

'Russia stepping up aid to Syria'

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State John Kerry renewed allegations against Russia of helping the Syrian regime, accusing Moscow of increasing its aid to President Bashar al-Assad.

What Assad "is doing is outrageous, unconscionable, unacceptable, disgraceful, craven, it's horrendous. And we all know that. Everybody knows that," Kerry said in an interview with MSNBC television.

He later revealed that he would meet Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov next week for talks on the sidelines of a conference in Rome on Libya.

The top US diplomat insisted Washington was "committed to try to make a difference in ways that we have chosen within the law that we believe are appropriate and permissible."

And he admitted it was challenging trying to work out how to put more pressure on Assad as the war is about to enter its fourth year with no end in sight.

"Frankly, Russia is increasing its assistance to Assad. I do not find that constructive in the effort to try to get him to change his mind and be able to come to a decision that he needs to negotiate in good faith," Kerry said.

President Barack Obama and his administration were constantly reviewing the options available, he said, even though Obama walked back from threatened military strikes over Assad's use of chemical weapons last year.

"There are limits on the ability of any nation to just spontaneously go out and use force whenever it wants," Kerry insisted.

"There are laws you have to follow and there's a process. The fact is that unless the nation that you're considering invites you in, unless you're doing it as a matter of self-defense or unless you have a UN resolution, there are greater limits



Kenya-based journalists demonstrate in Nairobi as part of the Global Day of Action in Support of Press Freedom, yesterday. Events supporting three Al Jazeera journalists detained in Egypt were planned in over 30 countries in the hopes that through the attention of the world's media and partners, pressure can be brought to bear on the Egyptian authorities to hasten the release of Peter Greste, Mohammed Fahmy and Baher Mohamed. PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan denies plans to arm Syrian rebels

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday denied any plans to send weapons to Syrian rebels, amid reports that Saudi Arabia is holding talks with it about arming the insurgents.

A Saudi source said Sunday that Riyadh was seeking Pakistani anti-aircraft and anti-tank rockets for forces fighting to topple President Bashar al-Assad.

The United States has long opposed arming the rebels with such weapons, fearing they might end up in the hands of extremists. But Syrian opposition figures say the failure of peace talks in Geneva seems to have led Washington to soften its opposition.

Sartaj Aziz, the prime minister's adviser on foreign affairs, told reporters Pakistan has not considered such a proposal.

"The reports about arms supply to Syria are totally baseless," Aziz said.

Soldier kills 5 colleagues, self in Indian Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

A soldier armed with two automatic weapons shot dead five of his colleagues as they slept early yesterday before killing himself in restive Indian Kashmir, police and the army said.

The soldier, who was on night duty, walked into the barracks where the soldiers were resting and opened fire at a military camp 20 kilometres (12 miles) north of the region's main city of Srinagar.

"The soldier ran amok, killing five others before shooting himself dead in the camp in Ganderbal district," army spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Narinder Nahar Joshi told AFP.

Another soldier who was injured in the attack recalled the events to police before being shifted to a military hospital in Srinagar for treatment, local superintendent of police Shahid Mehraj told AFP.

A military inquiry and a separate police probe were under way to determine what sparked the incident at the camp in Safapora

village, including whether the soldier was suffering from stress.

"We don't know what triggered this incident, but we are investigating thoroughly so that such an incident is not repeated in future," Mehraj said, adding police have seized two automatic rifles used by the soldier.

"We are also talking to soldiers who were awake at the time of shooting," Mehraj said.

The killer was a member of a counter-insurgency force called the Rashtriya Rifles posted to the heavily militarised Himalayan region and charged with tracking down suspected militants.

Indian forces have since 1989 been fighting some dozen militant groups seeking independence or the merger of the territory with Pakistan. The fighting has left tens of thousands of people, mostly civilians, dead.

Several similar incidents have occurred in the past in the region, including one in 2011 when an Indian soldier killed four of his comrades after an altercation in a camp in

Israeli raid on West Bank kills Palestinian

AFP, Birzeit

A Palestinian died during an Israeli army raid on his home in the West Bank town of Birzeit yesterday, the military and a Palestinian security source said.

