

NEWS IN

brief

Guatemala recognizes Palestine state

AFP, Guatemala City

Guatemala has recognized Palestine as a sovereign state in the belief that this will help foster peace in the Middle East, the president's office announced Tuesday.

Guatemala "has decided to join the vast majority of Latin American and Caribbean countries and recognize the State of Palestine, as a free, sovereign and independent State," the statement said.

"This decision in no way alters Guatemala's long tradition of friendship and cooperation with the State of Israel, a relationship the Guatemalan Government highly values," the statement added.

Malaysia election set for May 5

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia yesterday announced a general election for May 5, setting a long-awaited date for polls tipped to be the closest ever as the long-ruling government tries to hold off a surging opposition.

Speaking a week after Prime Minister Najib Razak dissolved parliament, Election Commission chairman Aziz Yusof said the two-week official campaign period would begin on April 20.

The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which has ruled Malaysia through coalition governments since independence in 1957, faces a formidable opposition that promises to end corruption, cronyism and authoritarian rule.

Anti-Thatcher song tops UK charts

AFP, London

"Ding Dong! The witch is dead", as sung by Judy Garland in The Wizard of Oz, on Tuesday raced to the top of the Amazon download chart in Britain, a day after the death of former prime minister Margaret Thatcher.

Another version sung by jazz legend Ella Fitzgerald placed at number 4 and also topped the iTunes UK vocal chart as record-buyers passed their judgement on the legacy of Thatcher, who died of a stroke on Monday aged 87.

China ex-minister charged with graft

AFP, Beijing

Prosecutors charged China's former railways minister Liu Zhijun, who was appointed in 2003 and sacked in 2011, with bribery and abuse of power yesterday, state media said, after scandals involving hundreds of millions of yuan.

The official Xinhua news agency said the charges were filed at the Beijing No. 2 Intermediate People's Court, which has "ac-

Test-tube baby pioneer dies

AFP, London

British scientist Robert Edwards, who was awarded a Nobel prize for his pioneering work in developing in vitro fertilisation (IVF), died yesterday aged 87, his university announced.

Edwards spent his career making the dream of having a baby come true for millions of people worldwide, running into conflict with the Catholic Church and fellow scientists on his way.

He was awarded the Nobel prize for medicine in 2010, three decades after the birth of the world's first test-tube baby, Louise Brown, in 1978, and five decades after he first began experimenting.

China targets bird flu rumours

AFP, Shanghai

China has detained at least a dozen people for spreading false rumours about bird flu, police statements showed yesterday, with authorities seeking to control "panic" as the number of cases rose to 33.

There have been nine deaths since China announced over a week ago that the H7N9 strain of avian influenza had been found in humans for the first time.

The latest such announcement came yesterday from the southwest city of Guiyang where three people have been detained, for up to 10 days.

Churchill's poem to be auctioned

BBC ONLINE

The only poem known to have been written by Winston Churchill as an adult is expected to fetch up to £15,000 when it is auctioned at Bonhams in London later.

The 40-line work, Our Modern Watchwords, is thought to have been written in 1899 or 1900 when he served abroad in the army, in his mid-20s. It has been described as "heavy-footed" by ex-poet laureate Andrew Motion. As a boy, the former British PM won a poetry prize at Harrow School.

The poem, written on Army notepaper in blue crayon, consists of four 10-line stanzas, each ending with the name of a distant outpost of the British empire.

The poem, which was discovered by retired manuscript dealer Roy Davids, begins with the lines: "The shadow falls along the shore, the search lights twinkle on the sea, the silence of a mighty fleet, portends the tumult yet to be".

Sir Winston joined the 4th Hussars in 1895 when he went to Cuba before transferring to India, in 1896. He served in the Boer War from 1899 to 1900.



A Syrian man walks amid destruction in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo yesterday. The United States is mulling ways to step up support for the Syrian opposition, a top US official said yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

'Execution-free world getting closer'

AFP, London

The use of the death penalty is broadly diminishing around the world although a handful of countries that had not used capital punishment for several years resumed executions in 2012, Amnesty International said yesterday.

