

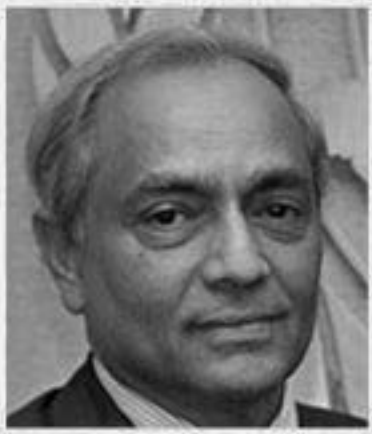
NEWS IN brief

Sri Lanka gets new chief justice

PTI, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa yesterday appointed his cabinet's legal adviser as the country's new chief justice to succeed Shirani Bandaranayake, whose impeachment created much furore both inside and outside the nation.

Rajapaksa sworn in new Chief Justice Mohan Peiris to replace Sri Lanka's first woman chief



Mohan Peiris

US military suicide record high

BBC ONLINE

The number of US military members who committed suicide rose to a record 349 in 2012, far exceeding US combat deaths in Afghanistan, the Pentagon has said.

Suicides by active-duty troops increased from 301 in 2011; the Marine Corps had the largest percentage rise.

The Pentagon has struggled to deal with what Defence Secretary Leon Panetta has described as

Senior Bush leaves hospital

AFP, Washington

Former US president George H W Bush was released from hospital on Monday following more than two months of treatment for bronchitis, a bacterial infection and a persistent cough.

Bush, at 88 the oldest surviving former president, was admitted to the Methodist Hospital in Houston on November 7 and released after 12 days only to be readmitted four days later when

Zardari's resignation demanded

AFP, Lahore

Opposition politician Imran Khan has asked President Asif Ali Zardari to resign immediately to make way for free and fair elections.

His call came after the Supreme Court issued an order for the arrest of the prime minister over corruption allegations, and as 25,000 people took part in the largest political protest in Islamabad since Zardari's government took office.

As things stand, the government has said it will disband parliament only in mid-March at the end of its mandate, after which elections would have to be held by mid-May.

Schoolgirl rape outrage in India

AFP, Vasco Da Gama

Thousands protested in the holiday state of Goa yesterday after a seven-year-old girl was raped in a school toilet, sparking fresh outrage in India following a deadly gang-rape on a bus.

Crowds began gathering outside the Deepvihar High School in the city of Vasco da Gama on Monday night after news of the attack emerged, prompting police to arrest the headmistress on charges of neglect as well as appeal

Iran to send monkey into space

AFP, Tehran

Iran will try again to send a live monkey into space after a previous attempt failed in 2011, media reports said yesterday quoting the space chief, who gave a launch date of before mid-February.

Iran has already sent small animals into space -- a rat, turtles and worms -- but its previous attempt to send a live monkey into space failed in 2011, which was announced without explanation.

The previous project envisaged launching a capsule with life support using the Kavoshgar-5 rocket to an altitude of 120 kilometres for a 20-minute sub-orbital flight.

French, Malian troops en route to Islamist-held town

AFP, Bamako

Hundreds of Malian and French troops were en route yesterday afternoon to the western town of Diabaly, which Islamists seized the day before, prompting airstrikes from French fighter jets overnight, witnesses said.

"Several hundred Malian and French soldiers left Niono (south of Diabaly) to take" back the town, said a local government official in Niono.

The move would be the first time French ground troops engage in the battle with Islamists, which they have waged up until now with fighter jets targeting the insurgents' bases.

"Our French brothers are currently with us in Niono on their way to Diabaly. Tomorrow we will take back Diabaly with the French," a



French soldiers prepare for their deployment

Malian security source said, on condition of anonymity.

The procession of troops in armoured vehicles was cheered on by residents of the town as they passed by, according to witnesses.

The Islamists, led by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) leader Abou Zeid, seized the town, which lies 400 kilometres north of the capi-

tal, on Monday.

