

NEWS IN
brief

Thailand agrees to talk with rebels

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Thailand and one of several rebel groups in the country's Muslim south will open talks in Kuala Lumpur in two weeks to try to end a bloody insurgency, Malaysia's prime minister said yesterday.

Najib Razak disclosed the news after talks with visiting Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, and following a deal signed earlier in the day by Thailand and the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) rebel group to launch a peace process.

Yingluck said Thailand "wished to see a lasting solution in the southern border provinces", where the nine-year revolt by a number of shadowy groups has claimed more than 5,500 lives.

Bulgaria president calls May polls

REUTERS, Sofia

Bulgaria's president yesterday called for a new political culture that would prevent citizens being "robbed" and "lied to" as he named an election date of May 12 to try to stem a surge of popular discontent.

Prime Minister Boiko Borisov quit last week after nationwide protests against high electricity prices - the final straw to many citizens in the European Union's poorest country, who have begun to despair of any improvement in living standards or governance.

While Bulgaria has avoided the debt or deficit problems of many of its peers, maintaining a currency peg to the euro, economic growth is sluggish and unemployment has risen to almost 12 percent.

EU launches probe against China

AFP, Brussels

The European Commission launched an anti-dumping probe yesterday targeting Chinese exports of solar glass following a complaint filed earlier this month by European manufacturers.

The probe, the latest move in a long-running dispute between the EU and China over solar panel technology, could last 15 months, the European Commission said in a statement.

Though solar glass is an essential component of solar panels, the investigation has no direct link with a probe on imports of solar panels launched by the European Commission in September.

"It is a stand-alone investigation concerning a clearly distinct product," statement added.

UK court blocks deportations of Tamils

AFP, London

Dozens of failed Tamil asylum seekers who were due to be sent back to Sri Lanka yesterday can stay in Britain after a court blocked their deportation over fears of torture, their lawyers said.

The High Court in London blocked the deportations at a last-minute hearing on Wednesday pending investigations into claims that the Tamils could face abuse if they were sent back to Sri Lanka.

Solicitor Kulasegaram Geetharthanan said the case involved some 40 Tamils, some of whom had links to the Tamil Tiger rebels who were finally crushed by Sri Lankan government forces in 2009 after more than three decades of civil war.

US pledges direct aid to Syria rebel

Hollande visits Russia to press Putin; Rebels seize historic Aleppo mosque

AFP, Rome

The United States said yesterday it would for the first time provide direct aid to rebel fighters battling Syria's Bashar al-Assad and \$60 million in extra assistance to the country's political opposition.

The assistance aims to bolster Assad's opponents, but hopes the main opposition National Coalition would soon elect a prime minister and government were dashed when it announced that a meeting this weekend had been put off indefinitely.

After talks with European and Arab partners and the opposition in Rome, Secretary of State John Kerry said the US would provide aid to fighters in the form of food and medical assistance.

The move was a significant shift in US policy but fell short of rebel demands for the opposition's Western backers to supply the rebellion with weapons or non-offensive military equipment like vehicles or body armour.

"For more than a year, the United States and our partners have called on Assad to heed the voice of the Syrian people and to halt his war machine," Kerry said. "Instead, what we have seen is his brutality increase."

Kerry said the goal was to give the opposition the means to control areas it has seized from the regime, to prove to Assad he can't "shoot his way out" of the conflict in Syria.

But soon after the announcement, the National Coalition disappointed backers by delaying the Saturday meeting in Istanbul without explanation.

"The conference has been postponed and no new date has been set. I cannot reveal the reasons at this time and I do not exclude its cancellation," National Coalition member Samir Nashar told AFP.



US Secretary of State John Kerry speaks to the Syrian opposition's National Coalition chief Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib during a meeting of the "Friends of the Syrian People (FOSP) Ministerial" group yesterday in Rome.

Violence continued to rage inside Syria meanwhile, with rebels seizing control of the historic Umayyad Mosque in second city Aleppo after days of fierce clashes, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

A car bomb also exploded in a regime-held suburb of Homs city, killing a number of people and wounding others, state news agency SANA said.

The United Nations says at least 70,000 people have died and hundreds of thousands have been uprooted since the conflict broke out in March 2011.

A State Department official said the \$60 mil-

lion (49 million euros) in new aid would be used to help local councils and communities in "liberated" areas, to provide basic goods and services and "fulfill administrative functions including security, sanitation and education services."

