

Syrians under siege call for medical help

Syrian forces fired mortars and rockets that killed scores of people Thursday in the rebellious city of Homs, activists said, the latest strike in a week-long assault as President Bashar Assad's regime tries to crush dissent.

During lulls in the onslaught, Syrians used loudspeakers to call for blood donations and medical supplies.

"There is medicine in the pharmacies, but getting it to the field clinics is very difficult. They can't get the medicine to the wounded," Mohammed Saleh, a Syria-based activist, told the Associated Press by telephone.

A senior Arab League official said the Cairo-based organization will discuss Sunday whether to recognize the opposition Syrian National Council as the legitimate representative of Syria. The official spoke to AP on condition of anonymity because no decision had been made.



By Carmelo Imbessi, AP

Lighting up the sky

Faithfully fuming: Lava flows during an eruption of the Mount Etna volcano, near Catania, Sicily, in Thursday's early hours. Over the past 2,500 years, more than 100 serious eruptions from the volcano have been documented.

15 tons of pure meth seized in Mexico

The Mexican army made a historic seizure of 15 tons of pure methamphetamine in the state of Jalisco, an amount equivalent to half of all meth seizures worldwide in 2009.

"This could potentially put a huge dent in the supply chain in the U.S.," said U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration spokesman Rusty Payne. "It's a huge deal."

The Associated Press

U.S. death toll

As of Thursday, 1,775 U.S. servicemembers and three Defense Department civilians had been reported killed in the Afghanistan War.

The latest death identified:

► **Army Sgt. 1st Class Billy A. Sutton**, 42, of Tupelo, Miss., died Tuesday in Uruzgan province; 168th Engineer Brigade, Mississippi National Guard.

Source: Defense Department

Opposition rallies to challenge Chávez

Rival wants friendlier relations with U.S., more equitable social policies

By Girish Gupta
Special for USA TODAY

CARACAS, Venezuela — A student at Andrés Bello Catholic University, Yesman Utrera climbs down a steep, shoddy staircase in between jaunty houses built on the hillside of his barrio and complains of the unfulfilled promises of the man he once admired.

"Young people are always talking about revolution, changing the world, taking the system down," says Utrera, 24, who is studying English. "Hugo Chávez represented all that."

Utrera supported Chávez when he was first elected president in 1998 and began his "Bolivarian Revolution" to remake Venezuela by turning it more toward the policies of Cuba's Fidel Castro and away from Western capitalism. Leftists cheered as he castigated the United States, and many believed his path to be the answer to Latin America's poor.

"People believe that Chávez is their Jesus Christ and he came to save us all," Utrera says, "but it's not like that."

'Social programs aren't enough'

For the first time in Chávez's tenure, a historically disjointed opposition has begun to unite, and Sunday, it will pick its candidate to face Chávez in October's presidential election.

The front-runner, Henrique Capriles Radonski, 39, beat a Chávez ally in 2008 for the governorship of the state of Miranda.

In previous elections, the opposition has attacked Chávez for his leftism and repression of democratic and economic freedoms.

Capriles says he understands why many Venezuelans are attracted to Chávez's beliefs. "We have to fight against poverty," he told USA TODAY, but "social programs aren't enough."

On Chávez's animosity toward the United States, Capriles says he would like to have better relations with America, "but a relationship of respect."

Thirteen years after Chávez embarked on his socialist revolution, oil-rich Venezuela is a mess in many ways.

Food shortages are common amid Chávez's attempts to fix prices. Electricity is rationed. Venezuela has one of the highest murder rates in the world, and drug violence is rising.

The production of crude oil has fallen since Chávez ordered a complete takeover of the industry by the state.

The country's inflation rate is 26%, the highest in the Americas.

Capriles has spent years courting the country's poor, first as a mayor, then as a governor, often riding in on his motorbike and playing basketball with locals.



By Girish Gupta for USA TODAY

Opposition favorite: Henrique Capriles Radonski attends a campaign rally in the slums of Maiquetía on Jan. 27. Capriles is the front-runner in primaries and likely to take on President Hugo Chávez.



By Ariana Cubillos, AP

Chávez: Venezuela's president attends a summit of the Bolivarian Alliance in Caracas on Feb. 4.

