

NEWS IN brief

Horsemeat Scam: 3 arrests in Britain

AFP, London

Three men at meat plants in Britain suspected of passing horsemeat off as beef have been arrested Thursday on suspicion of fraud, police said.

Concerns about horsemeat first emerged in mid-January when Irish authorities found traces of horse in beefburgers made by firms in the Ireland and Britain and the UK and sold in supermarket chains including Tesco and Aldi.

The discovery has sparked a European crisis, with supermarkets across the continent with-

Woman marries sister's killer

AFP, Buenos Aires

An Argentine woman tied the knot Thursday with a man convicted of killing her twin sister.

No one from the family of 22-year-old bride Edith Casas attended the Valentine's Day civil ceremony in the town of Pico Truncado.

Afterwards, a group of around 20 people threw rocks and eggs at groom Victor Cingolani, who is serving a 13-year sentence for killing the sister, a fashion model named Johana, in 2010.

Cingolani was out on a day pass to get married and escorted by prison guards and riot police.

BBC announces shake-up after scam

AFP, London

The BBC announced a staff shake-up on Thursday in the wake of the Jimmy Savile scandal, including the replacement of the head of news who was criticised for her handling of the crisis over child sex abuse.

Helen Boaden came under fire in an official report into the broadcaster's response to revelations that Savile, one of the BBC's top television and radio presenters who died in 2011, was a prolific paedophile.

The change was announced by incoming director-general Tony Hall, who was put at the helm of the world's largest public service broadcaster after the resignation of George Entwistle over the Savile scandal.

Thai couple sets new smooch record

AFP, Bangkok

A kiss lasting nearly two-and-a-half days propelled one determined Thai couple to a new record for the world's longest smooch on Valentine's Day, organisers said yesterday.

Hospital security guard Ekkachai Tiranarat, 44, and 33-year-old housewife Laksana locked lips for 58 hours, 35 minutes and 58 seconds, smashing last year's Guinness World Record by more than eight hours.

The romance of the clinch may have been marred by competition rules requiring contestants to remain on their feet throughout, slurp food and liquids through a straw and even go to the toilet while continuing to press their lips together.

Pakistan tests nuke-capable missile

ANI, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday tested a missile that can carry nuclear warheads, the second such test in a week, the military said.

"Pakistan today successfully test-fired the Short Range Surface to Surface Ballistic Missile Hatf II (Abdali), as part of the process of validation of land based ballistic missile systems," an army statement said. Hatf II (Abdali), with a range of 180 km, can carry nuclear as well as conventional warheads with high accuracy.

The president and prime minister of Pakistan have congratulated the scientists and engineers on this outstanding achievement which consolidates Pakistan's deterrence capability both at the

US, UN urge free polls in Maldives

AFP, Washington

The United States and the United Nations called Thursday for free elections in the Maldives, after the Indian Ocean archipelago's former leader took refuge in the Indian embassy.

"We urge all sides to remain calm, reject the use of violence and avoid rhetoric that could increase tensions," State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said in a statement.

The United Nations echoed her comments.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called for all sides to "exercise restraint, renew their commitment to the Constitution and work toward creating conducive conditions for fair, peaceful and inclusive elections," his spokesman Martin Nesirky said in a statement.

Mohamed Nasheed, the low-lying islands' first democratically elected president, fled Wednesday to the Indian embassy to avoid arrest after he failed to appear in court to face abuse of power charges.

Nasheed, who stepped down last year, said that his trial was a politically motivated sham as a conviction would prevent him from participating in polls in September.

Washington called for the election to be "free, fair, credible, transparent and inclusive." On Wednesday, India had also called for free elections, in a message seen as tacitly backing Nasheed.

India to scrap \$750m Italy chopper deal after row

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday said it had taken steps to cancel a \$748 million contract for 12 Italian helicopters amid allegations that the deal was won through kickbacks.

The ministry of defence said in a statement it had "initiated action for cancellation" of the contract for 12 helicopters from AgustaWestland, a unit of Italian aerospace group Finmeccanica, intended for use by top politicians.

The ministry issued a "show-cause" notice to Finmeccanica -- a legal step asking the company to justify why the contract should not be cancelled.

India, which has already put payments to the company on hold, asked the Italian firm to "reply within seven days" if any terms of the contract and an "integrity pact" it signed in 2010 had been violated.

The decision is a severe blow to Finmeccanica, whose chief executive was arrested earlier this week in



Milan as part of a probe by Italian prosecutors.

The purchase came under scrutiny from Italian investigators probing allegations the group had broken the law by paying bribes to foreign officials, leading to the arrest of Finmeccanica's boss Giuseppe Orsi on Tuesday.

Italian prosecutors suspect that kickbacks worth around 10 percent of the deal, or 50 million euros (\$68 million), were paid to Indian officials to ensure AgustaWestland won the contract, press reports say.

Orsi denies any wrongdoing and his lawyer has called the allegations against him "inconsistent" and his

arrest "unjustified".

The latest move by the Indian defence ministry is seen as an attempt by the government to contain the fallout from the corruption scandal ahead of elections in the first half of next year.

The chopper deal was cleared by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, whose Congress-led government has been buffeted by a series of corruption scandals that analysts say could affect the party's electoral chances in 2014 polls.

Defence Minister AK Antony on Tuesday ordered an Indian police investigation.

