in farms. They do many jobs that the Saudis don't."

Palestinian peace negotiators resign over Israel settlements

AFP, Ramallah

The Middle East peace process suffered a fresh blow after the entire Palestinian negotiating team resigned in protest against continued Israeli settlement building.

Negotiator Mohammed Shtayyeh told AFP the resignation move Wednesday was in response to "increasing settlement building (by Israel) and the absence of any hope of achieving results."

"Until now, president Abbas has not accepted our resignation," he added.

Shtayyeh held Israel "completely responsible for the failure of negotiations, because of the continuation and escalation of settlement building."

Another negotiator, speaking on condition of anonymity, confirmed the resignations.

"Abbas has a number of choices here -- he can refuse or accept and form a new delegation, or demand a new negotiations mechanism," he said, referring to the possibility of indirect talks through a US team.

Chief negotiator Saeb Erakat is among those who submitted their resignations, the sources said.

US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki noted that Abbas remained committed to peace talks "for the nine-month agreed-upon time frame."

"Both sides remain committed. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment last week. So we will continue to proceed," she told reporters.

Following mediation by Washington, direct talks

resumed in July after a three-year hiatus that was due primarily to Palestinian refusal to talk while settlement expansion continued.

Since then Israel has announced plans to build thousands of new settler homes in the occupied West Bank -- territory the Palestinians want for their future state under any peace deal.

Late on Tuesday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the cancellation of plans to build 20,000 more homes in the West Bank, hours after their announcement sparked US and Palestinian criticism.

Netanyahu publicly forced Housing Minister Uri Ariel, who had approved the plans, to back down after drawing US condemnation for a settlement project the Palestinians warned would end a fragile peace process.

His dramatic intervention to halt the plan to build what experts said would be the biggest ever batch of settler homes on occupied Palestinian territory came after fierce criticism from the US, which has been pushing for a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

Netanyahu directly linked his reprimand of Ariel to Israel's plans to scupper a possible international deal with its arch-foe Iran over its disputed nuclear programme.

"At this time, the attention of the international community must not be diverted from the main effort -- preventing Iran from receiving an agreement that will allow it to continue its military nuclear program," Netanyahu said.

Pope Francis 'is mafia target'

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Pope Francis's crusade against corruption has made him a target for Italy's all-powerful mafia clans, a leading anti-mob prosecutor has warned.

Nicola Gratteri, who has battled Calabria's shadowy 'Ndrangheta mafia, said on Wednesday that Francis's attempt to bring transparency to the Vatican was making the white collar mobsters who do business with corrupt prelates "nervous and agitated".

He told the Italian daily Il Fatto Quotidiano: "Pope Francis is dismantling centres of economic power in the Vatican."

"If the bosses could trip him up they wouldn't hesitate. I don't know if organised criminals are in a position to do something, but they are certainly thinking about it. They could be dangerous."

Francis, who has called for "a poor church", has backed reform at the Vatican's bank, which has been suspected for years of being a channel for the laundering of mob profits.



Blasts kill 43 in Iraq as millions mark Ashura

AFP, Karbala

Attacks mostly against Shias, including a suicide bombing that ripped through a religious procession, killed 43 people in Iraq yesterday despite massive security deployed for one of the holiest days of their faith.

The bloodshed came as a flood of worshippers, including tens of thousands of foreign pilgrims, thronged the central shrine city of Karbala for the climax of Ashura, braving the repeated attacks by Sunni militants that have marred the festival in previous years.

The suicide bomber, who was disguised in a police uniform, struck in a Shia-majority area of confessionally mixed Diyala province, north of Baghdad, killing 32 people and wounding 80, security and medical officials said.

It was the third attack of the day to target Shites.

Earlier, coordinated blasts in the town of Hafriyah, south of the capital, killed nine people, while twin bombings in the northern oil city of Kirkuk wounded five.

A bombing also targeted an army patrol in a predominantly Sunni town north of Baghdad, killing two soldiers.

An estimated two million faithful gathered in Karbala, site of the mausoleum of Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, whose death in the city at the hands of soldiers of the caliph Yazid in 680 AD lies at the heart of Islam's sectarian divide.



Chairperson of India's Congress-led UPA government, Sonia Gandhi (C) stands with her son Congress Party Vice-President Rahul Gandhi (R) as they pay their respects at Shantivana memorial to the first Indian prime minister Jawahar Lal Nehru on his 124th birth anniversary in New Delhi, yesterday. The day is celebrated as Children's Day in memory of Nehru who had a special affection towards children.

PHOTO : AFP

WikiLeaks publishes secret treaty

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

WikiLeaks has released the draft text of a chapter of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, a multilateral free-trade treaty currently being negotiated in secret by 12 Pacific Rim nations.

