

NEWS IN brief

Nepal vote counting begins

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese officials began counting votes yesterday, with analysts hailing the high turnout in polls seen as vital in stabilising the country and cementing a peace process seven years after a civil war ended.

Millions of Nepalis cast their ballots on Tuesday for a constituent assembly tasked with writing a new constitution, defying threats of poll violence by a breakaway faction of the Maoist party.

"The vote counting has begun," Election Commission spokesman Bir Bahadur Rai told AFP. Preliminary results are likely to emerge within three days, with full results expected in about ten days.

S Africa mall collapse: Search suspended

AFP, Tongaat

South African emergency workers yesterday said hope was fading of finding survivors under a collapsed half-built mall near Durban as heavy machinery was called in to remove the rubble.

One person has died and 29 people have been rescued after the vast roof of the structure collapsed on Tuesday afternoon in the town of Tongaat. The cause of the roof collapse

Ten Egyptian troops killed in Sinai

AFP, Cairo

A car bomb struck an army convoy killing at least 10 soldiers in the Sinai yesterday, the army said.

It said in a statement that 35 others were wounded. The bomb struck near the regional capital, an official said, adding that an explosives-laden parked car exploded as the convoy passed. A bus carrying soldiers on leave took the brunt of the blast at around

Venezuela leader gets special powers

REUTERS, Caracas

Venezuelan lawmakers granted President Nicolas Maduro yearlong decree powers on Tuesday that he says are essential to regulate the economy and stamp out corruption but adversaries view as a power grab.

The passage of the decree powers on Tuesday was widely expected and Chavez passed nearly 200 laws by decree during his time in office, including legislation that let him nationalize major oil projects and increase his influ-



Thai Red Shirts supporters cheer during a rally at a stadium in Bangkok, yesterday. Thailand's ruling party yesterday escaped the threat of dissolution, demanded by the opposition, in a key court verdict saving the country from fresh turmoil. But the court has ruled that government plans to amend the constitution are illegal.

PHOTO: AFP

Guarded optimism as Iran nuke talks begin

AFP, Geneva

World powers and Iran late yesterday kicked off talks aimed at reaching a landmark nuclear deal as Tehran's supreme leader vowed there would be no retreat from "red lines".

The first plenary session in Geneva lasted less than 10 minutes. Diplomats however downplayed the significance of the unexpected brevity of the initial meeting, as more detailed discussions are expected today.

A senior US official said the first meeting was "meant in many ways as a kick-off, to lay a quick basis for how we go forward." Another diplomat called it a "brief introductory session".

But comments from the supreme leader earlier yesterday indicated that this week's round of talks -- the third since Hassan Rohani's election as president in June raised hopes of a deal -- may not be easy.

In an anti-Israel diatribe that France said would "complicate" the Geneva negotiations, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said: "I insist on not retreating one step from the rights of the Iranian nation."

Iran's lead negotiator Abbas Araqchi said meanwhile that "the lost confidence must be regained", in reference to the last round of talks 10 days ago in Geneva when divisions

emerged among the powers.

The United States, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany, known as the P5+1, want Iran to suspend certain parts of its nuclear programme for a period of several months in a "first phase".

A longer-term agreement would then be hammered out in the meantime that would reduce Iran's programme to a size acceptable to the international community.

But Israel, widely assumed to have a formidable nuclear arsenal itself, has expressed alarm at the mooted deal, as have hardliners in Washington arguing for more sanctions.

Instead of stopping all uranium enrichment, as multiple UN Security Council resolutions have demanded, the powers appear to be satisfied with a suspension of enrichment above five percent purity.

For Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who arrived in Moscow yesterday where he sought to harden Russian President Vladimir Putin's stance, this leaves intact Iran's ability to make a bomb.

Putin said after the talks that he hoped for a "mutually acceptable" solution while the Israeli leader called for a "real solution" to the crisis.

Israel has refused to rule out bombing Iran, as it was assumed to have done with an Iraqi reactor in 1981 and a Syrian site in 2007.

It remains to be seen whether Iran, seeking an easing of UN, US and EU sanctions that have more than halved the country's lifeblood oil exports, will accept the minor relief the P5+1 offering in return.

If Rouhani's "charm offensive" fails to secure quick and substantial relief from the sanctions, the Iranian president risks losing the support of arch-conservatives and, most importantly, that of the supreme leader, experts say.

