

Syria

Defiant Assad Pledges To Continue Fighting

BY ZEINA KARAM
Associated Press

BEIRUT — A defiant Syrian President Bashar Assad rallied a chanting and cheering crowd Sunday to fight the uprising against his authoritarian rule, dismissing any chance of dialogue with "murderous criminals" that he blames for nearly two years of violence that has left 60,000 dead.

In his first public speech in six months, Assad laid out terms for a peace plan that keeps himself in power, ignoring international demands to step down and pledging to continue the battle "as long as there is one terrorist left" in Syria.

"What we started will not stop," he said, standing at a lectern on stage at the regal Opera House in central Damascus — a sign by the besieged leader that he sees no need to hide or compromise even with the violent civil war closing in on his seat of power in the capital. The theater was packed with his supporters who interrupted the speech with applause, cheers and occasional fist-waving chants, including "God, Bashar and Syria!"

The overtures that Assad offered — a national reconciliation conference, elections and a new constitution — were reminiscent of symbolic changes and concessions offered previously in the uprising that began in March 2011. Those were rejected at the time as too little, too late.

The government last year adopted a constitution that theoretically allows political parties to compete with Assad's ruling Baath Party. It carried out parliamentary elections that were boycotted by his opponents.

Assad demanded that regional and Western countries must stop funding and arming the rebels trying to overthrow him.

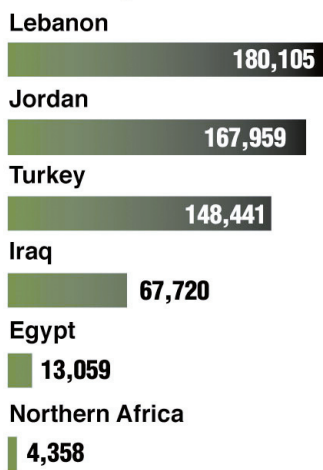
"We never rejected a political solution ... but with whom should we talk? With those who have an extremist ideology, who only understand the language of terrorism? Or should we with negotiate puppets whom the West brought?" he asked.

"We negotiate with the master, not with the slave," he answered.

As in previous speeches and interviews, he clung to the view that the crisis was a foreign-backed plot and not an uprising

More Syrians flee war

Syrian refugees registered or awaiting registration with the U.N. totaled more than 576,000 as of Dec. 31; where refugees are:



NOTE: Figures do not include the more than 2.5 million Syrians who are internally displaced. Source: United Nations High Commission on Refugees. Graphic: Judy Treible © 2013 MCT

against him and his family's decades-long rule.

"Is this a revolution and are these revolutionaries? By God, I say they are a bunch of criminals," he said.

He stressed the presence of religious extremists among those fighting in Syria, calling them "terrorists who carry the ideology of al-Qaida" and "servants who know nothing but the language of slaughter."

He said the fighters sought to transform the country into a "jihad land."

Although he put up a defiant front, Assad laid out the grim reality of the violence, and he spoke in front of a collage of photos of what appeared to be Syrians killed in the fighting.

"We are now in a state of war in every sense of the word," Assad said, "a war that targets Syria using a handful of Syrians and many foreigners. It is a war to defend the nation."

He said Syria will take advice but not dictates from anyone — a reference to outside powers calling on him to step down.

The speech, which was denounced by the West, including the U.S. and Britain, came amid stepped-up international efforts for a peaceful way out of the Syrian conflict. Previous efforts have failed to stem the bloodshed.

U.N.-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi met Assad last month to push for a peace plan for Syria based on a plan first presented in June at an international conference in Geneva. The proposal calls for an open-ended cease-fire and the formation of a transitional government until new elections can be held and a new constitution drafted.

The opposition swiftly rejected Assad's proposals. Those fighting to topple the regime have repeatedly said they will accept nothing less than his departure, dismissing any kind of settlement that leaves him in the picture.

"It is an excellent initiative that is only missing one crucial thing: His resignation," said Kamal Labwani, a veteran dissident and member of the opposition's Syrian National Coalition umbrella group.

"All what he is proposing will happen automatically, but only after he steps down," Labwani told The Associated Press by telephone from Sweden.

Haitham Maleh, an opposition figure in Turkey, said Assad was offering the initiative because he feels increasingly besieged by advancing rebels.

"How could he expect us to converse with a criminal, a killer, a man who does not abide by the law?" he asked.

Assad has spoken only on rare occasions since the uprising began, and Sunday's speech was his first since June. His last public comments came in an interview in November to Russian TV in which he vowed to "live and die" in Syria.

On Sunday, he seemed equally confident in the ability of his troops to crush the rebellion despite the recent fighting in Damascus.

"He did not come across as a leader under siege, nor as a leader whose regime is on the verge of collapse," said Fawaz A. Gerges, head of the Middle East Center at the London School of Economics.

"He seemed determined that any political settlement must come on his terms, linking those terms with the Syrian national interest as

if they are inseparable," he said.

U.S. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said in a statement that Assad's speech was "yet another attempt by the regime to cling to power and does nothing to advance the Syrian people's goal of a political transition."

British Foreign Secretary William Hague called Assad's speech "beyond hypocritical." In a message posted on his official Twitter feed, Hague said "empty promises of reform fool no one."

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu of Turkey said the speech was filled with "empty promises" and repetitive pledges of reform by a leader out of touch with the Syrian people.

"It seems (Assad) has shut himself in his room, and for months has read intelligence reports that are presented to him by those trying to win his favor," Davutoglu told reporters in the Aegean port city of Izmir on Sunday.

Turkey is a former ally of Damascus, and while Ankara first backed Assad after the uprising erupted, it turned against the regime after its violent crackdown on dissent.

Observers said the speech signaled the violence would continue indefinitely as long as both sides lacked the ability to score a victory on the battlefield.

Randa Slim, a research fellow at the New America Foundation in Washington, said Assad's made clear he has no intention of making way for a political transition.

"He sees himself rather as an orchestrator and arbiter of a process to be organized under his control," she said.

The Internet was cut in many parts of Damascus ahead of the address, apparently for security reasons, and some streets were closed.

At the end of his speech, loyalists shouted: "With our blood and souls we redeem you, Bashar!"

As he was leaving the hall, supporters pushed forward and swarmed around him to try to talk to him. Nervous security guards tried to push them away.

Many shouted "Shabiha forever!" — referring to the armed regime loyalists whom rebels have blamed for sectarian killings.

Amid the melee, Assad quickly shook hands with some of them and blew kisses to others.

Lawmakers Dig In Heels On Debt Crisis

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congressional leaders on Sunday showed no signs of emerging from their corners to resolve the next step in the financial crisis, with Democrats still talking about higher taxes on the wealthy and the Senate's top Republican suggesting that a crippling default on U.S. loans was possible unless there were significant cuts in government spending.

"It's a shame we have to use whatever leverage we have in Congress to get the president to deal with the biggest problem confronting our future, and that's our excessive spending," said Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

Last week's deal to avert the combination of end-of-year tax increases and spending cuts known as the "fiscal cliff" held income tax rates steady for 99 percent of Americans but left some other major pieces of business unresolved.

By late February or early March, the Treasury Department will run out of options to cover the nation's debts and could begin defaulting on government loans unless Congress raises the legal borrowing limit, or debt ceiling. Economists warn that a default could trigger a global recession.

Also looming are deep automatic spending cuts expected to take effect at the beginning of March that could further erode fragile gains in the U.S. economy. Then on March 27, the temporary measure that funds government activities expires, and congressional approval will be needed to keep the government running. It's one more chance to fight over spending.

2nd Obama Inauguration Will Not Be As Thrilling

WASHINGTON (AP) — Four years and one re-election after Barack Obama became America's first black president, some of the thrill is gone.

Yes, the inauguration of a U.S. president is still a big deal. But the ceremony that Washington will stage in a few weeks won't be the heady, historic affair it was in 2009, when nearly 2 million people flocked to the National Mall to see Obama take the oath of office. This time, District of Columbia officials expect between 600,000 and 800,000 people for Obama's public swearing-in on the steps of the Capitol on Monday, Jan. 21.

"There certainly will not be the sort of exultation you saw four years ago," said Mike Cornfield, a George Washington University political science professor. One reason why, Cornfield said, is it simply lacks the dramatic transfer of power from one president to the next.

"This is not a change that commands people's interest automatically," Cornfield said. "It's a confirmation of power."

Palestine P.M. Says Govt. In Extreme Jeopardy

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — The Palestinian self-rule government is in "extreme jeopardy" because of an unprecedented financial crisis, largely because Arab countries have failed to send hundreds of millions of dollars in promised aid, the Palestinian prime minister said Sunday.

The cash crunch has gradually worsened in recent years, and the Palestinian Authority now has reached the point of not being able to pay the salaries of about 150,000 government employees, Salam Fayyad told The Associated Press. The number of Palestinian poor is bound to quickly double to 50 percent of the population of roughly 4 million if the crisis continues, he said.

"The status quo is not sustainable," Fayyad said in an interview at his West Bank office.

The Palestinian Authority, set up two decades ago as part of interim peace deals with Israel, is on the "verge of being completely incapacitated," Fayyad warned. Only a year ago, he said he expected to make great strides in weaning his people off foreign aid.

The self-rule government was meant to be temporary and replaced by a state of Palestine, which was to be established through negotiations with Israel. However, those talks repeatedly broke down, and for the past four years the two sides have been unable to agree on the terms of renewing the negotiations.

Obama Struggles To Nominate, Confirm Federal Judges

BY DAVID G. SAVAGE
Tribune Washington Bureau



Obama

WASHINGTON — In September 2005, John G. Roberts Jr., a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, moved up a few blocks onto Capitol Hill to become chief justice of the United States. His seat on the appeals court has remained unfilled ever since.

The vacant seat symbolizes the problems that President Barack Obama had in his first term in quickly nominating judges and winning even routine confirmations in the face of a determined Republican minority. He has had fewer judges confirmed than any first-term president in a quarter of a century, and he is the first chief executive unable to appoint anyone to the powerful D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals, which decides challenges to federal regulations.

Firmly in Republican control thanks in part to three appointees of President George W. Bush, the D.C. circuit recently struck down clean-air rules put forth by the Obama administration for coal-burning power plants. It also threw out a "shareholder democracy" rule that would have made it easier for investors to vote for independent directors of public corporations. Both rules were strongly opposed by business interests.

Although the Constitution says judges are to be approved on a majority vote, the Republican minority used the Senate's 60-vote filibuster rule to slow or block confirmation of Obama's nominees. They included Caitlin Halligan, a former New York state solicitor general, who was nominated in 2010 to fill Roberts' seat on the D.C. circuit.

Republicans said they opposed Halligan because, as a state attorney, she had argued in

support of New York's suit against gun manufacturers. The National Rifle Association urged senators to block her, and she won only 54 votes, not enough to end a filibuster. Obama said he was "deeply disappointed" at "the Republican pattern of obstructionism." But the filibuster was not invented by the Republicans.

When George W. Bush was president, the Democrats used the filibuster to block some of his nominees. Soon after taking office, Bush chose Miguel Estrada and Roberts for the D.C. Circuit. Both were well qualified and, if confirmed, were seen as likely nominees to the Supreme Court. Estrada, a native of Honduras, could have been the first Latino justice.

Republicans took seven tries but were unable to muster the 60 votes needed to break a Democratic filibuster against Estrada for the D.C. Circuit. In 2003, he withdrew his nomination. Roberts, avoiding controversy, was confirmed. But Bush put three more judges on the D.C. Circuit. In Bush's second term, then-Sen. Barack Obama from Illinois voted against the Supreme Court nominations of Roberts and Samuel A. Alito, and he joined a brief bid in 2006 to filibuster against Alito.

When Obama became president in 2009, his former Republican colleagues in the Senate were not inclined to swiftly or easily approve his nominees to the courts. Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the GOP leader, repeatedly delayed votes on judges by invoking a different procedural rule. He refused to give unanimous consent to taking up nominations.

To compound the problem, Obama's team

was slow getting started in 2009. The White House focused on winning approval for its first Supreme Court nominee, Sonia Sotomayor. But Obama made only 43 nominations to the lower courts in his first year, less than half the rate of Bush, who made 89 nominations.

The slow start combined with the GOP's go-slow approach to reduce Obama's influence. When the 112th Congress adjourned last week, the Senate had approved 175 of Obama's judges. By comparison, Bush had 206 judges approved in his first term, and President Bill Clinton had 204 judges confirmed during his first four years.

The number of court vacancies rose during Obama's term, from 57 to 75. During Bush's term, vacancies were reduced from 81 to 41.

Obama's team contributed to the delay by taking months to decide on nominations. But the White House says the Senate has taken far longer than normal to approve his nominees.

Under Bush and Clinton, judicial battles were mostly limited to the appellate courts. Under Obama, even district court nominees who used to win quick approval were held up. On average, it took 225 days for an Obama court nominee to win confirmation, up from 154 days in Bush's first term and 98 days in Clinton's.

On Thursday, the White House renominated 33 judicial candidates, including Halligan, who were left hanging when the Senate adjourned. They included nominees from Oklahoma and Maine who could not get a final vote despite strong support from their two home-state Republican senators.

Liberal advocates says the "slow walking" of Obama's nominees must change in the second term.

Clites

From Page 1

law enforcement experience.

"A lot of the instructors are the people who wrote the books on the subjects," Clites said. "They're nationally-recognized experts on crime scene investigations, ethics and leadership, forensics and so on."

After a year-long process of paperwork and FBI interviews, Clites began the training Sept. 30. He graduated Dec. 14 at a ceremony in which FBI Director Robert Mueller was the main speaker.

Within the three months of training, Clites said he got to know all 259 other participants. Students learn just as much from each other with their diverse backgrounds as they do in the classroom, he stated.

"A lot of the instructors mentioned that they like teaching there because they learn as much from the students as the students learn from them," Clites added.

He was also impressed by the

camaraderie among participants.

"People from metro agencies are dealing with the same issues we are, just on a larger scale," Clites said. "Everyone respected everyone else. We were on the same level."

One of Clites' favorite courses was behavioral science, where he learned about the criminal mind. He said it shed light on the individuals he deals with in local law enforcement.

Another fascinating course, Clites said, was on ethics and leadership.

"It gave me some insight on situations that could come up here," he stated.

Overall, Clites said the academy built on what he had learned during years of local and state training opportunities.

"It's the latest technology, practices and procedures," he stated.

One of the requirements of the academy is physical training.

Clites completed running challenges every week, which gave him the optional "privilege" of taking part in the "Yellow Brick Road" challenge. According to the FBI, it is a 6.1-mile run through a hilly, wooded trail built by the Marines. Along the way,

participants must climb over walls, run through creeks, jump through simulated windows, scale rock faces with ropes, crawl under barbed wire in muddy water, maneuver across a cargo net, and more. It gained its name after the Marines placed yellow bricks at various spots to show runners the way through the wooded trail.

Clites added that Jodie Foster runs along that same trail in the classic serial killer thriller "The Silence of the Lambs."

"When you complete the 'Yellow Brick Road,' you get a yellow

brick," he said, pointing at the brick that now sits in his office.

Clites stated that he feels privileged to have taken part in the training that so few get to experience. Since the academy began in 1935, it has had 46,342 graduates. Of those, approximately 28,829 are still active in law enforcement.

"It was a good experience," he said. "It was amazing, world-class training."

You can follow Nathan Johnson on Twitter at twitter.com/AnInlandVoyage

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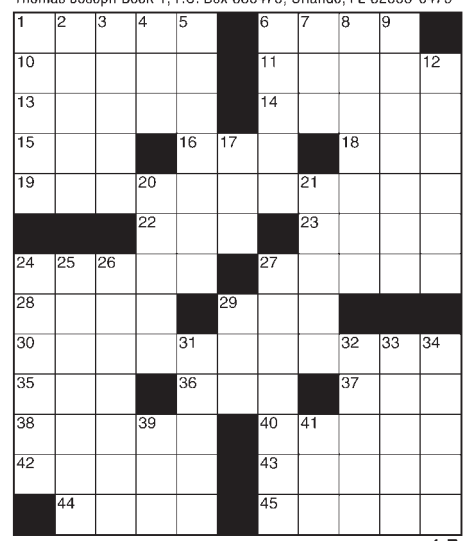
By THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS 42 Hunting 1 Like some weapon eclipses 6 Cain's brother 10 Chilled 11 Hay bundles 13 Early Mexican 14 Hollywood deal maker 15 Fragrant tree 16 List-ending abbr. 18 Espionage org. 19 Apollo Anton Ohno, for one 22 Sen.'s counterpart 23 Departed 24 Travel papers 27 Shipping cities 28 Guitar boosters 29 For each 30 Fast peruser 35 Min. part 36 "Alley —" 37 Log chopper 38 Opera pieces 40 New York's — Island

Saturday's answer

- 1 Avoids work 2 Open, in a way 3 Saltpeter, to Brits 4 Top card 5 Wanes 6 By surprise 7 Sack 8 One with a ballot 9 Not strict 12 Rude looks 17 Recipe amt. 20 Make blank 21 Old market-place 24 Pough-keepsie 25 Put in danger 26 Enumerate 27 Eyes, slangily 29 NFL player 31 Medicine amounts 32 — Lama 33 Be real 34 Takes a break 39 Pub drink 41 Cut off

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1-7 CRYPTOQUOTE PD HM IMZ YDEDERDY HFST, PD YDEDERDY EMEDIZT. ZND YWVNIDTT ML KWLD KWDT WI EDEMYWDT PD NFUD LMYJMZZDI. — VDTFYD QFUDTD Saturday's Cryptquote: I SHALL NOT DIE OF A COLD. I SHALL DIE OF HAVING LIVED. — WILLA CATHER

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