

Car bomb kills dozens near Syrian government headquarters

A car bomb killed more than 50 people and wounded 200 in central Damascus last Thursday when it blew up on a busy highway close to ruling Baath Party offices and the Russian Embassy

Syrian television showed charred and bloodied bodies strewn across the street after the blast, which it described as a suicide bombing by 'terrorists' battling President Bashar al-Assad. It said 53 people were killed. Central Damascus has been relatively insulated from almost two years of unrest and civil war in which around 70,000 people have been killed across the country, but the bloodshed has shattered suburbs around the capital.

Rebels who control districts to the south and east



People walk near debris and damaged vehicles after an explosion at central Damascus

of Damascus have attacked Assad's power base for nearly a month and struck with devastating bombs over the last year. The al Qaeda-linked rebel group Jabhat al-Nusra, which claimed responsibility for several of those bombs, says it carried out 17 attacks around Damascus in the first half of February, including at least

seven bombings. One resident in the heart of the capital heard three or four projectiles whistling through the sky, followed by explosions. At least one of them landed in a public garden in the Abu Rummaneh district, she said, but no one was hurt.

It said 56 people were killed, of which at least 15

were from Syria's security forces and the rest civilians. Eight other people were killed by a car bomb in the Barzeh district of northeast Damascus, one of several explosions which followed the Mazraa attack.

Vehicles up to 300 metres away were damaged by the blast in Mazraa district. Syrian President Bashar al-

Assad blamed the attack on what he called terrorists who are trying to overthrow the government. The attack came at the same time as the announcement by the opposition Syrian National Coalition that it is willing to negotiate a peace deal, under US and Russian auspices, to end the country's two-year long conflict.

Citizens say illegal immigrants should be deported

More than half of US citizens believe that most or all of the country's 11 million illegal immigrants should be deported

The online survey shows resistance to easing immigration laws despite the biggest push for reform in Congress since 2007. Thirty percent of those polled think that most illegal immigrants, with some exceptions, should be deported, while 23 percent believe all illegal immigrants should be deported. Only 5 percent believe all illegal immigrants should be allowed to stay in the United States legally, and 31 percent want most illegal immigrants to stay.

These results are in line with other polls in recent years, suggesting that people's views on immigration have not changed dramatically since the immigration debate reignited in Congress last month, according to Ipsos pollster Julia Clark.

Polls show that most Americans back immigration reform, although they often have different ideas of what that means.

A group of eight US senators are working on a bipartisan deal to enact immigration reform, the first major attempt since a similar overhaul died in Congress six years ago.

Greek back on track after 24-hour stoppage



Tens of thousands of Greeks took to the streets of Athens

Tens of thousands of Greeks took to the streets of Athens as part of a nationwide strike against austerity that confined ferries to ports, shut schools and left hospitals with only emergency staff

Over 60,000 people angry at wage cuts and tax rises marched to parliament in the biggest protest for months over austerity policies required by international lenders. In the capital, riot police fired tear gas at hooded youths

hurling rocks and bottles during a demonstration, mostly of students and pensioners, which ended peacefully.

The two biggest labour unions brought much of crisis-hit Greece to a standstill with a 24-hour protest strike against policies which they say deepen the hardship of people struggling through the country's worst peacetime downturn. Representing 2.5 million workers, the unions have gone on strike repeatedly since a debt crisis erupted in late 2009, testing the gov-

ernment's will to impose the painful conditions of an international bailout in the face of growing public anger.

The eight-month-old coalition of Prime Minister Antonis Samaras has been eager to show it will implement reforms promised to the European Union and International Monetary Fund, which have bailed Athens out twice with over 200 billion Euros. The government has cracked down on striking workers, invoking emergency laws twice this year to get seamen and subway workers back to work after week-long walkouts that paralyzed public transport in Athens and led to food shortages on islands.

Demonstrations were also held in Greece's second-biggest city, Thessaloniki, and on the island of Crete where dozens of protesters hit the streets waving black flags. In Athens, crowds began to disperse from Syntagma Square outside parliament, but minor clashes between riot police and hooded youths moved to sidestreets.

Major Italian art collection handed to UK galleries

A private collection of 57 Italian Baroque paintings once belonging to banking heir Denis Mahon and valued at more than 100 million pounds (\$154 million) has been formally handed over to six museums and galleries in Britain

The paintings had already been on long-term loan to the respective museums for many years on condition that they did not charge admission or sell works from their collections. Those terms are seen as particularly important at a time when government funding cuts have hit art establishments across the country hard and some local councils are seeking to reduce their debts by offering public artworks for sale.

In the most famous case, the London borough of Tower Hamlets plans to sell a Henry Moore sculpture worth up to 20 million pounds despite the late artist's wishes that it be kept on public display in the capital. Mahon, a renowned art



The Rape of Europa painted by Guido Reni circa 1637-9

collector and historian, died in 2011 at the age of 100 and left his collection to the Art Fund charity with instructions it should be placed on display in specific venues in perpetuity. Under the terms of the transfer of that collection into public ownership, announced this week, the Art Fund's trustees reserved the right to withdraw works from museums which breached the terms of the agreement at any point.

Mahon spent much of his life forming one of the most

important private collections of 17th century Italian Baroque art, including works by Guercino, Guido Reni, Domenichino, Ludovico Carracci and Luca Giordano.

Of the total of 57, 25 works go to the National Gallery in London, 12 to the Ashmolean in Oxford, eight to the Scottish National Gallery in Edinburgh, six to the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, five to Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery and one to Temple Newsam House, Leeds.