

NEWSIN

brief

Tymoshenko starts hunger strike

AFP, Kiev

Jailed Ukrainian opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko went on a hunger strike yesterday in solidarity with thousands of pro-European protesters outraged with the ex-Soviet state's shock decision to scrap a key EU pact.

The fiery co-leader of the 2004 pro-Western Orange Revolution made her announcement in a letter read out Monday night to 20,000 EU integration supporters

Saudi, Kuwait tighten controls on clerics

REUTERS, Dubai

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have been quietly reining in their clerics on concerns that preachers could use their influence to stir up trouble and inflame sectarian divisions at a time of high tension over the crises in Syria and Egypt.

Authorities in Saudi Arabia have declined to respond to local media reports in recent months which said nearly 20 clerics had been sacked or suspended. In Kuwait, the authorities have resumed the monitoring of sermons, pulled a television preacher off the air and deported a

Spying Row: Malaysia calls Singapore envoy

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's foreign ministry yesterday summoned the ambassador from neighbouring Singapore over a media report that the city-state helped with US-Australian surveillance in the region.

Malaysia had already summoned the heads of the US and Australian missions earlier in November in protest at reports that a vast US-led surveillance network included a listening post in

Nato launches largest-ever cyber drills

AFP, Tallinn

Nato yesterday launched its largest-ever cyber exercises to practise warding off massive, simultaneous attacks on member states and their partners.

Based at the alliance's cyber defence centre in EU member Estonia, the exercises will last three days and include participants in over 30 European states. Around 400 legal and IT experts as well as government officials will take part in the operation code-named "Cyber

India marks Mumbai Attacks anniversary

AFP, Mumbai

India yesterday marked the fifth anniversary of militant attacks on Mumbai with memorial services and prayers as victims recounted the three days of carnage that left 166 peo-

ARUSHI MURDER CASE

Parents jailed for life for killing daughter

AFP, Ghaziabad

A prosperous Indian dentist couple were sentenced to life in prison yesterday for slitting the throats of their teenage daughter and domestic servant in a case that transfixed the nation.

Rajesh and Nupur Talwar had been convicted on Monday of murdering Aarushi, 14, and Nepalese employee Hemraj Banjade at their home in an affluent New Delhi suburb in 2008, following a trial whose every detail was scrutinised by the media.

Judge Shyam Lal rejected prosecution requests for the death penalty during a hearing yesterday, instead giving the couple life in jail for the killings that investigators allege were carried out with "clinical precision".

The couple's jailing was the latest twist in the long-running case that has been awash with sexual rumours and allegations of police bungling and media bias.

Investigators said the Talwars killed Aarushi in a fit of rage after finding her with the 45-year-old servant in an "objectionable position", suggesting the double murder was a so-called honour killing. The couple, successful, middle-class dentists, vowed to appeal the conviction.

Aarushi, whom friends described as a chirpy, high-achieving student, was found on her bed with her throat cut one morning in May 2008.

Obama defends Iran nuke policy

Gulf states cautiously welcome deal

AFP, San Francisco

US President Barack Obama defended his administration's Iran policy but said "huge challenges" remained to successfully implement a landmark deal on Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

Obama has come under fierce criticism from Republican rivals at home and key allies abroad, such as Israel, for pursuing a diplomatic solution to the Iran question.

Israel decried the breakthrough agreement reached in Geneva on Sunday -- under which Tehran agreed to curb its nuclear program in return for an easing of sanctions -- as a "historic mistake."

Obama, however, insisted that the US policy of diplomacy twinned with sanctions had been more productive than rhetoric, stating that "tough talk" alone would not guarantee US security.

"For the first time in a decade, we've halted the progress on Iran's nuclear program," Obama said. "Key parts of the program will be rolled back."

Obama said diplomacy would continue over the coming months in a bit to settle "once and for all" the "threat of Iran's nuclear program."

"Huge challenges remain, but we cannot close the door on diplomacy, and we cannot



rule out peaceful solutions to the world's problems," Obama said. "We cannot commit ourselves to an endless cycle of violence."

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states, despite their mistrust of Iran, gave a qualified welcome on Monday to Tehran's interim deal with world powers over its disputed nuclear programme.

The kingdom said it hoped further steps would follow that would guarantee the rights of all states in the region to peaceful nuclear energy.

Earlier, Qatar and Kuwait came out in favour of the deal struck on Sunday after marathon talks in Geneva, saying they hoped it would help to preserve regional stability and security.

