

NEWS IN
briefEU fails to bring
Ukraine closer to West

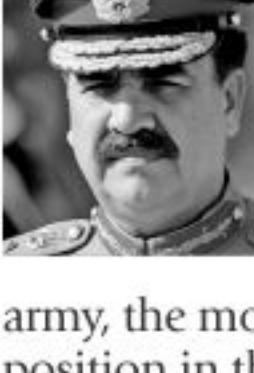
AFP, Vilnius

The European Union suffered a setback in its bid to draw ex-Soviet states into the Western fold when jewel-in-the-crown Ukraine refused to sign a landmark political and trade deal years in the making.

Ukraine's snub despite massive pro-EU protests on its streets highlighted a worsening EU-Russia tug-of-war over former Soviet satellites in eastern Europe.

New Pak army chief takes command

AFP, Rawalpindi



General Raheel Sharif yesterday formally took over as the head of Pakistan's

army, the most powerful position in the troubled military-dominated nation which is battling a home-grown Taliban insurgency.

Sharif, named chief of the army staff on Wednesday, took charge from predecessor General Ashfaq Kayani at a ceremony at military headquarters in Rawalpindi.

Hong Kong ferry accident hurts 87

AFP, Hong Kong

A high-speed ferry travelling from Hong Kong to Macau collided with an "unidentified object" yesterday, injuring 87 people and raising new concerns over maritime safety a year after a ferry crash claimed 39 lives.

In the latest accident, the double-deck hydrofoil "Madeira" carrying 105 passengers and 10 crew hit "an unidentifiable object" around 1:15am near one of Hong Kong's small outlying

Drone strikes Pakistan

AFP, Miranshah

A US drone strike targeting a militant compound killed at least three suspected insurgents in a restive Pakistani tribal region near the Afghan border yesterday, officials said.

The identities of those killed in the strike were not immediately known but they appeared to be of Central Asian origin, the official said.

Rockets fired near US base in Japan

AFP, Tokyo

Improvised rocket launchers were fired close to a US airbase near Tokyo, police and the American military said yesterday, with suspicions falling on one of Japan's small ultra-leftist groups.

No-one was hurt and no damage was done in the incident, which media reported came just hours after the arrest of a senior member of a radical faction, and followed a pattern seen four years earlier.

