

# S Sudan rivals battle over key oil region

AFP, Juba

South Sudan's government said yesterday it was battling to retake the key rebel-held town of Bentiu, as thousands of civilians continued to flee fighting across the country.

The ongoing fighting, mainly in the oil-rich north and around Bor in the centre, came as peace talks being held in neighbouring Ethiopia appeared to be deadlocked.

The rebels say they will only agree to a ceasefire if the government frees a group of alleged coup plotters detained after the fighting began more than three weeks ago, although the government has ruled this out.

Army spokesman Philip Aguer told AFP that troops loyal to President Salva Kiir were now "next to Bentiu," capital of Unity State and one of South Sudan's main oil-producing areas, and that clashes were continuing yesterday.

He added that government troops were also some 15 kilometres from Bor, capital of the restive Jonglei state and situated 200 kilometres north of Juba the only other major town in rebel hands.

An AFP correspondent in Minkammen, on the other side of the swamps of the crocodile-infested White Nile river from Bor, said hundreds of people are making a perilous journey by boat and on foot to escape the fighting, joining 80,000 others -- the single largest concentration of people displaced by the conflict.

Unity State is where much of fledgling oil producer South Sudan's best-quality crude is pumped. The country's oil production has dropped by around a fifth since the fighting began, depriving the impoverished nation of a key source of foreign currency.



People arrive at Minkammen, a small South Sudan port yesterday, fleeing violence in Bor region. South Sudan's young democracy risks "shattering" amid fierce fighting which has cost over 1,000 lives, a top US official warned yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

# Hamas and Iran rebuild ties

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

A rapprochement between Hamas and Tehran is under way almost three years after a breach over the Palestinian party's refusal to back the Syrian government in the civil war, and amid its current political isolation following the demise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

The rebuilding of the relationship is likely to dismay Israel and the US, which had welcomed the weakened ties between Gaza's rulers and their powerful political, financial and military sponsors.

The alliance was severely damaged by the stance Hamas took when the uprising against Bashar al-Assad began in Syria almost three years ago. Although the exiled Hamas leadership had been hosted by Assad's regime in Damascus for a decade, it refused to back the government against the rebels, incurring the wrath of Syria's allies, Tehran, Meshaal and other members of the external Hamas leadership left Syria the following year, in 2012.

Iranian leaders cut off funding to Hamas, which had been worth around \$23m (£14m) a month, causing a serious financial crisis for Gaza's rulers. This has been severely exacerbated in the past six months by the closure of the smuggling tunnels between Gaza and Egypt by the new regime in Cairo.

# Turkey moves to curb web freedom

AFP, Istanbul

The Turkish government has moved to impose strict controls on the Internet by monitoring the activities of online users and blocking certain keywords, a parliamentary source said yesterday.

The proposals are contained in a bill submitted to parliament by Turkey's family and social policy ministry and are the latest in a string of government moves testing freedom of expression in the aspiring EU member state.

The draft legislation will allow the authorities to block keywords deemed problematic and limit access to video-sharing websites that include them, the source said.

It will allow officials to keep a record of all activities of Internet users for two years and monitor all their activities, including access to social networking sites.

"The draft bill is designed to 'protect the family, children and youth from items on the Internet that encourage drug addiction, sexual abuse and suicide,'" Hurriyet newspaper said.

The ruling Justice and Development Party rejected comparisons with China, which is notorious for its Internet censorship.

In 2010, Turkey lifted a ban on YouTube, two years after a court blocked access to the website because of videos deemed insulting to the country's founder.

During the mass anti-government protests in June, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan called Twitter "a menace", denouncing protesters who turned to social media for information on the unrest.

# Jihadists fighting back

Russia blocks new UN move; Germany to help destroy chemical weapons

AFP, Damascus, United Nations, Berlin

Jihadists battling rebels in northern Syria fought yesterday to recover lost turf nearly a week after a new front opened in the conflict gripping the country.

The fighting comes a day after the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant was expelled from Aleppo city by rebels fighting to topple President Bashar al-Assad.

Meanwhile, a massive car bomb blast in the central province of Hama killed at least 18 people, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Russia, on the other hand, on Wednesday blocked a British-drafted UN Security Council statement condemning the Syrian government attacks on the city of Aleppo, diplomats said.

It was the second time in a month that Russia objected to a western bid to slam President Bashar al-Assad's air assault against Syria's biggest city that has killed hundreds since December 15.

Aid groups say that Scud missiles and barrels packed with explosives and shrapnel have been dropped on

schools, markets and hospitals in Aleppo, killing more than 700 people.

