

## Damascus rocked by violent clashes

Car blast hits capital, kills 11

AFP, Damascus

Syrian regime warplanes and troops yesterday blasted away at rebels close to Damascus, the day after a car bomb in a mainly Alawite northern district of the capital killed at least 11 people, a watchdog said.

Fighter-bombers were hitting Duma, northeast of Damascus, and army artillery was shelling the southwestern Daraya neighbourhood which the rebels have led against regime assaults for weeks, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Troop reinforcements were being sent to Daraya, the British-based group added.

The offensive was being waged a day after a car bomb in the north Damascus neighbourhood of Massaken Barzeh, mostly inhabited by members of President Bashar al-Assad's Alawite minority, killed at least 11 people, the Observatory said.

Two children were among the dead in the attack, it said.

The official SANA news agency said the bomb struck a petrol station near a hospital and that it also wounded many civilians.

On Wednesday, the United Nations said the overall death toll from the 21-month conflict had topped 60,000. The fatality rate has multiplied in recent months, as air strikes have stepped up.

Nationwide on Thursday at least 191 people died, including 99 civilians, according to the Observatory, which gathers information from a network of medics and activists. Fighting in Damascus and its outskirts accounted for 87 of the deaths, it said.

## US FISCAL CLIFF Battles ahead despite deal

AFP, Washington

With nearly 100 new members, the US Congress convened Thursday fresh from the year-end "fiscal cliff" fiasco, as lawmakers cast a wary eye towards the tough budget battles ahead.

Twelve freshman senators and 82 newly-elected lawmakers in the House of Representatives took the oath of office, eager to make the 113th Congress more productive than the 112th, whose two years were marred by mind-numbing partisan gridlock and record public disapproval.

President Barack Obama's Democrats enjoyed modest gains in both chambers, but the balance of power remains divided on Capitol Hill: Democrats control the Senate, while Republicans hold sway in the House, where John Boehner kept his job as speaker.

There was little expectation that he would lose the leadership role, but Republican infighting over backing a fiscal cliff deal that hikes taxes on the wealthy triggered speculation about Boehner's hold on the gavel.

Lawmakers burned the midnight oil as they approved a deal to prevent \$500 billion in tax increases and spending cuts from kicking in on January 1, and possibly tipping the US economy back into recession.

But larger budget battles are on the horizon, particularly over US borrowing, an extension of the government's 2013 budget, and the now-looming spending reductions set to hit the Pentagon and most domestic programs.

With the battle over taxes behind them -- the deal raises rates on individuals earning over \$400,000 and on couples earning more than \$450,000 -- McConnell was eyeing the coming bout over spending and the debt ceiling.

Obama resumed his Hawaii vacation hours after Congress approved the fiscal cliff deal late on New Year's Day, and signed it into law Wednesday by auto pen.



John Boehner



Waving national flags and Fatah's yellow banners, hundreds of thousands of supporters of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas's party held their first mass rally in Gaza yesterday since Hamas seized control of the territory in 2007.

PHOTO: AFP

## FALKLANDS ROW UK dismisses Argentina's demands

AFP, London

British Prime Minister David Cameron dismissed Thursday a renewed call by Argentinian President Cristina Kirchner for Britain to return the disputed Falkland Islands.

Cameron said the 3,000 residents of the South Atlantic archipelago had a strong desire to remain British and would have a chance to express their views in a referendum on March 10 and 11.

In an open letter to the British PM, Kirchner said the islands were "forcibly stripped" from Argentina exactly 180 years ago, "in a blatant exercise of 19th-century colonialism".

## Malala discharged from UK hospital

AFP, London

The British hospital treating Malala Yousufzai, the Pakistani schoolgirl shot by the Taliban for campaigning for girls' education, said Friday that she has been temporarily discharged ahead of surgery.

Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, central England, said the 15-year-old would stay at her family's temporary English home before undergoing major surgery on her skull in a few weeks.

"Malala Yousufzai was discharged from Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham (QEH) as an inpatient yesterday (3 January 2012) to continue her rehabilitation at her family's temporary home in the West Midlands," its statement said.

Malala was shot on her school bus by a Taliban hitman in October, in an attack that shocked the world.

The bullet grazed her brain coming within centimetres of killing her, and she was airlifted to the specialist Queen Elizabeth Hospital days after the attack in Mingora in Pakistan's northwestern Swat Valley.

"She is still due to be re-admitted in late January or early February to undergo cranial reconstructive surgery as part of her long-term recovery and in the meantime she will visit the hospital regularly to attend clinical appointments," the hospital said.

It added that Malala had been regularly leaving the hospital over the past couple of weeks to visit her family at home.



Pakistani schoolgirl Malala Yousufzai waves to the camera yesterday as she is discharged from the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham in central England.

PHOTO: AFP

## Hamas allows mass Fatah rally in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Hundreds of thousands of supporters of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah party yesterday held their first mass rally in Gaza since Hamas seized control of the territory in 2007, according to a Fatah spokesman.

Hamas, in a sign of reconciliation with Fatah, permitted the rally to go ahead as the climax of a week of Gaza festivities celebrating the 48th anniversary of Fatah taking up arms against Israel.

Thousands of demonstrators waved Palestinian and Fatah flags and carried pictures of Abbas, an AFP correspondent reported.

The centrepiece of the event was a short speech by Abbas from his West Bank headquarters in Ramallah, beamed to the Gaza crowd on giant screens.

Hamas congratulated Fatah on the anniversary in a statement, saying it considered it a "celebration of national unity and success for Hamas as well as Fatah."

Hamas and Fatah had been at loggerheads since the Islamist movement seized control of Gaza in June 2007, following its victory in Palestinian parliamentary elections the previous year.

But under Egyptian mediation, the two groups reached a unity agreement in April 2011, although it has so far not been implemented.

## NEWS IN brief

### Hillary aims to hit desk next week

AFP, Washington

A day after being released from hospital following treatment for a blood clot, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was Thursday hoping to return to work next week and end her month-long absence.



The globe-trotting 65-year-old diplomat was admitted to New York Presbyterian Hospital on Sunday after a routine scan revealed the clot in a vein behind her right ear in the space between her

### Japan sends envoy to South Korea

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's new Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday sent a special envoy to Seoul, the foreign ministry said, in an early attempt to mend fences over a territorial dispute.

Veteran lawmaker and former finance minister Fukushima Nukaga left Haneda airport Friday bound for the South Korean capital bearing Abe's message to president-elect Park Geun-Hye.

"As both Japan and South Korea have new governments, I would like to play the role of mediator so that this year can be a good one for the two countries," Nukaga told reporters at the airport.

### 54pc Israelis support Palestine state

AFP, Jerusalem

A slender majority of Israelis support the creation of a separate Palestinian state, but did not have high hopes for a peace deal, a survey said yesterday.

The survey by daily Israel Hayom asked more than 800 Israelis "do you support or oppose the idea of two states for two peoples, i.e. the creation of a Palestinian state independent from Israel?"

Almost 54 percent said they favoured the idea, and 38 percent rejected it, with the rest refusing to answer. The survey's margin of error was 3.4 per-

### Gunman kills 7 in Philippines

AFP, Kawiit

A gunman with a semi-automatic pistol killed seven people and wounded 11 others during a drug-fuelled rampage in a slum near the Philippine capital yesterday, authorities said.

The ordeal, which ended when police shot the assailant dead, again raised concerns about the country's lax gun controls after the week began with two children dying from bullets fired by revellers to celebrate New Year's Eve.

Two girls, aged three and seven, as well as a pregnant woman, were among the seven confirmed fatalities in yesterday's rampage, police said.

### Pak polio campaign resumes

AFP, Peshawar

Pakistan is providing paramilitary and police support to polio vaccinations being resumed discreetly in the northwest after a series of attacks on medical workers, officials said yesterday.

UN agencies suspended work on a nationwide campaign to inoculate children against the highly infectious disease after nine health workers were murdered in a string of attacks in the northwest and Karachi in December.

Pakistan is one of only three countries in the world where polio is endemic, but efforts to stamp out the disease have been hampered by

## 23 Shia pilgrims killed in Iraq

AFP, Hilla

The death toll from a truck bomb targeting pilgrims after the conclusion of annual mourning rituals for a revered figure in Shia Islam has risen to 23, an official said yesterday.

A further 49 people were wounded in the Thursday evening attack in the town of Musayyib, which lies about half-way along the main route linking Baghdad and the shrine city of Karbala where millions of worshippers have attended Arbaeen commemoration ceremonies in recent days.

