

# US won't drop case against Devyani

## More evidence being collected: reports

NDTV, Online  
The US has no plans to drop the criminal charges against Indian diplomat Devyani Khobragade who has been accused of visa fraud, according to the Press Trust of India. Khobragade was arrested in New York earlier this month before being granted bail. Sources said that more evidence is being collected against her to present before January 31, the deadline for the equivalent of a chargesheet to be presented in court. In Delhi, the US ambassador Nancy Powell said today in a statement, "I join Secretary Kerry in expressing our regret for the circumstances of the consular officer's arrest, but we believe that we can look forward to continuing to expand our bilateral relations." The case has forged a huge diplomatic dispute between the two countries. New

Delhi, which wants Washington to drop the case and offer an apology, has retaliated by drastically pruning the privileges extended to US consular staff in India. Khobragade, 39, who was India's deputy consul general at its mission in New York, has been accused by the US of underpaying and overworking her housekeeper, an Indian named Sangeeta Richards. The US said the diplomat lied in a visa application about Ms Richards' salary. Khobragade's lawyer recently claimed that the US misconstrued the contentious visa application by interpreting Khobragade's salary as that of her housekeeper's. The US has also refuted that charge. India is trying to secure full diplomatic immunity for Khobragade by shifting her to its UN mission in New York, although such a move needs the US State Department approval.

# Thai PM calls for peaceful end to political crisis

AFP, Bangkok  
Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra yesterday urged a "peaceful solution" to bitter political divisions in the kingdom that have spurred sometimes bloody protests, causing the embattled premier to call snap polls. Yingluck vowed not to give up working for reconciliation in the crisis-hit nation, where demonstrators have sought to unseat her government in a bid to rid the country of the influence of her polarising brother Thaksin -- a billionaire former premier. "The entire Thai people, regardless of political ideology or different beliefs, (should) turn toward each other to find a peaceful solution for our country," she said in a New Year message on her official Facebook page. Weeks of anti-government protests have shaken the Thai capital, throwing the country's fragile political system into fresh uncertainty and causing concern among the international community. Demonstrators have vowed to step up their efforts to disrupt the polls on February 2, after a short lull in activity for New Year celebrations.

Thailand has been periodically convulsed by political bloodshed since Thaksin was overthrown by royalist generals in a coup seven years ago. The protesters, a mix of southerners, middle-class Thais and the urban elite, accuse the tycoon-turned-politician of corruption and say he controls his sister's government from his self-exile in Dubai. They want an unelected "people's council" to run the country to oversee loosely-defined reforms -- such as an end to alleged "vote buying" -- before new elections are held in around a year to 18 months. Yingluck called elections in the hope of ending an end to the rallies, which have drawn tens of thousands of people calling on her to step down. Her party still enjoys strong support in the north and northeast of the country and is expected to win the election if it goes ahead. The Election Commission last week urged the government to postpone the polls after protesters stormed a party registration venue in Bangkok, triggering clashes in which a policeman and a demonstrator were shot dead by unidentified gunmen.

# Big blow for small traders

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"March for Democracy" programme, the most violent of protests have occurred in the areas in the last two days, traders said. "Most people are avoiding the places for fear of vandalism," said Zafar Iqbal, a roadside tea vendor near the main entrance to the Jatiya Press Club. In its efforts to foil the Sunday programme, the government has sealed off the capital from the rest of the country since Thursday evening. Iqbal's sales bring in Tk 2,500 on a normal day. Due to the government-imposed unofficial blockade, however, the amount came down to only around Tk 600 yesterday. Kamal Chandra Das, a cobbler, had the same story to tell. He sat idle near the main entrance to Shikha Bhaban on Abdul Gani Road, hoping a customer would stop by. He earned a meagre Tk 70 till afternoon, barely enough to buy food for his family of seven. "I usually do not come out on a hartal or blockade day, but now that it has become a regular affair, I have no other option." Kamal said he usually earns Tk 400-500 a day, but his earnings drop to Tk 100-150 during a shutdown. The cobbler, who lives in Madartek in Dhaka, has borrowed around Tk 15,000 in the last two months to feed the family, he said. Street vendor Shukur Ali, who sells pottery near Doel Chatter at Dhaka University, has also been witnessing a

