

NEWSIN brief

Vietnam reports 2nd 2014 bird flu death

AFP, Hanoi

Vietnam has recorded its second death from bird flu in 2014, a health official said yesterday, as regional concerns over a potential resurgence of the deadly virus grow.

A 60-year-old woman from southern Dong Thap province died on January 28 and tested positive for the H5N1 virus the following day, provincial medical department director Nguyen Ngoc An told AFP. It follows the death of a 52-year-old man from the southern Binh Phuoc prov-

1,100 asylum seekers rescued off Italian coast

CNN ONLINE

More than 1,100 asylum seekers have been rescued off the coast of Italy, the nation's navy said in a statement.

Patrol choppers saw the overcrowded rafts, and four navy vessels rescued those on board Wednesday. Officials believe the asylum seekers were from sub-Saharan Africa. About 50 children were on board. All of the passengers are en route to the port of Augusta, where they are

S Sudan rebels claim 700 govt troops defect

AFP, Juba

Rebels fighting government troops in South Sudan said yesterday that 700 men from the government side have defected with all their equipment and were heading to join the rebels.

"Kiir's army has suffered its biggest yet mass defection since the current conflict began on 15th December," rebel spokesman Lul Ruai Koang said in a statement.

Koang said the defectors "engineered an internal revolt, opened fire on loyalist soldiers and in the process killed the commanding

US presses Beijing on S China Sea claims

AFP, Washington

The United States on Wednesday urged Beijing to clarify or adjust its claims in the South China Sea, calling for a peaceful solution to one of Asia's growing flashpoints.

With tensions already high over Beijing's imposition of an air zone above islands administered by Japan in the East China Sea, fears are growing of a fresh showdown in a separate row in the South China Sea where the Philippines is



Opposition demonstrators march around the "government district", that includes the parliament, the Cabinet of the ministers and the presidential office in Kiev yesterday. Ukrainian opposition leader and former interior minister Yuriy Lutsenko has said the country's security services are investigating him for an alleged attempt to "overthrow the state". Lutsenko is a key figure in the protest movement locked in a two-month confrontation with Ukraine's President Viktor Yanukovich.

PHOTO: AFP

EU lawmakers call for sanctions against Ukraine

AFP, Strasbourg

European lawmakers called yesterday for targeted EU sanctions against the Ukraine government and those implicated in violence against pro-EU demonstrators.

A non-binding resolution said the European Union and member states should consider travel bans and asset freezes on "Ukrainian officials, legislators and oligarchs personally responsible for the attacks on and deaths of protesters".

MEPs said they also wanted the EU to provide financial support for Ukraine and in another resolution, urged Ukraine's Soviet-era master Russia to respect the country's right to decide its own future.

A spokeswoman for EU foreign affairs head Catherine Ashton, just back from another visit to Kiev, said the bloc was not looking at sanctions for the moment and was focusing instead on the need for political dialogue.

EU foreign ministers will discuss Ukraine at a meeting on Monday, the spokeswoman added.

There has been speculation the West could impose sanctions against Ukraine over its handling of the protests, sparked when President Viktor Yanukovich ditched an EU association accord in November under Russian pressure.

EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fuele told Parliament Wednesday that if the current impasse could be resolved under a new government and elections held, the EU would be ready to extend assistance in cooperation with the International Monetary Fund and other global actors.

Ukraine's political crisis has weakened its already struggling economy, with government finances stretched and promised aid worth billions from Russia hanging in the balance.

Syria's Assad making gains, Kerry admits

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State John Kerry admitted Wednesday that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was making gains on the ground, but denied US policy in Syria was failing.

"It's fair to say that Assad has improved his position a little bit, yes. But he's still not winning. This is a stalemate," Kerry told CNN television in an interview.

He was adamant, however, that America's policy had not failed in the war-torn country, despite a mounting death toll in the three-year conflict.

"The policy in Syria is just very challenging and very difficult," Kerry added.

Earlier this week, the State Department denied reports Kerry told US lawmakers in a private meeting that it was time to change strategy in Syria, where some 136,000 people have died and millions have fled their homes.

"I don't want to make any excuse whatsoever. We want this to move faster. We want it to do better," Kerry said.

"But the point I'm making is that diplomacy is tough, slogging, slow work and hard work."

January marked the deadliest month so far in the conflict with some 6,000 dead, and Kerry said the United States was "always in the process of re-evaluating whether there's more we can do, should do."

US President Barack Obama has so far refused to provide heavy weaponry to the moderate rebels battling to topple Assad, amid fears it could fall into the hands of militant groups flooding into the country.

Kerry pledged the administration would work with Congress as well as internally to come up with ways to push the Russians to use their influence on Assad in order to improve conditions on the ground.

And the top US diplomat, who has in the past advocated a more robust US policy on Syria, warned that "we don't have years" to find a way to end the war.

The United States is providing non-lethal support to the rebels, such as body armor, communications equipment and night-vision goggles.

"I don't want to go into details, I'm not free to go into all the details, but I will say to you that the president has taken an aggressive position," Kerry said.

He also pointed to a deal hammered out with Russia on eliminating Syria's chemical weapons stock as "a significant milestone" in getting rid of the "grotesque tool" the Assad regime had used against its own people.



John Kerry



Bashar al-Assad

Syria misses another chemical weapons deadline

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Syria claims it remains committed to destroying its chemical weapons arsenal by mid-2014 despite missing another deadline on Wednesday.

The delay is being blamed by Syrian officials on the ongoing war with anti-regime militants and comes despite an international agreement brokered last September to avert a US strike, mooted in the aftermath of a chemical attack in east Damascus that killed hundreds and drew global outrage.

Less than 5% of Syria's chemical arsenal, thought to total more than 1,300 tonnes, has been shipped out for destruction. By now, more than 90% should have been surrendered, according to a timeline prescribed by the UN and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

Egypt's Mubarak to face trial on new charges

Morsi trial adjourned to March 1

AFP, Cairo

Ousted Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, in court for alleged incitement to kill protesters and corruption, is to also stand trial this month on embezzlement charges, the prosecution said yesterday.

Mubarak, 85, has remained in a military hospital in Cairo since he was freed from prison in August after the maximum pre-trial detention period expired.

He had been convicted of involvement in the murder of protesters during the 2011 uprising that toppled him, but a court ordered a retrial last year on technical grounds.

The latest charges brought against Mubarak and his two sons



Hosni Mubarak



Mohamed Morsi

Alaa and Gamal involve their alleged embezzlement of 125 million Egyptian pounds (\$18 million) earmarked for presidential palaces, a prosecution official said.

That trial will start on February 19, he said.

Meanwhile, an Egyptian court on Wednesday adjourned the murder trial of ousted president Mohamed Morsi to March 1, to review video evidence against the Islamist.

Morsi and 14 co-defendants, some of them former aides, are charged with inciting the killings of at least seven opposition protesters outside the presidential palace in December 2012.

In the hearing on March 1, the court will review a report on video footage of the December 5, 2012 clashes between Morsi's supporters and opponents.

Morsi faces four separate trials, on charges ranging from contempt of the judiciary to plotting an elaborate conspiracy involving Iran and Palestinian militants to conduct attacks in Egypt.

He could be sentenced to death if convicted on several of the charges, which include collu-



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi security forces and civilians gather at the site of a car bomb explosion in the industrial Camp Sarah district of central Baghdad yesterday. Six car bombs ripped through the Iraqi capital yesterday, mostly targeting Shiite neighbourhoods, killing at least five people, security and medical officials said. The blasts occurred within an hour of each other from around midday (0900 GMT) onwards in various parts of the Iraqi capital, leaving dozens more wounded.

6 car bombs hit Baghdad US lawmakers slam Maliki

AFP, Baghdad

Six car bombs ripped through Baghdad killing five people yesterday, hours after American lawmakers criticised the slow pace of political reconciliation which they blamed for high levels of violence.

Diplomats and analysts have called for the Shiite-led government to do more to reach out to disaffected Sunnis, but with parliamentary elections looming in April, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has taken a hard line.

The bloodshed has continued unabated, with half a dozen car bombs going off across Baghdad from about noon (0900 GMT) onwards.

In all, they killed at least five people and left 38 others wounded, according to security and medical officials.

