

NEWS IN
brief

Israeli troops clear West Bank protest camp

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli troops cleared a Palestinian protest camp in the Jordan Valley yesterday, ending a week-long demonstration against Israel's refusal to pull out of the area in any future peace deal.

Soldiers, border guards and police asked the protesters to leave before forcefully evicting them, a statement from the army said.

Iraq attacks kill 9 including election candidate

AFP, Baghdad

Attacks in Baghdad and north of the capital killed nine people yesterday, including a supporter of powerful Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr who was standing in April's parliamentary election.

The murder of Hamza al-Shammari, the first of an election candidate, comes amid a protracted surge in bloodshed with near-daily attacks nationwide and security forces battling anti-government fighters in

Two Egypt bombs wound six officers

AFP, Cairo

Six Egyptian policemen were wounded in a bomb attack on a bridge in the capital yesterday, officials said.

The interior ministry said two small bombs exploded near policemen stationed on a bridge near central Cairo. At least six were wounded in the attack, the

Rampaging tiger claims 9th Indian victim

AFP, Lucknow

A man-eating tiger on the prowl in northern India has claimed its ninth victim, defying hunters and wildlife officials who have been trying to gun down the animal, an official said yesterday.

Since December 29, the same big cat is believed to have been on a killing spree in a densely forested area near Jim Corbett National Park in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

ODDLY enough

HK hotel brews storm in a teacup with 'promotion for men'

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong's Mandarin Oriental hotel stirred up ridicule yesterday with an afternoon-tea promotion for men based on pork pies and beef rather than dainty snacks "normally preserved for women".

The five-star hotel



denied that its marketing campaign for the "Gentlemen's Power Snack" and "Gentlemen's Power Afternoon Tea" was sexist, but a women's rights group heaped scorn on the language used in a press release.

"It is quite silly, as a marketing strategy, to single out certain food and beverage outlets and meals as more suitable to one sex than the other," Annie Chan, chairwoman of the Association for the Advancement of Feminism, told AFP.

The conversation appeared to have been held shortly after Yanukovich accepted his pro-Russian government's resignation on January 28.



INDIAN RURAL GAMES

A participant competes in a buffalo race in the village of Nijran on the outskirts of Jalandhar yesterday, part of a rural games festival. Buffalo racing in the northern Indian state of Punjab has a long tradition.

PHOTO:
AFP

IRAN SANCTIONS

Skeptical US senator revives push

AFP, Washington

ing its nuclear program.

Iran insists its nuclear drive is purely peaceful, but Menendez warned that it has refused to destroy any of its centrifuges, and was "weeks to months away from breakout" uranium enrichment capacity to produce a bomb should it ever resume the program.

"Let everyone understand: if there is no deal we won't have time to impose new sanctions before Iran could produce a nuclear weapon."

Menendez's legislation has support from 59 senators in the 100-member chamber.

But Obama has threatened a veto and several Democrats who favor the bill have since stepped back from a possible damaging vote against their own leader.

And Iranian officials have warned that new sanctions legislation could

SYRIA PEACE TALKS

Damascus confirms 2nd round attendance

AFP, Damascus

Syria's deputy foreign minister, Faisal Muqdad, said yesterday that Damascus will take part in a second round of peace talks in Geneva due to start on February 10.

"It has been decided that the delegation of the Syrian republic will take part in the second round of negotiations in Geneva," state news agency SANA quoted Muqdad as saying.

"The Syrian delegation wishes to pursue the efforts it deployed during the first round in Geneva, and insists that the discussions focus on all clauses in the Geneva I communiqué, beginning with the first clause," he said.

Ten days of talks in Switzerland last month between government and opposition delegations yielded no tangible results, and Damascus had said it was unsure whether it would return to the negotiating table.

Despite persistent pressure from UN-Arab

League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, and cosponsors Russia and the United States, the two sides failed to agree on a single point.

On Tuesday, Syrian National Coalition chief Ahmad Jarba met Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov of Russia, a key Damascus ally, in Moscow, where Russia's deputy foreign minister indicated that Moscow expected President Bashar al-Assad to state firmly his delegation's intention to resume the peace talks.

Damascus calls rebels "terrorists", and insists that the priority in the Geneva talks must be to focus on "terrorism".

For the opposition, the central point of the negotiations is the transition foreseen in the Geneva I communiqué.

It was adopted by world powers in 2012 but is ambiguous, in that it calls for an interim government but is unclear on Assad's future.

"A return to security and stability in Syria means that halting terrorism and violence must be discussed, as envisioned in the Geneva I communiqué," Muqdad said.

SYRIA'S BESIEGED HOMS UN poised to evacuate civilians

AFP, Homs

Scores of trapped civilians awaited evacuation yesterday from besieged rebel-held areas of Syria's third city Homs as Damascus finally confirmed it will join new peace talks next week.

The evacuation is part of a surprise deal brokered by the United Nations between the two sides on Thursday after months of negotiations that will also see desperately needed aid delivered to the rebel enclave during a "humanitarian pause" in fighting.

But the first consignment of food and medicines will not reach the hundreds of civilians who have been under army blockade for more than 600 days before today, Homs governor Talal Barazi told AFP.

