

briefly

NIGERIA

Clinton to meet with president

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton meets Nigeria's president on Thursday on her African tour as the continent's largest oil producer faces an Islamist insurgency raising deep concern among Western powers.

Clinton was scheduled to arrive on Thursday afternoon in Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and a major supplier of US oil imports, for a brief stopover before traveling to Ghana for the funeral of president John Atta Mills.

Her visit comes as President Goodluck Jonathan is under growing pressure to stop the violence, with Islamist militant group Boko Haram having killed more than 1,400 people in northern and central Nigeria since 2010, according to Human Rights Watch.

RUSSIA

Sect held kids in bunker for years

Russian police have freed more than a dozen children who were being held in underground isolation by a Muslim sect in Kazan, in the eastern republic of Tatarstan, the interior ministry said.

Some of the 60 members of the religious group, followers of a local spiritual leader, had lived for more than a decade in a bunker below a mosque in the city, the police said.

The children had been forced to live in squalid conditions with no access to the outside world.

The bunker was discovered in police searches of Islamic organizations in the city following twin attacks last month on moderate clerics.

TURKEY

Bomb hits bus carrying troops

Two roadside bombs struck a bus carrying Turkish troops to a navy base in the country's west, killing one soldier and wounding 11 people on Thursday, the governor's office said.

The explosions hit the bus near the base on the outskirts of the Aegean resort town of Foca, the governor's office in Izmir said. Governor Cahit Kirac of Izmir province said one soldier was killed and 11 people were wounded in the attack.

State-run Anadolu Agency said six soldiers were among the wounded. The rest of the wounded were civilians employed by the military, reports said.

JAPAN

PM survives confidence vote

Japan's prime minister survived a no-confidence motion on Thursday after reaching an 11th hour deal with a major opposition party over his much-cherished sales tax bill.

Yoshihiko Noda brushed off the attack by a phalanx of minor parties, including former rebels from his own disintegrating bloc, which comes ahead of an expected vote on Friday on his plan to double consumption tax.

The main opposition Liberal Democratic Party had, in recent days, begun to renege on its promise to back the legislation, which independent commentators say is a good first step on the long road to overhauling Japan's huge debt pile, worth twice its GDP.

INDIA

Yoga guru leads rally over graft

Indians shouted patriotic slogans and listened to a rousing speech from a charismatic yoga guru who began fasting on Thursday to pressure the government to bring back billions of ill-gotten gains — so-called black money — citizens have stashed in foreign banks.

Supporters of Baba Ramdev jammed traffic across New Delhi as they walked to the sprawling Ramlila fairgrounds and buses from nearby states converged on the capital. About 20,000 people pledged their support for Ramdev's campaign to wipe out tax evasion and endemic corruption in India.

Squatting on the ground and fanning themselves with bits of cardboard in the sweltering monsoon heat, supporters cheered as Ramdev spoke.

REUTERS—AP



FLOODING FORCES MORE EVACUATIONS

PHOTO BY PHILIPPINE AIR FORCE VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

An aerial photo shows a landslide in Rizal province, east of Manila, Philippines, on Thursday. A fresh deluge forced more evacuations along fast-rising rivers in the Philippine capital, as the city and surrounding areas struggled to deal with widespread flooding triggered by nearly two weeks of relentless rains.

Dialogue to enhance China's relations with Latin America

By CHENG GUANGJIN

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China will hold its maiden dialogue with foreign ministers of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States Troika in September. The dialogue will become a regular occurrence, which analysts said will help deepen cooperation between China and the 33 CELAC nations.

Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi held talks with ministers from the three countries that make up the premier grouping of CELAC, known as the Troika, in Beijing on Thursday. Yang met with Chilean Foreign Minister Alfredo Moreno Charne, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro Moros and Cuban Vice Foreign Minister Rogelio Sierra Diaz.

The two sides agreed to establish a regular dialogue between foreign ministers from China and Troika, and will hold their first meeting in September, according to a press release from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

They also agreed to expand

and deepen China-Latin America pragmatic cooperation in all areas and promote the early establishment of a China-Latin America cooperative forum.

