

NEWSIN brief

Man detonates bomb at Beijing airport

AFP, Beijing
A man in a wheelchair ignited a home-made explosive device at Beijing's international airport yesterday, state media reported, injuring himself but no others.

The man, identified only as Chinese, was being treated, the state-run Xinhua news agency said. Xinhua said the explosion came at about 6:24 pm, adding that police were investigating.

Costa Concordia disaster: 5 jailed

REUTERS, Rome
Four Costa Concordia crew members and a company official were sentenced to jail in Italy yesterday for their part in the 2012 cruise ship disaster that killed 32 people, leaving only Captain Francesco Schettino still on trial.

The five received sentences of between 18 and 34 months for multiple manslaughter, negligence and shipwreck - relatively short punishments for the crimes, in exchange for pleading guilty. However, none of the five are likely to be jailed, judicial sources said.

US charges Belmokhtar for Algeria siege

AFP, New York City
US authorities on Friday charged the former leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Mokhtar Belmokhtar, Branded "The Uncatchable" over the deadly January siege at an Algerian gas plant and other crimes.

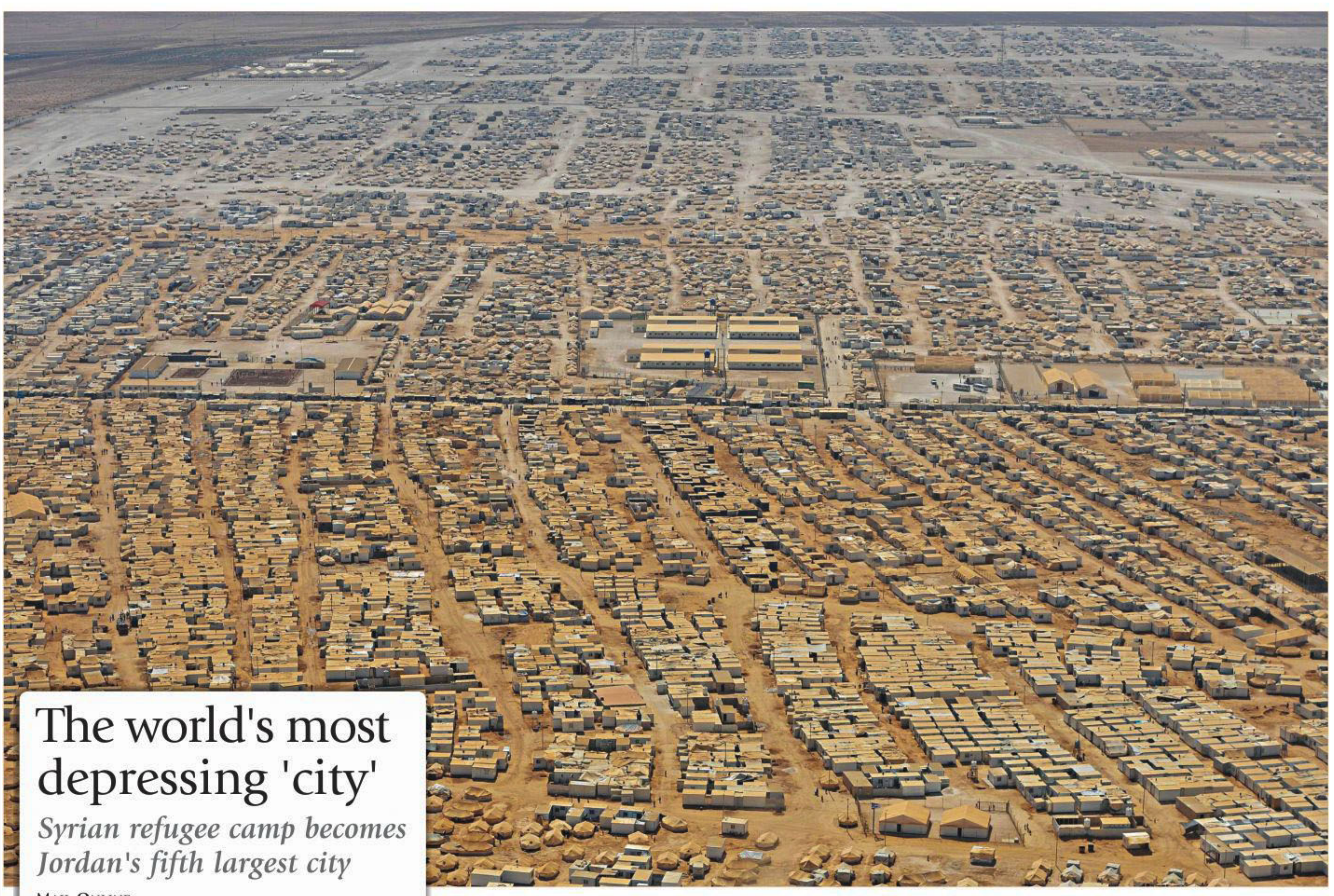
The one-eyed Algerian Islamist -- who allegedly masterminded the seizure in which 38 hostages, including three Americans, died -- was charged on eight counts, including kidnapping and conspiring to take hostages.

