

NEWS IN brief

Senate nods to Hagel's nomination

AFP, Washington

A divided Senate panel approved Chuck Hagel on Tuesday to be the next US secretary of defense, a key step in a process that could see the controversial nominee confirmed as early as this week.

The Senate Armed Services Committee split along party lines to vote 14 to 11, with one abstention, to approve the former Republican senator whose positions on Iran, Israel and the Iraq war sparked concerns by fellow conservatives.

If approved by the full Senate, Hagel would replace outgoing Pentagon chief Leon

BJP yet to pick its PM candidate

TNN, Raipur

Bharatiya Janata Party president Rajnath Singh yesterday said that his party was yet to take a call on whether to project or not anyone as prime ministerial candidate for the next Lok Sabha elections.

"Party's parliamentary board will take a decision on this at an appropriate time", he said parrying a volley of questions apparently in the wake of opinion among a section of party leaders to project Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi

Roof collapses at Chernobyl plant

AFP, Kiev

A section of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine has collapsed under the weight of snow but there were no injuries or any increase in radiation from the reactor that exploded in 1986, the country's emergency agency said yesterday.

The roof was constructed after the 1986 disaster but is not part of the sarcophagus structure covering the reactor, it said.

However the collapse underlines concerns about the condition of the now defunct nuclear plant over two-and-a-half-decades after the

Zimbabwe sets key election dates

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe will vote on a new constitution in March and hold crunch elections in July, the prime minister said yesterday, setting a timetable that will decide the fate of veteran President Robert Mugabe.

Officials from Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change and Mugabe's ZANU-PF told AFP that the referendum will be held on March 16,

Zimbabweans will be asked to vote for a law that would set presidential term limits and abolish the head of state's immunity for the first time.

Sanctions cost Iran \$40b in 2012: IEA

AFP, Paris

Sanctions by the West on Iran succeeded in slashing Iran's oil export revenue by \$40 billion in 2012, the International Energy Agency said yesterday, as production last month hit a three-decade low point.

The IEA, the oil monitoring and policy arm of the OECD, said Iranian oil output fell to 2.65 million barrels per day in January, down from the 3.7 mbd in late 2011 before the sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic by the US and

Syria death toll nearing 70,000

AFP, United Nations

The death toll from the Syria civil war is nearing 70,000, UN rights chief Navi Pillay said Tuesday as she again condemned the UN Security Council's failure to agree action on the conflict.

Pillay announced only last month that the toll had reached 60,000. "That figure is now probably approaching 70,000," Pillay told a Security Council meeting on protecting civilians in conflict.

"The lack of consensus on Syria and the resulting inaction has been disastrous and civilians on all sides have paid the price," Pillay said, criticizing Security Council divisions on the 23-month-old conflict.

"We will be judged against the tragedy that has unfolded before our eyes. This council, as well of those of us in key positions within the UN, will be rightly asked what we did," she said.



PHOTO: AFP

A Syrian man plays his guitar for a woman in Damascus yesterday. Red roses, tulips, heart-shaped toys and teddy bears cram the stands shops in Damascus, but with war raging few people have indulged in gifts for Valentine's Day.

Eyeing Iran, US urges 'strong' action on North Korea

Vows to work with Russia to reduce nuke arsenals

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State John Kerry yesterday urged "strong, credible" response from world leaders after North Korea's nuclear test to show Iran that they are serious about non-proliferation.

"This is about proliferation and this is also about Iran ... because they're linked. You connect the dots," Kerry said after talks with Jordanian Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh.

"It is important for the world to have credibility with respect to our nonproliferation efforts," he stressed, with world powers poised to resume talks with Tehran in two weeks on its suspect nuclear program.

In his State of the Union address late Tuesday, US President Barack Obama vowed to take "firm action" with US allies against North Korea.

"Just as it is impermissible for North Korea to pursue this kind of reckless effort, so we have said that it is impermissible with respect to Iran," Kerry told journalists. "And what our response is to this, will have an impact on all other proliferation efforts."



John Kerry

China, North Korea's trade and financial lifeline, have signed up to a UN Security Council statement accusing the communist state of standing in "grave violation" of UN resolutions amid global condemnation of Tuesday's blast.