At a recent rally in Maiquetía, a coastal slum about an hour from Caracas, Capriles struggled to walk down the dusty paths as thousands of supporters crowded in.

"We're here to build a change," he says. "We are going to translate resources into concrete deeds."

Despite shows of support, Capriles will find Chávez a tough opponent. While world oil prices hover around \$110 per barrel, Chávez is able to channel considerable funds toward social programs for the poor that will probably translate into votes.

Carlos Romero, a political analyst at the Central University of Venezuela, says Chávez has shielded the poor from the annual 30% rise in prices that has bedeviled the middle class through hefty government subsidies.

Chávez spends public money lavishly during an election season.

"Maybe in our (middle-class) area, people com-

plain about inflation," Romero says. "Chávez has a plate of money. The social policies are working."

Chávez enjoys greater support in the country's barrios, where he has built health clinics and schools and shipped food.

Gloria Torres organized prayer ceremonies for him when he was treated for cancer.

"We follow Chávez for his immense human qualities," says Torres in the Petare slum.

Helping the poor

Utrera says the social spending fools the poor and uneducated into believing Chávez's policies will improve their lives in the future.

"Living in a barrio, you can see the government fixing a house or two houses," he says, "but why doesn't Chávez propose a real solution rather than fixing the odd house just for publicity?"

Even Utrera says "El Comandante" as he is known by supporters was needed when he shot onto the scene 20 years ago in a failed coup attempt. For decades, corruption by elite governments misappropriated the country's oil wealth.

Capriles has offered up the softer socialism of Brazil as a model for Venezuela. In the state of Miranda, Capriles' government runs projects such as *Hambre Cero* (Zero Hunger), in which people are taught to cook with inexpensive ingredients to alleviate hunger. It is the same initiative, even in name, created by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva when he was Brazil's president.

In a wooden hut, Maria Vilchez, 56, learns to cook a type of local cake during one of the classes. Tears roll down her face as she describes her health problems and the help she has received from the state government.

"This is thanks to Capriles, who has the capacity to do so much," she says.

Across the USA

News from every state

Alabama: Troy — Troy University is kicking off a year-long 125th anniversary celebration on Saturday, CNN reporter and Troy alum Tom Foreman will be the master of ceremonies for the gala. The events continue with a "worldwide simultaneous celebration" on Feb. 24, spring reunion in late March and events throughout 2012.

Alaska: Anchorage — Health officials report an increase in tuberculosis cases in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region. Officials with the Department of Health and Social Services recommend people be screened if they have been in contact with someone with the disease. Officials also recommend that people be screened if they have a persistent cough, weight loss, fatigue, night sweats or they are coughing up blood.

Arizona: Tucson — The Department of Defense said it will deploy military resources in support of the Border Patrol's security efforts along border. The Pentagon said Thursday that communities in southern Arizona and southern New Mexico should expect to see additional military personnel, vehicles and equipment traveling throughout the area beginning in mid-February.

Arkansas: Little Rock — A new fishing hole is opening in Clay County. Mom's Lake, near Corning, is the latest addition to the Family and Community Fishing Program. Ben Williams Jr. and his family donated the 9-acre lake so that children, seniors and disabled anglers would have a good place to fish. The lake features bluegill, redear bream and largemouth bass. Mom's Lake may be fished only by persons 15 and younger, 65 and older or holders of a disability license.

California: San Rafael — A woman has her gold necklace back months after she accidentally flushed it down her toilet. San Rafael sanitation employees were performing routine cleaning on a pipeline last month when they came across Ann Aulakh's necklace. Her friend had left a message with the district after the chain was lost. Supervisor Kris Ozaki said workers remembered the message and dropped the necklace off at her home.

Colorado: Longmont — Health officials have ordered that all students and staff at Longmont High School be tested for tuberculosis after 40% of those tested showed signs of exposure. So far, one student has come down with the disease.

Connecticut: Hartford — Department of Children and Families Commissioner Joette Katz unveiled a system to deal with less serious neglect cases. The Differential Response System, which will start early next month, will focus on family participation in evaluating reports of neglect and abuse.

Delaware: Dover — Insurance commissioner Karen Weldin Stewart's office collected more than \$100 million in premium taxes last year and expects a similar total in the upcoming fiscal year. Stewart said her office contributed about \$39 million to fire and ambulance companies and fire and police

pension funds in fiscal 2011, and more than \$67 million to the general fund.

D.C.: The General Services Administration chose Donald Trump's hotel company to turn the Old Post Office Pavilion into a luxury hotel. Built in the 1890s, the building is on the National Register of Historic Places. It is home to a few federal offices and retail stores and restaurants, but loses more than \$6 million a year.

Florida: Tampa — Gov. Scott held a Cabinet meeting at the fairgrounds to celebrate the opening day of the Florida State Fair. Scott, a Republican, highlighted Florida's farm heritage and success, noting that agriculture is a \$9 billion industry for the state. He and the rest of the Cabinet toured the fairgrounds and met with farmers, exhibitors and kids.

Georgia: Atlanta — The Georgia Professional Standards Commission has revoked the license of one test coordinator and suspended the licenses of four teachers who were accused of cheating in Atlanta Public Schools. Their names were not released. A state investigation in July revealed cheating by educators in nearly half of Atlanta's schools dating back to 2001.

Hawaii: Honolulu — The city's Ethics Commission said Mayor Peter Carlisle, an independent, was wrong to use gifts to the city to pay for his wife to travel to China. Carlisle must reimburse the city \$3,300 for the cost of his wife to travel to China with him in June. The gifts were earmarked to pay for her trip, but under ethics laws, gifts to the city can be used only for public purposes. Carlisle said he disagrees that a spouse's travel might not serve a public purpose under appropriate circumstances.

Idaho: Mountain Home — Police have a suspect in custody in the weekend stabbing of five people. Juan Tabares faces five counts of aggravated assault and one count of destruction of evidence. Witnesses told police that around 1:45 a.m. Sunday a fight broke out at Charlie's Place bar in which five people were stabbed. One victim remained hospitalized Thursday.

Illinois: Chicago — Mayor Rahm Emanuel is proposing statewide legislation to require handgun owners to register their weapons. The bill is aimed at helping police trace the ownership of guns used in crimes and to reduce the transfer of illegal firearms. The city requires handgun owners to register their guns with police, but Illinois has no such requirement.

Indiana: Indianapolis — The State Board of Education has approved changes to the A-to-F ranking standards for public schools despite complaints that the new rules are too complex. The overhaul means the grading scale will now be attached to a new evaluation system that gives schools more credit when students' test scores grow faster than their peers.

Iowa: Des Moines — There were wild arm swings, sharp robotic turns and fist pumps. Michelle Obama busted out a few new moves Thursday along with 14,000 sixth- to ninth-graders to mark the second anniversary of her campaign against childhood obesity. The giant pep rally, complete with bal-

loons and a towering birthday cake made out of fruits and vegetables, was her first stop of a three-day trip to highlight her "Let's Move" campaign.

Kansas: Kansas City — The once financially troubled Union Station brought in more money than it spent for the second straight year. The attraction had a net operating surplus of \$3.25 million in 2011. Revenue was ahead of budget in every area except for the KC Rail Experience museum. Much of the success is attributed to a Princess Diana exhibit. A highlight of 2012 promises to be a Titanic exhibit.

Kentucky: Hindman — Knott County residents will vote April 10 on whether to allow alcohol sales. Knott County Sheriff Dale Richardson said the sales would help provide needed jobs and raise revenue, yet it would also mean more work for law enforcement.

Louisiana: New Orleans — Troy "Trombone Shorty" Andrews, blues singer Deacon John, clarinetist Pete Fountain and Cajun fiddler Amanda Shaw are among the artists lined up for the 29th French Quarter Festival. The free event, which runs April 12-15, offers entertainment on more than a dozen stages strung throughout the historic French Quarter.

Maine: Presque Isle — Mary Barton Akeley Smith, a city native who lives in Portola Valley, Calif., donated \$5 million to Northern Maine Community College, providing most of the \$6 million needed to renovate two campus buildings for a fitness center and a new student center.

Maryland: Baltimore — Maryland leads the nation in the percentage of graduating seniors who passed the Advanced Placement exams for the fourth year in a row. The percentage of seniors who earned a score of 3 or higher on one or more AP exams reached 27.9% in 2011. That score is the threshold to award college credit.

