

Treatment forced Yemeni President to 'leave country'



Yemen's veteran President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, left the country to travel to the US for medical treatment, Yemeni officials said.

In a televised "farewell speech" he asked for forgiveness for "any shortcomings" during his 33-year rule.

His departure came a day after MPs approved a law giving him immunity from prosecution.

The law was part of a Gulf Cooperation Council-brokered deal under which he would relinquish power and leave Yemen.

A spokesman for Mr Saleh, Ahmed al-Soufi, said the president had flown out of the country bound for neighbouring Oman, from where he is expected to continue his journey.

Afterwards, a senior official in Washington said the Yemeni president had been cleared to go to the US for medical treatment, the Associated Press reported.

"God willing, I will leave for treatment in the United States and I will return to Sanaa as head of the General People's Congress party," Mr Saleh earlier told party officials in his speech.

"I ask for forgiveness from all my people, men and women, for any shortcomings during my 33-year-long rule," he said.

One official who was at the early-morning event which brought together senior political, military and security officials, quoted Mr Saleh as saying: "Today, I leave the country in your hands."

The president's aides say Mr Saleh also announced the promotion of Vice-President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi - who is set to replace him as president - to the rank of marshal.

Mr Saleh, 69, was badly injured in an attack on his presidential palace in June after which he spent several months in Saudi Arabia for medical treatment.

The capital Sanaa saw renewed protests on Sunday calling for him to be put on trial.

Syria rejected an Arab League call for President Bashar al-Assad to hand over power to his deputy.

The league, meeting in Cairo, also called on Syria to form a national unity government with the opposition within two months.

A government official called the plan "flagrant interference" in Syria's internal affairs, state TV said.

The UN says more than 5,000 people have died as a result of the crackdown on protests since they began last March.

The league called on both sides to end the bloodshed.

The government in Damascus says it is fighting "terrorists and armed gangs" and claims that some 2,000 members of the security forces have been killed.

"Syria rejects the decisions taken which are outside an Arab working plan, and considers them an attack on its national sovereignty and a flagrant interference in internal affairs," the unnamed Syrian official said.

The official said the Arab League proposals were not in the interests of the Syrian people and would not prevent the country from "advancing its political reforms and bringing security and stability to its people who have shown, during this crisis, their support for national unity as they have rallied around President Assad".

Saudi Arabia said it was pulling out of the league's 165-strong



Arab League plan for Assad step down rejected by Syria

monitoring mission in Syria because Damascus had broken promises on peace initiatives.

While the Arab League

ministers said they were extending the controversial mission for another month, analysts say the Saudi decision has thrown its

longer-term future into serious doubt.

Saudi Arabia is one of the key funders of the league's projects, but the monitors have been criticised for failing to stop the violence.

The Arab League is now increasingly split about what could be done to resolve the Syrian crisis.

With the Syrians rejecting the conditions of the initiative, the Arab League's roadmap is effectively in tatters.

Meanwhile, violence has continued in Syria, with activists reporting battles between government troops and army defectors in the Damascus suburb of Douma.

At least five people were killed, according to Syria's Local Coordination Committees (LCC). The opposition grouping also said two more people were killed in other Damascus suburbs, three were killed in Idlib and one more each in Homs and Hama.

Activists say almost 1,000 people have been killed since the monitoring mission began in December.

At the Arab League meeting, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal urged the international community to step in and put pressure on Damascus.

Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani read out a statement agreed by the ministers laying out an ambitious plan of political reform.

EU envoys 'agree' to ban Iran oil imports



European Union ambassadors agreed the details of an oil embargo against Iran over its nuclear programme, diplomats said.

The measures were expected to be officially approved by EU foreign ministers meeting in Brussels.

The envoys reportedly agreed an immediate ban on all new oil contracts with Iran, while existing contracts will be honoured until 1 July.

The EU currently buys around 20 per cent of Iran's oil exports.

Tehran denies that it is trying to develop nuclear weapons and says talks and not sanctions are

to be phased out by 1 July.

Extra restrictive measures on Iran's central bank are also expected to be agreed by EU ministers, although no further details have been given.

EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton repeated again on Monday her previous assertion that the sanctions were a way of persuading Iran to take part in talks.

"The pressure of sanctions is designed to try and make sure that Iran takes seriously our request to come to the table and meet," she said as she arrived at the meeting in Brussels.

She said world powers had yet to receive a reply to an offer made to Iran in October to hold new talks.

UK Foreign Secretary William Hague said, as he arrived for the meeting, that the measures were an important way of increasing "the peaceful legitimate pressure on the Iranian government to enter into meaningful negotiations with the international community".

Oil is the country's most valuable asset and sales help to keep the Iranian government in money and power.

A decision by the EU to stop buying from Iran may damage the Iranian economy - but in itself it won't destroy it.

Iran sells most of its oil to countries in Asia. The EU and the United States are now working to

Hamas leader Meshaal 'to step down'



The political leader of the Palestinian organisation Hamas, Khaled Meshaal, does not want to stand for re-election this year, the movement announced. But, in an official statement, Hamas urged Mr Meshaal - who lives in exile in Syria - to reconsider his decision. The choice of leader should be made by Hamas as a whole, not one man, it said. It is not clear who might replace Mr Meshaal, although Ismail Haniyeh, the prime minister of Hamas's government in the Gaza Strip, is a likely candidate.

Hamas, which is branded a terrorist organisation by Israel, the EU and US, has governed the coastal territory since 2007. Many of its political leaders live in Damascus, but some have recently moved their families to other Arab states because of the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad. Mr Meshaal was appointed a leader of Hamas in 2004, after Israel assassinated the movement's founder, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, and his successor Abdel Aziz Rantissi.