Nevertheless Iran's foreign minister was upbeat about the prospects of reaching a deal in Geneva, after a previous, high-drama round in the same Swiss city came close but ultimately failed.

US President Barack Obama, fresh from seeking to dissuade lawmakers from imposing new sanctions on Iran, was more cautious on Tuesday: "I don't know if we will be able to close a deal this week or next week."

Calling the talks a "historic opportunity", British Foreign Secretary William Hague said in Turkey that the differences were "narrow and ... can be bridged through political will and

Afghan-US security pact hits obstacle

REUTERS, Kabul

The text of a US-Afghan pact that sets out a blueprint for military cooperation -- how many troops will stay in Afghanistan, where they will be based and what they can and cannot do -- after most foreign troops pull out next year was unfinished yesterday.

Without the accord the United States has warned it could withdraw all of its troops by the end of 2014 and leave Afghan forces to fight alone against a Taliban-led insurgency.

The last-minute politicking between Kabul and Washington provoked frustration among Afghan elders who gathered for a grand assembly to debate the pact in the capital.

Last-ditch efforts to finalise the pact stalled on Tuesday over differences over whether President Barack Obama had agreed to issue a letter acknowledging mistakes made during the 12-year Afghan war.

Poor countries stage walk out

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Representatives of most of the world's poor countries have walked out of increasingly fractious climate negotiations after the EU, Australia, the US and other developed countries insisted that the question of who should pay compensation for extreme climate events be discussed only after 2015.

The orchestrated move by the G77 and China bloc of 132 countries came during talks about "loss and damage" -- how countries should respond to climate impacts that are difficult or impossible to adapt to, such as typhoon Haiyan.

Developing countries have demanded that a new UN institution be set up to oversee compensation but rich countries have been dismissive, blocking calls for a full debate in the climate talks.

Connie Hedegaard, EU climate commissioner, ruled out developing countries most important demand, insisting "We cannot have a system where we have automatic compensation when severe events happen around the world. That is not feasible."

The G77 and China group claims to be unified with similar blocs including the Least Developed Countries, Alliance of Small Island States and the Africa Group of negotiators.

Hedegaard poured cold water on last week's related proposal by Brazil, that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change be asked to find a way to quantify each country's historical emissions of greenhouse gases in order to help countries establish the level of future emission cuts.

Debate on the issue has been rejected by rich countries, which fear it could lead to unacceptable costs.

Harjeet Singh, ActionAid International's spokesman on disaster risk, said: "The US, EU, Australia and Norway remain blind to the climate reality that's hitting us all, and poor people and countries much harder. They continue to derail negotiations in Warsaw that can create a new system to deal with new types of loss and damage such as sea-level rise, loss of territory, biodiversity and other non-economic losses more systematically."

UN CLIMATE TALKS



UN chief Ban Ki-moon poses with a bamboo bicycle as part of efforts to tackle climate change during a session of United Nations Climate Change Conference COP 19 in Warsaw, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



A soldier holds his 2-year-old son during a homecoming ceremony in the Natcher Physical Fitness Center on Fort Knox in the early morning hours of yesterday in Fort Knox, Ky. The 250 soldiers returned to Fort Knox after a nine-month combat deployment working alongside Afghan military and police forces in Afghanistan's Zabul Province.

PHOTO: AFP

Violence across Iraq kill 33; scores injured

AFP, Baghdad

A wave of attacks killed 33 people yesterday in the latest bout of deadly violence to hit Iraq.

The bombings and shootings, come just months ahead of general elections, have forced Iraqi officials to appeal for international help in combatting the country's worst unrest since 2008.

At least eight explosions, including seven car bombs, went off mostly against Shiite Muslim neighbourhoods of the Iraqi capital in areas ranging from the city's main commercial district of Karrada to Shaab, as well as Sadrriyah from about 7:30 am (0430 GMT) onwards, leaving 28 people dead and more than 70 wounded, according to security and medical officials. One car bomb also went off in the Sunni-majority neighbourhood of Adhamiyah in north Baghdad.

In a separate attack, gunmen assassinated Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's chief bodyguard in his home in the city of Sulaimaniyah, according to a police spokesman.

