

# Dozens killed in air strike on fuel station

UN says over 60,000 killed in conflict

AGENCIES

Dozens of people were killed or wounded in an air strike on a service station south-east of Damascus on Wednesday, many of them horribly burned, a watchdog and activists said, reports AFP.

The attack took place near the town of Maliha in the partly rebel-held Eastern Ghuta region of Damascus, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The watchdog said dozens were killed or wounded but could not immediately give a comprehensive breakdown.

The Local Coordination Committees, a grass-

roots network of activists, estimated that at least 50 people were killed and dozens of others wounded.

It said the toll was likely to rise because bodies were still being pulled from the rubble, adding that "it is extremely difficult to count the dead because most of the bodies have been immolated."

It was not immediately clear if the bomb blasts caused the storage tanks to explode, but the scene was engulfed in fire, which suggests that might have happened.

Meanwhile, Syrian rebels, some from

Islamist units, fired machineguns and mortars at helicopters grounded at a northern military air base near the main Aleppo-Damascus highway yesterday, a monitoring group said, reports Reuters.

The al Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham Brigade and other units operating in Syria's northwestern province of Idlib were attacking the Afis military airport near Taftanaz, the pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

There was no immediate account of the fighting around the air base from Syrian state media.

More than 60,000 people have been killed in Syria since the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's regime erupted in March 2011, a top UN official said yesterday, reports AFP.

Navi Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said that an exhaustive analysis carried out by data specialists showed that 59,648 people had died through the end of November.

"Given there has been no let-up in the conflict since the end of November, we can assume that more than 60,000 people have been killed by the beginning of 2013," Pillay concluded in a statement.



The old Iraqi flag is held by Iraqis rallying in the city of Samarra yesterday as protesters in mostly Sunni areas of Iraq's west and north have alleged that the Shia-led authorities use anti-terror legislation to target their minority community.

## NEWS IN brief

### 16 dead in Angola stampede

AFP, Luanda

The official death toll from a stampede at a New Year's Eve evangelical vigil in Angola rose to 16 Wednesday, as witnesses said the tragedy was caused by a scramble for sachets of holy water.

"We confirm the death of 16 people, including four children, due to asphyxia, shoving and trampling of faithful at the entrance of Cidadela Stadium," Paulo Gaspar de Almeida, deputy commander-general of the Angolan police, told AFP.

Authorities probing how the disaster happened have discovered that the 80,000-seater stadium in the capital Luanda was packed to nearly double its capacity as turnout far exceeded

### US shooting survivors go to class

AFP, New York

Students at the elementary school where a gunman massacred 26 children and teachers last month were returning to class for the first time today in a new building adapted to look exactly like their old one.

Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut has been closed since the December 14 tragedy in which a 20-year-old local man shot 20 small children and six staff members before committing suicide.

Yesterday, families were invited to inspect the new school in the nearby town of Monroe, where a disused facility has been prepared to resemble the old one, right down to the pictures on the walls and

### Dance Row : TMC suspends leaders

IANS, Kolkata

Ruling Trinamool Congress yesterday suspended party leaders and workers after they were seen showering money at dancing girls at an event to celebrate the Mamata Banerjee-led party's foundation day ceremony.

The decision came following severe criticism from political parties, the women's commission and intellectuals, after the partymen — including zila parishad member Meer Taheer Ali — were caught on camera showering money on skimpily-dressed women dancers who were hired for the event in South 24-Parganas' Bhangore Tuesday

### CAR rebels agree to peace talks

REUTERS, Bangui

Rebels in Central African Republic said they had halted their advance on the capital yesterday and would start peace talks, averting a clash with regionally-backed troops in the mineral-rich nation.

The announcement gave only a limited reprieve for President Francois Bozize as the insurgents told Reuters they might insist on his removal in the negotiations in Gabon's capital Libreville.

### Egypt quizzes suspected Israeli spy

AFP, Cairo

Egyptian prosecutors were interrogating on Tuesday an Israeli man in the Red Sea port of Nuweiba who is suspected of espionage, a judicial source said.

"An Israel man was arrested on Monday in Taba on suspicion of espionage. He was remanded today in police custody for four days pending investigation," the source said.

The suspect "infiltrated into Egypt through a mountainous area near Taba," the source added,

## Ivory Coast mourns new year stampede

Stampede caused by barricades

AGENCIES

Three days of mourning have been declared in Ivory Coast following a New Year's Eve stampede that killed at least 61 people in Abidjan, reports BBC.

Hundreds of people leaving a fireworks event at a stadium in the Plateau district were jammed into a tiny street in the early hours of Tuesday; many were crushed; others suffocated.

President Alassane Ouattara described the deaths as a national tragedy.

Different theories are emerging as to what caused the stampede after the fireworks display ended in the 65,000-capacity Felix Houphouet-Boigny Stadium.

Two survivors, who are hospitalized at Cocody Hospital, said after the fireworks they were prevented from moving along the Boulevard de la Republic by wooden barricades, reports AP.

Some say a group of youths brandishing knives was snatching people's mobile phones, causing panic among the large crowd, says BBC.

But others say security forces acted ineptly as they tried to control the many thousands walking through the city centre.

