

NEWSIN brief

19 child poisoned by woman in China

PTI, Changsha

Nineteen primary school students were hospitalized in central China after drinking yoghurt that was poisoned by a woman.

The 34-year-old woman, who confessed of injecting rat poison and herbicide into the yoghurt, has been arrested, local officials said. The woman is suspected of suffering from a mental disorder, police told the state-run Xinhua news agency.

Sanjay Dutt leaves jail on bail

PTI, Mumbai

Two weeks after Sanjay Dutt was granted a monthlong parole, the Bollywood actor was released from Pune's Yerwada jail yesterday.

Dutt, undergoing remainder of his five-year jail term for possessing illegal firearms, part of a cache of weapons meant to be used during the 1993 blasts, was granted parole on December 6.

Intel chief killed in Libya's Benghazi

AFP, Benghazi

The head of military intelligence in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi was shot dead on Friday by unknown assailants during a visit to his family in nearby Derna, a security official said.

In the wake of the 2011 revolt which toppled dictator Muammar Gaddafi, militants in lawless eastern Libya have targeted security forces and foreigners, as well as judges, political activists and the media, killing more than 300 people.

General among 15 killed in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

Five senior Iraqi officers, including a major general, and 10 soldiers were killed yesterday in clashes with insurgents in the west of the country, military sources reported.

Major General Mohammed al-Karoui and the other 14 all died in an assault on "a hideout of the al-Qaeda network" in Sunni-majority western Anbar province near the border with Syria, the sources said.

Polio vaccinators killed in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

Two gunmen shot dead a health worker administering polio drops and other vaccines to children in a restive Pakistani tribal region bordering Afghanistan yesterday, officials said.

The murder took place at a government-run dispensary in Jamrud town in the Khyber tribal district. The gunmen ordered women and children to leave before shooting dead the vaccinator, doctor Sameen Jan, the top health official in Khyber told AFP.

Violence kills 30 in C Africa

AFP, Bangui

More than 30 people including a Chadian peacekeeper have been killed in a fresh outbreak of brutal sectarian violence in the Central African Republic capital, sources said Friday.

The victims were "shot or hacked to death with machetes," said a Red Cross official who asked not to be named, and who said the overall toll was likely to be higher. Doctors Without Borders said around 40 victims had been taken to a community hospital Friday, most of them with gunshot wounds, and three had died of their injuries.

The Central African Republic (CAR) spiralled into chaos after a March coup in which the mainly Muslim Seleka rebel group overthrew president Francois Bozize.

Months of brutal massacres, rapes and looting have followed, with locals forming Christian vigilante groups in response to the atrocities.

DIPLOMAT'S HARASSMENT ISSUE

'Conversations' on to defuse US-India row

AGENCIES

Efforts to resolve the Indo-US diplomatic standoff over senior diplomat Devyani Khobragade's arrest continued yesterday with both sides stating that they are in "conversations" to find a way out.

Publicly their common refrain was that the bilateral relationship was extremely valuable, though Washington continued to harp on their line that Devyani would not enjoy diplomatic immunity "retroactively". She has since been transferred to the Indian Mission to the UN to give her full immunity.

The two countries' ties have warmed considerably since they were on opposite sides of the fence during the Cold War. They now participate in joint security exercises and Washington sees India as a valuable strategic partner in the troubled region.

But the world's two largest democracies have been at loggerheads since the arrest of Devyani, who said she was handcuffed and subjected to an invasive body search.

The diplomat, a mother of two, now free on bail, was arrested over accusations that she lied about the salary she was paying her Indian servant in a US visa application.

According to New York authorities, she was paying the domestic worker a third of the figure mentioned in the visa application.



Devyani Khobragade

sentiment reciprocated by the US State Department which said, "it is important to preserve and protect our partnership".

Khurshid told reporters in New Delhi, "We are in a conversation at different levels. Let the conversation go to its logical conclusion."

In Washington, a State Department Spokesperson also said the US was continuing the conversation with Indian counterparts privately to resolve the situation.

Asking the US to "understand the value of the relationship", Khurshid asked whether it was "unreasonable" for India to expect Washington to allow its diplomat to serve with dignity.

The State Department maintained that even if there was a change in the status of Khobragade from being Deputy Consul General with limited immunity to being posted to the UN mission where she gets full immunity, there would not be a "clean slate" from the past charges.

But her treatment has caused outrage in India, with the government urging Washington to drop the case and apologise.

Delhi has made a series of moves against the United States, bulldozing security barricades around the US embassy and snubbing a visiting US delegation.

