

NEWSIN brief

Iran, P5+1 talks to be held next week

AFP, Tehran

Iran is to hold new talks with major powers on its nuclear programme next week, buoyed by a landmark interim deal reached last month, the foreign ministry said yesterday.

"The expert-level talks between Iran and the P5+1 will be held in Vienna on December 9 and 10 with the aim of paving the way to implement the joint plan of action," an Iranian

India tests nuke-capable missile

PTI, Odisha

India yesterday successfully test-fired nuclear-capable Prithvi-II missile with a strike range of 350 km from a test range at Chandipur in Odisha as part of a user trial by defence forces. Prithvi is capable of carrying 500 kg to 1,000 kg of warheads and is thrust by liquid

Venezuela blacked out by power cut

AFP, Caracas

Caracas and other cities in Venezuela plunged into darkness Monday night as a power cut hit just as the president was speaking on TV and radio, with local elections five days away. President Nicolas Maduro later blamed the blackout on the "fascist right."

Power started being

Somali parliament ousts PM

CNN ONLINE

Somalia's parliament ousted the country's Prime Minister Abdi Farah Shirdon in a vote of no confidence Monday after a dispute between him and the President over cabinet picks.

Shirdon, in office less than 14 months, lost the confidence vote 184-65.

Parliament speaker said the current government will remain until a new prime minister takes office.

Bolshoi dancer gets 6-yrs for acid attack

AFP, Moscow

A Russian court yesterday sentenced Bolshoi dancer Pavel Dmitrichenko guilty of an acid attack on the troupe's artistic director Sergei Filin to six years in a penal colony, in the finale to a sensational case.

The January attack left Filin nearly blind. He underwent dozens of operations and is continuing

Amazon unveils drone delivery plan

AFP, Washington

US online retail giant Amazon's CEO Jeff Bezos says he hopes to soon deploy an armada of mini-drones able to drop small packages at consumer doorsteps.

The revolutionary project still needs extra safety testing and federal approval, but Bezos believes that Amazon "Prime Air" would be up and running within four to five years.

The aptly named "octocopter" is essentially the size of a flat-screen monitor attached to eight small environmentally friendly electric motors rotating eight small helicopter rotors, and sits on four tall legs. A claw on the underbelly of the octocopter is designed to latch onto the delivery payload -- weighing up to 2.3kg -- contained in a plastic bucket as soon as the consumer clicks the pay button on Amazon's website so that the delivery can be made within 30 minutes if the destination lies within a 16km radius



Thai anti-government protesters greet and receive flowers from policewomen after police lifted barricades in Bangkok, yesterday. Protesters responded with cheers and applause, claiming victory. Some of them hugged police officers and took photos with them.

PHOTO: AFP

Tension eases in Thailand

Cops, protesters reach temporary truce ahead of king's birthday

AGENCIES

Tensions eased in Thailand yesterday as police took down barricades in the capital and allowed anti-government demonstrators to enter the compounds of government buildings.

The Thai government said it had negotiated a truce with protesters for the next several days to honor the birthday of the country's deeply revered king. But the leader of the protests said the fight against Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and her exiled brother would continue.

Several days of street battles gave way to hugs and smiles after police said they would no longer use force against protesters trying to storm prime minister's offices as well as the city police headquarters.

The sudden change in tactics, after violent clashes between stone-throwing mobs and police firing tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets, came as the nation prepares to celebrate King Bhumibol Adulyadej's 86th birthday tomorrow.

The protests, aimed at unseating Yingluck's government and replacing it with an unelected "people's council", are the latest bout of unrest in the kingdom since royalist generals ousted the premier's brother Thaksin Shinawatra in a coup seven years ago.

Four people have been killed and about 250

wounded in the street violence since Saturday, according to the city's Erawan emergency centre.

Protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban, a former deputy premier, told supporters the fight to unseat the government was not over, in comments that suggested tensions could flare anew after the king's birthday.

"It's a partial victory but it's not final because the Thaksin regime is still in place. You cannot go back home yet. We have to continue our struggle," said the former deputy premier, who faces an arrest warrant for insurrection.

It is the kingdom's worst political violence since a deadly military crackdown on pro-Thaksin "Red Shirts" in 2010, although the recent clashes have been largely confined to certain parts of the city, away from main tourist districts.

In a short televised address to the nation yesterday, Yingluck said talks were needed between the different sectors of society to find a long-term solution.

The rallies were triggered by an amnesty bill, since abandoned by the ruling party, which opponents feared would have allowed Thaksin to return to his home country. He fled in 2008 to avoid jail for a corruption conviction he contends is politically motivated.

The demonstrators are a mix of royalists, Thaksin opponents, students and supporters of the opposi-

Egypt draft charter handed over ahead of referendum

AFP, Cairo

The text of a new constitution that would consolidate the power of the army was handed over to Egypt's interim president yesterday giving him a month to call a referendum.

