

NEWSIN brief

Taliban warn against US-Afghan pact

AFP, Kabul

Taliban leader Mullah Omar warned Sunday an agreement between Washington and Kabul on maintaining a US military presence in Afghanistan after 2014 would have "serious consequences".

The United States and Afghanistan are negotiating the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) on the future of US forces in Afghanistan when Nato's mission ends in late 2014, including the number of bases and the status of any

Britain to ease China visa applications

AFP, Beijing

Britain says it will make it easier for China's citizens to obtain visas, as it seeks a bigger share of the multi-billion-dollar Chinese traveller market against stiff European competition.

Chinese tourists visiting the European Union using selected travel agencies will no longer have to file a separate application to visit Britain, which is not part of the EU's "Schengen Area" for border-free travel.

Business people will also be able to apply for a "super-priority" visa, which will be processed within 24

Powerful sect shuts down Manila

AFP, Manila

More than 1.5 million people converged on the Philippine capital yesterday for a powerful Christian sect's evangelical event, causing traffic chaos that shut down large parts of the megacity.

The gathering of the secretive and politically influential Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ) in the historic district of Manila forced all schools and some government offices to close.

The Supreme Court were also suspended, while Manila's governing authority urged private employers to give their staff a paid day off to avoid the traffic.

The event is one of many ostentatious displays of faith in the mainly Catholic Philippines, where religious leaders also wield

Vietnam braces for Typhoon Nari

AFP, Hanoi

Vietnam is evacuating tens of thousands of people in the path of Typhoon Nari, state media said yesterday, after the powerful storm left 13 dead in the Philippines.

Nari is expected to slam into central Vietnam today morning, after ripping off rooftops, toppling trees and triggering flash floods in the northern Philippines

Italy steps up refugee patrols after tragedies

AFP, Rome

Italy yesterday planned a large-scale deployment of air and sea forces in the Mediterranean to manage the growing influx of asylum seekers and pressure the European Union to take action.

The plan is to triple the assets on Italy's southern maritime border ahead of an EU summit next week in which Italy wants the issue of increased refugee arrivals to be on the agenda.

"It is a deployment that will allow us to ask the European Union to do the same," Defence Minister Mario Mauro said ahead of a cabinet meeting later on Monday with Prime Minister Enrico Letta.

Ministers said the mission would be humanitarian and for security, following complaints by migrant rights advocate who said it was just the latest example of a "Fortress Europe" mentality.

The cabinet is planning to approve the final details of the operation to begin on Tuesday, with media reports saying Predator



An Indian fisherman family fix their house damaged during Cyclone Phailin in Jagannathpur village in Gopalpur, yesterday. Hundreds of thousands of people who fled India's strongest cyclone in 14 years returned home to scenes of devastation, as survivors stranded at sea during the storms were finally rescued.

PHOTO: AFP

Experts find polonium on Arafat clothing

AFP, Paris

Swiss radiation experts have confirmed they found traces of polonium on clothing used by Yasser Arafat which "support the possibility" the veteran Palestinian leader was poisoned.

In a report published by The Lancet at the weekend, the team provide scientific details to media statements made in 2012 that they had found polonium on Arafat's belongings.

Arafat died in France on November 11 2004 at the age of 75, but doctors were unable to specify the cause of death. No autopsy was carried out at the time, in line with his widow's request.

His remains were exhumed in November 2012 and samples taken, partly to investigate whether he had been poisoned -- a suspicion that grew after the assassination of Russian ex-spy and Kremlin critic Alexander Litvinenko in 2006.

That investigation is ongoing, con-

DEATH CONTROVERSY



ducted separately by teams in France, Switzerland and Russia.

In the Lancet report, eight scientists working at the Institute of Radiation Physics and University Centre of Legal Medicine in Lausanne said they had carried out radiological tests on 75 samples.

Thirty-eight samples came from Arafat's belongings, including underwear, a shapka hat, toothbrush, a hospital cap and sportswear, that were provided by the Palestinian leader's widow Suha Arafat.

These were checked against 37 "reference" samples of cotton clothing that had been kept in an attic for 10

years and protected from dust.

"Several samples containing body fluid stains (blood and urine) contained higher unexplained polonium 210 activities than the reference samples," says the case report.

"These findings support the possibility of Arafat's poisoning with polonium 210."

The polonium samples were measured at "several mBq," or millibecquerels, a unit of radioactivity.

Computer modelling, which calculates polonium's very fast decay, found that these levels "are compatible with a lethal ingestion of several GBq," or several billion becquerels, in 2004, they said.

In addition, says the report, Arafat's clinical symptoms "could not rule out" polonium poisoning. These include nausea, vomiting, fatigue and abdominal pain.