"After the army left the house and the town, the body of Motazz Washaha, 22, was found," the Palestinian source said.

The army confirmed the death of a "Palestinian suspected of terror activity."

"After the suspect was called to turn himself in, he barricaded himself inside his house," the army said in a statement. Soldiers responded with "live fire" and recovered an assault rifle, it added.

The death came as human rights group Amnesty International slammed Israel's killing of dozens of Palestinian civilians in the West Bank over the past three years. Its report released earlier on Thursday accused Israel of "war crimes and other serious violations of international law" against Palestinians.

UK spy agency intercepted millions of users' images

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Britain's surveillance agency GCHQ, with aid from the National Security Agency, intercepted and stored the webcam images of millions of internet users not suspected of wrongdoing, secret documents reveal.

GCHQ files dating between 2008 and 2010 explicitly state that a surveillance program codenamed Optic Nerve collected still images of Yahoo webcam chats in bulk and saved them to agency databases, regardless of whether individual users were an intelligence target or not.

In one six-month period in 2008 alone, the agency collected webcam imagery – including substantial quantities of sexually explicit communications – from more than 1.8 million Yahoo user accounts globally.

Yahoo reacted furiously to the

webcam interception when approached by the Guardian. The company denied any prior knowledge of the program, accusing the



agencies of "a whole new level of violation of our users' privacy".

GCHQ does not have the technical means to make sure no images of UK or US citizens are collected and stored by the system, and there are no restrictions under UK law to prevent Americans' images being accessed by British analysts without an individual warrant.

Next Afghan leader will sign BSA: US

AFP, Washington

The next president of Afghanistan will sign a security pact with the United States despite the refusal of outgoing leader Hamid Karzai, Secretary of State John Kerry confidently predicted Wednesday.

"But for one person and his decision we would be on a different track today," Kerry told a small group of reporters, referring to Karzai who is holding out on signing a bilateral security agreement to govern the presence of any US troops remaining after 2014.

Karzai has refused to endorse the deal, which he hammered out with Kerry last year, saying it should be up to his successor who will be chosen in April presidential elections.

"It will be signed by the way," Kerry insisted on Wednesday.

"Whether it's signed by him or not we obviously have serious reservations, but all six of the candidates for the presidency of Afghanistan have said that they will sign it."

SUBMARINE ACCIDENT Two sailors found dead in India

AFP, Mumbai

Two Indian naval officers were found dead yesterday after they went missing in a submarine fire off Mumbai's coast, the latest in a string of accidents that have forced the navy's chief to quit.

Seven other crew members were airlifted to hospital with breathing problems after smoke began to fill the vessel's living quarters on Wednesday, an accident that comes only six months after another deadly submarine disaster in Mumbai.

Admiral DK Joshi, the chief of naval staff, announced Wednesday night he was standing down to take "moral responsibility" for the accident on board the Russian-built INS Sindhuratna during exercises.

Last August, 18 sailors were killed when the fully-armed submarine INS Sindhurakshak exploded in flames and sank in a military shipyard in Mumbai.

That disaster was thought to be the Indian Navy's worst since the sinking of a frigate by a Pakistani submarine during a war with its neighbour in 1971.



Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, left, talks with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) during a meeting in New Delhi, yesterday. The Crown Prince is on a three-day official visit. PHOTO: AFP

Mamata, Jayalalithaa: The minnows who want to be PM

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

For the last several years, the two leading ladies of coalition-hit Indian politics -- Mamata Banerjee heading Trinamool Congress ruling West Bengal state and Jayalalithaa, the supremo of All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) governing Tamil Nadu -- have been major regional satraps with national profile.

With fresh parliamentary elections just two months away and opinion polls projecting a photo finish, both the leaders are eyeing even larger roles in deciding the contours of a future government.

Both Jayalalithaa and Mamata are too hard-nosed as politicians to go public with the national ambitions of aspiring to be prime minister. But their die-hard party supporters and in some cases some leaders have not stopped from telling the media that they would like their leaders to be in the coveted post, no matter how far-fetched such dreams are.

The closest hint about AIADMK wanting to see Jayalalithaa as PM came when the party organised a grand celebration of her 66th birthday earlier this week. Jayalalithaa cut a huge cake which was a replica of Indian parliament house in New Delhi. Posters and advertisements put up by AIADMK showed her in front of Parliament and the President of India inviting her to take oath as PM.

Tamil Nadu has 39 parliamentary seats and

adjacent Puducherry state one, and Jayalalithaa and her party and its allies CPI-M and CPI are contesting all the 40. Even the most optimistic assessment gives AIADMK and allies 36 seats.

On the other hand, Trinamool Congress supporters have been much less explicit about Mamata and have refrained from pitching her as prime minister. But nonetheless, Mamata and her party's leaders claim almost every day that Trinamool Congress will have a bigger voice in Delhi this time. Addressing election meetings, she has been saying "we will decide the next government."

However, this has not prevented anti-corruption movement leader Anna Hazare and the Shahi imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid Syed Bukhari from declaring that Mamata will be a better prime minister as both are impressed by her simple lifestyle and "development work" in West Bengal.

The tone and tenor of Mamata's campaign has tended to pander to sentiments of West Bengal voters that the state should have a greater role in national politics to end alleged discrimination from the federal government in New Delhi in terms of economic assistance.

An internal assessment gives Trinamool Congress 30 or more seats out of total 42 parliamentary seats in West Bengal. It is hoping to add a couple more from the Northeastern states and some from North India. The party is expected to put up candidates in about 10 states

NEWS ANALYSIS



Mamata Banerjee



Jayalalithaa

outside Bengal and is looking at an overall tally of 35-plus, which could make it the third largest after main contenders for power BJP and Congress.

But is it not a joke for die-hard Trinamool and AIADMK supporters to dream of seeing Mamata or Jayalalithaa in the PM's chair with just 35-plus or 37 parliamentary seats? When H D Deve Gowda had become India's PM in 1996, his party Janata Dal had 46 seats at that time in a 543-strong Lok Sabha where 272 is the simple majority mark. Strange are the ways of coalition politics in India.

The biggest problem with both Jayalalithaa and Mamata is that they both are unpredictable. In

1998, Jayalalithaa had helped the BJP-led NDA government form under Atal Bihari Vajpayee but delayed sending the letter of support. And within a year, she had pulled the government down on grounds less than convincing. They joined hands once more before the 2004 polls, only to part again after the results.

Trinamool Congress now has 19 MPs, its highest strength ever in the Lok Sabha, while its allies from the 2009 polls and the party is confident of doing much better in this year's poll. The confidence stems from Mamata's historic sweep to power in the assembly in May 2011 and the party's experience in three Lok Sabha and nine assembly by-polls, besides elections to panchayats and municipalities and above all the disarray in her main challenger Left Front. Its vote share has been growing, with the last panchayat polls bringing it between 44 and 45 per cent against the Left Front's 30 per cent or less.

If neither BJP nor Congress or the alliances led by the two parties gets a clear majority in the coming polls and if Trinamool and AIADMK fare as well as they expect, Mamata and Jayalalithaa could hold the key to the formation of the next government India will have. A good show in parliamentary polls will enhance their heft in Indian politics and influence domestic as well as New Delhi's policies towards Bangladesh and Sri Lanka which are next door neighbours of West

AFP, Tokyo

Government officials from Japan and North Korea will hold talks in China next Monday, the first such meeting since November 2012, the Japanese foreign ministry and Red Cross Society said yesterday. The talks will be on the sidelines of meetings by Red Cross officials from the two countries, a Japanese Red Cross

Morsi spy case put on hold

AFP, Cairo

A court in Egypt yesterday suspended the espionage trial of deposed Islamist president Mohamed Morsi after defence lawyers requested that the judges in the case withdraw. The case, one of three already opened against Morsi, comes amid a relentless government crackdown targeting him and his Muslim Brotherhood movement since the army removed him last July.