

Obama plans more pressure on Syria

Peace talks break off, no new date set

AFP, Rancho Mirage

As Syrian peace talks in Geneva appeared to flounder, US President Barack Obama vowed to step up pressure on the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

And in Geneva, UN mediator Lakhdar Brahimi yesterday said the second round of peace talks between Syria's warring sides broke off without making any progress and without a date being set for a third round.

"I think it is better that every side goes back and reflects on their responsibility, (and on whether) they want this process to continue or not," Brahimi told reporters in Geneva.

Speaking on the final day of a second round of talks that have been mired from the start by blame-trading over the violence ravaging Syria, he apologised to the Syrian people for not making progress.

"I'm very, very sorry," he said.

Brahimi said that the two sides now at least had reached agreement on an agenda for future talks -- if they happen -- something they had failed to do throughout the past week.

Obama's remarks came as he hosted Jordan's King Abdullah II at the Sunnyside retreat in Palm Springs, California, to address issues including the flood of Syrian refugees into Jordan.

The US leader said both he and the Jordanian king "recognise that we can't just treat the symptoms" of the Syrian crisis.

"We are going to need a political transition in that region."

"We don't expect to solve this any time in the short term so there are going to be some immediate steps that we have to take to help the humanitarian situation there," Obama said. However, he pressed on diplomatic solution to the crisis.

The Syrian opposition has insisted that the focus of the talks must be on creating a transitional government, without President Bashar al-Assad. The regime representatives have meanwhile stubbornly insist President Bashar al-Assad's position is non-negotiable and refused to discuss anything beyond the "terrorism" it blames on its opponents and their foreign backers.

Brahimi yesterday said that if the sides returned for a third round they would discuss violence and terrorism first, then the transitional governing body, followed by national institutions and finally national reconciliation and national debate.



Will work with anyone Indian people choose

Says United States
PTI, Washington

The US has said it is willing to work with anyone Indian people elect in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

"We will work with whoever the Indian people choose," State Department deputy spokesperson Marie Harf said on Friday, when asked if the US is willing to work with the BJP's prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi.

The meeting between Modi and US ambassador to India, Nancy Powell, in Gandhinagar on Thursday was part of US' effort of engagement of top Indian political leadership ahead of the general elections, Harf said.

Insisting that there has been no change in its visa policy, she said visa applications are looked at on a case-by-case basis and in accordance with the regulations that govern them.

"That has been the case in the past and will be going forward as well," she said.

She denied reports that the US has maintained distance from Modi.

"That's actually not true. Our current Consul General in Mumbai and previous CGs have met with chief minister Modi, so to say no American officials have actually isn't correct," Harf said.

Fall of AAP: Part two of script to unfold

THE HINDU ONLINE

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's resignation, with all the sound and fury, would have been surprising had it not happened. When, in December 2013, the Aam Aadmi Party formed a government in Delhi, it had a single objective in mind -- to pass the Jan Lokpal Bill, failing which to bow out of office as a martyr punished for taking on the corrupt. The script has played out almost perfectly.

Kejriwal was bound by his own past to make the passage of the Bill non-negotiable. Indeed, the anti-corruption law defines the AAP, it is the reason why the party was able to make the impossible transition from a political greenhorn to a party in power.

The Jan Lokpal Bill was the centrepiece of the 2011-2012 Anna Hazare movement. To those who thronged the fast venues of Anna, the specific clauses in the legislation were of no concern. As Kejriwal told The Hindu in a 2011 interview: "See, people did not understand the details of the JLB. They simply saw it as a dawai [medicine] for corruption."

The larger symbolism of the Jan Lokpal Bill is why Kejriwal took on the might of the Centre and Delhi's lieutenant-governor on the constitutional validity of its introduction and passage in the Assembly. There were always going to be two views on this given that the Congress was in the saddle at the Centre, and a different version of the Lokpal Bill had recently been passed by parliament. The Congress could obviously not support the AAP government's Jan Lokpal Bill and the Lokpal Bill passed by parliament for which credit was given to Rahul Gandhi.

In the event, the Jan Lokpal Bill got

blocked right at the stage of introduction with the Union Home Ministry insisting upon prior permission from the Lt Governor. Kejriwal contested this furiously. But, with the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party teaming up to vote against the Bill's introduction, the State government's fate was sealed.

Whichever way the Bill went, Kejriwal was certain to have claimed it as his victory.

Kejriwal's exit line predictably skewered the Congress and the BJP. "The two corrupt parties have got together to defeat me because they were scared I was going after

Mukesh Ambani. They could not afford for me to expose the nexus."

The AAP government's short life was high on drama; in less than two months it courted more controversy than governments would in a year. Kejriwal and his ministers probably overdid the histrionics. And yet, few would dispute that on corruption, the AAP went where none dared to go.

Part II of the script will see the AAP take the message to the country as a whole -- and set itself as the gold standard for probity and honesty.

Delhi to be ruled by president

Kejriwal launches anti-graft campaign

AGENCIES

Indian Cabinet yesterday decided to impose president's rule in Delhi following the resignation of chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and his council of ministers on Friday. The assembly will now be kept in suspended animation.

Delhi's lieutenant governor Najeeb Jung had earlier sent a report to the Union home ministry recommending imposition of President's rule in the state while keeping the assembly under suspended animation. President's rule can be imposed in a state for six months at a stretch.

The development is contrary to outgoing chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's call for immediate dissolution of the Delhi assembly and holding of fresh polls in the state.

The Constitutional vacuum in Delhi follows Arvind Kejriwal's resignation from the chief minister's post on Friday evening hours after his government's move to introduce the Jan Lokpal Bill fell through in the state assembly.

Keeping the assembly under suspended animation would leave the window open for exploring alternatives for government formation in the future.

Meanwhile, AAP yesterday announced a India-wide anti-graft campaign against Congress and BJP from February 23. Arvind Kejriwal will kick-start the campaign from Haryana on Feb 23 and in UP on March 2.

A day after Arvind Kejriwal stepped down as Delhi chief minister, Aam Aadmi Party also made it clear that it would contest the Lok Sabha polls under his leadership.

AAP leader Prashant Bhushan also echoed his party's view. Holding BJP and Congress responsible for the fall of Arvind Kejriwal government, said the party was left with no option but to quit as implementing Jan Lokpal was their top priority.

Meanwhile, Congress and opposition BJP said Kejriwal was never serious about governing and was looking for an excuse to "run away" to cover up his "failure" to deliver on his commitments. Congress spokesperson Sandeep Dikshit has accused Kejriwal of being a "negative person, a glib-talker and a smooth liar who was looking for an excuse to run away".

Congress says Kejriwal was looking for excuse to quit

NEWS IN brief

Musharraf summoned over Lal Masjid case

PTI, Islamabad

Beleaguered former President Pervez Musharraf was summoned by a Pakistani court yesterday to appear on March 1 in a case related to the killing of Lal Masjid cleric Abdul Rasheed Ghazi in a 2007 military raid. Musharraf's lawyers submitted an application requesting that the 70-year-old former president be exempted from attending Saturday's proceedings. The court accepted the application and ordered Musharraf to appear at the next hearing on March 1.

Lebanon forms consensus govt

AFP, Beirut

Lebanon yesterday formed a compromise government after a 10-month political vacuum in the country, which has seen the war in neighbouring Syria exacerbate longstanding political divisions. The announcement ends a 10-month political deadlock during which Lebanon's security situation has deteriorated sharply.

Ukraine frees all protesters

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine's leader called for the opposition to yield some ground ahead of a new mass demonstration on Sunday, after authorities released all protesters arrested in the anti-government unrest. The United States welcomed the prisoner release as an "important step to de-escalate tensions" after more than two months of political crisis as protesters seek to oust President Viktor Yanukovych.

Charge sheet against Tejpal tomorrow

PTI, Panaji

Goa police will file charge sheet tomorrow against Tejpal founder-editor Tarun Tejpal who was accused of sexually assaulting his woman colleague last year.

The charge sheet would be filed before Principal Additional Sessions court judge Anuja Prabhudesai, sources said yesterday. Tejpal (50) has been accused of raping the woman in a lift at a star hotel near here during Tejpal's ThinkFest in November 2013.



TURKEY MOVES TO REIN IN JUDICIARY

Members of parliament from the ruling AK Party (AKP) and the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) scuffle during a debate on a draft law at a parliamentary session in Ankara, yesterday. Turkey's parliament yesterday adopted the law. The opposition says the reform is a "government manoeuvre" to limit fallout from a graft probe that has ensnared top allies of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

PHOTO: AFP

India backs Karzai amid row with US

PTI, Kandahar

Amid a standoff between the US and the embattled Afghan president, India yesterday saluted Hamid Karzai's "extraordinary and brave" leadership in nurturing democracy and peace in the war-torn country.

External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid, in his speech at the inauguration of Afghanistan's first national agriculture university in Kandahar, backed Karzai and lauded his leadership in the last 12 years.

Khurshid, who arrived Kandahar early yesterday on a day-long visit, said upcoming elections in the country were a testament to the fact that democracy had taken firm roots.

"These elections are a testament to the fact that democracy has taken firm roots in this country. It is also a testament to your extraordinary and brave leadership over the last 12 years, and the manner in which you have nurtured the plant of democracy in this country," he said.

