



## Thai PM stands firm on election

### Says polls best way to end crisis

AGENCIES

Thailand's government stuck to a plan for a February election yesterday despite mounting pressure from protesters who have brought parts of Bangkok to a near-standstill, and said it believed support for the leader of the agitation was waning.

Yingluck Shinawatra urged anti-government protesters to vent their anger against her at the ballot box, insisting that elections were the best way to solve the country's deepening political crisis.

Yingluck has faced weeks of mass street demonstrations seeking to force her elected government from office and install an appointed "people's council" in its place.

Yingluck hosted talks yesterday to discuss a proposal by the country's election commission to postpone the polls, but the opposition as well as the kingdom's ostensibly independent election commissioners refused to attend.

While she did not completely rule out a delay, Yingluck reiterated her concerns that the constitution does not allow a postponement of the February 2 polls.

"If people don't want this government they should go out and vote," she said.

Many of her opponents, who include much of the country's royalist establishment, do not want the February polls to go ahead, fearing they will only return the Shinawatra family or its allies to power.

They say electoral reforms are needed before a vote is held in at least a year's time, but deny they are seeking to suspend the country's fragile democratic system.

Defiant demonstrators vowed to keep up their efforts to oust the prime minister with their self-styled "Bangkok shutdown" by occupying key intersections in the city.

Tensions flared overnight after two people were slightly wounded in a shooting by unknown gunmen at an anti-government rally in Bangkok's commercial district, while a small blast shook a house owned by the opposition leader's family. Nobody was injured.

Protesters blocked key intersections in the capital for a third straight day, but there was more traffic on the roads, in a possible sign that the attempted "shutdown" was losing momentum.

# Divided Egypt votes after deadly clashes

AFP, Cairo

Voting in Egypt's constitutional referendum was largely incident-free yesterday after clashes left nine people dead the previous day, with turnout seen as key to a likely presidential bid by the army chief.

Dozens of supporters of ousted Islamist president Mohamed Morsi blocked a metro railway station in a Cairo suburb yesterday, security officials said, but there were no reports of disruptions to polling.

On Tuesday, sporadic clashes in various parts of the country between supporters of Morsi and their opponents and police left at least nine dead, marring what otherwise had been peaceful voting.

Morsi, Egypt's first freely elected and civilian president, was ousted by army chief General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in July following mass protests against his turbulent one-year rule.

The constitution, which replaces the one passed under Morsi, is expected to be approved despite a boycott by his Islamist supporters in the Muslim Brotherhood.

Around 250 people were also arrested on Tuesday, among them members of the Brotherhood, for disrupting polling in areas.

More than 1,000 people have been killed in clashes since Morsi's ouster, and thousands have been arrested, including the top leadership of the Brotherhood.

## REFERENDUM ON CHARTER

Morsi's Brotherhood was designated a terrorist group by the military-installed authorities as part of their crackdown on the movement that dominated all polls since the ouster of long-time ruler Hosni Mubarak in early 2011.

US State Department deputy spokeswoman Marie Harf said a clause in a Congress bill expected to pass tomorrow allows the White House to unfreeze \$1.5 billion in aid to Cairo if it can certify that Egypt "has held a constitutional referendum, and is taking steps to support a democratic transition".

In October, Washington suspended the annual aid following a deadly crackdown by the Egyptian government on Morsi's supporters.

The Egyptian government hopes a large turnout in favour of the new constitution will bolster its disputed authority, while army chief Sisi will monitor it for an "indicator" of his popularity, an official close to the general said.

Interim president Adly Mansour's government has pledged the referendum will be followed by parliamentary and presidential elections.

Security forces had deployed across the country amid fears recent attacks by militants would deter voters.

Many Islamists revile Sisi after he overthrew Morsi, but the general is adored by millions who took to the streets to demand the Islamist's resignation.

Sisi is widely expected to run for president, and has said he would stand if there was "popular



# Blasts, attacks kill 62 in Iraq

## PM seeks world's support

REUTERS, Baghdad

Bombs hit Iraq's capital Baghdad and a village near the northern town of Baquba yesterday, killing at least 62 people, police and hospital sources said, as Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki warned that militants were trying to set up an "evil statelet".

In the deadliest incident, a bomb blew up in a funeral tent where mourners were marking the death two days ago of a Sunni Muslim pro-government militiaman, police said. It killed 18 people and wounded 16 in Shatub, a village south of Baquba.

Two years after US troops left Iraq, violence has climbed back to its highest levels since the Sunni-Shia bloodshed of 2006-2007, when tens of thousands of people were killed.

The army is locked in a standoff with Sunni militants who overran Falluja, a city west of Baghdad, more than two weeks ago in a challenge to Maliki's Shia-led government.

They are led by the al-Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which is fighting in western Iraq and Syria to carve out a cross-border Islamist fiefdom.

"The battle will be long and will continue," Maliki said on state television, calling for world support. "If we keep silent it means the creation of evil statelets that would wreak havoc with security in the region and the world."

Al-Qaeda loyalists are pursuing a relentless campaign of attacks, mostly aimed at security forces, Shia civilians and Sunnis seen as loyal to the Shia-led government.



An Egyptian woman shows her ink-stained finger as she holds a card bearing portraits of late Egyptian presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser (L) and Anwar Sadat (R) alongside Egypt's Defence Minister army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, after casting her ballot at a polling station in the northern port city of Alexandria, yesterday .

*Inset, An Egyptian man kisses a member of the Egyptian security force after casting his ballot during the second day of voting in Alexandria.*

PHOTO: AFP



## Wahhabism a 'threat to the world': Assad

AFP, Damascus

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad warned during a meeting in Damascus yesterday with Iran's foreign minister that Saudi Arabia's political and religious ideology is "a threat to the world," state television reported.

He was referring to Wahhabism, an ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim tradition which is predominant in Saudi Arabia, a key backer of Syria's revolt against Assad.

"President Assad warns during his meeting with Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif of the threat posed by Wahhabi thinking to all the world, not just to the region," the report said.

"The Syrian people and some peoples in the region know how serious the threat posed by Wahhabism is, and everyone must contribute to the confrontation against it and to eradicating it from the root," said Assad, who belongs to the Alawite offshoot of Shia Islam.

The comments came amid ongoing tensions between Syria and Saudi Arabia, which are fiercely opposed to each other.

Assad's meeting with Zarif, top diplomat of Syria's chief regional ally Iran, comes less than a week before the so-called Geneva II peace conference, which is aimed at ending the conflict in Syria that has killed 130,000 people in nearly three years.

Syria's opposition has issued several calls in recent weeks demanding

## NEWSIN brief

### Tehelka editor's bail plea refused

AFP, Panaji

An Indian judge yesterday refused bail to a news magazine editor who was arrested in late November on allegations of sexually assaulting a young female colleague in a Goa hotel.

Tarun Tejpal, the 50-year-old founder of top investigative magazine Tehelka, has been in custody since his arrest and faces a possible rape charge over the allegations that could see

### Snowden worked at US embassy in Delhi

PTI, New York

Intelligence whistleblower Edward Snowden worked at the US embassy in India and spent almost a week taking a course in "ethical hacking", about three years before he leaked the NSA's surveillance programmes.

Snowden was in India in this capacity as a National Security Agency (NSA) contractor "to assist as a technical expert" at the US embassy in New Delhi, the Foreign Policy magazine reported on Monday, citing a

### Devyani's father to contest LS polls

PTI, Mumbai

Uttam Khobragade, a retired IAS officer and father of diplomat Devyani Khobragade, yesterday said that he would contest the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections. However, he refused to disclose which political party he would join.

Meanwhile, Devyani's family will relocate to India, said her father adding that they will leave US after February. Her husband Akash is a US citizen. Her two daughters aged 7 and 4 are currently with the father

## Danish tourist gang-raped in Delhi

AFP, New Delhi

Indian police rounded up a group of homeless men yesterday over the alleged gang-rape of a 51-year-old Danish tourist who lost her way near the main backpacker's area of the capital, officers said.

The woman approached the suspects for directions early on Tuesday evening while trying to return to her hotel in the bustling Paharganj district of New Delhi, reportedly after visiting a city museum.

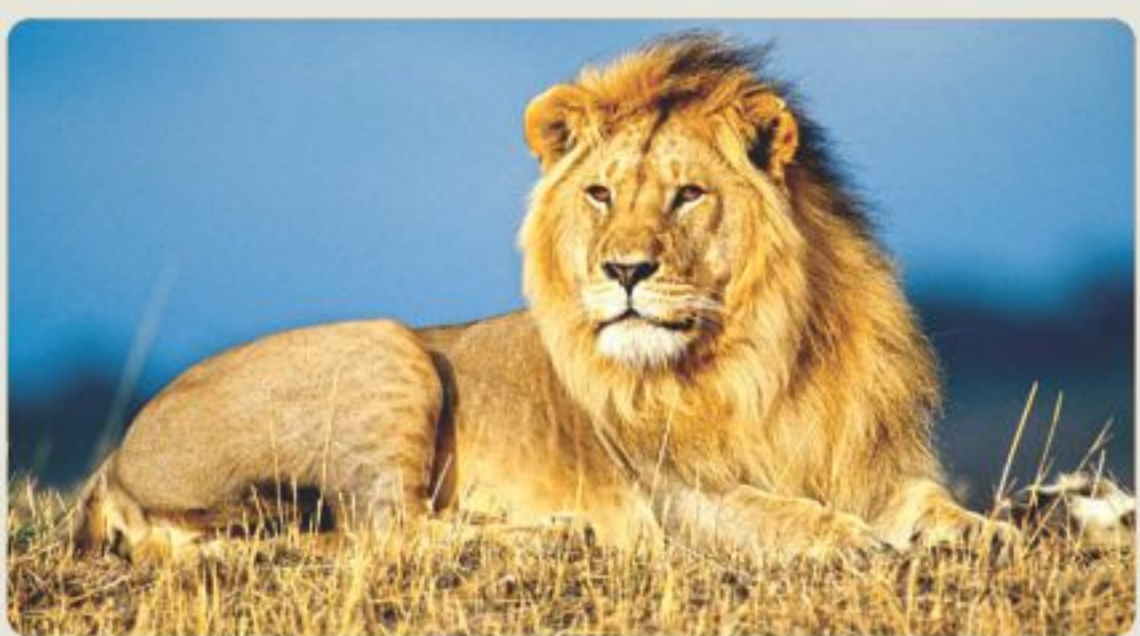
Up to six "youngsters" allegedly assaulted and robbed the victim, who was travelling alone and had been in New Delhi since Monday after visiting the Taj Mahal, police and a receptionist at her hotel told AFP.

"We have detained a group of men and we are questioning them over the incident," special commissioner of police Deepak Mishra told AFP.

A senior investigating officer in the Paharganj police station told AFP on condition of anonymity that the victim was held hostage at knife-point for three hours and had been kicked and slapped.

The alleged attack just minutes from Connaught Place in the heart of the capital is the latest involving a foreigner in India, and again raises questions about the safety of women in the world's second most populous country.

Last month, India marked the first anniversary of the death of the student who was gang-raped on a moving bus in the capital in an attack that sent shockwaves across the nation.



## Lions face extinction threat in West Africa

THE INDEPENDENT ONLINE

The African lion is facing extinction across the entire West African region, a report has revealed, with just 250 adult lions left following a 'catastrophic collapse' in their numbers.

A report led by conservation group Panthera found that West African lions now only exist in five countries - Senegal, Nigeria and on the shared borders of Benin, Niger and Burkina Faso.

Lions have disappeared across Africa as human populations and their livestock herds have grown, competing for land with lions and other wildlife. Wild savannas are converted for agriculture and cattle, the lion's natural prey is hunted out and lions are killed by pastoralists fearing the loss of their herds.

Today, fewer than 35,000 lions remain in Africa in

## AAP to contest over 400 Lok Sabha seats

TNN, New Delhi

Buoyed by the response, the Aam Aadmi Party has drastically scaled up its ambition for the 2014 Lok Sabha polls and now plans to contest over 400 seats across the country.

The party, which had set its sights on around 200 seats, has ramped up its plans following what it called an "unprecedented response" from across the country.

Although it may be difficult to replicate its Delhi feat on the national stage, AAP strategists may like to aim for "national party" tag after their maiden outing in the Lok Sabha arena. A party needs to be recognized as a state party in at least four states or mop up at least 6% of the vote to be declared a national party by the Election

## Rahul ready for 'responsibility' Says Prianka won't contest in polls

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's ruling Congress party vice president Rahul Gandhi has given the strongest hint yet that he is ready to be the party's prime ministerial candidate in coming general elections.

In an interview to leading Hindi newspaper "Dainik Bhaskar", he said he was willing to accept any responsibility conferred upon him by the party.

Rahul's remarks came ahead of a key party meeting of the party's top leadership tomorrow, when he is expected to be named the Congress Prime Ministerial candidate. The meeting will discuss the party's strategy for the parliamentary elections scheduled to be held in March-April this year.

"I am a sepy of Congress. I will obey whatever order is given to me. I will do whatever Congress wants me to do...Decisions are taken in our party by senior leaders," he told "Dainik Bhaskar".

