

NEWSIN brief

Kerry heading to Jerusalem, Ramallah next week

CNN ONLINE

Jerusalem, and Ramallah, West Bank: two crucial stops for U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in his ongoing attempt to broker peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

Kerry will travel to those cities on New Year's Day to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, respectively, "to discuss ongoing final status negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians, among other issues," the State Department said in a statement Saturday.

Eight 'attackers' shot dead in Xinjiang

AFP, Beijing

Eight "attackers" armed with knives and explosives were killed yesterday during a "terrorist attack" on a police station in China's Xinjiang according to authorities, the latest deadly incident in the largely Muslim region.

One of the attackers was held in the clash in Shache county, said the official website of the government of Xinjiang, where mainly Muslim Uighurs are the largest ethnic group.

NSA hacks computers worldwide

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

A top-secret National Security Agency hacking unit infiltrates computers around the world and breaks into the toughest data targets, according to internal documents quoted in a magazine report on Sunday.

Details of how the division, known as Tailored Access Operations, steals data and inserts invisible "back door" spying devices into computer systems were published by the

El Salvador erupts, thousands evacuated

AFP, San Salvador

Some 2,000 people were evacuated in eastern El Salvador Sunday when the Chaparrastique volcano belched and spewed a column of ashes high into the sky.

The 2,330 meter high volcano began erupting around 1630 GMT, and authorities suspended scores of flights across parts of the small Central American country. No victims were reported.



An Iraqi security forces' vehicle is seen on fire after it was set ablaze by anti-Iraqi government gunmen during clashes yesterday in the Iraqi city of Ramadi, West of Baghdad. Anti-Iraqi government gunmen are seen during (inset) clashes with security forces. Deadly clashes broke out in the Ramadi area and mosques called for "jihad" as security forces sought to dismantle Iraq's main anti-government protest site.

PHOTO: AFP

Clashes spread to Iraq's Fallujah

Protest camp cleared

AFP, Ramadi

Iraqi forces battled militants in Fallujah yesterday as clashes spread to a second city after an anti-government protest camp was demolished, a police officer said.

Captain Omar Oda said militants burned several military vehicles.

Dr Assem al-Hamdani said 10 gunmen were wounded in the unrest in the city, west of Baghdad, which was one of the hubs of the insurgency that followed the US-led invasion of 2003.

The clashes followed deadly violence in nearby Ramadi, where security forces killed 10 gunmen in fighting that broke out as they demolished a camp where Sunni Arab protesters had gathered for more than a year.

The violence in Ramadi came after Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki said the protest site had become a headquarters for Al-Qaeda, and called on legitimate demonstrators to leave.

The violence, which follows a raid on a Sunni MP's home in Ramadi city, west of Baghdad, in which he was arrested and his brother killed, threatens to escalate already-widespread anger among Iraq's minority Sunni Arab community.

Protests broke out in Sunni Arab-majority areas of Iraq in December 2012 after the arrest of guards of then-finance minister Rafa al-Essawi, an influential Sunni Arab, on terrorism charges.

SOUTH SUDAN CONFLICT

Battles rage on

Ceasefire hopes fade

AFP, Juba

South Sudanese rebels allied to ex-vice president Riek Machar sought to retake control of a key town yesterday, the army said, as hopes faded that an upcoming ceasefire deadline will be obeyed in the violence-wracked nation.

United Nations peacekeepers said they were concerned over claims thousands of armed youths from Machar's Nuer tribe were readying to attack Bor, the capital of Jonglei state, amid international efforts to stop two weeks of violence spiralling into all-out civil war.

"Yesterday there were heavy clashes at Gadiang north of Bor... the people in Bor are fearing an attack at any time," army spokesman Philip Aguer told AFP.

Rebels were currently reported around 50 kilometres northeast of Bor.

It was not clear how many of the gunmen remained in the thick bush around Bor, but the army statement appeared to contradict claims by government spokesman Michael Makuei late on Sunday that "most of them have returned home".

Reconnaissance flights by the UN

Mission in South Sudan on Sunday identified armed groups but could not confirm the force's size.

The world's youngest nation plunged into chaos on December 15 when President Salva Kiir accused his former deputy of mounting a coup, sparking deadly violence believed to have left thousands dead.

Regional leaders at the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development have set today as a deadline for face-to-face talks between Kiir and Machar.

While the government has said it was willing to observe a ceasefire, Machar -- who was sacked as vice-president in July -- has made demands including the release of his arrested political allies before committing to a truce.

South Sudanese government spokesman Makuei told AFP on Sunday: "I really doubt if we, the South Sudanese government, will be in a position to sit with Riek Machar... He has not even respected the call by IGAD and the African Union to agree to the cessation of hostilities."

Fuelled by ethnic rivalries between Kiir's Dinka group and Machar's Nuer, bloodshed has swept across the nation, with fierce battles reported in strategic oil-producing areas.

Russia on alert after second bombing

14 killed in deadly suicide blast

AFP, Moscow

At least 14 people were killed yesterday when a suicide bomber blew himself up on a packed trolleybus in Volgograd, raising new concerns about security at the Sochi Olympics a day after a deadly attack on the southern Russian city's train station.

President Vladimir Putin, under pressure to show that Russia can assure the security of tens of thousands of guests when the Winter Games open on February 7, ordered stepped up security across the country.

The twin suicide attacks on Volgograd, which until this year had no record of recent unrest, have stunned Russia and troubled the authorities as people prepare for mass New Year celebrations. At least 17 people died in Sunday's attack blamed on a suspected female suicide bomber.

The force of the blast destroyed the trolleybus packed with early morning commuters and was turned into a tangle of wreckage with only its roof and front remaining.

Health ministry spokesman Oleg Salagai told Russian state television that 14 people were killed in the bombing and 28 wounded.

Russian investigators have opened a criminal probe into a suspected act of terror as well as the illegal carrying of weapons, the Investigative Committee said.

"The explosives were detonated by a male suicide bomber, fragments of whose body have been found and taken for genetic analysis to establish his identity," said spokesman Vladimir Markin.

He said that some four kilogrammes of TNT equivalent had been used in the blast and noted the explosives were identical to those used in Sunday's train station bombing.

"This confirms the theory that the two attacks are linked. It is possible that they were prepared in the same place," he added.



View of the wreckage of a trolleybus in the southern Russian city of Volgograd yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



A Thai police officer (C) takes pictures during a peaceful protest at the Royal Plaza in Bangkok yesterday, while a Thai policeman holds a flower (inset) during the protest. Thai police in Bangkok held the peaceful protest near Government House after a police officer was shot dead on December 26 during clashes with anti-government protesters.

PHOTO: AFP



Hollande tackles Middle Eastern crises

AFP, Riyadh

French President Francois Hollande and Saudi King Abdullah on Sunday held talks on escalating tensions in the Middle East during a visit also aimed at boosting commercial ties.

The monarch highlighted a "convergence" of positions between the two countries on several issues, a member of Hollande's entourage said.

During the meeting Abdullah "expressed his concern, even anxiety, about regional crises -- Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt -- and praised France's courageous position on these key dossiers", the aide said.

Lebanon was at the top of the agenda amid heightening tensions in Beirut after the assassination of former prime minister Saad Hariri's close aide, ex-minister Mohammad Chatah, in a car bomb on Friday.

The two leaders, meeting at the king's luxurious Rawdat Khurayim farm, both expressed concern over Iranian interference in Lebanon and the region.

Paris and Riyadh share a "will to work for peace, security and stability in the Middle East", Hollande said in an interview published in Sunday's Saudi-owned daily Al-Hayat.



Explosives found near Musharraf's house

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan police yesterday found explosives on a road close to the home of former military ruler Pervez Musharraf, two days before he is to appear before a treason tribunal.

The 2.5 kilos of explosives and two detonators were found around two kilometres from the retired general's home on the edge of Islamabad.

The discovery was made close to where five kilos of explosives were found last Tuesday, as Musharraf's treason trial was due to start.

The case was adjourned to tomorrow because of the security alert.

The treason allegations are the latest in a series of serious criminal charges relating to Musharraf's 1999-2008 rule, brought against him since he returned from exile in March.

