

Thai protesters lay siege to provincial offices

AFP, Bangkok

Anti-government protesters in Thailand besieged government offices in a dozen southern provinces yesterday as part of their campaign to force Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra from power, officials said.

The move follows weeks of mass rallies in the Bangkok that have sparked several bouts of violence, including grenade attacks and shootings that both sides have blamed on each other.

The government reiterated yesterday that it was ready to declare a state of emergency if needed to control the situation.

Demonstrators blocked the entrances to state offices in 12 provinces in the opposition-dominated south to stop civil servants going to work, officials said.

"Protesters locked the gates and asked officials to leave," said Anucha Romayanan, a spokesman for the Centre for Administration of Peace and Order, set up by the government to oversee the handling of the protests.

Protesters also surrounded a government savings bank in Bangkok.

Yingluck is under intense pressure from demonstrators, backed by the royalist establishment, to step down after more than two months of street rallies aimed at ousting her government from office and installing an unelected "people's council".

She has called an election for February but the main opposition party is boycotting the vote. The protesters are seeking to disrupt the polls and have prevented candidates from registering in some southern constituencies.



A protester sprays fire in the direction of the riot police during clashes in the centre of Kiev, Ukraine yesterday. EU foreign ministers deplored violent protests in Kiev, saying the government was at fault for passing a package of repressive laws in an effort to tame pro-EU demonstrations.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

Zimbabwe's Mugabe appears in public

REUTERS, Harare

Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe appeared in public for the first time in several weeks yesterday to mourn the death of his sister, ending speculation that he may be bed-ridden, in declining health or even dead.

The health of Mugabe, who is 89 and has ruled since the former Rhodesia's independence from Britain in 1980, is the hottest news topic for Zimbabwe's 13 million people and its ruling ZANU-PF party.

Hariri to return to Lebanon for election

AFP, Paris

Former Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri, exiled in France since 2011, said yesterday he would return to his country for November legislative elections, adding that he hoped to become premier again.

Lebanon is in the throes of political turmoil since the March 2013 resignation of prime minister Najib Mikati.

Vietnam to execute 30 over drugs

AFP, Hanoi

Vietnam yesterday sentenced 30 drug smugglers to death in the communist country's largest ever narcotics case, involving scores of defendants and nearly two tons of heroin, a judge said.

The 30 men and women, all Vietnamese, were found guilty of drug trafficking and given the death penalty while a further 59 defendants were handed sentences ranging up to life in prison, presiding judge Ngo Duc told AFP.

Syrian peace talks in doubt after UN invites Iran

REUTERS, Un

Syria's political opposition said yesterday it would withdraw from international peace talks scheduled this week unless United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon retracts an invitation to Iran, President Bashar al-Assad's main backer.

Washington, however, suggested it could support Iran's participation if it explicitly declares its support for a June 2012 plan for a political transition that the United States says means Assad would have to step down.

"This is something Iran has never done publicly and something we have long made clear is required," State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said in a statement. "If Iran does not fully and publicly accept the Geneva communiqué, the invitation must be rescinded."

Ban said earlier that he had invited Iran to attend the first day of talks on January 22 in Montreux, Switzerland and that Tehran had pledged to play a "positive and constructive role" if it was asked to participate.

Less than 48 hours since Syria's main political opposition group in exile, the National Coalition, agreed to attend the talks, dubbed "Geneva 2," it

threatened to withdraw.

"The Syrian Coalition announces that they will withdraw their attendance in Geneva 2 unless Ban Ki-moon retracts Iran's invitation," it said in a Twitter post, quoting National Coalition spokesman Louay Safi.

Another senior Coalition member, Anas al-Abdah, told Al-Jazeera TV by phone that the body was "surprised" by the invitation to Iran. "It is illogical and we cannot in any way accept it."

Some 130,000 people have been killed and a quarter of Syrians driven from their homes in the civil war, which began with peaceful protests against 40 years of Assad family rule and has descended into a sectarian conflict, with the opposing sides armed and funded by Sunni Arab states and Shi'ite Iran.

Western and Gulf Arab nations say they have been reluctant to support the idea of Iran participating at all because it is supporting Assad militarily and has never backed a plan for a political transition in Syria agreed at an international conference in Geneva in June 2012.

Ban said he had spoken at length with Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in recent days and that he believed Tehran supported for the Geneva 2012 plan.

South Sudan battles rebels as UN warns of violations

AFP, Juba

South Sudanese troops battled rebels yesterday in a key oil town, the army said, as the UN warned soldiers had tried to forcefully enter a base sheltering thousands of civilians.

Thousands have been killed and half a million civilians have been forced to flee the fighting, which entered its sixth week yesterday with peace talks in Ethiopia deadlocked.

The United Nations says that atrocities including war crimes are reported to have been committed by both sides.

