

Kerry to visit Egypt tomorrow

US Secretary of State John Kerry will arrive in Cairo tomorrow for his first visit to Egypt since the army overthrew president Mohamed Morsi in July, state media said.

Kerry's visit comes at a time of strained relations between the traditional allies after Washington suspended some military aid to Egypt following Morsi's ouster.

Court grenade attack kills 2 in Russia

A Russian man unhappy with a prior conviction walked into a Urals court-room yesterday and detonated a grenade, killing himself and one other person, news agencies reported.

Two others were injured in the incident, which occurred in the Kurgan region, about 1,000 miles east of Moscow. He appeared to be carrying three military grenades, ITAR-TASS reported.

Vast Antarctic sanctuary plans fail

Plans to create two vast ocean sanctuaries in Antarctica to protect the pristine wilderness failed yesterday for a third time, with Russia and China blocking the bids, delegates at 24-nation talks said.

The 10-day talks ended with the nations unable to agree to a US-New Zealand proposal for a protected zone in the Ross Sea and another by Australia, France and the European Union for a sanctuary off East Antarctica.

Environmentalists said an ocean wilderness that is home to 16,000 known species, including whales, seals, albatrosses, penguins and unique species of fish, was at stake.

'Anonymous' strikes Singapore on press freedom

Activist group Anonymous hacked a Singapore newspaper website yesterday over Internet freedom in the city-state, where government agencies are now reportedly on alert for wider cyber attacks.

The website of the pro-government Straits Times was hacked early in the day by apparent members of the group, which is opposing recently introduced licensing rules for news websites in Singapore on censorship grounds.

Germany allows 'indeterminate' gender at birth

Germany has become Europe's first country to allow babies with characteristics of both sexes to be registered as neither male nor female.

Parents are now allowed to leave the gender blank on birth certificates, in effect creating a new category of "indeterminate sex".

The move is aimed at removing pressure on parents to make quick decisions on sex assignment surgery for newborns. As many as one in 2,000 people have characteristics of both sexes.

They are known as "intersex" people because they have a mixture of male and female chromosomes or even genitalia which have characteristics of both genders.

German passports, which currently list the holder's sex as M for male or F for female, will have a third designation, X, for intersex holders, according to the interior ministry.



US President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama hand out treats to local children and children of military families as they trick-or-treat for Halloween on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, DC, on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Israel raids Syria to halt arm supply to Hezbollah

Peace envoy says no peace talks without opposition

AFP, Damascus

Israel has reportedly bombed a Syrian base to halt an arms shipment to Hezbollah, while the international Syria envoy said yesterday there could be no peace talks without the opposition.

The reported air strike on a military base in regime stronghold Latakia on Wednesday would be the first Israeli strike on Syria since a US-Russian accord on chemical weapons averted punitive US military action last month.

Israel did not comment on the reports that emerged Thursday, but it has struck Syria in the past and warned it will continue to take action to prevent sophisticated weapons from falling into the hands of Hezbollah -- a key Damascus ally -- and other militant groups.

Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya television said Israel had targeted a shipment of surface-to-surface missiles destined for Hezbollah, the powerful Lebanese Shia movement fighting alongside the regime.

A US official confirmed to AFP that "there was an Israeli strike" but gave no details on the location or the target.

Syria, which has cooperated with international

disarmament efforts, has vowed to retaliate against any attack but did not respond when Israel carried out two air strikes in May.

Hoping to build on the momentum of last month's US-Russian accord to destroy Syria's chemical arsenal by mid-2014, UN-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi has meanwhile been crisscrossing the region to rally support for the so-called Geneva II talks.

But Syria's opposition has refused to attend unless President Bashar al-Assad's resignation is on the table -- a demand rejected by Damascus -- and powerful rebel groups have warned that anyone attending the talks will be viewed as a traitor.

"If the opposition does not participate there will be no Geneva conference," Brahimi told reporters in Damascus before travelling to Beirut.

The main opposition National Coalition plans to meet November 9 to decide whether to attend the Geneva talks, but a key member of the bloc, the Syrian National Council, has said it will leave the umbrella group if it does so.

The reports of the Israeli strike came as the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons said all of Syria's chemical arms were under "tamper proof" seals.

Snowden ready to testify over Merkel spying

AFP, Moscow

US intelligence leaker Edward Snowden is ready to talk with German prosecutors in Russia, his lawyer said yesterday, after the fugitive met a German lawmaker over his evidence that Washington spied on Chancellor Angela Merkel.

The former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor, who was also due to begin work at an undisclosed Russian Internet firm, was granted asylum in Russia in August to the fury of the United States, where he faces trial.

The Kremlin-friendly lawyer added: "Within the framework of international agreements Snowden can give testimony in Russia but this should be decided by the German authorities."

On Thursday, Snowden met with Green party lawmaker Hans-Christian Stroebele for three hours over reports that the US spied on the German government.

Kucherenka said Snowden's meeting with Stroebele was "not bad," adding that the German lawmaker

had asked the American whether he could be a "witness in the case".

The fugitive handed the German lawmaker a letter addressed to the German government, the Bundestag lower house of parliament and the Federal Public Prosecutor, Stroebele's office said.

In the letter, Snowden said he was prepared to provide details of US spying to Germany and his was



"heartened" by the global response to his leaks despite the unrelenting US pressure.

German interior minister Hans-Peter Friedrich yesterday said in Berlin that the government would like to speak to the American.

India's secular front to get bigger: CPM

TNN, New Delhi

A day after convention against communalism, CPM said the group of 14 political parties is likely to get enlarged significantly in the future. "It is not a closed list," CPM weekly People's Democracy said.

CPM also highlighted the way Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar and Samajwadi Party (SP) leader Mulayam Singh Yadav gave "enthusiastic calls for strengthening unity in the coming days". The party said that even as the convention was in progress messages came from various parties and groups from across the country that they would like to be associated with such campaigns in the future.

The convention, CPM said, reflected the rich diversity and plurality of the Indian social mosaic.

CPM said BJP's effort is integral to advance the RSS project of the metamorphosis of the modern Indian secular democratic republic into their version of Hindu nation. CPM said, "Sharpening of communal polarisation through fascist demagoguery and the triumph of the RSS project will only signal the death of the ideals enshrined in our Republican Constitution".

CPM said the fact that the convention made it clear that its primary objective was to strengthen people's unity against communalism.

RESUMPTION OF PEACE TALKS Taliban denies Pakistan's claim

AFP, Miranshah

The Pakistani Taliban yesterday said they have had "no contact" with the government, a day after officials said a process to initiate peace talks had been started.

The government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has been edging towards peace talks to end the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) bloody six-year struggle against the state, which has left thousands dead.

Last month Sharif won the backing of the main political parties to go ahead with dialogue, and the powerful army chief has voiced his support.

Officials said Thursday that the "process of dialogue" had started but no formal talks had taken place yet.

Shahidullah Shahid, the main spokesman for the TTP told AFP that there had been no overtures.

After the political parties gave their backing to talks, the TTP issued a list of preconditions including the release of all its members held in Pakistani jails and the withdrawal of troops from the tribal areas along the Afghan border, where the militants have hideouts.



A newspaper vendor sells newspapers carrying headlines commenting a new media bill in Nairobi, yesterday. Kenya's media reacted with shock and outrage after parliament voted through a bill that could see journalists and outlets slapped with huge fines for violating a code of conduct.

PHOTO: AFP

Obama meets Maliki as war still tears Iraq

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama welcomes Iraq's Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to the White House yesterday, as sectarian violence in the country hits its deadliest peak since April 2008.

The Oval Office talks take place nearly two years after the last American troops left Iraq following an eight-year occupation and as a wave of al-Qaeda attacks sows terror in the Iraqi Shiite community.

The violence is stirring fears the country may slide into an abyss exacerbated by the brutal war rending Syria next door.

October was Iraq's deadliest month since April 2008, with 964 killed and another 1,600 wounded, according to data from the Iraqi ministries of health, interior and defense.

The vast majority of those killed were civilians.

"The security situation is not only bad ... it not only could reverse all of the gains of 2008, it could tear the

country apart if both Maliki and the United States do not act quickly," said James Jeffrey, who was until last year the US ambassador to Iraq and is now with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

General David Petraeus, who led the troop surge credited by some with quelling the last sectarian explosion in Iraq, warned in a Foreign Policy article that the situation was now so dire that the past sacrifices of US troops could be squandered.

Maliki, blamed by some Iraq watchers in Washington for marginalizing Sunnis and for sinking a well of sectarian anger for extremists to exploit, is blunt about the challenge.

"The terrorists found a second chance," he said in a speech in Washington Thursday, warning al-Qaeda and allied groups were a "virus."

Maliki has a wish list of US military hardware, including attack helicopters to go with already ordered fighter jets to help his ill-equipped military battle insurgents.

US unearths new drug 'supertunnel'

AFP, Los Angeles

US and Mexican authorities have unearthed another sophisticated "supertunnel" used to smuggle drugs beneath their common border, the third since 2011, officials said Thursday.

Zig-zagging for a third of a mile beneath the border between San Diego and Tijuana, the newly-constructed tunnel was equipped with an electric-powered rail system to carry the drugs, as well as ventilation.

The tunnel was built at an average depth of 35 feet, and was 4 feet high by 3 feet wide.

Construction likely took a year or more, officials said, adding that it was the work of "engineers and architects." It included hydraulically-controlled steel doors.

SETTLEMENT EXPANSION Palestine threatens to sue Israel

Power outage hits Gaza

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian foreign minister Riyad al-Malki denounced Israeli plans to build hundreds of new settler homes in east Jerusalem, threatening to pursue international legal action in response.

Israel announced on Wednesday it would build 1,500 new settler homes in the mostly Arab sector of Jerusalem, immediately after the Jewish state released 26 long-serving Palestinian prisoners in line with its commitments to US-backed peace talks.

Israel says it never promised to freeze settlement during talks.

The Palestinians agreed to refrain from pursuing legal action against Israel during ongoing peace talks, but have repeatedly warned that continued settlement building would force them to recourse to the International Criminal Court and other international bodies.

The settlement issue derailed the last round of peace talks in 2010.

Meanwhile, a shortage of fuel halted the production of electricity across the Gaza Strip yesterday, said the energy authority of the Islamist movement Hamas, which controls the Palestinian enclave.

An AFP correspondent in the Gaza Strip said the electricity supply had been cut off across most of the territory.

ODDLY enough



The boy who feels no pain

STAR DESK

Isaac Brown is a 5-year-old boy from Iowa who suffers from a rare genetic condition which makes him immune to pain, but not to the effects of his frequent injuries.

Isaac was born with a congenital insensitivity to pain (CIP) and, according to his parents, the first years of his life years were especially hard as the boy "would just drop to the ground and smack his face on the table. He thought the fall was fun."

His parents sought medical help but were disappointed to find that his condition was untreatable. The only advice medics were able to give the couple was to teach Isaac to recognize pain.