

Sunni Leaders Shun Arab Summit

BY LARA JAKES AND HAMZA HENDAWI
Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Sunni Muslim rulers largely shunned an Arab League summit hosted by Shiite-led Iraq on Thursday, illustrating how powerfully the sectarian split and the rivalry with Iran define Middle Eastern politics in the era of the Arab Spring.

The crisis in Syria is the epicenter of those divisions. The one-day summit closed with a joint call on Syrian President Bashar Assad to stop his bloody crackdown on an uprising seeking his ouster. But the final statement barely papered over the differences among the Arab nations over how to deal with the longest-running regional revolt.

"What disturbs the breeze of our Arab Spring and fills our hearts with sadness is the scenes of slaughter and torture committed by the Syrian regime against our brothers and sisters in Syria," said Mustafa Abdul-Jalil, leader of Libya's National Transitional Council.

In a snub to Iraq, only 10 heads of state from the Arab League's 22 members attended, with the rest sending lower-level officials. Especially notable were the absences of the rulers of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and most other Gulf countries, as well Morocco and Jordan — all of them headed by Sunni monarchs who deeply distrust the close ties between Baghdad's Shiite-dominated government and their top regional rival, Iran.

The Gulf countries also see Iraq as too soft on Syria. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have talked

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MUSTAFA ABDUL-JALIL

of arming Syria's opposition, apparently eager to bring the fall of Assad and break the Sunni-majority country out of its alliance with Iran.

Speaking to the gathering, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki urged restraint, saying Baghdad opposes any military intervention and citing his country's years of turmoil as an example of what happens when outside forces get involved in national struggles. U.S. forces left Iraq just over 100 days ago after nearly nine years of war and occupation.

"Iraq is afraid of the attempts to militarize the Arab uprisings, because this will deviate them from the right course and push toward the wrong position," al-Maliki said. "Dialogue between the government and the opposition is the right option to solve the crisis."

Iraq's hosting of the annual summit for the first time since 1990 was touted by Baghdad officials as a victory in their efforts to show the country is moving toward stability after

years of sectarian fighting that almost tipped the nation into civil war. Thousands of security forces cleared the streets and locked down the capital in one of the quietest weeks in years, although officials said two Katyusha rockets hit near the fortified Green Zone where the summit was held just as diplomats convened. No casualties were reported.

The summit was the first since the wave of Arab Spring uprisings began sweeping the region more than a year ago, targeting its long-ruling strongmen. The 2011 summit was canceled because of the turmoil. There were two new faces at Thursday's collection of heads of state: Libya's Abdul-Jalil, who holds nominal power after the ouster and killing of Moammar Gadhafi, and Tunisia President Moncef Marzouki, a former human rights activist who was elevated after the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

The new leaders of Egypt and Yemen — the other two countries whose rulers fell last year — did not attend, a reflection of their continuing domestic troubles.

The session was dominated by the uprising in Syria, where the U.N. says more than 9,000 people have been killed in the regime's year-long crackdown on its political opponents. The regime has sent tanks and troops into Syrian cities and towns, saying the country was under attack from the armed groups.

The conflict has a dangerous sectarian angle — most in the opposition come from the Sunni majority, while Assad's regime relies on the minority Alawites, an offshoot from Shiism.

Apple Assemblers Working Illegal Overtime

NEW YORK (AP) — The Chinese workers who often spend more than 60 hours per week assembling iPhones and iPads will have their overtime curbed and their hourly wages raised after a labor auditor hired by Apple Inc. inspected their factories.

The Washington-based Fair Labor Association (FLA) says Hon Hai Precision Industry Co., the Taiwanese company that runs the factories, is committing to reducing weekly work time to the legal Chinese maximum of 49 hours.

That limit is routinely ignored in factories throughout China. Auren van Heerden, the CEO of the FLA, said Hon Hai is the first company to commit to following the legal standard.

Apple's and FLA's own guidelines call for work weeks of 60 hours or less.

The FLA found that many workers at the Hon Hai factories want to work even more overtime, so they can make more money. Hon Hai, also known as Foxconn, told the FLA that it will raise hourly salaries to compensate workers for the reduced hours.

Assad Pledges Cooperation With U.N. Plan

BEIRUT (AP) — Syria's President Bashar Assad said Thursday he will spare no effort to make U.N. envoy Kofi Annan's peace plan a success, but demanded that armed opponents battling his regime commit to halting violence.