Overnight, French fighter jets launched strikes on the town, and residents of a town some 20 kilometres away reported seeing some of the Islamists fleeing.

A regional security source confirmed however that the insurgents were still in the zone around the town, some of whom had taken hostage a local government official and his family.

Meanwhile a convoy of some 30 French tanks left Mali's capital on Tuesday afternoon, headed in a northern direction, an AFP journalist said.

The armoured vehicles were seen leaving Bamako's airport, where they had been stationed, but their destination could not be confirmed.

No business as usual with Pakistan Says Manmohan Singh

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh warned yesterday that there "cannot be business as usual" with neighbouring Pakistan after last week's deadly flare-up along the border in disputed Kashmir.

"It cannot be business as usual" with Pakistan, he told reporters on the sidelines of an army function. "What has happened is unacceptable," he added in reference to the killing of two Indian soldiers, one of whom was beheaded.

"Those responsible for this crime will have to be brought to book."

Singh's comments came a day after commanders of the rival armies traded protests over the border exchanges.

The Indian government has accused Pakistani soldiers of crossing into Indian territory and killing two of its soldiers on January 8.

Pakistan denies its troops were involved in any such incident and has accused Indian troops of killing two of its soldiers.

Foreign ministers of both sides have warned against escalating tensions. But the Indian army chief of staff told his commanders Monday to respond "aggressively" to any future Pakistani firing across the heavily-militarised de facto border in divided Kashmir, known as the Line of Control.



India's visa scheme for Pakistanis suspended

AFP, Amritsar

India's government suspended a new programme to allow Pakistani pensioners to get visas on arrival at the border, citing technical glitches only hours after officials said it had begun yesterday.

Home Secretary R.K. Singh told reporters the scheme, which was designed to issue visas on arrival to senior citizens from Pakistan, had been suspended until further notice.

Kuldeep Singh Dhatwalia, a spokesman for the home ministry, insisted to AFP that the decision over visas had "nothing to do with tensions along the India-Pakistan border".

'Iran set for 2014 nuke capability'

AFP, Washington

Iran is on track to be able to produce material for at least one nuclear bomb by mid-2014 as sanctions hit its economy but fail to stop the atomic program, a US think tank said Monday.

The Institute for Science and International Security, a private group opposed to nuclear proliferation, called for tougher US economic sanctions against Iran and pressure on major trading partners to isolate Tehran.

The group looked at Iran's "critical capability," defined as the point at which the clerical regime will be able to produce enough weapons-grade uranium or separated plutonium to build one or more bombs before foreign detection.

"Based on the current trajectory of Iran's nuclear program, we estimate that Iran could reach this critical capability in mid-2014," the think tank said in a report.

The think tank based its assessment on the growth in Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium and number of centrifuges and what it described as an uncooperative stance by Tehran toward the UN atomic agency.

The institute said it was "deeply skeptical" of the potential for preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons and painted a dire picture of the consequences if the regime developed the bomb.

The think tank said that a nuclear weapon would "embolden Iranian aggression and subversion" and questioned whether Iran's leadership, with its "apocalyptic messianism and exaltation of martyrdom," could be deterred from using a bomb.



Obama backs new gun reforms

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama pledged Monday to vigorously pursue "sensible" gun control but, a month after a school massacre traumatized America, questioned whether tough new laws could pass Congress.

Grieving relatives of some of the 20 children gunned down in their classes in Newtown, Connecticut on December 14, meanwhile vowed there should never be a "next time" and added heartbreaking heft to the fight against gun violence.

Obama said that Vice President Joe Biden had delivered "common sense" reform recommendations after meeting gun control advocates, firearms lobby groups, mental health experts and software and movie industry officials.

The president said he would lay out his response to the American people later in the week, but backed a renewal of a ban on assault weapons, curbs on high capacity magazines and better-enforced background checks for gun owners.

"My starting point is not to worry about the politics. My starting point is to focus on what makes sense, what works. What should we be doing to make sure that our children are safe?" Obama said at a White House press conference.

