

NEWS IN brief

Tunisia cabinet plan fails

Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali was pursuing "another solution" to Tunisia's biggest political crisis since the uprising two years ago yesterday after his plan to form a cabinet of technocrats failed. Jebali, left out on a limbo after his proposals for a non-partisan government were rebuffed by his own ruling Islamist Ennahda party, was to meet President Moncef Marzouki to discuss ways to exit the crisis sparked by the February 6 killing of a leftist politician.

The new formula should emerge "in the

Yemen warplane crash kills 12

A Yemeni air force plane crashed in the capital Sanaa yesterday, killing at least 12 people, security sources said.

State news agency Saba said three women and two children were among those killed when the plane, on a training flight, came down in a western residential district. Eleven people were wounded, security sources said.

A security official said the pilot had ejected from the plane. There was no immediate word on whether he had survived.

SARS-like virus kills 1 in Britain

A person suffering from a SARS-like virus has died in Britain on Sunday, hospital officials said yesterday, becoming the sixth fatality from the illness worldwide.

The victim was one of three people in the same family with the virus, which appeared to have been caught by one of the family members during a recent visit to the Middle East and Pakistan.

A total of 12 cases of the virus have so far been reported to the WHO with five previous fatalities -

EU eases Zimbabwe sanctions

The European Union agreed Monday to lift some of its punishing sanctions against Zimbabwe as a reward for ongoing political reforms, but the move brought a furious response from President Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF party.

Zimbabwe has announced a referendum on a new constitution on March 16, a key reform ahead of an election in July to end a shaky power-sharing government between veteran leader Mugabe and Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai.

Egypt ex-PM faces new graft charges

Egypt's justice ministry yesterday referred former presidential candidate Ahmed Shafiq to the Cairo criminal court on charges of corruption and squandering public funds, judicial sources told AFP.

He is being investigated along with his daughters and 10 other defendants over illegally seizing public land for use by the Pilot Association, which Shafiq headed. Shafiq, the last prime minister to serve under ousted president Hosni Mubarak, is already facing trial in a separate fraud cases.

NEPAL STANDOFF  
Parties agree to form govt to hold polls

TNN, Kathmandu

Nepalese political parties on Monday agreed to have a chief justice Khilaraj Regmi-led interim government to hold general elections by mid June for a constituent assembly.

Ragmi's 11-member cabinet, comprising ex-bureaucrats and civil society members, will oversee day to day running of the government but not make decisions with long-term impact.

Nepali Congress leader Bimalendra Nidhi, who was involved in drafting the agreement, said Regmi will stay away from his judicial responsibilities during his tenure as the prime minister.

The agreement ends the political uncertainty facing the country since the constituent assembly was dissolved last May after it was unable to draft a constitution in the four years of its extended tenure.

There is no provision in the existing interim constitution for fresh elections, but with the agreement among the parties, an amendment would be made to amend it to allow the chief justice to lead the interim government.

Assad confident of winning

Russia steps up evacuation efforts; refugee numbers top 850,000

AFP, Damascus

President Bashar al-Assad said he is confident his troops will win the conflict ravaging Syria as the number of Syrians who have fled their homeland has topped 850,000.

The United Nations also warned that refugee numbers could reach 1.1 million within months in what has become an increasingly radicalised civil war in the nation of almost 21 million.

Most of the refugees have fled to neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq.

Assad's comments, published in Lebanon's pro-Damascus newspaper As-Safir, came as the European Union renewed sanctions against Syria while amending them to enable more "non-lethal" and technical support to help protect civilians.

As-Safir said Assad had met unidentified Lebanese politicians in Damascus and assured them that Syria's future belonged to his camp.

"We are sure we will win, we are reassured by the political and military developments," Assad was quoted as telling them, the Lebanese newspaper said.

"We are convinced that the future

SYRIA CIVIL WAR

is ours... Syria has the willpower to defeat the conspiracy," As-Safir quoted Assad as saying and adding that those "loyal" to his regime "represent the absolute majority of Syrians."

The United Nations says that nearly 70,000 people have been killed in the conflict.

Meanwhile, Dozens of Russians left Syria yesterday on a plane sent by

Moscow as the navy despatched four warships to the Mediterranean reportedly for a possible larger evacuation.