In brazen attacks, gunmen kidnapped a high-ranking military pilot outside the capital and assassinated two army colonels in the country's business hub, in what appeared to be part of a stepped-up campaign by the battered opposition against the symbols of Assad's power.

The violence Thursday underlined the Syrian government's predicament: Acceptance and implementation of the U.N. plan, which calls for a full cease-fire, risks spelling the end of an autocratic regime which has relied largely on brute force to stay in power over the past four decades.

Assad's condition of an express promise from the opposition to stop attacks could complicate Annan's attempts to bring an end to more than a year of violence that the U.N. says has killed more than 9,000 people.

The opposition has cautiously welcomed Annan's six-point plan, but it is also deeply skeptical Assad will carry it out, believing he has accepted it just to win time while his forces continue their bloody campaign to crush the uprising. Armed rebels are unlikely to stop fighting unless offensives by security forces halt. It is also difficult for rebel forces to uniformly stop fighting since there is no central command structure.

House OKs Republican Deficit-Cutting Plan

WASHINGTON (AP) — A divided House approved a \$3.6 trillion Republican budget on Thursday recasting Medicare and imposing sweeping cuts in domestic programs, capping a battle that gave both political parties a campaign-season stage to spotlight their warring deficit-cutting priorities.

But the partisan divisions over the measure, which is dead on arrival in the Democratic-led Senate, also underscores how tough it will be for lawmakers to achieve the cooperation needed to contend with a tsunami of tax and spending decisions that will engulf Congress right after this fall's elections.

"This is very easy," Robert Bixby, executive director of the Concord Coalition, a bipartisan group that advocates debt reduction, said of House passage of a budget that will go no further in Congress. "When you get to the budget bomb at the end of the year, it's for real. You're going to actually have to pass something."

The fiscal plan the House passed Thursday by a near party-line 228-191 vote would reshape and squeeze savings out of Medicare and Medicaid, the federal health insurance programs for the elderly and poor. It would force deep cuts in a wide range of spending, including rail projects, research and Pell Grants for low-income college students.

It would block President Barack Obama's plans to raise taxes on couples earning above \$250,000 a year. Instead, it would collapse the current six income tax rates into just two, with a top rate of 25 percent — well below the current 35 percent ceiling — while erasing tax deductions and other breaks that the GOP plan failed to specify.

Autism More Common Than Previously Thought

ATLANTA (AP) — One child out of 88 is believed to have autism or a related disorder, an increase in the rate attributed largely to wider screening.

Advocacy groups seized on the new number as further evidence that autism research and services should get more attention. "Autism is now officially becoming an epidemic in the United States," said Mark Roithmayr, president of Autism Speaks, at a news conference where the new figures were released Thursday.

The previous estimate was 1 in 110. The new figure is from the latest in a series of studies that have steadily raised the government's autism estimate. This new number means autism is nearly twice as common as officials said it was only five years ago, and likely affects roughly 1 million U.S. children and teens.

Health officials attribute the increase largely to better recognition of cases, through wider screening and better diagnosis. But the search for the cause of autism is really only beginning, and officials acknowledge that other factors may be helping to drive up the numbers.

Spain Engulfed By Anti-Austerity Strike

MADRID (AP) — Spanish workers enraged by austerity-driven labor reforms to prevent the nation from becoming Europe's next bailout victim slowed down the country's economy in a general strike Thursday, closing factories and clashing with police as the new-center right government tried to convince investors the nation isn't headed for a financial meltdown.

Tens of thousands held protest marches in Madrid and other cities, and the demonstrations turned violent in Spain's second largest city of Barcelona, where hooded protesters smashed bank and storefront windows with hammers and rocks and set fire to streetside trash containers. Television images also showed the Barcelona demonstrators throwing rocks at riot police vans, and hitting them as they sped near the crowds.

Traffic was slowed in Valencia next to the Mediterranean Sea when demonstrators lit mattresses ablaze on a highway, and a Molotov cocktail was hurled at a police car in the eastern city of Murcia. Authorities arrested 176 protesters across Spain and said 104 people were injured in clashes, including 58 police officers. There were no immediate reports of serious injuries.

Romney's Ad Strategy Could Offer Preview For Summer

BY BETH FOUHY
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Rick Santorum doesn't care about the unemployment rate. Newt Gingrich has "more baggage than the airlines." Both are Washington insiders who have bent their principles for money and influence.

