

NEWS IN BRIEF

Mandela turns 91

AFP, Johannesburg

Nelson Mandela, South Africa's first black president, turns 91 on Saturday with a call for community service and celebrations from New York's Madison Square Garden to downtown Johannesburg.

The increasingly frail former statesman who is affectionately called Madiba, his clan name, has been inundated by messages of goodwill, from multinational companies to ordinary South Africans.

World's oldest man dies at age of 113

AFP, London

Henry Allingham, the world's oldest man and oldest World War I veteran, died Saturday at the age of 113, the nursing home in Britain where he spent his last years said.

"Everybody at St Dunstan's is saddened by Henry's loss and our sympathy goes out to his family," said Robert Leader, chief executive of St Dunstan's care home in Ovingdean, near Brighton on the south England coast. He had become the world's oldest man last month, Guinness World Records confirmed, after the previous holder, Tomoji Tanabe of Japan, died aged 113.

Obama takes first all-female helicopter flight

ANI, New York

For the first time in history US President Barack Obama flew in a chopper manned by an all-female Marine Corps crew.

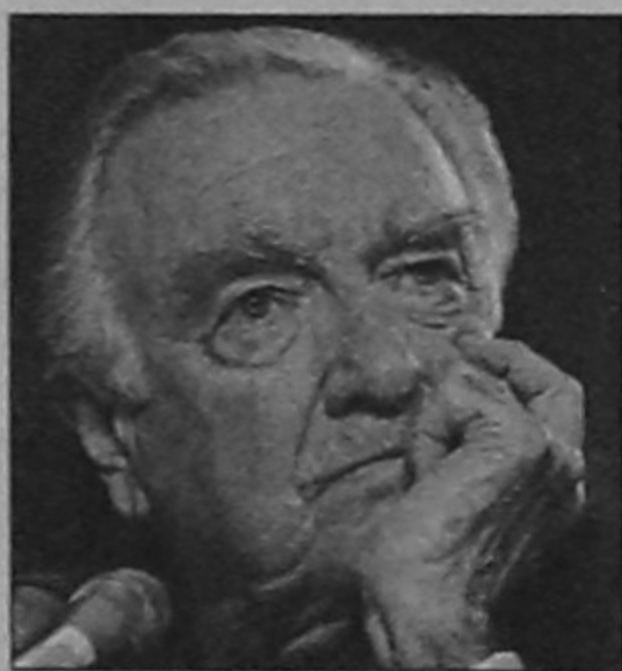
Maj. Jennifer L. Grieves, who is the first female pilot of Marine One, flew the chopper carrying Obama to Andrews Air Force Base.

First swine flu death in S'pore

AFP, Singapore

Singapore on Saturday reported its first death linked to swine flu after a 49-year-old man who was diagnosed with the virus died of a heart attack in hospital.

"He died of a heart attack, contributed to by severe pneumonia with underlying influenza A infection," the ministry of health said in a statement.



US TV news legend Walter Cronkite dies at age of 92

AFP, Washington

US TV news legend Walter Cronkite, dubbed "the most trusted man in America" for his calm and honest delivery during a tumultuous period in US history, died Friday in New York at the age of 92, said the CBS network, where he spent most of his career.

Cronkite presented the CBS Evening News from 1962 to 1981. During that time he delivered the news on civil rights unrest, the assassination of president John F. Kennedy, the Vietnam war, the moon landing, the Cold War, and the Watergate scandal that toppled president Richard Nixon.

Cronkite's period as a news anchor coincided with a time that television reigned supreme as the dominant media in the United States, and three broadcast networks -- CBS, NBC and ABC -- ruled the airwaves.

"It is impossible to imagine CBS News, journalism or indeed America without Walter Cronkite," CBS News and Sports President Sean McManus said in a statement.

"More than just the best and most trusted anchor in history, he guided America through our crises, tragedies and also our victories and greatest moments," McManus said.

Don Hewitt, a long-time CBS News staffer who for years was Cronkite's producer, said that the late newsmen set the "gold standard" for broadcast news.

Indian women's group a 'poverty-fighting model'

Says Hillary

AFP, Mumbai

Greeted with a garland and songs from rural India, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton held a reunion here Saturday with village women she presents as a model for easing global poverty.

Hillary marvelled at the embroidered clothes in the Hansiba outlet in south Mumbai, a business that sprung from the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), which she got to know when she was US first lady.

But more than the products

themselves, she praised the grassroots organisation and its aim of helping rural women and families find a way out of poverty that hampers social progress, peace and prosperity worldwide.