Four of the neighbourhoods hit are populated mostly by Iraq's Shiite majority, while the other two were in the commercial Karrada district of central Baghdad. Three of the blasts targeted market areas.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the latest attacks, but Sunni militant groups including the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), a powerful jihadist outfit, have in the past taken credit for bombing campaigns in the capital targeting Shiites.

US House Foreign Affairs Committee chairman Ed Royce said on Wednesday that Maliki's failure to do more to address Sunni grievances had allowed ISIL to exploit the minority community's "alienation" to sharply step up its attacks.

"As head of state, while he may not be up to it, Maliki must take steps to lead Iraq to a post-sectarian era," Royce said.

"Al-Qaeda has become very skilled at exploiting this sectarian rift, and Maliki's power grab has given them much ammunition."

US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iraq and Iran Brett McGurk insisted Maliki had made changes since he visited Washington in November and "got a very direct message" from President Barack Obama on "enlisting the Sunnis into the fight".

France urges punishments for CAR lynching

AFP, Paris

France yesterday called for authorities in the Central African Republic to make an example of soldiers who carried out the public lynching of a suspected ex-rebel.

"France condemns the heinous acts that followed the assembly of parts of the Central African armed forces," French foreign ministry spokesman Romain Nadal said.

"These abuses call for a punishment that sets an example," he said.

The soldiers lynched the man immediately after a military ceremony in the capital Bangui on Wednesday, beating and stabbing him before dragging his lifeless body through the streets, dismembering him and setting him on fire.

The gruesome attack, widely captured on camera, happened moments after new interim president Catherine Samba Panza spoke of her pride in seeing the country's armed forces contribute to national security again.

East Jerusalem Settlements Israel approves permits

CNN, Jerusalem

Israel approved construction permits for more than 550 settlement units in East Jerusalem, officials said, escalating tensions with Palestinians amid negotiations.

The city council committee Wednesday evening approved issuing the construction permits, which is considered the last stage before building of settlements can start.

"The local planning and building committee had dealt with request of private enterprises to approve building permits for 386 units in Har Homa, 136 units in Neve Yakov and 36 units in Pisgat Zeev for plans approved years ago," the Jerusalem municipality said in a statement.

The areas are considered disputed, with settlements illegal under international law.

Iran says it can reassure West over nuclear reactor

AFP, Tehran

Iran's nuclear chief Ali Akbar Salehi said the unfinished Arak reactor could be modified to produce less plutonium in a bid to reassure the West, local media reported yesterday.

The Arak site is of concern to the West because Tehran could theoretically extract weapons-grade plutonium from its spent fuel if it also builds a reprocessing facility, potentially giving it a second route to an atomic bomb.

"This reactor will produce about 9 kilogrammes of plutonium, but not weapon-grade plutonium," Salehi said, according to a transcript

of his interview with the English-language Press TV website.

Western nations and Israel have long suspected Iran of covertly pursuing nuclear weapons alongside its civilian programme, allegations denied by Tehran, which insists its nuclear activities are entirely peaceful.

Iran struck an interim nuclear deal with world powers in November under which it agreed to roll back parts of its nuclear work in exchange for the release of billions of dollars in frozen assets and limited relief from crippling sanctions, and committed not to make further advances at its Arak, Fordo and Natanz facilities.

'Sisi says to run for president'

But 'misinterpreted' by Kuwait paper says army

AFP, Kuwait City, Cairo

Egypt's army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi allegedly said in comments published in a Kuwait paper yesterday he has decided to run in the presidential election scheduled by mid-April.

But, Egypt's army said yesterday the newspaper "misinterpreted" remarks by Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi saying he would announce such a decision only to the Egyptian people.

Kuwait newspaper Al-Seyassah ran an interview with Sisi yesterday in which he was quoted as saying, "Yes, the matter has been decided and I have no choice but to respond to the call of the Egyptian people."

"What was published by the Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Seyassah is nothing but journalistic interpretations that are not direct declarations from Field Marshal Sisi," army spokesman Colonel Ahmed Ali said in a statement.

Sisi's "decision to run or not for the presidency is a personal decision that he will announce personally before ... the Egyptian people and not anyone else, through clear and direct words" Ali added in his statement.



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