

NEWSIN brief

Ex-Thai PM faces indictment

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's attorney general has decided to prosecute former premier Abhisit Vejjajiva, now the opposition leader, and his ex-deputy on murder charges related to a bloody crackdown on anti-government protests in 2010, officials said yesterday.

About 90 people died and nearly 1,900 were wounded in the clashes between "Red Shirt" demonstrators and security forces in central Bangkok.

Iran bans reformist newspaper Bahar

AFP, Tehran

Iran's press watchdog has imposed a ban on reformist newspaper Bahar for publishing an article seen by critics as questioning the beliefs of Shia Islam, media reported yesterday.

Bahar has issued an apology note, saying publishing an article last week was an "unintentional mistake. Iran's Culture Minister Ali Janati said the daily had received earlier warnings before the ban.

Kirchner looses ground in vote

AFP, Buenos Aires

President Cristina Kirchner begins the final stage of her presidency weakened after setbacks in Sunday's mid-term vote, though her supporters held on to a majority in Congress.

The setback dashes any hopes of gaining a two-thirds legislative majority to re-write the constitution and allow her to run for a third term in office, as was once hoped.

'Islamists kill 35 troops in Nigeria'

AFP, Kano

Thirty-five bodies in military uniform have been brought to a morgue in Nigeria's restive northeast after a coordinated assault by Boko Haram targeting the security forces, a hospital source told AFP yesterday.

Sources said large numbers of Boko Haram fighters stormed police stations in Damaturu ensuing hours-long heavy fighting. Boko Haram has repeatedly worn military uniforms as a disguise during attacks and it was not yet clear if the corpses were those of insurgents or troops.

Sudan conflict: Abyei votes to decide fate

AFP, Abyei

Residents of the flashpoint Abyei region claimed by both Sudan and South Sudan were voting yesterday in an unofficial referendum to decide which country they belong to, a move likely to inflame tensions in the war-ravaged region, officials said.

More than half of the 65,000 registered voters have already cast their ballot in the three-day vote, he said.

Phone-hacking trial opens in Britain

AFP, London

The first trial from the phone-hacking scandal that sank Rupert Murdoch's News of the World opened yesterday with his key aide Rebekah Brooks and the prime minister's former media chief Andy Coulson in the dock.

They are among eight defendants who will face a jury for the first time over the scandal two years ago that rocked the British newspaper industry and sent shockwaves through the establishment.

Dressed in a camel-coloured coat, Brooks looked relaxed and smiled as she walked into the court building, also 45, arrived with his legal team.

The defendants face charges ranging from hacking the voicemails of including a schoolgirl and as Paul McCartney, plus bribing public officials for stories and hiding evidence.

All the defendants deny any wrongdoing.

The jury is expected to hear explosive testimony about the scandal that forced Australian-born Murdoch to shut down the News of the World in disgrace in 2011, and threatened to drag in Prime Minister David Cameron's government.

Prosecution's opening statement is not expected until today at the earliest.

A public inquiry ordered by Cameron and led by judge Brian Leveson heard evidence on the scandal, but it is the first time that criminal charges will be put to the alleged key players.



A blaze sent clouds of smoke billowing into the air near a giant portrait of Mao Zedong that hangs at one end of in Beijing's Tiananmen Square yesterday as a vehicle ploughed into crowds killing five people, including a Philippine tourist, and injuring 38 others. Witnesses and reports said the SUV vehicle drove along the pavement outside the Forbidden City, the former imperial palace, before crashing -- prompting speculation the incident was intentional.

PHOTO: AFP

US denies Obama link

AFP, Berlin

Transatlantic tensions reached boiling point yesterday as Washington denied reports President Barack Obama knew US spies were tapping German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Leaked documents from former US intelligence contractor Edward Snowden indicate that US spy agencies accessed the electronic communications of dozens of world leaders and possibly millions of foreign nationals.

As outrage over secret US surveillance of leaders and average citizens mounted with a tide of new reports, a delegation from the European Parliament was due in Washington to demand answers on the extent of the operations.

The European Parliament said its delegation's three-day mission to Washington would probe US authorities on the impact of surveillance programmes "on EU citizens' fundamental rights" and discuss a recent request to suspend an EU-US agreement on the transfer of bank data in the wake of the scandal and seek clarity on the charges of spying on Merkel.

The outrage came on the heels of a

SPYING ON MERKEL

60.5m calls in Spain tapped

US security services tracked 60.5 million telephone calls in Spain in a single month, according to a leaked document published in a Spanish newspaper yesterday.

Spain denounced the alleged mass US eavesdropping, calling it "inappropriate and unacceptable". The Spanish government delivered the message to US Ambassador James Costos, summoned to explain the latest revelations.

Wall Street Journal article that Obama learned of the electronic surveillance of Merkel and other world leaders in an internal mid-year review.

The White House then ordered an end to the programmes, according to the Journal.

German media had reported at the weekend that eavesdropping on Merkel's phone may have started in 2002.

And the daily Bild am Sonntag quoted US intelligence sources as saying that Obama himself had been informed of the phone tap against Merkel by NSA

chief General Keith Alexander in 2010 but allowed it to continue.

NSA spokeswoman Vane Vines however denied the allegation.

