

NEWSIN brief

More than 20 Belgian Islamists killed in Syria

AFP, Brussels

More than 20 of the 200 or so Belgian Islamists who have left for Syria to fight President Bashar al-Assad's regime have been killed, Foreign Minister Didier Reynders said yesterday.

Reynders also reiterated growing concerns among governments across Europe over "how to keep track of these jihadists to see whether they are dangerous once they return here or

Syria arrests Kurdish journalist

AFP, Arbil

Syrian state security forces yesterday arrested a Kurdish journalist working for an Iraqi news outlet in the northern city of Qamishli, a relative told AFP.

Pishwa Bahlavi was filming a report about events in the city marking the Prophet Mohammed's birthday for Rudaw, an Iraqi Kurdish media company, when he was detained, said his cousin

C Africa troops return to their command

AFP, Bangui

Hundreds of deserting Central African Republic soldiers and police returned to their commands yesterday as the interim president said "the party is over" following weeks of deadly sectarian violence.

The soldiers and police had deserted for fear of being killed or joined a Christian militia who had opposed Michel Djotodia, the mainly Christian country's first Muslim president who resigned Friday under international pres-

CBI files status report with SC on coalgate

PTI, New Delhi

The CBI yesterday filed a status report giving details of its probe in the irregularities in coal block allocations.

The status report has been filed in a sealed envelope and the Indian Supreme Court might go through it on January 15 when a bench headed by Justice RM Lodha will hear a bunch of PILs on coalgate.

However, reports, quoting CBI sources, said that the agency has informed the apex court that it found no criminality in the allocation of about 60 coal blocks, which are likely to be taken out of the purview of its ongoing probe after taking Court's permission.

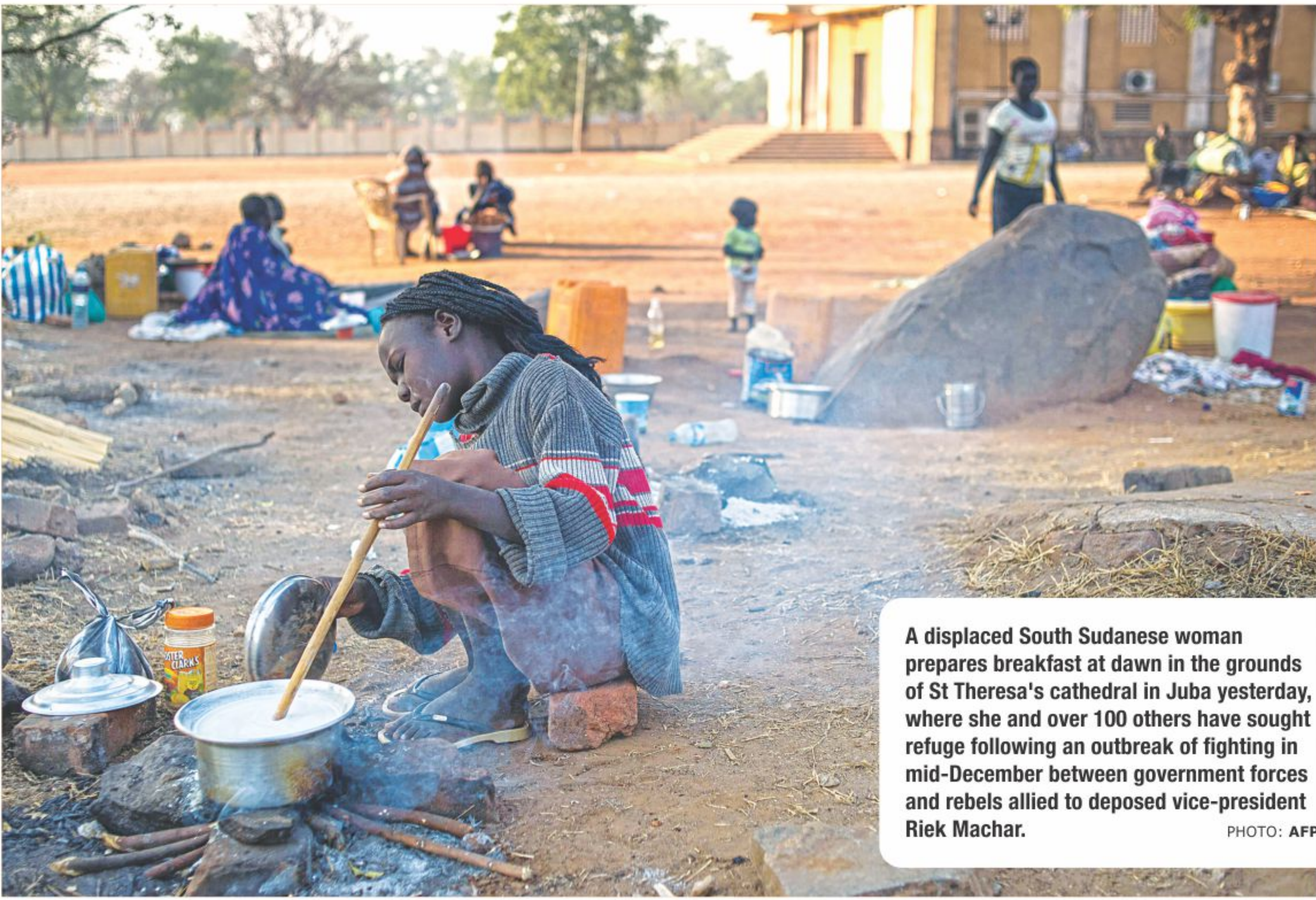
Although the agency has analysed the records in detail and concluded there was no criminality involved in the allocation of these coal blocks, a final decision whether to drop them from the ongoing probe would be taken after Supreme Court directives, the sources said.

The sources said 195 coal blocks allocations are being probed out of which in 16 cases CBI has found prima facie material which indicates cheating, criminal misconduct and corruption based on which the agency has registered FIRs.

However, during the analysis of nearly 60 allocations, records were found to be correct and no deviation from the laid down norms and procedures was detected.

All FIRs are rooted in three preliminary enquiries related to coal block allocation -- between 2006 and 2009, 1993 and 2004, and projects given under the government dispensation scheme.

There are two other preliminary enquiries which are related to missing



A displaced South Sudanese woman prepares breakfast at dawn in the grounds of St Theresa's cathedral in Juba yesterday, where she and over 100 others have sought refuge following an outbreak of fighting in mid-December between government forces and rebels allied to deposed vice-president Riek Machar.

PHOTO: AFP

Sharon laid to rest at his Negev ranch

AFP, Sycamore Ranch

Israel's controversial former prime minister Ariel Sharon was laid to rest at his ranch in the southern Negev desert yesterday, an AFP correspondent said.

Sharon died on Saturday after spending eight years in a coma that struck him at the height of a decades-long career which saw him lauded as a military hero and statesman, but also reviled as a warmongering criminal. He was 85.

Eight military generals carried Sharon's coffin to the grave alongside that of his second wife, as a Jewish cantor intoned a traditional prayer for the dead.

Removing the blue and white Israeli flag draped over it, the generals lowered the coffin into the ground, then began filling the grave with dirt.

In accordance with tradition, a military rabbi went up to Sharon's two sons and made a symbolic cut in each of their shirts as a sign of mourning.

"Arik, the commander. You had many titles over the years, but I think this is the one that suited you most," said Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Benny Gantz at the graveside, using the Sharon's nickname.

"Generations of soldiers came to salute you for the last time today... I came to salute you too."

Sharon, who was born into a farming community north of Tel Aviv in 1928, had wanted to be buried at his family home in Sycamore Ranch which lies just kilometres from the border with the Hamas-run Gaza Strip.

US, Russia call for 'local ceasefires' ahead of Syria talks

UN chief in Iraq for talks on Syria war

AFP, Paris, Baghdad

US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov yesterday called for "localised ceasefires" in Syria ahead of peace talks later this month in Switzerland.

Lavrov and UN-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi also said Damascus ally Iran should take part in the so-called Geneva 2 talks due to start in Montreux on January 22, after a meeting in Paris.

"We talked today about the possibility of trying to encourage a ceasefire, maybe a localised ceasefire beginning with Aleppo (north of Syria)," Kerry said.

Both said they hoped ceasefires could be in place before the talks, along with plans for prisoner exchanges and the opening of humanitarian corridors.

