

NEWS IN *brief*

**Pope may bring conclave forward**

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Benedict XVI may issue a decree that would bring forward the conclave tasked with electing his successor under a date in mid-March scheduled under the current rules, the Vatican said yesterday.

According to Apostolic Constitution, conclave must begin between 15 and 20 days of vacuum.

The delay is normally for cardinals to have time to travel to Rome following the death of a pope. But in this case many of the cardinals are already in Rome to bid farewell to pontiff.

**Bulgaria govt quits after protests**

AFP, Sofia

Bulgaria's government quit yesterday, Prime Minister Boyko Borisov announced, after days of sometimes violent protests sparked by sharply higher electricity prices expanded into nationwide demonstrations.

The surprise announcement paves the way for elections that had been scheduled for July in the European Union's poorest member to be brought forward.

**After FB, hackers hit Apple**

AFP, San Francisco

Apple said it suffered a cyber attack similar to the one recently carried out against Facebook, but that it repelled the invaders before its data was plundered.

The maker of iPhones, iPads, iPods, and Macintosh computers said on Tuesday it is working with law enforcement officials to hunt down the hackers, who appeared tied to a series

**Strike as Greeks protests austerity**

AFP, Athens

Police in Athens fired tear gas at stone-throwing protesters Wednesday as thousands of Greeks walked off the job to join the debt-ridden country's first general strike this year and oppose austerity measures.

About 15,000 striking workers took part in a demonstration in Athens and 20,000 more joined protests organised by other unions. Successive cuts to salaries and pensions over the past three years have angered Greeks who have frequently taken to the streets to demonstrate their frustration.



A handout picture released by Syria's opposition-run Aleppo Media Centre shows Syrians inspecting destruction following an apparent surface-to-surface missile strike on the northern Syrian city of Aleppo on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

**Four killed in US shooting spree**

AFP, Los Angeles

A gunman killed three people in California on Tuesday, including at least one execution-style, in a series of shootings and carjackings before taking his own life, police said.

At least two other people were injured as the gunman fired randomly on other vehicles on a freeway, before he shot and killed himself near the city of Orange, south of Los Angeles.

The suspect was identified as 20-year-old Ali Syed, who was unemployed, had no criminal record, and was living at home with his parents and taking a class at a local college.

**Syria risks 'mutual destruction'**  
*Warns Russia; Islamists and Kurds end hostilities*

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday urged the warring sides in Syria to halt their almost two-year conflict and start talks, warning that seeking a military settlement risked mutual destruction.

"It's time to end this two-year conflict," Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said after a meeting with Arab League chief Nabil al-Arabi and other top Arab diplomats.

"Neither side can allow itself to bet on a military settlement as this is a path to nowhere, a path to mutual destruction," he said.

Lavrov, who on Monday is due to host Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem for crucial talks, said Moscow was working to encourage dialogue between the rebels and regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

"There are signs of positive tendencies, signs of tendencies for dialogue

both from the side of the government and the opposition," he said.

But he said it was up to the two sides to decide what kind of dialogue might take place and at what level.

The fighting -- which according to the United Nations has claimed 70,000 lives since the conflict began in March 2011 -- has further intensified in the last days as both sides press for the military advantage.

Insurgents fired mortar rounds at one of Assad's palaces in the Syrian capital on Tuesday. The day before, an apparent surface-to-surface missile attack flattened a residential area of Aleppo city, killing at least 31 people, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Moscow, unlike other world powers, still keeps close ties with the regime of Assad and has infuriated the West and some Arab states by refusing to halt military cooperation

with Damascus.

Meanwhile, Islamist rebels and Kurdish militias have ceased hostilities in the northern Syrian city of Ras al-Ain after sealing an accord that will see them fight together against the regime.

Intermittent and sometimes deadly clashes have taken place between the two sides since rebels entered the majority Kurdish city, located on the border with Turkey, several months ago.

On the ground, rebels downed a warplane over Hammuriyeh, shortly after an air strike killed at least 14 people and wounded dozens more in the Damascus province town, a watchdog and activists said.

According to a preliminary toll by the Observatory at least 107 people were killed in violence across Syria yesterday, among them 54 civilians.

