

NEWSIN brief

Gang raped, burnt to death Indian teen was pregnant

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Two men have been charged in connection with the murder of an Indian teenager who was gang raped twice and set on fire in the eastern city of Kolkata, as police acknowledged she had not tried to kill herself following the assault.

An autopsy also revealed the girl was pregnant, The Hindustan Times has since reported. DNA tests are now underway to determine if one of the suspects fathered the child.

S Arabia jails 5 on Qaeda charges

AFP, Riyadh

A Saudi court has jailed five people for up to 30 years on charges including plotting to blow up an oil refinery on behalf of Al-Qaeda, state media reported yesterday.

The official SPA news agency gave no details of when the alleged plot against the refinery in the Red Sea port of Yanbu took place.

Blast kills 10 in Pak tribal elder's home

AFP, Peshawar

At least 10 people were killed and another nine wounded yesterday in an explosion at the home of a tribal leader in a restive area of northwest Pakistan, officials said.

The blast came in a remote village in Khyber tribal district, close to the Afghan border in Tirah Valley, which last year saw fierce fighting between the Pakistani military and Taliban militants.

Turkish photographer freed in Syria

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish photographer kidnapped while covering the civil war in neighbouring Syria has returned home after being freed from weeks in captivity, his newspaper said yesterday.

Bunyamin Aygun, who works for the newspaper Milliyet, was taken hostage by radical Islamists in mid-December during a reporting mission in the war-torn country.

S Korea for family reunions with North

AFP, Seoul

South Korean President Park Geun-Hye called yesterday for the resumption of reunions for families separated since the Korean War, saying the programme could help ease "grave" strains with North Korea.

Park, in a New Year press conference, also promised increased humanitarian aid to the impoverished North to improve relations at a time of growing uncertainty.

African migrants protest

Push for asylum in Israel

CNN ONLINE

Thousands of African migrants crammed into Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, Israel, calling for a labor strike. Their chants filled the air, summing up their message: "We need asylum." Activists estimate more than 50,000 migrants work illegally in low-paying jobs in Israel.

Many are fleeing persecution from war-torn areas like Sudan and Eritrea. The threat to their lives pushes them to undertake the dangerous journey via smugglers' routes to Israel. A vast majority cross the Sinai Peninsula, known for being a hotbed of kidnapping and organ harvesting. Once across the border in Israel, they try to claim asylum.

The asylum seekers complain that the Israeli government isn't viewing their goal as legitimate, but rather sees them as migrant workers.

The Israeli government blames them for an increase in crime and says they threaten Israel's internal security. They are giving refugee seekers willing to voluntarily return to their home countries a cash incentive of \$3,500. But if that doesn't work, then the government says they'll deport them.



Department of Education Region 8 director Luisa Yu (centre R) joins a student dance prior to the start of classes at a makeshift classroom in the Typhoon devastated town of Tanauan, Leyte province, central Philippines yesterday, as schools reopened for the first time since the disaster on November 8. Schools reopened in badly damaged central Philippine towns for the first time since one of the world's strongest storms ever to hit land killed thousands two months ago.

PHOTO: AFP

Syria rebels lay siege to jihadists in Raqa

AFP, Beirut

Rebel fighters were laying siege yesterday to Al-Qaeda-linked jihadists in their northern stronghold of Raqa, managing to free 50 people they had detained, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Raqa emerged as a new front Sunday in fighting among rebels battling to oust President Bashar al-Assad, with various groups joining forces against Al-Qaeda affiliate the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

Raqa is the only provincial capital to have fallen out of regime hands since the conflict erupted when regime opponents took up arms following a bloody crackdown by Assad's forces on democracy protests in March 2011.

But soon afterwards it fell into the grip of ISIL, which is said to be holding hundreds of prisoners in their now besieged headquarters in the heart of Raqa.

Among ISIL's abductees are scores of rival rebels, activists and journalists, including Westerners.

Yesterday's offensive in Raqa came three days after three powerful rebel alliances,

including moderates and Islamists, launched what they called a second "revolution" against ISIS in the northern province of Aleppo and Idlib to its west.

On Sunday the rebel infighting spread to the central province of Hama, as well as Raqa, and the Observatory says scores of insurgents have been killed on both sides.

A key complaint against ISIL among rebels is that its jihadists refuse to operate within the broader opposition dynamic.

The observatory said "the main group laying siege to ISIL's headquarters in Raqa is Al-Nusra Front," which like ISIL is affiliated to Al-Qaeda but is seen as more moderate.

ISIL and Al-Nusra have fought each other in recent months, after ISIL announced it was Al-Qaeda's representative in Syria. Al-Nusra had been operating in Syria for longer, and refused to work under ISIL's command.

The 33-month conflict in Syria is estimated to have killed more than 130,000 people and forced millions more to flee their homes as refugees or internally displaced persons.

Expel militants, avoid assault

Maliki urges Fajullah

AFP, Ramadi

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki called yesterday for Fallujah residents to expel "terrorists" holding the city to avoid an assault by security forces, as they battled gunmen in nearby Ramadi.

Iraq is preparing a "major attack" to retake Fallujah, which has been outside government control for days, while parts of Anbar provincial capital Ramadi, farther west, are also held by Al-Qaeda-linked fighters.

It is the first time militants have exercised such open control in major cities since the height of the bloody insurgency that followed the US-led invasion of 2003.

Maliki called on "the people of Fallujah and its tribes to expel the terrorists" so "their areas are not subjected to the danger of armed clashes," state television reported.

Maliki also ordered security forces "not to strike residential areas in Fallujah", it said.

Meanwhile, continuous fighting between security forces and militants took place in north, northeast and south Ramadi from early Monday, a police major said, while a captain reported clashes east of Fallujah.

A senior official told AFP on Sunday that "Iraqi forces are preparing for a major attack in Fallujah."

And ground forces commander Staff General Ali Ghaidan Majeed said the city should "wait for what is coming" -- a reference to the impending assault.



Men perform a traditional dance in the icy winter waters of the Tundzha river in the town of Kalofer, Bulgaria, as part of the Epiphany Day celebrations yesterday. As a tradition, an Eastern Orthodox priest throws a cross in the river and it is believed that the one who retrieves it will be healthy through the year as well as all those who dance in the icy waters.

PHOTO: AFP

'REFERENDUM ON ARMY IN KASHMIR' Kejriwal disagrees with Bhushan's comment

NDTV ONLINE

The Aam Aadmi Party yesterday launched damage control after senior party man Prashant Bhushan sparked a controversy by talking of a referendum in Jammu and Kashmir to decide whether the people want the army to handle internal security.

"We don't agree with what Prashant Bhushan said about Kashmir, it's his personal view," said party chief Arvind Kejriwal, who took over as chief minister of Delhi a week ago. "Whatever the army wants to do regarding deployment, there is no question of a referendum on it. We do not support Prashant Bhushan's statement."

The party later read out a clarification on behalf of Bhushan, "AAP is of the view that Kashmir is an integral part of India. I share this view." The AAP also asserted that it is against any kind of referendum in Kashmir.

Bhushan had earlier said on NDTV's "We The People" that in keeping with participatory democracy, locals in the Kashmir Valley should be allowed to determine whether they want the army for internal security or not.

The AAP leader said the government should only decide if the army should deal with external threats along the border.

The comments were criticised across the spectrum, with both the Congress and the BJP accusing the AAP of making irresponsible statements.

Drug trade could fragment Afghanistan into criminal state

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Afghanistan's booming narcotics trade risks splintering the country into a "fragmented, criminal state" if the government and its western allies do not step up efforts to tackle opium production and the illicit economy it supports, a senior UN official warned.

Opium farming in Afghanistan, the world's main producer of the drug, hit a record high last year, with farmers harvesting a crop worth nearly \$1bn to them, and far more to the traffickers who take about four-fifths of the profit.

There are no miracle cures. A transformation of the corrupt economy could take up to two decades, and opium production is likely to climb beyond 2013's worrying levels before it falls again, said Jean-Luc Lemahieu, outgoing head of the UN office on drugs and crime in Afghanistan.

But he still sees cause for hope in the transformation of the narcotics police into a disciplined and relatively well respected force, an increase in treatment for Afghan addicts, and the government's recent crackdown on powerful officials linked to the drugs trade including the arrest of a top police officer.

EFFORTS TO END S SUDAN WAR

Sudan president visits South

AFP, Juba

Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir arrived in South Sudan's capital Juba yesterday for a day of talks on the country's three-week-old unrest, as mediators struggled to get peace negotiations underway in neighbouring Ethiopia.

Bashir was greeted at Juba airport by South Sudan's Vice President James Wani Igga, before heading to the presidential palace for talks with his counterpart President Salva Kiir.

Bashir made no public comment, although Khartoum has reaffirmed Sudan's support for "a peaceful resolution to the conflict", which has already left thousands dead and close to 200,000 displaced.

South Sudan won independence from Khartoum in 2011 after decades of war, but the north remains a key player in the young nation's affairs -- serving as the export route for the South's oil production.