But his "Mr Clean" image is at stake amid questions over why he delayed investigating the deal as the allegations surfaced nearly a year ago.

President Pranab Mukherjee could also find himself in the firing line as he was defence minister when key parts of the deal -- allegedly influenced by air chief Tyagi to favour AgustaWestland -- were approved.

HEPATITIS E OUTBREAK More than 100 killed in S Sudan: UN

AFP, Geneva

More than 100 people have died in the past six months in a worsening outbreak of hepatitis E among refugees in South Sudan, the UN's refugee agency warned yesterday.

"Hepatitis E is endemic in the region, but among refugees has contaminated 6,017 people and led to 111 deaths since July," UN High Commissioner for Refugees spokesman Adrian Edwards told reporters in Geneva.

Last November, the UNHCR had tallied just 1,050 cases and 26 deaths from the virus among some 180,000 Sudanese refugees living in the Upper Nile and Unity states of the fledgling country.



PHOTO: AFP

South Korean Army 155mm Howitzers fire live rounds during a live fire drill in Cheorwon, 70 km northeast of Seoul yesterday. North Korea can never be made to abandon its nuclear weapons programme, South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak said yesterday, arguing that only regime collapse could remove the threat from Pyongyang.

'Large' asteroid to whiz past Earth

AFP, Boston

Nasa is closely tracking an asteroid large enough to destroy a city that was set to whiz past Earth yesterday in what the US space agency says is the closest flyby ever predicted for such a large object.

The 150-foot wide asteroid -- dubbed 2012 DA 14 -- is expected to pass about 17,200 miles (27,000 kilometers) above the Earth at the time of closest approach, about 2:25 pm EST, Nasa said.

"This distance is well away from Earth and the swarm of low Earth-orbiting satellites, including the International Space Station," it said in a statement on its website.

Still, "the flyby of 2012 DA14 is the closest-ever predicted approach to Earth for an object this large."

The asteroid isn't nearly as large as the 10-kilometer (six-mile) wide object that took out the dinosaurs, but would be large enough to wipe out a large urban area if it were to strike the Earth's surface.

The asteroid will be visible in eastern Europe, Australia and Asia, according to astronomers.

Tunisia PM in last bid to avert crisis

AFP, Tunis

Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali was consulting with a raft of party leaders yesterday as he hammered out a government of technocrats designed to pull Tunisia out of its worst political crisis since the revolution.

Jebali has promised to announce the new government today and says he will resign if it is rejected by the National Constituent Assembly, which is dominated by his own Islamist Ennahda party.

The prime minister announced his intention to form an apolitical government after Tunisia was plunged into political turmoil on February 6 when prominent leftist leader Chokri Belaid was assassinated outside his home in a Tunis suburb.

The plan has been met with resistance by the Ennahda but has won support from a number of secular parties.

The Islamists have joined ranks with President Moncef Marzouki's centre-left Congress for the Republic Party, and two other parties, in proposing that the new cabinet comprise both politicians and independents.

The prime minister is sticking to his guns that the criteria for inclusion in the new cabinet is non-partisanship as well as a firm commitment by future ministers not to run in the next elections.

Bulgaria expels visiting Hamas delegation

AFP, Sofia

Bulgaria yesterday expelled a visiting delegation from the Palestinian group Hamas, the head of the organisation that invited the lawmakers to the EU-member state told AFP.

Bulgarian security service agents "entered the hotel rooms of the three deputies and drove them to the airport," said Mohd Abuasi of the Centre for Middle East Studies.

"The agents explained to them that they had to leave because of strong political pressure on Bulgaria from Israel," he said, adding that they had departed for Istanbul.

The EU, like the US, considers Hamas a terror group.

Prisoner X mystery grips Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

Speculation over the top-secret arrest and suicide of an Australian-Israeli in prison reached fever pitch amid allegations he may have been about to blow the whistle on sensitive Mossad operations.

The mystery surrounding the so-called Prisoner X, identified this week by Australian media as Mossad agent Ben Zygier, has dominated headlines in Israel and Australia despite a media blackout on publishing details about his arrest.

Zygier is believed to have died in December 2010 while in isolation at Ayalon prison in Ramle near Tel Aviv, in a case which Israel went to extreme lengths to cover up.

Late on Wednesday, Israel admitted it had imprisoned a man with dual nationality on security grounds who had committed suicide in jail in 2010, but did not identify him, nor did it confirm reports he worked for its spy agency, Mossad.

But an Israeli lawyer who met Zygier just days before his death confirmed that Mossad agents had been involved in the



case, and said he saw no indication the prisoner was planning to kill himself.

According to the Sydney Morning Herald, Australian intelligence officials believe that Zygier may have been about to reveal information about sensitive Mossad operations, including the use of falsified Australian passports, to either Canberra or to the media when he was arrested.

Just a week earlier, Dubai police had publicly accused Mossad agents of carrying out a January hit on a top Hamas militant, saying they were looking for around a dozen people with Western passports -- four of them Australian.

The move sparked a crisis between Israel and several Western governments, including Canberra.

Shortly afterwards, it emerged that Australia's overseas intelligence agency had been investigating Zygier on suspicion of using his passport to spy for Israel, the paper said, indicating he was one of at least three dual Australian-Israelis being probed.

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