

NEWS IN brief

2012 deadliest year for journos

AFP, Vienna

2012 was the "deadliest year for journalists", said the International Press Institute on Monday, with the highest number of deaths recorded since the media watchdog began its annual tally.

The previous highest figure had been 110 deaths in 2009. Last year, 102 journalists were killed.

At least 31 journalists and eight citizen reporters died in Syria alone in 2012, while 16 others died in Somalia. Journalists were also killed in Brazil, Honduras, Mexico, Pakistan, the Philippines and other countries traditionally

Abbas Sees Palestine State In 2013

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas pledged on Monday that the coming year would see the implementation of Palestinian independence.

Lighting a torch in the grounds of his West Bank headquarters to start celebration of the the 48th anniversary of his Fatah movement he spoke of last month's historic United Nations vote upgrading the Palestinians's diplomatic standing, referring to it as the "birth certificate" of a Palestinian state.

"We have a birth certificate... and we want to complete the march toward full independence," he said. "Next year, 2013, will be the year of statehood and independence."

UN sanctions Congo rebels

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council slapped an arms embargo Monday on M23 rebels and their alleged Rwandan allies, the FDLR, amid a flare-up of violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo's eastern region.

The council committee tasked with monitoring sanctions on the Congo also imposed a travel ban and asset freeze on two key M23 figures: the group's civilian leader Jean-Marie Runiga Lugerero and Lieutenant Colonel Eric Bagege, a commander suspected of being responsible for the deaths of women and children.

Japan's population logs record drop

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's population logged a record drop in 2012, health ministry estimates showed yesterday, highlighting concerns that an ever-dwindling pool of workers is having to pay for a growing number of pensioners.

A record low 1,033,000 babies were born last year, against 1,245,000 deaths, resulting in a net drop of 212,000 in the nation's population of about 126 million, according to figures from the ministry.

Pakistan frees 8 Taliban prisoners

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has released eight Afghan Taliban prisoners, including senior former administration chiefs, in a bid to aid its wartorn neighbour's peace efforts, officials said yesterday.

Former justice minister Nooruddin Turabi and ex-governor of Helmand province were among those freed, a government official said Monday.

Foreign ministry spokesman Moazzam Ahmad Khan said the move was part of efforts "to further facilitate the Afghan reconciliation process".



(From top left clockwise) Fireworks light up the sky yesterday above Funchal Bay, Madeira Island, Portugal, in Sydney Harbour, Australia and in Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil to celebrate the arrival of the New Year. World cities from Sydney to Dubai rang in the New Year with a spectacular global wave of firework displays.



PHOTO: AFP

7 Pak charity workers shot dead

AFP, Peshawar

Six women and a man working for a health and education charity in northwest Pakistan were killed in a drive-by shooting yesterday, police said.

Police said they were investigating the motive for the attack. Charity workers have been the target in the past of attacks blamed on Islamist militants and other gunmen.

The victims -- all Pakistanis -- worked for a Pakistani charity which runs health and education projects, said Abdul Rashid Khan, police chief for Swabi district where the killings took place.

They were on their way home from a local community centre when they were attacked.

They were shot near a junction for the motorway which connects the north-western city of Peshawar to the capital Islamabad and the eastern city of Lahore.

Police also identified five women teachers among the dead, saying they worked for a local charity that promotes health and education at a community centre in a Swabi village.

Last month, nine polio vaccination workers were shot dead in a string of attacks in Karachi and northwest Pakistan.

Tortured corpses usher in Syria New Year

Regime to accept any peace effort as fighting rages

AGENCIES

Violence ravaged Syria into 2013 with the gruesome discovery of what activists said were dozens of tortured corpses in Damascus, clouding end-of-year efforts to end 21 months of bloodshed.

The government of President Bashar al-Assad said it welcomed any initiative for talks to end bloodshed in the country, after UN-Arab League envoy Brahimi said he had a peace plan acceptable to world powers.

The government's position, expressed by Prime Minister Wael al-Halaqi, came amid a flurry of diplomacy led by Brahimi to halt the conflict that monitors say has now killed more than 45,000 people.

It reported the discovery of 30 tortured bodies in a flashpoint district of Damascus, while a gruesome video emerged of a separate slaying of three

children in the capital.

The Syrian Revolution General Commission activist network gave a higher estimate of 50 bodies, saying "their heads were cut and disfigured to the point that it was no longer possible to identify" them.

