

NEWSIN brief

Obama may meet Rohani at UN

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Iran's new reform-minded president, Hassan Rohani, may meet Barack Obama in an informal, orchestrated encounter at the UN general assembly next week, amid signs of a rapidly softening stance in Tehran. Rohani will address the assembly on Tuesday afternoon, a few hours after the traditional opening speech by the host president, Barack Obama.

Saudis 'optimistic' on MERS-free hajj

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi authorities are optimistic that October's hajj pilgrimage to the kingdom, one of the world's annual largest gatherings, will pass without outbreaks of the deadly MERS coronavirus which has killed 49 people in the country, the health minister said yesterday. No MERS outbreaks were recorded at last year's hajj, nor during the Umrah season in July and August of this year. Authorities have urged the elderly and chronically ill to avoid the event and have reduced the number of people they will allow to perform come.

Obama to meet Abbas on Tuesday

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama will hold talks with Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas on Tuesday on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, the White House said. Obama is due to address the annual assembly of world leaders on Tuesday. The meeting with Abbas comes six days before the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the White House amid ongoing Israel-Palestinian peace negotiations.

2 more MLAs arrested over UP riots

PTI, Meerut/muzaffarnagar

Continuing its crackdown on those involved in the Muzaffarnagar violence which killed 47 and displaced thousands, Uttar Pradesh police yesterday arrested BJP legislator Sangeet Som and BSP MLA Noor Saleem Rana even as BJP president Rajnath Singh was prevented from touring the riot-hit district. The arrests come a day after Uttar Pradesh Police took into custody BJP MLA Suresh Rana in Lucknow on charges of making provocative speech to incite riots in Muzaffarnagar.



Myanmar people hold a sign saying "No War" as they march to mark the International Day of Peace in Yangon yesterday. Activists yesterday praised the Myanmar authorities for allowing the peace march through Yangon calling for an end to the nation's civil conflicts, after several people were charged for rallying without permission last year.

Gunmen besiege Nairobi mall

30 killed, dozens wounded

AFP, Nairobi

Masked attackers stormed a packed upmarket shopping mall in Nairobi yesterday, spraying gunfire and killing 30 people and wounding dozens more before holing themselves up in the complex.

The gunmen were "pinned down" after hours of painstaking evacuations, with police going shop to shop to secure the Westgate shopping mall, a security source told AFP.

"The attackers have been isolated and are pinned down in an area on one of the floors. The rest of the mall seems to be secure," a security source told AFP at the scene.

Senior police sources said they believed a well-organised "terror gang" numbering around 10 was behind the assault on the shopping centre, which was packed with around 1,000 shoppers when it was besieged at midday.

An eyewitness told AFP that he heard the gunmen speaking Arabic or Somali and saw the group executing shoppers, in what appeared to be the worst attack in Nairobi since an al-Qaeda bombing at the US embassy killed more than 200 in 1998.

The Red Cross confirmed the figure and said another 60 had been wounded in the attack.

The Kenyan government said it was too early to say who was responsible.

Police at the scene said a suspect wounded in the firefight had been detained and taken to hospital under armed guard. Earlier a police source said it had been confirmed that the attackers were holding at least seven hostages. As darkness fell over Nairobi, their fate was unclear.

PHOTO: AFP

PROVINCIAL ELECTION IN SRI LANKA

Tamils vote in historic poll

AFP, Jaffna

Minority Tamils voted in large numbers yesterday in a landmark election they hope will give them a chance at self-rule in Sri Lanka's north after decades of ethnic conflict that claimed over 100,000 lives.

Balloting closed on time after nine hours, but the main opposition Tamil National Alliance, which is expected to win the semi-autonomous Northern Provincial council election, said the military tried to intimidate and discourage voters.

Despite reports of sporadic minor "incidents", about 60 percent of the 426,000 electorate in Jaffna district voted, deputy elections commissioner S. Achchuthan told AFP.

"We took several measures to ensure people could vote freely and those steps appeared to have worked," he said. "A turnout of over 60 percent is very, very good for Jaffna."

Provisional figures indicated similar



turnouts in the four other districts in the province. Results are expected by today.

The vote in the former rebel stronghold has been promoted by the UN Human Rights Council as a step towards ethnic reconciliation after decades of fighting that ended when troops crushed Tamil separatists in 2009.

The poll was held amid international pressure on the Sinhalese-dominated national government to share power with Tamils who are a national minority, but are in the majority in the battle-scarred north.

