

Violence kills 40 in Iraq on X-mas day

AFP, Baghdad

Bombs exploded in a market near a church in the Iraqi capital yesterday, killing 40 people and wounding more than 50, the interior ministry said.

The blasts come as Iraq suffers its worst violence since 2008, when it was just emerging from a brutal period of sectarian killings, raising fears that the country is slipping back into all-out conflict.

Security officials had initially said that a car bomb targeted the St John church in Baghdad in addition to the market blasts, but Maan, a priest from the area as well as the Chaldean patriarch all denied this.

Militants frequently attack places where crowds of people gather, including markets, cafes and mosques, in an effort to cause maximum casualties.



Indian children dressed as Santa Claus play near a sand sculpture depicting God and Jesus Christ, and created by sand artist Sudarsan Pattnaik, at Golden Sea Beach in Puri, some 65 kms away from Bhubaneswar on Tuesday. Christians around the world, celebrated Christmas Day yesterday, a holiday commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ.

PHOTO: AFP

INDIA-US DIPLOMAT ROW 'US official made grave mistake'

NDTV ONLINE

Devyani Khobragade's lawyer yesterday said US officials made grave errors during investigation leading to the diplomat's arrest on charges of visa fraud on December 12.

Mark Smith, the Diplomatic Security Services agent who handled the investigation and arrest of Khobragade, "simply made an error in reading the DS-160 form which supported the visa application for the domestic worker, Sangeeta Richard," Daniel Arshack told PTI.

"He erroneously and disastrously believed that the USD 4,500 per month salary entry on the form was Richard's expected salary when, in fact, it was clearly a reporting of the base salary to be earned by the employer, Khobragade, in the US," he said.

It was submitted so that US Embassy officials in New Delhi could determine that Ms Khobragade would be earning enough money to afford to pay Ms Richard the \$1,560 per month (9.75\$/hour for 40 hours a week) which had been agreed to according to the contract between two.