"We have found five packets of explosive material, each weighing half a kilo, with two detonators," police chief for Bani Gala, Abdul Rauf Kayani, told AFP.

He said the material was found on the central reservation of Park Road, the main road leading to central Islamabad from the leafy suburb where Musharraf lives.



A Pakistani policeman displays recovered explosive material to the media in Islamabad yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Ready for peace talks

Assad to Pope in message

CNN ONLINE

In a message to Pope Francis, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said his government is ready to participate in next month's peace talks but noted outside countries must stop supporting what he called terrorist groups in the country's civil war, Syria's state-run news agency said Saturday.

Al-Assad sent the message through intermediaries and expressed appreciation for how the Pope on Christmas urged an end to the violence and suffering in Syria, state-run SANA reported.

The Syrian president's message said that "the crisis will be solved through national dialogue among the Syrians and under a Syrian leadership without foreign intervention as to enable the Syrians to determine their future and leadership through ballots."

The message was delivered during a meeting between Syrian Minister of State Joseph Sweid and the Pope's secretary of state, Archbishop Pietro Parolin, SANA said.

5,000 evacuated near Damascus

Syria regime claims

AFP, Damascus, Beirut

Syria's government said it evacuated 5,000 residents of the town of Adra near the capital Damascus over the weekend, Syrian state news agency SANA reported.

"Thanks to the efforts of the Syrian army, the ministry of social affairs evacuated more than 5,000 residents of the town of Adra," SANA said late Sunday, saying the operation was on Saturday.

"They were trapped by terrorist groups and are now in a safe place," the agency added.

Meanwhile, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees told AFP that at least 15 Palestinians have died of hunger since September in a besieged refugee camp in the Syrian capital Damascus.

"Reports have come in over the weekend that at least five Palestinian refugees in the besieged refugee camp of Yarmuk in Damascus have died because of malnutrition, bringing the total number of reported cases to 15," UN Relief and Works Agency spokesman Chris Gunness told AFP.

A military source cited by SANA said the army "was able to evacuate a large number of residents of Adra who had been trapped by armed terrorist groups who had terrorised them."

The Syrian government uses the term "terrorists" to refer to those seeking its overthrow.

It was not clear how the civilians had been trapped in the town.

Adra lies northeast of Damascus on a key road leading to the capital, and its industrial zone was attacked by rebel fighters and jihadists on December 11.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group, at least 32 civilians were killed in the town by rebel fighters in the early stages of clashes with the army.

Most of those were from the Alawite sect that President Bashar al-Assad belongs to, the Observatory said.

Egypt police arrest Al-Jazeera journalists

AFP, Cairo

Egyptian secret police have arrested an award-winning Australian journalist and an Egyptian reporter for the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera channel on suspicion of illegally broadcasting news harming "domestic security", the interior ministry said.

Al-Jazeera confirmed the arrests in a statement and said police also detained a producer and a cameraman.

Officers of the National Security service raided their makeshift bureau at a Cairo hotel on Sunday, arresting two of the journalists and confiscating their equipment, the ministry said in a statement.

It did not identify the journalists, only mentioning that one was a "Muslim Brotherhood member" and the other an Australian.

Al-Jazeera English identified them as Cairo bureau chief Mohamed Adel Fahmy, and Australian reporter Peter Greste.

It said producer Baher Mohamed and cameraman Mohamed Fawzi were also arrested on Sunday evening.

The raid came after authorities listed the Muslim Brotherhood movement of deposed president Mohamed Morsi as a "terrorist organisation", making membership in Islamism group or even possession of its literature a crime.

Too much for info, Kejriwal!

AFP, New Delhi

India's anti-corruption activist Arvind Kejriwal swept to power last month on a promise of greater transparency and he began office yesterday true to his word -- admitting that Delhi belly had spoiled his first day.

After weeks of rallies in a gruelling election campaign, Kejriwal said he had fallen ill with diarrhoea and a severe fever and could not come into the office.

"Running 102 fever since yesterday. Severe loose motions. Sad that I won't be able to attend office today," the former tax official tweeted on his verified Twitter account.

"It was so imp to attend office today. We had planned the water announcement. God, bahut galat time par bimaar kiya (you've had me sick at a very wrong time)."

