

NEWS IN brief

Militants kill 18 Afghan cops

AFP, Kunduz
Militants in northeast Afghanistan killed 18 police in an ambush, the interior ministry said yesterday, as the nation's security forces struggle to thwart the Taliban with decreasing assistance from international troops. The police convoy was caught in a firefight in the remote province of Badakhshan on Wednesday.

Super Typhoon Usagi nears China

AFP, Hong Kong
Super Typhoon Usagi -- one of the strongest storms of the year -- barreled towards Hong Kong and southern China yesterday, prompting warnings of fierce winds and torrential rains. Packing gusts of up to 205 kilometres per hour, the storm is projected to roar between the Philippines and Taiwan before smashing into the southern Chinese coast later in the weekend.

Chicago gang shooting wounds 13

AFP, Chicago
Thirteen people, including a toddler, were wounded in an overnight gang shooting in Chicago, President Barack Obama's adopted hometown that has been struggling to stem violent crime, police said.

Pak govt steps up AQ Khan's security

TNN, Islamabad
Pakistan's government has increased security of the father of the country's nuclear programme Abdul Qadeer Khan amid fears of an Abbottabad-type raid which killed al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden.

Pakistan arrests 58 Indian fishermen

PTI, Karachi
Pakistan's maritime security agency has arrested 58 Indian fishermen after they allegedly strayed into the country's territorial waters. Last month, Pakistan had released 337 Indian fishermen, including eight juveniles, in a goodwill gesture. There are still 97 Indian fishermen and three other Indian nationals, including a juvenile, languishing in jails in Karachi.

Mexico storms: Death toll hits 97

BBC ONLINE
Mexican authorities yesterday said 97 people have been killed by storms that hit the country earlier in the week. In the village of La Pintada, near the Pacific coast, a landslide partially engulfed the town. At least 15 bodies have been recovered and almost 70 residents are missing, the authorities said. A helicopter involved in the rescue effort in the area has disappeared with three crew on board, according to Mexican media.

Russia 'seizes' Greenpeace ship

BBC ONLINE
Greenpeace says 30 activists, including six Britons, are being held at gunpoint by Russian security officers who stormed the group's ship in the Arctic. One of the activists told the BBC that about 15 men in balaclavas seized the Arctic Sunrise ship in the Barents Sea.



A rebel fighter fires at pro-government forces in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo yesterday. Syrian rebels have agreed a ceasefire with al-Qaeda loyalists after bitter fighting for a key border town, a monitoring group said yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Syria war more complex than ever

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

The battlefields of Syria are now more complex than they have been at any point during the civil war. With plans for a second Geneva peace conference again percolating, it remains unclear who the anti-Assad opposition might send, or who they might claim to represent. Ground into what even Syria's deputy prime minister Qadri Jamil admits is a stalemate, and lured towards an increasingly violent standoff with jihadist groups, Syria's moderate or mainstream armed opposition have had few wins lately. Two and a half years into the war, the common ground staked out at the start is now a bitterly contested field of competing interests that seriously imperil the opposition's reason for taking up arms in the first place. More than 1,000 units now make up the anti-Assad forces, and while many can still unite behind the stated common cause of ousting the president, many others show no such discipline or even a will to work towards a pluralistic, democratic society if, or when, the Syrian leader falls.

Things are no less complex on the regime side. The standing Syrian military has been supplemented by a home defence force, the clout of Hezbollah and a large number of Shia fighters from outside Syria who have increasingly taken positions at the vanguard of the fighting. This year, northern Syria has seen a steady and significant shift in the groups lining up against the regime and in the influence that they bring to the

'Sex jihadists'

AFP, Tunis
Tunisian women have travelled to Syria to wage "sex jihad" by comforting Islamist fighters battling the regime there, Interior Minister Lotfi ben Jeddou has told MPs. "They have sexual relations with 20, 30, 100" militants, the minister told members of the National Constituent Assembly on Thursday. "After the sexual liaisons they have there in the name of 'jihad al-nikah' -- (sexual holy war, in Arabic) -- they come home pregnant," Ben Jeddou told the MPs. He did not elaborate on how many Tunisian women had returned to the country pregnant with the children of jihadist fighters. Jihad al-nikah, permitting extramarital sexual relations with multiple partners, is considered by some hardline Sunni Muslim Salafists as a legitimate form of holy war.

Every month since the beginning of Ramadan in July 2012, jihadist groups have increased in numbers and prominence. The regime has lost significant ground here which it is unable to retake. Jabhat al-Nusra was the standard bearer of the early days of the jihadist insurgency and by November 2012 it was either jointly leading operations with mainstream groups or taking the outright lead on many of the battles fought for the north.

