

Cuba's Castro in France

Hollande hails the historic visit as 'a new stage in relations'

AFP, Paris

Cuba's President Raul Castro began an official state visit to France yesterday, his first ever to Europe, which is being seen as a key step in rebuilding his island nation's ties with the West.

The Cuban leader was welcomed under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris before being driven down a virtually deserted Champs-Élysées avenue, decked out in Cuban flags.

Police severely restricted access to spectators, and just a few groups of supporters of the Cuban regime were present.

Castro, 84, is on his first official trip to the European Union since taking over from his elder brother Fidel in 2006, and spent the weekend in the French capital on a private visit.

France has led the way in welcoming Cuba back into the diplomatic fold since it restored relations last year with the United States after they were broken off for more than half a century.

French President Francois Hollande, who was to hold talks with Castro later yesterday, has described the visit as "a new stage in the strengthening of relations between the two countries".

It builds on Hollande's own state visit to

Cuba last May, the first by a head of state from the West in more than half a century.

Castro is the second former pariah to be welcomed to Paris in a matter of days, after Hollande hosted Iranian President Hassan Rouhani last week.

"This visit is important for Cuba's image," said Eduardo Perera, an international relations expert at Havana University.

"It will undeniably make Cuba shine on the international stage."

Havana hopes the visit will allow Cuba to "widen and diversify its relations with France in all possible areas -- politics, economics, trade, finance, investment, culture and cooperation," said Rogelio Sierra, Cuban deputy foreign minister.

Although Washington has yet to lift its trade embargo on Cuba, US and European businesses are jockeying for a place in the market as the island's economy gradually opens up.

Hollande urged an end to the blockade, which was imposed in 1962, on his Havana visit.

Trade delegations have been flocking to Cuba, hoping to cash in on its highly trained workforce and natural assets such as its sun-drenched Caribbean beaches, a draw for tourists.



Myanmar's National League for Democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi arrives for the opening of the new parliament in Naypyitaw yesterday. After decades of struggle, hundreds of lawmakers from Suu Kyi's camp will form Myanmar's ruling party, with enough seats in parliament to choose the first democratically elected government since the military took power in 1962. PHOTO: REUTERS

Taliban suicide bomber kills 9 in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

A Taliban suicide bomber struck a police base in central Kabul yesterday, killing at least nine people just days before a fresh round of international talks aimed at reviving dialogue with the Islamist group.

Scores of people were also wounded in the bombing at the entrance of the base, which left several bodies and charred debris strewn around the area. The attack comes amid the Taliban's unprecedented winter offensive despite a renewed push to restart formal peace talks.

The interior ministry initially reported the attack as a suicide car bomb, but later said the attacker appeared to be on foot and detonated himself in a queue of people waiting to get inside the base.

"Ten people were reported killed and 20 others were wounded in a suicide attack in Deh Mazang square of Kabul city," deputy interior minister Mohammad Ayoub Salangi said on Twitter. "Most of the victims were civilians."

Kabul police spokesman Basir Mujahid reported a death toll of nine, adding that as many as 12 people including a woman were wounded. The health ministry said some of those wounded were hit in the chest by flying shrapnel and are in critical condition.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, with insurgent spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid claiming on Twitter that up to 40 police were killed and wounded.

Ambulances rushed to the scene, which was cordoned off by authorities. The militants routinely exaggerate the toll in attacks on the Afghan government.

Talks struggle to get off ground

AFP, Geneva

The UN special envoy for Syria faced an uphill task in Geneva yesterday to get talks to end the brutal civil war off the ground, as the opposition hesitated to join negotiations with the regime.

The urgency to find a solution to the four-year war was brought home Sunday when multiple explosions killed 71 people near a revered Shia shrine outside the capital Damascus, according to a Britain-based monitor.

Present in Geneva are the main opposition umbrella group the High Negotiation Committee (HNC) and representatives of President Bashar al-Assad.

Talks between the UN special envoy for Syria and government representatives tentatively planned for yesterday 11:00 am in Geneva have been "re-scheduled" to allow talks with the opposition first, the UN said. Khawla Mattar, spokeswoman for special envoy Staffan de Mistura, told AFP there was "the need to meet" with opposition first, and that a meeting

with the government would happen "maybe another day".

