

NEWSIN
brief

Iraq blasts kill 44

AFP, Baghdad

Eleven car bombs exploded in Baghdad province on Thursday, killing at least 44 people and wounding more than 120 others, Iraqi security and medical officials said. With the latest attack, more than 390 people have been killed so far this month, and over 5,100 since the start of the year, according to AFP figures based on security and medical sources.

Bushfires rage in Australia

AFP, Winnalee

Residents faced scenes of devastation yesterday after bushfires ravaged communities and destroyed "hundreds" of homes in south-eastern Australia, leaving one man dead with dozens of blazes still out of control. Wildfires are common in Australia's summer months, and authorities are expecting a rough season this year due to low rainfall in the winter and forecasts of hot, dry weather ahead.

Abbas invites pope to Middle East

AFP, Vatican City

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas during a Vatican audience on Thursday invited Pope Francis to the Middle East, saying he would "walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ". Abbas gave the pope a ceramic panel with a view of Bethlehem and a Bible as gifts, while Francis gave him a decorative pen with which Abbas said he hoped to sign a peace agreement with Israel. "Soon, soon," the pope responded.

Philippines airport 'world's worst'

AFP, Manila

The Philippines' main Manila airport terminal has been named the world's worst for the second year in a row in a survey by an online travel website. Reviews for Manila's Terminal 1 posted on the site mentioned "dilapidated facilities", dishonest airport workers -- particularly taxi drivers -- long waiting times and rude officials. The terminal at the Italian airport of Bergamo was named the second. Its third-worst was Calcutta, just edging out Islamabad, ahead of Paris Beauvais.

Tymoshenko free to go abroad

AFP, Donetsk

Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich announced for the first time Thursday he was ready to allow jailed rival Yulia Tymoshenko to go abroad for medical treatment, as Kiev seeks to remove the key obstacle on the path to a deal with the European Union. EU leaders have made clear that Ukraine will only be able to sign an Association Agreement -- the first step to eventual EU membership -- at a summit in Vilnius in late November if Tymoshenko, a former prime minister, is released.

China Couple sell baby for iPhone

AFP, Shanghai

A young Chinese couple are facing criminal punishment for "selling" their infant daughter and using the proceeds to buy an Apple iPhone, state media said yesterday. Shanghai prosecutors have brought a case against them for human trafficking after they illegally put their third child up for adoption online and accepted money for the baby, the Liberation Daily reported. Investigators found the mother, whose full name was not given, used the money to buy an iPhone, high-end sports shoes and other goods, it said.



TYPHOON WIPHA DEVASTATES JAPAN COAST

Policemen search for missing people after a landslide on Oshima island, 120 km south of Tokyo, yesterday. Japanese coast guard personnel were scouring waters off the coast of a Japanese island where landslides buried houses after a huge typhoon rolled through on early Wednesday, as the death toll reached 24.

PHOTO: AFP

S Arabia rejects UNSC seat

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia rejected membership of the UN Security Council yesterday, a day after it was elected to the body, accusing it of "double-standards" in resolving world conflicts.

"Work mechanisms and double-standards on the Security Council prevent it from carrying out its duties and assuming its responsibilities in keeping world peace," the foreign ministry said.

"Therefore Saudi Arabia... has no other option but to turn down Security Council membership until it is reformed and given the means to accomplish its duties and assume its responsibilities in preserving the world's peace and security," a statement said.

For the first time ever, oil-rich, conservative Saudi Arabia won a seat Thursday on the 15-member council, which has a key role in dealing with world conflicts. Saudi Arabia was chosen by the 193-member UN General Assembly, along with Chile, Chad, Lithuania and Nigeria.

The foreign ministry said Saudi Arabia declines to be a member of a body unable to tackle long-standing conflicts in the Middle East or rid the region of the threat of nuclear war.

It pointed specifically to the nearly three-year civil war in Syria and the protracted Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as key reasons.

The ministry also criticised the body's "failure" to turn the Middle East into a region free from weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear arms -- in a reference to Iran and Israel.

Clashes rage in Syria as US pushes peace talks

AFP, Damascus

Fierce fighting raged in Syria's east yesterday, where rebels killed a top intelligence officer and executed 10 soldiers, as the United States pushed for new peace talks.

US officials said Secretary of State John Kerry would head to Europe for discussions on a planned peace conference in Geneva, which a Syrian official said could come at the end of November.

But the prospects for the conference, dubbed Geneva 2, remain unclear, with the Syrian opposition divided and due to vote next week on whether to take part.

On the ground, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported fierce clashes that began in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor overnight continued yesterday.

The group, which relies on a network of activists, doctors and lawyers, also reported regime air strikes wounded several people and damaged homes in Deir Ezzor city.

They followed rebel advances in the Rashdiya neighbourhood, where a top intelligence officer Major General Jamaa was killed on Thursday.

The Observatory said Jamaa, who was in charge of military intelligence in Deir Ezzor province, was hit by sniper fire during clashes in Rashdiya between troops and jihadist fighters.

It also reported that fighters of the al-Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra Front executed 10 soldiers after capturing them during the clashes.

The fighting came a day after Syria's Deputy Prime

Plane crashes into river in Laos

44 on board killed

AFP, Pakse

Rescuers have recovered the bodies of more than half of the victims of Laos's worst known air disaster, officials said yesterday, as families began to hold funerals for the dead.

All those on board died when the Lao Airlines turboprop ATR-72 plunged into the Mekong River in stormy weather on Wednesday near Pakse airport in Champasak province.

More than half of the 49 passengers and crew were foreigners from 10 countries.

Volunteers searched the river on boats of all sizes, mustered for the grim task of plucking the dead from the turbulent waters -- in some cases many miles from the crash site.

Thai officials at a crisis centre said at least 26 bodies have been found so far.

"We have not found the remains of the plane. It is believed that many of the passengers' bodies are stuck inside," said Russ Jalichandra, a Thai consul to Laos.

At the riverbank local people said prayers, laying flowers and burning incense near where the plane is thought to have dived into the water. The aircraft sank to the bottom of the river and rescuers said recovering the wreckage would be an extremely difficult task, complicated by raging currents.

The flight from the capital Vientiane was carrying 44 passengers and five crew, including 28 foreigners.

Lao Airlines said the aircraft hit "extreme" bad weather while witnesses described seeing the plane buffeted by strong winds caused by tropical storm Nari.



India mulling C'wealth summit boycott

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Manmohan Singh, the Indian prime minister, has written to powerful politicians in the south of India to assure them he has yet to make a final decision on whether to travel to the controversial Commonwealth summit in Sri Lanka next month.

Observers say his most recent letter, the latest in a series, and the continuing delay indicates Manmohan is increasingly concerned by the domestic political cost of attending the Commonwealth heads of government meeting in Colombo and is genuinely considering a boycott.

However, a no show from the leader of the Commonwealth's biggest member would be a huge blow to the credibility of the organisation.

The issue poses a particular dilemma to the Indian government. Relations between India, a large but troubled country with a population of 1.25 billion, and Sri Lanka, which is a small middle-income country of 22 million, are complex and often tense.

Chinese influence has grown significantly in recent years and there are fears in Delhi that further deterioration would allow Beijing to make more inroads in the island nation.

However, with a tough election expected next spring, which is, at best, likely to lead to frantic coalition-building, alienating local voters or potential allies for Singh's beleaguered Congress party would be costly.

CATS, DOGS, DONKEYS HALAL!

BBC ONLINE

A group of Syrian clerics have issued a ruling - or fatwa - allowing people living in besieged suburbs of Damascus to eat meat that is normally forbidden.

In a video, the Muslim clerics said people could eat cats, dogs and donkeys to stave off hunger. The fatwa comes amid reports of starvation in the besieged, rebel-held Damascus suburb of Muadhhamiya.

Aid agencies have urged the government to allow humanitarian supplies to the area, where many residents are trapped.

The clerics said it was a cry for help to the whole world, adding that if the situation continued to deteriorate, the living would have to eat the dead.

CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY TRIAL ICC partially excuses Kenyan president

AFP, The Hague

The International Criminal Court yesterday partially excused Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta from his upcoming crimes against humanity trial to allow him to fulfil his "demanding" political duties at home.

Kenyatta, who was elected president in March, has long argued that the trial in The Hague would hamper his running of the country.

"The trial chamber conditionally excuses Uhuru Kenyatta from continuous presence at his trial starting November 12," the ICC said in a statement, but insisted he be present for the opening hearing.

The court in the Netherlands also insisted that Kenyatta be present when all parties in the case make their closing statements, when victims testify and also, if need be, at sentencing hearings.

Kenyatta and his deputy William Ruto have both been charged by the ICC for allegedly masterminding a vicious campaign of ethnic violence that left at least 1,100 dead and more than 600,000 homeless after disputed 2007 elections.

Last week, the African Union urged the UN Security Council to delay Kenyatta's trial, which is due to start on 12 November.