Retired Supreme Court judge Kanagasabapathy Wigneswaran is expected to be the region's first elected chief minister in a council that will have limited powers over the local administration. He wants to work with Colombo on pushing his Tamil National Alliance manifesto, which calls for "self-government" for Tamils.

President Mahinda Rajapakse has accused the Tamil National Alliance -- a coalition of several Tamil groups, including ex-militants -- of raising expectations of a separate state.

Tamils consider Jaffna, 400 kilometres north of Colombo, as their cultural capital. It suffered extensive destruction and huge loss of life, but since the end of the war, Colombo has pumped in millions of dollars to rebuild infrastructure.

There were elections for two other provincial councils in the largely Sinhalese North West and Central regions yesterday with President Rajapakse's party expected to win both.

Afghan Taliban want peace

Claims ex-minister; Pakistan frees Mullah Baradar

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

A veteran Taliban leader claims that a majority of Afghan insurgents want to negotiate a peace deal but says their views have been suppressed by hardliners controlling the movement's propaganda machine.

Meanwhile, Pakistan released former Taliban second-in-command Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a man Afghanists believe could help tempt moderate Taliban leaders to the negotiating table and bring peace after more than a decade of war.

Pakistan's foreign ministry announced late on Friday Baradar - one of the founders of the Taliban insurgency - would be released a day later, and yesterday, Pakistani television reported Baradar had been set free.

Baradar is at the heart of Afghan efforts to kick-start a stalled peace process as US-led troops prepare to pull out at the end of next year and anxiety grows over the country's security.

Baradar was once a close friend of the reclusive Taliban leader, Mullah

Mohammad Omar, who gave him his nom de guerre, "Baradar" or "brother".

In a rare interview, Agha Jan Motasim, who was finance minister in the Taliban regime, said statements issued in recent years in the name of the insurgent leader Mullah Omar have not reflected the fugitive cleric's true views.

"Unfortunately there are hardliners and extremists in the movement who use his name. There are warmongers who have taken over his name and are putting out their own message with it," Motasim told the Guardian.

There have been no verified recordings or sightings of Omar since his government fell and he fled to Pakistan in 2001. There has also been speculation that the one-eyed former village cleric had died.

According to Motasim, Omar is alive but has lost control of the Taliban's public statements and communications with the outside world because his life on the run from the threat of drone attacks.



Mullah Baradar



BRIDE RUN Brides-to-be take the start in a charity event dubbed "Fuga de Novias" (the runaway brides) in Granada yesterday. The winners will have their wedding ceremony paid for by event organisers.

PHOTO: AFP

Attack kills more than 50 in Iraq

REUTERS, Baghdad

More than 50 people were killed in a triple bombing that targeted a tent filled with mourners in Baghdad's Shia Muslim stronghold of Sadr City yesterday, police and medical sources said.

Police said a car bomb went off near the tent where a funeral was being held, a suicide bomber driving a car then blew himself up, and a third explosion followed as police, ambulances and firefighters were gathering at the scene.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, in which at least 100 others were wounded, medics said.

A Reuters reporter said distraught survivors had attacked policemen and firefighters who tried to move them away from the scene. Puddles of blood surrounded the tent.

Iraq's delicate sectarian balance has come under growing strain from the civil war in neighbouring Syria, where mainly Sunni Muslim rebels are fighting to overthrow a leader backed by Shia Iran.

Around 800 Iraqis were killed in acts of violence in August, according to the United Nations. Earlier yesterday, four attackers killed six officers in an assault on a police station in Baiji, 180 km north of Baghdad.

ODDLY enough

US judge quits, just for laughs

CNN ONLINE

When the New Jersey Supreme Court decided that Vincent August Sicari must choose between his career as a municipal judge and his other career in the entertainment industry, he decided it wasn't yet the time to have a last laugh.

Vincent August Sicari has practiced both law and comedy for over 15 years, and in January 2008 he became a part-time municipal judge in South Hackensack. While a judge, he continued to pursue his entertainment career as a standup comedian and actor, according to court documents.

Sicari resigned in person from his judiciary position Thursday, just a few hours after the high court issued its unanimous decision.

Porsche, Mercedes seized from Thai monk

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand has seized nearly \$800,000 worth of assets, including a Porsche and a Mercedes-Benz, from a monk who was disrobed for a controversial trip in a private jet, authorities said.

Thailand's Anti-Money Laundering Office said Wiraphon Sukphon was suspected of deceiving people to give him donations.

Wiraphon went by the name Luang Pu Nuen Kham to bolster his claims to be the reincarnation of a famous miracle-performing monk.