Emergency rule lifted in central Myanmar

AFP, Yangon
Myanmar yesterday lifted a state of emergency imposed in a riot-hit area in March where 44 people were killed in the Buddhist-Muslim clashes, state media said.

FARC 'capture US soldier,' offers release

AFP, Bogota
Colombian FARC guerrillas said Friday they captured a US soldier last month and are offering his release as a "gesture" toward peace with Bogota. In a statement on their website, the leftist rebels identified their captive as Kevin Scott Sutay, and said they captured him on June 20 in the municipality of Retorno, in the southern department of Guaviare.



The world's most depressing 'city'

Syrian refugee camp becomes Jordan's fifth largest city

MAIL ONLINE

Stretching out as far as the eye can see, this is the grim and depressing home of 160,000 refugees who have escaped the brutal Syrian civil war.

Incredibly, 6,000 people a day arrive at the sprawling 2.8 square-mile Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, which has become the country's fifth largest city.

The city has 3,000 shops, restaurants and food vendors. There is also a taxi service, schools, soccer fields and hospitals within its 12 districts.

Despite this, the difficult lives its residents lead have led to riots. However, UN officials who run the camp say it has begun to emerge from the 'dark period' of violence, as its traumatised residents begin to reconcile themselves to a lengthy stay.

Some of those based at the camp - which is about 8 miles from the Syrian border - expressed their frustration to the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on Thursday when he visited Zaatari.

The fate of these displaced people remains unknown. An administrator at Zaatari was asked by reporters how long his camp would remain open for Syrians. He replied: "Three days. Thirty years. Who knows?"

More than 1.7 million Syrian refugees have fled to nearby countries to escape fighting that began as protests against the government in March 2011 and has degenerated into civil war with an increasingly sectarian dimension.

Egypt Islamists defiant after deadly clashes

AFP, Cairo
Egyptian Islamists yesterday pressed on with protests to demand the return of ousted president Mohamed Morsi, after tens of thousands of them clashed with his opponents during deadly rallies overnight.

Thousands of Morsi loyalists held a sit-in demonstration at Cairo's Rabaa al-Adawiya mosque in the morning, waving Egyptian flags and carrying portraits of the deposed leader.

The gathering comes amid heightened political tensions in Egypt, following a day of rival rallies across the country -- the largest since the formation of a new government this week -- which turned violent in the Nile Delta city of Mansura.

"Three people were killed and seven others wounded by birdshot and stabbing attacks during clashes between Morsi supporters and his opponents," Adel Said, a hospital official in Mansura, told AFP. Health officials confirmed the three killed were all women. On the eve of the demonstrations, Mansour pledged to rein in those who wanted to push Egypt "into the unknown" while the army warned it would decisively confront any violent protesters. Meanwhile, Egypt's foreign minister, Nabil Fahmy, yesterday said Cairo will "re-examine" diplomatic ties with Syria that were severed last month under ousted president Mohamed Morsi. "Everything will be re-examined," Fahmy said of the decision to sever ties with Syria.

