



SYRIA CRISIS

UN peace talks in quagmire

Opposition suspends negotiation; UN begins major evacuation of wounded

AFP, Zabadani

The UN began evacuating hundreds of wounded people from besieged Syrian towns Wednesday in a rare sign of humanitarian progress amid faltering peace talks and a fraying ceasefire.

In Geneva, the Syrian government said it was pushing on with indirect negotiations, calling the opposition's freeze on its participation "absurd theatre".

The anti-government High Negotiations Committee this week suspended its participation in the UN-brokered talks until it could see progress on political transition and humanitarian issues.

Yesterday, the United Nations secured the evacuation of dozens of people needing medical attention from four besieged towns as part of a complex humanitarian mission.

"Plans are underway to evacuate some 500 people including the sick, wounded and their family members from the besieged four towns -- Fuua, Kafraya, Madaya and Zabadani -- in urgent need of life-saving medical attention," said UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric.

More than 4 million in Syria live in besieged or hard-to-reach areas, with limited or no access to food or medical supplies.

The dire humanitarian situation has played a major role in the opposition walking away from troubled peace talks this week in Geneva. An already-shaky ceasefire between the government and non-jihadist rebels was severely strained on Tuesday after at least 44 people were killed in air strikes on two markets in northwest Syria.

On Tuesday, the coordinator of the High Negotiations Committee said his delegation could not remain in Switzerland while more Syrians died.

"It is not suitable, neither morally nor on the humanitarian side, to be part of negotiations when Syrians are dying daily from sieges, hunger, bombings, poisonous gases and barrel bombs," said Riad Hijab.

The talks are aimed at putting an end to Syria's five-year war with a political transition, a new constitution, and fresh elections by September 2017.

But the main stumbling block remains the fate of President Bashar al-Assad, whom the opposition insists cannot be a part of a transitional government. But the government is adamant that Assad must be part of the

Trump, Clinton win big in NY

AGENCIES

Billionaire Donald Trump and former secretary of state Hillary Clinton won sweeping victories in the New York primary Tuesday, bolstering their bids to secure the Republican and Democratic nominations for the White House.

It was the most decisive New York primary in decades and leaves self-styled democratic socialist Bernie Sanders with a tough decision on how to proceed as Clinton extends her overwhelming lead over the Vermont governor.

US networks called the race for Trump seconds after the polls closed, signaling a crushing victory that is likely to alarm his opponents desperately hoping to block his path to the nomination with a contested party convention in July.

Both Clinton and Trump will now look to replicate their wins in Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island, which hold primaries on April 26, as they edge closer toward a general election in November.

"To the people that know me the best -- the people of New York -- when they give us this kind of a vote it's just incredible," a delighted Trump, flanked by his family, told a Manhattan victory party.

Trump, whose campaign has appalled the Republican establishment, won 60.5 percent of the vote to 14.5 for his evangelical rival Ted Cruz and 25.1 for Ohio Governor John Kasich, with most of the

US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS 2016

votes counted, CNN said.

"Senator Cruz is just about mathematically eliminated," declared the 69-year-old to cheers and applause from supporters at Trump Tower.

CNN predicted Trump would take at least 89 of the 95 Republican party delegates up for grabs in New York -- a development that could help the Manhattan real estate mogul win the GOP

nomination outright and avoid what would be an explosive and messy contested convention in July.

After the Tuesday's primary, Trump held 847 delegates, while Ted Cruz had 553 and John Kasich had 148, according to CNN. A Republican candidate needs 1,237 delegates to clinch the nomination.

Clinton now leads with 1,930 delegates compared to 1,223 for Sanders, according to a CNN tally -- putting her even more firmly on course to clinch the 2,383 needed to secure the party's presidential nomination. New York's 247 Democratic delegates and 44 superdelegates are the party's second largest state haul, second only to California which votes in June.

Clinton relished the victory in her adopted home state to stall momentum generated by Sanders who won seven out of the eight previous nominating contests.

"Thank you New York," she said to chants of "Hillary, Hillary, Hillary" from jubilant supporters in a Manhattan hotel, where she walked on stage with her

husband Bill Clinton and heavily pregnant daughter Chelsea.

"Today you proved once again there's no place like home," said the 68-year-old candidate looking to make history as the first woman president of the United States.

"The race for the Democratic nomination is in the home stretch and victory is in sight."

The former first lady and New York senator won 57.9 percent of the vote to 42.1 for Sanders, CNN said.

