

NEWSIN brief

Musharraf's travel ban to stay

AFP, Rawalpindi

Pakistan's home ministry yesterday said they were not immediately lifting a travel ban on former military ruler Pervez Musharraf, who suffered a heart problem on the way to his treason trial earlier this week. The sudden health scare was met with scepticism from some observers and feverish media speculation that his departure from Pakistan on medical grounds could be imminent.

WWII bomb explodes in Germany; 1 killed

AFP, Cologne

The driver of an excavator was killed and 13 other people injured when a World War II-era bomb blew up during earthworks in Germany on Friday, police said. The ground below many German cities still contains unexploded ordnance dropped by Allied and Soviet forces in the Second World War.

Suu Kyi urges army to back charter reform

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday called on the powerful military to get involved in reforming the country's junta-era constitution, which currently bars her from becoming president. Myanmar's President Thein Sein on Thursday lent his support to constitutional reform in a monthly speech published in state media. Myanmar is heading for key parliamentary elections in 2015.

Phil of Everly Brothers dies at 74

AFP, Los Angeles

Phil Everly, half of the 1950s and '60s pop duo the Everly Brothers that influenced rock and country performers for decades, died Friday at the age of 74, US media reported.

Everly, a longtime smoker, died at a hospital in Burbank, California due to complications from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, his widow Patti Everly told the Los Angeles Times.

9 killed after gunmen storm Mexico prison

AFP, Iguala

Gunmen posing as public officials stormed a prison in southwestern Mexico on Friday, sparking a shootout that left five of the assailants and four inmates dead, officials said. Six armed men entered the prison in the Guerrero state town of Iguala by fooling a guard into thinking they were delivering an inmate some time after midnight, police and prosecutors said. Authorities were investigating the motive behind the attack.

US challenges ruling against NSA snooping

AFP, Washington

The US government said Friday it has lodged an appeal against a judge's ruling that the National Security Agency's "almost Orwellian" bulk collection of telephone records is illegal.

Separately, spy chief James Clapper revealed that a secret court had renewed the NSA's authority to gather call "metadata," despite the controversy triggered when the program came to light.

Civil liberties groups claim the digital dragnet infringes citizens' right to privacy, and on December 16 US District Court Judge Richard Leon agreed in Washington, branding the practice unconstitutional.

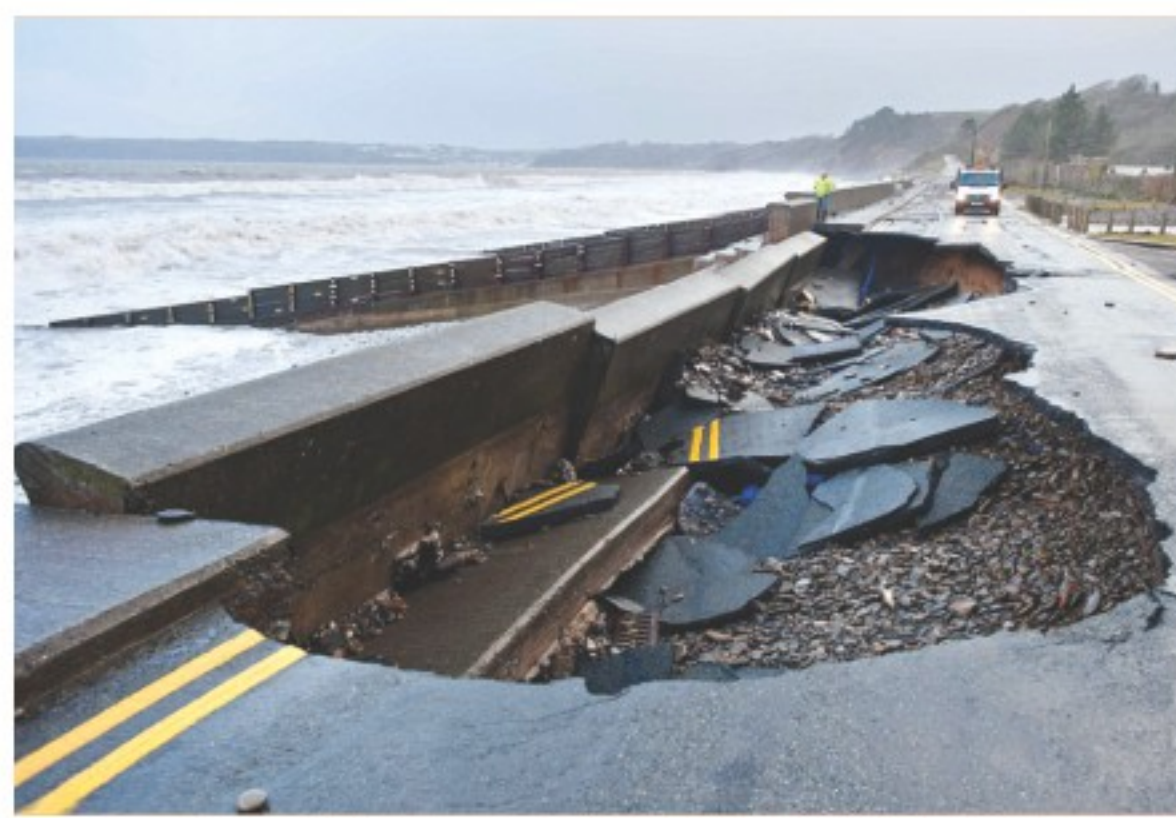
Meanwhile, more than 250 academics from around the world signed an online petition this week calling for an end to "blanket mass surveillance" by intelligence agencies.



ROUGH WEATHER BATTERS BRITAIN

Huge waves crash against the promenade wall in Porthcawl, south Wales, with the water and spray flying way above the buildings and lighthouse. *Top right*, Waves strike Coney Beach Pleasure Park at high tide in Porthcawl and *bottom right*, a road in Amroth, west Wales disintegrated under the force of the sea driven by high tides and strong winds. The fiercest storms in nearly 20 years have left a trail of destruction across the UK, with warnings that conditions are set to worsen over the weekend.

PHOTO: AFP, MAIL ONLINE



Syria rebels declare war on al-Qaeda

Kill, capture dozens of jihadists

AFP, Beirut

Rebels killed and captured dozens of jihadists loyal to an al-Qaeda affiliate in two days of unprecedented fighting in the Syrian provinces of Aleppo and Idlib, a monitor said yesterday.

Three powerful rebel alliances joined forces in the fighting against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, a move the main opposition National Coalition said it "fully supports".

And in a new sign of the war spreading, ISIL claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing targeting the southern Beirut stronghold of Shia Hezbollah, which has sent fighters into Syria to back forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad.

"At least 36 members and supporters of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant have been killed since Friday in Idlib and more than 100 have been captured by rebels" in Aleppo and Idlib, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The reports come a second day into major clashes in opposition areas of the northern and northwestern provinces between ISIL and rebel alliances which include the massive Islamic Front and the Syrian Revolutionaries Front. ISIL was reported to have kidnapped, beaten and executed dozens of rival rebels and activists since it appeared in Syria before last summer, establishing a reign of terror in areas where it operates.

It has forced young schoolgirls in some areas to wear the veil should they wish to go to school, and lashed and executed people -- including children -- on accusations of heresy.

The escalation came as the nascent Army of Mujahideen, a new rebel alliance, declared all-out war on ISIL.

Deadly freeze hits parts of US, Canada

AFP, New York

A fierce winter storm has caused chaos in the United States since the start of the year, killing 11 people, canceling thousands of flights and bringing freezing temperatures to Canada.

Northeastern US states felt the biggest impact, with more than 24 inches (61 centimeters) of snow falling in parts of a Massachusetts town and a state of emergency being declared in New York and New Jersey.

Four people were killed on Friday, with one worker crushed by a 100-foot (30-meter) pile of salt being prepared to treat roads in the Philadelphia area, media reports said.

At least nine other deaths were blamed on the storm -- named Hercules -- that caused traffic accidents and other disruption across 22 states and also affected parts of Canada.

Thai ruling party launches poll bid

Urges people to vote in polls to preserve democracy

AFP, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's party yesterday kicked off campaigning for February elections in the face of an opposition boycott and protester plans to "shut down" Bangkok in a bid to derail the vote.