Venezuela, US ties hit new low

AFP, Caracas
Venezuela late Friday said it has "ended" its rapprochement with the United States due to a statement by Samantha Power, nominated to become the US envoy to the United Nations.

Power said at a US Senate confirmation hearing Wednesday that if she got the job she would stand up to "repressive regimes" and challenge the "crackdown on civil society being carried out in countries like Cuba, Iran, Russia, and Venezuela."

Washington and Caracas have not exchanged ambassadors since 2010, even though Venezuela exports 900,000 barrels of oil per day to the United States.

"Venezuela hereby ends the process ... of finally normalizing our diplomatic relations" that began in early June, the Foreign Ministry said in a statement. Venezuela is opposed to the "interventionist agenda" presented by Power, and noted that her "disrespectful opinions" were later endorsed by the State Department, "contradicting in tone and in content" earlier statements by Secretary of State John Kerry.



Russia's top opposition leader Alexei Navalny (centre right) addresses supporters and journalists upon his arrival in a Moscow's railway station yesterday. Navalny yesterday told hundreds of cheering supporters that he would push ahead with his bid to become Moscow mayor after his surprise release from jail pending an appeal of an embezzlement conviction.

Pak women banned from shopping alone!

AFP, Peshawar
Tribal elders and Islamic clerics in northwest Pakistan have barred women from shopping in bazaars without a male relative, elders and an official said yesterday.

The decision was taken on Friday in the Karak district of conservative Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which borders the restive tribal areas along the Afghan border.

"We have decided that women will not visit bazaars without a male relative," Maulana Mirzaqem, a cleric and tribal elder, told AFP by telephone.

"Those who will visit markets without male relatives will be handed over to police," he said. "They spread vulgarity and spoil men's fasting in Ramadan," Mirzaqem said, adding that the ban would be publicised using local mosques loudspeakers. The decision had been taken due to the sanctity of the holy month, the cleric said -- it is not clear whether it will be lifted after Ramadan. A senior government official in Karak confirmed the move. Taliban threats and social taboos have deprived millions of women of their rights in Pakistan. In most parts of the northwestern tribal areas women are confined to their homes and do not go shopping or work outside. Pakistani women in most parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa cover their heads and bodies, either with salwar kameez and scarves, or head-to-toe burqas.

School lunch had insecticide

AFP, Patna
Oil used to cook a school lunch that killed 23 pupils in eastern India contained a "highly toxic", concentrated form of insecticide, a forensic report and police said yesterday.

The children died after eating lentils, potatoes and rice cooked at the school last Tuesday with oil containing an agricultural insecticide that was five times the strength sold in the market place, the report said.

Many of the 23 victims, aged four to 12, from Gandaman village in Bihar, were buried on a playing field adjacent to the primary school that served the free school lunch -- the only meal of the day for a number of the poor youngsters. Some 24 children and a cook are still being treated in hospital.

Merkel urges global data protection deal

AFP, Berlin
German Chancellor Angela Merkel has come out strongly in favour of an international agreement to protect electronic data, following revelations by fugitive former intelligence analyst Edward Snowden about US surveillance programme PRISM.

"We should be able, in the 21st century, to sign global agreements," Merkel told the weekly Welt am Sonntag, in an interview to be published today.

"If digital communication raises new questions worldwide, then we should take up the challenge. Germany is working for that," she said when asked whether an agreement modelled on the Kyoto Protocol that sets binding obligations on industrialised countries to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases was possible.

"This must be our goal, however ambitious it may be," Merkel, who faces re-election in September 22 elections, has been under pressure for weeks to come clean with voters on what she knew about the US online surveillance.

She remains the frontrunner for the vote, and a new poll suggests the snooping affair is not yet a major election issue -- but the opposition hopes this will change while the media are turning increasingly hostile.