"Like in India, today no one can predict the eventual election result in Afghanistan. Many of the presidential tickets that will fight elections represent political and democratic alliances between groups that one could never imagine will one day become allies in an electoral battle."

Khurshid made the remarks while jointly inaugurating the Afghan National Agricultural Sciences and Technology University with Karzai.

The varsity, a major capacity-building project backed by India, has been set up on the site of the erstwhile headquarters of the Taliban.

India's development assistance programme for Afghanistan currently stands at \$ 2 billion, making it the leading donor nation among all regional countries.

Khurshid's visit took place amid a rift between Karzai and the US, jeopardising their proposed Bilateral Security Agreement that is vital for the limited presence of American forces in Afghanistan after the drawdown this year.

In his speech, Khurshid extended India's support to the Afghan government's efforts to establish a genuine "Afghan-owned, Afghan-led and Afghan-controlled reconciliation process".

Renzi set to be Italy's youngest PM

AFP, Rome

Florence mayor Matteo Renzi was poised to win the nomination to be Italy's youngest-ever prime minister yesterday following the ouster of Enrico Letta by former allies in his centre-left Democratic Party.

President Giorgio Napolitano was set to appoint Renzi after a day of consultations with political leaders including disgraced former premier and opposition leader Silvio Berlusconi.

The anti-establishment Five Star Movement protested at what it called an undemocratic power grab by Renzi and boycotted the talks with Napolitano, saying Italians should be allowed to choose through elections.

Letta stepped down on Friday after the Democratic Party approved a motion calling for a new government proposed by the 39-year-old Renzi, an ambitious former Boy Scout who was elected to the party leadership in December.

Renzi would be Italy's youngest-ever prime minister if his bid succeeds and has promised a radical programme of reforms to combat rampant unemployment, boost growth and slash the costs of Italy's weighty bureaucratic machine.

Thai protesters vow to press on with campaign

AFP, Bangkok

Thai opposition protesters yesterday refused to end their rallies in Bangkok despite a vow by police to clear more demonstration sites, following an operation to reclaim the besieged government headquarters.

Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's government is attempting to seize back key state buildings after more than three months of mass protests seeking to curb the political domination of her billionaire family.

On Friday police with shields and riot helmets, some carrying rifles, met little resistance as they cleared areas around Government House, which Yingluck had been unable to use for about two months.

But there were no arrests or serious clashes, and demonstrators were later seen rebuilding their makeshift barricades.

The security operation is focused on

government offices rather than major intersections in the commercial centre that have become the main focus of the rallies in recent weeks as part of what protesters have described as the "Bangkok shutdown".

So far the authorities have not announced any plan to clear those intersections, where several thousand protesters gather each evening to hear free concerts and speeches.

"We will continue fighting. We will not be shaken by the police operation," a spokesman for the anti-government movement, Akanat Promphan, said yesterday.

"No matter whether police succeed in reclaiming the rally sites or not, we will keep on protesting," he added.

About 1,200 police were mobilised to try to reclaim a government complex in Chaeng Wattana in the north of the capital yesterday, National Security Council chief Paradox Pantanabut told AFP.

China bloggers press Kerry on web freedom

AFP, Beijing

Chinese bloggers urged US Secretary of State John Kerry to push for greater freedom online in China during a rare meeting in Beijing yesterday, asking for help to "tear down the great Internet firewall".

The US embassy-organised discussion was an opportunity for the top diplomat to hear directly from China's bloggers amid reports that Beijing is stepping up efforts to clamp down on political dissent.

Chinese microblogs similar to Twitter have become key drivers of public opinion in recent years, with bloggers calling attention to issues such as official corruption and pollution that challenge the ruling Communist Party. But the rising popularity of sites such as Sina Weibo has triggered a sweeping government-backed crackdown on online dissent.

The meeting with four leading bloggers came a day after Kerry used talks with President Xi Jinping and Foreign Minister Wang Yi to call for Communist Party authorities to improve their human rights record.

'Holy grail' of food

US army make pizza that stays fresh for 3 yrs

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Researchers at a US military laboratory are close to developing a pizza which stays fresh for three years, in what is being described as the holy grail of ready-to-eat food.

"You can basically take the pizza, leave it on the counter, packaged, for three years and it'd still be edible," said Michelle Richardson, a food scientist at the US Army Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center who has spent two years working on the product.

The pizza would not need to be frozen in order to stay fresh, Richardson added.

Soldiers have been asking for pizza since lightweight individual field rations — known as meals ready to eat, or MREs — replaced canned food in 1981 for soldiers in combat zones or areas where field kitchens cannot be set up.

