

SYRIA TURMOIL

Rivals say Geneva talks 'positive'

AFP, Geneva

Syria's opposition said peace talks with President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Geneva took a step forward yesterday with discussions on a transitional government after four days of deadlock.

The regime delegation also said that "positive" talks had started on the Geneva I communique -- the statement put out by global powers during talks here in 2012 -- while stressing that the focus was on ending violence and "stopping terrorism".

"Today we had a positive step forward because for the first time now we are talking about the transitional governing body, to end dictatorship and end the fighting and the misery in Syria," opposition delegation spokesman Louay Safi told reporters. He added that he hoped for "more progress in the coming



Rescue teams and local residents gather at the scene of destruction following reported air raids by government forces on the rebel-controlled part of Aleppo's Maadi residential district, yesterday. Inset, A father carries his dead son from the rubbles of his home.

PHOTO: AFP

Snowden nominated for Nobel Peace Prize

AFP, Oslo

A former Norwegian minister nominated fugitive US intelligence leaker Edward Snowden for the Nobel Peace Prize in a letter to the Norwegian Nobel Committee.

"He has contributed to revealing the extreme level of surveillance by nations against other nations and of citizens," former Socialist Left Party minister Baard Vegar Solhjell told AFP, explaining his move.

"Snowden contributed to people knowing about what has happened and spurring public debate" on trust in government, which he said was "a fundamental requirement for peace".

In a letter to the Norwegian Nobel Committee obtained by AFP, Solhjell and his party colleague Snorre Valen said that they do not necessarily condone or support all of Snowden's disclosures, but praised him for revealing the "nature and technological prowess of modern surveillance".

They added that Snowden's actions have "led to the reintroduction of trust and transparency as a leading principle in global security policies".

The deadline for submitting nominations for the 2014 peace prize is February 1. Among those eligible to forward nominations are politicians and barristers around the world, as well as university professors from certain disciplines. Snowden was also nominated for the prize in 2013.

OFFENSIVE AGAINST TALIBAN

Pak PM backtracks, says dialogue better option

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday scotched speculation his government would launch an offensive against the Taliban following a wave of bloody attacks, saying he wanted to "give the peaceful solution another chance".

His comments came after one of his ministers on Tuesday told the Guardian that the time had finally come to "smash" militant safe havens and Pakistan military is preparing for an assault.

Sharif's government has come under fire for failing to come up with a strategy to respond to a surge in militant violence, which has seen more than 114 people killed in attacks since the start of the year, according to an AFP tally.

Sharif was elected to office last year vowing to bring an end to a homegrown Taliban insurgency that has raged since 2007, by engaging militants in

meaningful dialogue.

But preliminary efforts to reach out to the Taliban ended after a US drone strike killed their then-leader Hakimullah Mehsud in November.

In a highly-anticipated address to Pakistan's parliament yesterday, Sharif slammed the Taliban for rejecting the government's first offer of talks and distorting the teachings of Islam, adding: "Our very existence is endangered. We cannot make the nation and the country hostage to militants."

He continued: "I know that today if state wants to eliminate terrorists by force, the entire nation will stand by it, however, when the offer of talks has come to fore from the other side, we ... want to give the peaceful solution another chance."

To aid in the renewed dialogue efforts Sharif said he would form a four-man committee that includes leading journalist Rahimullah Yousufzai.

STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS

Give diplomacy a chance: Obama

Says US must move away from permanent 'war footing'

AGENCIES

President Barack Obama declared Tuesday that America must move away from a permanent war footing to give diplomacy a chance to resolve some of the world's toughest problems, such as the nuclear standoff with Iran.

In his annual State of the Union address, Obama told Americans that 2014 should be the year to finally close the US prison at Guantanamo Bay as the United States wind down its military role in Afghanistan.

Obama renewed his old vow - dating back to the start of his presidency five years ago - to shut the internationally condemned jail at the US Naval Base in Cuba, and he called on Congress for further action to help him do so.

"This needs to be the year Congress lifts the remaining restrictions on detainee transfers and we close the prison at Guantanamo Bay," Obama said. "Because we counter terrorism not just through intelligence and military action, but by remaining true to our constitutional ideals and setting an example for the rest of the world."

"Even as we actively and aggressively pursue terrorist networks," Obama said, "America must move off a permanent war footing."

In a speech that focused mostly on domestic issues, Obama reminded Americans that he had already imposed "prudent limits" on deadly US drone strikes against al-Qaeda and its allies - a campaign that has drawn criticism for civilian casualties in countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Yemen.

"We will not be safer if people abroad believe we strike within their countries without regard for the consequence," he said.

And he called on US lawmakers to hold off any new sanctions on Iran for now, to allow time for fledgling negotiations between the Islamic republic and six global powers to work.

"The sanctions that we put in place helped make this opportunity possible. But let me be clear: if this Congress sends me a new sanctions bill now that threatens to derail these talks, I will veto it."

But although he was poised to order military strikes on Syria late last year, the bloody three-year conflict in which some 130,000 people have been killed drew barely a mention in the high-profile national address.

He also reasserted the pledge he made earlier this month to reform US surveillance activities.



Vows to shut Gitmo by 2014

Threatens to veto new Iran sanctions

Pledges to push ahead with spying reforms

NEWSIN brief

Cold snap paralyses US South

AFP, Washington

The usually balmy US South was paralysed yesterday by a freak snowstorm that forced children to shelter in their schools overnight and prompted officials across the region to issue emergency declarations.

Schools remained closed in many localities across the South, as authorities struggled to shake off Tuesday's unaccustomed snowfall and freezing temperatures. Temperatures in Atlanta fell to minus 10 degrees Celsius, the coldest in memory for many residents.

Hong Kong reports third H7N9 death

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong yesterday reported its third death from H7N9 bird flu -- an elderly man who had visited mainland China -- a day after authorities culled 22,000 birds to curb the disease.

The 75-year-old man had previously travelled to the neighbouring Chinese city of Shenzhen and died yesterday morning, a government doctor told reporters. So far this year, China has confirmed 110 human H7N9 cases including 22 deaths, according to an AFP tally of reports by local authorities.

Israel troops kill teen in West Bank

AFP, Ramallah

Israeli soldiers shot dead a 19-year-old Palestinian north of the West Bank city of Ramallah on Wednesday, Palestinian medical and security sources said.

The shooting, which took place just north of the Ofra settlement, was confirmed by the Israeli army in a statement that said a "terrorist" had opened fire at troops and they had returned fire, hitting him. It was the first time this year that a Palestinian has been killed by Israeli troops in the West Bank. Last year, 27 West Bankers were

New Zealand PM mulls flag change

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand Prime Minister John Key yesterday said he supported changing the national flag but would hold a referendum before any decision was made to ditch the existing banner.

The current flag has attracted criticism because one corner features the Union Jack, the symbol of former colonial power Britain, with the remainder consisting of four stars representing the Southern Cross constellation. Key said he believed the flag should display a silver fern, the national emblem already used by New Zealand sporting teams.

US-Afghan ties get more toxic

Karzai suspects US behind deadly blasts

AGENCIES

Afghan President Hamid Karzai suspects the United States may have backed insurgent-style attacks to undermine his government but has no evidence to support his theory, the Washington Post reported Tuesday.

Karzai, whose relations with Washington have steadily deteriorated over the years, has compiled a list of dozens of attacks that he believes the US government may have been involved in, the Post wrote, citing unnamed Afghan officials.

Karzai even harbors suspicions that the Americans may have been behind a deadly attack this month on a Lebanese restaurant frequented by foreigners in Kabul, the newspaper said, quoting a presidential palace official.

However, the Afghan official acknowledged that the government had no concrete proof of a US role in any of the attacks.

In Kabul, Afghan officials were unavailable to comment on the report. US officials privately scoffed at the allegations, while lawmakers vented their frustration.

Karzai has held up a crucial bilateral security agreement (BSA) negotiated with Washington that would allow for a smaller contingent of American troops to stay in the country after the end of the year.

Nato combat troops are due to withdraw by December and without a legal agreement, the United States and Nato would have to drop the idea of a post-2014 force.

The revelation is sure to exacerbate the already strained ties between Karzai and his American counterparts, who have long complained about his mood swings and lack of gratitude for American and Nato sacrifices.

Karzai's wider fears about US meddling in Afghan politics were confirmed by revelations from the memoir of former defence secretary Robert Gates that US diplomats had tried to oust the president by manipulating a 2009 election. Washington had long denied any aim beyond cutting fraud and violence, but Gates described the effort as a "clumsy and failed putsch".

