

NEWS IN
brief

Ecuador President Correa re-elected

AFP, Quito

Ecuadorian leader Rafael Correa insisted his revolution is unstoppable as he celebrated victory yesterday in the country's presidential election, with early results giving him a huge 33-point lead over his main rival.

"Nobody is going to stop this revolution. We are making history," said Correa, claiming outright victory in the first round of the vote.

Iran parliament apologises to Khamenei

AFP, Tehran

Iran's parliament has apologised to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei for a heated row during an impeachment session, joining the president, speaker and chief justice in pledging obedience to the supreme leader.

Khamenei at the weekend had rebuked the deputies for their role in the squabbling that broke out in the February 3 impeachment session, during which President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and speaker Ali Larijani got into verbal fight.

S African activist launches party

AFP, JOHANNESBURG

Top former World Bank official and anti-apartheid activist Mamphela Ramphele launched a political party yesterday to challenge the ruling ANC in her highly-anticipated entry into politics.

"Today I announce that I am working with a group of fellow citizens to form a party political platform that will focus on rekindling hope that building the country of our dreams is possible in our lifetime," Ramphele, 65, said in Johannesburg.

Pope begins week-long retreat

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Benedict XVI began a week-long spiritual retreat out of the public eye yesterday ahead of his resignation on February 28, with the field of candidates to succeed him still wide open.

Benedict and some of his top cardinals will devote this week to daily prayers in a frescoed private chapel in the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican during Lent -- a period of penitence in the Christian calendar before Easter.

Egypt court rejects election law

REUTERS, Cairo

Egypt's constitutional court rejected five articles of a draft election law yesterday and sent the text back to the country's temporary legislature for redrafting in a ruling that may delay a parliamentary poll due in April.

"The court has returned the draft parliamentary electoral law to the Shura Council after making five observations on five articles which it found unconstitutional," a court statement said.

Pak Shias demand protection

REUTERS, Quetta

Thousands of Pakistani Shi'ites furious over a sectarian bombing that killed 85 people protested yesterday, demanding that security forces protect them from hardline Sunni groups.

The attack, near a street market in the southwestern city of Quetta on Saturday, highlighted the government's failure to crack down on militancy in nuclear-armed Pakistan just a few months before a general election is due.

CAMERON IN INDIA
Chopper scandal hangs visit

AFP, Mumbai

British Prime Minister David Cameron arrived in India's financial hub Mumbai yesterday on a three-day trade-focused visit clouded by a corruption scandal over British-made helicopters sold to New Delhi.

Cameron's trip comes amid a raging scandal over the procurement of 12 helicopters for use by VIPs in 2010, which were bought for \$748 million from Anglo-Italian firm AgustaWestland.

After an investigation in Italy suggested kickbacks were paid via middlemen to secure the deal, India has taken steps to cancel the contract and has started its own police investigation.

The British prime minister is likely to face further questions about the contract -- the helicopters are being manufactured in south-west Britain -- with the Indian government keen to be seen to be acting tough on a new graft scandal.

"We did ask (Britain) in November and they said that since the Italians are investigating let us await the outcome (of that probe)," Indian foreign ministry spokesman Syed Akbaruddin told AFP.

After business meetings in Mumbai Cameron will fly to New Delhi for face-to-face talks with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Pranab Mukherjee today.

WAR CRIMES IN SYRIA

UN urges international action

Europe split over military support for rebels

AFP, Geneva

Former chief UN prosecutor Carla del Ponte said yesterday that the International Criminal Court should be called in to probe war crimes in Syria and bring the perpetrators to justice.

Issuing a report by a UN commission of inquiry that found war crimes by both government forces and rebels were spiralling amid an increasingly radicalised and sectarian conflict, del Ponte said it was time to act.

"We suggest the International Criminal Court. We can't decide, but we are pressuring the international community to act, because it's time to act," said del Ponte, a member of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry.

"It's time to react. After two years, it's incredible that the Security

Council hasn't made a decision," she told reporters in Geneva as the team prepared to submit a list of perpetrators who should face justice.

The decision to refer the conflict to the ICC lies with the UN Security Council, where there are deep rifts between Western members and Russia, a longstanding ally of Syria's regime, plus China.

The commission is due to submit the list to the UN's human rights office next month, potentially setting the wheels of international justice in motion, but has said it will not make it public.

Del Ponte gained renown for her tough stance as the UN's top prosecutor investigating war crimes in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.

The commission was set up in 2011 at the behest of the UN Human Rights Council.

Meanwhile, Britain, backed by a bare handful of European Union allies, is fighting to lift an EU arms embargo barring the supply of weapons to the Syrian rebel coalition battling President Bashar al-Assad.

Arriving for EU foreign ministers' talks yesterday, British Foreign Secretary William Hague called for changes to the existing arms ban "so that we can provide a broader range of support to the (Syrian) National Coalition."

But Britain has found little support and ministers began yesterday's talks divided with time running out for a decision.

"I don't see any need to amend the embargo, I don't think it would make sense to send more weapons to Syria," said Austria's Michael Spindelegger, echoing counterparts from Cyprus, Sweden and Spain.



Chavez makes surprise return after surgery

AFP, Caracas

President Hugo Chavez returned to Venezuela yesterday after spending more than two months in Cuba for cancer surgery and treatment, announcing his surprise homecoming via Twitter.

"We have arrived again to the Venezuelan motherland," Chavez wrote. "Thank you, God. Thank you, my beloved people. We will continue my treatment here."