India, Japan, Pakistan and Gambia, all countries which had not put people to death for some time, resumed executions last year, the rights group said in its annual survey of the death penalty.

London-based Amnesty said at least 129 people were executed in Iraq last year, almost double the 2011 figure of 68. India carried out its first execution since 2004 when Ajmal Kasab, one of the gunmen involved in the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, was hanged in November.

A total of 21 countries were recorded as carrying out executions in 2012 - the same number as in 2011, but a sharp drop from 28 countries in 2003.

In 2012, at least 682 executions were known to have been carried out worldwide, two more than in 2011. At least 1,722 newly imposed death sentences in 58 countries could be confirmed, compared to 1,923 in 63 countries the year before.

China led the top five of countries using the death penalty, followed by Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the United States, with Yemen close behind.

Methods of executions in 2012 included hanging, beheading, firing squad and lethal injection.



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Tension high as N Korea prepares for missile test

S Korea, US on high alert; Russia condemns warmongering in Korean Peninsula

AFP, Seoul

South Korean and US forces raised their alert status to "vital threat" yesterday before an expected North Korean missile test, with tensions high in the run-up to a key anniversary.

The North last week told foreign diplomats in Pyongyang they had until April 10 to consider evacuation, fuelling speculation of a launch between Wednesday and April 15 birthday celebrations for late founder Kim Il-Sung.

Any launch could coincide with visits by US Secretary of State John Kerry and Nato chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who will both be in Seoul tomorrow.

South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-Se told parliament the launch could take place "any time" and warned Pyongyang it risked triggering a fresh round of UN sanctions.

Meanwhile, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned against heating up

the crisis and stressed Moscow and Washington had a common stance.

South Korean intelligence says the North has prepared two mid-range missiles for imminent launch from its east coast, despite warnings from ally China to avoid provocative moves at a time of soaring military tensions.

On Tuesday the North reiterated a warning that the peninsula was headed for "thermo-nuclear" war and advised foreigners to consider leaving South Korea.

The South Korea-US Combined Forces Command raised its "Watchcon" status from 3 to 2 to reflect indications of a "vital threat", Yonhap news agency said, citing a senior military official.

In a separate report, Yonhap quoted a government source as saying Pyongyang might be preparing "multiple" launches, after other launch vehicles were reportedly detected carrying shorter-range SCUD and Rodong missiles.



Thatcher made 'racist' comments Says Aussie FM

AFP, Sydney

Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr says late British leader Margaret Thatcher made "unabashedly racist" comments, recalling what she allegedly said to him about Asian immigration after she left office.

Carr said the conservative "Iron Lady", who died in London on Monday, had told him Australia could end up like Fiji "where the Indian migrants have taken over".

Carr said: "I couldn't believe it. It reminded me that despite, yes, her greatness on those big questions, the role of the state, the evil nature of the communist totalitarianism, there was an old-fashioned quality to her that was entirely out of touch and probably explained why her party removed her in the early 90s."

Carr's opposite number in Australia, Julie Bishop, called his comments graceless and demanded he immediately apologise.

Thatcher, Britain's first female prime minister and its longest serving premier of the 20th century, was a divisive figure, with critics saying she destroyed millions of lives with her free-market economic policies.



Jaroslaw Kaczynski, leader of Law and Justice party and twin brother of late Polish president Lech Kaczynski attends a ceremony marking the third anniversary of the presidential plane crash in front of the presidential palace in Warsaw yesterday. Lech Kaczynski died in a jet crash in Russia three years ago that one third of Poles believe was an assassination.

PHOTO: AFP

America's secret Cold War weapons

MAIL ONLINE

Music icons Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell and James Taylor could have helped rock the foundations of Communism, according to a Cold War US government memo.

The artists were named in a US government dream list of stars who could have won over public opinion by going on tour in the Soviet Union.

