



Anti-government protesters wave Thai national flags during a rally at the Finance Ministry in Bangkok yesterday. Thai political protests spread outside the capital as opposition demonstrators predicted a victory within days in their bid to overthrow Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's crisis-hit government.

PHOTO:
AFP

Syria says it won't hand over power

AFP, Damascus

Syria will send delegates to a Geneva peace conference under President Bashar al-Assad's orders, but his grip over the war-torn country will not be under discussion, an official said yesterday.

The announcement comes a day after the opposition insisted Assad must not have a role in a future transition, echoing repeated calls by Western powers for the president to step down.

The January 22 peace conference dubbed Geneva 2 is aimed at ending the nearly three-year-old civil war, a bloody stalemate which has killed an estimated 120,000 people and driven millions from their homes.

"Syria announces the participation of an official delegation under the orders of (Assad) and the demands of the Syrian people, with the top priority eliminating terrorism," a foreign ministry source said, quoted by the official SANA news agency.

The source also said the delegation was not going to Geneva to hand over power, and that the condition stipulated by Syria's opposition and the West that Assad must not have a role in the country's future was out of the question.

"The official Syrian delegation will not go to Geneva to hand over power, but to take

part (in talks) along with those who are committed to furthering the interests of the Syrian people and who support a political solution for Syria's future," the source said.

"Our people will not allow anyone to steal their right to choose their future and their leaders, and what is key about Geneva is to assert the Syrians' rights, and not of those who are spilling the people's blood."

The source criticised "the French, British and other foreign ministries as well as their agents in the Arab world who have insisted that there can be no place for President Assad in the transitional period."

"The ministry reminds them that the age of colonialism is over, and they need to wake up... Otherwise it will be useless for them to attend Geneva 2."

On Tuesday, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said the peace talks would take place in the Swiss city without the presence of Assad or his radical opponents.

His remarks came as the opposition National Coalition, an umbrella group increasingly at odds with rebels on the ground, insisted Assad must go, casting doubt on whether a compromise can be found.

The Coalition affirmed its "absolute rejection of Assad or any of the criminals responsible for killing the Syrian people playing any role in a transitional body... or in Syria's political future".

NEWS IN brief

Berlusconi faces expulsion vote

AFP, Rome

Italy's parliament yesterday prepared to expel Silvio Berlusconi over his tax fraud conviction in a momentous move that raises the risk of his arrest but is unlikely to end his tumultuous career.

Thousands of Berlusconi loyalists massed outside the three-time former prime minister's luxury home in Rome to support their leader, as lawmakers from his party took the floor of the Senate one by one to back him.

"We are at a crossroads in the history of our country. Whatever happens today [Wednesday], a 20-year era is over," said Pier

Ferdinando Casini of the centrist UDC party.

Attacks in Iraq kill 33

AP, Baghdad

Attacks across Iraq including a suicide bombing at a Sunni funeral killed at least 33 yesterday, authorities said, while police found 13 bodies at two different locations with gunshot wounds to their heads.

Eight of the corpses were found dumped in a farmland in the Sunni-dominated Arab Jabour district, a police officer said. All of the dead, men believed to be between the ages of 25 to 35, suffered gunshot to their

Indian HC rejects Tejpal's plea

PTI, New Delhi

Tehelka Editor Tarun Tejpal's plea for four-week interim protection against his arrest in the woman journalist sexual assault case yesterday was rejected by the Delhi High Court which reserved its order on his anticipatory bail petition.

Justice Sunita Gupta will pronounce the order on November 29 on the anticipatory bail plea of Mr. Tejpal which was strongly

Libyan army fights Islamists in Benghazi

REUTERS, Benghazi

Libya's army clashed with Islamist militants in the eastern city of Benghazi early yesterday and three soldiers were shot dead, security and medical officials said.

Western powers, worried about stability in Libya, have promised more aid to the army to curb former fighters and militants who helped topple veteran ruler Muammar Gaddafi two years ago, but have since challenged the OPEC coun-

Bomb blast near India nuke plant kills six

AFP, New Delhi

A bomb blast near India's biggest nuclear power plant killed six people, police said yesterday, sparking a probe into whether the explosion was linked to protests against the facility.

