

NEWSIN brief

Britons become less religious: survey

AFP, London
The number of Britons who are religious has declined significantly in the last 30 years and the number of adherents to the established Church of England has halved, a survey revealed on Tuesday. Just 52 percent of people said they belong to a religion, down from 68 percent in 1983, according to the latest British Social

Iran bus collision kills 44

AFP, Tehran
A collision between two buses in Iran killed 44 people and injured 39 others, the ISNA news agency reported yesterday, in the country's most serious road accident in years. The accident took place on Monday along the highway

Iraq attacks kills 20

AFP, Baghdad
Attacks in central Iraq killed 20 people yesterday, including six shot dead when gunmen stormed a house where a corpse was being ritually washed ahead of a funeral. The violence, in restive Diyala province and an area known as the "Triangle of Death", is the latest in a surge in unrest that has left more than 4,000 people

Sushmita murder: Afghan cops nab 2

AFP, Kabul
Afghan police have arrested two militants over the murder of an Indian writer, an official said yesterday. Sushmita Banerjee, 49, was dragged out of her husband's house by masked gunmen in Afghanistan's eastern Paktika province and



A man walks through a destroyed residential area of the Syrian city of Saraqib, southwest of Aleppo on Monday, following repeated airstrikes by government forces' fighter jets. PHOTO: AFP

SURRENDER OF SYRIA CHEMICAL ARMS Major powers clash at UN

AFP, United Nations
Russia clashed once again with Western powers yesterday as envoys drafted a UN resolution to add muscle to a plan to strip Syria of its chemical weapons. US President Barack Obama maintained his threat to launch military strikes against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, even while cranking up the diplomatic pressure on Moscow. Envoys from France, Britain and the United States launched talks on a resolution after Russia had revealed a surprise plan of its own to secure Assad's banned weapons. But Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared that any resolution under Chapter Seven of the UN charter, which authorizes enforcement measures, would be "unacceptable." Moscow's UN mission called an urgent Security Council meeting for 2000 GMT, and France and Britain said they planned to introduce their motion later in the day. Later the meeting was postponed. Russia's proposal on Monday was seized upon by some as a way to dismantle Syria's nerve gas stockpile, but Western capitals remain deeply skeptical of both Moscow and Damascus's intent. And Obama's top national security team insisted yesterday that US military action to punish Assad's alleged use of chemical weapons was still very much on the table. They said the White House would examine the Russian initiative while still seeking domestic Congressional authorization for a limited package of missile strikes. Obama was due to make a major national address to a skeptical US public and Congress later in the day to ask for authorization to order missile strikes to punish Assad's regime.

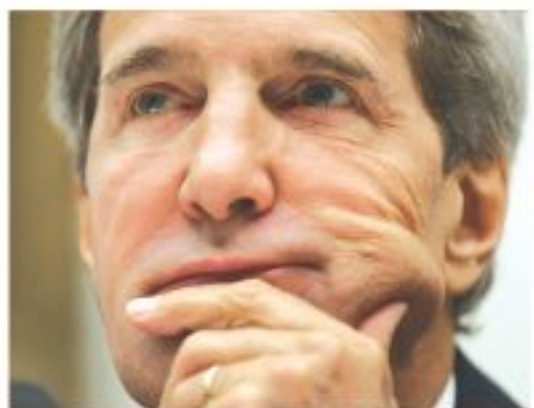
How a 'gaffe' could stop a war US alters strike plan

AFP, Washington
Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov took the ball and ran with it, calling on Damascus to "place the chemical weapons under international control and then have them destroyed."

At first it seemed like just another of John Kerry's musings -- Syria could stop threatened US military strikes by placing its chemical weapons stockpile under international control. But within hours, as the US top diplomat was still in the air flying back to Washington from London, what appeared to be an off-the-cuff remark caught fire, with Russia embracing it and the Syrian regime also seemingly coming on board. Late Monday, Obama appeared to give it his blessing, saying that what was now being seen as a surprise Russian initiative could prove to be a "significant breakthrough" in changing the course of the brutal Syrian war and the thinking of the Syrian regime. Asked early Monday in London if there was anything Syrian President could do to avert a US military strike, Kerry replied: "Sure." "He could turn over every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next week. Turn it over, all of it, without delay, and allow a full and total accounting for that," Kerry told reporters. He quickly seemed to shoot down his own idea, adding: "But he isn't about to do it, and it can't be done, obviously." Reporters traveling back to Washington aboard Kerry's plane agonized about what he had meant, all the while being assured that there was "no serious proposal" to address Syria's chemical weapons stock on the table. Except that while Kerry was still in mid-flight Russian

Such a plan would help "avoid military strikes," Lavrov insisted, apparently after he had talked for 14 minutes with Kerry two hours after take-off from London. During the call, Lavrov said he had heard Kerry's comments and Moscow would be willing to engage in the idea of an international supervision of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile. As Lavrov's offer ignited a storm of questions, it remained unclear whether this was just another misstep by the gaffe-prone secretary of state, or a carefully choreographed ploy, providing Obama with a possible exit strategy. Obama himself added to the mystery by saying he had discussed the issue with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of a G20 summit in St Petersburg last week. Moving fast before Kerry hit the ground again, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem in Moscow for talks "welcomed" the Russian initiative -- even though Assad has never admitted to possessing chemical weapons. Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron was also quick to join in, saying it would be a "big step" if Assad were to hand over its chemical weapons. And German Chancellor Angela Merkel said it was "an interesting proposal from Russia" adding she hoped "action would follow."