External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid maintained his conciliatory tone when he termed the relationship "extremely exceptionally valuable", a

Saudi our number one enemy: Syria

AFP, Damascus

Syria now views Saudi Arabia as its number one enemy and accuses it of trying to destroy the country by arming jihadists and other rebels fighting to oust President Bashar al-Assad.

The oil-rich Gulf monarchies have sided with the opposition from the start of Syria's conflict in March 2011, with Riyadh leading calls for the fall of Assad.

Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Muqdad told AFP this week that Saudi Arabia was providing unfettered support for "terrorist groups" in Syria, while other nations had reviewed their positions.

Muqdad urged the world to press Saudi Arabia to halt its support for the rebels. Earlier this month, Assad's government urged the United Nations to take a stand against Saudi support for Islamist groups whose influence has grown on the battlefield. It was the first time the Syrian government has appealed to the international body to take action against Riyadh.

Meanwhile, Syrian forces are "wreaking disaster" on Aleppo, killing hundreds in air strikes on the city, Human Rights Watch said yesterday. The HRW statement comes six days after the launch of a massive aerial campaign against opposition-held areas of Aleppo, once Syria's commercial capital, involving dozens of warplane strikes and helicopter attacks using TNT-packed barrels.



PHOTO: AFP

An elderly woman, who is sheltering from Narahamachi after the accident of a nuclear power plant, receives Christmas gifts from volunteers clad in Santa Claus costumes at her temporary housing in Iwaki, Fukushima Prefecture, yesterday. Some 100 volunteers delivered Christmas gifts to cheer people living at temporary housings.

AAP ready to form govt in Delhi

Kejriwal says his party would run it better than others

TNN, New Delhi

Strongly indicating that Delhi's wait for a government could be over soon, Aam Aadmi Party leader Arvind Kejriwal said auditing of power companies and legislating the Jan Lokpal bill would be top priorities for the new city government.

Though he added the proviso that a formal announcement on government formation will await till a referendum AAP is conducting is over, Kejriwal asserted AAP would do a much better job than traditional parties like BJP and Congress if it assumed office.

AAP has to take a formal decision on whether it is accepting the outside support of eight Congress MLAs that will take its numbers in the 70-member Delhi assembly to the halfway mark of 36.

The confident AAP leader looked set to become Delhi's next chief minister, saying the apprehension that the party will stumble once in office is

not a valid assessment. "I just want to say that political parties should stop challenging us. First they said they (AAP) won't get candidates, then they said we can't get elected. Now we have won 28 seats."

Kejriwal said mainstream parties continue to underestimate AAP. "I want to tell them: stop challenging the power of the aam aadmi. They have no idea how powerful the aam aadmi is. They have made it appear we will not be able to run the government. Governance is not like going to the moon. We will run the government better than them."

Asked how promises like auditing of power companies or provision of 700 litres of water for every household will be fulfilled, he said, "Our manifesto has been carefully thought out after public consultation. It is practical and can be implemented."

Having decided to step up to the table, AAP's pitch for the 2014 polls seems underway.



Graft scandal engulfs Turkey

Erdogan alleges international plot, launches police purge

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday claimed a huge graft probe in which the sons of two ministers were charged was an international conspiracy.

The case that erupted on Tuesday and targeted 89 people, including some of Erdogan's closest allies, has triggered a crescendo of reactions from Turkey's strongman.

Rattled by the worst scandal of his 11-year rule and with crucial polls three months away, Erdogan has already purged the police command for cooperating with the investigation and yesterday took it out on foreign ambassadors.

He described the probe into widespread bribery by members of his moderately Islamist regime as "smear campaign" with international ramifications. "Some ambassadors are engaged in provocative actions... Do your job," Erdogan said in televised remarks in the Black Sea city of Samsun. "We don't have to keep you in our country."

Erdogan's remarks were considered a veiled threat to US Ambassador Francis Ricciardone, after he was reported to have commented on the unfolding bribery scandal.

Observers have interpreted the raids



Turkey's ruling AKP lawmaker Omer Faruk Oz, right, attempts to stop an opposition lawmaker as he protests against graft at the parliament. Inset, Tayyip Erdogan.

PHOTO: AFP

as a result of tensions between Erdogan's government and Fethullah Gulen, a hugely influential Muslim cleric who lives in the United States.

Judges in Istanbul yesterday charged the sons of Interior Minister Muammer Guler and Economy Minister Zafer Caglayan with acting as intermediaries in order to give and take bribes, the Hurriyet newspaper reported.