Kerry said the United States would now "put energy" into an effort to draw up tough UN consequences against Pyongyang for setting off the test which he called "reckless and provocative" in defiance of UN resolutions.

Meanwhile, President Barack Obama vowed to work with the Kremlin to reduce both Russia and America's stockpiles of nuclear weapons in his annual State of the Union address.

Obama came to office four years ago promising to make nuclear arms reduction a centerpiece of his foreign and security policy, raising such hopes that the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded him their 2009 peace prize.

But his soaring rhetoric has not been matched by results, with Russia wary of engaging in dialogue, Iran refusing to rein in its nuclear enrichment drive and North Korea defying sanctions to carry out nuclear tests.

Nasheed seeks refuge at Indian high commission

AFP, Male

Former Maldives president Mohamed Nasheed took refuge at the Indian embassy in the capital Male yesterday to avoid arrest, demanding the resignation of his successor and free and fair elections.

Nasheed, 45, issued a statement from the besieged Indian diplomatic mission saying that his current trial for abuse of power when he was in office was a "politically motivated sham".

He sought refuge at the compound as police tried to execute a court warrant and arrest him.

Nasheed said his deputy and successor, current president Mohamed Waheed, could not be expected to hold a free and fair election.

"Waheed should do the right thing and resign from office," Nasheed said. "An interim, caretaker government should be established that can lead the Maldives to genuinely free and fair elections, in which



all candidates are freely able to compete."

Nasheed's spokesman Mariya Didi said he would remain at the diplomatic compound until the crisis was resolved.

The new crisis comes amid more political turbulence in the Indian Ocean holiday destination a year after

Nasheed, a pro-democracy campaigner, was ousted by violent demonstrations and a mutiny by police and security forces.

A local magistrate's court issued an arrest warrant for him on Monday after he failed to appear for a hearing at the weekend. A legal challenge to the arrest order in a higher court failed, his party said.

Nasheed has repeatedly claimed that his trial was a politically motivated attempt to prevent him from leading his Maldivian Democratic Party into polls in September. A conviction would disqualify him.

Nasheed, a famed global warming activist, won the first free elections in the Maldives in 2008.

This parrot speaks three languages

PTI, London



A blue-fronted Amazon parrot is amusing people in UK with his ability to speak multiple languages. Rocket, the multilingual bird who speaks Arabic, Urdu and English, can be heard shouting the greeting 'assalamu alaikum' - peace be upon you - in Arabic to amazed passers-by, the Mirror said.

The bird is just as likely to squawk "Hello, how are you?" as "Arg yahaan" - Urdu for "they're here", another report in Sun said.

The bird was brought to Greater Manchester two years back by a Pakistani who kept parrots back home.

Syria, Mali receive arms from Russia

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday said it was delivering military hardware and light weapons to the governments of Syria and Mali as it expands sales and maintains its footing in some of the world's deadliest conflicts.

The head of the Rosoboronexport arms exporter said Russian deliveries to the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad included air defence systems but not the advanced Iskander missiles sought by Damascus.

"We are continuing to fulfil our obligations on contracts for the delivery of military hardware," Anatoly Isaikin was quoted as saying by the Interfax news agency.

He also rejected reports that Russia was planning to supply advanced MiG29-M fighters to Damascus while confirming it had a deal outstanding for Yak-130 light attack jets.

Isaikin said Syria currently ranked "13th or 14th in terms of volume" on the list of nations receiving Russian arms supplies.

Russia has been repeatedly condemned by Western and Arab nations for keeping ties to the Syrian government despite violence that UN estimates show has claimed more than 70,000 lives.

Its shipment this year of repaired attack helicopters to the regime was disclosed by the media and drew a furious response from former US secretary of state Hillary Clinton.

But some Moscow officials counter that Russia's sales are legitimate because Syria's armed opposition has received both covert and open financial and military support from some Arab world governments.

Russia is the world's second-largest arms exporter after the United States and has its biggest contracts with India and China.

Isaikin put the value of exports last year at \$12.9 billion (9.57 billion euros) with the largest orders going to southern Asian nations.

S Lanka fails to keep war probe pledges: UN

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka has failed to honour promises to investigate serious rights abuses and allegations that thousands of civilians were killed in the final stages of its ethnic war, a UN report says.