So say Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney and his allies.

That advertising playbook has helped make Romney his party's likely presidential nominee and could offer a preview of what awaits President Barack Obama in this summer's general election campaign.

Voters in early primary states have seen plenty of this ad strategy

already: a torrent of attacks on Romney's opponents along with a few positive spots about the GOP front-runner's biography and business experience. The strategy, devised by Romney's campaign and an allied independent group, has been focused and unforgiving, all but eviscerating the former Massachusetts governor's rivals while portraying the candidate as an effective manager and devoted family man.

"The ads have been very effective," says Jonathan Collegio, a spokesman for American Crossroads, a conservative-leaning super political action committee. They've catapulted Romney "into a very strong position in the Republican primary without going so far that he's alienated swaths of independent voters."

The general election phase of the campaign will tell whether that's true.

One thing that's certain is that the Romney team's approach has successfully shepherded him through a primary season in which voters have been far more conservative than the candidate was perceived to be.

Romney's team now faces a far greater challenge: persuading a more centrist general electorate to bounce Obama, who polling shows has much higher favorability ratings than his Romney himself.

The Romney campaign and Restore Our Future, a super PAC supporting his candidacy, together have poured about \$50 million into television ads in the primary campaign so far, according to information provided to The Associated Press by ad buyers. No other candidate or super PAC has come close to that level of spending.



California Senate President Pro Tem Darrel Steinberg (D-Sacramento) wears a hooded sweatshirt during the morning session of the state Legislature in Sacramento, California. A handful of state lawmakers wore gray-hooded sweatshirts Thursday morning, taking up the symbol of solidarity and protest that has sprung up around the country over the slaying of Trayvon Martin.

New Video Raises Doubts About Fla. Gunman's Story

BY CURT ANDERSON
AP Legal Affairs Writer

MIAMI — Newly released police video of a handcuffed George Zimmerman may be important for what it doesn't show: No obvious cuts, scrapes, blood or bandages. No clearly broken nose. No plainly visible evidence of a life-and-death struggle with Trayvon Martin.

As the furor over race and self-defense raged on in Florida and around the U.S. on Thursday, Martin's family and supporters seized on the footage to dispute Zimmerman's claim that he shot and killed the unarmed black teenager after the young man attacked him.

While cautioning that the video is grainy and far from conclusive, some legal experts agreed it does raise questions about Zimmerman's story. The video was made about a half-hour after the shooting Feb. 26.

"It could be very significant," said Daniel Lurvey, a former Miami-Dade County homicide prosecutor. "If I were the prosecutor, it would certainly be Exhibit A that he did not suffer any major injury as a result of a confrontation with Trayvon Martin."

Zimmerman attorney Craig Sonner said on NBC's "Today" show that the footage appears to support his client's story in some respects.

"It's a very grainy video. ... However, if you watch, you'll see one of the officers, as he's walking in, looking at something on the back of his head," Sonner said. "Clearly the report shows he was cleaned up before he was taken in the squad car."

Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer in the town of Sanford, told police he

shot the 17-year-old Martin after the young man punched him in the nose, knocked him down and repeatedly slammed his head against a sidewalk.

The Sanford Police Department video begins at 7:52 p.m., about 35 minutes after the shooting, as Zimmerman arrives at the station. It shows Zimmerman's head and face as he gets out of a police car. There is no sound on the video.

There is no obvious wound on his head or blood on his clothing, and there are no indications of a broken nose — which Zimmerman's lawyer has insisted he suffered. He walks briskly, smoothly and unassisted.

"The explanation he is relying on is that there was a physical altercation," said Kendall Coffey, former U.S. attorney in Miami. "The intensity of the physical conflict is critical to his self-defense claim."

Benjamin Crump, an attorney for the Martin family, said the footage directly contradicts Zimmerman's story: "There are no marks on his face. There is no blood on his face. It's not like he's dazed or he has been injured."

Yet Ron Martinelli, founder of a California forensic consulting firm, said that Zimmerman was probably cleaned up when he was treated by paramedics at the scene and that in many cases there is no significant visual evidence of an injury.

"It really depends on how did the head strike the concrete? Did he get hit straight on in the face? Did he get hit with a fist or a backhand?" Martinelli said. "The video proves absolutely nothing."

Investigators have not released any paramedic or hospital records on the gunman.

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