Secretary General Ban Ki-moon warning Sunday he was "particularly disturbed" that UN staff were threatened by government troops when peacekeepers blocked soldiers from entering their base in Bor, where thousands of civilians are sheltering from weeks of conflict.

The army has denied the incident, saying that they wanted to investigate reports rebels may have thrown off their uniforms to hide in the UN base, the claims the UN has in turn denied.

But Ban said the incident was "just one of a growing number of violations" of the UN accord with the government "making it increasingly difficult" for peacekeepers to implement their mandate.

Army spokesman Philip Aguer said the military was now pushing northwards against the rebels driven from Bor.

"Bor town is calm, but we are pursuing the rebel forces," Aguer told AFP, saying that soldiers had pushed some 65 kilometres (40 miles) from the town, the strategic state capital of Jonglei state, which they wrested back off the rebels on Saturday.



Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal (L) addresses supporters outside Parliament, with fellow Minister Manish Sisodia looking on, as Delhi Police prevent him from reaching the home ministry in New Delhi yesterday.

Taliban bomb attack kills 13 in Pakistan

AFP, Rawalpindi

A Taliban suicide bomber killed at least 13 people in a market next to Pakistan's military headquarters yesterday, a day after one of the deadliest attacks on security forces in recent years.

A further 18 people were wounded in the blast which tore through RA bazaar in Rawalpindi, Islamabad's twin city, only 15 metres from the army's General Headquarters, at around 7:45 am.

It came a day after the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) killed 26 soldiers and wounded at least 25 others in a suicide bombing in the northwestern town of Bannu.

Two high-profile attacks in 24 hours mark a sharp upturn in violence from the TTP after a period of relative quiet following the death of their leader Hakimullah Mehsud.

Parades held to honour MLK

AP, Atlanta

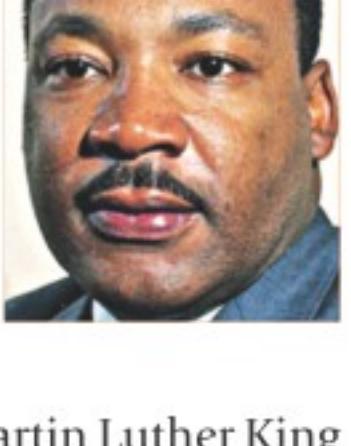
The US paused to remember Martin Luther King Jr yesterday with parades, marches and service projects.

King was born January 15, 1929, and the federal holiday is the third Monday in January.

In Atlanta, a service was planned at Ebenezer Baptist Church, where King was pastor. In Memphis, Tenn, where King was assassinated, an audio recording of an interview with King was played at the National Civil Rights Museum.

The recording shed new light on a phone call President John F Kennedy made to King's wife more than 50 years ago.

Historians generally agree Kennedy's phone call to Coretta Scott King expressing concern over her husband's arrest in October 1960 -- and Robert Kennedy's work behind the scenes to get King released -- helped JFK win the White House.



In Ann Arbor, Mich., activist and entertainer Harry Belafonte delivered the keynote address for the 28th annual Rev Martin Luther King Jr Symposium yesterday morning at the University of Michigan's Hill Auditorium.

Martin Luther King Jr was an American pastor, activist, humanitarian, and leader in the African-American Civil Rights Movement. He is best known for his role in the advancement of civil rights using nonviolent civil disobedience based on his Christian beliefs.

Pakistan president defends anti-terror record

AFP, Islamabad

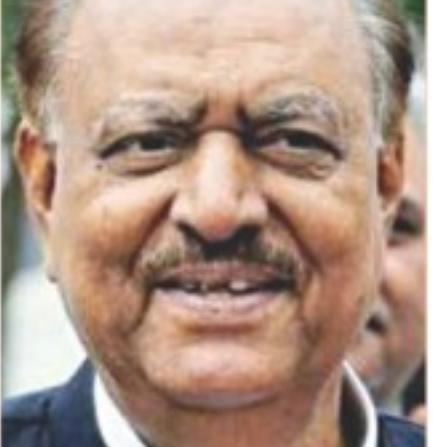
Pakistan's president said yesterday it was unfair to question his country's commitment to fighting terror at home and abroad, after Afghanistan hinted that Pakistani intelligence was behind a deadly restaurant attack.

President Mamnoon Hussain, who has a largely ceremonial role, said Pakistan wanted a peaceful and stable Afghanistan.

His comments came after Afghanistan's National Security Council, which is chaired by President Hamid Karzai, said "without doubt foreign intelligence services beyond the border" were behind Friday's suicide attack on a Kabul restaurant that killed 21 people.

"Beyond the border" is a phrase commonly used by Kabul to refer to neighbouring Pakistan, which was the main supporter of the former Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Afghan officials have long voiced suspicions about connections between the hard-



Mamnoon Hussain

line movement and Islamabad's powerful intelligence services.

Speaking at the launch of a new book about Afghanistan by a Pakistani think-tank, Hussain insisted his country's support for the fight against extremism was in earnest.

"Sometimes, our commitment is questioned. The reality is that, leaving aside Afghanistan, there is no other country in the world than Pakistan that has paid a higher price," Hussain said, according to a statement released by his office.

"Pakistan stands for a peaceful, stable, united and prosperous Afghanistan. We have consistently maintained that the solution of Afghanistan lies within Afghanistan."

The assault on a popular Lebanese restaurant in central Kabul left eight locals and 13 foreigners dead, including the International Monetary Fund head of mission, making it the deadliest attack on foreign civilians since the Taliban were ousted in 2001.

"Beyond the border" is a phrase commonly used by Kabul to refer to neighbouring Pakistan, which was the main supporter of the former Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Marijuana 'no more dangerous than alcohol'

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama says smoking pot is no more dangerous than drinking but calls it a "bad idea," amid a push for legalization in several states.

In comments to The New Yorker magazine published Sunday, the US leader also noted that poor minority youths are more likely to get prison time for using marijuana than their richer counterparts.

"As has been well documented, I smoked pot as a kid, and I view it as a bad habit and a vice, not very different from the cigarettes that I smoked as a young person up through a big chunk of my adult life," Obama said.

"I don't think it is more dangerous than alcohol."

He added that he has told his two daughters Sasha and Malia that "it's a bad idea, a waste of time, not very healthy."

Obama, in a wide-ranging series of interviews with the prestigious publication, went on to say that "middle-class kids don't get locked up for smoking pot, and poor kids do."

"And African-American kids and Latino kids are more likely to be poor and less likely to have the resources and the support to avoid unduly harsh penalties," he added.



Iran curbs enrichment as nuke deal takes effect

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday halted production of 20 percent enriched uranium, marking the coming into force of an interim deal with world powers on its disputed nuclear programme.

The UN atomic watchdog confirmed that Iran's partial nuclear freeze, part of a landmark deal struck in November with the P5+1 powers -- the US, China, Russia, France, Britain and Germany -- began yesterday as planned.

Mohammad Amiri, a top official of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation, told the IRNA news agency that Tehran had kept to its part of the deal reached in Geneva.

"In line with the implementation of the Geneva joint plan of action, Iran suspended the production of 20 percent enriched uranium in the presence of UN nuclear watchdog inspectors at Natanz and Fordo sites," Amiri said.

The International Atomic Energy Agency said in a report passed to member states that Iran "has ceased enriching uranium above

five percent" fissile purities at the Natanz and Fordo facilities.

The report, seen by AFP, said that Iran was also converting its stockpile of medium-enriched uranium, a particular concern to the international community since it can be relatively easily be further purified to weapons-grade plutonium.

"It's all fine, all their requirements have been fulfilled," one diplomat told AFP.

The suspension starts the clock on negotiating a trickier long-term accord aimed at ending the Iran nuclear standoff and averting war once and for all, a process threatened, however, by possible new US sanctions.

On day one, Iran had to halt enrichment of uranium to medium levels and to begin diluting half its stockpile of this material.

Baghdad bomb blasts kill 26

REUTERS, Baghdad

Seven bomb explosions killed 26 people and wounded 67 in the Iraqi capital yesterday, police and medics said, as security forces battled Sunni Muslim militants around the western cities of Falluja and Ramadi.

The bloodiest attack occurred in the mainly Shi'ite Muslim Abu Dsheer district in southern Baghdad, where a car bomb near a crowded market killed seven people and wounded 18.

No group claimed responsibility for the blasts. But Sunnis insurgents, some of them linked to al Qaeda, are widely blamed for a surge in violence in the past year apparently aimed at undermining the Shi'ite-led government and provoking a return to all-out sectarian strife.

Al Qaeda militants and their local allies seized control of Falluja and parts of Ramadi on January 1, exploiting resentment among minority Sunnis against the government for policies perceived as unfairly penalising their once-dominant community.

Five of yesterday's bombs targeted mainly Shi'ite districts of the capital, while two were in mostly Sunni areas.

Sporadic fighting again flared around Falluja and Ramadi.

Anti-government tribesmen attacked an army barracks in Saqlawiya, 10 km northwest of Falluja, and destroyed two Humvee vehicles, before army helicopter gunships forced them to retreat. One of the attackers was killed and two wounded, police said. There was no word on casualties among the army.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has ruled out a full-scale army assault on Falluja, urging tribesmen to drive al Qaeda militants from the city, where US troops occupying Iraq fought some of their toughest battles with Sunni insurgents in 2004.