

NEWS IN
brief

British MPs approve gay marriage

AFP, London

British lawmakers voted in favour of controversial legislation allowing gay marriage on Tuesday despite fierce opposition from members of Prime Minister David Cameron's own party.

The move puts Britain on track to join the ten countries that allow same-sex couples to marry, but Cameron had the embarrassment of seeing more than half of his Conservative legislators

Tunisia opposition leader shot dead

AFP, Tunis

Opposition leader and outspoken government critic Chokri Belaïd was shot dead yesterday, in what the Tunisian premier called "an act of terrorism", as the country grapples with growing political instability.

The murder prompted President Moncef Marzouki to scrap a trip to Cairo where he was due to attend a summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and return home in the afternoon. The family of Belaïd accused the ruling Ennahda party of being behind the murder.

Mexican girl gives birth at 9!

AFP, Mexico City

A Mexican girl aged nine has given birth to a girl of her own, local authorities and family members said yesterday.

"The girl was just over eight when she got pregnant. The father is a boy who is 17, but we have not found him, since he ran away," the mother of the girl, identified only as Dafne, told local officials in Jalisco state.

The baby girl was born January 27 in Zoquiapan Hospital, weighing 2.7 kilos (5.7 lbs). Both girls were released from the hospital over the weekend, apparently doing well.

Vatican receives 600 abuse cases a yr

AFP, Vatican City

The Vatican's new chief prosecutor against clerical child abuse on Tuesday said his office was receiving around 600 new cases a year, many of them dating back to the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

Catholic higher-ups in many dioceses including in Ireland and the US were accused of covering up abuse for decades and simply moving alleged abusers from one parish to another.

6 Spaniards raped at Mexico resort

AFP, Acapulco

A gang of masked gunmen broke into a beach bungalow and raped six Spanish women in Acapulco, a Mexican resort city on the Pacific heavily dependent on tourism revenue, officials said.

The attackers assaulted the Spanish women for two hours early Monday.

German minister stripped of doctorate

BBC ONLINE

A German university has voted to strip Education Minister Annette Schavan of her doctorate after an investigation into plagiarism allegations.

The University of Duesseldorf's philosophy faculty decided on Tuesday that she had carried out "a deliberate deception through plagiarism".

The minister has denied the claims and said she will appeal.

An earlier plagiarism row brought an end to the political career of Germany's defence minister in 2011.

Opposition talks offer suffers major setback

AFP, Damascus

A proposal by a Syrian opposition leader for peace talks with President Bashar al-Assad's regime has suffered sharp setbacks, with Damascus ignoring it and a key opposing faction flatly rejecting the initiative.

The peace offering by Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib, leader of the opposition National Coalition, has been welcomed by Washington and the Arab League and was expected to receive further support yesterday from leaders of Islamic nations meeting in Cairo.

Assad himself has yet to comment on the offer by Khatib, who says "the ball is now in the regime's court", but the pro-regime Al-Watan newspaper said the offer came two years too late.

The Syrian National Council, the main component of the Coalition, rejected the possibility of any talks, saying it was committed to ousting Assad's regime, rejecting dialogue with it, and protecting the revolution

Khatib's offer on Monday followed his surprise announcement last week that he was ready for talks with Assad's regime, subject to conditions including the release of 160,000 detainees.

Khatib later elaborated, saying he was ready to meet Assad's deputy, Vice President Faruq al-Sharaa.

In the past the opposition has demanded Assad step down before talks can begin but analysts say Khatib's change in stance stems from a belief the population will be bled dry while the West fails to act.

Arab League and the US threw their weight behind Khatib's offer, however, and offered to play a role in any negotiations for a democratic transition.

On the ground, a suicide bomber on Wednesday attacked a military intelligence headquarters in the south-central Syria city of Palmyra, killing and wounding an unknown number of people, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

It said that on Tuesday, 106 people died across Syria.

OIC summit opens in Egypt capital

Syria, Mali to dominate proceedings

AFP, Cairo

The 12th summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation yesterday opened in Cairo, with Syria's civil war and the battle against Islamist militants in Mali topping the agenda.

The meeting gathers leaders of 26 of the OIC's 57 states, with Morsi, Egypt's first Islamist president, assuming the organisation's rotating presidency.

