

NEWS IN
briefTrain derails in
French Alps; 2 killed

AFP, Digne-les-Bains

Two people died and nine others were injured yesterday when a train derailed in the southern French Alps, firefighters said. The train was travelling from the coastal city of Nice to the town of Digne-les-Bains and came off the tracks after hitting a rock on the rails, they said. There were a total of 34 people on board at the time of the accident.

Indian cabinet clears
Telangana Bill

THE HINDU ONLINE

The Union Cabinet on Friday cleared the Bill for the creation of Telangana, paving the way for its introduction in parliament on February 11 or 12. The key demands of Seemandhra leaders that Hyderabad be made a Union Territory and Rayala Telangana be created were rejected, putting a question mark on the fate of the Bill in Parliament.

Kashmir minister
quits over
molestation charges

BBC Online

A top minister in Indian-administered Kashmir has resigned after allegations that he attempted to sexually assault a doctor, officials said. State Health Minister Shabir Ahmed Khan quit after the senior gynaecologist alleged that he "made sexual advances" and tried to molest her. The incident took place in his office in Srinagar a few days back, she said.

Turkey kicks out
foreign journalist

AFP, Istanbul

Turkey expelled Azeri journalist Mahir Zeynalov Friday for tweets criticising the government, his newspaper said, stoking concerns about media freedom a day after new Internet curbs provoked a storm of protest. It followed in the wake of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government rushing new Internet restrictions through parliament that critics including the EU and Washington worry will limit free expression.

Indonesia grants
parole to Aussie
drug mule

AFP, Denpasar

Indonesia said Friday that Schapelle Corby, an Australian woman convicted almost nine years ago of drug smuggling, has been granted parole. Corby, 36, was convicted in May 2005 for smuggling nine pounds (4.1 kilograms) of marijuana in a bag, while arriving at Bali's Denpasar International Airport the previous October. It was unclear when she will be released from the Bali prison where she has been serving her lengthy sentence.

Its pay-back time

Band demands \$666,000 from Pentagon over unauthorised use of their music for Gitmo tortures

AFP, Montreal

A Canadian hard-rock band says it sent the Pentagon a \$666,000 bill after a former Guantanamo Bay guard alleged that the US military used their music to torture detainees.

Skinny Puppy found out their music was blasted out at the detention center in southern Cuba from a former guard who is a fan of the band, keyboardist Cevin Key told Canada's CTV Television.

Rights groups say that prison officials subjected Guantanamo's terror suspects to "deafening loud music," often featuring violent lyrics, during interrogation.

Several other bands, including REM, Rage Against the Machine and Metallica, have denounced the use of their music at Guantanamo.

The amount they requested may be a reference to 666, known as "the devil's number," in light of the band's Gothic themes. The band acknowledged that Skinny Puppy's music could be a "terrible nightmare" for some listeners if listened over a considerable period of time.

DIRE ECONOMIC SITUATION
Violent protests
rock Bosnia

AFP, Sarajevo

Bosnia yesterday braced for fresh protests amid warnings the country could face a "tsunami" of popular anger over its dire economy after days of riots left several hundred people injured.

The acrid smell of smoke hung over the capital Sarajevo where firemen spent the night dousing flames after protesters set fire to government buildings in scenes repeated in cities throughout the country.

The protests are the Balkan country's worst unrest since the 1992-1995 war and reflect growing despair over the state of the economy in a nation where unemployment stands at 44 percent and where one in five lives below the poverty line.

Police have used rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse protesters, leaving around 300 people injured since the demonstrations erupted on Wednesday.

"This is a state of war," warned the front page of the *Oslobodjenje* daily.

The protesters are demanding the resignation of local and regional officials, whom they blame for two decades of political stalemate that has left the economy in dire straits.

Woody Allen denies
abuse allegations

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Woody Allen has struck back against allegations he molested Dylan Farrow in a blistering reply that accuses Mia Farrow of spite, deceit and hatefulness.

The film director cast himself in a New York Times article as the persecuted victim of his former partner, as a "raging adversary" who destroyed their family and coached their daughter to invent stories of sexual abuse.

"Of course, I did not molest Dylan. I loved her and hope one day she will grasp how she has been cheated out of having a loving father and exploited by a mother more interested in her own festering anger than her daughter's wellbeing."

