

# NEWS IN brief

## French hostages freed in Niger

Four Frenchmen held hostage in the Sahara desert by al-Qaeda-linked gunmen for three years left Niger on a French government plane yesterday, with questions raised in France over whether a ransom had been paid. The men's release could benefit President Francois Hollande politically a day after a poll showed he had become the most unpopular French president on record, dogged by repeated rows over taxes, immigration and terrorism.

## Egypt detains key Brotherhood leader

Egyptian authorities yesterday detained senior Muslim Brotherhood figure Essam al-Erian, one of the last few leaders of the Islamist movement to have escaped a security crackdown, the interior ministry said. Security forces arrested Erian, deputy leader of the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, in the early hours of Wednesday at an apartment in east Cairo where he had been in hiding. The Islamist leader faces charges of inciting violence.

## Oman detects first MERS infection

Oman has discovered the first case of the MERS coronavirus in the Gulf sultanate, Health Minister Ahmed al-Saeedi said yesterday. The Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV) has so far claimed 62 lives worldwide, with most of the deaths occurring in Saudi Arabia, according to the World Health Organisation. The WHO said last week there was a total of 144 confirmed cases of the respiratory

## Kenya train collides with bus: 12 killed

Twelve people were killed and several others injured yesterday when a passenger train in Kenya's capital smashed into a bus at a crossing, police said. The train crashed into the side of the bus as it crossed the railway line during the peak hours of morning rush hour, local police commander Benjamin Nyamane said. The accident, in Nairobi's Eastlands district, took place as the roads were crowded with passengers.

## US curbs financing to overseas coal projects

The United States said Tuesday it would end most financing of coal projects overseas, taking a potentially significant step to curbing carbon emissions blamed for climate change. The decision puts into action one of President Barack Obama's pledges when he announced a new climate initiative in June. The effort comes amid forecasts that the world must do far more to achieve a UN-supported goal of limiting global warming to two degrees Celsius above

## UN warns over millions of teenage mothers

Around 7.3 million girls under the age of 18 give birth each year in developing countries, risking death and suffering that can only be addressed by changing social attitudes, a UN report said yesterday. Most are in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, with one in 10 girls in Bangladesh, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Mozambique and Niger reporting having a child before the age of 15, the UN Population Fund

# Parties meet to form third front in Indian politics

### Raise voice against threats from fascist, communal forces

Amid efforts to form a Third Front, several regional parties including Left, JD(U), AIADMK, BJD and UPA ally NCP yesterday came together at a convention in New Delhi with their leaders pitching for unity among them to defeat the "threat" from fascist and communal forces.



JD(U) leader and Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar appeared to target BJP's prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi as he said some leaders go after those who oppose their views or ideologies and talk about "cleansing" them. He accused Modi of power obsession. Addressing the 'Convention against Communalism', he said the 17 parties assembled at the meet should forge "maximum possible unity" to defeat the threat from "fascism, communalism

and terrorism" to the country. "The question being asked is that if this convention means formation of a new front. As of today, this is not the case. But we all have to think that in the face of fascism, communalism and terrorism, democratic forces should maintain maximum possible unity on issues to combat and defeat such powers," he said. Kumar said that in the aftermath of riots in UP's Muzaffarnagar, there has been a realization about the need to raise voice against the threat of communalism.

The convention, organized by the Left parties, is being seen as an attempt for forge a conglomerate of non-Congress and non-BJP parties ahead of the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. SP chief Mulayam Singh Yadav, whose party is in power in Uttar Pradesh, said Muzaffarnagar riots were fomented by communal forces. "At least we got together (on the same platform). If we unite, communal forces will not be able to raise their head ... We have crushed communal forces and we will continue to crush communal forces whenever they rear their head again," he said. Yadav's colleague Ram Gopal Yadav said the meeting was a "beginning" for the shape of things to come in the future. NCP leader Praful Patel justified the party's participation in the convention, saying "in the era of coalition politics, we have to keep our options

## India bus crash inferno kills 45

A speeding bus exploded in a ball of flames after crashing into the central reservation of a southern Indian highway early yesterday, killing 45 passengers as they slept. Only five people on the vehicle escaped the inferno, including the driver and the cleaner who broke windows and fled before the fuel tank exploded, police said. "The total number of charred bodies found is 45, including that of a small child," L Sarman, a senior district administrative official, told AFP. "The driver was speeding at about 120-130 kilometres (75-80 miles) an hour. He was driving all night, it seems he may have fallen asleep at the wheel," said Sarman. Fatalities were high even by the deadly standards of India, where bus crashes are common, particularly on the treacherous roads of the northern Himalayas. Police arrested the driver and cleaner. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh expressed "sorrow over the loss of lives in the bus accident", while the state government asked police to investigate the matter and submit a report. The Times of India reported that at least five of the victims were software engineers who were travelling home to celebrate Diwali, the Hindu festival this Sunday.

