

UNREST IN WEST BANK Abbas doesn't want escalation with Israel

Palestinian militants' homes demolished
AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas said yesterday he wanted to avoid a violent escalation with Israel, his most direct comments since unrest has spread in recent days and provoked fears of a new uprising.

His comments came as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pledged a crackdown and Israel, in a show of force, demolished the homes of two Palestinians who carried out attacks last year.

More clashes also erupted yesterday, including in Bethlehem following the funeral of a 13-year-old killed by Israeli soldiers during rioting outside the city.

"We don't want a military and security escalation with Israel," Abbas said at a meeting of Palestinian officials, according to official news agency Wafa.

"We are telling our security forces, our political movements, that we do not want an escalation, but that we want to protect ourselves."

Abbas's intentions were unclear before his recent comments, particularly following his UN General Assembly speech last week, in which he declared he was no longer bound by accords with Israel.

But the question remains of whether Palestinian youths frustrated with both Abbas's leadership and Israel's right-wing government will listen to his appeals.

Yesterday's demolitions came with Netanyahu under increasing pressure from right-wing members of his coalition, which holds only a one-seat parliamentary majority, as clashes have spread following the murder of four Israelis.



A Palestinian young man throws a bottle towards vehicles of Israeli security forces who search for the suspected Palestinian killers of a Jewish settler couple yesterday in the West Bank city of Nablus. Inset, A Palestinian man is carried into an ambulance after he was injured during clashes with Israeli security forces.

PHOTO: AFP

UK spies can hack smartphones

Says Edward Snowden

AFP, London

British spies can hack into phones remotely with a simple text message and make audio recordings or take photos without owners knowing, former US intelligence contractor Edward Snowden said on Monday.

"They want to own your phone instead of you," the whistleblower said in an interview with the BBC's Panorama programme, referring to Britain's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) agency.

Snowden claimed that GCHQ used a series of interception tools called "Smurf Suite", after the blue cartoon characters, The Smurfs.

"Nosy Smurf" enabled spies to switch on a smartphone's microphone even if the phone was off, he claimed. Other programmes used by GCHQ were nicknamed "Tracker Smurf" and "Dreamy Smurf", which allows phones to be switched on and off remotely, Snowden said. He said the text message sent by GCHQ to gain access to the phone would not be noticed by its owner.

"It's called an 'exploit'," he said. "When it arrives at your phone it's hidden from you. It doesn't display. You paid for it but whoever controls the software owns the phone," he added.



Russia's air violations no accident: Nato

AFP, Beirut

Nato's chief accused Russia yesterday of deliberately violating Turkey's airspace during bombing raids on Syria, as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned Moscow it risked losing an ally.

Turkey said its jets were harassed and put on radar lock by an unidentified MIG-29 on Monday -- the latest in a series of confrontations near the border with its war-torn neighbour.

The Nato member accuses Russia of violating its airspace at least twice over the weekend, and has warned it will activate its rules of military engagement if such intrusions are repeated.

Pentagon chief Ashton Carter said yesterday efforts by US military officials to work with Russia to keep the skies over Syria safe for pilots from both countries appear to be stalled.

Russian violations of Turkish airspace would prompt the United States to "strengthen our posture," Carter also warned, but did not give details.

In his toughest remarks yet against Russia in the crisis, Erdogan accused Moscow and its ally Iran of working to maintain the "state terror" of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

"It is of course not possible to remain patient about this," said Erdogan, referring to the incursions into Turkish airspace.

"If Russia loses a friend like Turkey with whom it has a lot of cooperation it is going to lose a lot of things. It needs to know this," he added.

Syrian state television said yesterday that Russian warplanes had struck IS targets in and around the ancient city of Palmyra for the first time.

A military source cited by Syrian state television said Russian forces struck the city of Palmyra and its outskirts, "destroying 20 armoured vehicles."

SYRIA AIRSTRIKES
Erdogan warns Russia against losing Turkey's friendship
Warplanes strike IS targets in Palmyra

Millions more refugees could flee Syria

Turkey warns EU
BBC ONLINE

Turkey has warned the EU that millions more refugees could flee Syria as the civil war intensifies, European Council President Donald Tusk has said.

He said Russian and Iranian engagement in Syria was making a victory for President Bashar al-Assad more likely. According to Turkish estimates, it could mean another three million refugees from Aleppo and the area.