Egypt train derails kill 19 troops

AFP, Cairo

A train carrying military conscripts derailed southwest of Cairo yesterday, killing 19 people and wounding 107, the health ministry said, highlighting the country's chronic transport problems.

The train was taking young recruits from south Egypt to a military camp in Cairo when two carriages went off the rails shortly after midnight in the Giza neighbourhood of Badrasheen, officials said.

More than 60 ambulances were sent to the site of the accident, where rescuers extracted survivors.



Supporters of Pakistani cleric Tahir-ul Qadri hold placards at a protest rally in Islamabad yesterday. Inset, the Pakistani cleric told his supporters to carry on their protest in central Islamabad for second day, after the government ignored his ultimatum to dissolve parliament immediately.

PHOTO: AFP

ROW OVER DISPUTED ISLANDS China to survey with Japan

AFP Beijing

China is to carry out a geographical survey of islands in the East China Sea at the centre of a bitter dispute with Japan, state media said yesterday.

The survey of the Diaoyu islands -- known as Senkakus in Japan, which controls them -- was part of a programme to map China's "territorial islands and reefs", the Xinhua news agency said, citing a state geographical agency.

The maritime dispute, which has simmered off and on for years, intensified last year when the Japanese government nationalised islands in the small chain it did not already own, triggering anger and demonstrations in China.

The protests were allowed to take place by the Communist authorities in Beijing, who use nationalism to bolster their claims to legitimacy, particularly regarding Japan, which occupied parts of China in the 20th century.



Obama a man without 'moral centre'

Says US linguist and political activist Noam Chomsky

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Linguist and political activist Noam Chomsky remains as vigorous as ever at the age of 84.

His popularity - or notoriety as some would say - endures because he is still criticising politicians, business leaders

and other powerful figures for not acting in the public's best interest. At the heart of Chomsky's work is examining the ways elites use their power to control millions of people, and pushing the public to resist.

In this episode of Talk to Al Jazeera, Noam Chomsky sits down with Rosiland Jordan to talk about the two main tracks of his life: research and political activism.

And it is his activism that keeps this US scholar engaged in the public discourse



Noam Chomsky

well into his ninth decade.

"The activism for me long antedates the professional work," Chomsky says. "I grew up that way. So I was a political activist as a teenager in the 1940s before I ever heard of linguistics."

Discussing US politics, he attributes the growing popularity of the Tea Party movement, and the fanatical opposition to President Barack Obama in some quarters, to what he calls "pathological paranoia".

"It's something that exists in the country. It's a very frightened country, always has been," he says.

At the same time, Chomsky sees Obama himself as a man without a "moral centre".

Palestinian student killed in West Bank

BBC ONLINE

A 17-year-old Palestinian was shot dead by Israeli forces in the northern West Bank yesterday.

Palestinian medical sources say Samir Ahmed Awad died after being hit by three bullets in the village of Budrus.

It happened near a school situated about 200m (650ft) from the barrier that Israel has built in the territory.

The mayor of the village, Mohammed Morar, said students had thrown stones at Israeli soldiers as they left the school, before Awad was shot.

WAR CRIMES IN SYRIA

Russia against referring to ICC

AFP, Moscow

Russia said yesterday it would be "counterproductive" to refer war crimes committed in the Syria conflict to the International Criminal Court as proposed by dozens of states led by Switzerland.

"We view this initiative as untimely and counterproductive to solving today's main goal -- an immediate end to the bloodshed in Syria," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

Switzerland sent a petition on Monday demanding referral from the 15-member UN Security Council -- the only body that can send the case to the ICC but where Russia wields veto power.

The letters' signatories included many European and Latin American nations as well as Australia and Japan.

Only the Security Council has the right to refer the Syria case to the Hague-based court because Syria is not an ICC member.

Meanwhile, more than 80 people were killed when twin explosions rocked Aleppo University on Tuesday, the governor of Syria's second city, Mohammed Wahid Akkad, and a source at the university hospital said.