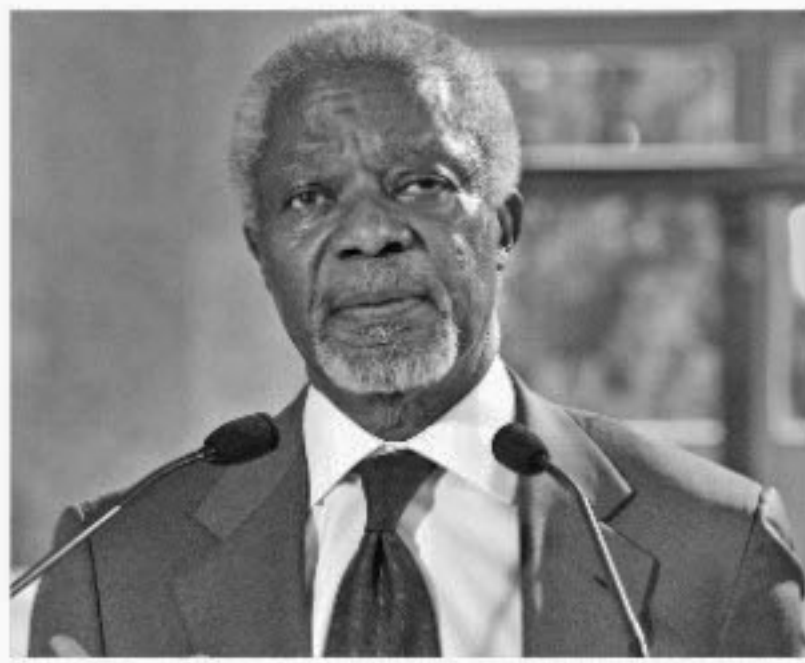


Blast hits UN observer convoy in Syria

Annan may visit Damascus amid civil war fears

A roadside blast hit troops escorting UN observers in Syria's south yesterday, a day after envoy Kofi Annan warned that his peace plan could be the last chance to avoid civil war.

The explosive device, apparently planted underground, wounded six Syrian soldiers escorting the convoy as it entered the city of Daraa, cradle of a 14-month uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's regime.



Major General Robert Mood, the head of the 70-strong UN mission, was in the four-vehicle convoy but escaped unharmed along with 11 other observers and his spokesman, Neeraj Singh, said an AFP photographer travelling with them.

The Norwegian general said the attack was "a graphic example of violence that the Syrian people" were suffering on a daily basis.

The opposition Syrian National Council accused the regime of being

behind the blast, the latest breach of a month-old ceasefire agreement brokered by UN-Arab League envoy Annan.

In other violence, troops pounded rebels hiding out in Douma near Damascus, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. More troops and civilians were killed in violence in other parts of the country, it added.

In neighbouring Lebanon, cross-border gunfire from Syrian forces killed an elderly woman and wounded her

daughter on Tuesday, an official said, a month after a Lebanese TV cameraman was killed in a similar shooting.

On Tuesday, Annan told the UN Security Council the priority in Syria was "to stop the killing," and expressed concern that torture, mass arrests and other human rights violations were intensifying.

Annan briefed the council on his efforts to get Assad to implement the plan, which he said was possibly "the last chance to avoid civil war."

He stressed, however, that the peace bid was not an "open-ended" opportunity for Assad, diplomats who attended the briefing said.

Annan plans to visit Damascus for a second time in the coming weeks, his spokesman said, though this depended on events on the ground.

Annan updated the UN body on the status of his six-point plan after UN chief Ban Ki-moon warned world powers were racing against time to prevent all-out civil war.

Palestinians demand UN action on hunger strikers

AFP, Ramallah

Several dozen Palestinians yesterday blocked staff from entering UN offices in Ramallah to demand that UN chief Ban Ki-moon take action over hunger striking prisoners.

The demonstrators, who blocked UN employees from entering the building, waved banners reading: "UNjust" and "UNfair."

More than a third of the 4,700 Palestinian prisoners being held by Israel are currently observing an open-ended hunger strike.

Two of them are marking their 71st day without eating in protest at their being held without charge under a procedure known as administrative detention which allows Israel to hold suspects indefinitely for renewable periods of up to six months.

Greece in turmoil amid rescue deal doubts

AFP, Athens

Athens raised the prospect Wednesday of renegotiating the terms of its bailout after voters roundly rejected austerity measures, raising fresh doubts over Greece's eurozone membership.