The visit comes as fighting in South Sudan showed no sign of easing, with the capital experiencing more sporadic gunfire overnight and government forces saying they were massing to recapture several rebel-held towns.

Heavy fighting was reported over the weekend in oil-producing Unity and Upper Nile states in the north, as well as near rebel-held Bor, capital of Jonglei State just north of the capital.

Army spokesman Philip Aguer said it was only a "matter of time" before Bor was recaptured, although rebel spokesman Moses Ruai insisted that it was anti-government fighters who were advancing on the capital.

The conflict in South Sudan erupted on December 15, pitting army units loyal to Kiir against a loose alliance of ethnic militia forces and mutinous army commanders nominally headed by Riek Machar, a former vice president who was sacked last July.

Machar denies allegations that he started the conflict by attempting a coup, and in turn accuses the president of orchestrating a violent purge.

Officials said the chief negotiators for both sides held another face-to-face meeting on Sunday, and had finally agreed on an agenda for the ceasefire negotiations -- which were expected to begin in earnest yesterday.

A key sticking point appears to be rebel and international demands that the South Sudanese government release 11 officials close to Machar so they can participate in the talks, aimed at putting in place a truce as well as ceasefire-monitoring mechanisms.

The South Sudanese government, however, has repeated that the rebel suspects would not be freed and should face justice.



Sudan President Omar al-Bashir (L) and his South Sudan counterpart Salva Kiir pose before a meeting yesterday at the presidential palace in Juba.

PHOTO: AFP

MUSHARRAF TRIAL

Court demands medical report

AFP, Islamabad

A special court set up to try Pakistan's former military ruler Pervez Musharraf for treason yesterday demanded a medical report after he missed another hearing following a heart complaint.

The 70-year-old was rushed to a military hospital on Thursday after falling ill while being taken to hear treason charges against him at the tribunal in Islamabad.

Musharraf spent a fifth day in the Armed Forces Institute of Cardiology in Rawalpindi, which neighbours Islamabad, missing the hearing as his lawyers had said he would on Sunday.

The three-judge bench adjourned the case to today and asked for a report on his condition to be submitted to explain his continued absence from proceedings.

Doctors treating Musharraf have sent medical reports to experts in Britain to determine whether he should be flown abroad for treatment.

GOA BUILDING COLLAPSE

More than 10 still trapped

TNN, Canacona

Around 10-20 persons are still trapped inside the debris of the building under-construction which collapsed on Saturday killing 17 persons so far, at Chaudi, Canacona.

Officials found out that 50-60 persons were in the 'Ruby' building when it collapsed like a pack of cards on Saturday. Of these, 24 were rescued mainly by the personnel of fire services or were lucky not to get trapped when the tragedy occurred claiming 17 lives, an official said.

Kerry ends Mideast trip without framework deal

'We'll help Iraq but won't send in troops'

AFP, Jerusalem

After four days of intense diplomacy, US Secretary of State John Kerry headed home yesterday, insisting progress was made despite failing to agree a framework to guide Israeli-Palestinian talks.

During his tour, Kerry spent hours locked in separate meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, as well as making a surprise day trip to key Arab allies, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

Yesterday morning, he briefed Tony Blair, the Middle East special envoy for the Quartet of regional peacemakers, at his Jerusalem hotel as he wrapped up his 10th trip to the region as secretary of state.

Speaking to reporters in Jerusalem on Sunday, Kerry said the United States will help the Iraqi government in its battle against al Qaeda-linked fighters in western Iraq, but stressed it won't send troops.

With the US remaining tight-lipped about the details, little news has filtered out about Kerry's proposals to bridge the huge gaps between the two sides as they seek to draw up the contours of two states living side-by-side.

But talks appear to have focused on security in the Jordan Valley, on the border between the West Bank and Jordan, as well as the fate of Jerusalem, which both sides claim as their future capital. Jordan and Saudi Arabia will be key to any deal.



No immediate summit hope with China, S Korea

Admits Shinzo Abe

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday defended his visit to a controversial war shrine, but admitted there was no immediate prospect of summits with his South Korean and Chinese counterparts.

In his annual new year press conference, the conservative leader said he wished to directly explain to China's President Xi Jinping and South Korean President Park Geun-Hye why he visited Yasukuni Shrine, which honours Japanese war dead including war criminals.

Late last month, Abe sparked harsh criticism from the neighbouring countries for his visit to the shrine, a place seen as a symbol of Japan's war-time aggression in Asia, particularly by China and the two Koreas.

Abe came to power just over a year ago and has not held direct talks with either leader.

Japan has strained relations with both countries, largely because of persisting animosity over the violence perpetrated by its soldiers before and during World War II.