

Israel weighs 5,000 new settler homes

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli planning committees are to weigh several plans for nearly 5,000 new settler homes in neighbourhoods of annexed east Jerusalem this week, with at least one major project set for final approval.

Non-governmental groups Peace Now and Terrestrial Jerusalem, which track settlement construction, said Jerusalem municipal and district committees will consider four projects this week in the Givat HaMatos and Gilo neighbourhoods.

The projects are up for discussion after Israel on Monday gave the green light for the construction of 1,500 homes in the east Jerusalem neighbourhood of Ramat Shlomo, in a move which has already drawn sharp US criticism.

The other settlement plans being weighed this week are all in southern sector of the city, near the West Bank city of Bethlehem.

Critics say construction in these areas would effectively sever Bethlehem from Jerusalem.

The projects are likely to spur new Palestinian and international criticism of Israel, which does not view construction in the east as settlement building, and describes both halves of the Holy City as the "eternal, undivided" capital of the Jewish state.

US SCHOOL MASSACRE

Obama to move swiftly on gun control

AGENCIES

The White House promised a comprehensive series of measures, including gun control legislation, on Monday to prevent a recurrence of mass shootings such as the "horrific" attack in Connecticut that left 20 children and six teachers dead.

The pledge came as the first cracks began to appear in the seemingly impregnable opposition to gun controls.

Less than 24 hours after Barack Obama signalled that gun control would be a second term priority during a powerful speech on Sunday evening at a vigil for the victims in Newtown, at least two Democratic senators strongly identified with gun rights shifted position in favour of reform.

The killings in Connecticut appear to be bringing about a change in mood that was not evident after shooting sprees over the last decade. They include Virginia Tech in 2007, the attack on congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords last year and the Aurora cinema shootings in July this year.

On Monday Obama met Vice President Joe Biden, Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Attorney General Eric Holder, and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius to discuss proposals aimed at reducing gun violence.

Biden will be put in charge of the initiative, the Washington Post said quoting unnamed sources close to the government.

At the emotional vigil in Newtown, Obama appeared to abandon his reluctance to take on

America's unique gun culture

AGENCIES

For many Americans, the right to bear arms is not only enshrined in the constitution, it is a key civil liberty.

The right was born out of the War of Independence when armed militias had the right to protect. Centuries have passed but the rules haven't.

The deadly shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary is provoking another heated round of the same conversation that the US has after every mass shooting: is there something particular or unusual to its gun culture? Yet, answers are hard to find.

Americans don't just have more guns than anyone else -- 310 million nonmilitary firearms as of 2009 -- they also have the highest gun ownership per capita rate in the world, with an average of about nine guns for every 10 Americans. The second highest gun ownership rate in the world is Yemen.

The second-ranking country, India, a country over three times of US population, has 46 million. And the vast majority of the world's countries have fewer 10 million guns held by its citizens.

Each year, more than 31,000 Americans die from gunshots, most of them self-inflicted, but more than 11,000 in homicides -- five times as many as the death toll for US troops during an entire decade of conflict in Afghanistan.

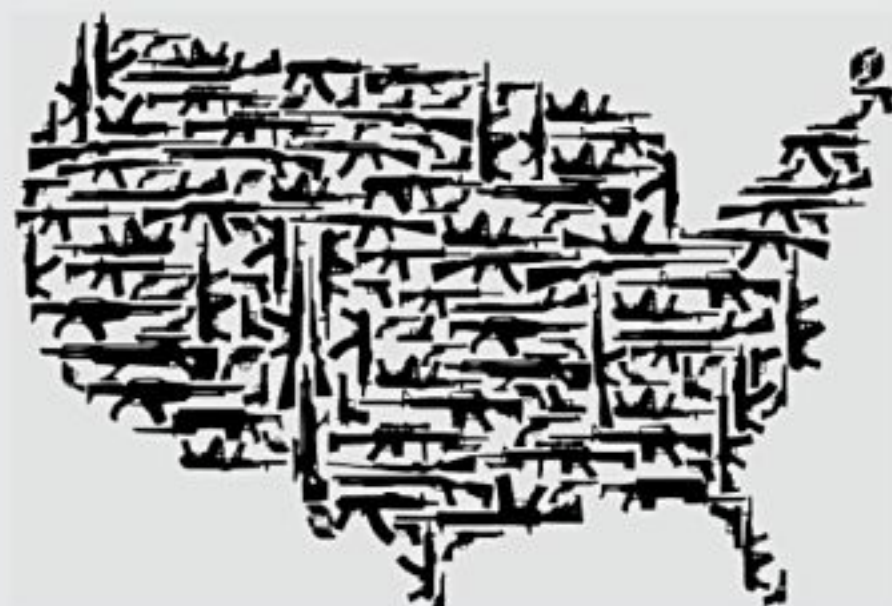
America's gun-related murder rate is the highest in the world, excluding Mexico, where the ongoing drug war pushes the murder stats way up.

the gun lobby and delivered an impassioned speech in which he said change had to come.

He did not specify what change he had in mind, or even whether it would include new legislation on gun control.

The White House spokesman,

Jay Carney, when asked what kind of measures the president had in mind, said: "It is a complex problem that will require a complex solution. No single piece of legislation, no single action will fully address the problem."



Palestinians flee as clashes rock camp

AFP, Damascus

Syrian rebels made advances yesterday in fierce fighting for a Palestinian refugee camp in south Damascus that sent tens of thousands of residents fleeing as the army prepared a counter-attack.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency said at least half of Yarmuk's population of more than 112,000 had fled the violence rocking the 2.1 square-kilometre camp.

An AFP correspondent at the border reported an influx of hundreds of Palestinians into neighbouring Lebanon in the face of the fierce fighting between Syrian rebels and their Palestinian allies, and Palestinian factions still loyal to Damascus.

President Bashar al-Assad's forces carried out air raids on the eastern and southern outskirts of the capital, killing three civilians, and clashes also erupted

near the airport road, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Fighting had rocked the Yarmuk camp during the night as the insurgents backed by some Palestinian fighters launched an offensive to push out a pro-regime Palestinian faction.

The population of the camp had halved, according to UNRWA. Many have fled to neighbouring

Lebanon.

One of the highest-profile US journalists to report from Syria, Richard Engel of NBC, was meanwhile freed after a firefight between his pro-regime militia captors and rebels fighters.

NBC said Engel, 39, and his TV crew went missing shortly after crossing into Syria from Turkey on Thursday, and that it had not been able to contact them until it learned they had been freed on Monday.

Coal use set to surpass oil in a decade:IEA

AFP, Paris

Coal is set to surpass oil as the world's top fuel within a decade, driven by growth in emerging market giants China and India, according to a report published yesterday.

Economic growth is expected to push up the share of coal, which produces the most climate-changing gasses, in the global energy mix, "and if no changes are made to current policies, coal will catch oil within a decade," said Maria van der Hoeven, head of the International Energy Agency, in a statement.

The latest IEA projections see coal consumption nearly catching oil consumption in four years time, rising to 4.32 billion tonnes of oil equivalent in 2017 against 4.4 billion tonnes for oil.

That has consequences for climate change as coal produces far more carbon emissions responsible for global warming than other fuels.

In its baseline scenario, the IEA sees rapid increases in power generation making India the second-largest coal consumer in 2017, displacing the United States where the shale gas boom makes coal uncompetitive.

Benghazi attack probe complete: US

AFP, Washington

A keenly awaited investigation into a deadly attack on the US consulate in the Libyan city of Benghazi, which killed Americans, is complete and has been given to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, a spokeswoman said.

Hillary appointed the ARB to investigate the incident amid allegations that the State Department had been lax in its security precautions in the restive city before the attack and at best sown confusion in its public response afterwards.

NEWS IN brief

Putin to visit India on Dec 24

THE HINDU ONLINE

Russian President Vladimir Putin will visit India on December 24, according to an announcement made by the Kremlin.

Putin will discuss specific steps to further develop the partnership in trade, economic, energy, and cultural and humanitarian spheres, said the statement.

World's oldest person dies

AFP, Washington

The world's oldest person -- an Iowa woman who scrubbed floors until she turned 90 -- died Monday at age 115, less than two weeks after earning her venerable distinction.

Dina Manfredini, a native of Italy, died in Iowa, said its director, Heather Rehmer. She declined to give details. Her birthday was April 4, 1897.

The passing of Manfredini apparently leaves a Japanese man, Jiroemon Kimura, as the world's oldest person. He was born just 15 days after Manfredini.

Christianity most populous religion

AFP, Washington

Christians are the world's biggest religious group, numbering some 2.2 billion people, according to a study released yesterday by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

It found that Christians make up about 32 percent of the world's population, followed by Muslims, the second largest group, with 1.6 billion adherents.

Hindus were the third largest group, numbering about one billion (15 percent), followed by Buddhists, at 500 million (seven percent) and Jews, who number 14 million (0.2 percent.)

Cold wave kills 37 in Ukraine

AFP, KIEV

Nineteen people died of exposure in Ukraine in the last 24 hours amid temperatures of minus 20 degrees Celsius (minus 4 degrees Fahrenheit), bringing the toll this month to 37, the health ministry said yesterday.

Some 190 people asked for medical attention due to hypothermia and frostbite, and 162 of them were hospitalised, the ministry said in a statement.