The two sides agreed that establishing ties between China and CELAC and developing dialogue and cooperation will benefit both sides and enhance their comprehensive cooperative partnership based on equality and mutual benefits.

"A regular dialogue will promote mutual understanding and ensure cooperation is carried out smoothly and deeply," said Qi Fengting, an expert on Latin American studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Qi said learning about each other's needs and concerns and respecting local laws is the best way for Chinese to avoid risks when doing business in other countries.

Cooperation between China and Latin American countries has developed quickly in recent years, especially in trade, investments, infrastructure construction and cooperation on energy.

The CELAC countries,

especially the Troika, with well developed domestic economies, are willing to welcome more Chinese investments and deepen the existing cooperative projects, Qi said.

CELAC, a new leading regional bloc, was formed on Dec 3, 2011. Latin American leaders proposed the grouping in February 2010 in Mexico, more than 60 years after the start of the Organization of American States.

It consists of 33 sovereign states of Latin America and the Caribbean region. Chile currently holds the rotating chair of CELAC.

Premier Wen Jiabao said in his speech at the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean on June 27 that China would like to set up a regular foreign ministers' dialogue mechanism with the Troika and hold the first round of dialogue this year.

Trade between China and Latin America amounted to \$241.5 billion in 2011, a year-on-year increase of 31.5 percent. China is the third biggest trading partner of Latin America, after the United States and

European Union.

While giving a speech at the CELAC headquarters during his official visit to Latin America late June, Wen called for the two sides to increase bilateral trade to \$400 billion in the next five years.

Wen also announced the creation of a cooperation fund with \$5 billion to spur the development of the region's manufacturing industry, as well as a \$10 billion credit line for infrastructure cooperation.

Latin American experts are going to publish a book later this year on Wen's proposals for China-Latin America relations, Xinhua News Agency reported.

"Economic trends in the first half of this year show specific China-Latin America ties are solid and preserved in fundamental areas," said Fernando Reyes Matta, director of the Santiago-based Center of Latin American Studies on China, in an interview with Xinhua.

It was also notable that the region's combined export volume to China is expanding fast while China's investment in the region is also rising, he added.

Teheran meeting on Syria 'not promising'

Conference may not affect crisis due to absence of major players: Experts

By ZHANG YUNBI

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Iran on Thursday hosted a 29-nation conference on Syria with the aim of stopping bloodshed there and forging a role for Teheran as peace broker for its Arab ally.

Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi opened the meeting by calling for "national dialogue between the (Syrian) opposition, which has popular support, and the Syrian government to establish calm and security," according to state television.

He added that Iran was prepared to host any such dialogue.

Salehi said Iran was opposed to "any foreign interference and military intervention in resolving the Syrian crisis" and supported efforts extended by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

Experts said the meeting's influence might be limited as most of the attending countries are friends of Teheran.

"Teheran's effort in hosting the Syrian-issue conference may not make a difference because of the absence of some major players, especially the countries that have given rise to the crisis," said Zhang Xiaodong, an expert on Middle East studies with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

As a major player in the region, Teheran also plans to run counter to Washington and show its influence in the region, and the conference serves as an example of Teheran's international reach, Zhang said, adding: "It serves as an approach for Iran to game with Washington."

Saeed Jalili, the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, on Tuesday stressed his country's rejection of foreign intervention in Syria, and he said the road for a settlement in Syria is a political rather than a military one.

In a news conference after his meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus on the same day, Jalili lashed out at the countries that render support and military supplies to

the armed rebels in Syria, saying that such parties "can't in any way serve the interests of the Syrian people."

Western diplomats have dismissed the conference as an attempt to divert attention away from bloody events on the ground and to preserve Assad's rule.

"The Islamic republic's support for Assad's regime is hardly compatible with a genuine attempt at conciliation between the parties," Reuters quoted one Western diplomat based in Teheran as saying.

It showed Iran was "running out of ideas," he added.

Another Western diplomat said Teheran was trying to broaden the support base of the Syrian leader.

The current situation Assad faces is not very ideal, yet he faces few major problems in the short term, analysts said.

The splits and rifts within the Assad administration are still isolated cases and have not harmed the core of the governing team, according to Li Shaonian, a researcher of Middle East studies at China Institutes of Contemporary Relations.

