

# No Israeli decision yet on Iran attack

Says US, Iran yet to decide on nuke bomb

AFP, Washington

Israel has not yet decided to carry out a pre-emptive military strike against Iran's nuclear program and Tehran appears reluctant to provoke a conflict, the head of the US Defence Intelligence Agency told lawmakers Thursday.

The assessment from General Ronald Burgess reinforced comments by President Barack Obama and other top officials who have played down the possibility of an imminent Israeli attack on Iran, amid intense speculation Israeli leaders are poised to stage bombing raids to prevent Tehran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

"To the best of our knowledge, Israel has not decided to attack Iran," Burgess told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Iran was working to bolster its naval and ballistic missile capabilities, could launch missile attacks against the West if attacked, "temporarily" shut the strategic Strait of Hormuz and could deploy "terrorist surrogates" abroad in the case of a war, Burgess said. "However, the agency assesses Iran is

unlikely to initiate or intentionally provoke a conflict," he said.

Iranian leaders have yet to take a decision to build a nuclear weapon but are expanding the country's technical capacity in the meantime, said James Clapper, director of national intelligence.

"We believe the decision would be made by the supreme leader himself and he would base that on a cost-benefit analysis," Clapper said.

He said that Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei likely did not want a nuclear weapon "at any price" and that demonstrated "the value of sanctions" imposed by the United States and other countries against Tehran.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday said sanctions against Tehran "haven't worked" while Iran on Wednesday announced it had installed another 3,000 centrifuges to increase its uranium enrichment abilities while stepping up exploration and processing of uranium yellowcake.



PHOTO: AFP

Libyan girls dressed up as angels wave the victory sign as they parade during celebrations on Thursday in the eastern city of Benghazi on the eve of the anniversary of the first protest against Gaddafi. One year since the revolt erupted, Libya is battling challenges ranging from how to tame rowdy militias who fought his forces to establishing a new rule of law in the country.

# NY Times MidEast reporter dies in Syria

AFP, New York

New York Times reporter Anthony Shadid, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist whose richly crafted dispatches captured more than a decade of Middle East turmoil, has died in Syria of an asthma attack.

Shadid, 43, had snuck into the country to report on Syria's increasingly bloody crackdown on a pro-democracy revolt, and the asthma attack Thursday was apparently brought on by horses used by guides, the Times said.

"Anthony died as he lived -- determined to bear witness to the transformation sweeping the Middle East and to testify to the suffering of people caught between government oppression and opposition forces," the paper's executive editor Jill Abramson wrote in an email to Times staff.

Shadid won two Pulitzer Prizes -- US journalism's highest honour -- in 2004



Anthony Shadid

and 2010 for his coverage of the US-led invasion of Iraq and the war's chaotic aftermath for the Washington Post.

An American of Lebanese descent who spoke fluent Arabic, Shadid documented the war through wrenching stories of ordinary Iraqis in "Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War," published in 2005.

More recently, he had reported on the revolts sweeping the Arab world from Egypt, Bahrain, Syria and Libya --

where he and other Times reporters were detained and abused by forces loyal to Muammar Gaddafi.

Condolences poured in as the news spread via Twitter and other online forums late Thursday.

"Heartbroken by the loss of the NYT's Anthony Shadid in Syria. One of the world's bravest and best journalists," US ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice tweeted.

"RIP Anthony Shadid. An inspiration & role model to every Arab American journalist, a brilliant and courageous writer," NBC News correspondent Ayman Mohyeldin wrote on the micro-blogging site.

Shadid began his reporting career by working for the Associated Press from 1995-1999, based in Cairo. He later went on to work for the Boston Globe and the Washington Post and joined the Times in 2009. He is survived by a wife and two children.

# Dutch prince injured in avalanche

AFP, Vienna

A son of Dutch Queen Beatrix, Prince Johan Friso, was injured in an avalanche while skiing in the western Austrian resort of Lech yesterday, the royal family said.

The prince was in a stable condition "but not out of danger" in an Austrian hospital after being buried, the Dutch royal house said in a statement from The Hague, quoting doctors treating him.

The 43-year-old Dutch royal apparently spent 15 minutes under the snow before he was rescued and evacuated by helicopter to Innsbruck University Hospital, the Austrian Press agency said.

The prince was accompanied by a small group but nobody else was believed to have been injured in the avalanche, APA said.

# UN chief makes new call for execution of nuke treaty

AFP, Vienna

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon made a new call yesterday for the last countries that have not yet ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) to let it enter into force.

"Any country opposed to signing or ratifying it is simply failing to meet its responsibilities as a member of the international community," he said.

"It is irresponsible to see this treaty still waiting to come into effect 15 years after it was opened for signature."

"I urge all governments that have not yet signed or ratified this treaty to immediately do so," Ban added. "I especially call for action by the countries whose ratification is essential for the treaty to enter into force."

The treaty bans nuclear explosions for either military or civilian purposes, and has so far been signed by 182 countries and ratified by 157 of them.

But it will not come into effect until it is ratified by the 44 key countries possessing nuclear technology. Thirty-six have done so



but holdouts include the United States, China, Egypt, Iran and Israel.

India, Pakistan and North Korea have yet to sign the pact.

Since Ban made a similar appeal at UN headquarters in September, one key country, Indonesia, has ratified the agreement.

Ban added, "Now we have only eight countries and I am ready to meet all these leaders and if necessary travel with Ambassador Tibor Toth to those eight countries who are still reluctant or may have doubts about the ratification of this treaty."

The CTBT is seen by arms control advocates as a key measure for preventing the spread of nuclear weapons.

The unwillingness of the United States to ratify the treaty has been a key obstacle, with many analysts saying that US ratification would encourage other holdout countries to follow suit.

The CTBT also calls for a global system for monitoring nuclear explosions, which has been partially set up.

# NEWS IN brief

## Nigerian bomber given life term

AFP, Detroit

Unrepentant to the last, the Nigerian "underwear bomber" who tried to blow up a packed airliner on Christmas Day 2009 was sentenced to life in prison by a US judge on Thursday.

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, 25, declared he was "proud to kill in the name of God" before being handed a mandatory life sentence for attempting to murder 289 people on board Detroit-bound Northwest Airlines Flight 253.

The failed suicide bomber, wearing a white skull cap and a long, white T-shirt at the sentencing hearing in Detroit, said he was carrying out the work of God against the "oppressors" of Muslims.

Abdulmutallab showed no emotion as Judge Nancy Edmunds handed down the maximum sen-

## UK, France sign nuke power deals

AFP, Paris

French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron put recent disputes behind them yesterday to unveil a nuclear power deal and renew their own sometimes shaky political alliance.

The pair took a strong position on the Syrian regime's violence at their summit in Paris, and Cameron took the opportunity of a joint news conference to wish his "friend" Sarkozy well in France's upcoming presidential election.

Celebrating a multi-million pound (euro) nuclear power deal and ever closer defence ties, the Paris summit was a far cry from recent encounters between the pair at European summits in Brussels,

## Japan emperor hospitalised

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's Emperor Akihito went into hospital yesterday, a day before he is due to have heart bypass surgery, royal officials said, as members of the public signed books at the Imperial Palace to wish him well.

The 78-year-old monarch arrived at the University of Tokyo Hospital shortly after 10:00am accompanied by his wife Empress Michiko and bowed to doctors before going inside.

The operation, which was announced on Sunday after tests showed a narrowing of Akihito's arteries, is expected to take about five hours and will be performed by physicians from the University of Tokyo and private Juntendo University.

# Sun journos mulling legal action as Murdoch flies in

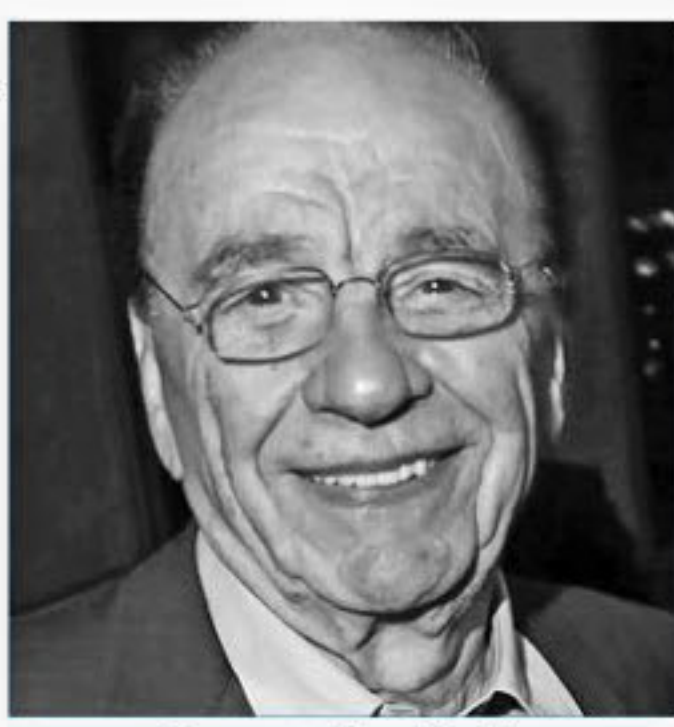
AFP, London

Journalists from Rupert Murdoch's The Sun have contacted a trade union to discuss suing the British tabloid's owners, the union said, after the arrest of five staff members in a police bribery probe.