The International Organization for Migration says it has so far had no reports of more people leaving Syria. "Violence and increased military activity breed displacement of civilians," IOM spokesman Leonard Doyle told the BBC.

ROW OVER CHARTER Negotiations fail to end Nepal protests

AP, Kathmandu

The main group of protesters opposing Nepal's new constitution said its negotiations with the government failed to reach a resolution yesterday even as a punishing border blockade continued to squeeze the country.

Laxman Lal Karna from the United Democratic Madhesi Front said talks with the government would resume today, adding the government negotiators failed to present a solid proposal to end the protests.

The activity in southern Nepal bordering India has stalled normal life in the area for several weeks and stopped the flow of fuel and supplies to the country's north, including the capital. "We had set some preconditions which the government had promised to fulfill but failed. We will not end our protests until our political demands are fulfilled," Karna said.

Their demands included free treatment of the injured protesters, monetary compensation for those killed, removing the soldiers from the protest area and stopping the use of excessive force against the protesters.

Another Madhesi negotiator, Sarbendra Nath Shukla, said their main issue with the constitution was the border of the proposed state for their ethnic group but that issue was yet to be discussed.

Government minister Mahesh Acharya said all the issues were discussed and the team was hopeful for a resolution soon.

US strike on hospital a mistake

Says top general in Afghanistan

AP, Washington

US forces attacked a hospital in northern Afghanistan last weekend, killing at least 22 people, despite "rigorous" US military procedures designed to avoid such mistakes, the top commander of US and allied forces in Afghanistan said yesterday.

Gen John F Campbell told a Senate committee that Afghan forces requested air support Saturday while engaged in combat with Taliban fighters in the city of Kunduz, communicating with US special operations troops at the scene. Those US forces were in contact with the AC-130 gunship that fired on the hospital, Campbell said.

"To be clear, the decision to provide (airstrikes) was a US decision, made within the US chain of command," Campbell said. "The hospital was mistakenly struck. We would never intentionally target a protected medical facility."

Appearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Campbell said he could not provide more details about what happened, including who may have failed to follow procedures for avoiding attacks on hospitals. He said he must await the outcome of multiple investigations.

The medical clinic that was struck was operated by the medical charity Doctors Without Borders. Campbell had disclosed on Monday that Afghan troops requested the airstrike. "Even though the Afghans request that support, it still has to go through a rigorous US procedure to enable fires to go on the ground," Campbell said. "Fires" means weapons fire - in this case howitzer or other fire from the AC-130 gunship.

NEWS IN brief

Turkish court acquits journo over graft case

AFP, Istanbul

A Turkish court yesterday acquitted a prominent female journalist of charges of "targeting a public servant" over a tweet suggesting a cover-up in a corruption scandal that shook the government. Sedef Kabas, a broadcast journalist and anchorwoman on the CNN-Turk channel, had been briefly detained in January for posting the tweet and faced up to five years in jail on charges of "targeting a public servant tasked with fighting against terrorism."

Dozens injured in Indian holy city riots

AFP, Lucknow

Extra police and paramilitaries were deployed to the Indian holy city of Varanasi yesterday after nearly 50 people were injured during riots in which a police post was torched and dozens of vehicles damaged. The violence broke out on Monday night when police fired tear gas at a group of holy men known as sadhus who were protesting at the authorities' refusal to allow them to immerse idols in the River Ganges last month.

HK univ protest over academic freedoms

AFP, Hong Kong

Around 2,000 protesters at Hong Kong University marched yesterday to support academic freedom as fears grow that Beijing is interfering in the city's education system. Anger has intensified among students and academics since the appointment of a liberal law scholar to a senior university administrative post was rejected last week.

Ukraine rebels delay disputed poll

BBC ONLINE

Pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine say they have agreed to postpone until February disputed elections that had been planned for the next few weeks.

The move was announced by two senior separatist representatives of the self-proclaimed republics in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Kiev says any polls held not according to Ukrainian law would be "fake". The disagreements have hindered progress towards ending the conflict in which nearly 8,000 people have died.

Moscow denies sending troops and heavy weapons to the separatists. However, the Kremlin admits that Russian "volunteers" are fighting alongside the rebels in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

The fighting erupted in April 2014, a month after Russia annexed Ukraine's southern Crimea peninsula.

Rebel representatives Denis Pushilin and Vladislav Deinego announced the move in a statement published on the separatist DAN news agency.

They said the elections - which had been originally planned on 18 October in Donetsk and 1 November in Luhansk - would be delayed until 21 February 2016.

In return, the rebels said the government in Kiev must fulfil its responsibilities in accordance with a peace deal agreed in Minsk, Belarus, last February.



Smoke billowing from the Al-Qasr hotel in Aden's western suburbs after it was hit by a rocket attack yesterday. Yemen's Prime Minister Khaled Bahah escaped unharmed after three rocket attacks killing two guards and wounding 12 at the hotel.

PHOTO: AFP

Nobel winner Youyou combed ancient texts for cure

CNN ONLINE

In the turmoil of China's Cultural Revolution, scientist Tu Youyou joined a covert mission to find a cure for malaria.

"Project 523," was set up in 1967 by Chairman Mao Zedong, who wanted to help Communist troops fighting in the mosquito-ridden jungles of Vietnam, where they were losing more soldiers to malaria than bullets.

"We needed a totally new structured antimalarial to deal with the drug resistance. I accepted the task," Tu recalled in 2011. She scoured ancient texts and folk manuals and traveled to remote parts of the country for clues, ultimately collecting 2,000 potential remedies. She whittled these down to 380 and tested each one on mice.

One of the compounds tested reduced the number of malaria parasites in the rodents' blood. Derived from sweet wormwood, its use as a treatment for malaria was first recorded in 1600 years ago in China,

when a manual recommended drinking juice extracted from the plant.

Her discovery resulted in the drug artemisinin -- humankind's best defense against the mosquito-borne disease, which kills 450,000 people each year.

On Monday, she was one of a trio of scientists awarded the Nobel Prize for medicine.

Rao Yi, a Chinese neurobiologist, says it's a miracle the compound was discovered at all, given that most of China's universities and research institutes were shut down as red guards ran riot across the country during the Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966 and continued for more than a decade.

Many scientists, especially those with Western training, were persecuted, he co-wrote in an academic paper published in Science China.

As a result, it wasn't until 1977 the first academic paper on artemisinin was published. The first English-language research wasn't published until 1982.



Boko Haram kills 11 Chad troops

AFP, N'djamena

Boko Haram Islamists attacked Chadian soldiers yesterday, killing 11 and wounding 13, a Chadian security source said, in the latest deadly raid by the militants despite a regional offensive against them.

The source said 17 Boko Haram fighters also died in the fighting following the pre-dawn strike near the Nigerian border and Lake Chad.

"Boko Haram members attacked our positions at 4:30 am in Kaiga Ngouboua about two kilometres (about a mile) from the Nigerian border," the source said.

"This surprise attack claimed the lives of 11 soldiers and wounded 13 (and) 17 Boko Haram fighters were killed."

"The attackers were pushed back and the army is continuing search operations in the zone."

India, Pakistan will return to talks

Says ex-Pak FM

THE HINDU ONLINE

Calling India and Pakistan's recent spat at the United Nations a "tit for tat," former Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri said both sides would inevitably return to talks.

Speaking to The Hindu in Delhi, Kasuri said the recent attempts at the UNGA by Pakistan to raise the Kashmir issue internationally, as well as the Indian government's push to highlight human rights abuses in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir were "irrelevant," and final settlement of Kashmir would mirror the current ground position.

"You can't take away from us what we have [of Kashmir], we can't take away from you what you have [of Kashmir]," Kasuri said in an interview to The Hindu, ahead of the release of his memoirs "Neither a hawk nor a dove" in India. Kasuri's statements are likely to be as controversial in Pakistan as they are in India, given that Pakistan has always refused to accept a "status quo" solution of Kashmir. Kasuri, who has recounted what he calls the "only insider's account" of negotiations between the Indian and Pakistani governments between 2004 and 2007, says they led to a "near-breakthrough" on Kashmir.



India activists back pollution tax in Delhi

AFP, New Delhi

Environmentalists called yesterday for a pollution tax in the Indian capital after a top court ordered the city and national governments to quickly come up with a plan to clean New Delhi's notoriously filthy air.

The Delhi government has long been criticised for failing to curb pollution from industries and mounting traffic, in a city ranked by the WHO as having the worst air quality in the world.

Acting on a petition from a lawyer, the Supreme Court on Monday ordered the Delhi and national governments to submit a plan within three days on clearing the city's air before winter starts, when quality deteriorates.

Delhi's CSE said thousands of diesel trucks pouring into the city every night account for nearly one third of the area's total pollution levels.