The full agreement covers a number of areas, but the chapter published by WikiLeaks focuses on intellectual property rights, an area of law which has effects in areas as diverse as pharmaceuticals and civil liberties.

Negotiations for the TPP have included representatives from the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Mexico, Malaysia, Chile, Singapore, Peru, Vietnam, and Brunei, but have been conducted behind closed doors.

"The US administration is aggressively pushing the TPP through the US legislative process on the sly," says Julian Assange, the founder and editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks, who is living in the Ecuadorian embassy in London.

"If instituted," Assange continues, "TPP's intellectual property regime would trample over individual rights and free expression, as well as ride roughshod over the intellectual and creative commons."

"If you read, write, publish, think, listen, dance, sing or invent; if you farm or consume food; if you're ill now or might one day be ill, the TPP has you in its crosshairs."

Even members of the US Congress were only allowed to view selected portions of the documents under supervision.

"We're really worried about a process which is so difficult for those who take an interest in these agreements to deal with. We rely on leaks like these to know what people are talking about," says Peter Bradwell, policy director of the London-based Open Rights Group.

The 30,000 word intellectual property chapter contains proposals to increase the term of patents, including medical patents, beyond 20 years, and lower global standards for patentability.

It also pushes for aggressive measures to prevent hackers breaking copyright protection. WikiLeaks claims that the text shows America attempting to enforce its highly restrictive vision of intellectual property on the world -- and on itself.

Just Foreign Policy, a group dedicated to reforming US foreign policy, managed to crowdfund a \$70,000 bounty for Wikileaks if the organisation managed to leak the TPP text.

Campaign group Fight for the Future has already collected over 1,00,000 signatures in an online petition against what it calls the "extreme Internet censorship plan: contained in the TPP."



ODDLY enough

Goats replace lawnmowers in Japan capital

AFP, Tokyo

A Japanese condominium complex has decided to ditch noisy lawnmowers and their paid pushers for a more natural option: goats.

The suburban Tokyo complex has obtained four grass-munching animals to help beautify the walled property. The developer says that if the two-month trial, which started in September, works out it may hire more goats for its other properties.

Russian ministers talk arms sales in Egypt

AFP, Cairo

The defence ministers of Russia and Egypt are locked in discussion on military collaboration between their countries, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said yesterday during a landmark visit to Cairo.

Lavrov and Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu are leading a high level Russian delegation on a visit that comes in the wake of a diplomatic spat between Egypt and the United States triggered since the ouster of president Mohamed Morsi.

Shoigu and "his counterpart (General Abdel Fattah al-) Sisi talked on military collaboration" between the two nations, Lavrov said at a Cairo news conference, without elaborating.

Sisi, who is both defence minister and army chief, led a military ouster of Islamist leader Morsi in July, after which he installed an interim government and promised elections.

Lavrov told yesterday's joint news conference with Egyptian counterpart Nabil Fahmy

that talks between the two sides had also touched on boosting economic and trade ties.

Egypt had close ties with Russia until several years before president Anwar Sadat made peace with Israel in 1979, bringing in roughly \$1.3 billion in yearly US military aid over the subsequent decades.

Diplomatic ties between Egypt and the United States soured after Washington suspended some of its military aid to Cairo after Morsi's ouster.

Since then Egypt has taken a more "independent" tack and broadened its foreign policy, Fahmy told AFP on Saturday.

Analysts said Egypt's strategy to reach out to Russia was a "smart move" but it would not lead to any fundamental change in the near term.

"Egypt's weapons system is entirely US supplied. We must understand that there won't be a fundamental shift in Egypt's military machinery as you can't have Russian arms operating on US weapons systems," said Shadi Hamid, research director at Brookings

Doha Centre.

Brotherhood leaders' trial set for Dec 11

AFP, Cairo

The trial of the Muslim Brotherhood chief and his deputies on charges related to protest deaths will resume on December 11, judicial sources said yesterday, after the previous judges withdrew.

The three judges who had presided over the trial of Mohamed Badie and 34 co-defendants, including his two deputies, recused themselves on October 29 for what they said were "reasons of conscience".

Badie and his two deputies, Khairat al-Shater and Rashad al-Bayoumi, face charges of inciting the murders of nine protesters who stormed the Brotherhood's Cairo headquarters on June 30.

If found guilty, they could face the death penalty.

Three other accused Islamists also face murder charges while 29 are charged with participating in acts of violence.

Millions of protesters on June 30 called for the ouster of Islamist president Mohamed Morsi, accusing him of working for the sole benefit of the Brotherhood, ruining an already dilapidated economy and monopolising power following the 2011 overthrow of long-time ruler Hosni Mubarak.