Morsi urged Syrian opposition groups to unify in his address.

Morsi called on opposition parties not allied to Syria's National Coalition, which is recognised by the international community, "to coordinate with this coalition and support their efforts for a unified approach... for democracy."

According to a draft resolution obtained by AFP, the gathering will call for "serious dialogue" between the Syrian opposition and government officials "not directly involved in oppression".

The call for dialogue, drafted by foreign ministers after two days of preparatory meetings, will pile pressure on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to respond to a surprise offer of talks by Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib, leader of National Coalition.

The document stresses the need to maintain "Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty", while underlining that "the main responsibility for the continued violence falls on the Syrian government".



Obama plans 1st Israel visit as president

AFP, Washington

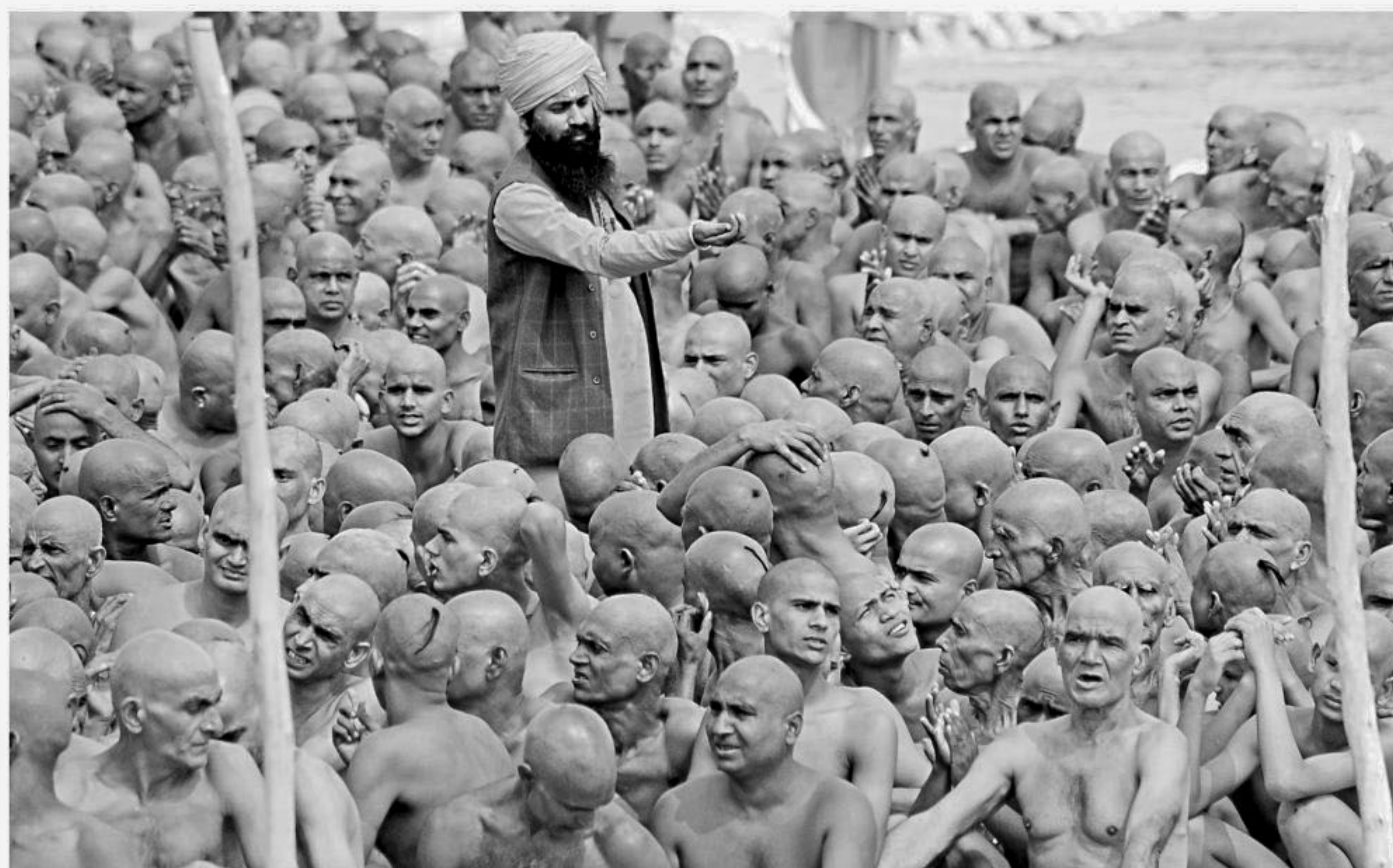
President Barack Obama plans to soon make his first trip to Israel as US leader to confer on the Iranian nuclear showdown and to soothe his delicate relationship with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The White House said Tuesday that Obama also plans to stop to talk to Palestinian leaders in the West Bank and to travel to Jordan on his trip, which will bring him close to the turmoil threatening to tear Syria apart.