From the airport, he was taken to Carlos Avarela Military Hospital in Caracas where he will continue his medical treatment, said his son-in-law and Science and Technology Minister Jorge Arreaza.

Vice President Nicolas Maduro swiftly went on national television to declare that Venezuelans were "absolutely happy" to have the president back and promised an update on the state of his health.

He also called on his countrymen to show solidarity with Chavez "without disturbing his calm".

The 58-year-old Chavez, who has been in power for more than 14 years.



British Prime Minister David Cameron pays his respects at a memorial for police and uniformed personnel who lost their lives in the 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai yesterday. Cameron arrived in India with what he called Britain's biggest ever overseas business delegation for a three-day visit clouded by a corruption scandal.

PHOTO: AFP

BBC journos go on strike over job cuts

AP, London

BBC journalists walked off the job yesterday in a 24-hour strike to protest job cuts at the broadcaster.

Staff mounted picket lines outside of the BBC's studios in central London and around the country. Programs went on, but many shows were canceled, including the flagship morning news radio program "Today."

National Union of Journalists general secretary Michelle Stanistreet said 2,000 jobs are at risk in BBC cost-cutting.

Maldives court seeks arrest of Nasheed

PTI, Male

A Maldivian Court yesterday ordered the police to produce Mohamed Nasheed before it, prompting them to approach the Foreign Ministry to talk to the Indian High Commission where former President is holed up for the sixth day.

"We have received court orders asking us to produce former President Nasheed before it by 4 p.m. on Wednesday," police spokesman Hassan Haneef told PTI.

He said the department, through the Attorney General, has approached the Foreign Ministry asking it to get in touch with the Indian High Commission, where Mr. Nasheed has taken refuge since February 13, 2013 to evade a similar arrest warrant issued by the court in a case concerning the detention of the Chief Judge of the Criminal Court during his Presidency in January 2012.

"We have asked the Foreign Ministry to ask the Indian Mission to arrange and facilitate Nasheed's arrest so that he could be produced before the Court," Mr. Haneef said.



Mohamed Nasheed

China takes over Pak port from Singapore

AFP, Islamabad

China took control yesterday of a strategic Pakistani port on the Arabian Sea, as part of a drive to secure energy and maritime routes that also gives it a potential naval base, sparking Indian concern.

The Pakistani cabinet approved the transfer of Gwadar, currently a commercial failure cut off from the national road network, from Singapore's PSA International to the state-owned China company on January 30.

India unlikely to hand over Afzal's body

PTI, New Delhi

Indian government is likely to turn down the request of family of Afzal Guru, who was hanged and buried in Tihar jail, for handing over his body.

A senior Home Ministry official said a final decision in this regard will be taken soon and the Jammu and Kashmir government will be informed about it.

The State government had forwarded a letter sent by Guru's wife Tabassum to Deputy Commissioner of Baramulla demanding handing over of his body.

The Home Ministry official said Guru was buried inside Tihar Jail complex in line with the prison manual and the government has no plans to hand over the body considering various aspects, including the law and order situation in the State.



Afzal's grave inside Tihar Jail

Israeli soldier posts photo of Palestinian child in sniper rifle

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

An Israeli soldier has sparked outrage by posting a photograph appearing to show the back of a Palestinian boy's head in the crosshairs of his sniper rifle on a social networking site.

The context of the picture, posted on the personal Instagram site of Mor Ostrovski, 20, could not be verified but the aggressive message is clear. The minarets and Arabic architecture of the village captured in the background suggest the boy and the town are Palestinian. Ostrovski is an Israeli soldier in a sniper unit.

The Israeli military said the soldier's commanders were investigating the incident. His actions "are not in accordance with the spirit of the Israel Defence Forces, IDF or its values", a spokesperson said.

Ostrovski, who has closed his Instagram account, told the army he did not take the picture but found it on the internet.

Breaking the Silence, an organisation of veteran Israeli combat soldiers campaigning to raise awareness about life in the West Bank, condemned the image.

"This is what occupation looks like. This is what military control over a civilian population looks like," one member



wrote on the group's Facebook page.

The image has been heavily criticised online. Electronic Intifada, a news site focused on Palestinian issues, described the photograph as "tasteless and dehumanising". The site published several other images from Ostrovski's Instagram page, including snaps of the soldier posing with heavy-duty guns.

The Israeli military has been hit by a series of scandals from uncensored social media sites, and Electronic Intifada has been one of the more rigorous monitors of offensive postings by Israeli soldiers.

Senate my ticket to freedom: Assange

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

The WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has told an Australian news website that his bid to become an Australian senator will serve as a defence against potential criminal prosecution in the United States and Britain.

Assange spoke to the Conversation website at the Ecuadorian embassy in London where he was granted asylum in June to avoid extradition to Sweden on sex crime allegations.

If he were to win a Senate seat at elections on 24 September, Assange told the website, the US department of justice would drop its espionage investigation rather than risk a diplomatic row. The British government would follow suit otherwise "the political costs of the current standoff will be higher still", Assange said.

Assange supporters have enrolled him to vote in the state of Victoria. Electoral enrolment is necessary to be nominated as a candidate.

Nominations for the Senate are likely to close on 22 August and if Assange were elected his six-year term of office would begin on 1 July 2014.

Australians living overseas can enrol to vote and run as a Senate candidate if they left Australia within the past three years and intend to return within six years of their date of departure. Assange said he was last in Australia in June 2010.

Assange said he would register a new political party, the WikiLeaks party, to run Senate candidates in several Australian states. He told the website he was sure the party would attract the minimum 500 fee-paying members required to be registered.



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