

NEWSIN brief

France FM doubts breakthrough at Syria talks

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius played down expectations yesterday for next month's talks in Geneva on the Syrian conflict, saying he doubted they would mark a breakthrough.

The "Geneva 2" meeting is slated for January 22 and aims to bring together Syria's opposition and President Bashar al-Assad's regime to try to end the country's nearly three-year civil war.

China 'regrets' S Korea air zone expansion

China expressed "regret" yesterday at South Korea's expansion of its air defence identification zone, weeks after Beijing provoked regional fury by establishing its own.

Seoul and Tokyo, along with Washington, which is in security alliances with them both, have all refused to accept Beijing's air defence identification zone (ADIZ).

Philippines bans worker deployment to Yemen

The Philippines yesterday banned its citizens from taking up new jobs in Yemen, following a militant attack which killed dozens including seven Filipino medical workers.

Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario said in a statement the government was also offering to repatriate an estimated 1,000 other citizens already employed there as medical workers or construction labourers.

Mandela's death raises leadership questions: Mbeki

Former president Thabo Mbeki on Sunday challenged South Africa's leadership to ask if they are living up to Nelson Mandela's standards, in a pointed public challenge to his ANC comrades.

Mbeki -- who succeed Mandela as president in 1999 and was ultimately ousted by Jacob Zuma in a party coup -- questioned whether current leaders were living up to Mandela's values.

"I think to celebrate his life properly we need to ask ourselves a question about the quality of leadership," Mbeki told a prayer gathering at the Oxford Shul synagogue in Johannesburg.

"To say: 'to what extent are we measuring up to the standard they (Nelson Mandela and his generation) set in terms of the quality of leadership?'" Mbeki said the remaining task of transforming South Africa into a truly free, fair and equal society was "in many respects more difficult than the struggle to end the system of apartheid".

Mbeki said South Africans must examine their loyalty to the values that Nelson Mandela and his generation had espoused.

"Are we in whatever echelon of our society, whatever we are doing in politics, in business, in unions, in civil society ... do we have the quality of leadership such as was exemplified by Mandela and others, sufficient to respond to the challenges we face?" he said.

"As we celebrate the life of Nelson Mandela this becomes a central task, that we reflect on what needs to be done to sustain his legacy, to ensure that we do not betray what he and others sacrificed for, what he and others stood for."



The photograph (L) made available by The New Paper yesterday shows rioters on a rampage in Singapore's Little India district late Sunday. The other photographs, also made available by The New Paper, shows a police car (TR) flipped on its side on fire after rioters went on the rampage and firemen dousing a charred ambulance (BR). Hundreds of South Asian workers rioted, after being enraged by a fatal road accident, in Singapore's worst outbreak of violence in more than 40 years.



Ukrainians keep up protests

Pro-EU Ukrainian demonstrators yesterday kept up their protest against President Viktor Yanukovich as the authorities sent internal troops and riot police into central Kiev in an increasingly tense showdown.

Upping the stakes after more than a fortnight of protests over the government's rejection of a pact with the European Union, the protesters the day earlier symbolically toppled the statue of the Soviet Union's founder Vladimir Lenin in Kiev.

Protests continued as Yanukovich announced he wanted to hold talks with leaders of the opposition and also meet former presidents.

A presidential statement said the president backed an initiative for talks proposed by Ukraine's first ex-Soviet president Leonid Kravchuk. He will also meet with Kravchuk and two other former leaders Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yushchenko today, it said.

Meanwhile, thousands braved sub-freezing temperatures to maintain the open-ended demonstration on Independence Square in Kiev while others guarded barricades thrown up the day earlier around key government buildings.

Raising fears of a possible looming showdown with protesters, dozens of interior ministry troops and anti-riot police were sent into central Kiev and could be seen moving in columns through the streets.

With tensions rising to boiling point, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called Yanukovich on Sunday to urge dialogue, the United Nations said.

European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton will travel to Ukraine on Tuesday for a two-day visit to find a way out of the crisis, the EU Commission said.

worker riot shocks Singapore

Singapore faced shocking scenes of burning cars and littered streets yesterday following a riot by South Asian workers in the worst outbreak of violence in more than 40 years in the tightly controlled city-state.

The hour-long fracas on Sunday night, triggered when an Indian construction worker was struck and killed by a private bus in the Little India district, compelled Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to order the creation of a special committee to investigate the incident.

The police arrested 25 Indian nationals, two Bangladeshi nationals and a Singaporean permanent resident. All 25 Indian nationals and the Singapore permanent resident, all of whom are men, will be charged with rioting today in court appearances, the police said late yesterday on Facebook. The two Bangladeshis weren't involved in the incident, it added.

Police said about 400 people were involved in the riot. About 300 officers responded to the situation with 22 police officers and five auxiliary officers hurt. All the officers were later released from hospital.

Prime Minister Lee said there could be "no excuse" for the rampage that left 39 police and civil defence staff injured, and 25 vehicles -- including 16 police cars -- damaged or torched.

"The riot was an isolated incident arising from the unlawful actions of an unruly mob reacting to a fatal traffic accident," Lee said in a statement.

"We must not allow this bad incident to tarnish our views of the foreign worker community here."

Lee added that the committee of inquiry will review the factors that led to the riot, as well as existing measures to manage areas where foreign workers congregate.

Singapore depends heavily on guest workers, with labourers from South Asia dominating sectors like construction. Widely regarded as one of the world's safest societies, the city-state prides itself on social order and racial harmony.

Hagel talks drones and Afghan peace with Pak PM

Pentagon chief Chuck Hagel held talks with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday as Washington sought to defuse tensions over controversial US drone strikes and Islamabad's role in Afghanistan.

Hagel flew from Kabul to Islamabad to meet the premier and the country's new army chief, General Raheel Sharif.

Ties between Washington and Islamabad have been seriously strained over US drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal belt as well as Afghan Taliban sanctuaries inside Pakistan's borders.

Prime Minister Sharif "reaffirmed Pakistan's support for the Afghan peace and reconciliation process," a Pakistan government statement said. "The Prime Minister also conveyed Pakistan's deep concern over continuing US drone strikes, stressing that drone strikes were counter-productive to our efforts to combat terrorism."

After greeting Prime Minister Sharif, Hagel said Pakistan and neighbouring Afghanistan had a "lot of common and mutual interests" and that he looked forward to discussing regional issues.

Snowden: Guardian person of the year

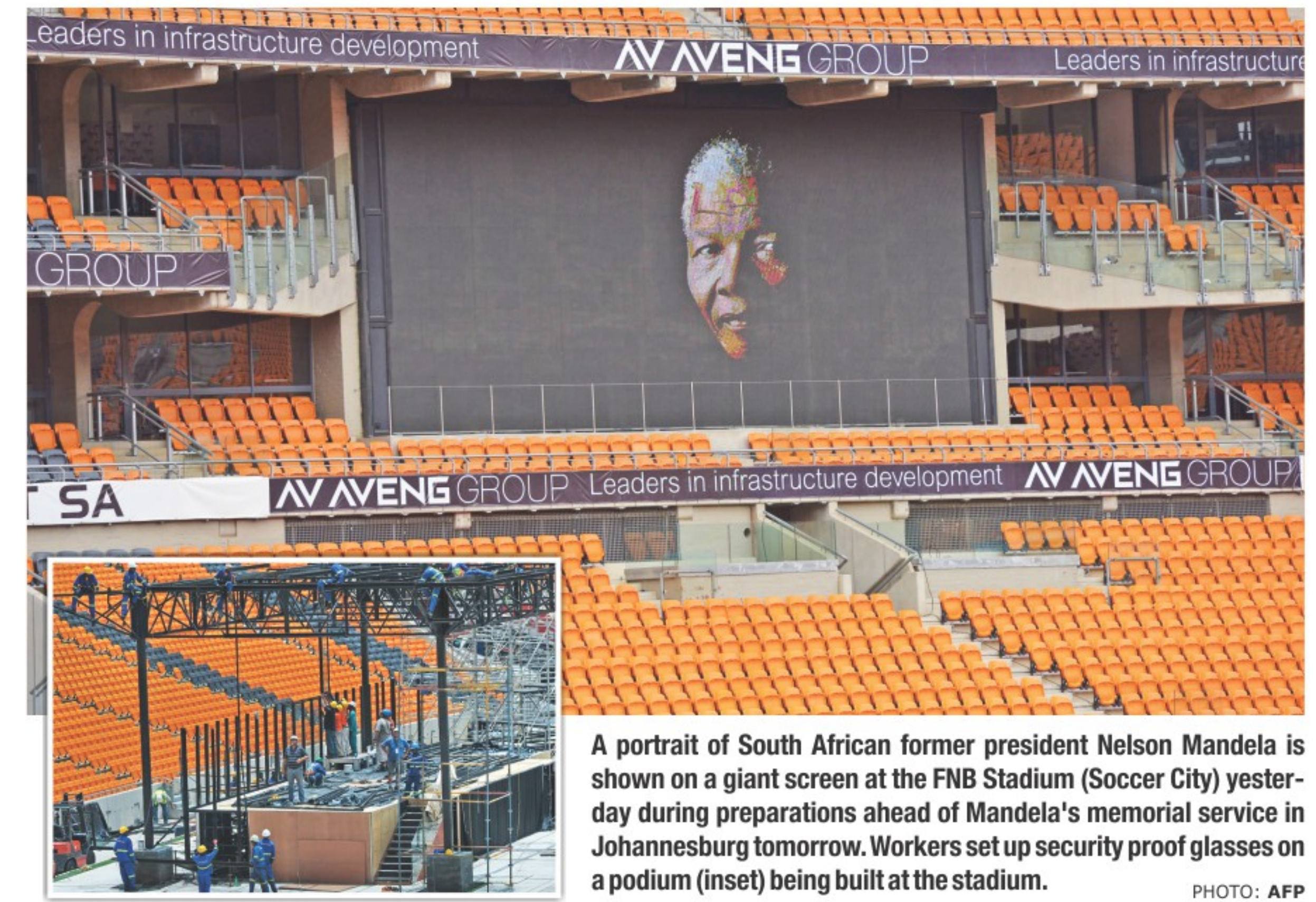
For the second consecutive year, a young American whistleblower alarmed at the unfettered and at times cynical deployment of power by the world's foremost superpower has been voted the Guardian's person of the year.

Edward Snowden, who leaked an estimated 200,000 files that exposed the extensive and intrusive nature of telephone and internet surveillance and intelligence gathering by the US and its western allies, was the overwhelming choice of more than 2,000 people who cast a vote.

Snowden won 1,445 votes. In a distant second, from a list of 10 candidates chosen by Guardian writers and editors, came Marco Weber and Sini Saarela, the Greenpeace activists who spearheaded the oil rig protest over Russian Arctic drilling. They received 314 votes. Pope Francis gained 153 votes, narrowly ahead of blogger and anti-poverty campaigner Jack Monroe, who received 144. Snowden's victory was as clearcut as Chelsea Manning's a year earlier.

It is this personal sacrifice, as much as his revelations, which impressed most readers who voted for him.

Some readers felt that the actions of the Greenpeace activists were as brave, if not braver, than Snowden's while others put in a good word for Pope Francis, Waris Dirie and Jack Monroe.



Mandela urged to refuse Nobel 2-decades ago

Two decades ago in Oslo, Nelson Mandela and South Africa's last apartheid president FW de Klerk stood side by side and accepted the Nobel peace prize, a moment that epitomised the reconciliation of enemies.

But that powerful gesture of forgiveness on December 10, 1993 might never have happened.

When it became clear that Mandela would receive the prestigious award in tandem with a man who ensured he spent 27 years in prison, he came under fierce pressure to decline.

When the telephone rang on October 15, 1993, with the Nobel committee's decision, "the reaction was quite strong and some of us were very hesitant about supporting the joint thing with De Klerk," Tokyo Sexwale, a African National Congress stalwart told AFP.

"We were, some of us, very concerned. We can't have Nelson Mandela, such an icon, receiving this thing with his oppressor," said Sexwale.