## WORLD'S MOST POWERFUL LEADER Putin topples Obama



Having outfoxed him on Syria, Russian President Vladimir Putin has now pipped Barack Obama to the title of the world's most powerful leader as ranked by Forbes yesterday. It was the first time in three years that the US president has dropped to second place on the magazine's list and came as US-Russia relations slid to a new low. Putin, who has enjoyed 12 years of dominant rule over Russia, was again elected president in April. Obama, on the other hand, has just emerged scathed from an embarrassing 16-day US government shutdown caused by a budget and debt crisis in Washington. "Putin has solidified his control over Russia, while Obama's lame duck period has seemingly set in earlier than usual for a two-term president -- latest example: the government shutdown mess," wrote Forbes. In August, Russia granted asylum to former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, wanted in the United States over a mammoth intelligence leak. A month later, Putin played the trump card again by averting Obama's threatened missile strikes on Syria with a plan for Damascus to hand over chemical weapons. "Anyone watching this year's chess match over Syria and NSA leaks has a clear idea of the shifting individual power dynamics," Forbes wrote. The 2013 list of 72 powerbrokers was chosen to reflect one for every 100 million lesser mortals on Earth. Third prize went to Chinese President Xi Jinping, who is expected to rule for a decade in which China is set to eclipse the US as the world's largest economy. Pope Francis made his debut at number four and German Chancellor Angela Merkel rounded out the top five.



Palestinian prisoners' relatives wait behind a fence for their release at Erez point in the northern Gaza Strip on Tuesday. Inset, a Palestinian released prisoner hugs his mother at his family house in al-Shatee refugee camp in Gaza City, yesterday.

## Israel okays new settler homes

### Palestine accuses Tel Aviv of destroying peace process

Israel's announcement that it plans to build 1,500 new settler homes in occupied east Jerusalem after freeing 26 Palestinian prisoners is destroying the peace process, the Palestinian Authority said yesterday. Plans to build the homes in the city's Arab sector came to light almost immediately after Israel began freeing 21 prisoners to the West Bank and another five to the Hamas-run Gaza Strip overnight. The sequence was almost a mirror image of August 13, when a first tranche of 26 prisoners was freed and Israel announced construction of more than 2,000 new settler homes, mostly in east Jerusalem. Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas's spokesman, Nabil Abu Rudeina, said the move "destroys the peace process and is a message to the international community that Israel is a country that does not respect international law". Earlier, a senior official told AFP that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Interior Minister Gideon Saar had "agreed on four



presidential compound in Ramallah. After a tearful reunion with relatives, many of them were carried through the crowds on people's shoulders, their hands held aloft in victory. "There will be no (peace) agreement if so much as one Palestinian prisoner remains behind bars," Abbas told the excited crowd, referring to the 5,000 or so inmates Israel is still holding. The move to ramp up settlements was mooted last week by a senior Israeli official who said it had been coordinated in advance with the Palestinians and the Americans. But Abbas, speaking shortly before the Israeli announcement, flatly denied that. All 26 prisoners were convicted of killing Israelis, with most of the attacks occurring before the 1993 Oslo accords, which granted the Palestinians limited self-rule but failed to usher in an independent state. The prisoner release has sparked tensions within Netanyahu's coalition, with the premier describing the decision to free them as "one of the most difficult" he had ever

## TIANANMEN 'TERROR ATTACK' Suspects caught as Uighurs fear crackdown

Chinese police captured five suspects over a "terrorist attack" in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, they said yesterday, the first time authorities have admitted to such a strike taking place in the capital. Beijing police said that the sports utility vehicle, which crashed in the symbolic heart of the Chinese state and burst into flames killing its three occupants and two tourists on Monday, had licence plates belonging to the restive western region of Xinjiang. The names given to the passengers sounded like names from the mostly Muslim Uighur ethnic minority constituting 46 percent of the population in Xinjiang. It was a "carefully planned, organised and premeditated violent terrorist attack", the statement said, adding that the car carried petrol, knives and banners bearing extremist religious content. Meanwhile, World Uyghur Congress president Rebiya Kadeer in a statement issued from Washington, fearing the for the future of East Turkestan -- the name which the activist organisation uses to refer to Xinjiang, said, "The Chinese government will not hesitate to concoct a version of the incident in Beijing, so as to further impose repressive measures on the Uighur people." In a notice to Beijing hotels on Monday, police identified two suspects and four car number plates, all from Xinjiang, in relation to a "major case". Prominent Uighur intellectual Ilham Tohti told AFP that he feared the event "could lead local governments to increase repression and discrimination" against the minority group and that evidence of the "terror attack" carried out by Uighurs was lacking.