The official said the new money was in addition to \$50 million in non-lethal support Washington has already provided to help Syrian opposition activists, including communications equipment.

That aid was provided through Turkey, while the United States has also contributed some \$380 million dollars in humanitarian aid through UN agencies and aid groups.

Asked about congressional approval of the funding, Kerry told journalists he was "very confident for rapid delivery".

Kerry met for about an hour with opposition leader Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib Thursday, before the 11-nation talks at the 16th-century Villa Madama on a hilltop above Rome.

Officials from the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates participated, as well as EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton.

Pressure has been building for talks to end the conflict with Russia, Assad's most powerful supporter, this week calling for both sides to sit down for negotiations.

In Moscow to meet President Vladimir Putin, French leader Francois Hollande said foreign powers had the same goal but acknowledged differences over how to reach it.

"We have the same objective -- to avoid the disintegration of this country and to avoid allowing terrorists to profit from this chaos. We want political dialogue," Hollande said after talks in the Kremlin. "There is the question of the manner of how to get there."



Jack Lew new US Treasury Secretary

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama's former chief of staff Jack Lew was confirmed Wednesday as the next US Treasury secretary, taking over a key portfolio at a time of deadlock over the US budget and debt.

The US Senate voted 71-26 -- with support from 20 Republicans -- to confirm Lew, a former White House budget director and Wall Street executive, providing Obama with a second new cabinet appointment approval in as many days.

The Senate voted Tuesday to confirm Chuck Hagel to head the Pentagon, after a contentious, seven-week process.

While Hagel's confirmation was marked by partisan acrimony and delays, Lew's nomination by contrast sailed through, just one day after the Finance Committee gave its approval.

The president issued a swift thanks to the Senate for its bipartisan action.

"At this critical time for our economy and our country, there is no one more qualified for this position than Jack," Obama said in a statement shortly after the vote.

DELHI GANG-RAPE
Minor charged with murder

AFP, New Delhi

A 17-year-old youth who is being tried in a juvenile court over the fatal gang-rape of a student on a bus in New Delhi was formally charged with murder yesterday, legal sources said.

The teenager, who cannot be named for legal reasons, was accused of playing a key role in the murder, rape and robbery of a 23-year-old medical student last December in the Indian capital.

Five adults are also being tried in a separate fast-track court.

Two sources, speaking on condition of anonymity due to a wideranging gagging order, said the minor was present before the judge when the charges were framed.

"The minor has been charged with rape, murder, criminal conspiracy and unnatural sex by the court and he has pleaded not guilty," one person closely involved in the case told AFP.

A second legal source confirmed that the charges had been put to the teenager on Thursday morning and that he had entered a not guilty plea.

China Nobel winner Mo Yan defies critics

AFP, Beijing

Nobel literature laureate Mo Yan has hit back at critics who accused him of being too close to China's government, saying in a newspaper interview he does not write on behalf of the ruling Communist party.

The writer scooped the Nobel in October for what judges called his "hallucinatory realism" and has won praise from literary critics, but is also fiercely attacked by Chinese dissidents who brand him a Communist stooge.

"I have emphasised repeatedly that I am writing on behalf of the people, not the party," he said in an interview with the German newspaper Der Spiegel, adding: "I detest corrupt officials."

Mo Yan hit out at exiled-Chinese dissident author Liao Yiwu, who called him a "state poet".

"I know (Liao) envies me for this award



Mo Yan

often infused with politics and a dark, cynical sense of humour.

His latest novel, 2009's "Frog", is considered his most daring yet, with a searing depiction of China's "one child" population control policy and the local officials who ruthlessly implement it with forced abortions and sterilisations.

Literary critics have said he has dodged censure by deftly avoiding overt criticism of the current authorities. He is also vice-chairman of the officially endorsed China Writers' Association.

and I understand this. But his criticism is unjustified," he said. "My political views are quite clear. One only has to read my books."

In a style influenced by the magical realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mo Yan's works deal with some of the darkest periods of China's recent history, and are

Berlusconi in new corruption probe

AFP, Rome

Italy's former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi is under investigation for corruption again over allegations that he bribed a leftist senator in 2006, Italian media reported yesterday.

"Silvio Berlusconi is under investigation in Naples for corruption in a scandal over the 'purchase' of senators," leftist daily La Repubblica said on its website.

"Prosecutors believe he paid senator De Gregorio three million euros (\$3.9 million)," it said.

The case goes back to parliamentary elections in 2006 which were won by a centre-left coalition by just a handful of votes.

A few months after the elections, a senator from the winning coalition, Sergio De Gregorio, crossed the aisle and joined the Berlusconi opposition in a move that helped bring down the government in 2008.

The subsequent elections were won handily by Berlusconi.

The investigation is being handled by prosecutors in Naples since that was De Gregorio's seat.

The Corriere della Sera daily said five prosecutors including anti-mafia investigators were in charge of the probe.



Silvio Berlusconi

Benedict vows obedience to next pope

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Benedict XVI yesterday vowed "unconditional obedience" to his successor on his historic final day as leader of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics, when he will become the first pontiff to resign since the Middle Ages.

"Among you there is also the future pope to whom I promise my unconditional obedience and reverence," the pope said as he bade farewell to cardinals in the Vatican's ornate Clementine Hall.

"Let the Lord reveal the one he has chosen," said the 85-year-old pope, wearing an ermine-lined red stole over his white cassock.

"We have experienced, with faith, beautiful moments of radiant light together, as well as times with a few clouds in the sky," Benedict said, reprising a theme from his adieu to some 150,000 pilgrims in St Peter's Square on Wednesday.

The cardinals with their black cassocks and red sashes then took turns bidding farewell to the pontiff, kissing his gold papal signet ring according to time-honoured tradition.

Many doffed their berettas in a sign of deference. Just hours remained before Benedict will make history as only the second pope to resign of his own free will in the Church's 2,000-year history.

The German pope stunned the globe when he announced on February 11 his surprise decision to step down, saying he no longer had the "strength of mind and body" to carry on in a fast-changing world.

"I took this step in full awareness of its gravity and novelty but with profound serenity," the pope said Wednesday.

The theologian pope -- a shy academic who struggled with Vatican infighting and a raft of toxic sex abuse scandals -- said his eight-year pontificate had seen "sunny days" and "stormy waters", but he added: "I never felt alone".



Pope Benedict

US hackers attack China military websites

AFP, Beijing

Hackers mainly based in the United States attacked two Chinese military websites, including the Defence Ministry page, an average of 144,000 times a month last year, the ministry said yesterday.

China's first account of attacks on its websites steps up a war of words between the powers, after a US security company said last week that a Chinese military unit was behind a series of hacking attacks on US firms.

"The Defense Ministry and China Military Online websites were hacked from overseas on average 144,000 times a month in 2012," ministry spokesman Geng Yansheng said on its website.