The home-made bomb accidentally exploded overnight in a village near Kudankulam power plant in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, destroying three homes and causing injuries, the district police chief told AFP.

"Some anti-nuclear activists were living in this village. This house was being used as a bomb-making facility. We are investigating from all angles," police superintendant Vijayendra Bidari said.

The coastal village is some four kilometres from the Russian-built plant which opened in October after delays and often violent protests by locals fearing a radiation leak.

A senior official at the Department of Atomic Energy said the plant was safe and functioning normally, the Press Trust of India said.

The People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy, which has been spearheading protests against the plant, denied its supporters were involved in the explosion, local media reports said.

Some residents were stockpiling small, crude bombs because they were embroiled in a feud with others in the village, according to the Times of India. The bomb exploded while the villagers were assembling it.

Opponents of the plant, located on the coast devastated by the 2004 Asian tsunami, say it is built in a seismically sensitive

Students hold a placard, reading: "Ukraine is Europe", and flags yesterday in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv during a rally of pro-European supporters. Ukraine said it still wanted to reach a historic agreement with the European Union on closer relations despite breaking off talks on the pact in a shock move that set off mass protests.

PHOTO: AFP



Anti-govt demos sweep Thailand

Protesters paralyse several ministries

AFP, Bangkok

Demonstrators have paralysed government ministries in Bangkok to challenge Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and her exiled brother, ousted former premier Thaksin Shinawatra, in the biggest street protests since mass rallies in 2010 that turned deadly.

Thailand's mass political protests spread outside the capital yesterday as opposition demonstrators stepped up their attempts to overthrow Yingluck's government, plunging the country deeper into crisis.

Stepping up their action yesterday, protesters entered a major government complex in the northern outskirts of the capital and also forced the evacuation of the Justice Department's besieged Department of Special Investigations.

Outside Bangkok, protesters gathered at about 25 provincial halls mainly in the opposition's southern heartlands -- including on the tourist island of Phuket.

"We will not give up even if the prime minister resigns or dissolves

parliament. We will stop only when power is in the hands of the people," protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban told supporters.

Warning that the political turmoil could affect economic confidence, the central bank unexpectedly cut its key interest rate by 25 basis points, to 2.25 percent.

While the demos have so far been largely peaceful, there are fears they could degenerate into another bout of street violence in a country that has seen several episodes of political unrest since Thaksin was toppled in a 2006 coup.

The billionaire tycoon-turned-politician is adored by many of the country's rural and urban working class. But he is reviled by many in the elite and the middle classes, who accuse him of being corrupt and a threat to the monarchy.

Suthep on Tuesday called for the creation of an unelected administration to run the country, in the clearest indication yet that the demonstrators are seeking to suspend the democratic system.

Merkel forms German coalition

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

More than two months after the German general elections, Angela Merkel's CDU party has reached an agreement to form a coalition government with the Social Democrats.

After a 17-hour negotiating session, the country's two largest parties finally came to an agreement to form a "grand coalition" at around 5:00am yesterday.

Merkel had secured her party an unprecedented 42% of the vote at the elections on 22 September, but her party's traditional coalition partner, the Free Liberal Democrats, had failed to clear the 5% hurdle required to get into the Bundestag.

She faces one more obstacle before she can be sworn in for a third term as chancellor: the Social Democrats will next month put the agreement to a ballot by its members -- some of whom remain deeply sceptical about becoming Merkel's junior partner.

Dual citizenship is another policy requirement that has made its way from the Social Democrats' party manifesto into the coalition treaty. Currently, people born and educated in Germany who also hold a passport from a non-EU country still have to choose one citizenship by the age of 23.

The treaty also includes a lowering of the pension age from 67 to 63 for those who have contributed to the system for more than 45 years, as called for by the SPD.

But critics on the left have claimed that Social Democrat policies only made their way into the treaty in watered-down form. A minimum wage of €8.50 an hour will be introduced in 2015, but won't come into full effect until 2017, thus potentially giving employers time to negotiate exceptions.

Bernd Riexinger, the co-chair of the leftwing party Die Linke, said: "That is not what a turn for social justice looks like. I don't recognise the Social Democrats' signature in this."