Devyani Khobragade

Fighting rages in S Sudan

'Thousands' killed as UNSC approves 6,000 more peacekeepers

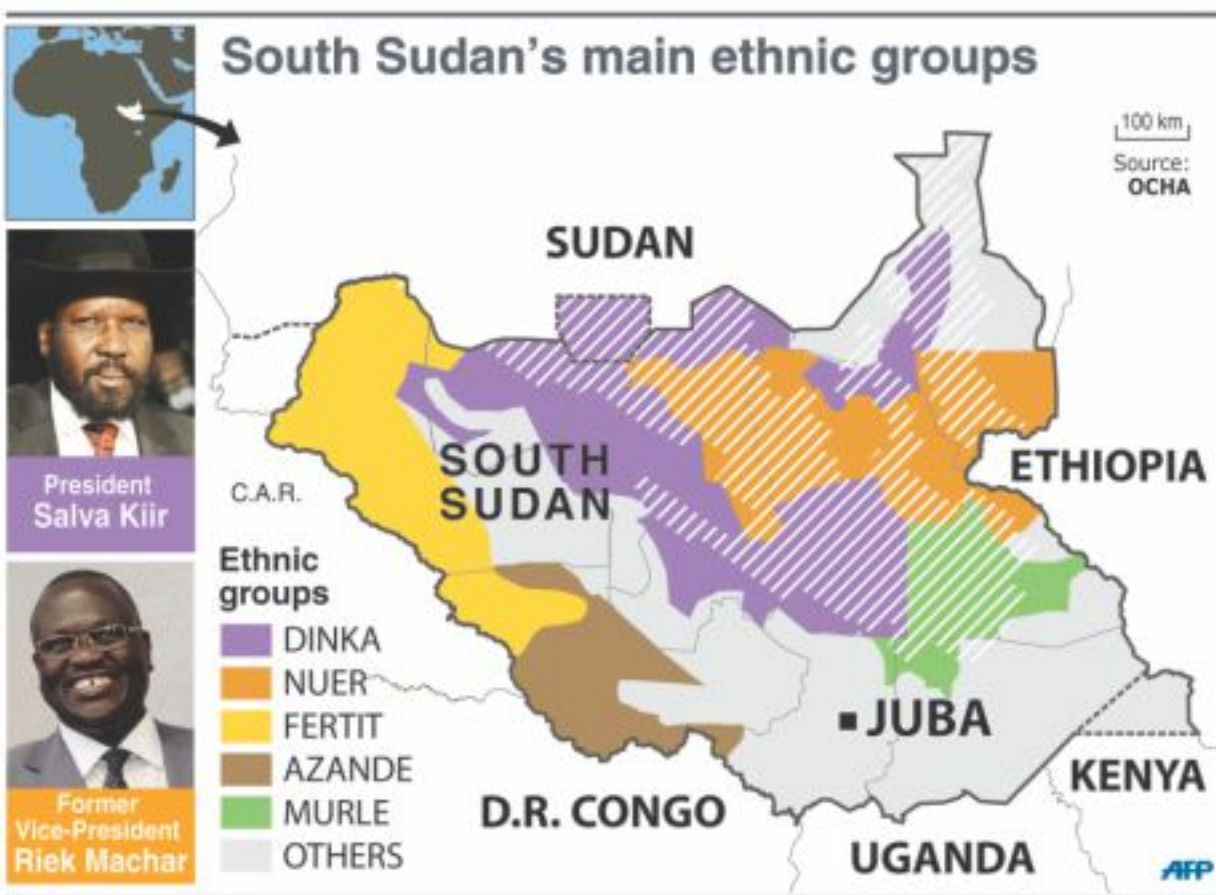
AFP, Bor

South Sudan's army battled rebel forces in one key town yesterday while troops flushed out insurgents in another after its recapture, as the UN moves to double its peacekeeping force to stave off civil war.

Thousands are believed to have been killed in more than a week of violence, with reports of bodies piled in mass graves amid escalating battles between troops loyal to President Salva Kiir and those backing his rival Riek Machar, a former vice president who was sacked in July.

Government forces celebrated late Tuesday the recapture of Bor from forces loyal to Machar after the army stormed the strategic town, but battles raged elsewhere including Malakal, capital of oil-producing Upper Nile state.

An AFP correspondent who visited Bor Wednesday said that bodies



littered the streets and stores were looted, with occasional gun shots still ringing out even as civilians poured back into the town to return home.

Fighting has spread to half the country's 10 states, the United Nations said, with hundreds of thousands fleeing to the countryside and others flooding UN bases seeking shelter.

The UN humanitarian chief in the country, Toby Lanzer, said Tuesday

there was "absolutely no doubt in my mind that we're into the thousands" of dead, the first clear indication of the scale of the conflict engulfing the world's youngest country.

Earlier, UN rights chief Navi Pillay said a mass grave had been found in the rebel-held town of Bentiu and cited reports of at least two more in Juba.

Late on Tuesday, the UN Security Council voted to send nearly 6,000 extra soldiers and police to South Sudan, nearly doubling the UNMISS force to 12,500 troops and 1,323 civilian police.

The unrest has taken on an ethnic dimension, pitting Kiir's Dinka tribe against Machar's Nuer.

South Sudan gained independence in July 2011 to become the youngest country in the world, born out of a bloody decades-long struggle for independence from Sudan. It remains a fragile state with deep ethnic

NEWSIN brief

Maoists get more time to name lawmakers

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's election commission yesterday gave the former ruling Maoists a five-day extension to propose members of a new parliament, a day after the party finally agreed to join the assembly.

The composition of the constituent assembly has been in limbo since November 19 elections when the Maoists were beaten into third place, prompting them to allege fraud and threaten

Rockets hits US embassy in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

Two Taliban rockets landed inside the US embassy compound in Kabul early yesterday, causing no casualties but underlining Afghanistan's continuing security problems as many foreigners in the capital marked Christmas Day.

Taliban militants claimed responsibility for the attack.

Kejriwal to take oath on Saturday

PTI, New Delhi

Arvind Kejriwal, who led the Aam Admi Party to a spectacular victory in the Assembly polls ending the Congress' 15-year rule, will take oath as Delhi's seventh Chief Minister on Saturday at the historic Ramlila Maidan, the venue of Anna Hazare's anti-corruption fast.

A Magsaysay award winner, 45-year-old Kejriwal and six other AAP MLAs will be sworn in a public ceremony at 12-noon.



A couple take a photo in front of a statue of former Chinese leader Mao Zedong at a park in Shaoshan, in China's central province of Hunan, yesterday. Thousands of admirers of the Communist China's founder flocked to his home town yesterday to bow before his graven image -- including one statue of solid gold -- before the 120th anniversary of his birth.

PHOTO: AFP

Thai PM unveils reform plan to stem protests

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's prime minister proposed a "national reform council" yesterday to seek a way out of the political crisis gripping the kingdom, following weeks of mass street protests against her government.

Yingluck Shinawatra said the body would be set up in parallel with a February 2 general election to recommend constitutional amendments, economic and legal reforms and anti-corruption measures.

"It is now time to develop a mechanism to push forward and mobilise national reform," she said in an address to the nation.