Multiple shootings in Baghdad and the main northern

Syria arms may be destroyed at sea: OPCW

AFP, The Hague

Syria's over 1,000 tonnes of chemical weapons could be destroyed at sea if no country agrees to dispose of them on its soil, the world's chemical watchdog said yesterday.

"This possibility has been looked at for some time already," Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) spokesman Christian Chartier told AFP of destroying the chemicals at sea.

"It's still being looked at and is one of several solutions envisaged by member states and as long as a decision has not been taken, it remains a possibility," Chartier said.

"This possibility doesn't exclude the fact that member states continue to think about the possibility of destroying them on land," Chartier added.

The world is in agreement about destroying Syria's chemical weapons as part of a US-Russia deal aimed at heading off strikes on the Damascus regime after deadly chemical attacks in August.

But despite consensus on destroying the chemicals outside war-ravaged Syria, no country has yet been found ready to have them destroyed on its soil.

Syria is cooperating with the disarmament operation and has already said it had approximately 1,290 tonnes of chemical weapons.

The OPCW's Executive Council on Friday approved a final roadmap for ridding Syria of its arsenal by mid-2014, with a plan on how to destroy them out of the country to be approved by December 17.

Surveillance row Indonesia suspends Australia cooperation

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesia's president yesterday suspended cooperation with Australia in the sensitive area of people-smuggling, denouncing Canberra's "Cold War" behaviour following allegations its spies tapped his phone.

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono also announced that cooperation would be temporarily halted in a number of other areas, including military exercises and intelligence exchanges.

But the most important area for the new Australian government of Tony Abbott will be people-smuggling, as it tries to stem the flow of asylum-seekers arriving by boat from Indonesia.

It was the latest angry outburst from Indonesia over reports, based on documents leaked by US intelligence fugitive Edward Snowden, that Australian spies tried to listen

Philippines typhoon China boosts aid after criticism

AFP, Beijing

China was sending an emergency response crew to the Philippines yesterday nearly two weeks after super typhoon Haiyan wreaked devastation, following staunch criticism over meagre help from the world's second-largest economy.

Foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei told reporters the first batch of 30 Chinese Red Cross relief workers was leaving for the Philippines yesterday, with a 51-strong emergency medical assistance team following "within the next few days".

A naval hospital ship, the 14,000-ton, 300-bed "Peace Ark", will also sail for the Philippines on Thursday to join the relief effort, Hong added.

The Chinese government, which disputes sovereignty over parts of the South China Sea with the Philippines, at first contributed just \$100,000 in disaster aid in the wake of Haiyan, but last Thursday added an additional \$1.6 million in supplies such as tents and blankets.

The first of them arrived on Monday, according to China's official Xinhua news agency.

Malala receives EU Sakharov rights prize

AFP, Strasbourg

Pakistani teenager Malala Yousafzai was handed the EU's prestigious Sakharov human rights prize yesterday in recognition of her crusade for the right of all children, girls and boys, to an education.

To thunderous applause announcing the European Parliament prize, the assembly's president Martin Schulz praised the 16-year-old activist as "a survivor, a heroine and an extraordinary young woman" and said: "You have given hope to millions of people."

Malala, dressed in orange and with her father Ziauddin at her side, became the 25th winner of the Sakharov prize at the ceremony significantly held on World Children's Day, with 21 of the former winners present.

Past winners of the 50,000 euro (\$68,000) prize also include South African anti-apartheid hero Nelson Mandela and former UN secretary general Kofi Annan.

Accepting the award "in the name of God", Malala spoke out for the 57 million children in the world deprived of education, emphasising the lack of schooling for girls, often because of forced marriages, trafficking, poverty and sexual violence.

"Children don't want an iPhone, an Xbox or chocolates," she said as lawmakers rose to their feet. "They just want a book and a pen." Governments need to cut military spending and invest instead in education to create "a country with a talented, educated and skillful people", she said.



ODDLY enough

Million-dollar gold stash found in plane toilet

AFP, Kolkata

Cleaners working on a commercial plane in eastern India have found 24 gold bars worth more than \$1 million stuffed into a toilet compartment, officials said yesterday.

India has witnessed a spike in smuggling after import duties were hiked three times this year to try to dampen demand for the precious metal.

The plane belonging to Jet Airways was being cleaned at Kolkata airport on Tuesday after a trip from Patna. It had previously been flying on international routes.

The one-kilogram gold bars have not been claimed by anyone. No arrests has