Egypt widens crackdown

AFP, Cairo

Arrest order issued for two top leaders

Egypt yesterday ordered the arrest of two prominent activists for defying a new law on demonstrations, as it widened its crackdown on protesters that has so far targeted backers of ousted president Mohamed Morsi.

Tuesday's crackdown on protesters, mainly from secular youth movements, is seen as the opening of a new front by the military-installed authorities which justified the July 3 overthrow of Morsi by saying it was responding to massive demonstrations against his one-year rule.

Morsi's overthrow triggered a massive crackdown against his Islamist supporters which has seen more than 1,000 people killed and thousands arrested.

Yesterday, Egypt's general prosecutor ordered the arrest of Ahmed Maher, founder of the April 6 movement that spearheaded the 2011 revolt against former president Hosni Mubarak, and Alaa Abdel Fattah, a prominent activist, state news agency MENA said.

The two were to be detained for four days over demonstrations held in Cairo on Tuesday in defiance of the new law that requires organisers to seek prior permission for protests.

TACKLING AIR POLLUTION

Beijing confiscates barbecues

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Beijing is waging a war against air pollution, one barbecue at a time. Officials have destroyed more than 500 open-air barbecues to cut particulate matter.

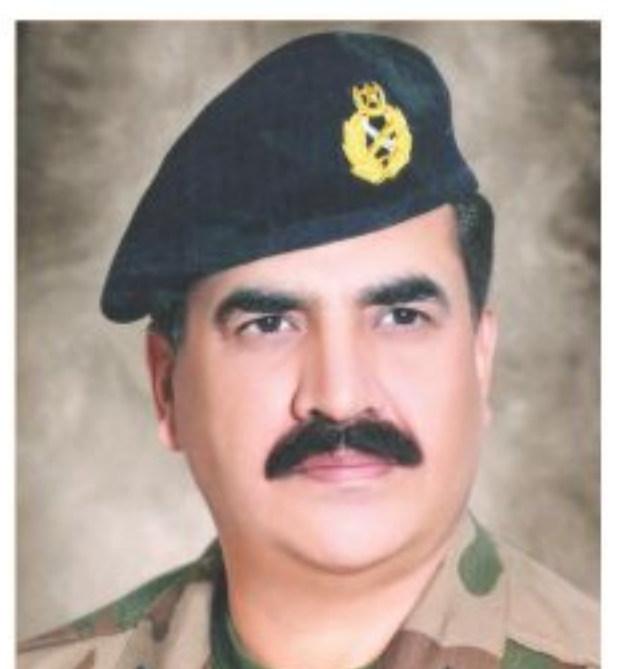
Photos carried by state media showed workers cutting pieces of metal as city wardens looked on. A media officer at Beijing's Xicheng district administration bureau said hundreds of barbecue grills had been confiscated in a three-month campaign and cut up so they could not be used again.

Ma Jun, an environmental campaigner, said residents had complained to environmental agencies in the past about the odour and smoke from open-air barbecues.

"This action will help local residents, but to deal with the bigger air quality problem we need to have priorities and I think one of the major priorities should still be the motor vehicle emissions," said Ma, director of the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs.

He said the focus should be on improving the fuel quality and emissions control of heavy duty diesel trucks, while also involving the surrounding regions, not just Beijing.

The capital's pollution regularly reaches hazardous levels. The city government announced last month that emergency measures such as factory shutdowns and traffic limits would be imposed when air pollution levels were particularly heavy.



Gen Sharif new Pak army chief

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan named a new army chief yesterday, promoting a veteran infantry commander to the most powerful position in the troubled nuclear-armed nation battling a home-grown Taliban insurgency.

General Raheel Sharif will take over as head of the 600,000-strong army from General Ashfaq Kayani, who is retiring after six years at the helm.

The change of command comes with the country facing a daunting array of challenges -- the six-year Taliban campaign which has claimed thousands of lives, vexed relations with India and the winding-down of the 12-year NATO mission in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Sharif, a veteran infantry commander whose elder brother won Pakistan's highest military award for valour in the 1971 war with India, will formally take command today.

A message from the office of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif confirmed Gen Sharif had been made chief of the army staff and General Rashid Mehmood had been made chairman of the joint chiefs of staff committee.

The prime minister's statement also named Khwaja Asif, the minister for water and power, as the new defence minister. The post had been vacant since the May general election.