High school students demonstrate in Paris on Thursday in protest against the deportation of foreign pupils following the high-profile eviction of a 15-year-old Roma girl. Leonarda Dibrani was detained by police during a school trip earlier this month and deported to Kosovo along with her parents and five siblings -- a case that has triggered an angry backlash and landed France's Interior Minister Manuel Valls in hot water.

PHOTO: AFP

Modi boosts India opposition's hopes

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Indian opposition hardliner Narendra Modi has boosted his party's chances of winning looming general elections since being named as its prime ministerial candidate last month, an opinion poll showed Thursday.

The poll also predicted regional parties will be a key factor in deciding who gets to rule India. Regional parties, it said, were expected to get as many as 240 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats in 2014.

The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would win 162 seats in the lower house of parliament if election results reflected the survey, well ahead of the scandal-hit ruling Congress party, forecast to win 102.

But a coalition led by the BJP was expected to win just 186 seats, according to the poll, meaning it would need to win over new allies such as small or regional parties to clinch the 272 seats needed to form a government.



Modi, three times chief minister of thriving Gujarat state, was declared the BJP's candidate in September as the opposition gears up for elections due to be held by May, despite his polarising character.

Many are convinced Modi, 63, can replicate Gujarat's economic success at the national level and revive India's slumping growth, but he remains tainted by deadly religious riots that erupted in his home state.

The survey, conducted by pollsters Team Cvoter for two television channels, suggests Congress, hit by corruption scandals and claims of policy paralysis, would struggle to win a third term in office, sinking to 102 seats at elections from the 206 it holds now.

The BJP has increased its popularity since Modi was named, with a survey by the same pollsters conducted in August predicting the party would win 130 seats, compared with 162 now, in the 545-seat lower house of parliament.

Maldives set for 'doubtful' polls today

AFP, Male

The Maldives' electoral commission yesterday warned that this weekend's presidential polls could be scrapped at the last minute as two of the candidates have still to endorse the voting roll.

Just hours before polling stations were due to open, commission chairman Fuwad Thowfeek said former president Mohamed Nasheed was the only one of the three candidates who had approved the lists -- a legal prerequisite for today's contest to proceed.

Nasheed, a pro-democracy campaigner who claims he was ousted in a coup last year, won 45.45 percent of the votes cast when the Indian Ocean archipelago went to the polls for a first round of voting on September 7.

IRAN NUKE NEGOTIATIONS

Israel bitter as world hails positive talks

AFP, Jerusalem

The world's positive response to the latest nuclear talks with Iran drew bitter scepticism from Israel, which warned its Western allies Thursday they risked being duped into easing sanctions prematurely.

Energy Minister Silvan Shalom, a former foreign minister, went further, accusing the European Union and the United States of being more concerned with relaxing restrictions on Iranian oil exports to boost their own economies than with addressing an issue that Israel regards as a threat to its very existence.

Washington, which has had no diplomatic relations with Tehran since the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic revolution, said Iranian negotiators had shown a greater level of "seriousness and substance" in this week's talks than ever before.

But Israel, which has mounted a massive lobbying campaign in the United States to keep up the economic and military pressure on its number one foe, insisted that Iran's

intentions could be proved only by concrete steps to wind down its nuclear programme, not by "sweet talk" from its new president.

"Iran will be judged by its actions and not by its presentations," a senior Israeli official said.

"The pressure of sanctions brought Iran to this point and must continue until Iran is stripped of its nuclear military programme."

After the talks in Geneva on Tuesday and Wednesday, Iranian officials touted a "breakthrough" in the decade-old negotiations on allaying international concerns over its nuclear ambitions.

They said they were hopeful of a "new phase in our relations" with the world, after they outlined a three-step plan, including spot checks on its nuclear facilities, to try to reach a comprehensive agreement "within a year."

Although there was no official response from the office of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's army radio quoted a source close to him as taking a hard line.

ODDLY enough

Living man ruled 'legally dead'

BBC ONLINE

A US man declared dead after he disappeared nearly three decades ago cannot now be declared officially alive, though he has returned home and is in good health, a judge has ruled.

Donald Miller of Ohio left behind a wife, two children and significant debt when he fled his home in 1986. He was declared legally dead in 1994, then re-emerged in 2005 and attempted to apply for a driving licence.



A judge this week found death rulings cannot be overturned after three years.

Judge Allan Davis handed down the ruling in Hancock County, Ohio, probate court on Monday, calling it a "strange, strange situation", according to media reports.

"We've got the obvious here. A man sitting in the courtroom, he appears to be in good health," he said, finding that he was prevented by state law from declaring Miller legally alive.

"I don't know where that leaves you, but you're still deceased as far as the law is concerned."

Miller has 30 days to appeal against the Ohio court's ruling, according to media reports.