The text was given to president Adly Mansour by former Arab League chief Amr Mussa, who headed the 50-member drafting committee which completed its work on Sunday.

Speaking at a news conference after the handover, Mussa called on "all Egyptians to take part in the referendum and to vote 'yes'."

"Egypt faces dangerous acts of sedition that we must bring to an end," he said.

The vote on the draft charter has been billed as the first stage in a "democratic transition" promised by the military-installed authorities following the ouster of Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in July.

The text would allow the military to prosecute civilians in some cases, appoint the defence minister and

keep its budget beyond any civilian scrutiny -- powers held by the legislature, executive and judiciary of most democracies.

The most controversial article



Egypt's interim president, right, receives the draft constitution

states that "no civilian can be tried by military judges, except for crimes of direct attacks on armed forces, military installations and military personnel."

Secular activists and rights groups have severely criticised the provision, fearing it could be applied to protesters, journalists and dissidents.

Ukraine govt survives no-confidence motion

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine's parliament yesterday rejected an opposition no-confidence motion in Prime Minister Mykola Azarov's government after the ruling party abstained from the vote.

The measure gathered 186 out of the required 226 votes in the Verkhovna Rada parliament with support from the three main opposition parties that sought Azarov's resignation over Ukraine's refusal to sign a historic EU trade and political pact.

The no-confidence vote failed after Azarov promised to reshuffle his government and apologised for a brutal police crackdown on weekend protests that drew Western condemnation and sparked even bigger rallies.

Protests over the Ukrainian government's decision to abandon a historic political and trade agreement with the EU has sparked the largest wave of protests in the ex-Soviet nation since the 2004 pro-democracy Orange Revolution.

More than 30 protesters were injured when police used tear gas and batons to push hundreds of angry Ukrainians off Kiev's iconic Independence Square early Saturday.

WORLD'S RICHEST LEADERS' LIST

Huff Post removes Sonia Gandhi's name after row

PTI, Washington

An American news website has removed the name of Congress president Sonia Gandhi from the list of richest leaders of the world after the party derided the portal for the "absurd and ridiculous" item.

"Sonia Gandhi and the former emir of Qatar Hamid bin Khalifa al-Thani have been removed from this list," the editor of Huffington Post wrote on its website last evening after the list of the world's richest leader was updated.

"Gandhi was originally included based on a listing on a third party site which was subsequently called into question," said the editor without

giving name of the third-party site.

"Our editors have been unable to verify the amount, removed the link, and regret any confusion," the Huffington post said.

According to the report, Sonia Gandhi was placed in the 12th place on the list.

With \$2 billion wealth, Gandhi was quoted to be richer than the British Queen Elizabeth II.

The list includes kings, presidents, sultans and queens. The richest leaders among the top 20 originated from the Middle East region.

The report puts Russian President Vladimir Putin on the top of the list with a wealth of \$40 billion, followed by King of Thailand Bhumibol Adulyadej with



TERRITORIAL ROW

Biden urges Japan, China to ease tension

AFP, Tokyo

Japan and China need more sophisticated communication strategies if they are to work through their territorial row, US Vice President Joe Biden said yesterday as he vowed Washington would stand by Tokyo.

Biden, in Tokyo at the start of a three-nation tour of Asia, said he will be talking "in great specificity" with Chinese leaders about the row over Beijing's declaration last month of an air defence zone in the East China Sea.

"This underscores the need for crisis management mechanisms and effective channels of communication between China and Japan to reduce risk of escalation," he told a joint press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

"I will be raising these concerns in great specificity directly when I meet with the Chinese leadership the day after tomorrow," he said.

Egypt's revolutionary poet dies at 84

AFP, Cairo

Egyptian poet Ahmed Fouad Negm, renowned for his revolutionary poetry and for his harsh criticism of political leaders, died yesterday at the age of 84, a publisher said.

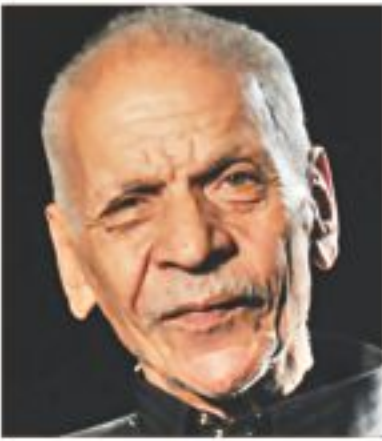
"Ahmed Fouad Negm passed away. He was 84," Mohammed Hashem told AFP.

Negm spent a total of 18 years in jail for his strident criticism of former Egyptian presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak.

He became recognised as a voice of protest in 1967 when he wrote poems on the Arab-Israel war, which were highly acclaimed.

During the 2011 anti-Mubarak revolt, protesters often recited his revolutionary poems at Cairo's iconic Tahrir Square -- epicentre of the 18-day uprising against the former strongman.