Observers are watching for any hints of Russia planning a full-scale evacuation of its citizens, which would be seen as a tacit admission from Moscow that Assad is doomed in his fight against rebels.

Two emergencies ministry planes carrying humanitarian aid flew from Moscow to the Syrian port city of Latakia on Tuesday and took back any Russians wanting to leave on their return trip.

Ninety-nine Russians and other ex-Soviet citizens, including women and children, took up the offer to fly to Moscow on one of the planes, the emergencies ministry said. It was not clear if the second plane would also carry people on its return.

US EMBASSY ATTACK  
Turkey cracks down on radical group

AFP, Ankara

Turkish police yesterday launched a massive nationwide crackdown against a radical Marxist group which claimed a suicide bomb attack against the US embassy this month, the state-run Anatolia news agency reported.

Police issued arrest warrants for 167 people in 28 cities as part of the operation against the Revolutionary People's Liberation Front (DHKP-C), which is classified as a terrorist organisation by the United States, Anatolia said.

Academics, civil servants, teachers, doctors and university students are reported to have been targeted in the raids, including 33 arrested in the capital Ankara and nearly 50 in Istanbul.

The outlawed DHKP-C, which has waged a string of attacks over the past few decades that have left dozens of people dead, including prominent political and military figures, claimed the February 1 attack on the US embassy in Ankara.

A Turkish guard at the highly-fortified embassy was killed and three other people including a journalist were wounded in the second attack on a US diplomatic mission in five months.



British Prime Minister David Cameron and Indian Bollywood actor Aamir Khan interact with college students at the Janki Devi Memorial College in New Delhi yesterday. Cameron yesterday promised full cooperation with India as a probe into alleged kickbacks in a helicopter deal clouded his India visit.

PHOTO: AFP

Mantel attacks 'plastic' princess

REUTERS, London

One of Britain's most celebrated authors has launched a withering attack on the Duchess of Cambridge, Kate Middleton, branding her a "shop-window mannequin" with a plastic smile whose only role in life is to breed.

In an unusually scathing public attack on a royal, Hilary Mantel said the princess had no personality, a "perfect plastic smile" and appears to have been designed by a committee.

"I saw Kate becoming a jointed doll on which certain rags are hung," Mantel said in a lecture at the British Museum earlier this month in which she spoke about her changing views about the princess.

"She was a shop-window mannequin, with no personality of her own, entirely defined by what she wore. These days she

is a mother-to-be, and draped in another set of threadbare attributions." Mantel, who last year became the first Briton to twice win the coveted Man Booker prize for fiction, referred to the princess's severe morning sickness during the early stage of her pregnancy and said her role was to provide an heir.

In her lecture on February 4, Mantel said the Duchess of Cambridge was "selected for her role ... because she was irreproachable", contrasting her with the "emotional incontinence" of William's late mother, Princess Diana.

"As painfully thin as anyone could wish, without quirks, without oddities, without the risk of the emergence of character. She appears precision-made, machine-made, so different from Diana," Mantel said.

Sri Lanka executed Tamil rebel chief's child

AFP, New Delhi

Photos released to publicise a new documentary on Sri Lanka show that government soldiers executed the 12-year-old son of separatist chief Velupillai Prabhakaran in 2009, its director claimed.

The photos, part of a documentary for Britain's Channel 4, prove the Sri Lankan army's involvement in war crimes including summary execution and torture during the island's 37-year-long civil war, according to director Callum Macrae.

The pictures "tell a chilling story", Macrae wrote in an article published in Indian newspaper The Hindu yesterday.

In one, Balachandran, the youngest son of the slain Tamil Tiger leader, is seen eating a snack while sitting in a green sandbag bunker guarded by a soldier. A

second image shows his bullet-riddled bare-chested body.

The documentary alleges that Balachandran was executed two hours after the first photo was taken.

The images have been scrutinised by digital image analysts, who concluded they came from the same camera, and support video footage of the boy's body uncovered last year, Macrae said.

The Sri Lankan government has maintained that Prabhakaran's family were killed in fighting. The bodies of his wife and daughter have never been found. "No War Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka" will be released in March in Geneva to coincide with a UN Human Rights Council discussion on the country, currently facing censure by the US over its failure to probe war crimes.