sluggish business. He sells around Tk 10,000 on an average day. But his sales have plummeted by 90 percent over the last two months thanks to the political unrest, said Ali. "Even today, I can't sell anything worth a penny." GFC Restaurant, which sells snacks, plain rice, biryani and Chinese food at Purana Paltan, is incurring losses of around Tk 10,000 a day due to the frequent blockades and shutdowns, said restaurant owner Md Abu Kawsar Chowdhury. On a normal day, the transaction of the restaurant hovers between Tk 50,000 and Tk 60,000. But the sales now barely cross the Tk 5,000 mark, he said. He has been compelled to lay off seven out of the total 35 restaurant staff due to sluggish business in the last two months, he said. "I will have to shut down the restaurant if the present situation continues to the next month." Over the past one month, the opposition has enforced countrywide blockade of roads, rail and waterways for 22 days in phases. Violent clashes, arson attacks and killings happened almost daily, claiming at least 120 lives. Between November 26 and December 24, only seven days were free from blockades -- four Fridays, two holidays for the Martyred Intellectuals Day and the Victory Day and December 15, when the Jamaat called a hartal to protest the execution of its leader Quader Mollah for war crimes.

# Syria says peace meet invites unsent, blames opposition: paper

AFP, Damascus  
Invitations to a Syria peace meeting in Switzerland next month have not been issued as planned because of delays in the formation of an opposition delegation, a Syrian newspaper said yesterday. "An official source at the foreign ministry said that invitations to attend the 'Geneva 2' conference were not sent out as planned on December 28th," reported the Al-Watan newspaper, which is close to the Syrian regime. The source told the newspaper that the delay was "the result of the floundering efforts to form a delegation representing the 'opposition'." The source said a December 27 deadline had been set for the regime and opposition to submit the names of representatives to the meeting on January 22. He said the government had submitted the details of its delegation but the opposition had yet to do so. Syria's foreign ministry declined to comment on the report. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said last week that invites to the conference would be issued before the end of the year. The 'Geneva 2' conference, named because it is intended to follow a first peace meeting in Geneva, is to be held in Montreux, a city north-east of Geneva. After months of delays, a January 22 date for the talks has been set, but doubts remain about whether the conference will go ahead. The key opposition National Coalition has yet to categorically say it will attend the meeting, and warned recently it would not show up if government war planes continued an aerial campaign in northern Aleppo province that has killed over 500 people. The opposition also insists that President Bashar al-Assad cannot be part of any transition in Syria, but the regime says Assad's departure from office will not be on the table at the peace talks. Other questions remain unanswered, including whether Iran will attend the talks. Tehran is the key regional ally of the Syrian regime, which has said it should be allowed to attend, and the opposition is opposed to it being invited to the talks. More than 126,000 people have been killed since the beginning of the conflict in Syria in March 2011.

# Fresh violence rocks Bangui

AFP, Bangui  
Christian militiamen attacked a Central African army base in the capital Bangui yesterday, as French and African soldiers struggled to contain sectarian violence. Vigilantes attacked a military position at the PK-11 crossroads on the northern outskirts of Bangui, General Mahamat Tahir Zaroga told AFP. He said the attack, the second in as many nights by the so-called anti-balaka groups, caused no casualties. Gunfire rang out through the night in Bangui, where 1,600 French troops and around 4,000 African peacekeepers are attempting to curb escalating religious strife. Witnesses holed up in their homes reported exchanges of fire in the central Ben Zvi neighbourhood just before dawn. The vigilantes were formed in response to abuses perpetrated by demobilised rebels from the Seleka coalition that helped Michel Djotodia become the country's first Muslim head of state after a March 2013 coup. Around 100,000 people displaced by weeks of violence have sought refuge near the main French army base by Bangui airport.