Iraq violence kills 39

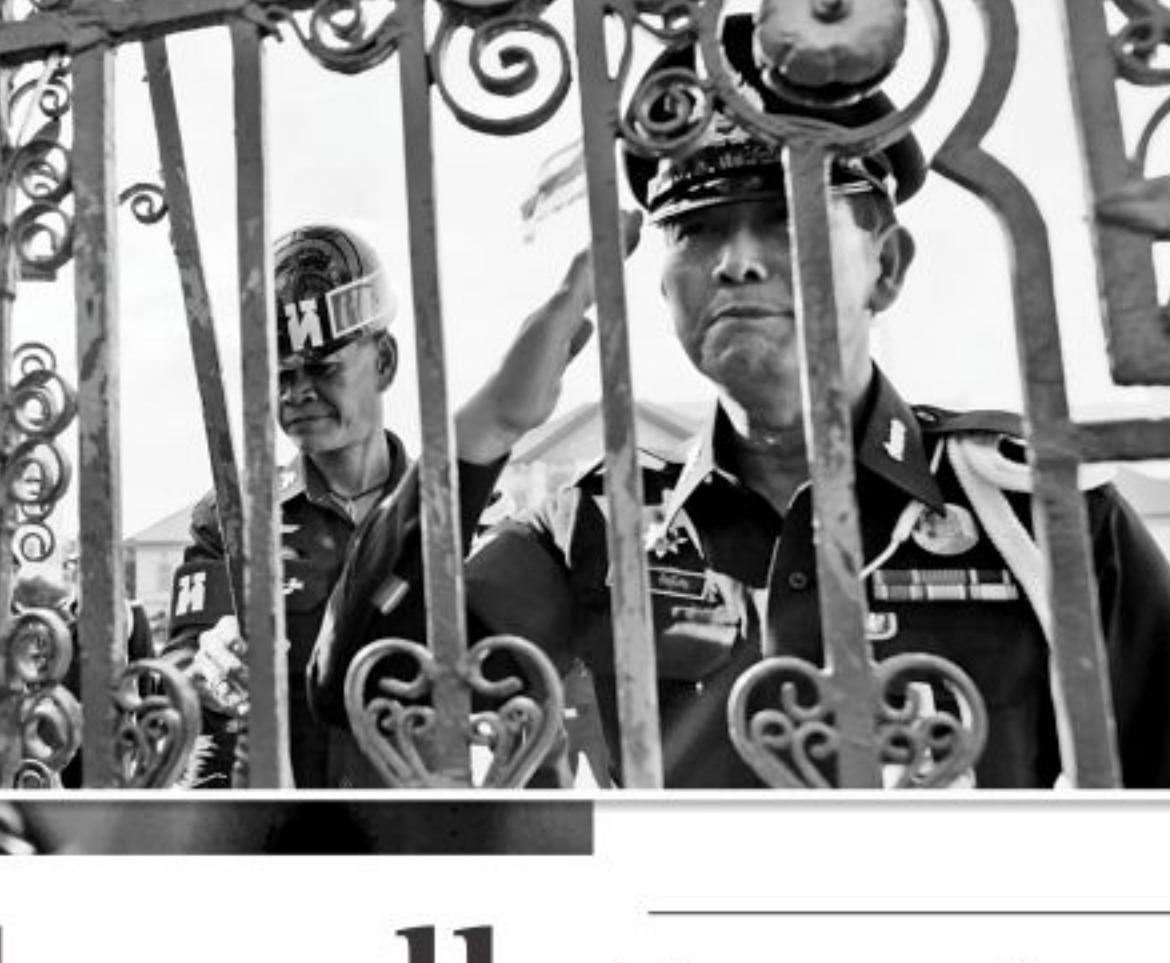
AFP, Baghdad

Authorities yesterday found the bodies of 28 people, most of them kidnapped by men in army uniforms, and attacks killed 11 more, in scenes harking back to Iraq's sectarian war.

The killings come amid a surge in violence that has seen victims snatched from their homes, only for their corpses to be found later, fuelling fears Iraq is slipping back into the worst of the bloodshed that plagued it from 2005 to 2007.

More than 6,000 people have been killed this year, forcing Baghdad to appeal for international help in battling militancy just months before a general election, as official concern focuses on a resurgent Al-Qaeda emboldened by the war in neighbouring Syria.

Early Friday, authorities discovered the bodies of 18 men, including two tribal chiefs, four policemen and an army major, dumped in farmland near the Sunni Arab town of Tarmiyah, just north of Baghdad.



Thai opposition protesters blow whistles as they face off with police deployed to guard the ruling Puea Thai party headquarters in Bangkok, yesterday. Inset, Thai army soldiers close the stormed gate and give a military salute to anti-government protesters (not seen) after they stormed the army headquarters.

PHOTO:
AFP

Thai PM rules out early polls

AGENCIES

Thai Prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra ruled out an early election, after defiant opposition protesters stormed the army headquarters and besieged ruling party offices yesterday, intensifying their fight to bring down her government.

She told the BBC the situation in Thailand was not calm enough for polls.

She also said she would not authorise the use of force against protesters occupying government ministries. On Thursday, Yingluck called for an end to the demonstrations after surviving a no-confidence vote.

Boisterous demonstrators have targeted key government buildings in Bangkok in the biggest street protests since mass rallies in 2010 degenerated into the kingdom's worst civil strife in decades.

The protesters -- a mix of royalists, southerners and the urban middle class sometimes numbering in their tens of thousands -- are united by their loathing of former premier Thaksin Shinawatra.

The controversial former telecoms tycoon was ousted in a coup in 2006

and lives in self-imposed exile, but he is widely believed to be the real power behind the embattled government of his younger sister Yingluck.

"The basic desire of the protesters and the protest leaders is to create chaos and destruction, presumably hoping that the military will have to intervene and take power from the government," said Thailand expert Andrew Walker, a professor at

Defiant protesters invade army, ruling party HQs

Analysts say move aims at engaging army to take charge

Australian National University.

In the latest provocative move targeting a symbol of state power, demonstrators forced open the gates of the army headquarters in Bangkok, calling on the military to support their fight to bring down the government.

Flag-waving demonstrators massed on the lawn inside the army compound in Bangkok's historic district for several

hours before leaving voluntarily.

The generals are traditionally seen as staunch defenders of the monarchy with close links to its supporters in the royalist "Yellow Shirt" protest movement -- the arch-rivals of the pro-Thaksin "Red Shirts".

But many experts believe the military does not want to become involved in the latest standoff -- either in support of, or against, the government -- for fear of a repeat of the 2010 bloodshed.

General Niphat Thonglek, permanent secretary at the defence ministry, said the military would remain in the barracks.

Thaksin remains a hugely divisive figure seven years after he was deposed by royalist generals. Pro-Thaksin parties have won every election for more than a decade.

He is adored by many of the country's rural and urban working class but hated by many southerners, middle-class Thais and the Bangkok elite, who see him as corrupt and a threat to the monarchy.

The protests snowballed after the ruling party tried to introduce an amnesty that could have allowed Thaksin's return from self-imposed exile, and have continued despite the Senate's rejection of the bill.

Sherlock to return on New Year's Day

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Sherlock will return to BBC1 on New Year's Day when the mystery will finally be resolved how the sleuth survived that plunge to his apparent certain death.