They acknowledge, though, that Arafat showed no hair loss or decline in bone marrow activity -- symptoms that typically occur in radiation poisoning.

Red Cross workers freed in Syria amid violence

Russia urges US to bring opposition to peace talks

AFP, Damascus

A car bomb killed at least 27 people in a rebel-held area of northwestern Syria yesterday as suspected jihadists freed four out of seven aid workers kidnapped in the increasingly volatile region.

The bombing and Sunday's kidnapping - both carried out in Idlib province, where rebels hold vast swaths of territory -- underscored the descent into chaos in several rebel-held areas, which have seen a recent spate of internal clashes, kidnappings and other attacks.

The blast in the town of Darkush killed at least three children, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said, adding that the death toll could rise because many of the wounded were in serious condition.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory of Human Rights said the six members of the International Committee of the Red Cross and a member of the Syrian Red Crescent were kidnapped by the Islamic State of Iraq

and the Levant (ISIL), an Al-Qaeda-linked rebel group.

The ICRC has not commented on the nationality of those abducted, though it had earlier said that most of the group were Syrian. There has been no claim of responsibility.

On the political front, the United States said there was an "urgent" need to set a date for so-called Geneva 2 peace talks, despite the rejection of the process this week by a leading opposition group.

"We believe that it is urgent to set a date to convene the conference and work toward a new Syria," US Secretary of State John Kerry said after meeting UN-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi in London.

"There has to be a transition government," he said. "This will require all the parties to come together in good faith."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had earlier called on Washington to bring the Syrian opposition to the talks proposed for mid-November.

Anti-migrant riot rocks Russia; 1,200 detained

AFP, Moscow

The Moscow authorities yesterday scrambled to calm intercommunal tensions after the Russian capital was rocked by some of its worst ethnically-fuelled rioting in years, sparked by the killing of a Russian allegedly by a Muslim migrant from the Caucasus.

Seeking to avert further protests, Moscow police detained 1,200 people in a raid on migrants as officials vowed to crack down on vegetable wholesale markets in the capital which employ hundreds illegally.

The initially peaceful protest in the Biryulyovo district of southern Moscow to protest the killing of Yegor Shcherbakov, 25, rapidly descended into bloody clashes with the police when a group of protestors attacked a wholesale vegetable market where they thought the suspected killer of Shcherbakov was hiding.

Shcherbakov was murdered overnight Thursday in the area in front of his girlfriend as they walked out of a billiards club.

Media said that security footage showed his killer was a man of "non-Slavic appearance" from the Northern Caucasus, leading nationalists to conclude the murderer was a Muslim labour migrant.

Police said Sunday evening that 394 people had been arrested at the riots and on a later raid on a local train. The RIA Novosti news agency said all would be released with the exception of 72 whose cases would be sent to court.

Police said that the situation in the district was now calm after they brought in hundreds of reinforcements in a bid to deal with the crisis and enforced their extreme "Vulkan" operation plan which is used in case of a terror attack.

US, India eye joint efforts to curb extremist funding

AFP, Washington

The United States and India agreed yesterday to step up cooperation to prevent the financing of violent extremist movements linked to Pakistan, officials said.

In annual talks between top economic officials, India and the United States spoke of "expanding cooperation on countering illicit financing, including targeting the financial networks and fund-raising activities of terrorist organizations," Indian Economic Affairs Secretary Arvind Mayaram said.

Mayaram said in a statement that efforts would target groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and the affiliated Jamaat-ud-Dawa, which investigators blame for the grisly 2008 siege of Mumbai that killed 166 people.

The statement did not provide more details on how the two sides would expand cooperation. India has been seeking to pressure the group which operates virtually in the open in Pakistan.

Mayaram also mentioned action against another Pakistan-linked movement, the Haqqani network. The group, blamed for attacks on the Indian embassy and US forces in Afghanistan, was designated last year as a terrorist group by the United States.

IRAN-P5+1 TALKS Tehran hopes for nuke 'roadmap'

AFP, Tehran

Iran's foreign minister said he hoped a "roadmap" for negotiations could be reached in nuclear talks with world powers this week but added that a higher-level meeting would probably be needed.

The Geneva talks, set to take place on Tuesday and Wednesday, will be the first such negotiations since President Hassan Rohani, a reputed moderate, took office in August.

"I hope that we will be able to reach a roadmap by Wednesday but... it will probably be necessary to have a new ministerial meeting," Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif wrote on his Facebook page late on Sunday.

A first meeting between Zarif and his counterparts from the six powers took place last month on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, which was accompanied by a landmark bilateral meeting between him and US Secretary of State John Kerry.