Discussions with the opposition umbrella group the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) were still expected to take place at the UN's European

SYRIA WAR

Opposition hesitates to join peace negotiations with regime

Kerry urges both sides 'to make the most of this moment'

'No amnesty' for Syria war criminals: UN rights chief

Shia shrine blast death toll rises to 71

headquarters at 5:00 pm, the UN said. The HNC, which only reluctantly showed up late Saturday and held informal talks with de Mistura on Sunday in a Geneva hotel, is hesitating about entering formal indirect talks envisioned under a November

roadmap agreed by outside powers.

It is demanding first that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime allows humanitarian access to besieged towns, stops bombarding civilians and releases prisoners.

The UN human rights chief said yesterday those committing crimes against humanity in Syria's brutal war should not be let off under any deal, as peace talks struggled in Geneva.

"We do have a principled position in the United Nations that no amnesties should be considered for those suspected of having committed crimes against humanity or war crimes," UN rights chief Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini told reporters in Geneva.

US Secretary of State John Kerry urged on Sunday both sides "to make the most of this moment" in an online statement broadcast from Washington.

Kerry urged the opposition to drop their preconditions, but also had hard words for their foes, accusing Assad's forces of deliberately starving besieged towns.

Tough road ahead for Suu Kyi

AFP, Naypyitaw

Aung San Suu Kyi's party has taken an unprecedented public mandate into parliament. But popularity and power are only the beginning for the Nobel laureate and her hundreds of new MPs, many of whom have no experience of public office. Here are a few of their main challenges:

PICKING A PRESIDENT

Suu Kyi's party can form a government, but who will lead it? The Nobel laureate is barred from the presidency by a clause in the junta-drafted constitution because her children are British.

Many believe it was scripted specifically to block her path to power. She has said she will rule "above" a puppet president, who will replace outgoing President Thein Sein in late March.

If she does, that position is not covered in the constitution and could rile the powerful military who have ceded some powers but retain 25 percent of seats in parliament -- and with them an effective veto on major charter change.

MILITARY STILL IN PLAY

Given the presidency issue, Suu Kyi may need to sweeten up an army which held her prisoner for some 15 years. Observers say good relations between Suu Kyi and the military will be crucial to get anything done.

That is because the military's political powers are not limited to parliament. The 2008 constitution that was scripted under ex-dictator Than Shwe hands the army chief control over three key ministries: home affairs, defence and border affairs.

UNCERTAIN PEACE

Myanmar's ethnic minorities have fought for greater autonomy for more than 50 years. Thein Sein signed ceasefires with several of the country's major ethnic armed groups, but heavy fighting continues, particularly in Kachin and Shan states.

As a member of the ethnic majority Bamar, Suu Kyi has sometimes been viewed with suspicion by these groups. But the NLD won handsomely in ethnic states and Suu Kyi has pledged to work towards a federal system.

She also must tackle the scourge of anti-Muslim sentiment that has fomented since an explosion of unrest in Rakhine state in 2012 between Buddhists and minority Rohingya communities.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Myanmar's economy has surged under reforms by Thein Sein's government. Foreign investment swept in as most Western sanctions were lifted. Mobile phones are now ubiquitous, car imports are rising fast and several special economic zones are in the pipeline.

The economy grew at 8.5 percent in the 2014/15 fiscal year, but the World Bank expects this to moderate to 6.5 percent this year. But poverty is still a problem for huge swathes of a country that relies on agriculture.

NEWS IN brief

Qaeda seizes Yemen town on key highway

AFP, Aden

Al-Qaeda fighters have taken control of a town in southern Yemen on a major road linking two provincial capitals, a local official and tribal chiefs said yesterday. Militants swept unopposed into Azzan, in Shabwa province, before raising the al-Qaeda flag over public buildings. "The state is absent and it is not surprising that this vacuum is filled by al-Qaeda," a local official said.

US island sail-by 'dangerous': China

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday condemned as "dangerous and irresponsible" the weekend transit of a US warship within 12 nautical miles of a disputed island in the South China Sea. Tensions have mounted in the Sea over Beijing's construction of artificial islands. A commentary by the official Xinhua news service said the sail-by "violated both Chinese and international law".

African leaders back push for ICC pull out

AFP, Addis Ababa

African leaders have backed a Kenyan proposal pushing for a pullout from the International Criminal Court, leaders said Sunday. Repeating claims it unfairly targets the continent, Chad's President Idriss Deby, elected African Union chairman at the two-day summit, criticised the court for focusing its efforts on African leaders.



