

NEWS IN
briefHeaviest snowstorm
in 50 years blankets
northern Iran

AFP, Tehran

The heaviest snowstorm in five decades has blanketed provinces in northern Iran, cutting power supplies and trapping villagers, Iranian media reported yesterday.

The storm is "unprecedented for the past 50 years, with two metres (almost seven feet) of snow falling since Friday," a Mazandaran provincial official said, quoted by the media. "Our main problems are (the provision of) power and water, which have been cut off due to the heavy snow," he said.

Russians jailed for
stabbing, burning
'gay man'

AFP, Moscow

A Russian court yesterday handed down long jail sentences to three men who stabbed and kicked a man they believed to be gay and then set him on fire.

The men, all from the same village in the region of Kamchatka in far eastern Russia, committed the murder last May because they were convinced of fellow villager being gay, regional prosecutors said in a statement, using a euphemism for being gay.

Tight security for
Turkish police
murder trial

AFP, Kayseri

Four policemen went on trial in Turkey amid heavy security yesterday, accused of beating to death a 19-year-old student in huge anti-government protests that rocked the country last June.

The high-profile court case comes as Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan battles his biggest crisis in 11 years in power, which has hit the economy and is threatening the strongman's presidential ambitions.

Some 2,000 riot police were deployed in the central city of Kayseri for the start of the trial, roads around the courthouse were blocked and demonstrations banned for "security" reasons.

Lithuania's
President to run for
second term

AFP, Vilnius

Lithuania's President Dalia Grybauskaite announced yesterday she would seek a second term when elections are held in May.

"My choice is to work for you and I will run again in Lithuania's presidential elections as an independent candidate," Grybauskaite said in her speech aired live on national television.

The 57-year-old tough-talking former European Union budget commissioner pledged to make sure that the Baltic EU state's ongoing economic recovery "reaches every home" except those of "oligarchs".

Israeli pullout over
5 years if NATO
deploys: Abbas

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas would support a five-year Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank provided a NATO force is deployed to ensure security, the New York Times has reported.

Abbas, in an interview published by the paper on Sunday, shifted from his insistence on a three-year time frame for Israel's withdrawal from occupied territories under any future peace deal.

"At the end of five years my country will be clean of occupation," Abbas said, insisting however that NATO forces should be deployed during this period to undertake cross-border security and anti-terrorism duties.

Abbas's comments came as the United States tries to coax Israel and the Palestinians into ending a decades-old conflict and bringing about a two-state solution.

But US-backed peace talks are faltering over a number of seemingly irreconcilable issues, including that of security arrangements in a future Palestinian state.

Israel insists it be allowed to maintain a long-term military presence, notably in the Jordan Valley, where the West Bank borders Jordan.

Thai protesters vow
to topple PM

REUTERS, Bangkok

Thai anti-government protesters who have been camped out in north Bangkok packed their tents and marched downtown yesterday as they consolidated efforts to topple Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, a day after a disrupted general election.

Some joined protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban on foot and others followed in cars and six-wheel trucks as Thailand's long-running political conflict showed no sign of ending.

They closed camps at two of the seven big intersections that they have blockaded since mid-January, at Victory Monument and Lat Phrao, and headed for the fringes of the central oasis of Lumpini Park.

A third camp run by an allied group at a big government administrative complex may also be closed.

Suthep said on Sunday this was being done out of safety concerns, but it could also be because their numbers are dwindling. Reuters put the number of marchers at about 3,000.

"Suthep's movement is now crumbling, but it still has powerful unseen backers," said Chris Baker, a historian and prominent Thailand scholar.

"Backdoor negotiations are needed because both sides will avoid any direct confrontation in public

view. The business lobby should revive its efforts to play the intermediary role."

Suthep's supporters on the route showed no sign of crumbling, waving flags and handing over money.

The demonstrators blocked balloting in a fifth of the country's constituencies on Sunday, saying Yingluck must resign and make way for an appointed "people's council" to overhaul a political system they say has been taken hostage by her billionaire brother and former premier, Thaksin Shinawatra.

The election, boycotted by the main opposition Democrat party, is almost certain to return Yingluck to power and, with voting passing off peacefully across the north and northeast, Yingluck's supporters will no doubt claim a legitimate mandate.

But there was no indication of when re-votes of Sunday's disrupted ballots will be held or when the Election Commission will be able to announce a result.