Brussels airport heist nets \$50m in diamonds

AFP, Brussels

Machine-gun toting robbers disguised as cops made off with \$50 million worth of diamonds in a spectacular heist on the tarmac at Brussels airport, prosecutors and dealers said yesterday.

Monday night's robbery at Zaventem airport was "one of the biggest" ever, said a spokeswoman for the Antwerp World Diamond Centre (AWDC), the global dealers syndicate.

The raid saw a gang of eight "heavily-armed and hooded" thieves pull up on the runway in two black vehicles with blue police-like markings, Brussels prosecutors' spokeswoman Anja Bijns told a press conference at Zaventem airport.

They opened security barriers and sped towards a Swiss passenger aircraft on the runway where they forced open the cargo hold to reach the rough gems that had already been loaded, she said.

Hitler, Frankenstein to run local Indian polls

AFP, Shillong

Politicians named after Adolf Hitler and Frankenstein are among 345 candidates competing in elections this week in a North East Indian state with a history of bizarre naming conventions.

Hopingsone Lyngdoh, Hilarius Pochen and Hopeful Bamon will also try their luck at nabbing one of the 60 seats up for grabs in the state legislative assembly.

The unusual names chosen in Meghalaya are among the most striking legacies of colonial rule preferring its temperate climate to the searing heat of the rest of India.

Shillong became known as the "Scotland of the East" and a steady stream of foreign missionaries and soldiers saw Christianity flourish and the English language trickle in.

Historians say the once-close ties with England have seen many people name their children using random English words or famous names from the past, often with no knowledge of what they might mean.

SECTARIAN DIVISION IN PAKISTAN

New bid to assuage simmering Shia anger

AFP, Quetta

Pakistani cabinet ministers yesterday opened negotiations with Shia Muslim protesters who are demanding army protection and refusing to bury victims of a bomb attack that killed 89 people in Quetta.

Saturday's attack, the second bomb targeting the Shia Hazara minority in five weeks in the southwestern city, has brought hundreds of protesters onto the streets across the country and shut down parts of Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad.

Shia, who make up around 20 percent of the mostly Sunni Muslim population of 180 million, are facing record numbers of attacks, raising serious questions about security as nuclear-armed Pakistan prepares to hold elections by mid-May.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LJ) has claimed responsibility for the attacks and Shias are furious that authorities have done nothing to prosecute those responsible.

Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf sent ministers to Quetta to negotiate with the protesters and ordered an "immediate launch of a targeted operation" against those responsible, his office said without elaborating.

Local officials in Quetta announced earlier yesterday that security forces had killed four men and arrested seven including an alleged mastermind of Saturday's bombing in an "ongoing" raid on the edge of the city.

Police said another 172 people had been rounded up in the surrounding prov-

ince of Baluchistan in the past two days, including the provincial chief of extremist Sunni outfit Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat, and they were now being questioned.

Pakistani security forces frequently detain people en masse after major bombings but few if any are ever charged. In 2011 a court released on bail the head of LJ, Malik Ishaq, even though he has been implicated in dozens of murders.

The president of the Shia Ulema Council, Sajid Naqvi, warned the protests



could intensify if they were not happy with the meeting with ministers.

"The government must know that if the talks fail the situation in the country will further deteriorate," he told AFP.

Another senior Shia leader, Sikandar Gilani, said the matter could be resolved if the army gave a guarantee they would launch an operation against the extremists.

Quetta is a small town where the military and intelligence agencies have a heavy presence. Rights groups have questioned whether authorities are complicit with extremists or just incompetent.

Killings of govt workers soar in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Insurgent attacks on Afghan government employees soared by 700 percent last year even as the overall 2012 civilian death toll from the war fell for the first time in six years, the UN said Tuesday.

Targeted killings of women in government service by Taliban-led insurgents were "particularly disturbing", the UN mission in Afghanistan said in its annual report on civilian casualties.

A total of 2,754 civilians died in the conflict last year, a 12 percent drop from 2011, taking the toll over the past six years to 14,728, the report said.

"While the overall incidence of civilian casualties decreased in 2012, anti-government elements increasingly targeted civilians throughout the country and carried out attacks without regard for human life," it said.

Civilian casualties among perceived government supporters,

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