

China bus blaze kills 47; probe launched

AFP, Beijing

Chinese police yesterday launched a criminal investigation into a horrific bus blaze that claimed the lives of 47 people, and identified a suspect in connection with the inferno. Authorities announced that the fire, which engulfed the bus in minutes during evening rush hour in the southeastern city of Xiamen, was being treated as a "criminal case".

US renews military aid for Egypt

AFP, Washington

Secretary of State John Kerry last month approved \$1.3 billion in annual US military aid to Egypt, despite concerns over democratic progress by the country's new government, a US official said Friday. The move came well before Tuesday's sentencing by a Cairo court that handed down jail terms and fines on 43 Egyptian and foreign NGO workers in what Kerry has denounced as a "politically-motivated trial."

Actress arrested in US ricin case

AFP, Washington

A Texas actress was arrested Friday for mailing ricin-laced letters to President Barack Obama, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and a gun control activist, officials said. She faces up to 10 years in federal prison if convicted.

White House chief of staff tours Gitmo

AFP, Washington

White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough toured Guantanamo Bay on Friday with two top senators to follow up on President Barack Obama's renewed vow to close the war on terror facility. The visit to the prison -- where most of the 166 remaining detainees are on a hunger strike -- was the first by an administration official since one by Attorney General Eric Holder in 2009.

Singapore protests new web rules

AFP, Singapore

Around 1,500 Singaporeans led by local bloggers attended a rally yesterday to protest new government licensing rules for news websites that they say curtail freedom of expression. Under the rules, websites with at least 50,000 unique visitors from Singapore every month that publish at least one local news article per week over a period of two months must obtain an annual licence.

US shooting spree kills 5

AFP, Los Angeles

A black-clad gunman killed at least four people in a shooting rampage in the US state of California Friday, before police shot him dead in a college library, officials said. The assailant began by killing his father and brother before a random string of slayings in Santa Monica, only a few miles from an event attended by President Barack Obama. One witness described how the gunman, a white male aged 25 to 30 carrying an ammunition belt and a semi-automatic rifle, shot a motorist at point-blank range before hijacking another vehicle. Police revised the death toll late Friday, telling journalists that five included the gunman were killed, down from earlier reports of seven.



US President Barack Obama shakes hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping before their bilateral meeting at the Annenberg Retreat at Sunnylands in Rancho Mirage, California, on Friday. Ditching the crushing formality of US-China summits, Xi and Obama met in Rancho Mirage, California, a playground of past presidents and the powerful. (Story on page 20.)

PHOTO: AFP

UN okays \$200m food aid to N Korea

AFP, Seoul

The UN food body yesterday said it had approved \$200 million of food aid for North Korea, targeting the country's most vulnerable people who remain dependent on external assistance. The news came as South Korea said the North had agreed to hold working-level talks in the border truce village of Panmunjom this weekend following months of soaring tensions -- the first such dialogue in more than two years. The World Food Programme (WFP) executive board has this week approved a new two-year operation for North Korea starting on July 1, WFP spokesman Marcus Prior said. "It will target about 2.4 million people - almost all children, and pregnant and nursing women - with about 207,000 metric tons of food assistance at a cost of US\$200 million," he said in an email to AFP.

Nearly 28 percent of children under five in the North suffer from chronic malnutrition and four percent are acutely malnourished, according to a UN national nutrition survey last year. North Korea suffered regular chronic food shortages under the Kim dynasty, with the situation exacerbated by floods, droughts and mismanagement. During a famine in the mid to late-1990s, hundreds of thousands died. International food aid, especially that from South Korea and the United States, has been drastically cut over the past several years amid tensions over the communist state's nuclear and missile programmes.

No one listening to your calls

Obama defends surveillance dragnet

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama has defended US spy agency programs which trawl phone and Internet data as a "modest encroachment" on privacy needed to keep Americans safe from terrorism. "Nobody is listening to your telephone calls," Obama said, seeking to quell public disquiet after two days of explosive revelations hinting at the scope of a vast and classified government data mining operation. Obama, in San Jose, California, hit out at what he said was "hype" over reports the National Security Agency (NSA) logs details of millions of domestic calls, for possible later use in anti-terror operations. He also defended a program called PRISM, in which NSA and FBI agents are tapping into the servers of nine US Internet giants, including Facebook, Google, YouTube, Apple and others, as they try to subvert terror plots originating abroad. "This does not apply to US citizens. And it does not apply to people living in the United States," Obama said. Civil liberties and privacy groups have raised alarm at the two programs, reported by the Guardian and Washington Post newspapers, warning they are "Orwellian" and could be unconstitutional. Obama said he welcomed the debate, but warned the programs had previously been kept under wraps to avoid tipping off

America's enemies and said they made only "modest encroachments" on privacy. "I think it's important to recognize that you can't have 100 percent security and also then have 100 percent privacy and zero inconvenience. We're going to have to make some choices as a society," he said. He repeatedly argued that Congress had been kept fully apprised of the activity and had voted to authorize it. Federal and secret intelligence courts were also used to present abuse, he said.

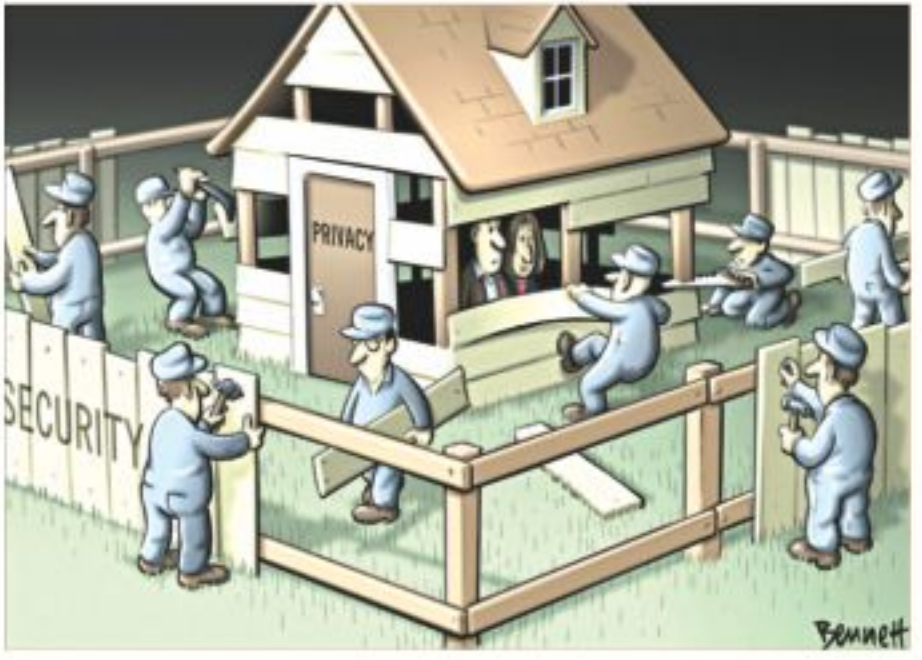
It's important to recognize that you can't have 100 percent security and also then have 100 percent privacy and zero inconvenience.

The Washington Post, citing a career intelligence officer, reported late Thursday the NSA had direct access to Internet firm servers to track an individual's web presence via audio, video, photographs and emails. Internet giants, however, denied opening their doors for US spy agencies. Claims of the Internet spy operation broke as Washington reeled from a Guardian newspaper report on Wednesday detailing an apparent operation by the NSA to capture millions of domestic phone records.

Why every call matters for NSA

AGENCIES

National Security Agency of USA has been collecting mass public data secretly on a large scale since 2005. These methods do not necessarily record every phone call or over hear all is being said on the phone but simply records the details of communications such as which phone number was called by a particular subscriber and for how long. Organised terrorism threats for US homeland have reduced considerably since the death of key terrorist leaders and continuous attacks on terrorist targets. Al-Qaeda is debilitated and leaderless. But the lone wolf terrorist, using the internet to self-radicalise, is fast becoming the new threat. The rise of surveillance is contextual in this regard. It was in Iraq, acting in support of the secret Joint Special Operations Command, that the NSA started to record the details of every phone call made in the country. What they found was that within months their bulk database of call details would allow them to break open terrorist networks with dramatic speed. A cell phone of a dead terrorist or a suspected number opened up a whole network for the forces. Within seconds NSA experts could discover every call made on it for months before, mapping the dead bomber's connections with other individuals. This was only possible because of the blanket recording of all call details. Seeing the extraordinary effects of these techniques in the field, the NSA sought to apply them to domestic communications from 2006 onwards. Since the recording of this data does not include the content of the conversations, it can be extended to US citizens more easily and does not require a warrant.



TURKEY UPRISING CONTINUES

Protesters shout slogans as they take part in a demonstration in the center of Ankara yesterday. Thousands of angry Turks poured into the streets on June 8 to join mass anti-government protests as the crisis entered its ninth day, defying Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's call to end the worst civil unrest of his decade-long rule.

PHOTO: AFP

Modi set to be frontman of India's opposition

AFP, Panaji

Controversial opposition politician Narendra Modi's hopes of becoming India's next premier could get a big boost this weekend when his party chooses its frontman for next year's general elections. Modi, chief minister of the thriving western state of Gujarat for more than a decade, is widely expected to be named head of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) election panel at a two-day meeting that began yesterday in the coastal state of Goa. The post is seen as a stepping stone to Modi being named the BJP's prime ministerial candidate, despite resistance from some colleagues who see him as an electorally divisive figure for failing to stop deadly anti-Muslim riots in 2002, while other senior party leaders would like the job themselves. Lal Krishna Advani, the 85-year-old party patriarch who mentored Modi, is now opposed to his elevation due to what some party officials say is the Gujarat politician's



arrogant style and fears that he could alienate Muslim voters. Party officials said Advani called in "sick" and skipped a crucial meeting on Friday -- the first time in recent memory he has missed a national executive meeting, according to BJP officials. But observers say Advani might relent and attend the last day of the conference to symbolically validate Modi's new expected role in a show of party unity. A senior party leaders -- Uma Bharti, Jaswant Singh -- were also skipped the meet. The party is expected to save its big announcements for today. Analysts said refraining from projecting Modi as the party's prime ministerial candidate could be a political ploy by the BJP to protect the politician in the event of electoral defeat. "If the BJP wins, then he is the star and if the party loses, he can safely go back to Gujarat," said Sanjay Kumar, a research fellow at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, an independent think-tank in New Delhi.

Egypt court adjourns Mubarak trial

AFP, Cairo

An Egyptian court in the retrial of fallen dictator Hosni Mubarak for alleged complicity in the killings of protesters barred lawyers in civil cases from the proceedings at a brief session yesterday. Presiding judge Mahmoud al-Rashidi adjourned the court to tomorrow, shortly after opening the second hearing in Mubarak's retrial, a criminal case. Mubarak, 85, watched the proceedings while sitting up on a stretcher inside the defendants' cage, shared with seven of his former security commanders and his two sons. His original trial led to a life sentence for Mubarak and his interior minister Habib al-Adly, and acquittals for six police commanders.

Mandela hospitalised in 'serious' condition

CNN ONLINE

Former South African leader Nelson Mandela is in "serious but stable condition" at a Pretoria hospital with a recurring lung infection, the presidential spokesman said yesterday. Mandela was hospitalized early yesterday after the state of his health deteriorated in the last few days, according to spokesman Mac Maharaj. "He's receiving the best possible care," he said. "Everything is being done to ensure that he is comfortable and that he is getting better." Maharaj said that the anti-apartheid icon is breathing on his own. Mandela's wife, Graca Machel, is at the hospital with him, sources told CNN. She canceled her plans to attend the Hunger Summit meeting in London on Saturday. Mandela, 94, has become increasingly frail over the years and has not appeared in public since South Africa hosted the World Cup in 2010. Despite his rare public appearances, news of his ailment spark concerns worldwide. Mandela has been in and out of hospitals in recent years. Considered the founding father of South Africa's democracy, Mandela became an international figure while enduring 27 years in prison for fighting against apartheid, the country's system of racial segregation. In 1993, Mandela and then-South African President FW de Klerk jointly won the Nobel Peace Prize.



ODDLY enough

Boy, 4, kills his dad in US

AP, Arizona

Authorities in northern Arizona say a 4-year-old boy has accidentally shot and killed his father at a Prescott Valley home. Prescott Valley police say the shooting occurred just after noon Friday. The 35-year-old man and his young son were visiting from Phoenix and were at a friend's house. Police say the boy somehow found a gun in the home's living room and accidentally fired it and a bullet hit his father, who was rushed to a hospital where he died. Police say the boy is with his mother. No other details have been released.

Uncommon Protest



AFP, Zagreb

People sit next to a "For Sale" sign which an unknown person attached to the base of a monument and statue of the first Croatian King Tomislav in downtown Zagreb yesterday. The unknown person was presumably dissatisfied with the Croatian government intentions to sell national goods amid public opposition.