AFP, Washington
A group of US senators was crafting a new measure yesterday that ties authorization for a military strike on Syria to action by the United Nations. The lawmakers, including allies and foes of President Barack Obama, were altering a resolution currently under debate which would green-light limited US strikes to punish President Bashar al-Assad's regime for its alleged use of chemical weapons. News of the new measure began to circulate shortly before Obama met with Democratic senators midday in the US Capitol in a bid to persuade skeptical lawmakers to back him in his use-of-force request. Congressional aides familiar with the new measure said it would require an immediate start to the transfer of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile to international control, as proposed by Russia in an initiative being closely studied by the White House. "Basically, the AUMF (authorization for use of military force) would be conditional and triggered only if the Russian plan fails," a Senate aide told AFP. The measure would grant such authority, the aide said, "only in the absence of certification by the president that a UN Security Council resolution had passed that includes specific conditions, and that those conditions were being met along a specified timeline." A second Senate aide said the measure aimed to establish a timeline to ensure Assad and Moscow were not using their initiative as a stalling tactic. Senate Democrat Chuck Schumer said he hoped the resolution would be "helpful" to the point that "Syria could rid itself of chemical weapons without us engaging in military action." Schumer would not reveal the timeline in the measure. "We're coordinating with the White House and we're working with them so that everybody's in sync with each other." Obama has agreed to test the viability of Russia's plan at the United Nations, a move that could head off contentious votes in Congress, where lawmakers remain skeptical of a military strike on Syria.



Pakistan to free key ex-Taliban leader

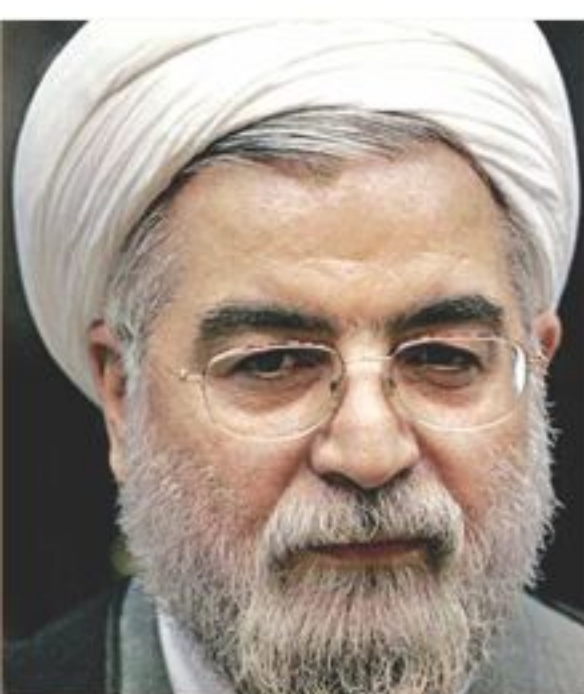
REUTERS, Islamabad
Pakistan plans to free former Afghan Taliban second-in-command, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, this month to help advance peace efforts in neighbouring Afghanistan, Pakistan's foreign policy chief said yesterday. The United States and Afghanistan have long pressed Pakistan to free Baradar and other senior Taliban figures who could be used to tempt moderate Taliban leaders to the negotiating table and transform the insurgency into a political movement. "In principle, we have agreed to release him. The timing is being discussed. It should be very soon ... I think within this month," Sartaj Aziz, Nawaz Sharif's adviser on foreign affairs, told Reuters in an interview. Baradar's fate is at the heart of Afghanistan's efforts to kick-start the stalled peace process as most Nato combat troops prepare to pull out of Afghanistan by the end of 2014 and anxiety grows over the country's security. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has spent years calling for his release because he believes Baradar is more open to dialogue than many of his comrades. Until being captured in Pakistan in 2010, Baradar was a close friend of the group's reclusive leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar.



Indian youth protest outside the Saket Court complex in New Delhi yesterday. An Indian court convicted four men of the gang rape and murder of a physiotherapy student on board a moving bus in a crime that sickened the nation. PHOTO: AFP

Adultery isn't cruelty Rules Indian SC

TNN, New Delhi
Merely being "intimate" with another woman is not sufficient ground for a man to be held guilty of inflicting cruelty on his wife on the charge of failing to discharge his marital obligations, the Indian Supreme Court ruled on Monday. Only if treatment meted out to the wife is of a nature as is likely to drive her to commit suicide will it fall within the ambit of Section 498A of IPC, a provision of the penal code providing up to three years in jail, said the bench. "We are of the view that the mere fact that the husband has developed some intimacy with another, during the subsistence of marriage, and failed to discharge his marital obligations, as such would not amount to cruelty," said a bench of Justices K S Radhakrishnan and P C Ghose. The SC reading of what constitutes cruelty brought relief to a man who had been convicted by both the trial court and the high court for behaviour that resulted in the suicide of his wife due to an alleged extra-marital affair at his place of work.



