

UKRAINE ARMY CALLS FOR 'URGENT' STEPS

KIEV: Ukraine's military yesterday called on President Viktor Yanukovich to take "urgent steps" to ease turmoil in the country, weighing in for the first time on the ex-Soviet nation's worst crisis since independence. The army's call on the embattled leader, who on Thursday took indefinite sick leave, came as protesters refused to leave occupied municipal buildings in Kiev and as the West prepared to receive opposition leaders at the weekend.

It also came as a prominent opposition activist who went missing more than a week ago re-appeared bloodied and disfigured, saying he was tortured by unidentified assailants before being dumped in a forest in the freezing cold. The Ukrainian army has previously said it would not interfere in the protests, which erupted in November after Yanukovich scrapped an integration deal with the European Union in favour of closer ties with Kiev's historical master Moscow. The unrest has since spiralled into an uprising demanding the president's removal.

The defence ministry said in a statement the seizure of government buildings was unacceptable and warned that "further esca-

lation of the confrontation threatens the country's territorial integrity". "Servicemen and employees of Ukraine's armed forces... have called on the commander-in-chief to take urgent steps within the limits of existing legislation with a view to stabilising the situation in the country and reaching consent in society," it said.

The outcome of the crisis will likely determine whether Ukraine will revert to close ties with Moscow or move toward closer integration with the West and the two sides have traded accusations of trying to influence Kiev since the protests started. Ukrainian opposition leaders including boxer-turned-politician Vitali Klitschko today are due to meet US Secretary of State John Kerry for the first time, a meeting sure to infuriate Moscow, which has repeatedly warned against foreign interference in its former satellite.

The announcement of the meeting, on the sidelines of a security conference in Munich, came as the White House said it was consulting with Congress over possible sanctions on Ukraine. Opposition leader Arseniy Yatsenyuk of the main opposition Batkivshchyna party,

was also due to meet Germany's President Joachim Gauck and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, along with EU foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton.

The meetings are likely to elicit fury from



Dmytro Bulatov

the Kremlin following warnings by President Vladimir Putin against foreign interference in the ex-Soviet country's worst crisis since its 1991 independence. Russia's outspoken Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin tweet-

ed yesterday that Kerry's planned meetings, which are also expected to include Ukraine's pro-opposition pop star Ruslana, were a "circus". The announcement of the Kerry meeting came hours after Yanukovich savaged the "irresponsible" opposition for inflaming tensions.

Opposition supporters are refusing to leave their protest camp on Kiev's central square despite a string of concessions from the authorities, including a promised amnesty for jailed demonstrators and Yanukovich's acceptance of his prime minister's resignation. The protest movement's leaders claim that abuse and beatings of activists are widespread. Prominent Ukrainian opposition activist Dmytro Bulatov, who went missing more than a week ago, reappeared Thursday night, saying he was blindfolded and tortured by abductors who cut off his ear and drove nails through his hands before dumping him in a forest. "My hands... they crucified me, nailed me, cut my ear off, cut my face," Bulatov told Channel 5 television, his face swollen and covered in caked blood. "Thank God I am alive." —AFP



BRIZE NORTON: British Prime Minister David Cameron (left) speaks as French President Francois Hollande looks on during a press conference at a one-day summit in Oxfordshire yesterday. —AFP

HOLLANDE DEALS BLOW TO CAMERON EU PLANS

BRIZE NORTON, United Kingdom: French President Francois Hollande dealt a blow yesterday to Prime Minister David Cameron's hopes of renegotiating Britain's membership of the EU before a referendum in 2017, saying treaty change was "not a priority". At an Anglo-French summit held at an airbase in Oxfordshire, west of London, Hollande indicated he might be open to treaty change in the future to ensure the eurozone was "better coordinated and better integrated". But he added: "We feel that revising the treaty is not a priority for the time being."

Under pressure from eurosceptics in his Conservative party, Cameron has promised to renegotiate Britain's position in the European Union and put the new deal to a referendum after the next election in 2015. Hollande said he "perfectly respected" Britain's right to hold a vote, but added: "We can't impose the British choice on Europe." Cameron brushed off the comments, however, saying he was optimistic of achieving the change he wanted and insisting nothing would stop him holding a referendum provided he is re-elected next year. "My position absolutely remains that we want to see those changes, we want that renegotiation... that renegotiation will involve elements of treaty change," Cameron told a joint press conference.

At their first summit since Hollande was elected in 2012, the two leaders sought to emphasise their shared European goals, notably to improve growth and create jobs. The Conservative prime minister also praised his Socialist counterpart's recent moves to boost the struggling French economy. "I believe the plans the president recently announced to cut taxes on business, reduce employment costs and remove unnecessary regulation are the right way to boost investment and create jobs," Cameron said. The British leader also praised Hollande's "courageous and determined leadership" in Mali and the Central African Republic, promising further logistical support. —AFP

KNOX, SOLLECITO CONVICTED AGAIN OF BRITON'S MURDER

RETRIAL REVERSES EARLIER APPEAL JUDGMENT

FLORENCE, Italy: American student Amanda Knox and her former Italian boyfriend Raffaele Sollecito were found guilty on Thursday for the second time of the 2007 murder of Briton Meredith Kercher, in a retrial that reversed an earlier appeal judgment. The verdict, after 12 hours of deliberations, confirmed Knox and Sollecito's original 2009 conviction. Knox's sentence was increased to 28 years and six months and Sollecito was sentenced to 25 years. Knox did not attend the retrial, however, having gone home to the United States after the previous appeal. "I am frightened and saddened by this unjust verdict. Having been found innocent before, I expected better from the Italian justice system," Knox said in a statement.

Speaking on US television a day after her conviction, the 26-year-old American said that she would never willingly return to Italy to serve the 28-1/2 year sentence handed down by judges. "I'm going to fight this until the very end. And it's not right, and it's not fair and I'm going to do everything that I can," she told ABC News' "Good Morning America" program yesterday.

Sollecito left the court hours before the verdict was delivered and was found by police in the early hours of yesterday between the northern towns of Udine and Tarvisio, less than 10 km from Italy's border with Austria. It was not immediately clear what he was doing in the region. Italian media said he briefly crossed into Austria before returning to Italy, but his lawyer denied he was trying to escape, having left Thursday's hearing early due to stress.

"Raffaele Sollecito had no intention of fleeing. He went to the police station in Udine voluntarily," lawyer Luca Maori said. He said Sollecito was still complet-

ing the formalities for the surrender of his passport at the police station. Under the terms of his sentence, authorities were confiscating his passport and have instructed him not to leave Italy after the verdict. For the moment he is free to travel around inside the country.

For Kercher's family, who had pushed to have the appeal verdict

attacked the "overzealous and intransigent prosecution" and "prejudiced and narrow-minded investigation" and said she had been wrongfully prosecuted.

Gabriele Giambone, managing partner of Anglo-Italian law firm Giambone Law, said it was "very unlikely" Knox would be extradited to serve her sentence. "The US will do everything to protect their own citi-



NEW YORK: Amanda Knox prepares to leave the set following a television interview yesterday. —AP

overturned, the reaction was equally raw. "We didn't know what to expect. We are still in shock," said Stephanie Kercher, Meredith's sister, after the ruling was read. If final appeals are heard, neither Knox nor Sollecito, who was banned from leaving Italy, would face arrest or jail time until a final verdict by the highest court. Knox, who is in the United States and would have to be extradited to serve her sentence,

zens, they will mount every challenge possible so I don't think she'll serve any time in an Italian jail," said Giambone, who is not involved in the case. The US State Department declined comment on the matter, given "that there is room for appeal in this case". Legal experts estimate the case could continue until the end of 2015, although it could be brought forward if fast-tracked. —Reuters