By early this year, its ranks had been swelled by foreign jihadists who had flocked to Syria -- many of them through Turkey. The foreigners called themselves al-Muhajirin, and by March had started to form their own units in the Aleppo and Idlib countryside, as well as in the Jebel al-Krud plateau north of Latakia and in eastern Syria, where the oilfields proved attractive, as did the corridor to Anbar in Iraq, where a rejuvenated al-Qaeda insurgency is again wreaking havoc.

In central Syria, jihadist groups do not have the same presence. The war around the cities of Homs and Hama is by and large a standoff between Free Syrian Army units, who are armed by a military council that reports to the Turkey-based Syrian civil opposition, and a regime that is slowly gaining ground with the help of its powerful backers. Syria's Alawite minority communities are nearly all in the centre of the country. So too are Shia and Christian villages, which have remained loyal to Assad. The battle here matters greatly to the regime and to its key patron, Iran, with both determined to make sure that the heartland retains a contiguous link to the north-west coast and to the capital, Damascus, no matter what happens in the rest of the country. While the regime is not losing the capital, it is not winning it either. Its gains in the centre have been offset by losses in the north that have put Aleppo and the oilfields out of its reach. Despite Assad's claims of sweeping battlefield gains, his deputy prime minister has a more realistic take on things; the civil war seems unwinnable for either side.

End rivalries

Iran leader urges US

CNN ONLINE
Iranian President Hassan Rohani made his case Thursday to the American people and the world for "a constructive approach" to contentious issues including his nation's nuclear program, arguing that failing to engage "leads to everyone's loss." "We must work together to end the unhealthy rivalries and interferences that fuel violence and drive us apart," Rohani said in an op-ed published Thursday evening on the Washington Post's website.

It's not the first time a leader from a country often at odds with the United States has used its newspapers to convey his or her views. Just last week, for instance, Russian President Vladimir Putin argued against international military intervention in Syria and jabbed his US counterpart for saying Americans should consider themselves "exceptional" -- a remark that quickly elicited derision from across the US political spectrum.

But Rohani's tone differed from Putin's, echoing the theme of "prudence and hope" and the promise of more positive engagement with the rest of the world that helped propel him to an election win in June.

"To move beyond impasses, ... we need to aim higher," he said. "Rather than focusing on how to prevent things from getting worse, we need to think -- and talk -- about how to make things better."

Contending "the age of blood feuds" and the idea of diplomacy as a "zero-sum game" no longer apply in a "changed" world, Rohani said leaders should engage each other "on the basis of equal footing and mutual respect."

"My approach to foreign policy seeks to resolve ... issues by addressing their underlying causes," he said. "We must work together to end the unhealthy rivalries and interferences that fuel violence and drive us apart."

Earlier, Rohani said his country doesn't want with any nation and will never seek to build nuclear weapons.

Sisters kill themselves over dowry in Pakistan

AFP, Multan
Four Pakistani sisters killed themselves after a row with their father who could not afford dowries for them to get married, officials said yesterday. The women threw themselves into a canal after arguing with their father in Mailsi, a town in the rural southern part of Punjab province. A fifth sister was pulled alive from the water. "A poor farmer, Bashir Ahmed Rajput, could not marry his five daughters because he had no money to offer dowry," Malik Daud Hasnain, a senior police official told AFP. "After an argument on the issue on Thursday, his daughters became desperate and jumped together into a water canal." The women were aged 45, 43, 38, 35 and 31. Dowry for weddings is a serious issue for poor families in the subcontinent and many women are unable to marry because their relatives cannot afford the gifts and money demanded by grooms' families.



Sri Lankan election workers carry ballot boxes before boarding buses as they prepare to go to their polling centres in Jaffna, 400 kilometres north of the capital Colombo yesterday. A Tamil candidate for landmark polls in Sri Lanka's former warzone fled a mob attack as the man tipped to become the region's chief minister accused the army of intimidating voters.

Pak army, govt on collision course over Taliban talks

REUTERS, Islamabad

Disagreement over how to handle an escalating insurgency has put Pakistan's all-powerful army on a collision course with the government, with the military increasingly vocal in its criticism of civilian leaders, officials and diplomats said. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif who came to power in May has promised to tame Islamist militancy through negotiations, but four months on, talks have yet to start and attacks continue daily. The army, which has ruled the South Asian nation for more than half its history, has avoided open confrontation with Sharif and his government but tension is on the rise.

"The army chief ... is thinking: 'Mian Sahib (Nawaz Sharif), enough is enough'," a senior army officer serving in the strife-plagued Pashtun tribal area along the Afghan border told Reuters during a visit to Islamabad. The military-civilian discord has been the source of tension throughout Pakistani

history but Sharif's election has raised hopes the government would get a larger say following Pakistan's first transition between civilian administrations.

Sharif promised to hold talk with the militants during the election campaign, a many Pakistanis who, while abhorring the bombers, have never been convinced of the necessity of joining the US-led campaign against militancy.

The army, which keeps thousands of troops in the tribal belt, opposes talks with the Pakistani Taliban, saying previous attempts to bring the militants to the negotiating table yielded no results.

Frustration spilled into the open on Sunday when a roadside bomb killed a general and another officer near the Afghan border, just days after government officials promised to launch peace negotiations with the Pakistani Taliban soon.

"This incident has dealt a serious blow (to the peace process)," Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar told parliament this week. "We have come to a standstill."

'Qaeda' attacks in Yemen kill 56 cops, troops

AFP, Sanaa

Suspected al-Qaeda militants launched dawn attacks in Yemen yesterday killing at least 56 security personnel in the deadliest assault on troops since the army retook jihadist strongholds last year.

Two of the three attacks in Shabwa, a southern province where al-Qaeda has long been active, involved vehicle bombs, military officials said. Eight of the militants, among them two suicide bombers were also killed.

The deadliest single attack was at an army camp responsible for ensuring security at oilfields in the region, where 38 soldiers were killed, the sources said.

The attacks were the deadliest since May 21, 2012 when some 100 soldiers were killed and hundreds more wounded in a suicide bombing in the capital.

'Army secret unit tried to oust Kashmir govt'

PTI, New Delhi

A huge controversy erupted yesterday over allegations that an intelligence unit set up by Indian ex-Army chief Gen V K Singh misused secret funds to try and topple the Omar Abdullah government in Jammu and Kashmir with the Centre promising action if any serving or retired officer is found involved.

As the allegations in a secret Army report that the controversial Technical Services Division (TSD) was involved in unauthorised operations and financial wrongdoings triggered a political slugfest between Congress and BJP, a Union Minister on condition of anonymity said a CBI probe into the "extremely sensitive" matter is not ruled out.

The Defence Ministry said it will take a decision about action on the Army report on TSD after its careful examination while asserting it had measures in place to prevent any such undesirable activities.

The BJP questioned the timing of the report and claimed that Singh was being "hounded" for sharing the dais with its prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi at the Rewari rally five days ago.

A media report quoting an Army document said Gen Singh had allegedly misused the secret service funds to destabilise the Omar government, to pay off an NGO to try change the line of succession in the Army top brass, to buy off-air interception equipment and to conduct "unauthorised" covert operations.



Russia for boosting ties with India

PTI, Moscow

Observing that Russia has very "purposeful" relationship with India, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev yesterday said it would like to consolidate the bilateral strategic partnership and help India in expanding its peaceful nuclear energy programme.

Medvedev's remark came days ahead of the planned commencement of production of the first unit of Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KNPP). The Indo-Russian joint venture project in Tirunelveli district in Tamil Nadu is expected to begin production in the next three weeks.

"Kudankulam project is doing well and we would like to increase cooperation with India in the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes," he said.

The Russian premier was speaking during a media interaction with editors attending the 15th General Assembly of Organisation of Asia-Pacific News Agencies (OANA) here.

Noting that Russia has very "purposeful" relationship with India, he said, "we would like to advance this relationship in various fields including by having technical cooperation."

"We have done in the past and would continue to do so," Medvedev said, adding, "We are interested in further developing and consolidating our strategic partnership with India."

Honesty pays off for homeless man

BBC ONLINE

Donations of more than \$110,000 (£67,000) have poured in from across the US for a Boston homeless man who returned a lost bag with \$42,000 in it.

Glen James alerted police after he found the backpack containing cash and traveller's cheques last weekend, and the bag's owner was then tracked down.

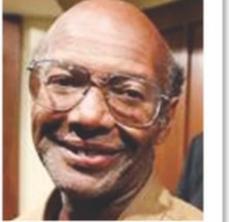
A complete stranger later started an online fund for James after reading media reports about his honesty.

The man, Ethan Whittington, now plans to meet James to give him the money.

Mr Whittington, who lives in Midlothian, Virginia, said he was so overwhelmed by James' honesty that he decided to start the fund.

"The fact that he's in the situation he is, being homeless, it blew my mind that he would do this," Whittington was quoted as saying by the Associated Press.

He said his idea of starting donations on a crowdfunding website for James "caught on like wildfire ever since".



"It's brought me a lot of hope. This isn't only about rewarding a great guy. I think it's a statement to everyone in America. "If we come together and work toward one thing and work together, then we can make it happen."