The Puea Thai party launched its re-election bid with rallies in its northern heartlands and on the outskirts of the capital, which has been shaken by weeks of sometimes violent anti-government demonstrations that have left eight people dead and about 400 wounded.

"I am confident that the campaign will go smoothly -- we are not the ones triggering conflict," said party leader Jarupong Ruangsuan, adding that the party's election slogan would urge people to vote to "preserve democracy".

Yingluck called snap elections after coming under intense pressure from protesters vowing to rid the country of the influence of her brother -- controversial former premier

Thaksin Shinawatra, who is widely believed to control her party from self-exile in Dubai.

Demonstrators, who have vowed to disrupt the election on February 2, want Thai democracy to be suspended for a year or more, with a "people's council" installed to implement loosely defined reforms.

Protesters plan to occupy Bangkok from January 13 in the run up to the poll, vowing to prevent government officials from going to work and to cut off power and water to official buildings.

They also plan several marches in the capital starting from today to build momentum ahead of the occupation attempt.

Thailand's main opposition Democrat Party, which has not won an elected majority in two decades, support the rallies and have opted to boycott the election.

As campaigning began yesterday, several thousand Puea Thai supporters gathered in a field on the outskirts of Bangkok, one of five party rally locations.



University students shout anti-government slogans during a protest in New Delhi yesterday, after an Indian teenager was gang-raped in two separate attacks and then died after being set on fire in the eastern city of Kolkata.

PHOTO: AFP

'Kashmir deal was almost done'

THE HINDU ONLINE

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Friday stressed peace efforts with Pakistan, the keystone of his foreign policy.

Addressing a press conference here, Manmohan, in a significant revelation, for the first time, publicly acknowledged that secret envoys from the two countries had almost arrived at an agreed resolution to end the conflict in Kashmir.

"At one time it appeared an important breakthrough was in sight. However, in Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf had to make way for a different set of [leaders]. I think that led to the process not moving properly. However, I still believe that good relations between India and Pakistan are possible."

Manmohan said: "I very much like to go to Pakistan, [as] I was born in a village which is now part of that country. However, as Prime Minister, I have to go when a positive result can be had. I did not think the circumstances were right. I have still not given up hopes of going to Pakistan before I leave office."

Corrective rape

S Africa's shocking cure to lesbianism

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Mvuleni Fana was walking down a quiet alleyway in Springs -- 30 miles east of Johannesburg -- on her way home from football practice one evening when four men surrounded her and dragged her back to the football stadium. She recognised her attackers. One by one, the men raped her, beating her unconscious and leaving her for dead.

The next morning, Mvuleni came round, bleeding, battered, in shock, and taunted by one overriding memory -- the last thing they said to her before she passed out: "After everything we're going to do to you, you're going to be a real woman, and you're never going to act like this again".

Corrective rape is a hate crime wielded to convert lesbians to heterosexuality -- an attempt to 'cure' them of being gay. The term was coined in South Africa in the early 2000s when charity workers first noticed an influx of such attacks. But despite recognition and international coverage, corrective rape in the region is escalating in severity.

Compared to many of South Africa's victims, Mvuleni was lucky: she survived. At least 31 women in the past 15 years did not.

Ever since a 1998-2000 report by the United Nations Office on Crime and Drugs ranked South Africa as highest for rapes per capita, it has repeatedly been described as the rape capital of the world: 500,000 rapes a year; one every 17 seconds; one in every two women will be raped in her lifetime. A quarter of men in the Eastern Cape Provinces, when asked anonymously by the Medical Research Council, admitted to raping at least once -- three quarters of whom said their victim was under 20, a tenth said under 10. A quarter of schoolboys in Soweto described "jackrolling" -- the local term for gang rape -- as "fun".

Nepal rules out amnesty for serious war crimes

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's top court has rejected a demand by ultra-leftists that an amnesty be granted to people who committed serious rights abuses during the country's civil war, an official said yesterday.

More than 16,000 people died in the conflict between Maoist rebels and the state, which ended in 2006, and more than 1,000 are still missing.

The Himalayan nation's top court was responding to a petition filed last year by the National Network of Families of the Disappeared and the Missing, an organisation of victims' families.