Russia is a key backer of Assad and has used its power as a permanent council member to veto three legally binding resolutions on Syria since the war started in March 2011.

The United States proposed a non-binding statement on Aleppo in December, but Russia blocked it with what Western diplomats called "wrecking amendments" that would have watered it down.

Germany, meanwhile, said yesterday it had accepted a UN request to destroy remnants of Syria's chemical weapons on its own soil as part of a bid to eliminate the arsenal by June 30.

The foreign and defence ministries said in a joint statement that the move was intended to speed up the scrapping of all of Syria's chemical weapons stocks and thus advance the peace process.

State-owned company GEKA based in the northern town of Munster will handle the mission "in full compliance with environmental regulations",

the ministries added.

Yesterday's violence comes nearly a week after rebels launched an all-out attack on ISIL, and almost three years into a war that broke out after Assad's regime launched a brutal crackdown against dissent.

The fighting has not stopped the main conflict between opposition fighters and the regime.

At least 18 people, among them women and children, were killed in the huge car bombing in Kafat in central Hama province yesterday, the Observatory said.

Much of the province, including Kafat, is still under regime control, and state television reported the "terrorist" blast, saying 16 people were dead and tens more wounded.

The Observatory said "the number of casualties is likely to rise because several of the wounded are in critical condition", adding that the blast took place near a school.

Most of the victims were civilians, it added.

The majority of Syria's car bomb-

# Heavy clashes as Iraq fighting sparks rights worries

AFP, Fallujah

Security forces backed by tanks yesterday battled militants in Iraq's Anbar province, where fighting has displaced thousands and sparked warnings of rights abuses and a worsening humanitarian crisis.

The UN and NGOs have warned of a lack of access for civilians to key supplies during a government blockade of Fallujah and parts of the nearby Anbar provincial capital Ramadi, which were seized by militants last week.

And Washington has piled pressure on Baghdad to focus on political reconciliation as well as military operations to resolve the standoff.

The Anbar crisis and a protracted surge in nationwide violence are among the biggest threats to face Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki during his eight years in office, and come just months before the country's first general election in four years.

Security forces yesterday backed by tanks engaged in heavy fighting with Al-Qaeda-linked militants in the Al-Bubali area, between Ramadi and Fallujah, a police officer said.

Human Rights Watch meanwhile condemned abuses by all sides in the Anbar clashes, criticising Iraqi government forces for using what it alleged was indiscriminate mortar fire in civilian neighbourhoods, and militants for deploying in and attacking from populated areas.

Fallujah and parts of Ramadi have been outside government hands for days -- the first time militants have exercised such open control in major cities since the insurgency that followed the 2003 US-led

# Killing that led to UK riots was lawful: jury

AFP, London

A British inquest jury concluded Wednesday that police acted lawfully in shooting a man dead in 2011, prompting an angry reaction two years after his death sparked nationwide riots.

The family of suspected gang member Mark Duggan shouted obscenities at jurors after the verdict, while police said reinforcements were ready to deal with any fresh unrest.

The 29-year-old father of six, who had previous convictions for low-level offences, was gunned down after police stopped the taxicab in which he was travelling in Tottenham, north London, on August 4, 2011, on suspicion of having collected a gun from Kevin Hutchinson-Foster and had been under surveillance for suspected gang link.

Hutchinson-Foster was jailed for 11 years in February for supplying the gun.

The jury found that police had not done enough to gather and react to this intelligence, but they recorded a verdict of lawful killing by an 8-2 majority.

They ruled that Duggan did not have a gun in his hand when he was shot by a police marksman in the arm and the chest. But they concluded that he had had a gun with him in the taxi and threw the weapon over a nearby fence seconds before the killing.

The resulting unrest in London, Birmingham, Manchester and other English cities left five people dead and caused millions of pounds' worth of damage.



Thai protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban, centre, clinches his fist as he leads a protest march through the streets of Bangkok, yesterday. Nearly 15,000 police and soldiers will be deployed in the Thai capital next week for the planned "shutdown" of Bangkok by demonstrators trying to overthrow the government, officials said.

PHOTO: AFP

# EU body approves Snowden hearing

AFP, Brussels

A European Parliament committee approved plans yesterday to hear US intelligence whistleblower Edward Snowden, whose revelations about snooping on EU leaders has sparked uproar against Washington.

Parliament's Civil Liberties committee voted 36 in favour, two against, to hear Snowden in an inter-active video-link from Russia where he has found temporary asylum.

Reports based on Snowden's leaked files have shown Washington running a global system, backed up by allies such as Britain, to listen in on Internet and telephone systems.

Many MEPs have demanded Brussels take a hard line with Washington, threatening the suspension of talks on a massive EU-US free trade deal to drive the point home.

# Obama to finalise NSA reforms

Invites Merkel to Washington after phone-tap row

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama met top spy chiefs Wednesday as he finalised a decision on how to rein in National Security Agency spying sweeps following revelations by Edward Snowden.

Obama met the heads of the NSA, CIA, FBI and the director of national intelligence as part of a string of meetings with advocates on both sides of the debate on balancing privacy and national security.

The meeting included CIA chief John Brennan, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, NSA head General Keith Alexander and Federal Bureau of Investigation Director James Comey.

Obama was to meet top lawmakers with responsibilities overseeing the intelligence community to discuss how to reform the intelligence community.

Aides say that Obama spent considerable time during his recent vacation in Hawaii mulling new constraints on US security agencies in the wake of

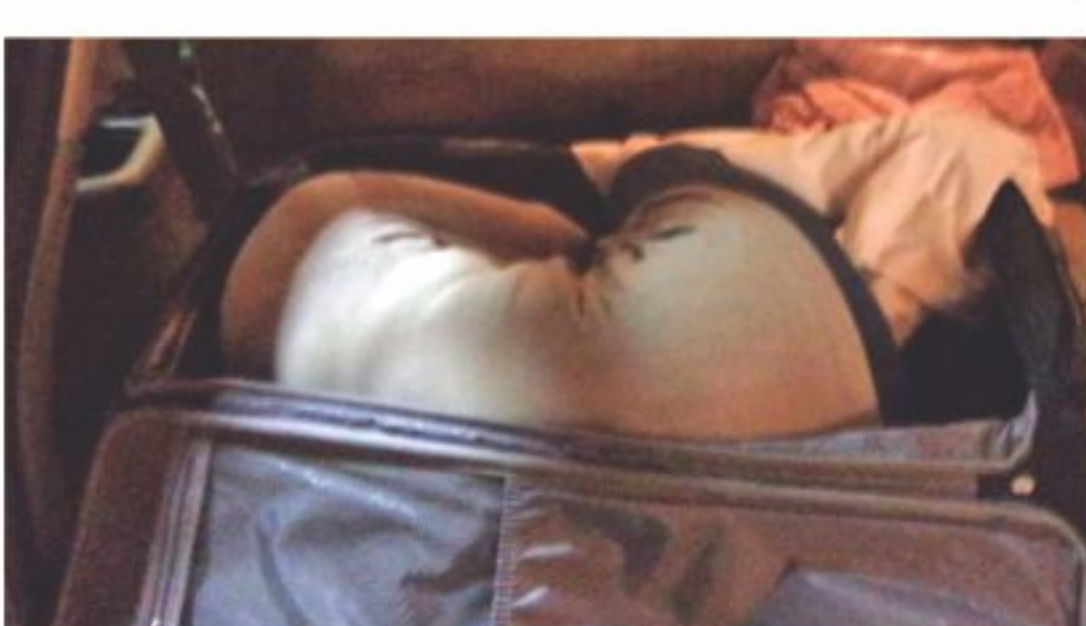
revelations of mass snooping by fugitive intelligence agency contractor Snowden.

The president will deliver his conclusions in a speech within weeks, and definitely before his annual State of the Union Address, which is scheduled for January 28.

A review panel tasked by Obama with looking at reforms of the intelligence community came up with 46 recommendations in a report issued in December, among them scaling back NSA activities to restore public trust.

Meanwhile, President Barack Obama invited German Chancellor Angela Merkel to Washington on Wednesday, hoping to mend fences after a row provoked by revelations of US eavesdropping on her cellphone.

Obama called Merkel to wish her a speedy recovery after her recent skiing injury and invited her to visit at a "mutually agreeable time in the coming months," the White House said in a statement.



# Woman caught sneaking into US in suitcase

CNN ONLINE

Customs and Border Protection officers foiled a smuggling attempt at the US-Mexico border when they discovered a woman contorted and hidden inside a suitcase on December 30.

The woman, a Thai national named Pornkamol Mongkolsermsak, was charged with re-entry after deportation, CBP spokesman Victor Brabble said.

When officers inspected the vehicle, they opened up the suitcase and found the 48-year-old woman tucked into a ball and laying hidden underneath some clothing.



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