"Being taught to hate your father and made to believe he molested you has already taken a psychological

cal toll on this lovely young woman, and Soon-Yi [Allen's wife] and I are both hoping that one day she will understand who has really made her a victim and reconnect with us."

The 2,000-word column, which Allen, 78, vowed would be his "final word" on the subject, was published on Friday in response to an open letter from Dylan a week earlier in which she repeated the accusations against her father.

The story erupted in 1992 during an acrimonious split between Allen and Farrow, who had starred in several of his films. Dylan, then aged seven, alleged her father abused her in the attic of their family home.

A panel of experts investigated the claims and found no evidence of abuse. Allen claimed Farrow concocted the story to punish him for an affair with their adopted teenage daughter, Soon-Yi, now his wife.

'OBAMA WITH BANANA'
Russian MP's tweet
sparks racism debate

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

The subject of racism has become the focus of a public discussion in Russia after an MP from the Duma caused outrage by posting an image of Barack Obama on Twitter that was photoshopped to include a banana.

Irina Rodnina, an MP from Vladimir Putin's United Russia party and a triple Olympic champion figure-skater, posted the picture on her personal Twitter account.

The image features Obama chewing, while a hand in the foreground waves a banana at him.

Rodnina insisted that there was nothing wrong with the photograph, and said she had been sent it by friends in America. "Freedom of speech is freedom of speech, and you should answer for your own hang-ups," she wrote.

The US ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, wrote on Twitter that Rodnina was guilty of "outrageous behaviour, which only brings shame to her parliament and country".

Racism is rife in Russia, and black football players often face racial abuse involving bananas. In 2011, the Brazilian Roberto Carlos, playing for Russian team Anzhi Makhachkala, left the pitch in anger after a banana was thrown at him from the stands.

Mortars, shots hit
Homs aid convoy

AFP, Beirut

The Syrian Red Crescent yesterday said vehicles delivering aid in besieged districts of the central city of Homs were fired on and that one driver was wounded.

Meanwhile the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that two residents of besieged Homs were killed in the shelling attack, and several wounded including a media activist.

"Shots fired targeting aid trucks and the team," the Red Crescent said on Twitter, without accusing anyone -- government forces or rebels -- of being responsible. It also said a Red Crescent "aid truck driver (was) injured."

"Mortar shells falling in close proximity near the team and aid trucks that moved into Old City," a second tweet said.

State news agency SANA said four Red Crescent volunteers were wounded "by gunshots fired by armed terrorist groups," as an aid convoy was entering the Old City.

The regime calls rebels trying to topple the government "terrorists".

Homs governor Talal al-Barazi said "two vehicles carrying humanitarian assistance entered the Old City," but that "terrorist groups prevented the entrance of other vehicles."

SYRIA
CRISIS

clies by firing mortar rounds on the road."

The UN was hoping to deliver aid to civilians trapped in rebel-held areas of the Old City for more than 600 days of a choking army siege, a day after evacuating dozens from there.

Activists for their part accused the regime of launching mortar and tank fire against the convoy.

Rebels said that the rounds were launched from two separate areas, one bordering the besieged neighbourhoods, the other some 200 metres (yards) away. Both areas are under regime control.

The UN and Red Crescent were poised to deliver humanitarian aid to some 3,000 people trapped in Homs since June 2012, under a UN-supervised truce agreement between the regime and the rebels.

Under the agreement, 83 civilians were evacuated Friday.

Meanwhile, new aerial bombardment from explosives-packed barrel bombs in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo killed at least 20 people yesterday.

Hundreds of people have been killed in several waves of barrel bomb assaults, each lasting several days, since December 15, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Spain princess
fights fraud
accusations

AFP, Palma

Spain's princess Cristina fought to distance herself from fraud accusations as she faced a tough court hearing yesterday over a scandal that has plunged the royal family into crisis.

King Juan Carlos's youngest daughter, 48, smiled and looked relaxed as she arrived at court in Palma on the holiday island of Majorca.

Dressed in a white shirt and black jacket, she stepped out of a car and walked into the closed-door hearing to answer accusations that she was complicit in tax-dodging and money-laundering.

Long thought untouchable as a royal, