

# 38 male Homs evacuees freed in Syria: Governor

AFP, Damascus

A group of 38 male evacuees from besieged parts of the Syrian city of Homs were released yesterday after investigation, leaving almost 200 others still being held, the provincial governor said.

The men and boys were among those detained by security services for questioning after being evacuated from the Old City of Homs by the UN and Red Crescent under a deal including a temporary ceasefire.

"They left the (processing) centre to the places they wanted to go to after their situations were resolved," governor Talal Barazi said of the 38 evacuees.

He told AFP that around 195 evacuees were still being held at the processing centre while investigations into their identity papers and military service status were being carried out.

The United Nations said earlier this week that some 380 male evacuees were still being held in processing centres, though it said some had been cleared for release but not yet left.

Barazi said many of the detainees were eager to take advantage of an amnesty offered last year to those who had failed to report for compulsory military service.

"Detainees have told us about their desire to settle their situations before being released because they were unable to take advantage of the amnesty while they were under siege," Barazi said.

He said evacuees over 42 would be automatically cleared because they were over the age for compulsory military service.

Beginning February 7, the United Nations and Red Crescent evacuated some 1,400 people trapped in besieged parts of Homs for more than 18 months as the Syrian regime battles rebels across the country.

Food was also delivered to those remaining behind, who had been forced to subsist on little more than olives and wild herbs.

All men and boys aged between 15-55 were taken for processing by security services, in a move that raised the

concern of UN officials.

They are present at the processing centre and have warned that the operation is being carefully monitored.

The evacuations and delivery of aid were made possible by a deal that included a tenuous truce that was twice extended but expired last Saturday with no agreement to extend it further.

On Wednesday, Barazi said a group of 11 civilians had been evacuated from part of Homs, but operations have otherwise largely ground to a halt.

The UN has said it is focusing on the processing of male evacuees before any additional evacuation or aid distribution operations resume.

"The UN is taking a pause to plan for the next round of evacuations given that a significant number of civilians in the Old City of Homs are reported to be more vulnerable and frail," UN humanitarian coordinator Yacoub El-Hillo told AFP.

"The focus of UN activities currently remains on providing protection services to evacuees -- men and boys --

## Four killed in California shooting

AFP, Washington

A woman with a gun killed four people and critically wounded two others at a Native American community in northern California, media reports said.

Sherie Rhoades, 44, was held on suspicion of murder and attempted murder after the shootings Thursday at the Cedarville Rancheria Tribal Office in Alturas, NBC News quoted local police chief Ken Barnes saying.

The shootings occurred during a hearing to evict Rhoades and her son from the Rancheria, NBC said.

Two men aged 19 and 45 were killed, as were two men, ages 30 and 50, authorities said. Two other women were in critical condition.

Alturas is a town of about 2,800 in sparsely populated Modoc County, near the Oregon border.

## Zimbabwe orders deportation of US ex-congressman

AFP, Harare

A Zimbabwean court yesterday ordered that former US congressman Melvin Reynolds be deported, after he pleaded guilty to flouting immigration laws for staying in the country on an expired visa.

The Harare magistrate's court ruled that Reynolds, a 62-year-old former congressman from Illinois, be expelled immediately after he pays a fine of \$100 or serves five days in prison.

Reynolds also faces a further charge of breaching Zimbabwe's tough pornography laws, a case that was set to be heard later yesterday.

The charge sheet against him said he "had in his possession an iPhone 4S cell phone which contained videos and pictures of naked women and men having sexual intercourse".

Reynolds, once seen as a rising star in US politics, stepped down from Congress in 1995 in disgrace after being convicted of statutory rape.

He was later convicted of bank fraud and served a prison sentence before being pardoned by then president Bill Clinton.

## Two dead as Yemen disperses Aden independence protests

AFP, Aden

Yemeni forces shot dead one protester and wounded 16 others as they opened fire on defiant secessionist demonstrators in the southern city of Aden yesterday, hours after killing another.