Murdoch arrived at his London home late Thursday, according to an AFP photographer, ahead of a planned visit to The Sun's offices today.

The Australian-born tycoon, who shut down The Sun's weekly stablemate, the News of the World, in July after it became embroiled in a phone-hacking scandal, has promised to continue publishing the top-selling daily despite the corruption row.

However, former editor of The Sunday Times Andrew Neil warned his ex-boss would do "whatever it takes" to detoxify his company's brand.



Rupert Murdoch

Police arrested five Sun journalists last weekend on suspicion of bribing public officials, after receiving information from a committee set up at Murdoch's News Corp to investigate allegations of wrongdoing.

The arrests caused outrage in the newsroom and the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) said it was now looking at how to defend staff "against a management that seems prepared to throw them to the wolves".

"We have been approached by a group of journalists from The Sun. We are now exploring a number of ways to support them, including discussing legal redress," NUJ General Secretary Michelle Stanistreet said in a statement.

News International, Murdoch's British newspaper unit, refused to comment on the possibility of staff legal action.

# Tablet computers the new babysitter

AFP, Washington

Move over TV. Tablet computers are the new electronic babysitter.

A Nielsen survey published on Thursday broke down the ways tablet-owning parents of children under age 12 are using gadgets such as the iPad to keep the kids occupied.

More than half of parents -- 55 percent -- said their kids used tablets for entertainment while traveling and 41 percent said they give the children the device to use in restaurants.

Some 77 percent said their children play downloaded games on a tablet while 57 percent said they access educational applications.

# US to withdraw 11,000 troops from Europe

AFP, Washington

The United States vowed Thursday to retain close military ties to its European allies after unveiling plans to withdraw more than 11,000 troops from Germany and Italy as part of a strategic shift to Asia.

The details of the troop reduction, which include two Army brigades and two air squadrons, were announced as Defence Secretary Leon Panetta hosted his German counterpart, Thomas de Maiziere, for talks at the Pentagon.

Both men endorsed the drawdown at a joint press conference, with Panetta promising the move would not alter Washington's commitment to the Nato alliance.

The Pentagon chief said over 40,000 American troops would remain in Germany.

Starting later this year, the US military will start pulling out two US Army brigades, two Air Force squadrons as well as about 2,500 support troops, officials said.

The two Army heavy infantry brigades and one of the Air Force squadrons, which flies A-10 "tank killer" aircraft, are currently based in Germany while the second air unit is located in Aviano, Italy.

The move will reduce the total number of American forces in Europe to roughly 70,000 from the current level of about 81,000, officials said.

The US military footprint in Europe has drastically declined since the Cold War, when more than 270,000 troops were stationed on the continent at one point.

# Western pupils lag Asians by 3 years: Study

AFP, Sydney

Western schoolchildren are up to three years behind those in China's Shanghai and success in Asian education is not just the product of pushy "tiger" parents, an Australian report released yesterday said.

The study by independent think-tank The Grattan Institute said East Asia was the centre of high performance in schools with four of the world's top systems in the region -- Hong Kong, South Korea, Shanghai and Singapore.

"In Shanghai, the average 15-year-old mathematics student is performing at a level two to three years above his or her counterpart in Australia, the USA and Europe," Grattan's school education programme director Ben Jensen said.

"That has profound consequences. As economic power is shifting from West to East, high performance in education is too."

Students in South Korea were a year ahead of those in the US and European Union in reading and seven months ahead of Australian pupils, said the report, using data from the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment.

The PISA, pioneered by the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, has become a standard tool for benchmarking international standards in education.

The study said that while many OECD countries had substantially increased funding for schools in recent years, this had often produced disappointing results and success was not always the result of spending more money.



PHOTO: AFP

A stranded Air Australia passenger gives a thumb down as they wait with their luggage at Phuket international airport after their flight was cancelled yesterday. The airline collapsed, stranding thousands of passengers as its domestic flights and international services to Honolulu, Bali and Phuket were all grounded.