The head of the radical left-wing Syriza party charged with forming a government was to warn in a letter yesterday to Athens' international lenders that any cabinet resulting from his negotiations would renege on the terms of Greece's 240 billion euro (311 billion dollar) EU-IMF bailout.

Even the leaders of the outgoing Pasok-New Democracy coalition that signed off on the agreement on March 9 are beginning to suggest that the EU-IMF deal would have to be reopened.

The uncertainty sent markets and the euro tumbling, as fears resurfaced of Greece quitting the eurozone before the year is out.

Questions also surfaced on whether international lenders would go ahead with the promised loans to save the country from default if Athens is not prepared to deliver on its promises.

Syriza chief Alexis Tsipras has two more days to form a coalition, with meetings due

Wednesday with the leaders of Pasok and New Democracy. But Tsipras has already made his position against the austerity measures abundantly clear.

"The public verdict has clearly nullified the loan agreement and (pledges) sent to Europe and the IMF," the 37-year-old said in a televised address on Tuesday following weekend elections that decimated the vote of the pro-austerity parties.

"Citizens have crushingly voted against the barbaric policy of loan agreements."

"This was a mature, conscious political choice," he said.

But outgoing Prime Minister Lucas Papademos' economics advisor warned that throwing the austerity measures out completely meant leaving the eurozone.

"If we say no to everything, we leave the eurozone," warned Gikas Hardouvelis.

The anti-austerity rhetoric is also putting doubts on whether lenders will release desperately-needed loans due at the end of this week.

According to daily Kathimerini, the European Commission has confirmed that the latest 5.2 billion euro tranche due this week would be approved, though news website To Vima speculated that the EU may decide to hold it back.

'Underwear bomber' was working for the CIA

AFP, Washington

The man ordered by al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen to blow up a US-bound airliner was a double agent who infiltrated the group and volunteered for the suicide attack, with Saudi intelligence likely playing a key role, US media reported Tuesday.

He was in fact working as an undercover informer with Saudi intelligence and the CIA, it has emerged.

American officials leaked out details of the extraordinary intelligence coup two days after the White House announced a plot by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) had been successfully thwarted.

The double agent managed to spend weeks with AQAP before handing over information that allowed the United States to launch a drone strike on Sunday that killed Fahd al-Quso, a senior figure who was wanted for the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen, the New York Times and other media reported, citing unnamed US officials.

A senior US official told the Times that a bomb for the would-be attack was sewn into

"custom fit" underwear that would have been difficult to detect even in a careful pat-down at an airport.

Unlike the device used in the failed December 2009 plot by AQAP to blow up an airliner en route to Detroit, this explosive could have been detonated in two ways, in case one failed, the unnamed official was quoted as saying.

The main charge was a high-grade military explosive that "undoubtedly would have brought down an aircraft," the official said.

ABC News had reported earlier that the latest plot by AQAP was thwarted by a spy who infiltrated the group and took the explosive to Saudi Arabia.

The CIA and other government agencies declined to comment on the reports when contacted by AFP.

Although officials touted the disrupted plot as a success, they acknowledged AQAP remained determined to strike and its master bombmaker, Ibrahim Hassan Taleh Al-Asiri, was apparently hard at work seeking to circumvent airport security.



An actress, acting as high priestess, lights the Olympic torch yesterday during the lighting ceremony in ancient Olympia the sanctuary where the Olympic Games were born in 776 BC.

US detects activities at Iran nuke site

REUTERS, Vienna

A US security institute says commercial satellite imagery shows new activity at an Iranian military site which raises concern that the Islamic state may be "washing" a building the United Nations' nuclear agency wants to inspect.

The images showed items lined up outside a building and what appeared to be a stream of water, ISIS said.

The United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) suspects nuclear weapons-related research may have taken place at the Parchin military complex southeast of Tehran.

Iran has dismissed the allegations but has yet to allow the agency to visit the facility, despite repeated requests.



Sarkozy to quit politics, practice law

PTI, London

Nicolas Sarkozy, who lost the recent presidential race in France, is to quit politics and practice law, a report said.

The 57-year-old outgoing French President, a qualified lawyer, will first have a holiday at his wife Carla Bruni's sprawling villa in south of France after handing over power to socialist president-elect Hollande next week.

He is expected to rejoin his old firm in Paris, which specialises in property law, the 'Daily Express' reported.

In fact, he doesn't even want to wait until the official transition of power next Tuesday to move out of the Elysee Palace. He reportedly told friends: "If I could, I'd be gone tomorrow."

His close friend and political adviser Franck Louvrier was quoted by the British newspaper as telling 'Le Parisien' newspaper in France: "He is a lawyer and he will return to his legal firm."

Another friend told the newspaper, "He is very keen to rediscover his freedom and his private life and to stop being attacked by the press."

Sarkozy had indicated after his defeat on Sunday that he would quit politics. "I hope to live a normal life. I lost the election but journalists continue to prevent me from taking a break. I'm unable to have lunch with my family. I hope I can now be left to enjoy a bit of quiet," he said.

Producing enough oil to fill up Iran vacuum

Says Saudi Arabia

REUTERS, Tokyo

Saudi Oil Minister Ali al-Naimi yesterday said oil markets would remain well supplied even after fresh international sanctions against Iran take effect, as global crude over supply is already as much as 1.5 million barrels per day (bpd).

US and European Union sanctions on Iran's oil exports take effect in June and July, and are aimed at stemming the flow of petrodollars to Tehran to force it to halt a nuclear programme the West suspects is intended to produce weapons.

Iran exports about 2.2 million bpd, mostly to Asia, in a global market of around 89 million bpd.

When asked if he saw oil supplies tightening in coming months as global sanctions against Iran come into effect, Naimi said: "Absolutely not".

"There is today about 1.3 to 1.5 million barrels per day (bpd) of extra supply over demand," he told reporters in Tokyo after holding talks with Japanese officials about energy supplies. Japan is a major buyer of Iranian crude.

The Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) pumped about 1.3 million barrels per day above its output target in March, according to the group's monthly report in April.

Niger worst place to be mother

BBC ONLINE

The West African state of Niger is the worst place in the world to be a mother, according to Save the Children.

The ranking comes in the charity's annual index which compares conditions for mothers in 165 countries.

It considers a number of factors including health, education, economic status and nutrition.

Niger is severely affected by a regional food crisis. It replaces Afghanistan at the bottom of the Save the Children index.

Save the Children identifies Norway as the best place to be a mother, while the UK comes 10th.

Plane with 44 aboard missing in Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta

A Russian Sukhoi Superjet 100 on a demonstration flight with at least 44 people aboard went missing in a mountainous area south of the Indonesian capital Jakarta yesterday, officials said.

"The plane disappeared from the radar around the Bogor area. We are still looking for it and we are uncertain whether it crashed," said Gagah Prakoso, spokesman for the national search and rescue agency.

The plane took off at 2:00pm from east Jakarta's Halim Perdanakusuma airport, which is used for some commercial and military flights, he said.

"At 2:50 pm it dropped from 3,000 metres to 6,000 feet," the agency added in a text message to AFP.

Transport ministry spokesman Bambang Ervan said the descent was intentional, and that the pilot was trying to head back to the Halim air field.

He said the flight went missing "in a mountainous area 10 nautical miles from Bogor military airbase."

The rescue agency spokesman said it was carrying 46 people but Dimitry Solodov, press attache at the Russian embassy in Jakarta, said he could confirm 44 on board, eight of them Russian airline crew members, and some journalists.

Mahatma and his anti-tea campaign

BBC ONLINE

Tea is one of India's most popular drinks and by this time next year, it may get the official seal of approval as the country's national drink. But for many years, it was viewed with suspicion and even fear.

Thanks to British colonial policies of the first half of the 19th Century, India remained the world's largest producer of the leaf until 2006, when China overtook India.

But unlike China, in most of India there was no ancient tradition of tea drinking.

And as late as the 1950s, stern proscriptions by nationalist leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi were dampening domestic demand, and meant India was exporting more than half its tea.

So how did the cuppa overcome such a hostile market to stand at the brink of national drink status?