Israeli media reported that Obama would begin his visit to Israel on March 20.

It will also come as the United States mulls whether to make a new effort to revive stalled peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, though political conditions on neither side seem conducive to dramatic progress.

Obama has a fractious relationship with Netanyahu, and there has been open disagreement between the two men on the imminence of the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program, and Israeli settlement building and talks with Palestinians.



Newly initiated 'naga sadhus' prepare to perform rituals on the banks of the Ganga River during the Maha Kumbh festival in Allahabad yesterday. During every Kumbh Mela, the diksha - ritual of initiation by a guru - program for new members takes place.

PHOTO: AFP

Shoes thrown at Ahmadinejad

BBC ONLINE

Security guards on Tuesday seized a man who tried to hit Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad with a shoe as he visited a mosque in the Egyptian capital Cairo. The incident occurred as Ahmadinejad was leaving Cairo's al-Hussein mosque.

Video released by Turkish news agency Anadolu shows a man straining forward in the crowd with a shoe in his hand, striking out several times. He called the Iranian president a coward.

It is not clear what the motive was - some reports suggested it was against Iran's support for Syria's government.

Ahmadinejad is the first Iran leader to visit Egypt since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Showing the sole of a shoe is a grave insult in the Arab world.



DEADLY ANTI-ISRAELI BLAST Bulgaria blames Hezbollah

AFP, Sofia

Bulgaria has blamed Hezbollah for a July 2012 bomb attack that killed five Israeli tourists, leading to renewed calls on the EU to declare the Lebanese movement a "terrorist" organisation.

"What we can make as a justified conclusion is that the two persons whose identity we have established belonged to the military wing of Hezbollah," Interior Minister Tsvetan Tsvetanov told reporters on Tuesday.

He said they "had Canadian and Australian passports but have resided in Lebanon since 2006 and 2010."

The investigation made the conclusions on the basis of three fake drivers' licenses -- made in Lebanon -- from the US state of Michigan used by the bomber and suspected accomplices between

their entry into EU member Bulgaria on June 28 and the July 18 attack.

Five Israeli tourists and their Bulgarian driver were killed in the bus bombing at Bulgaria's Black Sea Burgas airport in the deadliest attack on Israelis abroad since 2004.

Some 30 Israelis were also wounded in the attack, in which the bomber also perished.

Israel immediately blamed Iran and its "terrorist proxy" Hezbollah for the bombing. Tehran denied any involvement.

Israel and the United States have long pressed Brussels to blacklist Hezbollah, and on Tuesday both reiterated their stance, as did Canada.

Just after the bombing the EU rejected calls to change its designation of Hezbollah because of a lack of consensus among its 27 members.

Huge quake triggers Pacific tsunami, kills 5

AFP, Honiara

A major 8.0 magnitude earthquake yesterday jolted the Solomon Islands with small tsunami waves buffeting Pacific coasts, leaving at least five people dead and dozens of homes damaged or destroyed.

A quake-generated wave of just under one metre (three feet) reached parts of the Solomons, and Vanuatu and New Caledonia also reported rising sea levels, before a region-wide tsunami alert was lifted.

Sirens were heard in Fiji, locals said. "Chaos in the streets of Suva as everyone tries to avoid the tsunami!" tweeted Ratu Nemani Tebana from the Fiji capital.

The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center cancelled its regional alert for Pacific-island nations at 0350 GMT, about two and a half hours after the powerful quake struck at 0112 GMT near the Santa Cruz Islands in the Solomons.