Two separate roadside bombs in east Baghdad, one yesterday morning and the other Thursday evening, each wounded eight Shia pilgrims, officials said.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attacks, but Sunni militants often try to target Shias during commemoration rituals.

## Chavez has 'severe' lungs problem

REUTERS, caracas

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is still suffering a "severe" respiratory infection that has hindered his breathing as he struggles to recover from cancer surgery in Cuba, the government said on Thursday.

The 58-year-old socialist leader has not been seen in public nor heard from in more than three weeks. Officials say he is in delicate condition after his fourth operation in just 18 months for an undisclosed form of cancer in his pelvic area.

"Comandante Chavez has faced complications as a result of a severe lung infection," Information Minister Ernesto Villegas said in the latest official update on the president's condition.

"This infection has caused a breathing insufficiency that requires Comandante Chavez to comply strictly with medical treatment," the communiqué added, giving no further details.

Vice President Nicolas Maduro had earlier returned to Venezuela on Thursday after visiting Chavez in hospital as rumours swirled that the president could be close to death.

In scenes that recalled Chavez's hours-



long televised visits to building sites, hospitals and oil refineries, Maduro told workers at the nationalized Fama de America factory that there was no "transition" taking place in the country.

"The only transition in Venezuela is the transition to socialism," he said in comments carried live by state television.

Chavez's abrupt exit from the political scene would be a huge shock for the South American OPEC nation. His oil-financed socialism has made him a hero to the poor majority but critics call him a dictator.

His condition is being watched closely by Latin American allies that have benefited from his help, as well as investors attracted by Venezuela's lucrative and widely traded debt.

Chavez is still set to be sworn in on January 10, as spelled out in the constitution. If he were to die or had to step aside, new elections would be held within 30 days, with Maduro running as the ruling Socialist Party (PSUV) candidate.

While the constitution gives January 10 as the start of a new presidential term, it does not explicitly state what happens if a president-elect cannot take office on that date.

## Orphanage fire kills 7 children in China

AFP, Beijing

Seven children died and another was injured in a fire at a private orphanage in central China on Friday, the local government and state media said.

Flames swept through the home for orphans and abandoned children in Lankao, Henan province, for around two hours before they were put out, the Xinhua news agency reported.

Four children died at the scene and three on their way to hospital, it said. One child, aged about 10, was injured and hospitalised, a government spokesman told AFP.

"The cause of the fire is still under investigation," the spokesman said, adding it was unclear how many people were inside the facility when the fire broke out.

The orphanage was owned by a local street seller, he added, but said he did not know whether it was licensed.



### Request for Proposal (RFP)

Katalyst, a pro-poor market development project funded by a donor consortium and implemented under Ministry of Commerce by Swisscontact and GIZ International Services, requests proposals from individual consultants for carrying out a study to understand the perspectives of 'micronutrient and compost' market in Bangladesh.

The consultant is expected to conduct the study in association with the Katalyst fertilizer team. The objective of the study is to explore existing and future market including demand-supply scenario, growth potentials and allied constraints that impedes growth.

The bidders should have knowledge on micro-nutrient and compost market system and relevant experience in conducting such a study. The proposal should be based on the detailed RFP that can be downloaded from [http://www.katalyst.com.bd/abtus\\_procurement.php](http://www.katalyst.com.bd/abtus_procurement.php). The deadline for submission is by 5.00 p.m., 15th January, 2013.



### REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL (RFP)

Study on understanding the perspectives of Kharif Maize in Bangladesh

Katalyst, a pro-poor market development project funded by a donor consortium and implemented under Ministry of Commerce by Swisscontact and GIZ International Services, requests proposals from interested consulting firms/ team of consultants for carrying out the following assignment.

Conduct a study titled "Understanding the perspectives of Kharif Maize in Bangladesh with focus on support services, market dynamics and farmers perception". The assessment methodology will involve collection & analysis of both primary and secondary data sources.

The bidder should have relevant experience in the maize value chain and prior experience in conducting such a study. The proposal should be based on the detail RFP that can be downloaded from [http://www.katalyst.com.bd/abtus\\_procurement.php](http://www.katalyst.com.bd/abtus_procurement.php). Proposal should be submitted by 5.00 p.m., 15th January, 2013.