

# SYRIA CRISIS

## Israel call reserve forces over Syria

The Israeli cabinet yesterday authorised a partial call-up of army reservists amid growing expectations of a foreign military strike on neighbouring Syria, army radio reported. However, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued a statement telling Israelis that, after discussions Wednesday on the security situation, there was "no need to change their daily



US F-16 Fighting Falcons demonstrating an "Elephant Walk" as they taxi down a runway during an exercise at South Korea's Kunsan air base on March 2, 2012. The United States and its allies built their case yesterday for likely military action against the regime in war-torn Syria over alleged chemical weapons attacks, despite stern warnings from Russia.

# A regional conflict that went global

**There's more to the Syrian civil war than rebels versus the regime; regime versus the west. Syria's neighbors in the Middle East also have a stake in the conflict, which many analysts say has become a proxy for regional rivalries and competing interests.**

**Saudi Arabia and Qatar**: Two of Iran's biggest rivals, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are backing the Syrian rebels because they and other Persian Gulf monarchies fear the spread of Iran's influence in the region. There is an element of sectarianism there as well. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are both led by Sunnis; Sunnis make up most of the Syrian opposition. Iran is the region's leading Shia power. Getting a Sunni government into power in Syria would make the Gulf states more comfortable, said Michele Dunne, director of the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East in Washington. "Probably, their desire to change the regional sectarian and political power balance has largely dictated their policies toward Syria," she said last year. **Turkey**: Relations between Turkey and Syria have all but collapsed since the Syrian uprising began and refugees started flooding into Turkey and other neighboring countries. Turkey, trying to be the west's closest ally in the region, now backs the Syrian rebels with logistical support, hosting opposition groups and allowing shipments of weapons and ammunition to cross its borders. **Iran and Lebanon**: Syria is believed to be Iran's main conduit to Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, the proxy through which Iran can threaten arch-enemy Israel with an arsenal of short-range missiles. Iran could lose that link and a major ally if the al-Assad regime falls to a Sunni-dominated opposition. The al-Assads are Alawite, an offshoot of Shia Islam. **Iraq**: Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has blamed an outbreak of violence in his country partly on what's going on in Syria, saying the conflict has stoked a raging fire of sectarian tensions. Sunnis are the minority in Iraq, and, like the Sunnis in Syria, many of them are feeling oppressed by a predominantly non-Sunni government. There are also long tribal ties between Iraq's Sunnis and Syria's Sunnis. **Israel**: Israel conducted airstrikes inside Syria in early May, a US official confirmed, stressing that Israel is concerned about Syria transferring powerful weapons to the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah. Hezbollah also gets funding and weapons from Shiite ally Iran, Israel's arch-enemy. "For Israel, it is very important that the front group for Iran, which is in Lebanon, needs to be stopped," Shaul Mofaz, a lawmaker in Israel's Knesset or parliament, told Israeli Army Radio.



## OIC urges 'decisive action' at UN

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation yesterday condemned alleged poison gas attacks in Syria, blaming the government and calling for "decisive action" in response. The world's largest grouping of Muslim nations "stressed the need to hold the Syrian government legally and morally accountable for this heinous crime and to bring its perpetrators to jus-

# West needs UN mandate to strike

Says UN-Arab League's Syria envoy

The UN-Arab League special envoy for Syria yesterday said that international military action in the country cannot go ahead without approval by the UN Security Council while the UN chief Ban Ki-moon said the inspectors in Syria need four more days to reach a conclusion on what happened there. "I think international law is clear on this. International law says that military action must be taken after a decision by the Security Council," Lakhdar Brahimi told reporters in Geneva. Brahimi, whose comments came as the United States and its allies were building their case for military action against the Syrian regime over alleged chemical weapons attacks, also said it was clear that some kind of substance had been used in the August 21 assault, killing hundreds. Speaking of the suspected attack, he said: "It does seem some kind of substance was used that killed a lot of people."



Brahimi refused to lend his voice to the assertion that Assad's regime was responsible for the attack. Meanwhile, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon yesterday said that UN inspectors needed four days to conclude a probe into chemical weapons use in Syria. "My mandate and my responsibility at this time is to conduct a thorough and complete investigation," Ban told reporters in The Hague. "Let them (inspectors) conclude their work for four days," he said, adding that their findings would then be analysed and the result sent to the UN Security Council.

## PROOF OF GAS ATTACK US intel heard call of Syrian army unit

AFP, Washington

US intelligence services overheard a Syrian defense ministry official in "panicked phone calls with the leader of a chemical weapons unit" after last week's deadly chemical attack, Foreign Policy magazine reported Tuesday. "Last Wednesday, in the hours after a horrific chemical attack east of Damascus, an official at the Syrian Ministry of Defense exchanged panicked phone calls with leader of a chemical weapons unit, demanding answers for a nerve agent strike that killed more than 1,000 people," the report said. "Those conversations were overheard by US intelligence services," the magazine said in a statement. "That is the major reason why American officials now say they're certain that the attacks were the work of the Bashar al-Assad regime -- and why the US military is likely to attack that regime in a matter of days."

# US attack on Syria to spell 'disaster'

Warns Khamenei; Russia rejects US arguments on gas attack

Any military intervention by the United States against Tehran's ally Syria will spell "disaster" for the region, Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned yesterday. "The US intervention will be a disaster for the region," Khamenei, the Islamic republic's most powerful authority, told a meeting with the cabinet of President Hassan Rowhani, state television reported. "The region is like a gunpowder depot. (Its) future cannot be predicted" in case of a military strike against Syria, he added. US Vice President Joe Biden said Tuesday there is "no doubt" the Syrian regime is responsible for the use of chemical weapons. His remarks came after Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel said the US military was already prepared to act if President Barack Obama gave the order, although White House aides said no final decision had been taken. But Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told US Secretary of State John Kerry that Moscow rejects Washington's claim the Syrian regime was behind a chemical weapons attack outside Damascus, the foreign ministry said. In a phone call Tuesday, Lavrov also told Kerry of Moscow's alarm the situation was undermining diplomatic efforts to end the crisis, as expectations grow of Western military action against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime.



## Russia evacuates citizens from Syria

Russia evacuated 116 Russian citizens and nationals of other ex-Soviet states on two planes belonging to the emergency ministry which flew them from the Syrian port city of Latakia, the ministry said yesterday. Russia has insisted it has not been implementing a full-scale evacuation of the many thousands of Russian passport-holders still

# Hagel pushes US's Asia 'pivot' amid Syria crisis

Pentagon chief Chuck Hagel assured Asian nations yesterday that Washington's long-term "pivot" to the region was not just rhetoric even as an escalating confrontation with Syria dominates his immediate crisis planning. US officials said Hagel also called for restraint in the disputed South China Sea at a gathering in Brunei of defence ministers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), China and elsewhere. The two-day Asean meeting is the main event of Hagel's week-long trip to Southeast Asia but the mounting crisis between Syria and the West has repeatedly intruded. The Obama administration wants to bolster trade and security ties with vibrant Asia-Pacific economies after a decade pre-occupied by the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. In the BBC interview broadcasted yesterday, Hagel insisted the United States was serious about the pivot, saying "this area of



the world is going to continue to be a significant part of redefining international affairs". Despite Pentagon budget cuts, US officials say Washington will stick by plans to provide more military aid to countries anxious about China's growing muscle. Tensions have risen over territorial disputes in the South China Sea, with Asean countries accusing Beijing of taking an aggressive stance. "This is not about encircling China or anybody else," Hagel said in the BBC interview. "This is about economic interests, it's about the world, it's about prosperity, stability and security." The Pentagon chief was scheduled to meet China's defence minister, General Chang Wanquan, on the sidelines in Brunei, after having hosted him in Washington earlier this month. He also was due to meet Myanmar's defence minister in Brunei, before heading to the Philippines today to wrap up his trip.

## 11 killed in India building collapse

AFP, Ahmedabad

At least 11 people were killed and several more feared trapped when a four-storey apartment block collapsed yesterday in a city in western India, officials said. The public housing block, located in the city of Vadodara, some 110 kilometres from Ahmedabad, caved in before dawn senior local government administrator Vinod Rao said. Earlier, Rao said up to 20 people were in the building at the time of the collapse. Last month, a two-storey hotel collapsed in the southern city of Secunderabad, killing 13 people and injuring 17 others. In April, another building collapse in Mumbai claimed the lives of 74 people.

# Egypt backs away from plan to dissolve Brotherhood

REUTERS, Cairo

Egypt should not ban the Muslim Brotherhood or exclude it from politics after the army's overthrow of Islamist President Mohamed Morsi, the interim prime minister said on Tuesday, reversing his previous stated view. The apparent about-turn fuelled speculation that the military-installed government may now seek a political settlement to the crisis, but it also coincided with a new call for protests by Morsi's supporters. Hazem el-Beblawi, the interim prime minister, had proposed on August 17 that the Brotherhood, the Arab world's oldest and arguably most influential Islamist group, should be dissolved, and said the government was studying the idea. In an interview with state media late on Tuesday, Beblawi appeared to row back, saying the government would instead monitor the group and its political wing and that the actions of its members would determine its fate. "Dissolving the party or the group is not the solution and it is wrong to make decisions in turbulent situations," the state news agency MENA quoted Beblawi as saying. There has been no sign from the Brotherhood, most of whose leaders are now in jail or on the run, that it wants to engage with the army establishment that ousted it by force. Founded in 1928, the Brotherhood was banned by Egypt's then military rulers in 1954. Though still outlawed during the 30-year rule of Hosni Mubarak, it ran a large welfare network and its members ran as independents in limited elections. After decades of operating in the shadows and winning support with its charities and preaching, the Brotherhood registered itself as a non-governmental organization in March in response to a court challenge by people contesting its legality.



# NEWS IN brief

## 'Japan should come clear on Fukushima'

The world's nuclear watchdog has urged Japan to explain more clearly what is happening at Fukushima and avoid sending "confusing messages" about the disaster, the country's atomic regulator revealed yesterday. TEPCO said last week that some of the 300 tonnes that leaked from a tank could have made its way through drainage systems

## San Francisco wildfire grows

The wildfire threatening Yosemite National Park is still burning its way into the huge US tourist attraction despite dogged efforts by thousands of firefighters using planes and bulldozers. The so-called Rim Fire -- California's seventh biggest ever -- now covers some 281 square miles (731 sq km), an area bigger than Chicago. The fire, which broke out August 17, was still only 20 percent contained compared

## Attack on Nato convoy kills 4 Afghans

A suicide bomber rammed his explosives-laden car into a convoy of foreign troops in southern Afghanistan yesterday, killing four civilians, officials said, adding there were no confirmed military casualties. About 15 by-standers were also injured in the attack on Nato-led forces travelling on a main road near the police headquarters in Lashkar Gah, capital of the volatile province of Helmand. No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack but suicide bombings are a hall-

## ODDLY enough

### Is she the oldest person ever?

This picture taken on August 16, 2013 shows Alimihan Seyiti sitting in her home in Shule county of Kashgar, north-west China's Xinjiang region. A Chinese government news portal has claimed that Seyiti is 127 years old, making her the oldest person ever to have lived -- but experts yesterday raised questions over the supposed record. According to the portal, Seyiti was born on June 25, 1886, when Grover Cleveland was president of the United States and William Gladstone the British prime minister. According to Guinness, the oldest person ever was Jeanne Calment of France, who lived to 122, while the oldest person currently alive was Japan's Misao Okawa, "who is 115 years and 176 days old as of today".



# Series of blasts kill 71 in Iraq; 201 hurt

REUTERS, Baghdad

At least 71 people were killed and 201 wounded in a series of bombings and other attacks across Baghdad yesterday, police and medical sources said, extending the worst wave of sectarian bloodshed in Iraq for at least five years. It was not immediately clear who carried out the attacks, which appeared coordinated, but Sunni Muslim insurgents including the al Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq have significantly stepped up bombings this year. More than two years of civil war in neighboring Syria have aggravated deep-rooted sectarian divisions in Iraq, fraying the country's uneasy coalition of Shi'ite Muslim, Sunni Muslim and Kurdish factions. In Sadr City, an impoverished Shi'ite district in Baghdad's northeast, two car bombs killed seven people. A restaurant owner said he saw an attacker just before one of the explosions. "A man parked his car in front of the restaurant. He got breakfast and drank his tea. (Then) I heard a huge explosion when I was inside the kitchen," the owner, who requested anonymity, told Reuters. "When I went outside, I saw his car completely destroyed and he had disappeared. Many people were hurt." Another car bomb killed seven people and wounded 23 in Jisr Diyala in southeastern Baghdad, police and medics said. The Interior Ministry described the attacks were "terrorist explosions" but said the number of people killed was only 20, with 213 wounded. The Shi'ite-led Baghdad government has said that media reports exaggerate attacks in Iraq and that security forces have stopped many attempted bombings.

## Cyber attacks hit NY Times, Twitter

AFP, New York City

The New York Times and Twitter have been hit with cyber attacks, with credit quickly claimed by a group backing embattled Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad. The Syrian Electronic Army (SEA), ironically used Twitter to tout its efforts to take down the globally popular one-to-many messaging service and the Times news website. The SEA has made itself known in recent months, hacking the Twitter account of The Associated Press to put out a false tweet saying President Barack Obama had been hurt in two explosions at the White House. SEA has also targeted the Twitter account of the AFP photo service, as well as social media at the BBC, Al Jazeera and the Financial Times and Guardian newspapers.

## Imran khan cleared of court contempt

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's top court yesterday dropped contempt charges against cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan, accepting his explanation that he never intended to bring senior judges into disrepute. Khan, the head of Pakistan's third largest party, criticised the judiciary and election commission for inaction over alleged rigged elections in May, when he won a political breakthrough. But Khan, summoned for a second time before the Supreme Court, said he never criticised the senior judiciary and that undermining the supremacy of the judiciary was akin to undermining democracy. The court dropped the case. Pakistan's previous government accused the judiciary of politically motivated meddling when it sacked prime minister Yousuf Raza Gilani after finding him guilty of contempt. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) finished third place in the polls won by Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N), but formed a government in the northwestern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