Super typhoon lashes Taiwan, Philippines

AFP, Hengsun

Super Typhoon Usagi, the most powerful storm of the year, brought torrential rain and ferocious winds to Taiwan yesterday, leaving tens of thousands without power and throwing travel plans into disarray as it barreled towards Hong Kong.

Southern Taiwan was battered by the storm, which rolled past the Batanes island group in the far north of the Philippines overnight -- tearing coconut trees in half -- and headed on towards the Chinese mainland.

By 1100 GMT Usagi was 610 kilometres southeast of Hong Kong, forcing local carrier Cathay Pacific to warn that all its flights in and out of the city will be cancelled from 6:00 pm today.

Usagi was packing maximum sustained winds of up to 195 kilometres per hour. The typhoon also left 45,000 homes powerless and more than 5,000 households without water, it said.

Ice free Arctic in summer!

Scientists say that day isn't far away

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

The Arctic is on course for an ice-free summer within the next few decades, as scientists on Friday declared that sea ice in the region had fallen to one of the lowest annual minimums on record.

On 13 September, the expanse of frozen water in the Arctic fell to 5.10 million square kilometres, the sixth-lowest such measurement on record, the National Snow and Ice Data Center (NSIDC) said in a statement.

"The overall trend is still decidedly downwards," the NSIDC director, Mark Serreze, said in a statement. "The pattern we've seen so far is an overall downward trend in summer ice extent, punctuated by ups and downs due to natural variability in weather patterns and ocean conditions."

He went on: "We could be looking at summers with essentially no sea ice on the Arctic Ocean only a few decades from now."



Germany goes to polls today

Survey says result too close to call

AFP, Berlin

German Chancellor Angela Merkel's centre-right coalition is set for a photo finish with her rivals, the final poll before today's elections showed.

Merkel's conservatives scored 39 percent, with her pro-business allies, the Free Democrats (FDP), on six percent in the Emnid survey to appear in Sunday's Bild weekly.

Her main rivals, the centre-left Social Democrats, scored 26 percent and their preferred allies, the ecologist Greens, won nine percent.

Together with the far-left Linke party, the combined leftist opposition garnered 44 percent in the poll compared to 45 percent for Merkel's coalition.

However, the Linke has been rejected as a coalition partner by all major parties. A wild card in the election are small parties. A new eurosceptic Alternative for Germany party scored four percent, below the five-percent threshold to send MPs into the Bundestag lower house of parliament.



Angela Merkel Peer Steinbrueck

Key to the success of Merkel's current coalition is the precarious fate of her junior partners, the FDP, which crashed out of Bavaria's state parliament last Sunday.

The latest poll shows them narrowly staying in parliament but if that is not the case on election day, Merkel would have to find new partners -- most likely with her traditional rivals the SPD, with whom she ruled in a previous 2005-09 "grand coalition".

N Korea scraps family reunions with South

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea yesterday ordered the indefinite postponement of a scheduled series of reunions for families divided since the 1950-53 Korean War, dealing a setback to months of efforts to improve ties between the Korean neighbours.

Six days of meetings between family members still separated six decades after the war had been due to start on Wednesday in the Mount Kumgang resort, just north of the militarised border.

They had been seen as a step in furthering months of thaw in chilled relations compounded by the North's refusal to abandon its nuclear programme, described as its "treasured sword".

South Korea said the pullout by Pyongyang "broke the hearts" of Koreans grieving for relatives they were unable to see.

Rough justice

Pak man found not guilty in trial by fire

REUTERS, Islamabad

Seemingly impervious to pain, the murder suspect runs bare-footed across a strip of sizzling coals, raising his arms victoriously as he completes the ordeal. A group of village elders then inspects his soles and declares him innocent.

In Pakistan's remote tribal belt, where the mainstream court system has no authority, such scenes are a feature of daily life despite an intensifying government crackdown on a practice which has changed little since mediaeval times.

Feudal lords still preside over gatherings, often arranged in secrecy, to settle disputes ranging from theft to murder, and to punish women for falling in love with inappropriate men.

In the latest case that has shed new light on the ancient practice, several men were declared innocent this week after walking on hot coals in a remote part of southwestern Punjab.

A shaky video shot by a journalist and obtained by Reuters shows one of the men walking the length of a 15-foot strip of coal in a parched mountainous terrain, as more than 100 ethnic Baluch tribesmen wearing turbans look on sternly.

If coals leave no marks on the soles, then the man is declared innocent.