

NEWS IN brief

Yemen clashes kill 60

AFP, Sanaa

Fierce clashes between Huthi Shia rebels and gunmen from the powerful Hashid tribe killed at least 60 people on Friday in northern Yemen, tribal sources told AFP. The violence in Omran dates back to January 5 when Huthis tried to seize Hashid strongholds.

Red Cross ordered to suspend Sudan work

AFP, Khartoum

Sudanese authorities have ordered the Red Cross to suspend its activities, the organisation said yesterday, in the latest restriction to be placed on foreign aid workers in the war-ravaged country. "We have received an official letter from the HAC (Humanitarian Aid Commission) informing us to suspend our activities with effect from today," Rafullah Qureshi, spokesman for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Sudan, told AFP. "Our activities are suspended."

Egypt air strike kills 7 Sinai militants

AFP, Cairo

The Egyptian army said it killed seven militants in an air strike in the Sinai Peninsula less than a week after jihadists downed a military helicopter in the restive region. The army said the Thursday night air raid hit militants linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Blasphemy: Pakistan to charge 2nd Briton

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The family of a second British man facing blasphemy charges in Pakistan said yesterday that he is entirely innocent and called for more to be done to allow him to return to the UK. Masud Ahmad, 72, is currently on bail in Lahore after he was allegedly tricked into publicly reading from the Quran - an act which is forbidden for members of the minority Ahmadi sect to which he belongs. He now faces three years in jail.

Kashmir border bus service to resume

AFP, Muzaffarabad

The bus service across the de facto border in Kashmir will resume next week after being suspended for more than two weeks, a Pakistani official said yesterday. All movement including travelling and trade along the Line of Control (LoC), which divides the disputed Himalayan region between Pakistan and India, had been suspended after Indian authorities detained a Pakistani truck driver for allegedly carrying heroin.

Devyani enjoys no immunity: US prosecutors

REUTERS, New York

Devyani Khobragade, the Indian diplomat whose December arrest led to a major international dispute, holds no immunity from US prosecution and should continue to face charges of visa fraud, Manhattan federal prosecutors said in court papers filed on Friday.

Devyani was arrested on December 12 on charges that she lied to US authorities about what she paid her housekeeper. She was stripped-searched while detained in Manhattan federal courthouse, which led to a diplomatic firestorm between India and the United States that continued for weeks.

Manhattan US attorney Preet Bharara's office argues in the court filings that Devyani is a former diplomat and not immune from prosecution. Devyani "currently enjoys no diplomatic status, and at the time of her arrest, the defendant's position as a consular official gave her immunity from prosecution for official acts only," assistant US attorneys Kristy Greenberg and Amanda Kramer wrote.

As Indian officials demanded her release, Devyani's New York attorney argued that her status as a consular official granted her immunity.



Thai opposition under fire for polls boycott

AFP, Bangkok

After two decades of election defeats, Thailand's oldest political party stands accused of turning its back on democracy by refusing to contest controversial elections to be held yesterday.

The elite-backed opposition Democrat Party has joined forces with anti-government supporters who are threatening to disrupt the polls and want Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra to step down to make way for an unelected "people's council".

"The party is turning away from democracy," said Pavin Chachavalponpun, associate professor at the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies at Japan's Kyoto University.

The Democrats are "trying to find a short cut" to power, he added, noting that on the several occasions in the past two decades when they did take office it was with the support of the military.

The opposition accuses Yingluck's Puea Thai party of corruption and buying votes, and says she is a puppet for her elder brother, fugitive former premier Thaksin Shinawatra -- accusations she denies.

The Democrats, who are popular in Bangkok and parts of southern Thailand, argue that elections will not end a cycle of political violence in the kingdom stretching back to around the time of a military coup in 2006 that ousted Thaksin from power.

"For the country, the elections could not solve the problems and conflicts that we are facing," Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva told AFP.

"A reform process needs to be initiated so that people can be confident that come election time, and after the elections, an elected government does not abuse power in the way that it has done over the last couple of years," he said.

Helped by support among rural voters who benefited from their policies, pro-Thaksin parties have won every election in more than a decade, most recently in 2011 with 265 seats against 159 for the Democrats.