The US Geological Survey said the quake struck the Santa Cruz Islands, which have been rocked by a series of strong tremors over the past week, at a depth of 28.7 kilometres (18 miles).

About 20 aftershocks were recorded, including one at 6.6-magnitude.

Drone strikes legal, ethical Says White House; justifies killing US citizens

AFP, Washington

The White House has defended drone strikes against al-Qaeda suspects as legal, ethical and wise and insisted they complied with US law and the Constitution, even if they targeted Americans.

The White House defended President Barack Obama's power to wage drone war after a Justice Department memo argued that Americans high up in al-Qaeda could be lawfully killed, even if intelligence fails to show them plotting an attack.

The disclosure by NBC news, which posted a link to the white paper on its web page, came as US drone attacks in Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere face increasing scrutiny and questions from human rights groups.

"We conduct those strikes because they are necessary to mitigate ongoing actual threats, to stop plots, to prevent future attacks and, again, save American lives," said White House spokesman Jay Carney.

"These strikes are legal, they are ethical, and they are wise."

Among the most controversial of the attacks were the September 2011 killings in Yemen of Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan, which stoked concern because the two were US citizens who had never been charged with a crime.

The 16-page memo is entitled "Lawfulness of a Lethal Operation Directed Against a US Citizen Who Is a Senior Operational Leader of al-Qaeda or an Associated Force."

The white paper offers a more expansive definition of self-defense and imminent attack than those given publicly in the past by senior US officials, who have cited "the inherent right to self-defense" in defending the attacks.

Its leak comes just two days before White House counter-terrorism chief John Brennan goes before the Senate for hearings on his nomination to be head of the CIA. Brennan has been a central player in the US drone campaign.



CIA operating drone base in Saudi Arabia

BBC ONLINE

The US Central Intelligence Agency has been operating a secret airbase for unmanned drones in Saudi Arabia for the past two years, US media reported on Tuesday.

The facility was established to hunt for members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which is based in Yemen.

A drone flown from there was used in September 2011 to kill Anwar al-Awlaki, a US-born cleric who was alleged to be AQAP's external operations chief.

US media have known of its existence since then, but have not reported it. Senior officials had said they were concerned that disclosure would undermine operations against AQAP.

Would be CIA boss opposes harsh interrogation ploys

AP, Washington

John Brennan, now President Barack Obama's nominee to be CIA director, has opposed controversial torture techniques such as waterboarding, former and current US intelligence officials said.

He withdrew his name from consideration in 2008 following a stream of complaints that he was tainted by his CIA service during the administration of President George W Bush, when harsh interrogation techniques like waterboarding came under fire.

Brennan's silence may have cost him his first chance to lead the spy agency. But in his letter withdrawing his nomination, Brennan wrote that he'd been a "strong opponent" of the programme.

The same issue that caused him to withdraw from consideration to be the nation's spy chief is likely to come up again this week as Brennan faces his confirmation hearings in Congress to be director of the CIA.

A senior administration official speaking on Brennan's behalf said Brennan had



John Brennan

"significant concerns and personal objections to many elements of the EIT programme while it was under way. He voiced those objections privately with colleagues at the agency."

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorised to discuss the nomination publicly, said Brennan spoke out after being named to his current job, where he was "in a position of influence over decisions such as how we handle interrogations, and he advised the president to ban such techniques."

Some of the former and current US intelligence officials said he was silent during the Bush administration because it wasn't his place to object to a White House-approved policy that was run by another CIA department. Others said he could have objected to any subject raised at any briefing in keeping with CIA custom.

Waterboarding is a technique in which interrogators typically wrap a cloth over a restrained suspect's face and pour water on the cloth at timed intervals to simulate the sensation of drowning.

US, Egypt back security ties: Pentagon

AFP, Washington

US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta spoke by phone with his Egyptian counterpart on Tuesday to hear an update on the tense political situation in Cairo and the "role" of the army amid recent street demonstrations, a Pentagon spokesman said.

Defence minister and military chief General Abdel Fattah al-Sissi, who has warned the state could collapse in the face of political upheaval, voiced support for maintaining strong security ties with Washington and reassured Panetta that the armed forces remained committed to his country's peace treaty with Israel, spokesman George Little said in a statement.