The uprising began in March 2011 with peaceful protests inspired by the Arab Spring but escalated into an armed rebellion following a brutal government crackdown.

The sharp increase in the death toll came in the face of an escalating resort to air power by the Assad government against densely populated areas, the Observatory said.

State news agency Sana said fierce clashes were going on near the international airport in Syria's second city of Aleppo with unconfirmed reports said it has temporarily been closed.

Hillary most admired US woman

AFP, Washington

Ailing US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had something to smile about from her hospital bed Monday when she was named the woman most admired by Americans, for the 17th time.

Hillary topped the 2012 list compiled by Gallup, with 21 percent of those surveyed naming her as the woman they most looked up to this year.

It is the 11th straight time that she has topped the annual poll, and the 17th altogether -- a first for Gallup.

The result "further solidifies her position as the most often named Most Admired Woman in Gallup's history -- a total of 17 times going back to her first

year as first lady in 1993," the polling company said.

President Barack Obama was named the most admired man of the year by 30 percent of the 1,038 adults polled from December 19 to 22, his fifth time at the



top of the list. Former South African president Nelson Mandela came in second with three percent support.

First Lady Michelle Obama came second to Hillary, with 5 percent of people naming her, and talk show diva Oprah Winfrey ran a close third.

Hillary was being treated in a New York hospital for a blood clot near her brain. Her top aide said she was admitted on Sunday and doctors said she should make a full recovery.

North Korean leader seeks peace with South

REUTERS, Seoul



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un yesterday called for an end to confrontation between the two Koreas, technically still at war in the absence of a peace treaty to end their 1950-53 conflict, in a surprise New Year speech broadcast on state media.

The address by Kim, who took over power in the reclusive state after his father, Kim Jong-il, died in 2011, appeared to take the place of the policy-setting New Year editorial published in leading state newspapers.

But North Korea has offered olive branches before and Kim's speech does not necessarily signify a change in tack from a country which vilifies the United States and US ally South Korea at every chance it gets.

Impoverished North Korea raised tensions in the region by launching a long-range rocket in December that it said was aimed at putting a scientific satellite in orbit, drawing international condemnation.

North Korea, which considers North and South as one country, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, is banned from testing missile or nuclear technology under UN sanctions imposed after its 2006 and 2009 nuclear weapons tests.

"An important issue in putting an end to the division of the country and achieving its reunification is to remove confrontation between the north and the south," Kim said in the address that appeared to be pre-recorded and was made at an undisclosed location.

"The past records of inter-Korean relations show that confrontation between fellow countrymen leads to nothing but war."

The New Year address was the first in 19 years by a North Korean leader after the death of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-un's grandfather. Kim Jong-il rarely spoke in public and disclosed his national policy agenda in editorials in state newspapers.

"(Kim's statement) apparently contains a message that he has an intention to dispel the current face-off (between the two Koreas), which could eventually be linked with the North's call for aid (from the South)," said Kim Tae-woo, a North Korea expert at the state-funded Korea Institute for National Unification.

"But such a move does not necessarily mean any substantive change in the North Korean regime's policy towards the South."

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Orientation
Wednesday, January 16, 2013, 5:15 pm

India rolls out cash scheme for poor

BBC ONLINE

India yesterday rolled out an ambitious plan for a cash payout of subsidies to the poor in 20 districts, officials said.

Finance Minister P Chidambaram said the scheme would benefit more than 200,000 people initially, and would cover the entire country by the end of 2013.

Authorities say it will bring the country's poorest citizens "into the mainstream".

But opposition parties have accused the government of "bribing the voters" ahead of the 2014 general elections.

The government plans to disburse 3,200bn rupees (\$58bn; £36bn) under the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) scheme.

Under the scheme, money meant for recipients of 29 welfare programmes - mainly related to scholarships - will be transferred to bank accounts linked to their unique identification numbers in 20 districts from 1 January. It will be extended to 11 more districts from 1 February and 12 districts from 1 March.

"This is indeed a game-changer for governance, the manner in which we govern," Chidambaram told reporters on Monday, a day before the launch of the scheme.

Under the scheme, those living below the poverty line will receive between 30,000 rupees (\$542; £338) and 40,000 rupees (\$723; £450) per year in lieu of nearly 30 welfare programmes, including scholarships and pensions.

Analysts, however, say implementing the scheme may not be easy as only 222 million people in India have so far enrolled into a biometric identity scheme, most poor families do not have bank accounts and many villages do not have a bank.

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