world

Syrian protesters chant angry slogans as they protest in front of the Syrian embassy in Cairo, Egypt, on Tuesday.
AP photo

Syria's deadly unrest

UN, European nations seek end to violence, demand respect for human rights

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The Associated Press

GENEVA — European nations summoned Syrian ambassadors in a co-ordinated demand that President Bashar Assad stop gunning down his people, and Germany said sanctions were possible if the crackdown did not ease.

The United States called on the U.N.'s top human rights body to approve an independent probe and recommend prosecution if violations of international human rights law are uncovered.

A draft resolution to be considered at an emergency session of the U.N. Human Rights Council on Friday demands an immediate end to Assad's efforts to crush the challenge to his rule. It also calls on Syria to lift its ban on nearly all foreign media and ease its restrictions on the Internet and telecommunications.

The U.N.'s Security Council, however, failed to agree on a statement condemning the violence, highlighting divisions among world powers over the ways to treat the deadly unrest.

On Wednesday, France, Britain, Germany, Italy and Spain told Syrian ambassadors that they condemned the violence and said that Assad must change tactics, according to France's foreign ministry.

The German government said it would strongly support EU sanctions against the Syrian leadership and German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said an arms embargo, asset freezes and travel restrictions were possible.

"If there is not an immediate change of course by the Syrian leadership, the international community will have to come up with consequences – then sanctions against Syria will be inevitable," Westerwelle said.

The European condemnation was a significant personal blow to Assad, a British-educated self-styled reformer who has made a high priority of efforts to bring Syria back into the global mainstream, efforts that included hosting a series of visits from European diplomats.

It was far from clear, however, if Europe's shaming of Assad would have enough impact to moderate his government's brutal handling of the Syrian uprising.

"This is a revolutionary movement and if he doesn't stop it, it will mean regime change and possibly civil war," said Joshua Landis, director of the University of Oklahoma's Center for Middle East Studies, who runs a blog called Syria Comment. "The threat of sanctions from Europe isn't going to be uppermost in his mind."

Landis said that Europeans sanctions could strengthen the effect of U.S. trade and financial sanctions slapped on Syria in 2004 and 2006, mainly on counterterrorism grounds.

"It could help bring down the regime much more quickly," he said.

Meanwhile, the Human Rights Council based at the United Nations' European headquarters in Geneva agreed to a U.S. request for a special session Friday focused on Syria. It is unusual for the U.N.'s 47-nation council to agree to such a request singling out the behaviour of one nation.

"It is entirely appropriate that the Human Rights Council condemn wilful government violence against peaceful political protesters," the U.S. ambassador to the council, Eileen Chamberlain Donahoe, said.

The EU's political and security committee was also planning to discuss Syria on Friday in Brussels and "all options are on the table," Michael Mann, a spokesman for European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, said.

U.S. officials have said Washington has begun drawing up targeted sanctions against him, his family and his inner circle to boost pressure on them to halt the repression.

The U.N.'s Security Council, however, failed to agree on a statement condemning Syrian violence against peaceful protesters.

France Britain, Germany and Portugal had circulated a draft media statement on Monday calling for the 15-member council to condemn the violence.

In brief

Afghan military officer kills eight U.S. troops, one U.S. contractor

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — A veteran Afghan military pilot said to be distressed over his personal finances opened fire at Kabul airport after an argument Wednesday, killing eight U.S. troops and an American civilian contractor.

Those killed were trainers and advisers for the nascent Afghan air force. The shooting was the deadliest attack by a member of the Afghan security forces, or an insurgent impersonating them, on coalition troops or Afghan soldiers or policemen. There have been seven such attacks so far this year.

Although the individual circumstances may differ, the incidents of Afghans turning against their coalition partners seem to reflect growing anti-foreigner sentiment independent of the Taliban. Afghans are increasingly tired of the nearly decade-long war and think their lives have not improved despite billions of dollars in international aid.

Defence Ministry spokesman Gen. Mohammad Zahir Azimi said the gunman was an officer who had served as a pilot in the Afghan military for the past 20 years. The gunman – identified as Ahmad Gul, 48, of Tarakhail district in Kabul province – died in an exchange of fire that followed his attack.

Fighter-bomber crashes after mission in Libya

BRUSSELS, Belgium (AP) — NATO says one of its F-16 fighter-bombers crashed on landing at an air base in southern Italy after completing a mission over Libya.

A statement said the pilot ejected safely after landing Wednesday on the outbound runway. His condition was "being assessed" it said without elaborating.

The air base at Sigonella in western Sicily is about 360 miles (600 kilometres) north of Libya's capital, Tripoli. It has been used extensively by aircraft from several NATO nations for bombing missions over Libya.

Italian police have opened a probe into the crash landing, the statement said.

No NATO aircraft had been lost since the alliance's missions over Libya started March 31. A U.S. F-15 crashed in Libya before NATO took over command of the strike missions.

Palestinian officials reach agreement on ending 4-year-old rift

(AP) — Palestinian officials from the rival Fatah and Hamas movements say they have reached an initial agreement on ending a four-year-old rift that has left them divided between rival governments in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The officials say the plan calls for the formation of a single caretaker government in the coming days, and preparations to hold presidential and legislative elections a year from now.

The officials say the agreement was reached through Egyptian mediation. They spoke on condition of anonymity before a formal announcement in Cairo later Wednesday.

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