Egypt seeks to cut foreign support to Brotherhood

Approves contentious new protest law

AGENCIES

Locked in a crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood since president Mohamed Morsi's ouster, Egypt has launched a diplomatic offensive against the movement's foreign backers armed with funds from its old foes.

On Sunday, Egypt's interim president Adly Mansour approved a controversial law that regulates demonstrations and gives authorities the power to ban protests deemed a "threat" to national security, officials said. The law also says protesters can be jailed for up to five years if found guilty of offences ranging from covering their faces to carrying weapons while participating in demonstrations.

But Egypt launched to cut foreign links soon after Morsi ouster. In their first salvo soon after Morsi was toppled, the military-installed rulers took aim at Qatar -- the only Gulf monarchy that openly supported the Brotherhood -- by closing the Egyptian channel of Al-Jazeera television.

In addition, officials said Cairo was willing to return to Qatar funds given to Egypt during the Morsi presidency.

But the main confrontation for the new authorities is a diplomatic one that has developed with Turkey, which is being governed by moderate Islamists.

On Sunday, Cairo expelled Ankara's ambassador after Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan condemned the repression of Morsi's supporters.

For Shadi Hamid, research director at the Brookings Doha Center, "Egypt's ruling military leaders are clearly not tolerating any backing to the Muslim Brotherhood, either inside the country or outside".

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, who historically despise Muslim Brotherhood, announced they would give \$9 billion to Egypt just days after Morsi's ouster on July 3. They even promised to make up for any shortage of military assistance Cairo normally gets from the US.

Analysts say, after initial reluctance, many countries had already accepted what has happened in Egypt. Washington too is slowly stepping back from its earlier stance, with US Secretary of State John Kerry recently accusing the Brotherhood of "stealing the revolution" of 2011 that ousted long-time ruler Hosni Mubarak.

Pope eyes to reforming papal powers



AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis called for reform to take powers away from the Vatican and said Catholics should be more engaged in helping the needy as

he outlined his vision for the Church in a key Vatican document released yesterday.

The Catholic leader said he was "open to suggestions" on how his role should change -- using an informal style in his first "apostolic exhortation", which marked a break from his predecessor Benedict XVI.

Francis said it was time for "a conversion of the papacy", adding that "excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church's life".

"Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world.

Bishops should have "genuine doctrinal authority", he said in the document -- a type of long open letter used by popes to communicate with their faithful.

Francis has instituted a council of cardinals to advise him on reforms including a shake-up of the Vatican bureaucracy after a series of high-profile scandals in recent years and disquiet in many local churches.



A Thai opposition protester holds a banner with pictures of prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra, inset, and her brother and ex-premier Thaksin Shinawatra during a rally at the occupied Finance Ministry in Bangkok, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



Syrian foes to attend Geneva peace talks

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Syria's government and opposition will meet for the first time in Geneva in January, in an attempt to halt the nearly three-year-old civil war that has killed more than 100,000 people, the United Nations has announced.

Previous attempts to bring the two sides together have failed, mainly because of disputes over who should represent the government and opposition, the future role of President Bashar al-Assad, and whether Iran, Saudi Arabia and other regional powers should be at the table.

The UN secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, urged the government and opposition to help the conference succeed by taking steps to stop the violence, provide access for humanitarian aid, release detainees and help hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced people return to their homes.

He said a key goal of the conference, scheduled for 22 January, would be the establishment of a transitional government with powers over military and security.

The UN statement did not specify who would represent Syria's opposition at the talks, but Britain's foreign secretary, William Hague, said the main opposition group, the Syrian National Coalition, would participate.

Thailand in turmoil again

Protesters paralyse more ministries; PM faces no confidence vote

AFP, Bangkok

Thai opposition protesters besieged several more ministries in Bangkok yesterday to try to topple the government, as Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra faced a no-confidence motion in parliament and warned against "mob rule".

Tens of thousands of demonstrators have rallied against Yingluck and her brother, ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra, in the biggest street protests since 2010, when more than 90 people were killed in a military crackdown.

Recent protests were sparked by the ruling Puea Thai plans to introduce an amnesty that could have allowed the return from self-imposed exile of Thaksin. Outrage over that plan failed to ebb after the amnesty was quashed by the Senate on November 11.

Demonstrators surrounded the

interior, agriculture, transport, and sports and tourism ministries, ordering officials inside to leave, a day after occupying the finance and foreign ministries.

Suthep Thaugsuban, the rabble-rousing leader of the anti-government protests, called late yesterday for demonstrators to rally at the "remaining government ministries" and provincial offices nationwide today.

