

NEWSIN
briefChild soldiers fighting
in S Sudan: UN

AFP, Juba

A top UN rights envoy in South Sudan said child soldiers are fighting in the more than month-long conflict, with mass killings reported to have taken place.

UN's Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Ivan Simonovic told reporters that the unrest can now be classified as internal armed conflict, meaning

Bomb rips through
Pak train; kills 3

AP, Lahore

A Pakistan Railways official said a bomb blast targeting a train killed three passengers and injured 15 others.

Mohammad Ejaz said yesterday's blast took place as the train was en route from the northwestern city of Peshawar to the southern port city of Karachi. The explosion blew up the train tracks in the central

Syrian fires shells; kills
7 in Lebanese town

AFP, Baalbek

Shells fired from war-torn Syria killed seven people, including five children, when they rained down on the Lebanese border town of Arsal yesterday, Lebanese officials said.

The deaths came as at least 20 rockets and shells launched from Syria hit border areas in the eastern Lebanon Bekaa Valley, which has seen frequent violence related to the

Kenya airport 'blast'
just 'loose light bulb':
Police

AFP, Nairobi

An explosion at a cafe outside Kenya's main airport in the capital Nairobi sparked panic late Thursday, but police insisted it was only caused by a "loose light bulb".

No casualties were reported in the incident at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, the region's busiest

Jihadists pull
out of north
Syria town

AFP, Beirut

Jihadists yesterday withdrew from Saraqeb, their last bastion in the Syrian province of Idlib, five days into a major battle in the town against local rebels, a monitor said.

Rami Abdel Rahman of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said "members of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant withdrew at dawn today from Saraqeb to Sermin."

Their retreat comes two weeks into a major rebel offensive against the jihadist ISIL.

While rebels and jihadis were once allied in the fight against President Bashar al-Assad, ISIL's quest for hegemony and its horrific abuses against the local population and opposition has turned rebels -- including other Islamists -- against them.

Dozens of ISIL fighters were killed or injured in the fighting for Saraqeb, where a major battle pitting rebels and jihadis broke out Monday.

Saraqeb was once a key source of inspiration for moderate activists using art and other peaceful means to protest Assad's regime.

Long out of regime control, it fell to ISIL last month.

The battle for Saraqeb is part of a wider rebel offensive against ISIL in several parts of Syria, which in two weeks has killed nearly 1,100 people, most of them fighters on both sides.



Ukrainian pro-EU protesters keep warm around a bonfire in Independence Square in Kiev early yesterday. The European Union and the United States expressed concern after the Ukrainian parliament passed laws to curb the right to protest, a move the opposition called a power grab. Western rights groups meanwhile denounced the bills as an attempt by President Viktor Yanukovych to impose a "dictatorship" and called on him to veto the legislation.

PHOTO:
AFP

Obama presents NSA reforms

Plan to end govt storage of call data

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

US president Barack Obama forcefully defended the embattled National Security Agency yesterday in a speech that outlined a series of surveillance reforms but stopped well short of demanding an end to the bulk collection of American phone data.

In his widely anticipated address at the Justice Department on the future course of US surveillance policy, Obama said the government should no longer hold databases of every call record made in the United States, citing the "potential for abuse" as the reason for making the change.

But Obama did not make a decision on what ought to replace that database, effectively rejecting a call from civil libertarians to require the NSA to collect subscriber information from phone companies only when they possess specific suspicion of connection to a terrorist group or other wrongdoing.

Mounting a forceful defence of the NSA, Obama said: "They're not abusing authorities in order to listen to your private phone calls, or read your emails." He did not mention that judges on the secret surveillance court have found NSA has repeatedly and "systematically" overstepped its bounds. "We cannot unilaterally disarm our intelligence agencies," Obama said.

Obama has directed attorney general Eric Holder, NSA director



Keith Alexander and the rest of the intelligence community to present proposals over the next several weeks for what private entity should hold Americans' telephone metadata, casting it as an issue that requires further deliberation before any decision that could have major implications for both privacy and security.

Obama said that ahead of transitioning the database out of government hands, the NSA will now have to receive approval from the secret surveillance court before searching through the data trove for

connections to terrorist groups. Those searches would be restricted to two "hops", meaning that a number "reasonably" suspected can have all the numbers it called and from which it received calls reviewed, and all of those numbers can also have their connections examined.

Obama was more definitive about assuring allied foreign leaders that he would not spy on their communications, an issue that became a diplomatic row straining relations with Germany, Brazil and other countries.

But Obama did not issue new protections for non-Americans abroad, saying instead that he wanted additional privacy protections for foreigners. Nor did he address the NSA's secret weakening of encryption standards, first reported by the Guardian, which have greatly concerned US businesses.

Obama gave less attention to the man whose disclosures prompted his speech: Edward Snowden. "I'm not going to

Residents gather next to a flooded basketball court at a Philippine village in Butuan City yesterday, as floods inundated villages and towns after heavy rains. Thousands of people fled rising floods and an approaching storm in a fresh round of evacuations in the Philippines, officials said on January 17 as the death toll from a week of foul weather rose to 37.

PHOTO: AFP

SYRIA CONFLICT
UN refugee chief urges
'political solution'

Opposition meets to decide on peace talks

AFP, Harran Refugee Camp, Istanbul

UN refugee chief Antonio Guterres said yesterday it was vital that long-delayed Syria peace talks next week produce a "political solution" to the conflict.

And he issued a fresh appeal for the world to help ease the massive burden on countries which have taken in millions of Syrian refugees since the fighting erupted almost three years ago.

"I am humble enough to recognise that there is no humanitarian solution for this problem. The solution is political," he told a meeting in Turkey of regional refugee-hosting nations.

"That's why it is very important to send a clear message to the international community gathering in Geneva next week that it is absolutely central to stop this bloodshed and to find a political solution," he said.

Meanwhile, the divided Syrian opposition met Friday to decide whether to join landmark talks next week aimed at ending almost three years of brutal conflict, facing intense pressure from Western and Arab allies to attend.

On the eve of the National Coalition's meeting in Istanbul, US Secretary of State John Kerry made a powerful plea to the exiled group to decide in favour of the long-delayed talks opening in Switzerland on January 22.

And at key preparatory talks with Russia in Moscow yesterday, the Syrian regime said it was ready to swap prisoners with the rebels in the first such mass exchange since the conflict began in March 2011.

The announcement by Foreign Minister Walid Muallem could mark another diplomatic success for Russia after the Kremlin managed to convince Damascus last year to renounce its chemical weapons to avert US air strikes.

Next week's so-called Geneva II conference is aimed at finding a way to install a transitional government to help chart an end to the civil war, which has cost 130,000 lives

Israel hits back
at EU over
settlement protest

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel called in European ambassadors in a tit-for-tat move yesterday after four EU states lodged formal protests against the rightwing government's drive to expand settlements in the occupied West Bank.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused the EU of a "hypocritical" attitude toward the Middle East process, saying it should be more concerned by Palestinian militancy than Israeli housing construction.

The new spat with Europe follows a furious public row with key ally the US after Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon launched a bitter personal tirade against Secretary of State John Kerry for his "obsession" with brokering a framework peace deal with the Palestinians by April.

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman ordered the ambassadors of Britain, France, Italy and Spain to be called in to "stress to them that their perpetual one-sided stance against Israel and in favour of the Palestinians is unacceptable and creates the impression they are only seeking ways to blame Israel," his spokesman said.

"Beyond being biased, unbalanced and ignoring the reality on the ground, the positions held by these states significantly harm the possibility of reaching some sort of agreement between the sides," a statement said.

Another Israeli official told AFP that calling in ambassadors for the same day was a rare move indicative of the degree of offence caused.

AAP govt
looks to
'fix' police

PTI, New Delhi

The Aam Aadmi Party government has decided to take up with the Union home minister its demand for the suspension of four police officials for alleged non-cooperation and lapses in duty after the Delhi police chief rejected their call for the said personnel to be penalised.

With the government going into confrontational mode, Delhi Minister Manish Sisodia said they will "fix" the police even if the force did not come under their jurisdiction.

"There are rapes happening in the city, sex and drug rackets are being run openly, but police is doing nothing."

"This government won't make any excuses like Delhi Police is not under us, they will have to do their duty. Police has to act. We will fix the police even if it doesn't come under us," Sisodia told reporters at the Secretariat.

Law to ban use of
'Nazi' in Israel

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

An Israeli draft law that would criminalise the use of the word Nazi in most cases has sparked a debate on freedom of speech.

Seven decades after the formation of the state of Israel, memories of the extermination of millions of Jews during the second world war permeate virtually every aspect of life in Israel. Public figures and interest groups frequently invoke the genocide to score political points, and the word and Nazi symbols have slipped into Israeli discourse over the years.

The bill would impose a fine of 100,000 shekels (more than \$21,000) and six months in jail for anybody using the word or symbols from Adolf Hitler's Third Reich in a "wrong or inappropriate way". Educational settings would be exempt, as would certain artistic performances, said Shimon Ohayon, the bill's sponsor.

The Knesset gave preliminary approval to the measure on Wednesday, but it has to pass three more readings and committee discussions before becoming law. A similar effort in 2012 failed at the committee stage.

Opponents say the measure endangers freedom of speech in a country that frequently asserts a claim to being the only democracy in the Middle East.

Explosion
wounds Thai
protesters

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Dozens of people were wounded in Bangkok when a grenade was hurled at anti-government demonstrators marching through the Thai capital at midday yesterday, raising tensions in the country's political crisis.

The explosive device was thrown into a lorry driven by demonstrators, the group's spokesman Akanat Promphan said. The city's emergency services centre put the number of injured at 31.

Anti-government demonstrators, seeking to oust Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, have taken over seven key roads and overpasses in Bangkok this week, blocking them off with sandbag walls and steel barricades.

The National Anti-Corruption Commission said on Thursday that it had found grounds to investigate allegations that Yingluck was criminally negligent in her handling of what the government had described as a deal to export surplus rice to China.

If found guilty, Yingluck would be forced to resign.

Indian minister's
wife found dead
amid adultery row

TNN, New Delhi

Sunanda Pushkar, wife of Union minister Shashi Tharoor, was found dead in a five-star hotel here yesterday.

Pushkar's body was found in room number 345 of Leela Hotel. The incident came to fore around 8pm after the hotel authorities informed the police.

The special commissioner of police Deepak Mishra confirmed to TOI about the incident. However police were yet to ascertain if it was a suicide. Further investigations are on. The room in which 52-year-old Pushkar was staying has been sealed by the police.

Pushkar had checked into the five star hotel on Thursday, police said. Sources said she was last seen at 3:30pm yesterday.

A team of officers has sought for the CCTV footages of the last 12 hours. A team is also going through the video footages at the hotel's control room.

The shocking news comes just a day after Sunanda and her husband Shashi Tharoor were involved in a Twitter controversy, also involving a Pakistani woman journalist, Mehr Tarar.

As the indecorous row surrounding the suave 57-year-old Tharoor escalated, the controversy-prone minister took to Twitter to come out with a joint statement with his wife Sunanda Pushkar to say they were "happily married", but distressed by "some unauthorised tweets".

Pushkar had accused the 45-year-old Pakistani journalist Mehr Tarar of stalking her husband and trying to "break" her marriage when she was away for medical treatment.

"I just woke up and read this. I'm absolutely shocked. This is too awful for words," Mehr Tarar tweeted later in the evening yesterday.