The issue is sensitive for Merkel, who said last week she only learnt about the scope of the US National Security Agency (NSA) snooping through media reports. Many Germans are angry that their emails, phone calls, web searches and other data have been captured and stored under the NSA programme.

'Trayvon could have been me'

AGENCIES
President Barack Obama offered a very personal take on the death of Trayvon Martin Friday, saying that 35 years ago, he could have been the unarmed black teen shot dead by a neighborhood watchman.

In a surprise appearance before reporters, Obama hailed the "incredible grace and dignity" of Martin's parents and warned that a resort to violence in the wake of the Florida court verdict would "dishonor" his death.

In remarks immediately interpreted as the most expansive comments on race since he became president, Obama said the US was still not "a post-racial society".

He also called for a review of controversial "stand your ground" laws like the one in place in Florida, which assert that citizens can use lethal force -- rather than retreat -- if they sense their lives are at risk.

"When Trayvon Martin was first shot, I said that this could have been my son," Obama said, in his first substantive comments on a verdict that has aroused an impassioned debate on US race relations.

"Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago."



Barack Obama, inset Trayvon Martin

The teen's parents Tracy Martin and Sybrina Fulton said they were "deeply honored and moved" by Obama's comments.

Civil rights rallies were scheduled in cities across the country yesterday in the wake of the Zimmerman verdict, with Fulton due to appear in New York and Tracy Martin expected to speak in Miami.

Martin, 17, was fatally shot on the rainy night of February 26, 2012 during an altercation with the 29-year-old Zimmerman in a gated community in Sanford, Florida. A jury of six women, all but one white, cleared him of second-degree murder and manslaughter charges. Critics of Saturday's verdict argue that Zimmerman racially profiled the youth -- who had no criminal record -- and was able to kill him with impunity because of a biased criminal justice system.

Zimmerman on Saturday, Obama didn't shy away from expressing his emotions.

"There are very few African American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me," he said.

"And I don't want to exaggerate this, but those sets of experiences inform how the African American community interprets what happened one night in Florida," he said.

"I'm not going to say that Trayvon Martin was a victim of a biased criminal justice system. I'm going to say that Trayvon Martin was a victim of a biased criminal justice system."

6 awarded life terms in India

AFP, New Delhi
Six men accused in the gang-rape and robbery of a 39-year-old Swiss woman cyclist holidaying in India were sentenced to life terms by a court in central India. "All the accused have been convicted and we are satisfied with the judgement," said the public prosecutor in the case, Rajendra Tiwari, after the ruling handed down by a special court, the Press Trust of India and other local media reported yesterday.

The rape of the Swiss woman came three months after the fatal gang-rape of a 23-year-old physiotherapy student on a bus in Delhi in December, which brought simmering anger about the treatment of women in India to the surface.

The six sentenced to life were detained soon after the attack on the Swiss woman in mid-March in a remote, forested area of Datia district in central Madhya Pradesh state where the victim was camping with her husband. Her 30-year-old husband was tied up as the woman was assaulted and the pair were also robbed, according to police.

ODDLY enough

Copy of Schindler's list up for sale

AFP, Los Angeles
An original copy of the list of Jews Oskar Schindler saved from the Holocaust is up for sale on eBay, with the starting bid set at \$3 million dollars, a Los Angeles auctioneer said Friday.

The auction is set to end on July 28 at 6:00pm Los Angeles time.

Schindler is credited with saving the lives of some 1,200 Jews employed in his factories during World War II. He died in anonymity in Germany in 1974 at the age of 66.

Karzai decree clears way for Afghan polls

AFP, Kabul
President Hamid Karzai yesterday approved the second of two new election laws designed to pave the way for smooth transition of power in Afghanistan next year.

Karzai's signature on the law, which determines how presidential and provincial elections will be run, is expected to alleviate international concerns that the ballot could be delayed or its credibility could be at risk.

His office said Karzai's decree meant the law had come into immediate effect.

Karzai on Wednesday approved a bill giving more power and independence to the electoral complaints watchdog, which was integral to unmasking massive fraud at the last presidential election in 2009.