"What can be done before the beginning of the conference should be done," Lavrov said. "We are going to try to send signals to all the Syrian sides on the need for the establishment of a localised ceasefire."

Lavrov added, however, that these issues would not be a precondition to the talks and reiterated Russia's support for Iran taking part in the peace talks, which has been repeatedly rejected by the United States.

On the other hand, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon arrived in Baghdad yesterday for talks with senior Iraqi



John Kerry



Ban Ki-moon



Sergei Lavrov

officials on the war in neighbouring Syria, as Iraq grapples with its own deadly crisis.

Ban, whose arrival was confirmed by Iraqi state television and the UN's official Twitter feed, was due to meet Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari.

The talks were to concentrate on the situation in the Middle East and in particular the bloodshed in Syria, Maliki's office said in a statement.

Kerry said Tehran could take part in the talks only if it agrees to the principles set out at the first Syria peace talks in Geneva, including the goal of creating a transitional government.

The Swiss talks have been organised to try and revive the idea of moving to a transitional government in Syria -- where the nearly three-year conflict has killed 130,000 people -- including figures from the current regime and the opposition.

Afghan 'suicide vest girl' reveals family ordeal

BBC ONLINE

An Afghan girl has told the BBC that her family forced her to attack a police checkpoint in Helmand province.

The girl, known as Spozhmai, said her brother and father had beaten her, ordering her to put on a suicide vest.

She was taken into protective custody in the provincial capital Lashkar Gah, after an Afghan soldier spotted her wearing the vest last Monday.

Said to be about 10, she has appealed to Afghan President Hamid Karzai to put her in a new home.

The girl is thought to be the sister of a prominent Taliban commander, who police say encouraged her to carry out the attack.

She told the BBC's Newsday programme that she had been scared to carry out the attack, but that her brother had promised only her targets would die.

She added that her father had ordered her to return home, but she refused to obey.

In her appeal to Karzai last week, the child said: "I won't go back there. God didn't make me to become a suicide bomber. I ask the president to put me in a good place."

The president has condemned the Taliban over the incident, but the group has denied any involvement in the alleged plot.



Libyans beat drums as they walk through the lanes of the old city of Tripoli towards Martyrs' Square as they celebrate the anniversary of Islam's Prophet Muhammad's birthday yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Maliki rebukes Ban Ki-moon on execution moratorium

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki yesterday publicly rebuked UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's call for the country to halt executions while standing beside him at a joint news conference.

Despite widespread calls for a moratorium due to major problems with the country's criminal justice system, Iraq executed at least 169 people last year, its highest such figure since the 2003 US-led invasion, placing it third in the world, behind just China and Iran.

"I have urged the prime minister and Iraqi government to put (a) moratorium on (the) death penalty," Ban said in response to a question during the news conference with Maliki in Baghdad.

But Maliki replied that Iraqis would not accept murderers being allowed to live, and said executions were permitted under the constitution and Islam.

"We respect UN decisions and human rights, but we do not believe that the rights of someone who kills people must be respected," Maliki said.

Iraq has faced widespread criticism from diplomats, analysts and human rights groups who say that due to a problematic justice system, those being executed are not necessarily guilty of the crimes for which they were sentenced to die.

The rise in executions in 2013 came as Iraq grappled with its worst prolonged period of violence since it emerged from brutal sectarian fighting that peaked in 2006-2007 and left tens of thousands dead.

And with elections coming up in April and a litany of concerns facing voters, from poor services to high unemployment, politicians will likely seek to focus attention elsewhere while ministers wanting to project toughness could even up the pace of executions.

No more janata durbar

Says Delhi CM

THE TIMES OF INDIA ONLINE

Arvind Kejriwal's AAP govt in Delhi will not hold any more janata durbar for the aam aadmi, the Delhi chief minister announced yesterday adding he will meet people once in a week instead.

However, no complaints will be entertained during this meeting.

The Delhi govt has urged people to place their grievances online and through calls.

"We are setting up a system in which the people will be able to send their grievances online. The facility is already available on the Delhi government website," Kejriwal told reporters.

"We will also set up call centres for those who cannot write their grievances and their problems would be written and read to them. People can also send their grievances by post," the chief minister added.

The move comes after the huge chaos at the first such janata durbar of the Delhi govt which was held on last Saturday.



America to expect another polar plunge

MAIL ONLINE

Americans living in the Midwest or East Coast, may want to hold off on putting away the winter gear.

Just as temperatures are beginning to warm in much of the US, another arctic blast in the form of a polar vortex appears to be on the horizon.

The upcoming front of icy temperatures is expected to bring arctic air to southern Canada and then move into the northern plains of the US before moving to the Midwest and East Coast -- each of which is still recovering from last week's frigid temperatures.

Many areas are still recovering from the extreme weather last week, which has caused a dam of ice to block the Delaware river in New Jersey, forcing roads to close and causing a severe flood risk.

SOUTH SUDAN TURMOIL

Govt forces close to Bor

AFP, Juba

Government troops in South Sudan were advancing yesterday on Bor, the last state capital still in rebel hands, as peace talks in neighbouring Ethiopia appeared to make little progress towards a ceasefire.

Bor, the capital of the restive Jonglei State some 200 kilometres north of Juba, has already changed hands three times since fighting broke out in South Sudan one month ago.

The fighting is between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir and a loose coalition of army defectors and ethnic militia nominally headed by Riek Machar, a former vice president and seasoned guerrilla fighter.

Negotiators for both sides met for the first time in five days in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa in the hope of reaching a ceasefire agreement.

Mediators from the East African regional bloc IGAD are trying to bring the two sides to a compromise over the issue of 11 pro-Machar figures who were arrested by loyalist forces shortly after the fighting erupted on December 15.

According to the United Nations, the month of fighting in South Sudan has displaced some 400,000 people and put the death toll at well in excess of 1,000, although the independent think-tank International Crisis Group says reports from the field indicate the death toll is closer to 10,000.

Of those forced to flee, some 350,000 are internally displaced and the remainder have fled into neighbouring

Jihadists seize 'most' of north Syria town

AFP, Beirut

The jihadist Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant has taken most of the town of Al-Bab in Syria's Aleppo province after fighting with rebels, an NGO said yesterday.

The advance by the group in the country's turbulent north comes after 10 days of fighting pitting moderate and Islamist opposition forces against the Al-Qaeda inspired organisation that has killed nearly 700 people.

"ISIL has seized almost complete control of the town of Al-Bab, northeast of Aleppo city," Rami Abdel Rahman, director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, told AFP.

"The sound of shooting can still be heard in Al-Bab, but it's not clear if that is from continuing clashes or mopping up operations," he added.

The town has been out of regime control for more than a year, but came under fierce aerial bombardment by government troops over the weekend.

The two-day wave of air strikes killed 50 people, according to the Observatory.

Elsewhere in the province, the Observatory said the rebel groups battling ISIL were progressing in the town of Jarabulus, near the Turkish border.

Fighting between ISIL and opposition forces also erupted again in the north-western province of Idlib and in Raqa.

Jihadist foreign fighters were widely welcomed by Syrian rebels when they first entered the conflict, but have experienced a backlash against their reported abuses of civilians and rival rebels.

Syria's regime and opposition are scheduled to hold talks in the town of Montreux beginning on January 22.

Titanic replica to be built in Chinese theme park

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

A life-sized replica of the Titanic will become the centrepiece of a landlocked theme park in China, featuring a museum and a shipwreck simulation to give visitors a harrowing sense of the 1912 disaster.

The Chinese version of "the unsinkable ship", with a price tag of 1bn yuan (£100m) and an expected opening date in 2016, will be built at least 1,500km from the nearest ocean in the central province of Sichuan.

Su Shaojun, the chief executive of the Seven Star Energy Investment Group, which funded the project, said Asia needed its own Titanic museum.

"We think it's worth spreading the spirit of the Titanic. The universal love and sense of responsibility shown during the Titanic shipwreck represent the spiritual richness of human civilisation," he told a media conference on Sunday.

The project aims to be more than a museum that replicates the original ship and the 1997 movie that became a global hit. The simulation will allow several hundred people at a time to feel what the shipwreck was like.

The Titanic sank on 15 April 1912 during its maiden voyage from the English port of Southampton to New York, taking more than 1,500