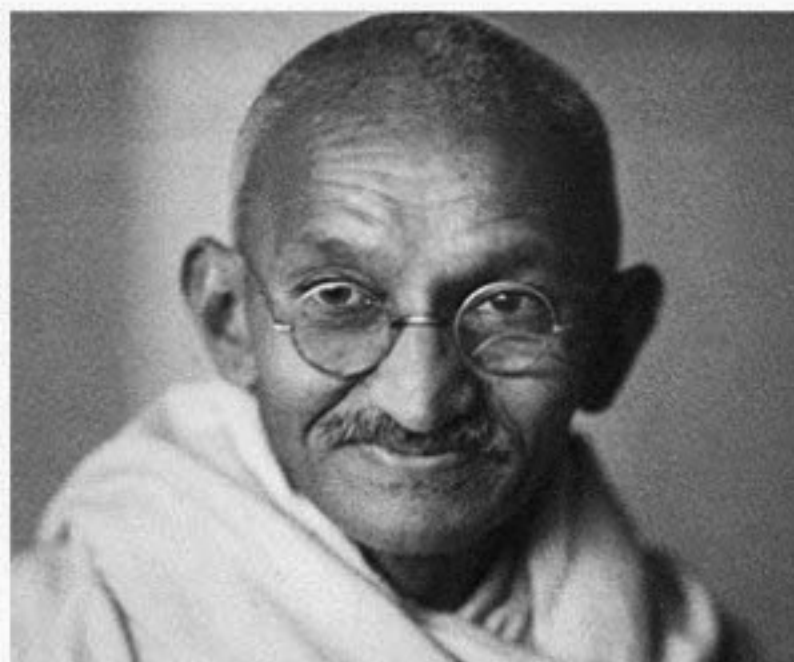
Viceroy Curzon introduced the Tea Cess Bill in 1903 to tax the Indian trade, raise a fund and promote marketing.

Over the previous two decades China's share of the London tea market had fallen from 70% to 10%, replaced mostly by India's and Ceylon's.

By 1900, tea was a large part of British household spending, but the market, although the largest, was starting to go flat.

One reason for this low demand and slow growth was the vociferous opposition to tea within India - and especially against labour practices at tea plantations - that had been aired by nationalist leaders from as early as 1906.

A reflection of this is found in Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's Bengali novella Parineeta, published in 1914. The main character, Lalita, does not have tea because Shekhar,



her love who is influenced by the nationalist movement, does not like women drinking tea.

In the early 1920s, Acharya Prafulla Ray, an eminent chemist and a passionate nationalist, published cartoons equating tea with poison.

Later, Mahatma Gandhi wrote a chapter in his book, A Key to Health, explaining why tannin, the compound that gives tea its astringency, was bad for human consumption.

He called tea "an intoxicant", in the same class of avoidable substances as tobacco and cacao.

Another widely held belief was that tea made the skin darker. Among a people obsessed with fair skin, especially in north India, this amplified the political message as a

taboo.

Facing such unprecedented hostility, The Tea Cess Committee was morphed in 1933 into the unambiguously named Tea Marketing Expansion Board, a precursor to today's Tea Board.

It started putting out illustrated advertisements at railway stations with instructions for brewing tea and with the Board's counter-claims about the drink's health benefits such as "increased stamina".

Boiling was encouraged as an antidote to the Indian "poison" - and it is still how tea is made across India.

Even private companies undertook their own promotion.

The combined efforts contributed to the doubling of Indian consumption in the 1930s. Still, the Indian market remained relatively small through the 1940s.

But the things on the ground started to change in the 1960s when the working classes took to tea in numbers.

NEWS IN brief

Tymoshenko ends hunger strike

REUTERS, Kiev

Ukraine's jailed opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko, whose plight in prison has soured relations between the country's leadership and the West, was moved to a local hospital yesterday in a high-security police convoy.

Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich has faced growing criticism over the conviction of Tymoshenko - and the authorities' refusal to let her travel abroad for treatment for chronic back pain.

Meanwhile, the German doctor treating her said the former prime minister yesterday ended a 20-day hunger strike after being transferred from her prison to hospital.



Indian SC strikes down Hajj subsidy

AFP, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court on Tuesday ordered the government to scrap a state policy of subsidising the travel of thousands of Muslims to Mecca for the annual hajj pilgrimage.

"We hold that the policy is best done away with and it should be eliminated over 10 years," said justice Altamas Kabir, striking down New Delhi's argument that pilgrims were entitled to the state help once in their lifetime.

The court also scrapped New Delhi's plans to send a nine-member official team to Mecca for hajj, which must be performed at least once in a lifetime by all those who are able to make the journey.

Dalai Lama to get spiritual prize

AFP, London

The Dalai Lama will receive the 2012 Templeton Prize, one of the world's biggest monetary awards, in a ceremony at Saint Paul's Cathedral in London on May 14, organisers said yesterday.

The exiled Tibetan spiritual leader will receive the £1.1 million (\$1.8 million, 1.4 million euro) prize for his work in encouraging scientific research and harmony among religions.

The Templeton Prize honours a living person who has made an exceptional contribution to "affirming life's spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works".

Established in 1972, it is one of the world's largest