Son of a police officer and a housewife, Negm was born in 1929 in the Egyptian city of Sharqia and was one among 17 brothers.



Violence kills 6,200 in Iraq this year

AFP, Baghdad

Attacks in mostly Sunni Arab areas of Baghdad as well as northern and western Iraq killed at least 18 people yesterday, the latest in a months-long surge in bloodletting.

The rise in violence, which has killed more than 6,200 people this year, has prompted the authorities to appeal for international help in combating militancy ahead of general elections due in April.

Officials have blamed al-Qaeda militants who have emboldened by the civil war raging in Syria, but the government has itself faced criticism for not doing enough to address the concerns of Iraq's disaffected Sunni minority. Analysts say that while most Sunnis do not actively support al-Qaeda, a lack of faith in the government may persuade them to stop cooperating with the authorities in their efforts to combat

Assad implicated in Syria war crimes

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

A UN inquiry has found "massive evidence" that the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, is implicated in war crimes as the latest reported death toll in the country's civil war reached 126,000.

Navi Pillay, the UN's human rights chief, said a commission of inquiry into human rights violations in Syria "has produced massive evidence ... [of] very serious crimes, war crimes, crimes against humanity" and that "the evidence indicates responsibility at the highest level of government, including the head of state."

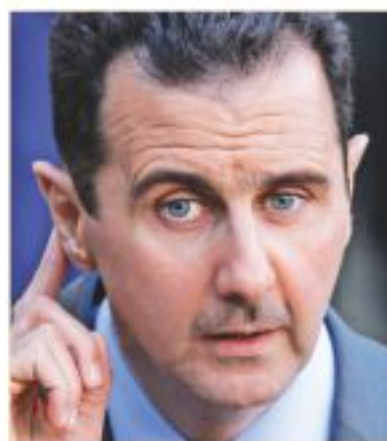
The report is the first time the UN body has accused Assad directly.

Damascus swiftly dismissed Pillay's remarks. "She has been talking nonsense for a long time and we don't listen to her," Faisal Miqdad, the deputy foreign minister, told AP.

The UN commissioner's statement, reported from Geneva, coincided with the publication of a new death toll of 125,835 for the last 33 months.

The UN commission has repeatedly accused the Syrian government, which is supported by Russia and Iran, of crimes against humanity and war crimes. It has said the rebels, who are backed by both western and Arab countries, are also guilty of committing war crimes.

Pillay reiterated her call for the case to be handed over to the international criminal court (ICC) in The Hague to ensure accountability. But an ICC referral requires the backing of the "big five" permanent members of the UN security council, where Russia and China have blocked any action against the Syrian government and are unlikely to change tack.



India focuses on better ties with Arab world

Offers aid to destroy Syria's chem arms

PTI, New Delhi

As if to complement its Look East policy, India has suddenly lined up a series of engagements with West Asia and Arab world leaders in the next few months.

Top diplomatic sources confirmed that these engagements, starting with a visit by Egyptian foreign minister Nabil Fahmy this week, will culminate in India's participation at the Geneva II conference on Syria in January.

The UN announced on Monday that the Geneva Conference, which is meant to negotiate an end to the ongoing civil war in Syria, will be held on January 22.

Meanwhile, India has decided to give \$1 million to the trust of Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) at The Hague for destruction of Syria's chemical weapons and related facilities.

Apart from the financial assistance, India has offered the services of its experts to help in the destruction of Damascus' chemical weapons arsenal and related facilities, a

ministry of external affairs statement said.

Arab League secretary general Nabil Al Araby will be in Delhi for talks on the Syrian situation by the end of December, officials confirmed.

Fahmy will arrive today in what will be his first visit to an Asian country. Sources said Egypt is looking at substantive engagement with India both in terms of outlining the political roadmap that it intends to pursue domestically "as well as the possibility of greater cooperation between the two countries in West Asia including on the Palestinian issue, Syria and developments following the interim agreement between Iran and E3+3".

Following this, Khurshid will address in Bahrain all Indian heads of missions in the Gulf, West Asia, North Africa and Iran during a brainstorming session on opportunities for India in the Middle East. This will coincide with India's participation in the Manama Dialogue in Bahrain which too is expected to focus on Syria. It will also be attended by US secretary of defence Chuck Hagel.

ODDLY enough



Concussion turns ordinary man into musical genius, overnight

STAR DESK

Derek Amato, 41, had no idea his life was about to change forever when he dove into the shallow end of a pool to catch a football at a party. He hit his head and had a concussion, resulting in Acquired Savant Syndrome -- a rare condition where people display profound abilities, ones they never had before, after suffering head trauma -- for music.

Derek is one of only 30 people in the world with this rare condition and the only one to have acquired music as a savant skill. He has never had any professional training in music, but can now play eight different instruments with the ease of a professional