But the plan was immediately rejected by protest leaders who want reforms before elections, in a bid to curb the political influence of the prime minister's family.

The premier has called a snap election for February 2 to try to ease tensions, but the main opposition Democrat Party -- which



Yingluck Shinawatra

has not won an elected majority in about two decades -- has vowed to boycott the vote.

Election authorities have expressed confidence that candidates will be able to register in time. But the demonstrators have vowed to keep up their campaign to disrupt the polls, with protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban threatening to "shut down the country" to prevent people voting.

Pro-Thaksin parties have won every election since 2001. The recent protests have left five people dead and more than 200 wounded in street violence, although tensions have abated recently.

Yingluck's cabinet yesterday extended a special security law for two more months to cope with the protests.

The law, known as the Internal Security Act, gives the police additional powers to block routes, ban gatherings, carry out searches and impose a curfew, although not all the measures have been used.

Air raids kills 400 in Syria's Aleppo

AFP, Damascus

The death toll from a 10-day Syrian regime air offensive on Aleppo rebels passed 400 yesterday.

Aleppo has been divided into regime and rebel-held enclaves since the opposition launched a massive offensive on the northern city in July last year.

The air force has been bombarding the rebel-held areas using TNT-packed barrels since December 15, in an offensive the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said has left 410 people dead, including 117 children, as of Tuesday night.

Also among those killed were 34 women, 30 rebel fighters and nine jihadists.

The Syrian conflict is estimated to have killed more than 126,000 people since it first started out as peaceful anti-regime protests in 2011.

Meanwhile, in a new sign of confidence, Syria's Oil Minister Suleiman Abbas and General Petroleum Company signed a major oil and gas exploration deal with Russia's Soyuzneftegaz energy firm, with cooperation spanning 25 years.

The deal permits the exploration of an area of 2,190 square kilometres in the Mediterranean off the Syrian coast.

Brotherhood a terrorist group

Declares Egypt; Islamists defiant; former Morsi-era PM arrested

AGENCIES

Egypt's military-backed interim government has declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group, criminalising all its activities, its financing and even membership to the group from which the country's ousted president hails.

The announcement is a dramatic escalation of the fight between the government and the Brotherhood, which has waged near-daily protests since the 3 July popularly backed military coup that toppled Mohamed Morsi. An Egyptian court had banned the group in September.

Hossam Eissa, the minister of higher education, read out the cabinet statement after a long meeting yesterday, saying: "The cabinet has declared the Muslim Brotherhood group and its organisation as a terrorist organisation."

He said the decision was in response to Tuesday's deadly suicide bombing targeting a police headquarters in a Nile Delta city which killed 16 people and wounded more than 100. The Brotherhood has denied being responsible for the Mansoura attack, for which an al-Qaeda inspired group has claimed responsibility.

"Egypt was horrified from north to south by the hideous crime committed by the Muslim Brotherhood group," Eissa said. "This was in context of dangerous escalation to violence against Egypt and Egyptians [and] a clear declaration by the Muslim

Brotherhood group that it still knows nothing but violence."

"It's not possible for Egypt the state nor Egypt the people to submit to the Muslim Brotherhood terrorism," he added.

"Members who continue to belong to this group or organisation following the release of this statement will be punished according to the law," the statement said.

Eissa offered no evidence in his speech linking the Brotherhood to Tuesday's attack.

The declaration gives the armed forces and the police the right to enter universities and prevent protests, as "protection to the students", it added.

However, a member of Muslim Brotherhood's executive council, Ibrahim Munir, vowed that the movement would keep up protests after Egypt's military-installed government.

Meanwhile, Egyptian police arrested ousted Islamist president Mohamed Morsi's former prime minister Hisham Qandil Tuesday. He is facing jail after being convicted of failing to respect a court ruling while in office.

The cabinet had come under increased pressure to declare the Brotherhood a terrorist group following Tuesday's bombing.

"Egypt enveloped in sadness... and the government waffles," read the front page banner of the state-owned Al-Ahram newspaper yesterday.

Morsi and the Brotherhood's leadership face trial on charges of colluding with militant groups, including the Palestinian



ODDLY enough



Creepy surgeon

AFP, London

A British surgeon has been suspended over allegations that he "branded" his initials onto a patient's liver, media reported on Tuesday.

Simon Bramhall faces an investigation after a colleague discovered the initials "SB" on the organ during a follow-up operation at Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, central England, newspapers said.

The Daily Mail newspaper said Bramhall used non-toxic argon gas to sear his initials onto the