"Alexander did not discuss with President Obama in 2010 an alleged foreign intelligence operation involving German Chancellor Merkel, nor has he ever discussed alleged operations involving Chancellor Merkel," Vane said Sunday.

According to the Journal, Obama was "briefed on and approved of broader intelligence-collection 'priorities,'" but deputies decided on specific targets because it would have been impractical to brief the president on all of eavesdropping operations.

"These decisions are made at NSA," the unnamed official told the Journal.

"The president doesn't sign off on this stuff."

Some programmes have been scheduled to end but have not yet been terminated due to the complicated nature of surveillance: a leader such as Merkel may be communicating with someone else whom Washington is monitoring, officials told the newspaper.

Israel strikes Gaza after rocket attacks

Tel Aviv says violence won't impact Palestine prisoner release

AFP, Gaza

Israeli warplanes raided the northern Gaza Strip yesterday after militants fired rockets over the border, as Israel readied to free a new batch of Palestinian prisoners.

It was the first Israeli air strike on Gaza since August 14 when the air force hit targets in the same area shortly after two rockets were fired towards southern Israel.

That attack occurred just hours after Israel released the first of four batches -- 26 out of 104 Palestinian prisoners -- in line with commitments which led to a resumption of direct peace talks July 30, following months of sustained US pressure.

The Israeli military confirmed the air strike targeting a training ground west of Beit Lahiya which was used by militants from the armed wing of Gaza's ruling Hamas movement.

But yesterday's scuffle along the Gaza border was not expected to have any impact on plans to free a second batch of prisoners, with a senior official telling AFP it "won't delay" the release of 26 long-term inmates.

Last week, an Israeli official said that in parallel with the release, a new batch of tenders would be announced for construction in settlements in the West Bank and annexed east Jerusalem, in a move allegedly coordinated in advance with the US and the Palestinians.

The Palestinians have denied any such link.

UN RIGHTS MEET

Israel to attend summit after German threat

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel will attend a UN human rights review today, a top official told AFP after media reported that Germany had warned of a diplomatic backlash if it stayed away.

Haaretz newspaper earlier reported that Germany warned Israel of "severe diplomatic damage" if it fails to attend the meeting.

The daily said the warning had come in the form of a personal letter from German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, delivered to the Israeli embassy in Berlin on Friday "with the instruction that the prime minister receive it as soon as possible."

Brahimi arrives in Syria

Russia slams rebels for threatening Geneva talks

AFP, Damascus

UN-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi yesterday arrived in Damascus to seek support for a Syria peace conference, as Russia slammed rebels for threatening those planning to attend the so-called Geneva II talks.

Brahimi, who is in a regional tour to drum up support for Geneva talks,, arrived at the Sheraton hotel accompanied by Syrian deputy foreign minister Faisal Mogdad.

The Syria leg of his mission is the most sensitive as he needs to persuade a wary regime and its hostile opponents to attend the talks.

The initiative's backers, Washington and Moscow, have struggled to win the support of the warring parties in Syria, where more than 115,000 people are estimated to have been killed in the 31-month conflict.

In the latest blow, 19 Islamist groups fighting to topple Assad issued a statement Sunday saying the Geneva conference "is

not, nor will it ever be our people's choice or our revolution's demand."

The statement went on to say that anyone who attends such talks would be committing "treason" and "would have to answer for it before our courts," implying they could face execution.

Russia yesterday issued a stinging rebuke to the rebels.

"It is outrageous that some of these extremist, terrorist organisations fighting government forces in Syria are starting to make threats," Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in televised comments. "The threats are directed at those who have the courage to

attend the proposed Geneva conference being offered by Russia and the United States with the entire world's support."

Al-Watan newspaper in Damascus linked the rebels' rejection to the cooling in ties between Washington and Riyadh over both the Syrian conflict and ties with its regional rival, Iran.



CEASEFIRE VIOLATION

India says officer killed in Pak firing

AFP, Srinagar

India said one of its soldiers was killed when Pakistan troops fired early yesterday across the border in Kashmir, the latest in a series of deadly flareups in the disputed Himalayan region.

The soldier was killed just after midnight at an army post along the northern part of the heavily militarised border that divides the two countries in Kashmir, an Indian army spokesman said.

The incident came hours after senior officials of the two armies held scheduled phone talks on Sunday aimed at easing tensions in the region, that has recently seen some of the worst firing since a ceasefire agreement a decade ago. Both sides have accused each other of violating the truce agreed in 2003.

India's Border Security Force said last week that 50 frontier posts had been targeted in an escalation of small arms firing and shelling over the last month -- despite public pledges to reduce tensions there.

Pakistan, in turn, accused India of killing a Rangers soldier and two civilians last Wednesday during firing and injuring 26 civilians. The recent increase of cross-border firing has caused alarm between the two nuke-powered neighbours.

ODDLY enough



World's tallest man finds his love

AFP, Ankara

Turkey's Sultan Kosen, at 2.51 metres (eight foot three) the world's tallest man, has wed a Syrian woman, Mervi Dibo, he called the "love of my life", though he towers over his 1.75-metre bride.

The groom's black suit was custom made, requiring six metres of fabric, Anatolia reported.

Kosen won global fame in September 2009 when Guinness World Records declared him the tallest man in the world.

His growth has resulted from a tumor affecting his pituitary gland. Kosen is forced to use crutches in order to walk.