

NEWS IN brief

Cameron inks \$1b deals with Kazakhstan

British Prime Minister David Cameron signed a strategic cooperation agreement as well as \$1.0 billion in deals with Kazakhstan yesterday during his first visit to the energy-rich ex-Soviet state. Cameron and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev also unveiled an oil and gas processing plant on the shores of the Caspian Sea which is intended to provide a new reliable source of energy for European countries.

New Aussie PM reshuffles cabinet

Australia's new cabinet was sworn in yesterday with Prime Minister Kevin Rudd naming a record number of six women and switching focus to the economy ahead of upcoming elections.

With Labor trailing badly in the polls Rudd ruthlessly seized the leadership on Wednesday, ousting the country's first woman prime minister Julia Gillard three years after she had overthrown him.

The Labor Party, which is counting on Rudd's vaunted campaigning skills, has seen an immediate bounce in popularity.

Cop, rebel killed in Indian Kashmir

A policeman and a rebel were killed in Indian Kashmir yesterday as the troubled region shut down to protest at the weekend shooting of two civilians by the army, a police chief said. The officer and the militant were killed during a gun battle in the southern village of Mandoora, 35 kilometres south of the main city of Srinagar, said Kashmir's police chief Abdul Gani Mir.

Over 2,500 killed in 3 months Iraq violence

More than 2,500 people were killed in Iraq in the past three months, UN figures showed yesterday, a surge of violence that has fanned fears the politically-deadlocked country is slipping back into all-out bloodshed. The toll comes as the country grapples with months of protests by the Sunni Arab minority, tensions along a swathe of disputed territory in north Iraq and a protracted political standoff that has left key pieces of legislation unresolved. The violence showed no signs of letting up on Monday as a new attack left eight former anti-al-Qaeda fighters dead. The UN mission in Iraq said a total of 761 people were killed across the country in June, bringing the overall death toll for the past three months to 2,518.

Overworked elephant dies in Mumbai

An overworked and overweight elephant in Mumbai whose plight illustrated the mistreatment of the animals as street performers has died after fighting for her life for weeks, vets said yesterday. The 58-year-old named Bijlee died on Sunday from complications relating to old age, degeneration of leg muscles and arthritis, JC Khanna, secretary of the Bombay Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, told AFP. Bijlee, whose name means lightning, had sparked anguish amongst animal activists and Bollywood stars after she was found lying in pain earlier this month in the city's northeastern suburbs, unable to walk after decades of neglect and overwork.



ARIZONA WILDFIRE

Clockwise, wildfire spreads near the Arizona town of Yarnell, planes are battling the blaze, and homes have burned down as the blaze gained momentum. Hot winds blew a US wildfire out of control, killing 19 elite firefighters in the country's deadliest wildfire involving firefighters for at least 30 years.

PHOTO: DAILY MAIL

West encouraging Xinjiang 'terrorism' Claims Chinese state media

The United States is encouraging "terrorism" in Xinjiang, Chinese state media said yesterday, also claiming separatists in the region -- which has a large Uighur minority -- had fought alongside Syrian rebels. Beijing denies the unrest in the vast region bordering Central Asia -- which last week left at least 35 people dead -- is due to ethnic tensions between Uighurs and China's majority Han. It has vowed to crack down on "terrorist groups", ordering military exercises ahead of Friday's anniversary of major riots in 2009 that left around 200 dead. But rights groups for the mostly Muslim Uighurs blame unrest on economic inequality and religious repression, and Washington has raised concerns about discrimination. The People's Daily, a mouthpiece for the ruling Communist Party, slammed the US government and media for what it said was its role in the violence. "For fear of a lack of chaos in China," it said in a commentary, the US was "conspiring to direct the calamity of terrorist activities toward China". "America's double standards on the issue of countering terrorism is no different than incitement and indulgence... How is this different than those who act as accomplices to terrorism?" it said. It asked if the 9/11 attacks and Boston marathon bombings in April meant "America's ethnic and religious policies also have problems", while rejecting such linkages in China. "The violent terrorist incidents in Xinjiang are not an ethnic issue or a religious issue," it said, calling the "massacres" of officials and bystanders "inhumane".