Clinton extended an olive branch to supporters of Sanders, who has galvanized millions of young voters with his calls for healthcare as a right, free college education and campaign finance reform.

"I believe there's much more that unites us than divides us," she said.

The 74-year-old Sanders had hoped for a much closer margin to keep alive his White House dreams but showed no signs of stepping aside.

"We lost tonight. There are five primaries next week. We think we're going to do well," he told reporters.

NEWS IN brief

Maldives strips jailed Nasheed of pension

AFP, Colombo

The Maldives yesterday stripped jailed former president Mohamed Nasheed of his pension entitlements and health insurance, after demanding he return from medical leave in Britain. The government said changes to the law meant former presidents and their spouses are

Kabul attack death toll rises to 64

AFP, Kabul

The death toll from a Taliban suicide attack in Kabul has more than doubled to 64, officials said yesterday, making it the deadliest militant assault in the Afghan capital for years. The brazen attack on Tuesday on a security services office in the heart of Kabul is seen as the opening salvo in this

Attack on Pak Polio team kills 7 cops

REUTERS, Karachi

Taliban gunmen attacked policemen guarding medical workers administering polio vaccinations in the Pakistani city of Karachi yesterday, killing seven of them. Teams in Pakistan working to immunize children against the virus are often targeted by Taliban and other militant groups, who say the campaign is a cover for Western spies. At least 89 have been killed in

21 Rohingyas die as boat sinks

AFP, Yangon

Witnesses to a boat capsizing off Myanmar that left some 20 people dead, including children, say the victims were from the persecuted Rohingya Muslim minority and blamed the tragedy on travel restrictions that forced them to journey by sea. At least 21 people, including nine children, died after a packed boat capsized in choppy waters on Tuesday as it approached the Rakhine state capital of

'500 die' in new tragedy

AFP, Rome

The UN refugee agency yesterday said it feared around 500 migrants from Africa had drowned in the Mediterranean, in what could be one of the worst tragedies since the start of the migrant crisis in Europe.

Survivors who were spotted drifting at sea before being picked up by a passing merchant ship on April 16 told the UNHCR many migrants drowned when human traffickers tried to transfer people to an already overcrowded vessel somewhere between Libya and Italy.

The latest reported deaths come as Europe struggles to find a way of stemming the flow of people fleeing war, poverty and persecution in what has become Europe's worst migrant crisis since World War II.

"The survivors told us that they had been part of a group of between 100 and 200 people who departed last week from a locality near Tobruk in Libya on a 30-metre (100-foot) boat," the UNHCR said in a statement.

"After sailing for several hours, the smugglers in charge of the boat attempted to transfer the passengers to a larger ship

carrying hundreds of people in terribly overcrowded conditions," it said, adding that the larger boat then capsized and sank.

The 41 survivors -- 37 men, three women and a three-year-old child -- included migrants who were still on the smaller ship when the one they were being transferred to capsized as well as others who had already boarded the larger ship and managed to swim back when it sank.

They are believed to have drifted at sea for up to three days before being rescued by the Philippine-flagged cargo vessel and taken to Kalamata on the Peloponnese peninsula in southern Greece.

In what is believed to be the deadliest incident involving migrants and refugees trying to reach Europe, at least 740 people were feared to have perished in April 2015 after a crammed fishing boat capsized in Libyan waters.

Migrant arrivals in Greece have fallen sharply since an agreement Between EU and Turkey took effect on March 20. The number landing on the Greek islands has now stabilised at around 100 people a day -- around a tenth of the arrivals last summer.

But about 50,000 people remain stranded in Greece since the closure of the migrant

MIGRANT CRISIS

ECUADOR QUAKE



Collapsed buildings in Portoviejo, Ecuador, on Tuesday. Three days after the powerful 7.8-magnitude quake struck Ecuador's Pacific coast in a zone popular with tourists, more than 525 people are known to have died, the government said.

PHOTO: AFP

Death toll hits 525

AFP, Pedernales

A 6.1-magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of Ecuador yesterday, sowing new panic four days after a more powerful quake killed more than 525 people, with hundreds still missing.

The latest quake, which officials called an aftershock, struck just off the coastal town of Muisne in northwestern Ecuador. No new damage or casualties were immediately reported.

But tremors still jolted nerves even as rescue workers continued pulling bodies from the rubble of Saturday's 7.8-magnitude earthquake, Ecuador's worst in nearly 40 years.

