

UN CHIEF CALLS SECURITY SITUATION IN MALI ALARMING

UNITED NATIONS: The UN peacekeeping chief called the security situation in Mali "alarming" on Thursday, warning that extremist groups operating under the al-Qaida banner are carrying out more sophisticated attacks and Islamic State militants are slowly making inroads. Jean-Pierre Lacroix told the Security Council that "this convergence of threats is particularly alarming" because the government presence is often weak or non-existent.

He said the situation is exacerbated by groups defying state authority in the center of the country that are killing individuals and closing certain schools, and by criminal networks that are operating very actively in the region. Islamic extremists linked to al-Qaida took over northern Mali in 2012, exploiting a power vacuum after mutinous soldiers

overthrew the president. French-backed forces pushed the extremists from strongholds in 2013, but attacks have continued and progressed south.

Lacroix was critical of the slow progress in implementing a peace deal reached in June 2015 between Mali's government, Tuareg separatists and armed groups in the north. Despite advances on some fronts, he said that with elections looming in 2018 "we cannot ignore the major delays sustained and the fragility of the gains that have been made."

Lacroix said criteria for integrating former combatants haven't been determined, eight sites for the cantonment of weapons remain empty, and there is no clarity about government institutions which is "leading to splintering on the security and political fronts." The

United Nations sent a peacekeeping force to Mali in 2013 to help stabilize the country and it has become the most dangerous and deadly of its 16 far-flung missions with at least 114 members killed since it began operations. Lacroix welcomed the decision by five countries in the Sahel including Mali to set up a regional force. He said the UN peacekeeping mission - which has more than 12,000 troops and police and over 1,300 civilian staffers, with a current budget of \$933 million - will step up support to Malian forces and help the government implement defense and security reforms.

Mali's Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop told the council the government's accomplishments "are still fragile" and the country faces many challenges including mobilizing resources

to implement the peace agreement and restore authority throughout the country. Mali also needs funds to provide "the peace dividend" to people affected by the crisis in the country, he said. US Ambassador Nikki Haley urged the government to do more to implement the peace agreement and immediately focus on extending the authority of the state.

She said the Security Council must also do more to address the shortfalls in the peacekeeping mission. "In far too many parts of Mali, there isn't a peace for the blue helmets to keep," Haley said, and "the mission's equipment is simply not up to standard." Haley said in the coming months the US will be reviewing MINUSMA's mandate to help the mission "play a more effective role."—AP

ONE DEAD AS VENEZUELA POLICE, PROTESTERS CLASH

DISSIDENTS CALL SHOOTING A SIGN OF VIOLENT OPPRESSION

CARACAS: Violence erupted for a third straight day at protests against Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, leaving one demonstrator dead amid escalating tension over moves to keep the leftist leader in power. Police said a 19-year old youth died after being shot in the chest during a demonstration in the capital. The teen, Jairo Ortizo, died from a gunshot wound when National Guard troops tried to disperse crowds of protesters who had blocked a road on the outskirts of Caracas, authorities said.

Outraged dissidents called the shooting, which occurred at the end of day-long demonstrations in Caracas, yet another sign of the violent oppression they are subjected to under the Maduro regime. In addition to the slain youth, dozens of people were injured Thursday, including at least 19 who required medical attention, mostly for breathing problems after inhaling tear gas. AFP reporters also witnessed a National Guard soldier lying unconscious after having been struck by a large rock.

Maduro, who issued a televised appeal for order, said 30 people had been detained by late Thursday and that more arrests were possible. "We are looking for all of them—we've identified them all," he said of opposition activists who had scattered after skirmishing with police. "One by one, they are going to fall and face justice," Maduro declared on state television.

No more dictatorship!

Earlier Thursday, protesters chanting "No more dictatorship!" hurled stones at National Guard riot police who blocked them from marching on central Caracas. The police responded with tear gas and water cannons, prompting chaos on the eight-lane highway where some 10,000 protesters had tried to break through security barricades. Scores of protesters were also hurt at violent protests on Tuesday and Wednesday, with the opposition vowing to return to the streets Saturday as a political crisis in the

volatile oil-exporting country is raising concerns about democracy and stability.

Street protests are among the few options left for the center-right opposition to pressure Maduro, whom they blame for the country's descent into economic calamity. Negotiations have failed and he has resisted international pressure, while retaining backing from the military and control over most state institutions. The opposition is accusing pro-Maduro Supreme Court judges of attempting an internal "coup d'etat" for attempting to take over the opposition-majority legislature's powers last week. The socialist president's supporters held counter-demonstrations on Thursday, condemning Maduro's opponents as "imperialists" plotting with the United States to oust him.

Tired of dictatorship

Last week, the Supreme Court issued rulings transferring the National Assembly's legislative powers to itself and revoking lawmakers' immunity from prosecution. The court later reversed the rulings after an international outcry,

but kept in place other measures limiting the assembly's powers. Opposition lawmakers launched an effort to impeach the judges on Wednesday.

But that would require a green light from the attorney general, prosecutor general and comptroller, all Maduro allies. They refused Thursday to give the go-ahead though the attorney general had sharply criticized the Supreme Court rulings, in a rare display of dissent in Maduro's camp. On the streets, protesters said they want to get rid of Maduro. "We're tired of this dictatorship," said Yoleidy Rodriguez, a 22-year-old university student. "We're not afraid."

A group of protesters eventually managed to march up to the metal police barricade, their hands in the air, and spray paint "Freedom" on it in blue letters. An opposition politician, Roberto Enriquez, meanwhile fled to the Chilean ambassador's residence in Caracas, alleging political persecution. Chile vowed to protect Enriquez, the head of the Christian social democratic party, whom Maduro's allies accused of plotting a coup. —AFP



CARACAS: Venezuelan opposition activists clash with the police during a protest against the government of President Nicolas Maduro in Caracas.—AFP



FLORIDA: Secretary of State Rex Tillerson speaks during a news conference at the Palm Beach International Airport in West Palm Beach, Florida.—AP

TILLERSON VISITING MOSCOW AS US, RUSSIA FACE FRESH TENSIONS

WASHINGTON: A proxy battle with Russia in Syria and multiple Russia-related investigations in the US will follow Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to Moscow next week on a trip designed to test the Trump administration's hopes for closer ties to the former Cold War foe. Tillerson will make the first visit to Russia by a Trump administration official just days after the US launched cruise missiles against an air base in Syria, where Russia's military is on the ground propping up its ally, President Bashar Assad.

Until Thursday, the US had avoided striking Assad's forces, largely out of concern about being pulled into a military conflict with Russia. Tillerson, speaking just after the strikes were announced, said Russia had "failed in its responsibility" to deliver on a 2013 deal it helped broker to destroy Syria's chemical weapons arsenal. "So either Russia has been complicit, or Russia has been simply incompetent on its ability to deliver," Tillerson said.

Growing disagreements about Syria are just the latest obstacle to any plans President Donald Trump had to closer align the US and Russia on the world stage. Trump and his associates are embroiled in mushrooming investigations into potential collusion between his presidential campaign and Russian President Vladimir Putin's government, accused by America's spy agencies of interfering in the election to help elect Trump.

Despite Trump's much-hyped campaign talk about a Russia reset, there's no appetite for that from either political party in the US. Skepticism about Russia's intentions was only compounded by its defense of Assad after a deadly chemical attack that the US says was no doubt carried out by Assad's forces. Even minor concessions to Russia would trigger immediate accusations from Trump's opponents that the president - who has praised Putin generously and repeatedly - is beholden to Putin, a former KGB agent.

Add to that Trump's anger at Russia for violating a nuclear arms treaty and continued global outrage over Putin's actions in Ukraine, and it's difficult to see realistic chances for near-term rapprochement. —AP