Mourners gather after a train rammed into a public service bus in Nairobi, yesterday. The accident happened at a crossing point killing at least 12 passengers in the bus.

## Syrians alone will decide on Geneva talks: Assad

500 evacuated from besieged Damascus suburb. President Bashar al-Assad insisted in a meeting Wednesday with peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi that the Syrian people alone will decide the fate of a peace initiative dubbed Geneva II. The encounter came a day after the Red Crescent oversaw the evacuation of about 500 women, children and elderly civilians from a besieged town near Damascus, in an operation that saw rare cooperation between the regime, its opponents and the international community. Assad also reiterated his long-standing position that in order for Syria to have peace, foreign nations must halt their support of rebels and opposition groups seeking to topple his regime, state television reported. "The Syrian people are the only ones who have the right to decide on Syria's future, and any solution or agreement must have the acceptance of the Syrian people, and reflect their desires," Assad told Brahimi. Brahimi's meeting with Assad comes as part of a regional tour aimed at garnering support for a US-Russian peace initiative for Syria planned next month in Geneva. Assad also warned there must not be "any foreign intervention" in seeking a solution to Syria's civil war, in which an estimated 115,000 people have died in 31 months. "Putting an end to support for the terrorists and pressuring the states that support them is the most important step to prepare... for dialogue," Assad said, using his regime's term for rebels. State television also reported UN-Arab League envoy Brahimi as agreeing with Assad that the Syrians themselves need to find a solution to the conflict ravaging the country.

## Attacks on troops, blasts kill 35 in Iraq

Three suicide bombings killed 14 Iraqi security force members overnight, officials said yesterday, the deadliest in a series of attacks that left 35 people dead in two days. The attacks come as Iraq witnesses its worst violence since 2008, a surge in unrest that has killed more than 5,400 people this year that has persisted despite authorities having carried out a swathe of operations and implemented tightened security measures. Since the beginning of 2013, AFP has recorded just 16 days in which there were no deaths from violence in Iraq, the most recent of which was May 24. Experts say Baghdad should turn to longer-term efforts that build trust among citizens, especially members of the country's Sunni minority.

## PHONE HACKING TRIAL 'Practice was rife at Murdoch's NoW'

Top executives at Rupert Murdoch's News of the World knew that staff were routinely hacking celebrities' phones, British prosecutors said yesterday as they opened their case at the long-awaited trial over the scandal that sank the tabloid. Two former editors of the newspaper -- Murdoch's protegee Rebekah Brooks and Andy Coulson, a one-time media chief to Prime Minister David Cameron -- are among eight defendants at the high-profile trial. It is the first time that criminal charges have been put to alleged key players in the scandal that rocked the British media and the political world two years ago. Brooks, Coulson and the six others are accused of offences ranging from plotting to illegally hack celebrities' phones to concealing evidence and bribing officials for stories. All the defendants deny the charges against them. Opening the case at London's Old Bailey court, prosecutor Andrew Edis said the jury had "quite a simple" question to consider. "There was phone hacking," he told the panel of nine women and three men. "Who knew?" Three former senior journalists at the News of the World -- Greg Miskiw, James Weatherup and Neville Thurlbeck -- have pleaded guilty to conspiracy to hack phones, Edis revealed. Murdoch shut down the 168-year-old News of the World in disgrace in July 2011 amid a storm of allegations that its staff had hacked the mobile phone voicemail messages of a murdered schoolgirl as well as hundreds of celebrities and public figures.

### ODDLY enough

#### Women driven to fury by Beijing police road tips

Don't wear high heels while driving. Make sure you release the handbrake before setting off. And don't panic if you suddenly realise you're going the wrong way. Those are some of the suggestions given by the Beijing police department to women drivers in a series of microblog postings that have sparked a backlash among Chinese Internet users who say the tips are sexually discriminatory. Web users responded with anger at what they condemned as sexual discrimination on an account maintained by the authorities. One woman van driver in Beijing dismissed the police advice. "What do you mean, women can't drive?" she asked, jerking her head towards the back of her vehicle and laughing. "Look, I'm carry-