The turmoil has caused international concern and raised fears of fresh street violence in a country that has been rocked by several episodes of political unrest since royalist generals overthrew Thaksin in a 2006 coup.

The billionaire telecoms tycoon-turned-politician draws strong support from many of the country's rural and urban working class. But he is loathed among the elite and the middle classes, who accuse him of being corrupt and a threat to the monarchy.

Security has been tightened on Bangkok's streets since the expansion late Monday of the Internal Security Act, which gives authorities additional powers to block routes, impose a curfew, ban gatherings and carry out searches.

A Thai court yesterday approved an arrest warrant for Suthep -- who resigned from the opposition Democrat Party to head the rallies -- in connection with the occupation of government buildings.

Yingluck yesterday reiterated that authorities would "absolutely not use violence" as she arrived at parliament, which was guarded by dozens of police.

The no-confidence motion was introduced by the Democrats.

Debate continued late into the night yesterday and the ruling Puea Thai party, which holds a comfortable majority, is expected to win the censure



Scotland files case for independence

AFP, Glasgow

An independent Scotland would keep Queen Elizabeth II as its monarch but create its own defence force, nationalist leader Alex Salmond said yesterday as he unveiled detailed proposals ahead of next year's historic referendum.

Launching his regional government's long-awaited "white paper" on independence, Salmond said he could build a "wealthier and fairer nation" if Scots vote on next September 24 to end the 300-year-old union with London.

Among the proposals in the 670-page tome, an independent Scotland would take 90 percent of revenues from the North Sea oil reserves lying off its shores and would no longer play host to Britain's Trident nuclear deterrent -- both highly contentious issues.

An independent Scotland would continue to use the pound as its currency, but would ditch the BBC as its national broadcaster.

Despite the push, some 47 percent Scott people are currently planning to vote against independence.

The document plans for Scotland to celebrate its independence day on March 24, 2016 and hold its first parliamentary elections in May 2016.

CIA turned Gitmo inmates into double agents: Report

The Guardian Online

In the early years after 9/11, the CIA turned some Guantánamo Bay prisoners into double agents then sent them home to help the US kill terrorists, current and former US officials said.

The CIA promised the prisoners freedom, safety for their families, and millions of dollars from secret accounts.

It was a risky gamble. Officials knew there was a chance that some prisoners might quickly spurn their deal and kill Americans. For the CIA, that was an acceptable risk in a dangerous business. For the American public, which was never told, the programme was one of the many secret trade-offs the government made on its behalf. At the same time the government used the fear of terrorism to justify jailing people indefinitely, it was releasing dangerous people to work for the CIA.

The programme, Penny Lane, was carried out in a secret facility built near the prison's administrative offices in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

Nearly a dozen current and former US officials described aspects of the programme. All spoke on condition of

anonymity as no one was authorised to discuss the secret programme publicly by name, even though it ended in about 2006.

Some of the men who passed through Penny Lane, which opened by early 2003, helped the CIA find and kill many top al-Qaeda operatives, current and former US officials said. Others stopped providing useful information and the CIA lost touch with them.

Candidates were ushered from prison to the relative comfort of Penny Lane, officials said. The cottages had private kitchens, showers and televisions. Each had a patio.

Current and former officials said dozens of prisoners were evaluated but only a handful, from a variety of countries, were turned into spies who agreed to work for the CIA.

Prisoners agreed to co-operate for a variety of reasons, officials said. Some received assurances that the US would settle their families. Another thought al-Qaeda had perverted Islam and believed it was his duty as a Muslim to help the CIA destroy it.

All were promised money. Exactly how much each was paid remains unclear. But

Buddha lived in 6th BC!

AFP, Washington

The discovery of an previously unknown wooden structure at the Buddha's birthplace suggests the sage might have lived in the 6th century BC, two centuries earlier than thought, archeologists said Monday.

Traces of what appears to have been an ancient timber shrine was found under a brick temple that is itself within Buddhism's sacred Maya Devi Temple at Lumbini, in southern Nepal near the Indian border.

In design it resembles the Asokan temple erected on top of it. Significantly, however, it features an open area, unprotected from the elements, from which it seems a tree once grew -- possibly the tree where the Buddha was born.

"This sheds light on a very very long debate" over when the Buddha was born and, in turn, when the faith that grew out of his teachings took root, said archeologist Robin Coningham in a conference call.

It's widely accepted that the Buddha was born beneath a hard-wood sal tree at Lumbini as his mother Queen Maya Devi, the wife of a clan chief, was traveling to her father's kingdom to give birth.

But much of what is known about his life and time has its origins in oral tradition -- with little scientific evidence to sort out fact from myth.