Walter Stoessel Jr, a former US Ambassador to Moscow, wrote that Soviets had little appetite for American soul music.

But in his January 1975 diplomatic note to Washington, he suggested 'soft rock' like 'American Pie' by Don McLean or 'Free Man in Paris' by singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell could be a big hit with the oppressed.

He added that 'priority' should also be given to 'blues/rock' or 'country rock'.

The cable, one of a new batch of 1.7 million US diplomatic communications from the years 1973 to 1976 released by the whistleblower Wikileaks website on Monday, suggests bigger stars should be

approached rather than 'lesser-known more derivative artists.'

As well as Dylan, Mitchell and Taylor, the ambassador's wish list included seventies rockers Lynyrd Skynyrd, Poco and The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band.

None of the artists ended up playing behind the Iron Curtain at the



Bob Dylan

Joni Mitchell

time and it's unclear whether any were asked.

Dylan's only public appearance in the USSR was at a poetry concert in Moscow in 1985, but neither he nor Joni Mitchell of Don McLean ever toured there.

The first major western artist to play concerts in the Soviet Union was

Elton John in May 1979.

Eight years later, James Taylor, accompanied by Santana, Bonnie Raitt and the Doobie Brothers - all artists fitting the US ambassador's criteria - headlined the joint Soviet-American 'Summit' concert in Moscow to herald the dawning of glasnost.

Later that same year, Billy Joel would perform three sold-out shows in Moscow and three more in Leningrad that were hyped as 'the first time an American pop music star had brought a fully staged rock show to the Soviet Union.'

Although from a different musical genre, Duke Ellington and his band also visited the USSR in 1971 on a tour backed by the US State Department.

Cold War paranoia over pop music was so intense that youngsters from East Germany were not even allowed to congregate near the Berlin Wall when Michael Jackson played an 1988 concert in front of the Brandenburg Gate on the western side of the city's divide for fear they would rebel.

Syria rebels pledge allegiance to Qaeda

AFP, Damascus

The head of Syria's jihadist Al-Nusra Front pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri yesterday, but distanced his group from claims it had merged with al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The announcement is likely to bolster assertions by President Bashar al-Assad's regime that it is fighting "terrorists" who want to impose an Islamic state, and could further complicate Western attempts to help rebel forces.

The group is among the most prominent organisations involved in Syria's conflict, which erupted in March 2011 with peaceful protests against Assad's regime but has evolved into a war that has killed tens of thousands.

The West has been wary, and the announcements this week are likely to complicate any attempt to arm the rebels.

On Wednesday, rebels are meeting US Secretary of State John Kerry and G8 foreign ministers in London to push for weapons shipments.

The US and EU are now providing non-lethal aid to the rebels, but Britain and France want an EU arms embargo on Syria lifted so they can supply the rebels with weapons.

Many countries have refused to arm the opposition fearing the weapons could get into the hands of al-Qaeda-linked militants.

US student stabs 14 in Texas attack

Preschooler shoots friend in head

AFP, Washington

A US college student stabbed 14 people, leaving two victims critically wounded, in a rampage on Tuesday that ended when he was wrestled to the ground and taken into custody, police said.

Television images showed a red-headed white youth with a goatee being led off in handcuffs after the incident at the sprawling Lone Star College's Cyfair campus, about 60 miles north of Houston.

Authorities said 14 people were stabbed in the attack, which appeared to have occurred in and around the college's Health Science Center around 11:00am local time.

Four of the wounded were airlifted by helicopter to area hospitals, and two were reported in critical condition.

Meanwhile, a four-year-old boy in New Jersey shot and wounded a six-year-old friend in the head Tuesday, police said, the second such accident involving children in a day.

Police in the town of Toms River said the young boy took a .22 caliber rifle and shot his friend at a distance of about 14 meters. It was unclear why the weapon discharged.

The victim was in hospital in "serious" condition. Meanwhile in Tennessee, another four-year-old pulled the trigger of a loaded handgun and killed the wife of the local sheriff's deputy, the owner of the gun.