The result is unlikely to change the dysfunctional status quo in a country popular with tourists and investors yet blighted by eight years of polarisation and turmoil, pitting the Bangkok-based middle class and royalist establishment against the mostly poor, rural supporters of the Shinawatras.

Baghdad attacks kill 16

Iraq presses Anbar assault

AFP, Baghdad

A series of attacks in and around Baghdad, including a spate of car bombings, killed 16 people yesterday as Iraqi forces pressed an assault against militant-held areas of Anbar province.

The latest bloodshed comes amid a surge in violence that left more than 1,000 people dead last month, the worst such figure in nearly six years, as security forces grapple with near-daily attacks and protracted battles with anti-government fighters.

Foreign leaders have urged the Shiite-led government to do more to reach out to the disaffected Sunni Arab minority in a bid to undercut support for militants.

But with parliamentary polls looming in less than three months, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has taken a hard line.

Despite officials insisting operations against militants, including those affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

jihadist group, are having an impact, the bloodshed has continued unabated.

In and around the capital yesterday, four car bombs killed 12 people while authorities said they found the dumped bodies of three men and a woman. All were shot in the head and they appear to have been tortured.

Seven people were killed in two separate car bombs -- one of which was detonated by a suicide attacker in the town of Mahmudiyah, just south of the capital.

Five others were killed by vehicles rigged with explosives in the Baghdad neighbourhoods of Baladiyat and Hurriyah.

The assassinations in particular harken back to Iraq's brutal Sunni-Shiite sectarian war which raged from 2006 to 2007, when corpses were often found abandoned on the streets, with the victims' bodies bearing signs of torture.

North of Baghdad in restive Diyala province, five soldiers were also wounded in a gun attack on their checkpoint.

Hillary for no
more sanctions
on Iran

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Hillary Clinton, the former secretary of state and Democratic presidential heir apparent, has urged her former Senate colleagues not to pass new sanctions on Iran, even as she called the Islamic Republic a "threat to global security".

Hillary's involvement in the Iran debate subtly positions the Democratic frontrunner as an Iran hawk who is less hopeful of the diplomatic bargain ending US grievances with Tehran than she is cautious about Washington fracturing a diplomatic coalition needed to enforce punitive measures on Iran.

That coalition, she implied in a letter released on Sunday, by Senator Carl Levin, was an accomplishment of Clinton's tenure as Obama's first secretary of state. Her letter subtly points to differences between her foreign policy outlook and that of the administration she served, a discrepancy that both Clinton and Obama will have to navigate delicately as the next presidential contest approaches.

In her letter, dated 26 January, Clinton stressed her early advocacy of "crippling sanctions" on Iran over its nuclear programme, a nod to her bona fides as an Iran hawk, before telling her former Senate colleagues that proposed sanctions legislation would risk making Washington seem at fault if a permanent deal cannot be reached in the agreed-upon six-month timeframe.

Student kills
2 in Moscow

AFP, Moscow

An armed student yesterday briefly took 20 teenagers hostage in a Moscow school and killed a policeman and a teacher before being detained amid security jitters ahead of the Sochi Winter Olympic Games.

Witnesses said 'straight-A' pupil Sergei Gordeyev charged into the school wielding two rifles and ordered a security guard to lead him to a specific classroom and bolted himself inside with about 20 teenage pupils and the class teacher.

He then opened fire through a window at scores of police who had rushed to the scene. Security officials said the student made no demands during the broad daylight attack.

ODDLY
enough30ft sinkhole
swallows car

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A car has been swallowed by a 30-ft deep "sinkhole" outside a family home.

Firefighters were called to the property in Walter's Ash, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, at 8:32am on Sunday morning.

No one was inside Volkswagen Lupo when the 15-ft-wide hole opened up.

Phil Conran, the stepfather of car's teenage owner, told the Daily Mail: "At 7am my daughter normally goes to the stables. She went out the front door and instead of her car being there, there was a huge hole."

ALEPO AIR STRIKES

A Syrian man carries the body of a victim out of the rubble of a destroyed building (left) and children exit a building (right) after an alleged air strike by Syrian government forces on the northern Syrian city of Aleppo yesterday.

PHOTO:
AFPQaeda cements split
with ISIL in Syria

AFP, Beirut

Al-Qaeda's command has cemented its split with its one-time Iraqi affiliate, in a statement distancing itself from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and its battle with Syria's rebels.