The prime minister, who faced an unprecedented wave of protests six

months ago, has responded with a deep purge of the police, a force he once bolstered to counter the army's influence.

He sacked the Istanbul police and dozens of unit chiefs, essentially accusing them of not warning him that some of his closest aides were being investigated.

The graft probe has exposed bitter fault lines in Erdogan's traditional power base and drawn calls for the government's resignation from both his own party and the opposition.

Fighting escalates in South Sudan

Foreigners flee raging violence

AFP, Juba

Fighting escalated in South Sudan yesterday, with a top commander in the country's key oil-producing region defecting to the rebels and foreign governments scrambling to evacuate their nationals.

A US military aircraft was shot at as it was engaged in evacuation operations in Bor, the rebel-held capital of Jonglei state, a diplomatic source and Ugandan military officials said, with some US military personnel injured in the incident.

The upsurge in hostilities in the world's youngest nation came despite an offer from President Salva Kiir to open talks with his former deputy Riek Machar, who is accused of having started the fighting by attempting a coup.

Machar in turn accuses Kiir of conducting a violent purge, and has quickly built up a rebel army to take on the central government on several fronts.

At least 500 people have been killed in Juba alone in six days of fighting, while tens of thousands have been displaced -- many of them seeking shelter in UN bases across the country amid warnings that the impoverished nation is on the brink of all-out civil war.

US President Barack Obama has warned that hopes for South Sudan at its independence from Sudan in July 2011 are now "at risk", amid reports from rights groups of an upsurge in ethnic killings. US Secretary of State John Kerry said Friday he was sending Donald Booth, his special envoy for Sudan and South Sudan, to the region to encourage talks between the warring factions.

Neighbouring Kenya yesterday ordered troops into the country to evacuate Kenyans stranded there, following Uganda, which has already sent in a special forces unit to help evacuate its nationals.

Juba's main bus park was crowded with people struggling to find space on public transport, while foreigners have headed to the airport where several countries -- including the United States and Britain -- have sent military transport planes to evacuate their nationals.

South Sudan gained independence from Sudan as part of a peace process after a two-decade civil war that left two million dead, but it has never been able to heal its own ethnic rivalries.



Morsi faces trial for prison break, murder

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's deposed president Mohamed Morsi and 132 others, including members of Hamas, will stand trial for a prison break and the murder of officers during the 2011 uprising, the prosecution said yesterday.

Almost 70 of the defendants are members of Hamas and Hezbollah, the Palestinian and Lebanese militant groups, who will be tried in absentia.

It will be the third trial announced for Morsi on separate charges, amid a crackdown on his Muslim Brotherhood movement following his overthrow.

Prosecutors claim that Brotherhood, Hamas, Hezbollah and jihadist militants attacked prisons and police stations during the first few days of the revolt against dictator Hosni Mubarak, killing policemen and helping thousands of inmates escape. Several Hamas and Hezbollah members were in jail and escaped during the unrest.

The other defendants include leaders of Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood, who also escaped from the Wadi al-Natrun prison during the revolt, and prominent Qatar-based cleric Yousef al-Qaradawi.

Morsi had been under investigation for the January 28, 2011 prison break along with Brotherhood members.

He is already on trial for allegedly inciting the killings of opposition activists during his one year in power. And prosecutors said earlier this week he will also stand trial for espionage involving Hamas.

Mandela 'got training from Mossad'

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Nelson Mandela apparently underwent weapons training by Mossad agents in Ethiopia in 1962

without the Israeli secret service knowing his true identity, according to an intriguing secret letter lodged in the Israeli state archives.

The missive, revealed by the Israeli paper Haaretz two weeks after the death of the iconic South African leader, said Mandela was instructed in the use of weapons and sabotage techniques, and was encouraged to develop Zionist sympathies.

Mandela visited other African countries in 1962 in order to drum up support for the African National Congress's fight against the apartheid regime in South Africa. While in Ethiopia, he sought help from the Israeli embassy, using a pseudonym, according to the letter -- classified top secret -- which was sent to officials in Israel in October 1962. Its subject line was the "Black Pimpernel", a term used by the South African press to refer to Mandela.

Haaretz quoted the letter as saying that the man gave the impression of being an intellectual. The staff tried to make him into a Zionist. In conversations with him, he expressed socialist world views and at times created the impression that he leaned toward communism.

According to Haaretz, a later handwritten annotation to the letter confirmed the Black Pimpernel was Mandela. The newspaper said the letter was kept in the state archives, and was discovered a few years ago by a student researching a thesis on relations between Israel and South Africa.