The ex-Soviet country straddling Russia and the European Union was hit with a cold snap and snowstorms which left nearly 600 villages without electricity last week.

ICC acquits Congo ex-militia boss

AFP, The Hague

The International Criminal Court acquitted Congolese ex-militia boss Mathieu Ngudjolo Chui of war crimes yesterday, saying prosecutors failed to prove his commanding role in the murder of 200 people in a 2003 attack on a village using child soldiers.

"The chamber acquits Mathieu Ngudjolo of all the crimes against him. The chamber orders... the immediate release of Mr Ngudjolo," presiding Judge Bruno Cotte said.

Cotte stressed the acquittal did not mean the court felt no crimes were committed in Bogoro village but that witness testimony had been "too contradictory and too hazy". Ngudjolo was once one of the most important militia leaders in northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo's mineral-rich Ituri province.

Now 42, Ngudjolo faced seven war crimes charges including using child soldiers to fight in his militia and three crimes against humanity charges for the bloody massacre of 200 villagers at Bogoro village on February 24, 2003.

It is the first time the Hague-based ICC, the world's only permanent war crimes tribunal, acquitted a suspect.

The court has only convicted one suspect, former Congolese rebel fighter Thomas Lubanga, in March for recruiting and enlisting child soldiers.



Mathieu Ngudjolo Chui

Prosecutor general resigns in Egypt

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's prosecutor general named by President Mohamed Morsi last month as he temporarily assumed sweeping powers handed in his resignation on Monday, a judicial source told AFP.

The Supreme Judicial Council will examine prosecutor general Talaat Ibrahim Abdallah's resignation next Sunday, a day after a final round of voting in a referendum on Egypt's draft constitution, the source said.

In his resignation letter, which was published by state news agency MENA, Abdallah said he wished to "return to his work in the judicial system."

Earlier Monday, hundreds of magistrates had organised a sit-in outside his office demanded that he quit.

Iraqi president in coma after stroke

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd who has mediated among the country's Shia, Sunni and Kurdish parties, was in hospital yesterday after suffering a stroke that left him in "critical but stable condition", government sources said.

However, well-placed Kurdish sources say he remains in a coma.

Should Talabani be incapacitated, Iraq would lose an influential negotiator who often stepped in to ease tensions in the fragile power-sharing government and between the central government and the country's autonomous Kurdistan region.

Talabani's office said he was admitted to a Baghdad hospital on Monday night and the 79-year-old president was in stable condition under intensive medical supervision after receiving treatment for blocked arteries.

Talabani had been suffering from ill health this year and received medical treatment overseas several times in the last two years.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki visited the president at the Baghdad hospital yesterday.

According to Iraq's constitution, the parliament should elect a new president if the post becomes vacant. Under Iraq's power-sharing deal the presidency should go to a Kurd while two deputy president positions are shared by a Sunni Muslim and a Shia Muslim.



Jalal Talabani

Zuma secures leadership in South Africa

AFP, Bloemfontein

South African president Jacob Zuma scored a thumping victory in an ANC leadership contest yesterday, opening the way for him to lead Africa's largest economy until 2019.

Zuma won the backing of 75.1 percent of the ANC's 3,977 voting delegates at a party conference in Bloemfontein, making him the odds-on favourite to retain the presidency after 2014 general elections.

Businessman Cyril Ramaphosa won the deputy presidency of the party with 76.4 percent of the vote in a three-way race, setting him up to become Zuma's potential eventual successor.

The vote took place despite the conference being threatened by right wing extremists.



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II (C) sits flanked by British Prime Minister David Cameron (L) and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg (R) as members of the Cabinet pose for a family picture at No 10 Downing Street in central London yesterday. This was the Queen's first-ever cabinet meeting to mark her diamond jubilee, the only monarch to do so since 1781.

Incoming Japan PM in Obama-Bush gaffe

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's presumptive premier Shinzo Abe got his US leaders mixed up yesterday, when he told business chiefs he had been speaking to "President Bush" after a phone call from Barack Obama.

The gaffe came in one of Abe's first speaking engagements since his landslide victory in weekend polls that saw his Liberal Democratic Party returned to power.

Abe, who was prime minister in 2006-7 during the final years of George W. Bush's presidency, quickly realised his error when assembled journalists and business leader began chuckling.

The 58-year-old corrected his verbal misstep and told officials from the Keidanren, Japan's business lobby, that he and Obama had agreed on the importance of the Japan-US security alliance.

Abe is expected to be formally elected as prime minister by fellow lawmakers on December 26.

Business chiefs had been kept waiting for Abe, who turned up around an hour late. Aides told reporters the White House call had been expected earlier.



Shinzo Abe