The report by human rights experts, which was submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on Monday, found that investigations by local authorities were inconclusive and were not independent or impartial.

"The steps taken to investigate allegations of serious violations of human rights have been inconclusive, and lack the independence and impartiality required to inspire confidence," according to the report seen by AFP yesterday.

The document, compiled by experts who visited Sri Lanka in September, asked the government to establish a "truth seeking mechanism" to address "transitional justice" in a country emerging from nearly four decades of ethnic strife.

UN figures show that up to 100,000 people were killed between 1972 and May 2009, when security forces declared victory over Tamil Tiger separatists who had fought for independence for minority Tamils in the Sinhalese-majority state.

TIBET'S FIGHT FOR FREEDOM 100th self-immolation as monk set himself on fire

AFP, Kathmandu

A Tibetan monk yesterday doused himself in petrol in a Kathmandu restaurant and set himself on fire, marking the 100th self-immolation bid in a wave of protests against Chinese rule since 2009.

Police in the Nepalese capital told AFP that the exile had burned himself in an eatery near Kathmandu's Boudhanath Stupa, one of the world's holiest Buddhist shrines, terrifying tourists who were having breakfast.

The Tibetan government in exile, based in the Indian town of Dharamshala in the foothills of the Himalayas, had previously put the number of burnings since 2009 at 99, with 83 of them leading to the death of the protester.

The gruesome burnings, most of which have occurred in Tibetan-inhabited areas of China, are seen as a sign of desperation in the community over perceived religious persecution in Chinese-ruled Tibet.

Speaking to AFP ahead of the milestone of 100 cases, Tibetan exile prime minister Lobsang Sangay blamed Chinese authorities and called for the international community to take note.

"Because there is no freedom of speech or outlet for any form of protest, unfortunately Tibetans have chosen self-immolations," he said in an interview in Dharamshala.

The first self-immolation occurred in 2009 in the Kirti monastery in China's Sichuan province, with a pause until 2011 when they spread across the Tibetan plateau.

Nepal, home to around 20,000 Tibetans, is under intense pressure from Beijing over the exiles, and has repeatedly said it will not tolerate what it calls "anti-China activities".

"It's a sacrifice for the Tibetan people's struggle for freedom," a Tibetan community activist in Nepal said of yesterday's protest, asking not to be named because of fears over possible reprisals.



Pope urges end to hypocrisy at final mass

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Benedict XVI urged an end to "religious hypocrisy" and "rivalry" in the Catholic Church as he donned his papal mitre for the last time at an emotional mass in St Peter's Basilica yesterday.

Benedict urged the faithful to be sincere in their faith in his final mass as leader of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics before he becomes only the second pontiff to resign voluntarily in the Church's 2,000 years.

He condemned "religious hypocrisy" and called for an end to divisions, saying that "the face of the Church is sometimes marred by sins against the unity of the Church."

The pope also called for an end to "individualism and rivalry".

The Vatican announced that cardinal electors will meet on or in the days after March 15 to choose Benedict's successor. He will no longer be pope from 1900 GMT on February 28.

GRAFT ALLEGATIONS

India may scrap Italy chopper deal

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday threatened to cancel a deal to purchase 12 helicopters from the Italian firm Finmeccanica if an official inquiry proved the contract worth nearly \$750 million was secured through kickbacks.

"If we find any evidence of corruption then we will blacklist the company and even cancel the deal," Defence Minister A K Antony told reporters in New Delhi. "We don't want to jump the gun... (but) we can get our money back at any stage."

India's government announced Tuesday that it had ordered the Central Bureau of Investigation to probe reports of alleged bribery of government officials by Finmeccanica, after the head of the Italian aerospace giant was arrested.

Italian media reports said the company's chairman and chief executive Giuseppe Orsi had been detained as part of an investigation into alleged kickbacks paid to Indian government officials.

Italian prosecutors were reported to suspect that bribes worth around 10 percent of the deal were paid to ensure Finmeccanica's AgustaWestland helicopter unit won the contract.

Under the terms of a deal signed in 2010 and valued at \$748-million, the entire fleet should be delivered by 2014. India has already received three of the 12 helicopters which were meant to be used to transport top politicians.