Rowhani talks tough on Iran nuclear rights

AFP, Tehran
Iran's new President Hassan Rowhani yesterday said that Tehran will not give up "one iota" of its nuclear rights, echoing his hardline predecessor, after the UN nuclear watchdog urged improved cooperation. The comments come ahead of meeting later this month between his Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton on restarting negotiations on the Islamic republic's controversial nuclear ambitions. "Our government will not give up one iota of its absolute rights" on the nuclear issue, said Rowhani, a reputed moderate, repeating a mantra frequently used by his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Soon after his election as president in June, Rowhani said he wanted "serious" talks with world powers to resolve Western suspicions that Iran's nuclear drive is cover to build a bomb despite repeated denials by Tehran. The two sides have failed to achieve a breakthrough in years of talks, with Iran -- during Ahmadinejad's two-term presidency -- refusing to make any concessions on sensitive activities in the nuclear programme, notably enrichment. That has led to several rounds of international sanctions being slapped on the Islamic republic choking the economy and stoking a raging inflation.

ODDLYenough



Invisibility cloak to fool mosquitoes!

MAIL ONLINE
US scientists are working on an 'invisibility cloak' for mosquito-plagued people, pets and livestock. The researchers have discovered substances that occur naturally on human skin and block mosquitoes' ability to smell and target their victims. Scientists believe the research could be another step in the fight to stamp out deadly diseases such as malaria, which kills approximately one million people around the world every year. The scientists, in their research, used substances that impair the mosquito's sense of smell. 'If a mosquito can't sense that dinner is ready, there will be no buzzing, no landing and no bite,' they explained.

'Never imagined one human could treat another so badly'

AFP, New Delhi
As he recalls the attack that killed his best friend and left him grievously wounded, the young IT operator still can't fathom the depravity they encountered after a night out at a Delhi shopping mall. "I never imagined that one human being could treat another so badly," said the 28-year-old about the fatal gang rape of his female companion on December 16. "The rapists injured my friend in the most shocking ways while they beat me with a metal bar and dumped us near a highway." "They wanted us to die. Now, I want them to die and she also wanted them to die... She wanted them to be set on fire." The young man, who cannot be named to prevent identification of the victim, visited his friend twice at a Delhi hospital before she was airlifted to Singapore by the government for further treatment. In an interview with AFP ahead of the verdict, which saw four men convicted of murder and gang rape, he said how he is wracked by guilt for being unable to protect his 23-year-old friend as they made their way home from the cinema. Nearly unconscious after being savagely beaten, he could do nothing but watch as his friend was repeatedly raped and then violated with an iron rod, as they returned from cinema. The victim's intestinal injuries were so horrific that they led to her death in a Singapore hospital where she suffered multiple organ failure on December 29. The trial may be over but the young man, who moved to Delhi in 2006 from Uttar Pradesh, is still struggling both physically and psychologically. "For me, I lost a friend... The guilt will always remain. The only good thing would be if we ensure that such cases do not happen ever again."

UP RIOTS Death toll climbs to 38

PTI, Muzaffarnagar
Curfew remained in force in riot-hit areas of Muzaffarnagar with the Army patrolling troubled places as the death toll in the clashes in the district and adjoining towns rose to 38. Sources said 81 people have been injured in violence and 366 people have been arrested. The home secretary said no fresh incident has been reported and the situation was under control. The government has constituted a one-member judicial commission headed by (retired) Justice Vishnu Sahai to probe into the Muzaffarnagar violence starting August 27 from the Kawal incident till September 9. The panel would submit its report in two months time.

Kenyan VP faces ICC probe

AFP, The Hague
Kenyan Vice President William Ruto yesterday pleaded not guilty to charges of fomenting deadly post-election violence in Kenya five years ago, at the opening of his high-stakes trial at the International Criminal Court. The case, crucial for the under-fire court's future, opened at the Hague-based ICC with presiding Judge Chile Ebou-Osuji asking Ruto, 46 and fellow accused, Kenyan radio boss Joshua arap Sang, 38, to enter pleas to three charges of crimes against humanity each. "Not guilty," both men told the judge. Ruto came to court voluntarily from Nairobi to face charges of masterminding deadly post-election violence in Kenya, a bastion of stability in east Africa, after a tainted 2007 election. A crowd of Kenyan MPs and other supporters welcomed Ruto and Sang as they arrived for the trial. Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, a one-time political foe of Ruto's turned ally, goes on trial at the ICC on November 12. He also says he is innocent. The ICC has come under increased pressure globally, especially from the 54-nation African Union, which accused the court of targeting the continent on the basis of race and demanded the court drop the Kenyan prosecutions. The trial also comes just days after lawmakers in Kenya became the first in the world to approve moves to withdraw recognition of the 10-year-old court that so far has only one conviction under its belt.

