

Syria accused of new 'massacre'

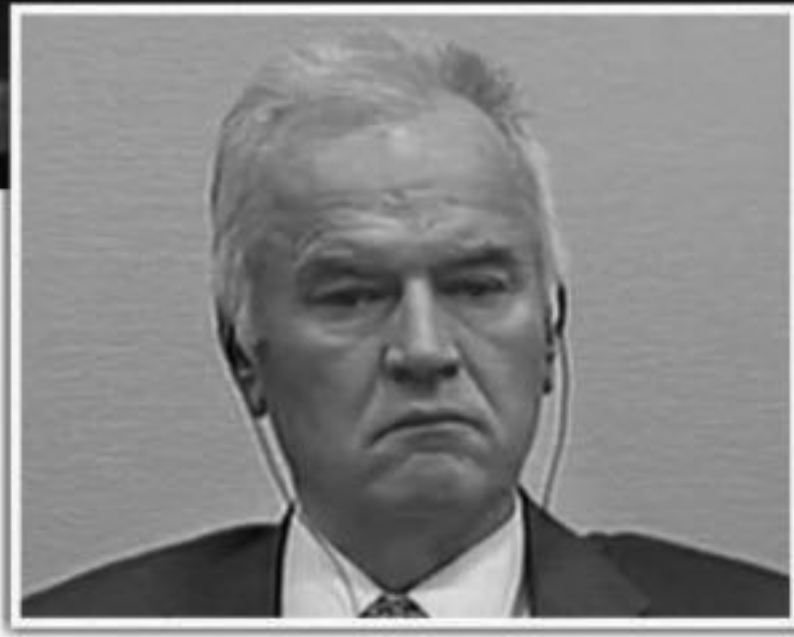
Assad boosts popularity in TV appearance

AFP, Damascus
Syrian forces were accused of having executed 15 civilians yesterday, as the office of UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan said UN observers were evacuated from a tense town a day after a blast hit their convoy.
Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, however, accused the West of ignoring violence by "terrorists" and said he would demand an explanation from Annan when he visits Damascus later this month.
"After regime forces raided the neighbourhood of Shammas (in the central city of Homs), 15 civilians were found summarily executed," Rami Abdel Rahman of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights told AFP, in what he branded a massacre.
The overnight killings came a day the Observatory accused troops of another massacre in the town of Khan Sheikhun, in the northwestern province of Idlib, when they opened fire on a funeral procession and reportedly killed 20 people.

At least 11 more people were killed in incidents around the country yesterday, the Observatory said, while another four died of wounds suffered during the funeral in Khan Sheikhun.
Annan's office said the UN mission had picked up the six military observers who had to stay in rebel stronghold as blast targeted their vehicle. They were back at their team site in the central city of Hama safely, it added.
Meanwhile, President Assad, in an interview with Russian state news channel Rossia-24, accused the West of ignoring the real situation in his country.
Turning to legislative elections held on May 7, Assad said they showed that the Syrian people "are until now supporting the policy of reform" and "support the institutions of the state."
He complained that, since the arrival of the UN observers there had been an increase in "terrorist attacks" despite a reduction in "direct confrontation" between government forces and their foes.



PHOTO: AFP
Bosnian Muslim woman, Ramiza Gurdic, 59, a survivor of the 1995 Srebrenica massacre, reacts yesterday as she watches in Sarajevo a live television broadcast of the first day of trial of former Bosnian Serb army commander Ratko Mladic. Inset, Mladic, 70, is being tried on charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity for his role in Bosnia's 1992-1995 war.



Greece to hold new polls on June 17

AFP, Athens
Greek elections will be held on June 17, the Athens News Agency yesterday said, adding that a senior judge had been tasked with heading a caretaker government to organise the ballot.
Council of State president Panagiotis Pikrammenos, the head of Greece's top administrative court, will be named as caretaker prime minister, the semi-state ANA said.
Political leaders agreed on the appointment with President Karolos Papoulias after an inconclusive general election on May 6, which delivered a strong anti-austerity message and raised fears of a Greek eurozone exit.
Nine days of talks on forming an emergency coalition had failed but there is no guarantee that the new vote will produce a viable government.



Austerity measures on the way

Says Pranab
PTI, New Delhi
Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee yesterday said the government would resort to a fresh spell of austerity measures to deal with the difficult economic situation, but made it clear that he was not pressing the "panic button".
India's rupee hit a record low against the dollar yesterday and stocks fell nearly two percent as uncertainty over the eurozone debt crisis and weak domestic indicators hit Asia's third-largest economy.
The Indian unit fell to 54.52 rupees to the dollar, breaching its previous intraday lifetime low of 54.30 on December 15, and bringing its losses for the past 12 months against the US currency to over 20 percent.
"International situation is difficult. Country after country is witnessing economic crisis... I shall have to keep in mind it's a difficult world... I cannot live in a world which is not real", he said in Lok Sabha.
Referring to the eurozone crisis and its impact on India, Mukherjee said the government would resort to some "unpopular" steps to deal with fiscal problems. "I am going to issue some sort of austerity measures... whether people like it or not... to convey a signal that we are responding to the situation", he said, adding, "We are not pressing panic button."
Mukherjee, however, did not spell out any measures.