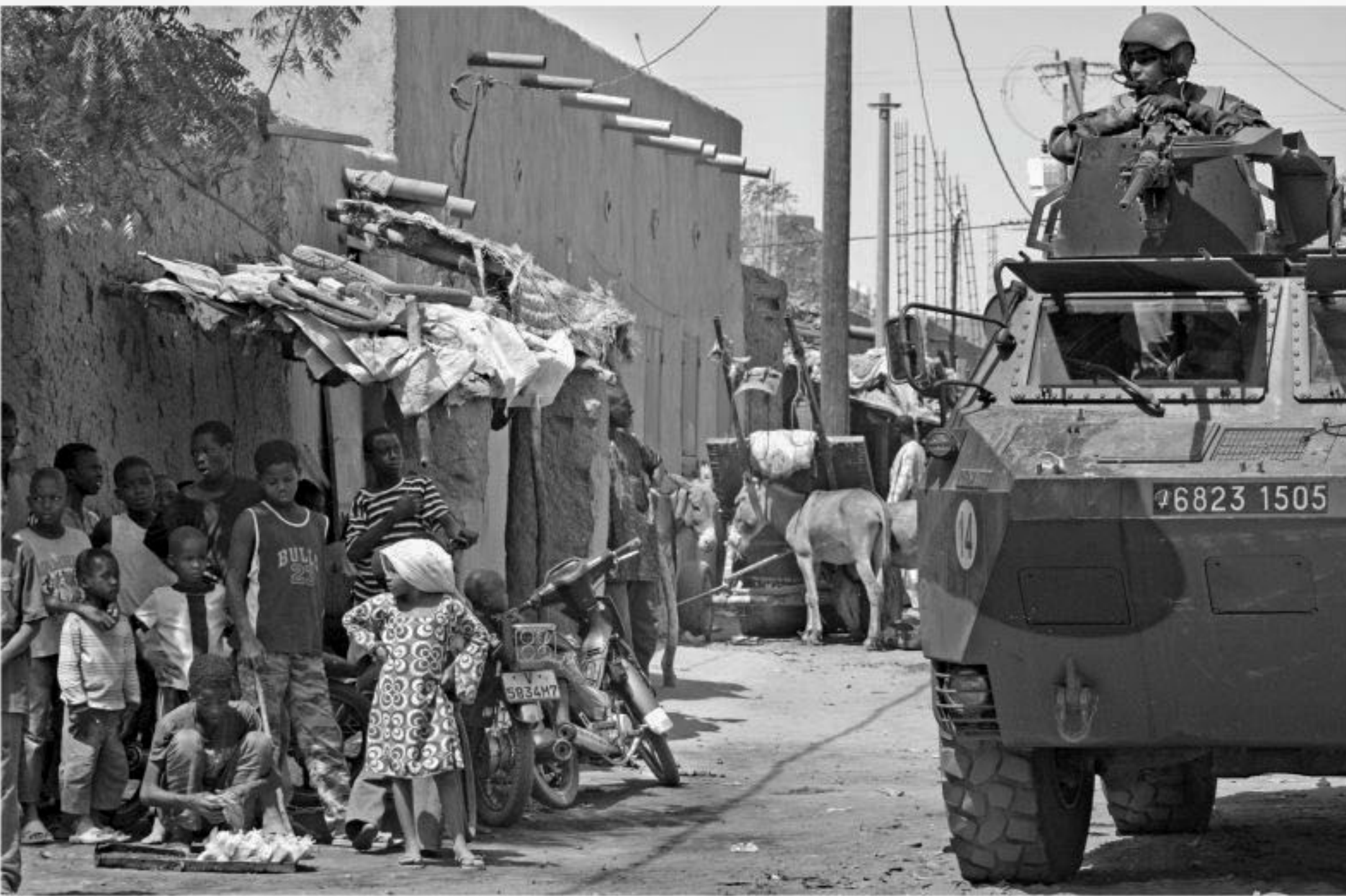
China Military Online is a People's Liberation Army news website.

More than 62 percent of the attacks came from the United States, he said, adding that the number of hacking assaults on military websites "has risen steadily in recent years."

He did not specify any entities from which the alleged attacks originated.

French soldiers patrol a street yesterday in the northern Mali's largest city Gao. France, which is battling militants in Mali, will not formally propose setting up a UN peacekeeping force to take over until at least April, the French UN ambassador said Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP



Fukushima raises cancer risk

AFP, Geneva

Japan's 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster has raised the risk of thyroid cancer for people living near the plant, but no jump in cases is expected elsewhere, the WHO said yesterday.

The World Health Organisation said in a report that within a 20-kilometre radius of the plant, rates of thyroid cancer among women exposed to radiation as infants were expected to be up to 1.25 percent.

The normally expected risk of thyroid cancer over a woman's lifetime in the region is 0.75 percent, the UN health agency noted in a 166-page report.

Radioactive iodine released in nuclear accidents tends to accumulate in thyroid



glands.

In the 1986 Chernobyl disaster in what was then Soviet Ukraine, a noticeable increase in thyroid cancer cases was detected among children in the affected area.

The risk of breast cancer among women exposed as infants, and of leukaemia among men exposed as infants, also looked set to rise, albeit to a lesser extent, the WHO said.

"The primary concern identified in this report is related to specific cancer risks linked to particular locations and demographic factors," says Maria Neira, the WHO's director of public health and environment.

Boss orders staff to do daughter's homework

AFP, Shanghai

A Chinese boss ordered nine employees to do his 12-year-old daughter's homework, a report said, as office tyranny meshed with a parent's desire to see his child score well in the competitive school system.

"The leader said, 'Do some homework, it will be like practising'," one of the suffering subordinates told the Qianjiang Evening News.

The boss in the eastern city of Jinhua, whose name and organisation were not given, regularly asked workers to do maths problems and build small models, typically requiring two people to work overtime to finish the assignments.

But over the Chinese New Year holiday, an assignment to show changes in one's home town required nine people to paint pictures, take photos, produce a video and write an essay.