# Rights situation

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Thirty-seven people died across the country in clashes that ensued when the verdict on Jamaat leader Delwar Hossain Sayedee was passed in early March. Due to violence following the Hefajat-e Islam rally at Motijheel Shapla Chattar, 22 people died on May 5 and 27 more the next day in different parts of the country. An injured Hefajat activist died on May 7 at a hospital in Comilla, according to the report. The report points out a disturbing trend of communal violence in 2013. Temples and houses along with shops and businesses of minority communities, especially Hindus, were vandalised and torched following the verdicts on war criminals. As many as 278 houses, 208 business places and 495 temples belonging to Hindus were reportedly vandalised and torched. Such acts of violence, which happened in more than 30 districts, were fuelled by religious fundamentalists and political parties. Militancy may rise in the country if the major political parties fail to reach an understanding, said Noor Khan, acting executive director of ASK. "While major political parties squabbled over different issues throughout the year, there were attempts by religion-based parties to rise," he said. The law enforcement agencies were responsible for extrajudicial killings of 72 people in the year, in addition to illegal torture and harassment of countless others, the report says. As many as 335 cases of deaths and torture by Border Security Force were reported last year. Twenty-six people were murdered, 84 tortured and 175 abducted by the Indian BSF, according to the report. Three journalists were killed and at least 280 were subjected to harassment and assault. The ASK report mentions rapes of 812 women in the past year. Of them, 87 were killed and 14 committed suicide. Besides, 703 women were subjected to violence at home, including those who had dowry-related issues. As many as 162 indigenous families took shelter in the nearby jungle and on the other side of the border after miscreants set fire to their houses in Matiranga, Khagrachhari, on August 3.

# South Sudan rebels counter-attack, ignore ceasefire deadline

AFP, Juba  
Anti-government rebels in South Sudan launched an attack on the key town of Bor on yesterday, ignoring a deadline set by regional powers to stop fighting and hold peace talks. Renewed battles in Bor, capital of the powder-keg Jonglei state and situated just 200 kilometres (125 miles) north of the capital Juba, is a major blow to government troops who celebrated the town's recapture from rebel forces only last week. "There is fighting this morning in Bor town," army spokesman Philip Aguer told AFP. A UN spokesman in Juba, Joe Contreras, said fighting started before dawn and involved tanks, rockets and small arms. He said the airstrip in Bor was also closed and that it was unclear who was in control of the town. Thousands of people are feared to have been killed in over two weeks of fighting, pitching army units loyal to President Salva Kiir against a loose alliance of ethnic militia forces and mutinous army commanders nominally headed by ex-vice president Riek Machar. Despite a heavy army presence, thousands have fled in recent days from Bor in fear of an impending counter-attack by rebels -- including an ethnic militia force dubbed the "White Army", reported to have been marching on the dusty town for days. The world's youngest nation plunged into chaos on December 15 when Kiir accused his former deputy Machar of mounting a coup. Machar in turn has accused the president of using a clash between army units as a pretext to carry out a violent purge. Regional leaders at the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), an East African grouping, had demanded Machar agree to a ceasefire and hold face-to-face talks with Kiir by yesterday -- but there appeared to be little chance of that deadline being met.

The United States, which was a key backer of South Sudan's independence struggle, has warned of a "very complicated, tenuous situation" and has sent a special envoy in a bid to kickstart negotiations. The conflict has fanned ethnic differences between Kiir's Dinka group and Machar's Nuer clan. Fierce battles have been reported in strategic oil-producing areas -- with rebels controlling Bentiu, state capital of the key state of Unity, as well parts of the oil-rich Upper Nile State. African Union 'dismay' There have also been grim reports of massacres, rapes and killings, prompting the African Union to threaten "targeted sanctions" over the conflict. The AU expressed "Africa's dismay and disappointment that the continent's newest nation should descend so quickly into civil strife" warning of its potential to deteriorate into "full-fledged civil war" -- even though many observers say this has already happened. Kiir has described the war as "senseless", but ruled out power sharing with the rebels. "What power sharing? It is not an option. This man has rebelled. If you want power, you don't rebel so that you are awarded with the power," Kiir said in an interview broadcast on the BBC yesterday. "You go through the process. When I came here I did not come through a military coup, I came because I was elected by the people," he said. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni had warned that Machar must comply with the ceasefire deal by yesterday or face action by regional nations. He said if Machar does not respond "we shall have to go for him," without clarifying if his threat involved military action. A key rebel demand has been the release of several top level political leaders arrested hours after the fighting began, but Kiir said they must follow the court process.

# Country has a lot more to lose

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heartbreaks on many counts, sports being only one. Bangladesh has a tall task ahead in getting back the GSP facility that the US cancelled following allegations of low labour standards, human rights violations and unsafe working conditions. These measures will not only go for claiming back the US GSP but also to retain its duty-free access to the EU, which will review the facility in June. So far, very little has been done to comply with the requirements for GSP. The Bangladesh government and the private sector together have to go through a long list of corrective measures. But in such a volatile situation, it now seems that Bangladesh will progress little in that direction and the results are anybody's guess. Until very recently, Bangladesh was the hotspot for international garment buyers. McKinsey had predicted, based on the ground realities, that Bangladesh's garment exports would boom and reach \$42 billion in 10 years. True to the report, exports surged heftily (last growth is 19 percent). Even a garment giant like China has started placing orders. When a one billion plus populated country growing at astronomical rate shows interest in you, you should be in the seventh heaven. Unfortunately, that dream dims if 2014 continues to be tumultuous. Buyers are looking

for alternative sources and they will find it sooner or later. Even China is now tentative. Bangladesh also needs to focus its whole machinery on a number of critical issues like climate change and aid for trade. After the successful WTO meeting in Bali, Bangladesh needs to chart its agenda for mobilisation of resources to address its trade-related constraints. Similarly, it needs to negotiate on climate funds, which needs leadership and a comprehensive approach to the country's needs. But if 2014 continues in the mood of 2013, such initiatives would get the least priority. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) initiative of which Bangladesh starred as a big achiever is another area that stands to be jeopardised. Bangladesh has been portrayed as one of the 18 "highlighted" countries in the South that have made significant gains on the Human Development Index over a two-decade period. Now as the MDG 2.0 begins after 2015, Bangladesh needs to set its targets and implement them. We risk upsetting that too. And then our hope to make it to the next 11 countries, as predicted by Goldman Sachs, to emerge in economic power will diminish. There are many more such possibilities that may get upset if the New Year proves to be violent and uncertain.

# Israel frees Palestinian prisoners ahead of Kerry visit

AFP, Jerusalem  
Israel freed 26 Palestinian prisoners yesterday as part of US-brokered peace talks ahead of the latest visit to the region by Secretary of State John Kerry. The release prompted elation among Palestinians, who welcomed the prisoners back into the West Bank and Gaza Strip after they had spent two to three decades in Israeli jails. But as Kerry geared up for his 10th visit to the region since March, an anticipated announcement by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government of further settlement construction -- designed to appease hardliners -- looked set again to undermine the talks. Kerry, expected to arrive today, has been pressing the two sides to agree on a framework for a final settlement ahead of an agreed late April target date for the talks to conclude. The prisoners were the third batch of 104 detainees that Netanyahu pledged to release in four stages when the peace talks were revived in July. All were imprisoned before the 1993 Oslo accords, which officially launched the Middle East peace process. Many Israelis, including families of victims of Palestinian attacks, protested the release, accus-

ing the government of freeing convicted killers who could return to militancy. But the freed prisoners were hailed by Palestinians as heroes imprisoned for fighting against the Israeli occupation, with some welcomed back to Ramallah in the West Bank, others to east Jerusalem and the remainder into the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. Palestinian media hailed the prisoners as "heroic fighters" and looked forward to the release of the final batch by end of April, when the nine-month period for talks is to end. The 18 men taken to Ramallah were warmly embraced by Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas in his presidential compound, a correspondent said, before laying flowers on the grave of late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Abbas pledged to the prisoners and their exuberant families that "there would be no final agreement (with Israel) until all prisoners were in their homes." The Islamist Hamas movement ruling Gaza hailed the prisoner release, but reiterated its rejection of the peace talks and slammed the notion that freeing prisoners justified Israeli settlement expansion.

# 2014 off to a bad start

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been introduced only recently, but it has proved to be inadequate. As a result, supply chain of businesses was only restored partially. In an apparent move to thwart the opposition's "March for Democracy", the government unofficially banned all Dhaka-bound transport from Saturday to Monday to cut off the capital from the rest of the country. No Dhaka-bound train operated either on Sunday or Monday. The ongoing political battle between the two major parties has affected the country's garment sector most. Garment makers are sending goods to the port and bringing raw materials to their factories on weekends with police escort. "I don't know how some of my goods-laden trucks will reach Chittagong port from Habiganj tonight [Tuesday night]," said Shafiq Ahmed, managing director of Saiham Knit Composite Ltd. The BGMEA and BKMEA have suggested Shafiqat send his shipment with police protection. "We're set to lose our competitiveness in the international market due to the political dead-

lock," BGMEA president Atiqul Islam told this newspaper. The two-day halt in rail trips deprived 1.10 lakh passengers of the service and caused around Tk5 crore in revenue losses to the railway. Nearly 25,000 railway officials and employees were busy yesterday as train services resumed. Kamalapur Railway Station was seen bustling with passengers. A top railway official said over 8,000 Ansar members were deployed yesterday to guard trains and railway tracks. Khandaker Enayet of the pro-government Bangladesh Sarak Paribahan Samity, which did not operate any buses on Sunday and Monday, said the samity started operating vehicles yesterday and would continue during the blockade. "Police have reassured us about security. If necessary, we will ask law enforcers to help run buses," he added. A few launches operated to and from the Sadarghat launch terminal during the opposition's "March for Democracy" programme, but all the vessels operated yesterday.

## HIGH COMMISSION OF INDIA DHAKA

### SCHOLARSHIPS FOR STUDY IN INDIA (2014-15)

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), Government of India offers scholarships to meritorious Bangladeshi nationals under the following scholarship schemes for the academic session 2014-15 to pursue various courses in India at the Under Graduate, Post-Graduate and PhD level, except in Medicine:

- (i) Bangladesh Scholarship Scheme
- (ii) Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme
- (iii) India Scholarship Scheme

Candidates are required to have proficiency in English and should have secured minimum 60 percent marks or GPA 3 out of GPA 5 in the qualifying examination. The application forms for these scholarships along with further information / instructions may be downloaded from the website of the High Commission of India, Dhaka ([www.hcidhaka.gov.in](http://www.hcidhaka.gov.in)).

Six complete sets of the duly filled-in application form along with attested copies of all required documents, certificates etc. as mentioned in the instructions may be submitted on any working day (Sunday-Thursday) from 1000-1300 hrs from January 12 to 23, 2014, at the following locations in Bangladesh:

- (a) Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre, House No. 35, Road No. 24, Gulshan-1, Dhaka
- (b) Assistant High Commission of India, Chittagong
- (c) Assistant High Commission of India, Rajshahi

For further details, please contact Education Wing, High Commission of India, House No. 2, Road No. 142, Gulshan-1, Dhaka-1212, Ph: 9888789-91 Ext 142 or 311. **The last date for receipt of completed application forms at Dhaka, Chittagong and Rajshahi is January 23, 2014.**