Critics say the Democrat Party missed a golden opportunity to increase its support base owing to public anger over corruption allegations and a failed amnesty bill that could have allowed Thaksin to return without going to jail.

"No democratic system works without a talented and committed opposition," said Thailand-based author and scholar David Streckfuss.

"They failed in their role of seizing on the moment when they could have really gained in votes," added.



THAILAND CRISIS

From top, anti-clockwise A Thai anti-government protester aims his gun and shoot towards Thai election protesters (not seen) during clashes in Bangkok, yesterday; anti-government protesters take cover during the clashes; A protester holds a protest placard urging not to vote; and officials carry election materials during vote preparations at a polling station in the southern Thai city of Narathiwat, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



The tale of Modi's forgotten wife

AFP, New Delhi

The woman who calls herself the wife of fiery headline Indian prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi said in a rare interview yesterday that she doesn't "feel bad" he has cut her out of his life.

Modi, a 63-year-old opposition Hindu nationalist politician, has never commented on numerous reports that he wed Jashodaben, 62, in a traditional arranged marriage when she was 17.

Jashodaben, a retired school teacher, told The Indian Express daily that she remains a big fan of Modi, even though she says they split three years into their marriage and since he left "we have never been in touch". Modi kept the wedding secret because it meant he would not be able to climb the ladder of the puritan Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), a hardline Hindu group that frowns on key workers marrying, according to a recent Modi biography.

Jashodaben gets a monthly government teacher's pension of 14,000 rupees (\$223) and leads a reclusive life with a brother in a village in western Gujarat.

She said the couple "parted on good terms... there were never any fights".

US, EU trade barbs with Russia

AFP, Munich

The United States and EU traded unusually sharp barbs with Russia yesterday over Ukraine's future amid concerns that Kiev could resort to possible military intervention to end anti-government protests.

Neither side pulled any punches, with US Secretary of State John Kerry saying what happens in Ukraine is crucial for Europe's future while his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov blasted wilful and two-faced Western interference.

"Nowhere is the fight for a democratic, European future more important today than in Ukraine," Kerry told political, diplomatic and military leaders at the Munich Security Conference.

"The United States and EU stand with the people of Ukraine in that fight," said Kerry who later met Ukrainian opposition leaders in Munich.

European Council President Herman Van Rompuy told another panel that the EU wanted good relations with Russia but that the Ukrainian people had to have the right to choose their own future, a

future with Europe.

The West and Russia have been at loggerheads over Ukraine since Yanukovich ditched an EU association accord in November under pressure from a Moscow trying to bring its former Soviet satellite back into the fold.

His decision sparked off massive anti-government protests.

Kerry's meeting with the Ukraine opposition may have explained the unequivocally harsh remarks by Lavrov who accused the West of stoking the violence in Kiev in a clear example of double standards.

"Why are many prominent EU politicians actually encouraging such actions although back home they are quick to severely punish any violations of the law?" Lavrov told the conference.

"What does incitement of increasingly violent street protests have to do with promoting democracy?" he said, speaking at the same panel as Van Rompuy.

Earlier yesterday, the party of opposition leader Arseniy Yatsenyuk said he had warned European officials it was "very likely" Kiev would "resort to a use of force scenario, including with the involvement of the Ukrainian army".

Talks end with little gain

AFP, Beirut

Syrian government and opposition delegations leave 10 days of peace talks with few results and a follow-up meeting uncertain, but analysts and negotiators say the discussions are an important beginning.

The immediate post-mortem on the talks from Syrian Foreign Minister was blunt. "I regret to tell you that we have not reached tangible results during this week," he said as the talks wrapped up in Geneva on Friday.

Despite persistent pressure from UN-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, and cosponsors Russia and the United States, the two delegations failed to agree on a single point.

No ceasefire was inked, talks on a transitional government never began, and a mooted deal to allow aid into the besieged Old City of Homs went nowhere.

The failure to secure humanitarian access ranks among the larger disappointments of the talks, dashing hopes that the government might ease its blockade of besieged rebel-held enclaves as a show of good will.

In the end, the regime offered to allow women and children to leave the Old City of Homs, but aid convoys on standby to enter were left waiting. Other besieged enclaves' situations are in dire straits.

The talks have also done nothing to slow the pace of killing in Syria, where more than 130,000 people have been killed.

A second round of talks is proposed for February 10, but regime participation has not been confirmed yet.

But despite the deadlock, Jarba confirmed that the opposition would attend the

next round of talks, and Brahimi said there had been glimpses of common ground.

And reports that the US Congress has secretly approved resuming weapons deliveries to "moderate" rebels suggest the opposition gained something by attending the talks.

SYRIA CIVIL WAR



MAIL ONLINE

He is barely old enough to go to infant school, let alone fight in a savage civil war.

Yet this youngster, believed to be just four years old, is one of the latest 'cub jihadists' recruited for bloody battle in Syria.

He can be seen firing rounds from an automatic assault rifle in a shocking video that has emerged from the war-torn country.

Counter-terrorism officials say it is further evidence of how jihadists are grooming children to become fighters, as al-Qaeda factions strive to establish a Taliban-like Islamic state in Syria.

LIST OF 'CORRUPT LEADERS' AAP adds names of Sonia, Modi

PTI, New Delhi

After naming India's Congress leader Rahul Gandhi as corrupt, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) yesterday said it added Congress president Sonia Gandhi and BJP's prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi's names in the list against whom it has decided to field candidates in the Lok Sabha elections as they were leading a party of tainted politicians and protecting them.

"After taking feedback from volunteers and party workers the name of Sonia Gandhi and Narendra Modi was added to the list. Names of Sonia Gandhi and Modi were added to the list as they led and protected corrupt politicians and corrupt politics. We want to put an end to this type of politics," senior party leader and political affairs committee (PAC) member Gopal Rai told reporters here.

Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal read out a list of "corrupt leaders" before the National Council meeting held on Friday that included politicians across political parties, including some UPA ministers.

Kejriwal had said that the party will field candidates against politicians who were corrupt, with criminal record and those who represented dynastic politics.

Kejriwal went on to name former BJP president Nitin Gadkari, cabinet ministers Sushikumar Shinde, P Chidambaram, Salman Khurshid, M Veerappa Moily, Kapil Sibal, Kamal Nath, Sriprakash Jaiswal, Praful Patel and Sharad Pawar, Congress MP Suresh Kalmadi, BSP chief Mayawati, Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav, central minister Farooq Abdullah, Assam chief minister Tarun Gogoi, DMK's Kanimozhi, BJP's Ananth Kumar and B S Yeddyurappa and BJP MP Anurag Thakur.

US warns China against new air defense zone

AFP, Washington

The United States warned China on Friday against any move to declare a new air defense zone over parts of the South China Sea including disputed islands.

The Asahi Shimbun daily of Japan reported that Chinese air force officials have drafted proposals for the next Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) that could place the Paracel Islands at its core.

Any such move would be seen "as a provocative and unilateral act that would raise tensions and call into serious question China's commitment to diplomatically managing territorial disputes," State Department deputy spokeswoman Marie Harf told reporters.

She stressed, however, that the reports were "unconfirmed" at this time.

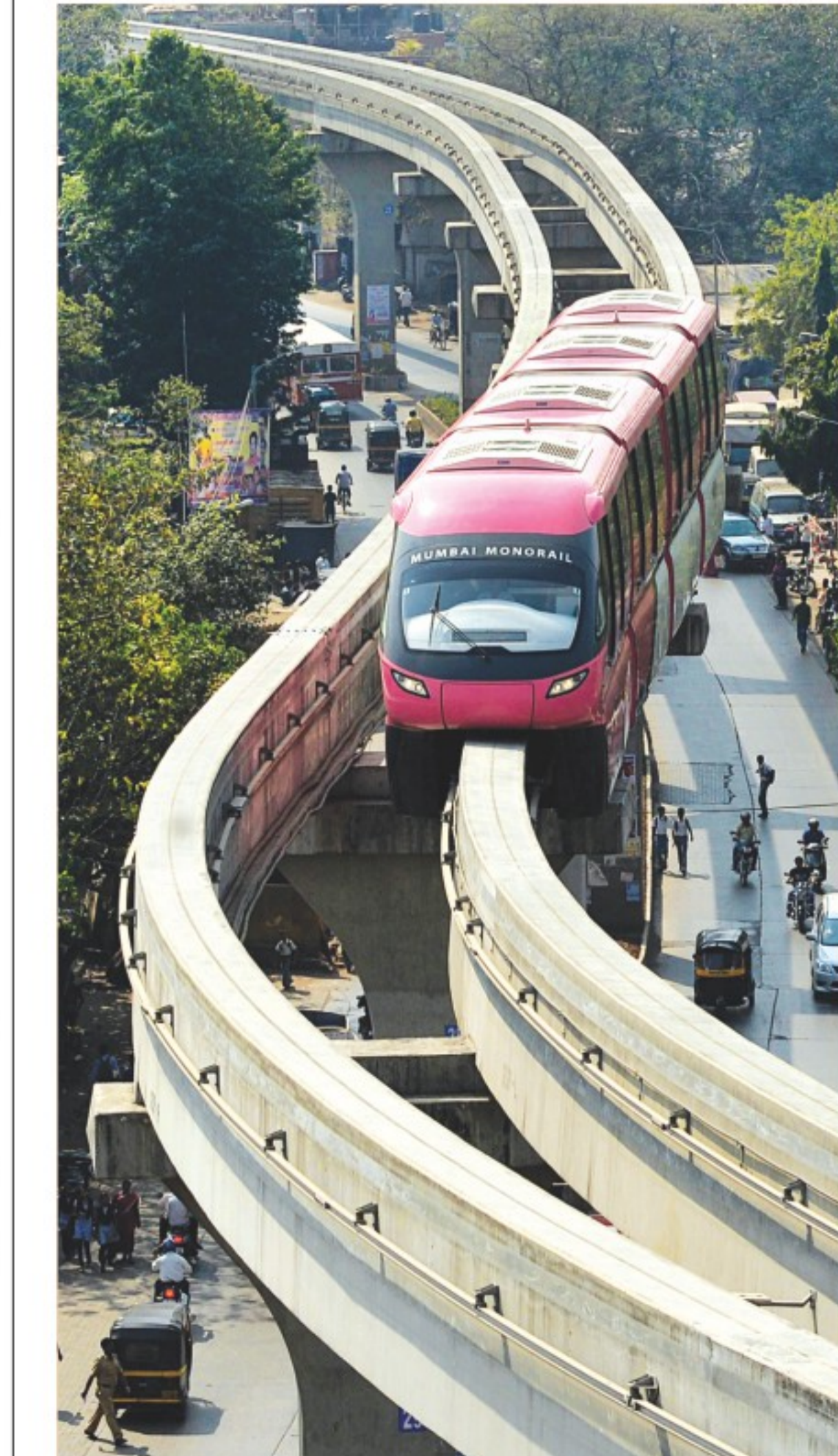
Beijing claims the South China Sea almost in its entirety, even areas a long way from its shoreline.

Late last year, it caused a storm when it abruptly declared an ADIZ above the East China Sea, including islands at the heart of a sovereignty row with Tokyo.

"We've made very clear that parties must refrain from announcing an ADIZ or any other administrative regulation restraining activity of others in disputed territories, and we would of course urge China not to do so," Harf added.

Monorail begins journey in India

AFP, Mumbai



India's financial capital unveiled its first monorail system yesterday, a much-delayed project that aims to boost the city's creaking transport infrastructure and ease traffic on its notoriously congested roads.

The first phase of the transit system, which opens to the public today, will ferry passengers in green, pink and blue carriages along an 8.8 kilometre stretch in the city's east, with the line expected to extend to about 20 kilometres in length and into south Mumbai next year.

Mumbai is famed for its poor roads, heaving traffic and a claustrophobic local train network, which carries millions to work each day and on which thousands die each year -- mostly from illegally crossing the tracks.

The monorail aims to ease congestion for commuters in the busy eastern suburbs and help connect them with the city's trains.

When completed it will have capacity for 100,000 to 200,000 passengers a day.