## UK urges bold G8 action on global economy

AFP, London

British Prime Minister David Cameron called on his fellow G8 leaders yesterday to start work now on agreeing "bold steps" to help boost global economic growth, ahead of a summit he will host in June.

In a letter marking the start of Britain's presidency of the Group of Eight richest nations, Cameron laid out his three priorities for the year: to extend free trade, tackle tax evasion and combat corruption.

Writing to the leaders of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia and the United States, Cameron said: "It is clear that in 2013 the world will continue to face grave economic uncertainty."

While each country would rightly focus on their own challenges, he said, "the



David Cameron

ambitious standards we set and the bold steps we take by working together through the G8 can make a tangible difference by firing up economies and driving prosperity, not just in our own countries, but all over the world".

But he warned that if the G8 is to see progress in these areas, leaders meeting in Northern Ireland in June need to do more than "whip out a chequebook at the 11th hour, pledge some money and call it a success".

"What we are talking about are long-term changes in our countries and the rules that govern the relationships between them. With ambition on this scale, I am convinced that success depends on us starting a debate on these changes now."

## Iraqi PM warns Sunni protesters to end rallies

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq's Shia Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki, has warned he will not tolerate anti-Sunni government rallies indefinitely, but made a concession to their demands by promising to free some women prisoners.

Thousands of Sunnis have been taking to the streets of Iraq for more than a week in protest against Maliki, whom they accuse of discriminating against their sect and being under the sway of their non-Arab Shi'ite neighbor Iran.

The incident has once more threatened to plunge a delicate power-sharing deal into turmoil, just as President Jalal Talabani, a moderating influence, is in Germany for medical care after suffering a stroke.

The cradle of the protests is Anbar province, a Sunni stronghold in western Iraq, where demonstrators are blocking a key highway to Jordan and Syria.

## Egypt investigates satirist for Morsi insult

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's state prosecutor ordered on Tuesday an investigation into a claim that popular satirical show host Bassem Youssef insulted President Mohamed Morsi, a judicial source said.

On his show Al-Barnameg (The Programme), Youssef, dubbed the Egyptian Jon Stewart, had poked fun at the ruling Islamists and Morsi's temporary adoption of extensive powers in November and December.

He may be summoned for questioning after the case was transferred to a Cairo prosecutor for investigation, the source said.

The lawyer who filed the complaint, Ramadan Abdel Hamid al-Aqsari, had in the past sought to sue a range of media personalities and politicians.

The state prosecutor, Talaat Ibrahim, had on December 27 ordered a probe into three top opposition leaders accused of trying to incite Morsi's overthrow.



## Chavez conscious, says his deputy

REUTERS, Caracas

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is aware that his condition is complicated following a fourth cancer operation in Cuba, Vice President Nicolas Maduro said on Tuesday, as the OPEC nation watches for clues to the socialist leader's health.

Maduro said he was returning to Venezuela after spending several days alongside Chavez and members of the president's family. That may help squelch rumors his visit was a sign that the former soldier was near death.

"During these days I was able to see him twice and speak with him," Maduro



said during an interview from Havana with regional television network Telesur. "He is completely conscious of the complexity of his post-operative state and he expressly asked us keep the people informed."

Maduro, who Chavez last month designated as his successor, said the president had grasped his hand "with immense strength" as they spoke, and asked him about the state of the economy and the swearing-in of newly elected governors.

"After staying in Havana to accompany the family members, we are returning to Caracas tomorrow (January 2) to continue our work," said Maduro, who visited Chavez with his wife, Attorney General Cilia Flores.

## Paris fire kills 5

AFP, Paris

Five people, including a child, were killed and 18 others slightly hurt in a pre-dawn fire yesterday at an apartment building in the suburbs of the French capital Paris, rescue workers said.

The five lived in the same flat on the fifth floor of the six-storey building in a disadvantaged area of Gennevilliers, northwest of Paris, they said, adding that the cause of the fire remained unknown.

Some 100 firefighters fought the blaze that began in a fourth-floor flat, rescue workers told AFP.

## Myanmar prison art tells story of repression

AFP, Yangon

Painted on scraps of clothing with carved soap, cigarette lighters and even syringes, Htein Lin's artworks were his lifeline during years in Myanmar jails -- and the spark for an extraordinary love story.

"These paintings were really dangerous and also precious," said the 46-year-old former student protest leader, who produced more than 200 works during his six-and-a-half years in jail under the junta.

"I really wanted to tell the government that locked me up for nothing: 'you might have put me behind bars but you cannot imprison my creativity'," he said.

Htein Lin was arrested in 1998 and



A artwork of Htein Lin

imprisoned on the basis of an intercepted letter from a former "comrade" naming him as potentially still interested in opposition activity.

Jail was fraught with hardship such as beatings, solitary confinement and unsanitary conditions, but it also became his "studio".

Using any material he could get

his hands on Htein Lin -- who had previously focused on performance art -- channelled his creativity to express the injustices that were a part of life during decades of military rule.

With names like "Shadow of Hope", "Back from the Chain Gang" and "Self Torture for 6 Years", the paintings writhe with colour, depicting anything from contorted figures to abstract designs.

Held first in Mandalay prison and then at Myaungmya, close to his home town in the Irrawaddy delta region, the artist was able not only to receive the occasional batch of smuggled paint, but also to sneak the collection out.

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