The situation was fraught.

Talks with De Klerk's white-supremacist government were already at an advanced stage, and the two men often sparred bitterly.

All-race elections had been slated for April the following year.

"Remember, there was a lot of violence in South Africa," said Sexwale.

Thousands died in clashes in the four years up to the 1994 polls.

At the same time there was a lot of bitterness toward the apartheid government, which had assassinated many ANC activists, said Sexwale.

ANC leaders pointed out that Albert Luthuli and Anglican bishop Desmond Tutu

A picture taken on December 10, 1993 shows Nelson Mandela (L) and South Africa's last apartheid President Frederik de Klerk (R), in Oslo after being awarded the Nobel Peace Prizes.

had won the prize earlier as individuals.

"So we were saying, Nelson Mandela doesn't need it with another person, and above all with a man who has just jailed him," said Sexwale.

Authorities under pressure preparing Mandela's funeral

The South African government has urged people to attend local rather than national services of commemoration for Nelson Mandela as the sheer scale of the logistics involved in planning the extraordinary week ahead began to bring signs of stress.

An unprecedented number of foreign journalists and foreign dignitaries have arrived in the country along with tourists to witness what will be a historic event.

There were disgruntled scenes on Sunday at Johannesburg's Nasrec Expo centre, where several hundred of the estimated 2,500 to 3,000 national and international journalists covering the death of the former president arrived to collect passes that would grant them access to key events of the week.

Mandela funeral: The 'world is coming'

South Africa raced yesterday to meet the unprecedented logistical challenge of hosting close to 100 world leaders flying in from every corner of the globe for the state funeral of freedom icon Nelson Mandela.

"The world literally is coming to South Africa," said the government's head of public diplomacy, Clayton Monyela.

"I don't think it has ever happened before," Monyela said of the wave of 91 heads of state and government, including US President Barack Obama, descending on the country.

Many will join the 80,000 people expected to cram into the FNB stadium in Soweto tomorrow for a sweeping, emotional tribute to their inspirational first black president.

The memorial service, in the venue where Mandela made his last major public appearance for the 2010 World Cup final, is seen as a final chance for grieving South Africans to unite in a mass celebration of his life ahead

of the more formal state funeral.

Another 120,000 people will be able to watch a live broadcast of the event on giant screens set up in three overflow stadiums in Johannesburg.

Around 11,000 troops have been mobilised to ensure security and help with crowd control efforts during the week-long series of funeral events.

Despite the sudden influx of international dignitaries and the compressed preparation time, National Police spokesman Solomon Makgale insisted that the security apparatus would hold firm.

"Having so many heads of state is not a security headache for us. We've learned over the years," Makgale said, adding that they would be "working closely" with the foreign leaders' own security details.

As well as Obama and three previous occupants of the White House, British Prime Minister David Cameron, French President Francois Hollande and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon were all on the guest list.

The widow who made a 'decent man' of Mandela

Nelson Mandela's widow Graca Machel, who barely left her husband's bedside in the final six months of his life, has hardly been seen in the wake of his death.

Machel maintained a near round-the-clock bedside vigil during the 84 days Mandela spent in a Pretoria hospital and the subsequent three months he spent at home before he died on December 5.

The couple marked their 15th wedding anniversary on July 18 as Mandela lay critically ill in hospital.

Machel met Mandela shortly after his release from prison in 1990.

At their wedding, Mandela's fellow Nobel peace laureate, arch-bishop Desmond Tutu, joked that Machel had made a "decent man" out of her new husband.

Machel was Mandela's third wife, and he was her second presidential husband. She was the widow of Mozambican president Samora Machel who died in a plane crash in 1986.

Tutu would later say that South Africans owed Machel a "tremendous debt of gratitude" for the joy she brought Mandela in the latter stages of his life.

As Mandela grew frailer, Machel managed to stay above the ugly feuding that broke out between his various family factions.

According to Mandela's close friend and lawyer George Bizos, she also carefully protected Mandela -- an avid TV watcher and newspaper reader -- from any news "which would disturb him."