The death toll from that quake crossed a new threshold as officials reported 525 deaths in the western province of Manabi alone -- not including at least two deaths in

the southwestern province of Guayas.

Some 4,600 people were also injured in the quake. Officials warned the toll was likely to rise further as some 1,700 were still missing.

Hope of finding more victims alive was fading fast as the crucial three-day mark came and went late Tuesday. Locals in devastated towns such as Manta -- population 253,000 -- were starting to lose patience.

Luis Felipe Navarro said he was sure there were people alive in the concrete and twisted metal of a building he owned -- one of around 800 structures toppled in the quake.

"I have received messages on my telephone. They say there are 10 of them in a cavity," he said. "But the rescue teams will not listen to me."

In a glimmer of good news, rescuers said 54 people had been rescued alive from the rubble. Some 4,600 people were injured in the



Killer Breivik wins human rights case

AFP, Oslo

A Norwegian court yesterday ruled in favour of mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik in his lawsuit against the Norwegian state, finding it guilty of "inhuman treatment" for keeping him in solitary confinement.

It said the rightwing extremist's almost five-year isolation violated Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Norway's most notorious inmate has been detained in a high-security prison unit since he massacred 77 people in a bomb-and-gun rampage.

He is serving a maximum 21-year sentence -- which can be extended if he is still considered dangerous -- for killing eight people in a bombing outside a government building in Oslo and then shooting dead another 69, mostly teenagers, at a Labour Youth camp on the island of Utøya on July 22, 2011.

The state was also ordered to pay Breivik's legal fees of 331,000 Norwegian kroner (\$40,735).

Nato, Russia meeting fails to bridge gaps

AFP, Brussels

Nato and Russia ran up against "profound disagreements" over Ukraine and other issues as their ambassadors met yesterday for the first time since 2014, alliance chief Jens Stoltenberg said.

The two sides agreed to keep communicating following the meeting of the Nato-Russia Council, which has been on ice since the alliance cut practical ties with Moscow to protest the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in early 2014.

"I think we had a very frank, serious and actually good meeting," Stoltenberg told a news conference after the talks.

But he admitted they were far from any breakthrough on easing tensions over the simmering violence still gripping eastern Ukraine.

Relations have also worsened in recent months over Moscow's air campaign in Syria and tensions have flared in the past week after two incidents involving the US military and Russian planes in the Baltic Sea.

Russia blames Nato for increasing the risk of conflict by building up its troops in eastern European countries, many of which have been lobbying for more Western support.

'Ideas of Communist Cuba will live on'

Fidel Castro speaks to Congress for 'one of the last times'

AFP, Havana

Fidel Castro appeared alongside brother Raul at a Communist party congress that ended Tuesday without sweeping leadership changes, leaving to another day the question of who will run Cuba when the old guard bows out.

Flanked by his younger sibling, the 89-year-old retired revolutionary was given a rock star welcome at the close of a congress that left Cuba's elderly Politburo at the helm for another five years -- despite Raul Castro's pledge to stand down in 2018.

"Soon I will be 90 years old," he said. "Soon I will be like all the rest. Everybody's turn comes." Castro, whose birthday is Aug 13, told 1,300 party activists gathered at a Havana convention center where he delivered countless, hours-long speeches during his rule. "Perhaps this will be one of the last times I speak in this room," said Castro.

"We should fight without end to achieve them," the now-frail statesman, who led Cuba for 47 years, told the party meeting intended to set the island's economic and political path for the coming five years.

'330m people affected'

BBC ONLINE

At least 330 million people are affected by drought in India, the government has told the Supreme Court.

Authorities say this number is likely to rise further given that some states with water shortages have not yet submitted status reports.

The drought is taking place as a heat wave extends across much of India with temperatures crossing 40C for days now. An 11-year-old girl died of heatstroke while collecting water from a village pump in the western Maharashtra state.

Yogita Desai had spent close to four hours in 42C temperatures gathering water from the pump on Sunday, local journalist Manoj Sapte told the BBC. She began

vomiting after returning home and was rushed to hospital, but died early on Monday.

Yogita's death certificate says she died of heatstroke and dehydration. The pump was a mere 500m from her house, but a typical wait for water stretches into hours.

India is heavily dependent on monsoon rains, which have been poor for two years in a row. The government said that nearly 256 districts across India, home to nearly a quarter of the population were impacted by the drought.

Schools have been shut in the eastern state of Orissa and more than 100 deaths due to heatstroke have been reported from across the country, including from the southern states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh which saw

DROUGHT IN INDIA