Two years after the ouster of veteran strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh, secessionist leaders called for anniversary demonstrations to press their campaign for the restoration of the independence that the south enjoyed until union with the north in 1990.

Thousands of protesters marched on Aden's central government and diplomatic district of Khor Maksar after the main weekly Muslim prayers, an AFP correspondent reported.

But police fired live rounds as well as tear gas at the protesters as they neared the district's central Arood Square defying a ban on protests in the area.

One person was killed and 16 wounded, a medical source said. Activists said dozens more suffered from the effects of tear gas inhalation.

"The south is a state and an identity," the protesters chanted.

Police opened fire on a similar protest march on Khor Maksar late on Thursday, killing one demonstrator and wounding 12, medics said.

Video footage posted online showed police firing tear gas to disperse dozens of protesters as they held evening prayers out in the open.

## Jubo League man hacked to death

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Narayangangj

Miscreants hacked a Jubo League activist to death at Boidyar Bazar in the district's Sonargaon upazila yesterday.

The deceased, Tapan Chandra Barman, hailed from the upazila's Saathaiya Para.

Police detained a person named Mishu in connection with the killing, said Rezaul Haque, officer-in-charge of Sonargaon Police Station.

The killers left Tapan critically injured at Balur Math late in the evening. He was later taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital where doctors declared him dead, police said.

## UN rights office criticises Australia asylum policy

AFP, Geneva

The UN's human rights office yesterday urged Australia to reconsider its policy of shipping asylum-seekers to Papua New Guinea and detaining them there, after rioting at a holding centre left one person dead.

Ravina Shamdasani, spokeswoman for the UN high commissioner for human rights, said this week's violence at the Manus Island facility had thrown the spotlight on a wider problem.

Manus Island and another centre in the tiny Pacific nation of Nauru are the core of Australia's punitive off-shore detention policy, which has been repeatedly condemned by the UN and human rights groups.

Under the scheme, which Australia says is aimed at deterring people-smugglers, any asylum-seeker arriving by boat or intercepted at sea is transferred to Manus or Nauru for processing and permanent resettlement outside Australia.

"We stress the obligation of Australia, PNG and Nauru to ensure that the human rights of asylum seekers are protected in accordance with international standards," Shamdasani told reporters.

"The practice of detaining migrants and asylum-seekers arriving by boat on a mandatory, prolonged and potentially indefinite basis, without individ-

ual assessment, is inherently arbitrary. Moreover, alternatives to immigration detention should always be considered," she added.

An estimated 1,340 asylum-seekers are currently being held at Manus Island.

Tensions with locals have reportedly spiked, and the detainees recently learned that if their asylum claims were approved they would only be allowed to settle in Papua New Guinea, not Australia.

Thirty-five asylum-seekers broke out of the facility on Sunday and several were injured.

In more rioting the following night one person was killed and 77 injured 13 of them seriously.

"While the precise circumstances are not yet clear, it is alarming to see violence against the very individuals who seek protection," said Shamdasani, adding that the incident underscored the need for independent monitoring of the facilities.

While welcoming a probe by Australian and Papuan New Guinean authorities, she said it must examine reports that private security forces were involved in the violence.

"We stress that states maintain their human rights obligations when they privatise delivery of services such as security, and must take steps to investigate, redress and punish human rights abuses by third parties," she said.

## UN boss calls for linguistic

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the International Mother Language Day with the theme "Local Languages for Global Citizenship: Spotlight on Science".

Dr AK Abdul Momen, representative to the permanent mission of Bangladesh to the UN, thanked the UN secretary general for issuing the message for the first time.

In his message, Ban said the International Mother Language Day celebrates linguistic and cultural diversity alongside multilingualism as a force for peace and sustainable development.

"As we work towards achieving the millennium development goals while mapping out a post-2015 sustainable development agenda, this diversity can encourage dialogue, mutual understanding, innovation and creativity," he said, adding that this in turn can help build more just and inclusive societies.

Quoting late president Nelson Mandela, the UN chief said, "If you

talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language that goes to his heart."

"This will help ensure that the latest scientific knowledge is more widely shared. At the same time, it will help deepen and enrich our global knowledge base with more traditional but often overlooked scientific wisdom," said the message.

Unesco's General Conference in November 1999 proclaimed February 21 as International Mother Language Day.

On May 16, 2007, the UN General Assembly in its resolution called upon member states "to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by peoples of the world".

By the same resolution, the General Assembly proclaimed 2008 as the International Year of Languages to promote unity in diversity and international understanding through multilingualism and multiculturalism.

## Zero tolerance on terrorism

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Bangladesh has also been successful in containing radicalisation through the promotion of tolerant and inclusive socio-cultural values and development, he added.

The Steering Group of the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund aims to promote greater global engagement in counter-extremism.

The foreign secretary is leading a four-member delegation on a five-day visit to the US.

Meanwhile, the United States has assured Bangladesh of full support in implementing Bangladesh's first-ever national strategy to address the issue of refugees and undocumented Myanmar nationals.

The assurance came at a meeting between Anne Richard, assistant secretary of the Bureau of Population, Refugee and Migration, and the foreign secretary on Thursday.

The Bangladesh cabinet on September 9 last year approved the National Strategy Paper to identify, locate and ensure the return of three to five lakh undocumented Myanmar citizens (Rohingyas) to their home.

Appreciating Bangladesh's efforts on the Rohingya issue, the US official assured that her country would continue its constructive engagement with the Myanmar government to resolve the problem, said a foreign ministry press release.

Shahidul appreciated the US presi-

dent's insistence that the displacement of Myanmar Muslims should be resolved within Myanmar as it had its origin there.

Meeting Rose Gottemoeller, acting under secretary for Arms Control & International Security, Shahidul expressed satisfaction over the regular security and the defence dialogues between Bangladesh and the US.

The Millennium Challenge Corporation officials at a meeting with the foreign secretary congratulated Bangladesh for achieving eligibility for its assistance programme as per its annual scorecard.

The foreign secretary briefed the officials on Bangladesh's recent achievements in the economic and social sectors as well as in governance and anti-corruption measures.

At a meeting with Daniella Ballou-Aares, senior adviser to the secretary of state on development, Shahidul discussed the possible areas of bilateral and multilateral engagements with the US government on Post-2015 Development Agenda.

At another meeting, the foreign secretary briefed Nicholas Dean, senior director for South Asia of National Security Staff at the White House, on the recent developments in Bangladesh, particularly the workers' rights and workplace safety in the RMG sector.

The senior director appreciated Bangladesh's achievements in ensuring safety and workers' rights in the RMG sector within a very short time.

## National issues come into play

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"Anti-government sentiment among the people is extreme due to its failures. So we are trying to use it in our favour to win the polls," said Mukur Chowdhury, general secretary of Dinajpur district BNP.

In Dinajpur, four upazilas will go to polls on February 27. And in the first phase, polls to two upazilas were held on Wednesday.

Echoing the views of Mukur, Saifur Rahman Rana, general secretary of Kurigram district BNP, said they were not giving much importance on local issues in their electioneering.

"There are some local issues, but we all know that it is the central government which ultimately addresses those," he added.

Ayubur Rahman Shah and Muzammel Haq Prodhan, presidents of AL units of Chirirbandar and Nageshwari upazilas of Dinajpur and Kurigram respectively, said they were reaching out to people with the government's success stories.

"The prime minister from her cabinet has dropped the controversial figures following graft allegations. So

the present government stands against corruption. This is how we are countering the opposition's smear campaign against us," said Mozammel.

Narayan Chandra Chanda, president of Dumuria upazila AL in Khulna, said the candidates and their supporters are asking the electorate not to forget very recent destructive acts of BNP and Jamaat.

"The destructive acts like burning public transports, felling thousands of trees, uprooting railway sleepers and so on did not bring any good to people. Do they [voters] want to see the perpetrators as their representatives? This is what our men are asking voters," he said.