CYBER ATTACKS

**China rejects hacking charges**

AFP, Beijing

China's defence ministry yesterday rebuffed a report linking its People's Liberation Army to sophisticated cyberattacks on US firms, saying there was no internationally agreed definition of hacking.

The 74-page analysis by the American Internet security firm Mandiant provided one of the most detailed accounts of large-scale hacking operations that many Western experts have long believed receive official Chinese support.

Security was stepped up at the 12-storey office building in Shanghai identified by Mandiant as the headquarters of the military cyberspying Unit 61398, with officers temporarily detaining journalists in the area.

Defence ministry spokesman Geng Yansheng said in a statement that Mandiant's claims had "no factual basis" and insisted there was no consensus on what qualified as hacking.

"There has been no clear internationally agreed definition for 'cyber attacks'," he said, adding that the report "subjectively deduced" that online activities amounted to cyberspying.

He reiterated previous arguments by Beijing officials that attacks traced to Chinese IP addresses did not necessarily originate in the country.

"It's widely known that using stolen IP addresses to carry out hacking attacks is happening practically every day," he said.

**Tunisia PM quits office deepening crisis**



AFP, Tunis

Tunisia's Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali resigned on Tuesday after failing to form a non-partisan government to end a political crisis exacerbated by the assassination of a senior opposition figure.

Jebali, who had warned of chaos if his plan fell through, made a last-ditch effort to push for "another solution" to the long-running crisis in a meeting with President Moncef Marzouki.

President Moncef Marzouki was holding urgent talks yesterday with political leaders in a bid to steer Tunisia out of a weeks-long crisis.

Marzouki was meeting in the morning with leader of the Islamist ruling Ennahda party, Rached Ghannouchi, and later with Maya Jribi of the opposition Republican party, his office said.

Tunisia was plunged into its worst political crisis since the 2011 Arab Spring revolt that ousted President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali when leftist politician Chokri Belaid was shot dead outside his home in Tunis on February 6.

**North Korea: A nuclear 7-Eleven? Iran nuke unlikely to start ME arms race**

*Experts fear the cash-strapped nation can become a one-stop nuke shop*

AFP, Seoul

Experts differ about the scale and immediacy of the military threat posed by North Korea's latest nuclear test, but there is little disagreement about the alarming proliferation risks it presents.

The most pressing concern is that cash-strapped North Korea will become a one-stop shop, selling nuclear material, technology and even weapons to other countries, terror groups, or states seen as sponsoring terror.

And there is also a fear that the North's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes will prompt others in the region to reconsider their non-nuclear status, causing the entire non-proliferation regime to unravel.

North Korea has clear form as a



secretary of state.

"The prospect that the North will sell highly-enriched uranium, nuclear weapons designs or even nuclear weapons to all comers, is not a happy thought if you live in one of America's cities," Gallucci told a nuclear security forum in Seoul on Tuesday.

A key unanswered question arising from the North's test on February 12 concerns the type of fissile material that was used.

Many experts believe the North detonated a uranium device for the first time.

Highly-enriched uranium is seen as the "preferred currency" of rogue states and terror groups. It is the easiest fissile material from which to make a crude bomb and uranium enrichment technology can be readily transferred and sold.

REUTERS, Riyadh

Fears that an Iranian nuclear weapon might trigger an atomic arms race across the Middle East are overplayed, a US security thinktank said on Tuesday, arguing that countries like Saudi Arabia face big disincentives against getting the bomb.

Western powers believe Iran is trying to develop a nuclear weapon under cover of a civilian atomic electricity programme, a charge Tehran denies.

Sunni Muslim Saudi Arabia, the world's biggest oil exporter, is engaged in a fierce rivalry with Shia power Iran and is seen in Western countries as the most likely Middle Eastern state to seek an atomic weapon if Iran did the same.

In December 2011, former Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki al-Faisal said that if Tehran did gain nuclear weapons capability, Saudi Arabia should consider matching it.

However, a report by the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) says that although there is some risk that Saudi Arabia would seek an atomic bomb, it would more likely rely on its ally, the United States, to protect it.

The report said Egypt did not see Iran's nuclear ambitions as an existential threat and that Turkey already has a nuclear deterrent in the form of its Nato security guarantees.

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