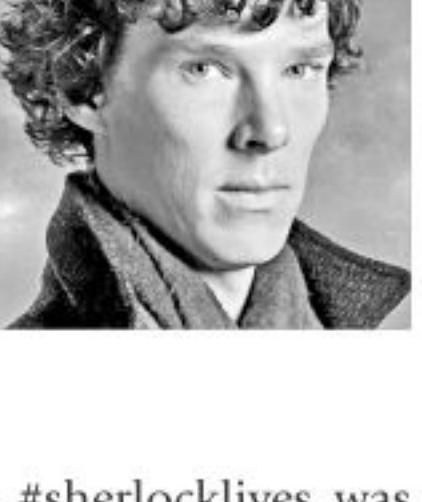
The BBC took the unusual step of using an empty hearse, with its return date spelled out in the back, travelling around central London on Friday to announce its return.

Its use of Twitter and the hashtag #sherlocklives was rather more de rigueur, ensuring that the show was trending on Twitter as fans were sent into a frenzy by its imminent return.

The exact return date of the show, for a new three-part series, has been the source of much speculation -- almost as much as the mystery around his fall -- since it was revealed it would return in the US on 19 January.

The first episode of the new show will be called, appropriately enough, The Empty Hearse.

It has been two years since it was last on the BBC, since when its stars Benedict Cumberbatch, in Star Trek sequel Into Darkness, and Martin Freeman, in The Hobbit, have been catapulted into the top tier of big screen talent.



UN warns on Syria's refugee children

AFP, Geneva

Syrian refugee children are paying a cruel price as civil war rips their country apart, the United Nations warned yesterday in a report with heart-rending testimony from youngsters driven from their homes.

"This is impossible to forget. It's like someone has stabbed me with a knife when I remember," 15-year-old Taha, who saw seven corpses near his house in Syria, told interviewers with the UN refugee agency (UNHCR).

He and scores of other Syrian refugee children in Jordan and Lebanon were interviewed for a 60-page UNHCR report, starkly laying out the trauma of young exiles from a conflict that has killed over 120,000 people.

"It is important that this human face of the refugee crisis is not forgotten," Volker Turk, UNHCR head of international protection, told journalists in Geneva.

"And if you look at what children face, they illustrate very strongly what



this crisis is all about," he said.

Children make up around half of the more than 2.2 million Syrians who have fled their homeland, according to UN numbers of registered refugees.

Syria's neighbours meanwhile estimate some three million Syrians have already left the war-ravaged country, which means around 1.5 million Syrian children are living as refugees.

"Looking back over the last 20 years, the Syria refugee crisis for us is unparalleled since the Rwanda crisis," Turk said, referring to the 1994 genocide in the African nation.

He pointed out that children also

represent about half of the 6.5 million people driven from their homes but who remain inside Syria.

In the report, the children describe in words and with drawings the horrors they have witnessed and the turmoil within.

"There is blood up to people's knees in Syria," said 17-year-old Sala.

And 16-year-old Maher, who was tortured in Syria and whose father remains missing there, said: "My first wish would be to go back to Syria and to have my father released."

Some of the children also drew pictures of weapons of war and bodies.

"The idea of home and warmth is gone with a stroke," said Turk.

"There is a lot of psychological scarring and a lot of trauma... You see it in sleeplessness, children being very withdrawn, there is stuttering, bed-wetting."

Anger was also common, with some boys wanting to return to Syria to fight.

Other scars are physical: 741 Syrian children were treated for war wounds in Lebanon in the first six months of

Another arson victim dies

FROM PAGE 1

These two were among the most critical of the 19 burn victims brought to DMCH Thursday evening.

Robin's last night passed in extreme pain with the youth screaming out at intervals on his intensive care unit bed. He kept calling "Allah" seeking refuge in his faith since the medicine could not give him respite.

He left behind a five months' pregnant wife.

"Mabia [Robin's wife] lost consciousness when she heard about Robin's death. She could not pull herself together to get back to see the body in the hospital," said a family member.

Nahid too had died an excruciatingly painful death. The doctors at DMCH said he had died as his neck muscles swelled due to the burns which constricted his windpipe and caused breathing difficulties.

"My mother just could not take this nor did I know what to do to save

attack.

According to the case statement, the named accused plotted and provided money for the attack while some unnamed people executed it.

Meanwhile, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia yesterday in a statement condemned filing of the case against her party senior leaders and demanded that the case be immediately withdrawn.

She also accused the government of pushing the country towards uncertainty and alleged that it had cunningly avoided their dialogue offer several times.

The opposition leader also blamed the Election Commission for adding fuel to an already heated situation by hurriedly declaring the election schedule.

She urged the EC to postpone the election and asked the government to pave way for the polls under a non-party caretaker government.