In Khulna, BNP leaders and activists are trying to woo voters by raising two issues -- corruption and the controversial January 5 parliamentary elections.

"People in southern part are blaming the government's corruption for not being able to construct the Padma bridge which, if completed, would have ensured smooth and faster communications with the capital," said Shafiqul Alam Moni, general secretary of Khulna city BNP.

"So people are annoyed and we are trying to cash in on it."

Besides, he said, they are telling people that the government came to power again "forcefully" through the January 5 farcical election. "People are responding positively to our campaigns."

But most of the AL grassroots are telling voters that the AL is now in power and the upazilas will see more developments if the AL-backed candidates are elected.

"Development will be hampered if candidates backed by other parties get elected in the polls," said Moslem Uddin Ahmed, president of Chittagong district (south) AL unit.

Some local AL leaders, however, claimed people in rural areas do not consider national issues in the local government polls.

Contacted, local government expert Prof Tofail Ahmed said the national issues get importance more in the electioneering as both the AL and BNP high-commands make desperate efforts to secure win of their favourites.

He believes this is not good for the local government.

## Obama meets Dalai Lama

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Sangay told AFP after the meeting.

China, which calls the Dalai Lama a "wolf in sheep's clothing" and accuses him of seeking independence for Tibet, was quick to react to Thursday's announcement of a meeting.

"China is firmly opposed to this," foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said in a statement.

"We urge the US side to treat China's concern in a serious way and immediately cancel the planned meeting."

Hua called the Dalai Lama a "political exile who has long been engaged in anti-China separatist activities under the cloak of religion."

Sangay dismissed the Chinese charges, saying that the Dalai Lama has made clear he has no "anti-China" message and was peacefully seeking greater autonomy for Tibetans while accepting Beijing's rule.

On Thursday, National Security Council spokeswoman Caitlin Hayden underlined that the United States supported the Dalai Lama's approach but recognised Tibet to be "a part of the People's Republic of China".

"We do not support Tibetan independence," Hayden said.

"The United States strongly supports human rights and religious freedom in China. We are concerned

about continuing tensions and the deteriorating human rights situation in Tibetan areas of China."

Hayden said the administration would renew calls for the Chinese government to resume dialogue with the Dalai Lama or his representatives, without preconditions.

China has for decades opposed foreign dignitaries meeting the revered Buddhist leader, who fled to India in 1959 after a failed uprising against Chinese rule.

In Beijing, Hua said that China had "already lodged solemn representations" with the United States.

"The US leader's meeting with the Dalai is a gross interference in China's internal affairs, a severe violation of codes of international relations and will seriously impair China-US relations," she said.

More than 120 Tibetans have set themselves on fire and committed suicide in recent years to protest against what they see as oppression by China's government and controls on their right to exercise their religion.

"The Dalai Lama is essentially a political fugitive whose group instigates separatist activities including self-immolations," the state-run Xinhua news agency said in a commentary.

The visit comes on the heels of a trip to Beijing by US Secretary of State John Kerry, but well ahead of an Asia-Pacific summit there in November that Obama is expected to attend -- meaning that China could not retaliate by canceling a high-profile visit.

Obama is due in Asia in April, but has no stop in China planned -- though the visit will be dominated by questions over Beijing's tense relations with its neighbors.

Obama came under domestic criticism in 2009 when he did not see the Dalai Lama during a visit to Washington, as the new president looked to start on the right foot with China.

The United States and China are the world's two largest economies.

But the optimism of the early days of the Obama presidency has dimmed, with the United States pressing China on a range of concerns including its territorial disputes with US allies Japan and the Philippines and Beijing's alleged cyber espionage campaign.

In an interview with Time magazine before his meeting, the Dalai Lama praised Chinese President Xi Jinping for "fearlessly" fighting corruption.

But he condemned censorship and said that China's judicial system needed to be improved to international standards.