The negotiations will be between Iran's deputy foreign minister Abbas Mousavi and the P5+1 group Britain, France, Russia and the United States plus Germany, who will be led by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton.

After meeting Ashton in London on Sunday, Kerry said that the window for diplomacy with Iran was "cracking open".

But he also warned that Washington would remain wary during the negotiations as he spoke to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee summit in Washington via satellite from London.

"When President (Barack) Obama says that he will not allow a nuclear-armed Iran, he means what he says. I believe firmly that no deal is better than a bad deal," Kerry said.

Israel has repeatedly called on its US ally not to fall for "sweet talk" from the new Iranian president, insisting that actions not words are essential to ensure there is no possibility of Iran ever acquiring the capability to build an atomic bomb.

Israeli Intelligence Minister Yuval Steinitz yesterday called for the pressure of EU and US sanctions against Iran to be kept up, saying that was what was driving it to seek an agreement with the major powers.

Zarif will take part in the opening sessions in Geneva but Araqchi will lead the Iranian delegation during the talks.



Geneva negotiations will be between Iran's deputy foreign minister Abbas Mousavi and the P5+1 group Britain, France, Russia and the United States plus Germany, who will be led by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton.

Eat chocolate, loose weight

MAIL ONLINE

It seems dieters have got it all wrong -- cutting out chocolate is likely to make you put on weight rather than lose it, according to a survey.

In fact, the poll found that 86 per cent of slimmers who carried on enjoying their favourite treats successfully lost weight.

And of the 2,100 men and women questioned, those who lost the most weight had -- in 91 per cent of cases -- continued to eat the same amount of chocolate they normally ate before going on a weight-loss plan.

Previous research has shown that dieters who completely eliminate treats



such as chocolate, wine and biscuits are often more likely to put on weight as they 'compensate' by eating more of other foods.

One study even showed that as many as 65 per cent of those who give up all treats actually end up ballooning in weight.

And there's more good news for chocoholics, as separate research has also suggested that eating chocolate may help you live longer.

A Harvard University team studied 8,000 men for 65 years and found that those who ate modest amounts of chocolate up to three times a month lived almost a year longer than those who ate none.

Three UN peacekeepers killed in Darfur

AFP, United Nations

Attackers swooped on a UN water convoy in Sudan's troubled Darfur region Sunday, killing three Senegalese peacekeepers, the United Nations said.

It was the second deadly attack on the UN mission in Darfur, UNAMID, in three days and UN leader Ban Ki-moon called on the Sudanese government to act over the incidents.

UNAMID did not identify the group behind the latest attack in which a fourth Senegalese soldier was also wounded.

The peacekeepers were escorting a water convoy from the town of El Geneina to the UN mission's regional headquarters in West Darfur when they were ambushed, UNAMID said in a statement.

Pak court reopens Zardari graft cases

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's anti-graft court has reopened five corruption cases against former president Asif Ali Zardari dating back to the 1990s, officials said yesterday.

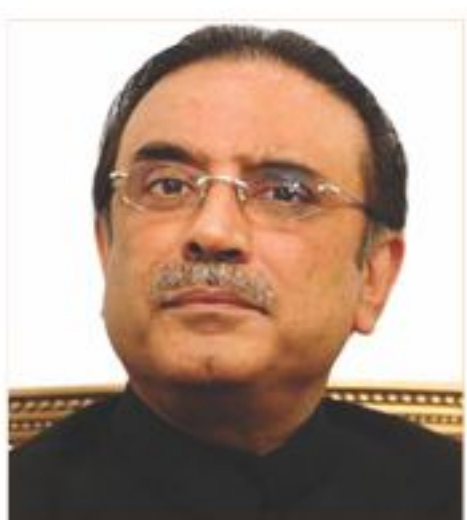
The allegations against Zardari relate to kickbacks, money laundering and the illegal construction of a polo ground at the prime minister's official residence, during his slain wife Benazir Bhutto's two stints as premier.

As president immunity from this ended when after five years in now an anti-has taken up the "The account-ordered former Zardari to appear on October 29," told AFP.

The probe includes corruption allegations relating to customs contracts given to two Swiss companies that were behind a long-running tussle between the Supreme Court and the last government, led by Zardari's Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

For more than two years PPP ministers refused to write to the Swiss to ask them to reopen their probe into claims Zardari and Bhutto laundered \$12 million worth of bribes.

In June Swiss prosecutors refused to reopen the cases, saying no new evidence had emerged since they were dropped in 2008 and in any event the statute of limitations had expired.



Zardari enjoyed prosecution, but he stepped down September and corruption court cases. ability court has president Asif Ali before the court a court official



Russian riot policemen detain two men at the end of a rally in Moscow's southern Biryulyovo district on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP