

Putin in Cuba, Nicaragua to rekindle LatAm ties

AFP, Managua

President Vladimir Putin made a surprise stop in Nicaragua Friday after visiting Russia's Cold War ally Cuba, part of a tour to increase Moscow's influence in Latin America amid frayed ties with the West.

Putin's six-day trip will also take him to Argentina and Brazil, where he will take part in a summit of the BRICS group of emerging countries -- an agenda that neatly aligns with his push for a multipolar world at a time when the Ukraine crisis has brought Moscow-Washington relations to a post-Cold War low.

Leftist President Daniel Ortega, whose country was close to the Soviet Union under the Sandinista regime of the 1980s, welcomed Putin at the airport along with his wife and the head of Nicaragua's army.

"This is the first time that a Russian president visits Nicaragua," a beaming Ortega said at a brief airport media event.

Through an interpreter Putin said that his government intends to continue strengthening economic with the Nicaragua.

Putin said before the trip that he has his eye on Latin America's oil and bauxite, and plans to woo regional leaders with offers of increased Russian investment and trade in return.

Analysts say that Putin is also using the tour to thumb his nose at Brussels and Washington, which have slapped sanctions on some of his closest allies over Moscow's takeover of Crimea and support for pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine.

Moscow is seeking comprehensive technological partnerships with Latin

America in the oil and gas sector, hydropower, nuclear energy, aircraft construction and the bio pharmaceutical industry, Putin told Cuba's state news agency Prensa Latina.

Putin arrived in Nicaragua after visiting Havana, where he and Cuban President Raul Castro witnessed the signing of a dozen bilateral agreements, including for oil exploration off the island's coast, creating an international airline hub in Cuba and supplying equipment for two Cuban thermoelectric plants worth \$1.6 billion.

Following Putin's arrival early Friday, the two men visited a small cemetery that holds the remains of Soviet soldiers who died of illness or accident while serving in Cuba during the Cold War.

The Russian leader then met Castro's older brother Fidel, the 87-year-old father of the Cuban Revolution.

According to Russian sources, Putin said they had a "long and very interesting conversation" of about one hour on international politics and bilateral relations.

In recent years, Moscow has sought to revive ties with the Caribbean island, whose economy has been saddled with a US embargo since 1962 and is growing less than the government expected, despite recent free-market reforms.

Ahead of the visit, Russia wrote off 90 percent of Cuba's Soviet-era debt of more than \$30 billion.

Havana for its part has sided with its old ally Russia in the Ukraine conflict.

Putin is next scheduled to fly to Buenos Aires, where analysts say he will likely seek a stake in Argentina's Vaca Muerta shale formation, an oil

and gas field estimated to contain the equivalent of 22.8 billion barrels of oil, potentially one of the largest finds in history.

Argentina, locked out of capital markets since defaulting on its debt in 2001, desperately needs foreign investment.

President Cristina Kirchner will be keen to tap Russian capital at a time when her government is fighting to stay solvent in the face of a US court order to pay more than \$1.3 billion by the end of the month to "holdout" hedge funds refusing to take part in the restructuring of the country's defaulted debt.

Putin has also invited Argentina to take a seat at the table when Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa -- the so-called BRICS group -- hold a summit next week in Brazil.

But first he will attend the World Cup final between Germany and Argentina in Rio de Janeiro on Sunday.

At the end of the tournament, Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff will officially hand over World Cup responsibilities to Putin, whose country hosts the next edition in 2018.

Moscow says he will likely also meet Chancellor Angela Merkel on Sunday.

The Kremlin has sought to play Germany against the United States in the Ukraine crisis, leveraging Berlin's dependence on Russian gas in a bid to fend off more Western sanctions.

Before departing on the trip Putin condemned as "blatant hypocrisy" Washington's cyber-spying revealed by fugitive US intelligence analyst Edward Snowden, who is in Russia on asylum.

The remark came after Germany expelled the CIA station chief in Berlin on Thursday over alleged spying on Merkel.

Missing councillor

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police, the OC told The Daily Star around 12:15am today.

He added that Parvin claimed the abductors carried her on a microbus before leaving her on the highway.

She stepped out of her Dakkhin Panishail house in Gazipur around 8:00am on Friday, telling her family members that she would join a meeting of village arbitration but did not tell them the exact location.

Since then she remained missing. She also forgot to take her cell phone along with her, her husband Minhajul Islam said.

A local land broker, Haji Dulal, might have abducted her, he said. Parvin's family had filed a case, accusing him of killing her father Chan Miah in July 2011.

"Dulal threatened to abduct my wife three months back when she [Parvin] was proceeding with the murder case," Minhajul said.

There had been land disputes between Dulal and Chan Miah, locals said.

Minhajul yesterday lodged another case with Joydevpur Police Station accusing Dulal and eight others of abducting Parvin.

Consultant

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formally ask the World Bank and other donors (ADB, Jica, IDB) to confirm whether Sinohydro or any other entity of the company were debarred, cross-debarred or under temporary suspension in any ongoing sanction proceedings.

The authority should also obtain legal advice regarding the statement by Jan De Nul that the public procurement regulations of Bangladesh would debar Sinohydro from participating in the bid if the company was debarred, crossed-debarred or under temporary suspension by the WB or any other donor, the consultant said.

Earlier the project director told The Daily Star that the evaluation committee usually takes care of all the complaints.

After the main bridge, river training is the costliest component of the \$3 billion Padma Bridge project.

Sinohydro pocketed the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway Expansion job by making a similarly low offer in 2010. But later it totally stopped the expansion work on 140 km part of the highway and started demanding higher payment. Till date, the company has completed less than 50 percent of its work that was supposed to be completed by December 2013.

Rejoinder

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presented false news on Sahco and Syed Abul Hossain to malign his reputation.

Our Reply
The rejoinder only referred to the part of the allegation where Sahco's name popped up as the local agent of Sinohydro. However, in the same report The Daily Star quoted deputy representative of Sinohydro Liao Libing who denied any relation between his company and Sahco or Syed Abul Hossain.

Highway repair

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progress of the construction work of an overpass and the four-lane Dhaka-Chittagong highway at Paduarbazar Bishwa Road area of Sadar Dakkhin upazila in Comilla, reports UNB.

A recent survey conducted by the RHD found that around 41 percent of roads and highways across the country are in a dilapidated state. Of the roads, 12 percent are severely battered.

Earlier on Thursday, transport leaders in Chittagong threatened to stop plying vehicles in the district ahead of Eid, if the authorities concerned failed to repair the appalling roads by July 14.

The leaders issued a 72-hour ultimatum at a meeting with AKM Hafiz Akhter, Chittagong superintendent of police.

Roads in Satkania, Patiya, Hathazari upazila and the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway's Sitakunda-Mirorai stretch have turned risky for vehicular movement as numerous potholes have recently appeared after the ongoing rains.

The sorry state of the highways disrupts the communication of the homebound passengers ahead of Eid, who blame the negligence of the authorities concerned.

A total of 16 teams are working to make the highways fit for smooth traffic. Some potholes have been created in Sitakunda, Chittagong, due to the poor drainage system there, said the minister.

Makeshift shops along highways will be evicted and necessary steps will be taken to stop plying of "Nasimon", "Karimon", "Bhotbhoti" and other illegal three-wheelers to ensure smooth movement of vehicles, he mentioned.

The construction works of overpasses in Comilla, Feni and Chittagong will remain suspended for three days to ensure a smooth flow of traffic.

Shia rebels agree to pull out of key Yemen city

AFP, Sanaa

Yemeni Shiite rebels yesterday agreed to withdraw from Amran, seized in a push towards the capital, in a deal struck with authorities who are dispatching troops to the strategic city.

The Huthi rebels seized the northern city Tuesday, in a new challenge to the government, which is also facing an Al-Qaeda threat and a separatist movement in the south.

The capture of Amran, just 50 kilometres (30 miles) north of Sanaa, threatened a federalisation plan that was agreed in February following national talks as part of a political transition.

The rebels, also known as Ansarullah, have complained for years of marginalisation in the Sunni majority country, and say the transition plan would divide Yemen into rich and poor regions.

In February they advanced from their mountain strongholds in the remote north towards the capital, battling loyalist troops and pro-government tribesmen.

Rebel spokesman Mohammed Abdessalam told AFP Saturday that the Huthis had struck a deal with the defence ministry to withdraw from Amran and that troops would move in later in the day.

"Our men will withdraw from Amran as soon as an army unit moves in," Abdessalam said, adding that a regiment was on its way from the northern city of Saada.

"Other military units... will follow suit," he said.

Amran fell after four days of fierce fighting that unconfirmed reports say killed as many as 400 people. The Red Crescent said the violence uprooted at least 10,000 families.

The unrest triggered concern at the

United Nations, where the Security Council unanimously called on the Shiite rebels to leave Amra.

A statement said the fighting impeded Yemen's political transition, threatened to impose sanctions on those blocking it and called on all fighters to disarm.

The council demanded that "the Huthis, all armed groups and parties involved in the violence withdraw and relinquish control of Amran and hand over weapons and ammunition pillaged in Amran to the national authorities loyal to the government."

Calling on all sides to disarm and implement existing ceasefire agreements, the council also asked military units to "remain committed to their obligation of neutrality at the service of the state."

But violence was again reported Saturday between troops and rebels around the Mount al-Dhin region overlooking the Amran-Saada highway and the village of Darwan near Sanaa, the Ansarullah spokesman said.

And tribal sources said fighting has also raged in the northeastern province of Al-Jawf between Shiite rebels and tribes close to the Sunni Al-Islah party, with seven killed since Friday on both sides.

Huthis, who have been battling the central government for years, are suspected of trying to expand their sphere of influence as Yemen is reorganised into six regions.

They have repeatedly complained of marginalisation under former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who ruled for 33 years before being forced out in February 2012.

He was replaced by his long-time deputy Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi under a UN- and Gulf-sponsored deal.

Israel widens Gaza assault

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The 15-member Security Council issued a press statement calling for de-escalation, restoration of calm and a resumption of Mideast peace talks.

The press statement, which is not legally binding but reflects international opinion, was the first response by the UN's most powerful body, reports AP.

Israel's aerial campaign -- the largest and deadliest since 2012 -- saw strikes start early yesterday, including one that killed two nephews of Gaza's former Hamas premier, Ismail Haniya.

Rockets fired from Gaza targeted Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, with several intercepted over Israel's commercial capital and Jerusalem-bound projectiles hitting two southern West Bank cities.

Hundreds of rockets have so far caused no Israeli deaths, and many have been intercepted by the Iron Dome missile defence system.

An Israeli military said it has struck more than 1,100 targets, including Hamas rocket launchers, command centres and weapon manufacturing and storage facilities, in a bid to stop relentless rocket fire coming Gaza.

The central Gaza mosque was being used to conceal rockets like those militants have fired nearly 700 times toward Israel over the past five days, the military said.

However, the strikes in the densely populated Gaza Strip show the challenge Israel faces as it considers a ground operation that could potentially pose further dangers to civilians.

The Israeli army warned Palestinians in the northern Gaza Strip to "leave their homes for their own safety," the military said in a statement last night.

"Tonight we will send messages to northern Gaza residents urging them to leave their homes for their own safety. It's unsafe to be near Hamas," the statement said.

Gaza health ministry spokesman Ashraf al-Kidra said Israeli strikes raised the death toll there to 135, with

more than 920 wounded. Among the dead was a nephew of Ismail Haniyeh, a top Hamas leader, who was killed in an airstrike near his home, Hamas officials said.

Hamas militants have been hit hard. Though the exact breakdown of casualties remains unclear, dozens of the dead also have been civilians. Israel has also demolished dozens of homes it says are used by Hamas for military purposes.

"Am I a terrorist? Do I make rockets and artillery?" screamed Umm Omar, a woman in the southern town of Rafah whose home was destroyed in an airstrike. It was not immediately known why the building was targeted.

The offensive showed no signs of slowing down yesterday as Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon said his country should ready itself for several more days of fighting.

Hamas said it hoped the mosque attack would galvanise support for it in the Muslim world.

The Israeli military released an aerial photo of the mosque it hit, saying Hamas hid rockets in it right next to another religious site and civilian homes. It said Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other Gaza militant groups use religious sites to conceal weapons and establish underground tunnel networks, deliberately endangering civilians.

Sarit Michaeli of the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem said that while using human shields violates international humanitarian law, "this does not give Israel the excuse to violate international humanitarian law as well."

Michaeli said civilians have been killed when Israel bombed family homes of Hamas militants or when residents were unable to leave their homes quickly enough following the Israeli warnings.

The "Iron Dome," a US-funded, Israel-developed rocket defence system, has intercepted more than 130 incoming rockets, preventing any

Israeli fatalities so far. A handful of Israelis have been wounded by rockets that slipped through.

Militant rockets have reached further into Israel than ever before, with air raid sirens sounding even in the northern city of Haifa, 100 miles (160 kilometres) away.

An attack on the northern Gaza Strip hit a centre for the handicapped, killing two disabled women and wounding four, the centre's director said.

"They didn't understand what was happening and they were so frightened," Jamila Alaywa said of those inside the care home.

"They fired the rocket and it hit us without any warning."

However, there has been little sign that either side is interested in an immediate end to the hostilities.

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu told a Tel Aviv news conference he would not end the military campaign until he achieved his goal of stopping the Hamas fire.

"No international pressure will prevent us from striking, with all force, against the terrorist organisation which calls for our destruction," he said.

And Haniya said: "(Israel) is the one that started this aggression and it must stop, because we are (simply) defending ourselves."

The latest conflict unfolded after last month's kidnap and murder of three young Israelis in the occupied West Bank and the brutal revenge killing of a Palestinian teenager by Jewish extremists.

Israel cracked down on Hamas, though the Islamist group declined to confirm or deny involvement in the abductions, and Gaza militants hit back with intensified rocket fire.

Israel says preparations are under way for a possible ground incursion, with tanks and artillery massed along the border and some 33,000 reservists mobilised out of 40,000 approved by the cabinet.

No solace for Brazil

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Wijnaldum rubbed salt into the hosts' wounds by adding a third in injury time.

Brazil have now lost back-to-back home games for the first time since 1940, and they end the tournament having conceded 14 goals altogether, the most of any side at a World Cup since 1986 and the most ever for a host team.

In contrast, Louis van Gaal's Netherlands leave with the consolation of taking third place and end the competition unbeaten, with their semifinal exit against Argentina only coming after a penalty shoot-out.

The day had not started well for Holland, who saw playmaker Wesley Sneijder withdraw at the last minute due to an injury suffered in the warm-up, with Jonathan de Guzman replacing him in the starting line-up.

Brazil coach Luiz Felipe Scolari had made six changes to his team following the Germany debacle, with one seeing captain Thiago Silva make his return after suspension.

The absence of Silva, along with that of Neymar, was a contributing factor in the semifinal humiliation, but the usually inspirational centre-back was at fault as Brazil conceded a penalty with less than two minutes played.

Silva was caught the wrong side of Arjen Robben as the winger latched onto a pass from Holland captain van Persie and was left with a clear path on goal.

Robben was pulled back by the defender, with the contact starting outside the box and carrying on into the area. Algerian referee Djamel Haïmoudi decided to award a spot-kick but controversially opted against showing Silva a straight red

card.

If Silva was let off the hook, van Persie made no mistake from the spot, lashing his kick high into the top right-hand corner to give goalkeeper Julio Cesar no chance.

Once again Brazil's defensive frailties were hopelessly exposed when the Netherlands' second goal arrived in the 17th minute.

De Guzman broke in behind Maxwell in the Brazilian left-back position and got to the byeline, from where his cross was headed back out by David Luiz and straight into the path of Blind, who had time to take the ball down 12 yards out and volley home.

Blind injured himself making the challenge, and his replacement Daryl Janmaat was the provider for the third goal, his low ball from the right being swept home by Wijnaldum.

Germany have a team," ran one widely retweeted summary on Twitter this week.

Ranged against Germany's attacking arsenal are an Argentina side led by 27-year-old Barcelona superstar Messi.

The four-time world footballer of the year came into the tournament determined to atone for two disappointing World Cups in 2006 and 2010.

Like Maradona 28 years ago, he has dragged his team over the line at key moments in Brazil. He opened with an individual goal against Bosnia, an injury-time winner to beat Iran, and two more goals against Nigeria.

Messi's run and pass created the extra-time winner for Angel Di Maria against Switzerland in the last 16.

While he was largely anonymous in the semifinal win over the Dutch, Germany will know that one slip on Sunday could present Messi with a match-winning moment, just as it did for Maradona in the 1986 final against the Germans.

Man-marked out of the match by Lothar Matthaus, Maradona still created the game's winning goal -- a sublime first-time through ball which released Jorge Burruchaga to clinch a 3-2 victory.