New NSA leaks show how US is bugging

Papers reveal 38 targets including ME, SA, SEA and more THE GUARDIAN US intelligence services are spying on the European Union mission in New York and its embassy in Washington, according to the latest top secret US National Security Agency documents leaked by the whistleblower Edward Snowden. One document lists 38 embassies and missions, describing them as "targets". It details an extraordinary range of spying methods used against each target, from bugs implanted in electronic communications gear to taps into cables to the collection of transmissions with specialised antennae. Along with traditional ideological adversaries and sensitive Middle Eastern countries, the list of targets includes the EU missions and the French, Italian and Greek embassies, as well as a number of other American allies, including Japan, Mexico, South Korea, India and Turkey. The list in the September 2010 document does not mention the UK, Germany or other western European states. One of the bugging methods mentioned is codenamed Dropmire, which, according to a 2007 document, is "implanted on the Cryptofax at the EU embassy, DC" -- an apparent reference to a bug placed in a commercially available encrypted fax machine used at the mission. The NSA documents note the machine is used to send cables back to foreign affairs ministries in European capitals. The new revelations come at a time when there is already considerable anger across the EU over earlier evidence provided by Snowden of NSA eavesdropping on America's European allies. Although the latest documents are part of an NSA haul leaked by Snowden, it is not clear in each case whether the surveillance was being exclusively done by the NSA -- which is most probable as the embassies and missions are technically overseas -- or by the FBI or the CIA, or a combination of them. The 2010 document describes the operation as "close access domestic collection". The operation against the French mission to the UN had the codename "Blackfoot" and the one against its embassy in Washington was "Wabash". The Italian embassy in Washington was known to the NSA as both "Bruneau" and "Hemlock". The eavesdropping of the Greek UN mission was known as "Powell" and the operation against its embassy was referred to as "Klondyke".

Bugging allegations threaten EU-US trade Says French President Hollande

BBC ONLINE French President Francois Hollande yesterday said allegations that the US bugged European embassies could threaten a huge planned trade deal. Negotiations over the EU-US pact, the biggest bilateral deal ever negotiated, are due to start on 8 July. Hollande said there could be no negotiations without guarantees spying would stop "immediately". US Secretary of State John Kerry said earlier that activities to protect national security were "not unusual". German Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesman, Steffen Seibert, said "bugging friends is unacceptable... we are no longer in the Cold War". He added that Germany wanted the deal to go ahead but "mutual trust is necessary in order to come to an agreement". The allegations of US security services bugging EU missions and the embassies of friendly European countries - including the French, Italian and Greek embassies - come from documents apparently leaked by an ex-CIA analyst. Edward Snowden has been charged in the US with theft of government property, unauthorised communication of national defence information and wilful communication of classified communications intelligence. He is believed to be at an airport in Moscow, and is seeking a destination safe from prosecution by the US authorities. Green parties in France and Germany have called on their governments to offer Mr Snowden asylum.



CROATIA JOINS EU

The picture shows fireworks during the celebration of the accession of Croatia to the European Union in Split early yesterday. Tens of thousands of Croatians cheered the country's entry into the European Union at midnight Sunday, almost two decades after the former Yugoslav republic's bloody independence war ended.

PHOTO: AFP

Syria neighbours must open borders to refugees Tells Human Rights Watch

AFP, Beirut Turkey, Jordan and Iraq must fully reopen their border crossings to allow thousands of Syrians fleeing their country's war to seek refuge, Human Rights Watch said yesterday. "Iraqi, Jordanian, and Turkish border guards are pushing back tens of thousands of people trying to flee Syria," the international rights group said, adding that the lives of those trying to flee were in danger. "Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey have either closed numerous border crossings entirely or allowed only limited numbers of Syrians to cross, leaving tens of thousands stranded." The UN says more than 1.7 million Syrians have fled the conflict in their country. The vast majority have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. But only Lebanon has kept an open-door policy for Syrian refugees, says HRW. Arab states of the Gulf yesterday urged the UN Security Council to hold an emergency meeting to prevent a "massacre" in Syria's central city of Homs, the target of a fierce offensive by regime troops. In a statement, the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) announced they are "following with deep concern... the unjust siege Syrian regime forces are imposing on Homs... with military support from the militias of the Lebanese Hezbollah movement and under the umbrella of Iran's Revolutionary Guards." Syria's war broke out more than 27 months ago and has left more than 100,000 dead, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights watchdog says.

US presses Asean to ease sea tensions

REUTERS, Bandar Seri Begawan US Secretary of State John Kerry pressed China and Southeast Asian nations yesterday to make progress on a plan to ease tensions in the South China Sea, reminding the region that Washington had national interests at stake in the disputes. Kerry, who made the comments as he arrived in Brunei for a regional security meeting, was speaking a day after China said it would hold formal discussions with Southeast Asian nations over the maritime disputes later this year. While marking a move forward, the talks are not seen as a major breakthrough in protracted efforts to bring China into a binding agreement over the energy-rich ocean, where Beijing's assertive claims have sparked rising tensions. "We have a strong interest in the manner in which the disputes of the South China Sea are addressed, and in the conduct of the parties," Kerry said in opening remarks at the conference in the oil-rich sultanate. "We very much hope to see progress soon on a substantive code of conduct in order to help ensure stability in this vital region." China said in a joint statement with the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) on Sunday that it agreed to hold "official consultations" on a proposed Code of Conduct (CoC) governing naval actions at a meeting with Asean senior officials in China in September. Thailand's foreign minister hailed the step as "very significant".

Mandela clings to life Obama leaves South Africa

AFP, Cape Town the Robben Island prison where the anti-apartheid icon spent 18 years -- a visit he said left him "deeply humbled". Obama stood in the tiny cell once occupied by Mandela on the windswept outcrop near Cape Town, and took his daughters to the lime quarry where the man who would become South Africa's first black president did back-breaking hard labour. "Mandela's spirit could never be imprisoned -- for his legacy is here for all to see," Obama said in a speech at the University of Cape Town afterwards. There has been no update on the health of the 94-year-old Nobel peace laureate since Saturday when South African President Jacob Zuma said he remained "critical but stable". Few details have been released about his condition or treatment. In an interview with Britain's ITV News broadcast over the weekend, his daughter Zindzi said her father was hanging on.



News Corp reborn

THE GUARDIAN News Corporation, the newly devolved publishing division in Rupert Murdoch's global empire starts, launches on the New York and Sydney stock exchanges yesterday with the aim of dominating the smartphone market for news, entertainment and information. Robert Thomson, the chief executive of new News Corp, told investors in Sydney the company would retain "Murdochian magic" and would have "a permanent startup sensibility" with globalisation and digitisation its biggest opportunities for growth. "One of our foremost ambitions outside Australia is to own the second screen," he said in an investor roadshow whether this was "a football match or a British election". He said the media sector was "still at the early stage of a second great migration, from print to web from web to mobile" and it was working on all fronts to make sure its newspaper content was a vibrant and appealing on smart phones. In August the Sun hopes to make major inroads with the "second screen" when it starts charging customers £2 a week for online access.

ODDLY enough



Arabian driving craze

STAR DESK Nobody does dangerous driving stunts quite like the youth of Saudi Arabia. Sure, drifting is pretty cool, and Ken Block's Gymkhana is awesome, but they're nothing compared to the latest driving craze in the Middle East. It's called "sidewall skiing" and it basically means driving a car on its side wheels at high speed. A few years back, footage of Saudi daredevils skating on the country's desert highways while clinging to speeding cars went viral on video sharing sites like YouTube. But that got old really fast, and the bored youth had to come up with something even more exciting. These days they get their kicks by driving around on two wheels, while passengers perform all kinds of tricks, like standing on top of the car, or even changing tires at high speed. Sidewall skiing has also become a spectator sport, with crowds of young men and women sitting on the side of the road cheering on the adrenaline junkies.