Excluded from the Teheran meeting were Western and Gulf nations that Iran has accused of giving military backing to the bloody near 17-month insurgency seeking to oust Assad.

State media said the foreign ministers of Iraq, Pakistan and Zimbabwe were present.

Lower-ranking diplomats, most of them ambassadors, represented the other nations.

Salehi listed those nations as: Afghanistan, Algeria, Armenia, Benin, Belarus, China, Cuba, Ecuador, Georgia, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Mauritania, Nicaragua, Oman, Russia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Turkmenistan and Venezuela.

As a close ally of Syria, Iran recently also called on the Syrian government to listen to its people's pursuits and implement necessary reforms.

AFP, Reuters and Xinhua contributed to this story.

Libya's ruling council hands over power

By AGENCIES

in Tripoli, Libya

Libya's ruling council handed over power to a newly elected national assembly on Wednesday in the North African country's first peaceful transition of power in its modern history but which comes amid heightened violence.

In a late-night ceremony held under tight security in Tripoli, the National Transitional Council, political arm of the opposition forces that toppled Muammar Gadhafi a year ago, handed over to the national congress, elected in July.

NTC Chairman Mustafa Abdel Jalil symbolically passed on the reins to the oldest member of the new 200-member assembly, Mohammed Ali Salim.

"The National Transitional Council hands over the constitutional duties for leading the state to the general national congress, which from now on is the sole legitimate representative of the Libyan people," Jalil said to loud cheers.

In a speech, Jalil, who announced he would retire



MAHMUD TURKIA / AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Mahmoud Jibril (left), Libya's interim prime minister during last year's war and now head of the National Forces Alliance, and Dr Ali Altarhani, centrist National Movement head, stand during the transfer of authority ceremony in Tripoli on Wednesday.

after ending his NTC chief post, acknowledged "mistakes" had been made during an "extraordinary" transitional period and said security and disarmament issues had not been resolved in time.

Ensure security

The NTC, which was established in the then rebel stronghold of Benghazi in February 2011, has served as Libya's rul-

ing authority since the fall of Gadhafi in 2011.

Jalil also admitted the NTC had failed to find a solution to the country's refugee crisis, which he called a "real tragedy", and to guarantee the security of the Libyan people expected.

Mohammed Toumi, a member of parliament, said one of the most urgent tasks was to ensure security and collect weapons, while at the

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MUSTAFA ABDEL JALIL
NTC CHAIRMAN

same time cause no confrontations with those rebels who had refused to lay down their weapons despite Gadhafi's ouster.

Frequent violence in the run-up to the transition has demonstrated the country's precarious stability and fragile security situation.

Last week, a huge blast hit a military intelligence headquarters in Benghazi.

REUTERS—XINHUA—AP

S. Korea firms in talks to resume Iran oil imports

By AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE in Seoul

South Korean oil refiners are in talks with Iran to resume oil imports, officials said on Thursday, potentially by using Iranian tankers as a way to circumvent European Union sanctions.

Talks are currently under way with Teheran, officials of Hyundai Oilbank, SK Energy and Seoul's knowledge economy ministry said.

Imports stopped entirely in July when an EU oil embargo on Iran over its nuclear program took effect, banning European firms from insuring Iranian oil shipments.

South Korea had relied entirely on European firms for such coverage but a Hyundai Oilbank spokeswoman said: "We are still hammering out details before finalizing the deal ... in a way to let Iran to take

responsibility for oil tanker insurance."

A spokesman for SK Energy, the other South Korean refiner which previously bought Iranian oil, confirmed the ongoing talks but refused to elaborate.

Seoul bought 9.4 percent of its crude oil from Teheran last year. It had been sharply reducing purchases this year in return for a waiver from separate US sanctions on Teheran.

An official of the knowledge economy ministry also said Seoul refiners were discussing with Teheran ways to resume imports, including letting the Middle East nation provide tankers or cover insurance for shipments.

"No firm date has been set when exactly it (oil imports) will resume though ... companies need time to hammer out details of contracts," he told AFP on condition of anonymity.