A migrant child carries blankets as refugees and migrants disembark from the passenger ferry Blue Star1 at the port of Piraeus, near Athens, Greece, on Sunday. More than half a million people have put their names to an online petition yesterday, calling for Greek islanders on the frontline of Europe's migrant crisis to be awarded the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize. PHOTO: REUTERS

PATHANKOT ATTACK Pak to seek more proof from India

PTI, Lahore

With no headway made in the probe into the Pathankot terror attack, Pakistan plans to seek more evidence from India, a media report said yesterday. This comes days after Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said the outcome of the investigation into the assault would be made public soon.

A Pakistani Government team, which is investigating the attack, will ask the Foreign Ministry to seek more evidence from India.

"The team has almost completed its investigation into five cellphone numbers [allegedly used for making calls from Pakistan to India] provided by the Indian government. No further leads were found from these numbers because they were unregistered and had fake identities," Dawn quoted a source as saying.

ZIKA OUTBREAK

WHO declares global health emergency

Calls for an international coordinated response

REUTERS, Geneva

The World Health Organization yesterday declared the mosquito-borne Zika virus to be an international public health emergency as the disease linked to thousands of birth defects in Brazil spreads rapidly.

WHO Director-General Margaret Chan told reporters that an international coordinated response was needed, although restrictions on travel or trade were not necessary.

The emergency designation was recommended by a committee of independent experts to the United Nations agency following criticism of a hesitant response so far. The move should help fast-track international action and research priorities.

The WHO said last week the Zika virus was "spreading explosively" and could infect as many as four million people in the Americas.

The agency was criticised for reacting too slowly to the Ebola epidemic in West Africa which killed more than 10,000 people, and

has promised to do better in future global health crises.

The WHO's International Health Regulations emergency committee brings together experts in epidemiology, public health and infectious diseases from the Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa.

Brazil has reported nearly 4,000 suspected cases of microcephaly, in which infants are born with smaller-than-usual brains. The health ministry has linked the condition to Zika, although the connection is not yet definitive.

Brazilian Health Minister Marcelo Castro told Reuters that the epidemic was worse than believed because the infected people had no symptoms in 80 percent of the cases.

As the virus spreads from Brazil, other countries in the Americas are also likely to see cases of babies with Zika-linked birth defects, experts believe.

The Pan American Health Organization says that Zika has now spread in 24 nations and territories in the Americas.

WHITE HOUSE RACE

Contenders offer closing arguments in Iowa

AFP, Des Moines

US Republican and Democratic candidates made last-gasp appeals to Iowa voters just hours before the first nominating contest of the 2016 campaign, with their White House aspirations on the line.

By late yesterday, presidential hopefuls will learn whether the time, effort and money they poured into their campaigns have been rewarded with the kind of strong showing here that would lend huge momentum to their cause when the race shifts toward the next vote, in New Hampshire.

Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Hillary Clinton both were leading in the polls, but not by enough to assure victory for either candidate in yesterday's caucuses.

Will an establishment Republican -- Marco Rubio, perhaps -- outperform the polls and make it a three-way race with Trump and conservative Ted Cruz? And will self-declared Democratic Socialist Bernie

Sanders convert the excitement about his political revolution into enough votes to upset Clinton's second shot at history?

Iowa -- and early momentum in the presidential race -- is up for grabs. Most of the 12 Republicans and three Democrats in the race were holding several weekend events to press the flesh and win over voters.

By evening, several leading candidates were rallying their faithful, pleading with them to defy snow or freezing rain and bring friends and neighbors to caucus. Clinton, seeking to stave off a surge by Sanders, was leaving nothing to chance, stumping in the heartland this weekend and warning that the policy proposals of her main rival were pie-in-the-sky idealism.

Sanders, a senator from Vermont, declared his race with Clinton a "tossup." A Bloomberg/Des Moines Register poll published late Saturday put Clinton just ahead of Sanders in Iowa, 45 to 42 percent. The same poll gave Trump a bigger lead over chief Republican rival Cruz, a senator from Texas.



Palestinian shot dead after 'stabbing attack'

AFP, Jerusalem

A Palestinian was shot dead yesterday after trying to stab Israeli soldiers near a Jewish settlement in the occupied West Bank, Israel's army said. A Palestinian security source named the assailant as Ahmed Toba, 17, from a village in the northern West Bank. A wave of Palestinian knife, gun and car-ramming attacks erupted in October.

Dubai stays busiest airport for int'l travel

AFP, Dubai

Dubai International remained the world's busiest airport for international travel last year with a 10.7 percent rise in passenger numbers, its operator said yesterday. More than 78 million passengers passed through Dubai in 2015, led by an increase in travellers from India, Britain and Saudi Arabia, the state-owned airport said in a statement.