SEWA, a 1.2-million strong group with affiliates in Pakistan and Afghanistan -- the frontline in US efforts to fight both poverty and Islamist militancy -- has "become a model for women's economic progress and empowerment," she said.

But the Mumbai outlet, which looks like an ordinary

shop, represented much more, she added, after being greeted with cheerful songs from women dressed in colourful saris, embroidered dresses and shawlworkameez.

"It is a lifeline for rural women across India with valuable skills but too few opportunities to use them and to realise income from them," she said.

"At this time of global economic turmoil, we can see a disproportionate impact on women. SEWA represents an innovative and successful approach to sustainable, inclusive development."

Hillary salutes Mumbai's 'brave men and women'

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Mumbai

"Let us rid the world of hatred and extremism that produces such nihilistic violence," US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote in memory of the Mumbai terror victims while hailing the "brave men and women" of India's financial capital.

Paying homage to those killed and wounded in the November 2008 savagery,

Hillary penned her thoughts in a register at the Taj Palace and Tower Hotel where she is staying and which was one of the landmarks which was stormed by terrorists from Pakistan.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton (L) reacts while listening to Indian Bollywood actor Aamir Khan at an interactive education discussion in Mumbai yesterday. Hillary arrived in India hoping to deepen strategic ties with an emerging player on the world stage in security, trade, arms control and climate change.



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (front 2nd L) yesterday inspects damage caused by the bomb blast at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Jakarta on Friday.

Indonesian police examine bombers' remains for clues

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian police Saturday were studying DNA evidence from the remains of two suicide bombers who carried out twin attacks on luxury Jakarta hotels, as security was tightened across the country.

Suspected Islamist suicide bombers detonated powerful devices at the Ritz-Carlton and JW Marriott hotels in an upmarket business district Friday, leaving nine dead and up to 50 injured including at least 18 foreigners.

A New Zealand businessman was confirmed dead and Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith, who is due in Jakarta later Saturday, said he feared the worst for three missing Australians, including diplomat Craig Senger.

National police chief General Bambang Hendarso Danuri called on hotels and shopping malls across the vast, mainly Muslim archipelago of 234 million people to raise their security protocols amid warnings of follow-up attacks.

UK shopping centres on terror attack alert

ANI, London

Shopping centres across Britain have been placed on alert for a terrorist attack that would probably result in the deaths of dozens of innocent people.

According to The Telegraph, the National Counter Terrorism Security Office now holds training days for shopping centres and other vulnerable targets up and down the country, warning: Terrorist attacks in the UK are a real and serious danger."

"Crowded places, including shopping centres, are likely to feature in the attack plans of terrorist organisations in the future as they are usually locations with limited protective security measures and therefore afford the potential for mass fatalities and casualties," the office adds.

MI5 have also launched Operation Lightening to record, research and investigate suspicious activity and it is particularly focused on the "hostile reconnaissance" of targets.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Jakarta blasts show security weaknesses of hotels

AP, Jakarta

Twin hotel suicide bombings in Indonesia on Friday exposed new security weaknesses in an industry increasingly in the cross-hairs of terrorists and pointed to evolving tactics by the militants.

By posing as guests and then checking into one of the hotels with explosives that were then assembled into bombs in the privacy of a room, the terrorists were apparently able to evade the metal detectors and vehicle checks put in place to ward off attackers.

Expensive X-ray machines, devices that detect explosives and intrusive searches of guest luggage may be the only way to stop a repeat attack, but they come at a price: making properties that are supposed to be welcoming to weary travellers feel like prisons.

"The authorities are not opposed to this, because they worry about the effect of the attacks, but hotel authorities and the tourist industry is a bit reluctant because they don't want the hotels to look like bunkers," said Paul Wilkinson, director of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. "But I think the more attacks we have of this kind, the more hotels will have to think about improving the protection."

The suicide blasts in restaurants at the JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels in the heart of the

capital, Jakarta, were the first in Indonesia in four years, showing the tenacity of terrorists despite a widely praised crackdown in recent years.

They came nine days after the re-election of a US-friendly president in the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation that furthered its reputation as a beacon of secular democracy in the Islamic world.

Suspicion has already fallen on the Jemaah Islamiyah terror network and its allies -- especially Noordin Top, a Malaysian engineer who heads a particularly violent offshoot of the group.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute said in a paper released Thursday that tensions in Jemaah Islamiyah's leadership and the release of former members from prison "raise the possibility that splinter factions might now seek to re-energize the movement through violent attacks" against Western targets. It said, however, the possibility remained low.

At its peak, Jemaah Islamiyah was believed to have a network of several hundred members across Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Australia. They received military training and were motivated by a desire to establish an Islamic state in the region.

The most dangerous members were the more than 60 Indonesians and Malaysians who travelled to Afghanistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s to fight the Soviet army or attend al-Qaeda training camps.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad (2nd L) enjoys a piece from the world's largest knafeh in the West Bank city of Nablus yesterday. Confectionery makers in Nablus created the largest sweet pastry that set a new Guinness record after it measured at 1,765 kg (3,891 pound), 74 meters (243 feet) long and 1.05 meters (3.5 feet) wide.

Iraq govt faces claims of prisoner abuse

AP, Baghdad

Iraqi officials outraged by the abuse of prisoners at the US-run Abu Ghraib prison are trying to contain a scandal of their own as allegations continue to surface of mistreatment inside Iraqi jails.

Accounts of Iraqis being beaten with clubs, blindfolded and coerced into signing false confessions are attracting increased attention partly because the United States is getting out of the prison business in Iraq. Since a security agreement took effect Jan. 1, the US has transferred 841 detainees into Iraq's crowded prison system and more are on the way.

Allegations of mistreatment have persisted since 2005, when US troops raided an Interior Ministry lockup in a predominantly Shia area of southeastern Baghdad and found scores of

emaciated prisoners. The matter returned to the spotlight after the June 12 assassination of Sunni lawmaker Harith al-Obeidi, an outspoken advocate of prisoner rights.

The issue is a test of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's commitment to the rule of law and to reconcile with the Sunni minority, who account for most of the prisoners held in security cases. Sunnis claim they are being unfairly targeted by security forces run by al-Maliki's Shia-dominated government.

"The cases are as bad as what took place at Abu Ghraib, but it is painful when these things take place in Iraqi prisons," said Sunni lawmaker Salim Abdullah. "We met some of those who were released and saw the scars on their skins. They use different kinds of torture like tying the shoulders and hanging the body, which normally leads to dislocation of the shoulders."

3 foreign aid workers kidnapped in Kenya

AP, Nairobi

Gunmen have seized three foreign aid workers in northern Kenya and taken them across the border into Somalia, a security official said Saturday.

Roughly 10 gunmen arrived late on Friday night at a house in the border town of Mandera where the workers were staying, shot the watchman in the head and kidnapped the three, the official said, speaking anonymously because he was not authorised to talk to the media.



PHOTO: AFP

This aerial picture shows the area where two houses, which collapsed in a landslide yesterday in Nachterstedt, eastern Germany. According to a statement by the police of Magdeburg, two people are missing.

Group linked to Qaeda threatens China

AP, Beijing

An offshoot of a secessionist group with ties to al-Qaeda is threatening revenge for the deaths of Muslim Uighurs in clashes with Chinese earlier this month, a US group that monitors militant Web sites said.

The Washington-based SITE Intelligence Group said a video released this week by the Turkistan Islamic Party

condemned the July 5 violence between Chinese and Uighurs in the Xinjiang region, which stemmed from a brawl between the two sides in southern China in June.

Seyfullah, military commander of the Turkistan Islamic Party, known as TIP, said in the video that the two incidents were examples of "genocide" perpetrated by the Chinese government.

US seeks meetings with N Korea on nukes

AP, Seoul

A top envoy said the US remains ready for talks with North Korea, while Washington warned of aggressive sanctions against the North unless it returns to stalled multinational talks on ending its nuclear programmes.

"Under the right circumstances, we'd be prepared to sit down with North Korea if they would abandon their

nuclear ambitions," Kurt Campbell, the assistant secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific affairs, told reporters after arriving in South Korea on Saturday.

It wasn't immediately clear whether Campbell was referring to direct bilateral meetings, which North Korea has sought, or talks within a six-nation framework that had been ongoing before North Korea abandoned the process in April.

BSF to raise strength by 35,000

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Jammu

The strength of the Border Security Force (BSF) is to be increased by 35,000 troopers and a women's battalion will be raised by July 25, the Director General (DG) of BSF ML Kumawat said yesterday.

Kumawat, addressing a press conference here, said that despite the 'dangerous' situation in Pakistan, 'our strong vigil has assured safe borders'.

Israel planned to kill Ahmadinejad

Says Iranian minister

AFP, Tehran

Iranian Intelligence Minister Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejeie said on Friday that Israel had planned to assassinate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad around the time of last month's presidential election.

The Fars news agency quoted Ejeie as saying that Israeli officials had met members of the exiled Iranian opposition group, People's Mujahadeen of Iran (PMOI), to execute the plan.

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