Pakistan backs quick deal on Nato supplies

Threats sent to foreign embassies warning over deal

AFP, Islamabad
Pakistan yesterday said it had ordered officials to finalise an agreement as quickly as possible on lifting a six-month blockade on overland Nato supplies into war-torn Afghanistan.
Islamabad has stopped short of announcing when the transit lines will reopen, but has signalled President Asif Ali Zardari will attend key talks on Afghanistan in Chicago on May 20-21, after a last-minute invitation from Nato.
The country shut its Afghan border crossings to Nato supplies on November 26 after US air strikes killed 24 Pakistani soldiers.
As a result, Pakistani-US relations -- already frayed by the US raid that killed Osama bin Laden -- plunged into their worst crisis since Islamabad joined the United States in the war on al-Qaeda after 9/11.
Now Pakistani and US officials are locked in talks to finalise a deal on again allowing thousands of trucks and oil tankers to carry non-lethal supplies from the southern port city of Karachi to landlocked Afghanistan.
Asked if there was any deadline for the talks, Information Minister Qamar Zaman Kaira said: "There is no deadline. All departments have been asked to conclude their negotiations in the quickest possible time."
The cabinet yesterday welcomed Nato's invitation to Zardari, clearing the way for him to travel to the May 20-21 summit.
Meanwhile, several Western embassies in Islamabad received letters yesterday containing suspicious powder and threats to poison supplies for Nato soldiers in Afghanistan, officials said.
The letters said the powder was a sample of "poison" that would be hidden in Nato supplies if Pakistan lifts a nearly six-month blockade on convoys carrying supplies for troops fighting the Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan.
Senior Pakistani security officials told AFP that the French embassy and the Australian and British High Commissions had received suspicious packages for certain, and other diplomatic missions may also have been targeted.

New cabinet takes oath in Palestine

AFP, Ramallah
A new Palestinian government in the West Bank featuring 11 new faces was sworn in yesterday at a ceremony in Ramallah, in a move which angered the Hamas government in Gaza.
Ministers, including returning prime minister Salam Fayyad, took the oath of office in the presence of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.
The swearing in of the 25-member government -- which includes 11 new faces and two ministers who changed their posts -- comes more than a year after the last cabinet resigned in February 2011.
New ministers took over several key portfolios including that of the finance and justice ministries, an official list of the line-up showed.

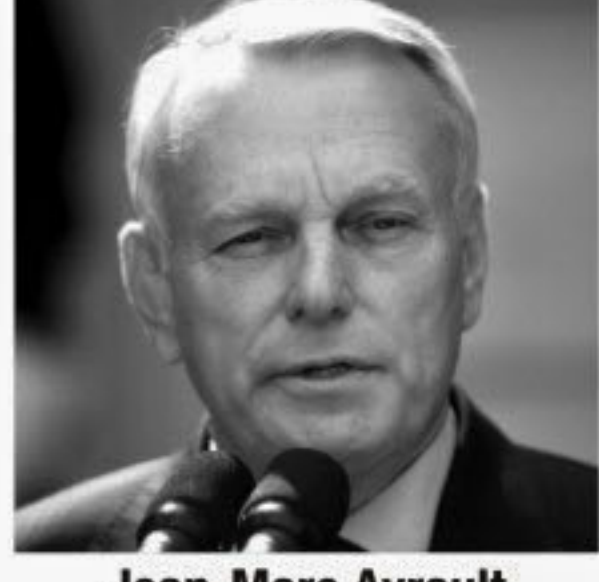
Mladic masterminded ethnic cleansing

Hears Hague court in the opening day of trial

AFP, The Hague
Former Bosnian Serb army commander Ratko Mladic went on trial yesterday accused of carrying out a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing and Europe's worst massacre since World War II.
"Ratko Mladic assumed the mantle of the criminal goal of ethnically cleansing Bosnia," prosecutor Dermot Groome told judges as the trial opened at the Yugoslav war crimes court in The Hague.
Mladic, 70, has been indicted on 11 counts of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity for his role in the Balkan country's brutal 1992-95 war that killed 100,000 people and left 2.2 million homeless.
Almost 8,000 Muslim men and boys were systematically murdered as Bosnian-Serb forces under General Mladic's command overran the town and Dutch UN peacekeepers helplessly looked on.
Groome displayed population maps showing the ethnic distribution in Bosnia before and after the war, explaining how mixed or predominantly Muslim municipalities became exclusively Serbian after a campaign of ethnic cleansing he said was one of Mladic's "strategic objectives".
Mladic pleaded not guilty to the charges at an earlier court hearing last June.
Outside the court, a group of 25 women belonging to the "Mothers of Srebrenica" organisation representing widows and victims of the Srebrenica massacre, held a demonstration.
"This is the biggest butcher of the Balkans and the world," Munira Subasic, 65, told AFP. She lost 22 relatives to Bosnian Serb military forces when the enclave of Srebrenica was overrun in July 1995.
The prosecutor said the very first objective was to "separate the Serbs from the other two national communities" -- Bosnians and Croats.
The trial is to continue today, before resuming on May 29.
Mladic faces life imprisonment if found guilty.

France unveils Hollande's new government

AFP, Paris
France unveiled President Francois Hollande's new government yesterday, with former prime minister Laurent Fabius, 65, named foreign minister and Pierre Moscovici, 54, finance minister.
Jean-Yves Le Drian, a 64-year-old local politician from Brittany, was named defence minister, while Manuel Valls, a free-market moderniser seen as on the right of the Socialist Party, was named interior minister.
Not counting Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault, who was named by the Socialist Hollande on Tuesday, the cabinet consists of 34 members, two more than the outgoing cabinet that served under right-winger Nicolas Sarkozy.
Though most of the top-level posts were held by men, it was also the first French cabinet to reach gender parity, meeting a promise made by Hollande during the election campaign.
Hollande also chose close ally Michel Sapin, 60, as labour minister and put Arnaud Montebourg, a 49-year-old from the left wing of the Socialist party, in charge of industrialisation.
Moscovici, a former European affairs minister, was Hollande's campaign manager and transition chief.
Jerome Cahuzac, 59 and the head of parliament's budget committee, was named budget minister, while Christiane Taubira, a 60-year-old lawmaker from French Guiana, was named justice minister.
Notably absent from the line-up was Socialist leader and former labour minister Martine Aubry, a key figure in the party's old-guard left wing, who said she would not join cabinet after being passed up for the premiership.



Jean-Marc Ayrault

Maternal deaths cut by half: UN

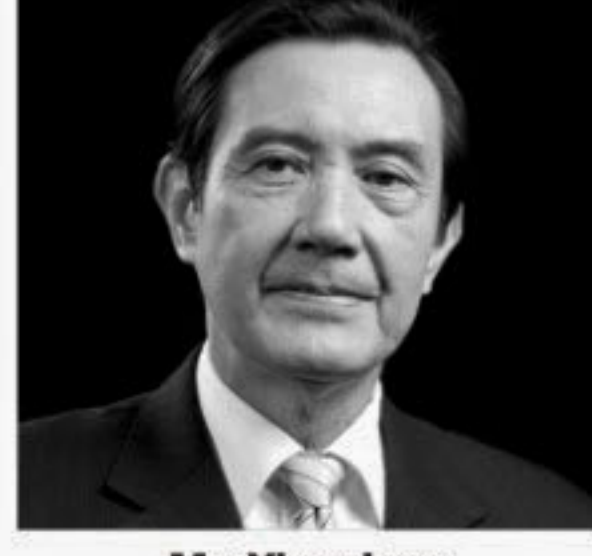
AFP, United Nations
Better care has cut the number of women dying in pregnancy and childbirth by nearly half in the past two decades, but there is still a death every two minutes, according to UN figures released yesterday.
India and Nigeria between them accounted for one third of the 287,000 deaths of pregnant women in 2010 and Africa accounts for 36 of the 40 countries with the highest maternal deaths.
But health experts hailed the 47% fall in fatalities from 543,000 in 1990, and said the strategy for saving more lives was clear.
"We know exactly what to do to prevent maternal deaths: improve access to voluntary family planning, invest in health workers with midwifery skills, and ensure access to emergency obstetric care when complications arise," said executive director of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA).
"These interventions have proven to save lives," he added at the launch of the "Trends in Maternal Mortality" report by the UNFPA, World Health Organization, UN Children's Fund and the World Bank.
Countries in Eastern Asia have made most progress on improving the health of expectant and new mothers, said the report. Many countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, will fail to reach the Millennium Development Goal of reducing maternal death by 75% from 1990 to 2015.

NEWS IN brief

- Romney wins two primaries**
AFP, Los Angeles
Presumptive Republican nominee Mitt Romney won primary ballots in Oregon and Nebraska on Tuesday, partial results showed, moving him a step closer to winning his party's formal White House nomination.
Romney won 73 percent of the vote in Oregon against 12.2 percent for Ron Paul, who suspended active campaigning this week, and 5.7 percent for Newt Gingrich, according to results from nearly two thirds of precincts.
In Nebraska the former Massachusetts governor had some 70.9 percent of votes compared to 9.9 percent for Paul and 5.2 percent for former House Speaker Gingrich, according to nearly complete results.
- 13 more killed in Yemen clashes**
AFP, Aden
An all-out army offensive against al-Qaeda in south Yemen raged into a fifth straight day yesterday with battles around the restive town of Loder leaving another 13 people dead, most of them jihadists, sources said.
Troops on Saturday launched a multi-pronged assault aimed at recapturing Qaeda-held towns and cities across Abyan, including Zinjibar.
Since then at least 128 people -- 82 jihadists, 20 soldiers, 16 civilians, and 10 militiamen -- have been killed, according to an AFP tally based on reports by officials and tribal leaders.
- S Lanka may free ex-army chief**
AFP, Colombo
Sarath Fonseka could be free "within days" after Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse held talks yesterday with the jailed former army chief's political party, officials said.
Fonseka fell out with the government over who should take credit for winning the separatist war against the Tamil Tiger rebels and he lost the 2010 presidential election to Rajapakse after quitting the army.
He was detained on a charge of corruption relating to military procurements and was given a 30-month jail sentence in September 2010.

Taiwan president fined 'Clean' Suranjit declares

AFP, Taipei
Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou has been fined \$17,000 by electoral authorities for urging his Facebook followers on polling day to vote for him, the Central Election Commission yesterday said.
Taiwanese election law forbids any form of campaigning on voting day.
Elected in 2008, Ma won a comfortable re-election victory on January 14. He is due to be inaugurated for his second and last four-year term on Sunday.
However, his government has recently come under fire over a string of controversial policies, which saw his popularity plunge to 19.5 percent, its lowest level in nearly three years, according to a poll released last week.
Thousands of people took to the streets of Taipei on May Day to voice their anger at the government, while the opposition party has vowed to stage a mass rally on the eve of his inauguration.
President Ma Ying-jeou was re-elected this year by a comfortable margin amid speculations that his second term may put Taiwan's sovereignty into question due to his China ties.



Ma Ying-jeou

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When told that the probe body had no jurisdiction to look into the minister's link with the scandal, the former railway minister said the committee had been assigned to cover all aspects of the incident.
On April 9 night, BGB personnel seized Tk 70 lakh from Suranjit's APS Omar Faruq Talukder's microbus after Faruq's driver Ali Azam drove the vehicle carrying Faruq and two railway officials to the Pikhana BGB headquarters, and shouted at the guards that there was bribe money in the microbus.
The money was reportedly collected as bribe from railway job seekers.
BGB personnel detained Suranjit's assistant personal secretary Faruq, railway general manager (east) Yusuf Ali Mridha, its Dhaka divisional commandant Enamul Haq and the driver, but released them the next day after verifying their identity.
Faruq was sacked, and the two railway officials were suspended after the incident.
Suranjit stepped down as railway minister on April 16 taking full responsibility for the incident.
Referring to his resignation, Suranjit said he stood down to ensure a fair and neutral probe into the incident. "I also told you that I would stay away from politics until I am proved innocent."
He ridiculed the media for dragging his son into the issue. "This is very unfortunate and aimed at tarnishing my image as well as my family's," said Suranjit and asked the media to be more responsible and impartial.
He said his son clarified everything to the Anti-Corruption Commission about his getting licence from Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Commission.
"One of my favourite media organisations ran a story on my son getting his licence for Tk 5 crore and some other media organisations followed that," said Suranjit, an advisory board member of the ruling party.
He said like others, his computer engineer son with his friends applied for the licence.
"Not only my son, but 22 others got licences, and I will not say who they are."
He claimed that his son was a "victim of politics."
Suranjit said people consider him as an honest and courageous politician, but the media did not spare him when he faced allegations. "I deserved the benefit of the doubt as I have 55 years of clean political career."
"Public opinion is very important to me. I believe people are now clear about me, as I have a clear conscience," he said.
Suranjit said he would start serving people afresh from his constituency in Sylhet.
Asked whether he would again take the charge of the railway ministry, Suranjit said it completely depends on the "desire of the prime minister." "I will meet the prime minister after returning from Sylhet."
Suranjit has not attended any political programmes since his resignation.
The AL leader said he had made a bold decision by tendering his resignation. "I have set an example in a democratic polity, as none, especially in politics, wants to resign when faced with allegations."
He believes that a conspiracy had been hatched to tarnish his image.
Suranjit, who was elected lawmaker seven times from his Sunamganj constituency, said his fight for democracy would continue, as he had fought against militancy and terrorism risking his life.

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