Massachusetts: Boston — The Longfellow Bridge that spans the Charles River from here to Cambridge is getting a \$300 million, three-year makeover. The number of lanes into Cambridge will be reduced from two to one, while bike lanes and the sidewalks will be widened both ways. The trolley tracks will be largely unchanged.

Michigan: Detroit — More than a dozen Public Schools buildings, including several high schools, will close and many students reassigned before the start of fall classes. The continuing closures and consolidations are expected to save the district about \$9.1 million annually in operating costs.

Minnesota: St. Paul — A bill that would expand the situations where citizens can use deadly force in their home is headed for a vote by the state Senate. The House passed the gun bill last year. A number of law enforcement groups are against the bill.

Mississippi: Chunky — Newton County authorities are investigating the discovery of the skeletal remains of a man in a home. Sheriff Jackie Knight said the body was found sitting in a recliner, partially covered up as if the individual had gone to sleep. An autopsy was ordered.

Missouri: Maplewood — The death of a convicted art thief was ruled a homicide. Donald Rasch, 50, was found unconscious Nov. 22 at his home and died four days later. Officials aren't disclosing the cause of death, and no arrests have been made. In 2005, he admitted that he and another person stole 133 pieces of artwork valued at up to \$4 million in 2002.

Montana: Great Falls — Frontier Airlines is adding flights between Great Falls and Denver to its summer schedule. The airline will offer flights four days a week, starting May 14 and ending Sept. 30. The round-trip cost will start at \$160 per person.

Nebraska: Lincoln — A street reopened after a chemical spill. Authorities shut down a stretch of Sallito Road after 150 gallons of ethanol leaked from a truck as it unloaded the fuel additive at a fuel farm. Ethanol is highly flammable and can cause respiratory problems if its fumes are inhaled.

Nevada: Las Vegas — The state Development Authority is relaunching TV commercials encouraging Southern Californians to move their families and businesses to Nevada. The 30-second ads will air in California until March 29. Authority President Somer Hollingsworth said the ads tout lifestyles, schools, community activities and business support in the state.

New Hampshire: Concord — Advocates for the mentally ill filed a class-action lawsuit, saying the state needlessly confines the disabled in mental wards because it lacks services to treat them in the community. The suit comes 10 months after a federal investigation found the mental health system fails its citizens.

New Jersey: Lawrence — The town has processed 932 tickets since a red-light camera was installed at the Route 1 and Bakers Basin-Franklin Corner intersection in October. Municipal Court Judge Kevin Nerwinski told the City Council it has put a strain on the court system, which needs two new computers to handle the business.

New Mexico: Bloomfield — The American Civil Liberties Union of New Mexico has filed suit on behalf of two residents over a Ten Commandments monument displayed at City Hall. The lawsuit alleges that the monument is a government endorsement of religion and violates the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution as well as the New Mexico State Constitution.

New York: New York — City Council Speaker Christine Quinn proposed making kindergarten mandatory and instituting a loan program to help middle-income families pay for child care. She said that would place an extra 3,000 5-year-olds in school each year.

North Carolina: High Point — Solstas Lab Partners, a company that carries out and analyzes medical tests, will add 500 jobs in the next five years. The company, which already employs 700 here, could get a \$450,000 grant from the state and another \$1 million from the city and Guilford County.

North Dakota: Dickinson — Dickinson State University will not implement a Confucius institute to encour-

age the study of Chinese languages and culture. Last year, the state Board of Higher Education gave Dickinson State permission to establish a partnership with a Chinese university, but DSU officials decided against moving forward. A majority of DSU's faculty voted last fall against the institute.

Ohio: Dayton — The Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce will go to Cuba in June to start making connections even though a 50-year-old U.S. trade embargo remains in place regarding the Communist-led island. Members think changes are coming in Cuba that will lead to business opportunities.

Oklahoma: Oklahoma City — A seven-hour standoff ended peacefully with the arrest of a man accused of breaking into an automotive repair shop. Police Sgt. Gary Knight said the standoff ended when officers entered the business and found the man hiding inside. His name was not released. Knight said officers investigating a report of a suspicious man at the business saw him in the building. Knight said the man ran to the rear of the business and refused to come outside.