The statement released late Sunday builds on previous comments by Al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri, who has called on ISIL to withdraw from Syria and deemed another jihadist group, the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda's official Syrian affiliate.

The statement comes as moderate and Islamist Syrian rebels are locked in brutal conflict with ISIL.

The clashes began in early January, after accusations that ISIL was abusing both civilians and rival rebel forces. The fighting has left more than 1,700 people dead, according to a monitoring group.

"Al-Qaeda announces it is not linked to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, as it was not informed of its creation... (and) did not accept it," the statement said.

ISIL "is not a branch of Al-Qaeda, has no links to it, and the (Al-Qaeda) group is not responsible for its acts," it added.

ISIL grew from the Islamic State of Iraq, Al-Qaeda's one-time Iraqi affiliate, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

In April 2013, Baghdadi announced his group would merge with Al-Nusra to form the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, but they rejected his overtures and pledged direct allegiance to Zawahiri.

The Al-Qaeda chief also rejected the merger, ordering ISIL to return to Iraq, a directive they ignored.

Mandela's estate
'worth £2.5m'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Nelson Mandela has left behind a 46 million South African rand (£2.5 million) estate to his family, members of staff, schools that he attended, and the African National Congress.

The Mandela family's trust is worth 1.5 million rand (£79,603) and will provide for more 30 children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren that he left when he died in December, aged 95.

His former schools the Wits and Fort Hare Universities are expected to receive 100,000 rand (£5,506) for bursaries and scholarships.

Money to the ANC is to be used at the discretion of the party's executive committee, with a stress on spreading information on reconciliation.

Close personal staff, including long-time personal aide Zelda la Grange, each get 50,000 rand (£2,753)

Deputy Chief Justice Dikgang Mosehene confirmed the provisional amount yesterday.

Mandela's family have accepted the 40-page will, first written in 2004 and amended in 2008, with no contestation so far.

Imran Khan declines
Taliban talks role

AFP, Islamabad

The party of Pakistani cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan said yesterday they "appreciated" a Taliban request for him to represent them in peace talks with the government, but declined the offer.

Two teams, nominated by the government and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), will hold a preliminary meeting in Islamabad today afternoon to chart a "roadmap" for talks.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif caused surprise last week by naming a team to begin dialogue with the militants, who have been waging a violent insurgency since 2007.

Following a bloody start to the year, with more than 110 people killed in militant attacks in January, many had been anticipating a military offensive against TTP strongholds in Pakistan's tribal areas.

The TTP named Khan as one of its negotiators on Saturday, along with several hardline religious figures including Maulana Sami-ul-Haq, known as



the "Father of the Taliban".

Khan, the leader of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, has been a vocal supporter of negotiating with the insurgents.

But PTI spokeswoman Shireen Mazari told AFP yesterday that because a senior party figure, Rustam Shah Mohmand, was already on the government team, Khan's presence was not needed.

"The core committee of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf appreciated Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan offer to our chairman Imran Khan to become part of their committee," Mazari said.

Haq said his team would meet its government counterparts today and afterwards discuss with the TTP leadership how to proceed.

"We expect a ceasefire from both the government and the Taliban -- it's mandatory for the peace process," said Haq.

He told AFP that the TTP, which has repeatedly said it wants Islamic sharia law to be imposed throughout Pakistan, had not yet put forward any formal demands for the talks.

Israeli ministers harangue
Kerry over boycott remark

AFP, Jerusalem

US Secretary of State John Kerry came under further attack yesterday by Israeli hawks who accuse him of manipulating the threat of an economic boycott to pressure Israel into peace concessions.

The latest war of words between the two allies erupted Saturday after Kerry warned that Israel was facing a growing campaign of delegitimisation which would likely worsen if peace talks with the Palestinians collapsed.

Washington's top diplomat also referred to "talk of boycotts" of Israel.

A growing number of governments and businesses have recently said they will not trade with Israeli firms with ties to Jewish settlements, highlighting the creeping success of a Palestinian-led boycott campaign.

The so-called BDS movement -- boycott, divestment and sanctions -- works to convince governments, businesses and celebrities to cut ties with Israeli companies active in the occupied Palestinian territories, in a



bid to repeat the success of the boycott which ended apartheid in South Africa.

Hardliners in the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu were quick to lash out at Kerry.

One described his remarks as "offensive"

and another accused him of "working to amplify" the boycott threat, prompting a terse statement from Washington urging

Kerry's critics to get their facts straight.

But there was no sign they were backing down yesterday.