The comments by the 43-year-old scion

### PM CANDIDACY



of Nehru-Gandhi family is his clearest signal yet about his willingness to be the party prime ministerial candidate.

Asked about his comment last year when he described power as "poison", Rahul told the Hindi daily that "power is poison doesn't mean that I am not keen to take responsibility. I don't have the word 'reluctance' in my life".

Rahul's mother and Congress chief Sonia Gandhi had on December 7 indicated that her party would name its prime ministerial candidate.

He also ruled out any significant role for his younger sister Priyanka, who attended recent party meetings. "As an active Congress worker, she is helping me strengthen the party. But I don't think she will have any electoral role," he said.

Rahul had helmed Congress campaign in elections to legislatures in four Indian states in November-December last year in which the party had fared poorly.

Despite growing pressure from the party's rank and file, Congress had so far

## US, India ties on the mend after dispute

AGENCIES

A senior US diplomat met India's ambassador to the United States on Tuesday and US's handover to India this week, of idols worth more than \$1.5m stolen from temples in Rajasthan, and Bihar or West Bengal, marked what seemed to be a gradual thaw in bilateral frost following a month-long diplomatic crisis.

The US Customs and Immigration Enforcement (ICE)'s Homeland Security Investigations (HIS) on Tuesday returned two sandstone sculptures of "Vishnu and Lakshmi," respectively weighing 159 and 272 kg. A third, black sandstone sculpture of a Bodhisattava was also returned to the Indian government.

Deputy Secretary of State William Burns hosted a "productive" lunch meeting with Indian Ambassador S Jaishankar and both sides affirmed the importance of the US-India strategic partnership and "discussed initial preparations for a range of upcoming bilateral meetings and exchanges," a statement from the US State Department said.

"They agreed that the past several weeks have been challenging, and affirmed that we are both committed to moving forward to resume cooperation on the broad range of bilateral issues," the statement said.

The statement said both Burns and Jaishankar "affirmed our shared commitment to continue joint US-India work on issues such as clean energy and climate change, defense, economic and trade engagement, counterterrorism, and civil nuclear development."

On Saturday, India blamed the United States for what it called a "mini crisis" over the arrest and strip search of its deputy consul general in New York last month and said more work was needed to repair ties.

The Indian diplomat, Devyani Khobragade, 39, was arrested in December on charges of visa fraud and lying to US authorities about what she said her housekeeper. Her treatment provoked protests in India and dealt a serious blow to US efforts to strengthen ties.

## Collision with lorry kills 19 Pak pupils

AFP, Karachi

At least 21 people including 19 children were killed in Pakistan yesterday when a school van smashed head-on into a heavy truck, officials said.

The van collided with the loaded dump-truck near the town of Nawabshah, around 270 kilometres north of Karachi in the southern province of Sindh.

The students of the Bright Future School from the nearby town of Daulatpur had come to Nawabshah for a school trip. They were on their way back to Daulatpur when the accident happened.

Doctor Hashim Langa, chief of the government-run Civil Hospital in Nawabshah, said the hospital had received 21 dead bodies -- including the school van driver -- out of which 19 were children.

"Their ages range from five or six to 16," he told AFP.

Some 15 to 20 injured were also brought to the hospital, seven of whom were in intensive care and neurological wards, he added.

Police said that they were trying to locate the driver of the truck who had fled the scene.

Senior police officer Asif Ali Pechuho told AFP that the school van had been so badly wrecked that rescue workers had to use tools to extract bodies.

## ODDLY enough

### Bike One for Obama

A cycle with space for 'nuke button'

MAIL ONLINE

Next summer President Barack Obama will have a slick new pair of wheels to cruise around Martha's Vineyard on.

An enterprising bicycle company has designed a model specifically for the needs of the US President, in the hope he'll help popularise the eco-friendly mode of transport.

And in a pointed commentary on US foreign policy, Chilean firm Oxford bikes will tell him: 'If we all used a bicycle, there would be no



more oil wars.'

It adds: 'In order to commemorate 24 years since the first Gulf War, we are sending Barack Obama a new presidential vehicle, quite a departure from his Air Force and Cadillac One, we are sending him a machine that doesn't run on oil.'

Oxford has kitted out its Bike One with all the accessories the commander-in-chief of the world's most powerful country might need.

Along with eco-friendly features like dynamo-powered LED lights and an oil-less belt transmission, the bicycle includes bullet-proof tyres, a Blackberry dock and space for the nuclear briefcase.