ODDLY enough

Swimming goggles are 'weapons'!

AFP, Istanbul

A Turkish court has ruled that swimming goggles and other protective equipment used by protesters during this year's mass street demonstrations were "weapons", local media reported yesterday.

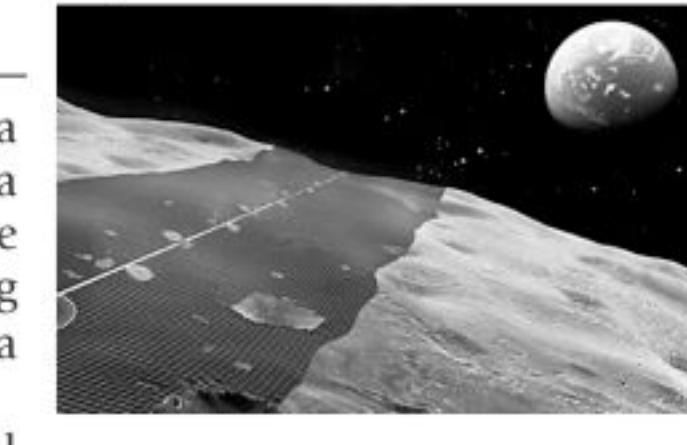
Demonstrators armed themselves with homemade gear such as masks made of plastic bottles, motorbike helmets and goggles to protect themselves from tear gas fired by riot police during the protests that gripped the country in June.

But an Istanbul court ruled Thursday that such items could be classified as weapons in a case against 23 people who joined the action against government plans to build on the city's Gezi park.

She urged the EC to postpone the election and asked the government to pave way for the polls under a non-party caretaker government.

Japan to turn moon into solar panel

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK



It sounds like a tale from a science fiction novel, but a team of Japanese engineers really is hoping to turn the moon into a giant solar panel.

Shimizu, a giant civil engineering and construction firm, plans to install a 'solar belt' around the moon's equator.

To be built almost entirely by remote-controlled robots, the Luna Ring would run around the 6,800 mile lunar equator and be 248 miles in width.

The solar energy collected would be converted and beamed back to earth as microwaves and laser, where it would then be converted into electricity and then potentially supplied to the national grid.

Shimizu says the Luna Ring could generate a massive 13,000 terra watts of energy. The Sizewell B nuclear reactor in Suffolk produces 1,198 megawatts (MW).

According to the firm's engineers, the moon's equator is exposed to a steady amount of sun and not subject to some of the weather problems associated with solar energy generation on earth.

"Virtually inexhaustible, non-polluting solar energy is the ultimate source of green energy that brings prosperity to nature as well as our lives," says Shimizu.

The company plans to have a pilot demonstration by 2020 and for construction to begin by 2035.

This is not the first time solar energy generated in space has been mooted as an answer to the earth's dwindling energy resources. NASA has been investigating space-based solar systems for decades.

Egypt Islamists defy tough protest law

AFP, Cairo

Police yesterday fired tear gas at Islamists who demonstrated in Egypt, defying a new law banning unauthorised protests that has also angered activists following the arrest of a prominent blogger.

The Muslim Brotherhood had vowed to go ahead regardless with the weekly protests it has organised after noon prayers ever since Islamist president Mohamed Morsi was overthrown in a July 3 "military coup".

Late Thursday the interior ministry warned against unauthorised protests, after police detained prominent blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah, in a stark declaration of intent reminiscent of the autocratic rule of veteran strongman Hosni Mubarak, ousted in a popular uprising nearly three years ago.

Police used tear gas against hundreds of Morsi's supporters who protested in front of a presidential palace in Cairo, an AFP reporter said, adding that he also heard gunshots.

Protests were also reported from other parts of Cairo.

Egypt's army-installed government say the new law requires protest organisers to give three days' written notice to the authorities before holding any demonstration.

In addition, it also bans demonstrations in places of worship or starting from such places.

The interior ministry Thursday warned against "demonstrations that break the law without obtaining prior permission from security forces" and said "it will deal with these illegal activities firmly and decisively."

Canada let NSA spy on G20, G8 meets: Report

AFP, Ottawa

Canada allowed America's National Security Agency to spy on G20 talks in Toronto in 2010 and at the G8 summit days earlier, according to documents cited by public broadcaster CBC.

The NSA briefing notes provided by Edward Snowden, the former NSA contractor who is now a fugitive in Russia, reportedly detail a six-day spying operation run out of the US embassy in Ottawa.

The documents say the monitoring -- conducted while American President Barack Obama and 25 other foreign heads of government met on Canadian soil in June 2010 -- was meant to "support US policy goals."

The G20 summit in Toronto focused on how to rouse a global economic recovery and prevent another financial crisis. One proposal included a global tax on banks, an