Oregon: Portland — An 85-year-old Eugene woman who said a call from a debt collector brought police to her door and left her with a \$1,000 bill for an emergency suicide evaluation is suing Wells Fargo bank. Anne Sessions' lawsuit alleges that Wells Fargo debt collector Charles Gajewski told her he wasn't honoring her credit card payment plan and wanted the debt settled before he left for vacation. Sessions said she told him calls like his could make people abandon their homes or even commit suicide, though she said she was not considering suicide.

Pennsylvania: Johnstown — A funeral was set for James and Marjorie Landis, who died 88 minutes apart after more than 65 years of marriage. Erin Miller said her grandmother, 87, died Monday, and her grandfather told his wife, "We had many good years together. I will see you real soon." James Landis, 89, later died of a heart attack.

Rhode Island: Providence — HousingWorks RI, a coalition of groups that promotes affordable housing, said one in four state residents pays more than half their income for housing. Nearly 40% of residents live in rented homes at a time when rental costs have soared during the foreclosure crisis.

South Carolina: Columbia — Gov. Haley, a Republican, announced a partnership with college admissions tests company ACT to match unemployed workers with businesses that need them. The Certified Work Ready Communities academy will integrate the state's various training programs.

South Dakota: Sioux Falls — An inmate pleaded guilty to first-degree murder in the killing of a prison guard during a failed escape attempt and was sentenced to life in prison. Michael Nordman, 47, also pleaded guilty to being a habitual offender and felony murder in the slaying of Ronald Johnson. Nordman was already serving life for a conviction in 1990 for first-degree rape and child abuse.

Tennessee: Nashville — Piedmont Natural Gas plans to run a pipeline through a state nature preserve and

neighborhoods on the city's south side. The company would bury at least part of a 13.5-mile gas line through the Radnor Lake Natural Area and the upscale Forest Hills and Oak Hill communities, according to *The Tennessean*.

Texas: Jacksonville — A small plane found in a lake may be the craft that's been missing since Wednesday. Civil Air Patrol Lt. Col. Rick Woolfolk said searchers in a boat located the plane in Lake Palestine. The fate of the pilot was not immediately known.

Utah: Plain City — A 10-foot, 70-pound Burmese python that spent nearly three decades as a classroom pet has died. He was 30 years old. Plain City Elementary School science teacher Steve Gertsch told the *Ogden Standard-Examiner* that Monty Python had developed pneumonia. An obituary was published on the school's website.

Vermont: Montpelier — Lawmakers are taking testimony on a bill that would elevate the office of the state's chief education official from a commissioner to a Cabinet-level secretary.

Virginia: Hanover — The Hanover County Board of Supervisors approved a special exception allowing Kings Dominion to put up a 24-foot tall, 59-foot long Tyrannosaurus Rex sign along State Route 30. The three-dimensional sign will promote a new animatronic dinosaur exhibit at the theme park.

Washington: Aberdeen — The Quinalt Indian tribe closed all beaches to public access along its reservation on the coast. The beaches extend along about 30 miles of coastline between the Moclips River and Queets.

West Virginia: Charleston — The House of Delegates voted 83-17 to pass Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin's plan to tackle a \$5 billion funding shortfall involving public retiree health benefits. The Senate approved the bill last week. Tomblin, a Democrat, proposes gradually closing the shortfall with annual revenues from personal income taxes.

Wisconsin: Appleton — A student at Appleton North High School contracted tuberculosis, and the city plans to test about 300 students who may have been exposed. The Health Department contacted all parents at the school this week after the case was confirmed.

Wyoming: Cheyenne — The state Supreme Court upheld a life prison sentence for a Sheridan teenager convicted of murder in a home invasion. The court rejected Wyatt Bear Cloud's claim that his sentence in the killing of Sheridan businessman Robert Ernst in August 2009 violated his constitutional rights. Bear Cloud was 16 at the time and is one of three teens sentenced to life in the killing.

U.S. territory: Guam — Judge Elizabeth Barrett-Anderson plans to retire in March. She created a DWI court to tackle a backlog of drunken driving cases that had built up. Often her DWI court calendar would be as lengthy as a few other judges' calendars combined.

From wire reports



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