Last year, a Maoist-led government proposed legislation in which it sought amnesty for those responsible for cases such as "forced disappearances" -- kidnappings in which the victims never were found -- and other crimes.

The amnesty was put forward as part of the powers of a planned Truth and Reconciliation Commission aimed at healing the wounds from the long civil war.

But the court said no amnesty could be given for serious cases of rights abuses.

Both the security forces and the Maoists are accused of serious human

rights violations including killings, rapes, torture and disappearances during the civil war.

"The court has said that cases of forced disappearances come under criminal act and violators should not be given amnesties," Srikant Paudel, the spokesman of the Supreme Court told AFP.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was agreed as part of the peace pact signed between the Maoists and the government in 2007.

The pact transformed the former Hindu kingdom into a secular republic.

Paudel added the court had ordered the government to establish two separate commissions to investigate war-crimes and human rights abuses.

Nepalese human rights lawyer Hari Phuyal welcomed the move, calling it "historic".

Although the Supreme Court has issued arrest warrants over several cases of human rights abuses committed during the war, not a single accused has been arrested so far.

There are allegations of killings and torture on both sides, and rights groups say little has been done to bring justice to victims and their families.

Cuba's classic cars set to disappear

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

One of Cuba's most distinctive anachronisms -- roads full of classic cars from the 1950s -- looks set to fade into history following the most sweeping relaxation of vehicle imports since the revolution.

People in Cuba are now allowed to buy modern cars from state-owned retailers.

New regulations put into place on Friday allow the sale of "new and used motorcycles, cars, vans, small trucks and mini buses for Cubans and foreign residents, companies and diplomats".

The plans are a part of a new economic plan adopted by President Raul Castro, the younger brother of former president Fidel Castro, who has promoted free-market reforms since 2008.

However, only the wealthiest Cubans will benefit as the state has kept its monopoly on new car sales and is marking up prices by over 400 per cent.

With the average wage in Cuba standing at \$20 (£12) per month, the new laws do not help the majority of the country's population.

However, the Cuban Government claims a slice of the profits from sales will be put to improving the Latin American country's public transport system.

Until laws were loosened in 2011, the country's Communist government only allowed the sale of cars built before the 1959 revolution.

Major Iraq city falls to Qaeda militants

AFP, Fallujah

Iraq has lost Fallujah to al-Qaeda-linked fighters, a senior security official said yesterday, putting militants back in control of a city where American forces repeatedly battled insurgents.

Parts of Fallujah and Ramadi, west of Baghdad, have been held by militants for days, harkening back to the years after the 2003 US-led invasion when both cities were insurgent strongholds.

Fighting erupted in the Ramadi area Monday, when security forces broke up an anti-government protest camp set up after demonstrations broke out in late 2012 against what Sunni Arabs say is the marginalisation and targeting of their community.

The violence then spread to Fallujah, and a subsequent withdrawal of security forces from areas of both cities cleared the way for ISIL to move in.

Meanwhile, Iraqi ground forces commander Staff General Ali Ghaidan Majeed told AFP that police and tribesmen were hunting for militants in Ramadi, with army support.

And he said authorities were working on "fixing the situation in Fallujah."

On Friday alone, more than 100 people were killed in Ramadi and Fallujah, in the country's deadliest single day in years.

South Sudan peace talks stall

AFP, Addis Ababa

Warring parties in South Sudan delayed direct peace talks yesterday dashing hopes of a swift ceasefire to end raging fighting and risks of a slide into all-out civil war.

While top leaders of the government and rebel teams have briefly met directly, the rivals continued to hold separate talks with negotiators yesterday.

No timeline has been set for the crucial face-to-face talks to begin, despite the teams having already spent three days in the same luxury hotel in neighbouring Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa.

Since the conflict erupted on December 15, thousands of people are feared to have been killed in the fighting, pitting army units loyal to President Salva Kiir against a loose alliance of ethnic militia forces and mutinous army commanders nominally headed by his rival, former vice president Riek Machar.

In South Sudan Saturday the army battled to wrest back from rebels the strategic town of Bor, capital of Jonglei, one of the country's largest states.

There were reports of intense battles involving tanks and artillery on the outskirts of Bor, which has already exchanged hands three times since fighting began almost three weeks ago.