'Gassy' cows blow-off barn in Germany

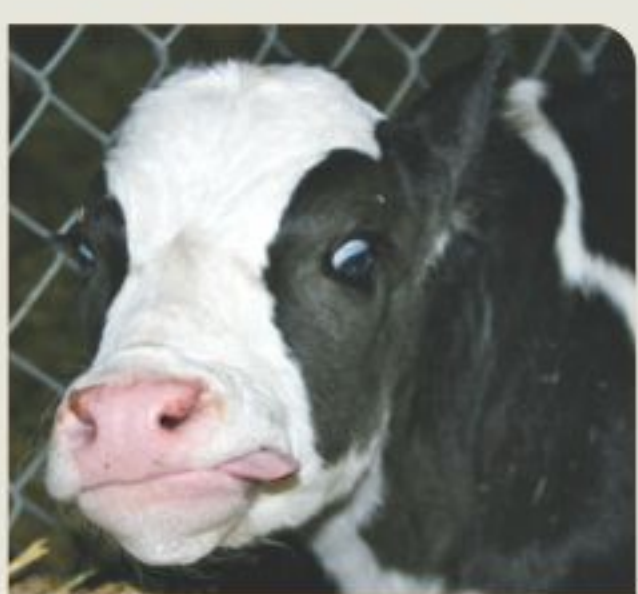
AP, Berlin

A herd of dairy cows nearly lifted the roof off their barn in central Germany when methane released by the animals caused an explosion.

A static electric charge apparently triggered the detonation, and a spurt of flame, on Monday at a farm in Rasdorf, police in Hesse state said.

The roof was slightly damaged and one cow suffered light burns. No people were hurt.

Police said 90 cows are kept in the shed and it was not clear why quantities of methane had built up. Bovine belching and flatulence releases large quantities of the gas.



A woman poses in front of a street art mural showing Pope Francis as a superman, flying through the air with his white papal cloak, by Italian street artist Maupal in downtown Rome near the Vatican, yesterday. The image became an internet sensation.

PHOTO: AFP

SOUTH SUDAN CRISIS

Govt to try rebel leaders, risking truce

AFP, Juba

South Sudan says it will put key leaders of an alleged coup it claims triggered weeks of fighting on trial, in a move likely to threaten a fragile ceasefire with rebels.

Both sides implemented a ceasefire last Friday, but combat has only eased, not ended, with reports of continuing clashes and a worsening humanitarian crisis that has left thousands dead and forced almost 800,000 to flee their homes.

President Salva Kiir accused his former deputy and rebel leader Riek Machar and other former officials of a failed coup against his government after fighting broke out in the capital Juba on December 15.

The fighting has seen waves of brutal revenge attacks, as fighters and ethnic militia use the violence to loot and settle old scores.

Ukraine on verge of 'civil war'

Says ex-leader as parliament mulling amnesty for protesters

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine's parliament yesterday launched a debate on whether to grant amnesty for detained protesters as the country's first post-independence president warned of civil war.

A day after scrapping tough anti-protest laws that had ignited the latest political turmoil, deputies met in an extraordinary session to consider granting amnesty to those arrested in the anti-government unrest.

The debate came after Prime Minister Mykola Azarov and his entire government resigned on Tuesday after weeks of protests that began when President Viktor Yanukovich pulled out of a key EU deal in favour of closer ties with Moscow in November.

Urging deputies to come to an agreement on the amnesty issue, former president Leonid Kravchuk warned parliament that the country was "on the brink of civil war".

"It is a revolution. It is a dramatic situation in which we must act with the greatest responsibility," Kravchuk, president from 1991 to 1994, said to applause and a standing ovation.

The crisis has reverberated internationally with Russian President Putin criticising what he called "foreign interference" in Ukraine and US President Obama voicing support for the protesters during his State of Union address on Tuesday.

But German Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday did not hide her support for the protesters, saying "they are fighting for the same values that guide the European Union and that is why they must be listened to."

The protests erupted in late November as a pro-Europe movement after the government ditched an integration deal with the European Union under Russian pressure. But they swelled into an all-out drive to

ABC unpatriotic

Aussie PM blasts nat'l broadcaster

AFP, Sydney

Prime Minister Tony Abbott launched a scathing attack on national broadcaster ABC yesterday, accusing it of taking "everyone's side but Australia's" in coverage of asylum-seekers and the Edward Snowden leaks.

His comments follow government criticism of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation late last year after it broke a story about Australian spying on Indonesia, which sparked a major diplomatic crisis.

More recently, the conservative leader has been unhappy with ABC's reports about asylum-seekers' claims they were tortured by the Australian navy during an operation at sea.

"It dismays Australians when the national broadcaster appears to take everyone's side but Australia's and I think it is a problem," Abbott told commercial radio station 2GB. "You would like the national broadcaster to have a rigorous commitment to truth and at least some basic affection for the home team," the PM said.