

## Mandela's health improving

REUTERS, Johannesburg

Former South African President and anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela continues to recover from a lung infection but his condition remains serious, the South African government said on Thursday.

President Jacob Zuma visited Madiba, the clan name by which 94-year-old Mandela is popularly known, in the Pretoria hospital to which he was admitted in a "serious but stable" condition on Saturday, a statement said.

## Two killed as boat capsizes in India

AFP, Kolkata

An overcrowded ferry which was packed with dozens of people and livestock capsized yesterday in the Indian state of West Bengal, killing at least two and leaving 25 others missing, officials said.

The overcrowded ferry was carrying more than 45 passengers as well as two buffaloes, the official said. Heavy rains and strong waves caused the boat to capsize, he added.

## Menem sentenced to 7 years in Argentina

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentine ex-president Carlos Menem, 82, was sentenced to seven years in prison Thursday for organising contraband arms shipments to Croatia and Ecuador during his tenure.

But because Menem enjoys immunity as a legislator, the former president must first go through an impeachment process by his fellow lawmakers. If they fail to oust him from the Senate, Menem could be incarcerated after his term ends in 2017, legal observers said.

## Airbus A350 takes off

AFP, Toulouse

Airbus's new A350 plane glided smoothly through its maiden flight yesterday, leaving company executives relieved and brimming with confidence for the battle with Boeing that lies ahead.

Designed to help the European manufacturer catch up with its American rival in the market for long-haul, fuel-efficient planes, the new Airbus completed a faultless test flight from an airport close to the company's headquarters in southern France.

If all goes well, first delivery is expected at the end of 2014.

# Syria crossed 'red line': US

## Vows military aid to rebels; UN chief, Russia oppose move

AFP, Damascus

A US pledge to step up military aid to Syrian rebels saying the regime has crossed a "red line" with its use of chemical weapons which yesterday triggered criticism from UN chief Ban Ki-moon and Russia.

Damascus itself dismissed the accusation as "lies".

The UN secretary general said that arming either side in the 27-month Syrian conflict that has cost tens of thousands of lives "would not be helpful".

Ban told reporters he has been "consistently clear that providing arms to either side would not address this current situation. There is no such military solution."

The harder US line also dismayed Moscow, which had been working with Washington to organise a peace conference.

US data on the Syrian regime's alleged use of chemical weapons was "unconvincing", it said, warning Washington against repeating the mistake it made when invading Iraq after falsely accusing Saddam Hussein of stocking weapons of mass destruction.

The Kremlin's top foreign policy adviser Yuri Ushakov also said the US decision to provide military aid to Syrian rebels would damage international efforts to end the conflict.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Barack Obama are to meet at the G8 summit in Northern Ireland on Monday.

The US decision to up the ante also



Syrian rebel fighters leave their position after a battle with regime forces in the southern Syrian town of Maaret al-Numan on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

prompted expressions of concern from neutral countries such as Sweden, which warned of the risks of an arms race between the rival foreign supporters of the regime and the rebels.

Obama's administration announced late Thursday that it had reviewed intelligence reports and concluded that regime forces had used banned weapons, including sarin, in attacks that killed up to 150 people.

US officials refused to rule out moving towards arming rebels or imposing a no-fly

zone, and said Washington would provide backing to the rebel Syrian Military Council.

"The president has made a decision about providing more support to the opposition. That will involve providing direct support to the SMC. That includes military support," deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes said, declining to elaborate.

Britain and France, which had already said publicly that they believed the Syrian government had resorted to use of its chem-

## Turkey to halt park project

AFP, Istanbul

Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday agreed to halt plans to redevelop an Istanbul park at the centre of two weeks of mass anti-government unrest, in a move protesters welcomed as "positive".

It marked the first easing of tensions in the standoff, which has presented the Islamist-rooted government with the biggest challenge of its decade-long rule and earned it criticism from the West.

Hours after giving a "last warning" to defiant demonstrators camping out in Gezi Park, Erdogan made the concession in his first talks with a key group of protesters to defuse tensions in the crisis.

An peaceful sit-in to save Gezi Park's 600 trees from being razed prompted a brutal

police response on May 31, spiralling into nationwide outpourings of anger against Erdogan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), seen as increasingly authoritarian.

The promise to abide by a court decision suspending the redevelopment of Gezi Park was hailed as a win by the protesters, who had earlier balked at Erdogan's offer to hold a referendum over plans to reconstruct Ottoman-era military barracks on the site in return for evacuating the park.

Speaking after the four-hour emergency meeting, Deputy Prime Minister Huseyin Celik said the government would respect the court's decision on the project suspension and insisted a popular vote to seal the fate of the park would go ahead.

The court process is expected to take several months.

## Australia embraces new gender guidelines

AFP, Sydney

Australia has embraced a growing global trend towards acknowledging greater gender diversity with individuals now able to be referred to as "indeterminate, intersex or unspecified" on official documents rather than male or female.

Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus said new national guidelines, which come into force on July 1, will make it simpler for people to establish or change their sex or gender in personal records held by government departments and agencies.

"We recognise individuals may identify, and be recognised within the community, as a gender other than the gender they were

assigned at birth or during infancy, or as an indeterminate gender," he said in a statement late Thursday.

"This should be recognised and reflected in their personal records held by departments and agencies."

The move comes after the Australian Human Rights Commission in 2009 recommended the government consider developing national guidelines concerning the collection of sex and gender information.

The new guidelines state that "where sex and/or gender information is collected and recorded in a personal record, individuals should be given the option to select M (male), F (female) or X (Indeterminate/Intersex/Unspecified)".

The Old City of Homs and its Bab Hod neighbourhood, as the army pressed a siege they have kept up on the two rebel districts for the past year.

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In the latest fighting, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported, fierce battles swept the northern city of Aleppo, Syria's once-thriving commercial capital and its third-largest city Homs.

Loud explosions rocked the Old City of Homs and its Bab Hod neighbourhood, as the army pressed a siege they have kept up on the two rebel districts for the past year.

## Poll date raises hopes in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's announcement of November elections raised hopes for stability in the deeply divided Himalayan nation, but also concerns that the long-awaited polls could still be scuppered, analysts said yesterday.

The caretaker government set the November 19 date late on Thursday following months of political deadlock that has hampered the country's recovery after a decade-long civil war.

Nepalese politics has operated in a legislative vacuum since May 2012 when the old parliament was dissolved without producing a constitution, aimed at healing deep divisions over the conflict, amid political disagreements.

Thursday's breakthrough came after the interim government assured them their concerns would be incorporated into a new amendment on election laws, which has been forwarded to President Ram Baran Yadav for his approval.

## ROHINGYA VIOLENCE EU condemns Myanmar

AFP, Strasbourg

European lawmakers on Thursday condemned violence suffered by Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim minority and called on the authorities to protect them.

Scores of Rohingya have been killed and thousands have fled Buddhist-Muslim unrest which has tempered international optimism about Myanmar's reforms after decades of military rule.

The European Parliament passed a motion saying that it "condemns the grave violations of human rights and the violence perpetrated against Rohingya Muslims" in Myanmar.

It said it "deplores...the failure of the government to protect the Rohingya from organised violence".

The EU lawmakers called on Myanmar authorities to do "everything in their power to protect Rohingya Muslims from violent actions" and expressed "deep concerns" over allegations that security forces have taken part in the violence.

Meanwhile, senior monks in Myanmar yesterday appealed for peace following a surge in religious bloodshed in the former junta-ruled nation, in a joint statement that stopped short of condemning a wave of anti-Muslim attacks.

After two days of talks between more than 200 monks at a monastery near Yangon, the Buddhist clerics accused media of tarnishing their image with allegations that monks were at the forefront of the violence.

## US to hold Snowden responsible for leaks

AFP, Brussels

The United States is confident it will bring Edward Snowden to justice for "extremely damaging" leaks about secret internet surveillance programmes, US Attorney General Eric Holder said yesterday.

Snowden is hiding in Hong Kong and the United States has launched a criminal investigation after the former CIA technical assistant blew the lid on the National Security Agency's vast electronic surveillance operation.

"This case is still under investigation and I can assure you that we will hold accountable the person responsible for those extremely damaging leaks," Holder told a news conference in Dublin after a meeting with EU officials.

"The national security of the United States has been damaged by

those leaks. The safety of the American people and safety of people in allied nations is at risk," he said.

"I am confident that the person who is responsible will be held accountable."

Holder also said that he had agreed to share details with the European Union about the so-called PRISM programme, which was exposed after Snowden spoke to British and American newspapers.

The 29-year-old Snowden has vowed to fight any bid to extradite him.

Meanwhile, the UK government has warned airlines not to allow Snowden to fly to the UK, according to reports.

The travel alert - reported to feature a Home Office letterhead - said Mr Snowden "is highly likely to be refused entry to the UK".



## Murdoch splits with third wife

AFP, New York

News Corp chief Rupert Murdoch filed papers to divorce his third wife Wendy Deng on Thursday, citing an "irretrievably" broken marriage to a woman 38 years his junior.

The 82-year-old media tycoon's Chinese-born partner is perhaps best known for a 2011 incident when she leapt to defend her husband by striking a pie-wielding protester, prompting headlines calling her a "tiger wife."

"I can confirm for the record that Rupert filed in New York State Supreme Court this morning for divorce," his spokesman Steven Rubenstein told AFP.

The divorce will not affect the way in which the media empire is run as Deng does not have stock or voting rights in News Corp, the source said on condition of anonymity.

Deng, 44, married Murdoch in 1999 aboard a private yacht that he had reportedly bought for his retirement. They have two daughters, Grace and Chloe.

## Minnows eye upset in India polls

REUTERS, New Delhi

The popular expectation for India's coming general election is that it will be a showdown between the scion of the grand old Congress party's Nehru-Gandhi dynasty and a firebrand leader of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

But with both big national parties deeply troubled and languishing in opinion polls, a group of increasingly powerful regional parties might emerge from the media frenzy around Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi as the dark-horse winners.

A rag-tag of parties with ambitious leaders and diverse local agendas, their empowerment could be a risk for Asia's third-largest economy, whose growth rate has already tumbled to a decade low after a long period of policy paralysis.

"They won't be thinking of the country, they'll think of their states," said DH Pai Panandiker, president of the RPG Foundation, an economic think-tank.

Most of these parties are keeping their options open ahead of the election, which is due by next May. But there is mounting speculation that they could form an alternative "third front" government after the poll, a step that would break the mould of alternating power between the Congress and its rival, the BJP.

Akhilesh Yadav, chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, a pivotal state in elections because it sends the most lawmakers to parliament, has come out squarely in favour of a Third Front.

Even if they fail to cobble together enough parliamentary seats to forge a coalition government of their own, opinion



polls suggest that these groups will have more lawmakers - and therefore greater influence - at the national level than ever before.

Congress, which has ruled at the head of a coalition for the last nine years, goes into these polls battered by corruption scandals and popular disgust over its handling of the economy, while the BJP is torn by infighting.

Leaders of some of the regional groups spotted an opportunity to flex their muscle this week when the BJP chose the polarizing Narendra Modi as its election campaign leader, a move that exposed damaging rifts within the party.

Mamata Banerjee, the mercurial chief minister of West Bengal state who has sat in coalitions led by both the BJP and Congress, took the first step.

On Wednesday, she met a key aide of Bihar state's chief minister, who looks set to break his party's ties with the BJP, angry over Modi's elevation. She also picked up the phone to win over the chief of another eastern state, and she posted a telling message of her intentions on Facebook.

"Time has come for all the regional parties to come together and form a federal front in the coming Lok Sabha election," Banerjee wrote, referring to the lower house of parliament.

A recent poll by Team Cvoter, a public opinion research company, showed that potential third front parties could win as many as 232 seats in the 543-member lower house of parliament. It suggested that the Congress party and the BJP would both fall at least 100 seats short of that.



## Prince William 'has Indian genes': Study

PTI, London

Prince William, second-in-line to the throne, will be first British king with proven Indian ancestry, DNA analysis has revealed.

The DNA analysis of saliva samples taken from the Duke of Cambridge's relatives have established a direct lineage between the 30-year-old prince and an Indian housekeeper on his mother Princess Diana's side.

It is his only non-European DNA and means he will become the first head of the Commonwealth with a clear genetic link to its most populous nation - India.

William is now likely to be encouraged to make his debut mission to India soon after the birth of his baby next month.

Researchers have uncovered the details of his lineage via a doomed relationship of William's Indian great-great-great-great-grandmother.

Eliza Kewark was housekeeper to Prince William's great grandfather Theodore Forbes (1788-1820), a Scottish merchant who worked for the East India Company in the port town of Surat in Gujarat.

Eliza's mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) was passed on by her daughters and granddaughters directly in an unbroken line to Princess Diana and then on to Prince William and Prince Harry.

Eliza is claimed to have been Armenian, possibly because her surname is rather like the Armenian name Kevork and letters from her to Forbes have been found which contain Armenian script.