The relief supplies had been held up in a UN warehouse in a government-held area of Homs just kilometres away from the rebel-held Old City while the negotiations for relief access dragged on.

At least 1,200 children, women and elderly people are among some 2,500 civilians who have been trapped under siege, surviving on little but olives, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says.

Political Transition Libya braces for protests

AFP, Tripoli

Security forces braced for protests yesterday against Libya's protracted political transition following the ouster of longtime dictator Moamer Gaddafi, with fears of more violence after an overnight attack on army headquarters.

Tensions have risen after a decision by Libya's highest political authority, the General National Congress, to extend its interim mandate.

Interim Interior Minister Seddik Abdelkarim, who escaped an assassination bid late last month, issued an order late Thursday for security forces to "protect peaceful demonstrators."

But the "No Extension" movement is so concerned about the risk of violence that it was not formally organising any protests yesterday.

A statement said any of its backers demonstrating would be doing so "as individuals expressing their opinions."



Stolen urn of Buddha's remains found

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Police in Cambodia said they have recovered a precious gold urn that was stolen last year and contains what are considered to be remains of the Buddha's body.

The urn was taken from a mountain shrine 40km outside the capital, Phnom Penh, in mid-December.

National Police spokesman Kirti Chantharith said it was recovered on Thursday from a house in the southern province of Takeo, and a man was arrested in connection with the theft.

Several countries in Asia possess relics believed to come from the body of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, and the stolen urn holds great religious and cultural significance for Cambodia, a predominantly Buddhist

PHOTO:
AFP

A patrol of the African Union-led MISCA mission drive past the body of a lynched Muslim man who tried to leave Bangui for Chad yesterday.

US red-faced over diplomat cursing EU

AFP, Kiev

The United States tried to contain fallout yesterday from a leaked phone conversation in which a top diplomat uses the f-word regarding the European Union's handling of the crisis in Ukraine.

Washington and Brussels have engaged in a diplomatic standoff with Kiev and Moscow over mass protests that erupted in Ukraine in November when Yanukovich rejected a pact with the EU in favour of closer ties with former Soviet master Russia.

But the leaked phone call appears to reveal US frustration with the EU over the handling of the long-running crisis.

In the recording, which went viral after being re-posted by an aide to Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, top diplomat for Europe, Victoria Nuland and US ambassador to Kiev, Geoff Pyatt discuss frankly which opposition figures should go into the new Ukrainian government.

"That would be great I think to help glue this thing and have the UN glue it and you know, f*** the EU," Nuland says, in apparent frustration at policy differences, in what appeared to be a recent phone call with Pyatt.

The conversation appeared to have been held shortly after Yanukovich accepted his pro-Russian government's resignation on January 28.

An apology and an outrage over an 'f-bomb'

Nuland apologises
THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

US state Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said that the top US diplomat for European and Eurasian affairs, Victoria Nuland, who made the disparaging remark about the EU, "has been in contact with her EU counterparts and of course has apologised for these reported comments".

In an attempt at damage limitation, US officials tried to turn focus onto Russia, suggesting that Moscow had leaked the audio recording. They pointed to an early tweet from Dmitry Loskutov, an aide to the deputy prime minister of Russia Dmitry Rogozin, that said: "Sort of controversial judgment from Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland speaking about the EU."

White House spokesman Jay Carney would not discuss the content of the conversation recorded in the clip, but he too invoked the Loskutov tweet. "I would say that since the video was first noted and tweeted out by the Russian government, I think it says something about Russia's role," he said.

At the State Department, Psaki said that if the Russians were responsible for listening to, recording and posting a private diplomatic telephone conversation, it would be "a new low in Russian tradecraft". Pressed on whether the call was authentic, Psaki said: "I didn't say it was inauthentic."

Merkel fumes at curse

AFP, Kiev

German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed outrage yesterday over the leaked phone conversation.

"The chancellor considers this statement absolutely unacceptable ... and wants to emphasise again that (EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton) is doing an outstanding job," a spokeswoman for

Merkel said yesterday, referring to the video.



"The European Union will continue with its intensive efforts to calm the situation in Ukraine."

Israel denies shooting down rocket fired from Gaza

Says third rocket fired from Gaza Thursday
AFP, Jerusalem

AP

The military denied media reports it shot down a rocket fired from Gaza at southern Israel on Thursday, saying the projectile fell on open ground.

"There was no interception," a spokesman told AFP. "A rocket fell."

Public radio, army radio and other Israeli media earlier reported that the Iron Dome missile defence system shot down a rocket fired from the Gaza Strip towards the southern city of Ashkelon.

A military statement said the rocket had been aimed at Ashkelon but fell to earth without causing injuries or damage.

The incident was Thursday's second cross-border rocket attack, the military said, but did not elaborate, and added that a third rocket slammed into southern Israel Thursday night without any immediate reports of injuries.

On Tuesday, Gaza's Hamas rulers said they had redeployed a 600-strong special security force tasked with preventing cross-border rocket fire, after reports it had pulled the unit back two days before.

Hamas spokesman Islam Shahwan said the Palestinian Islamist movement would "not allow the occupation (Israel) to break off the ceasefire" that ended an eight-day, full-scale conflict with the Jewish state in November 2012.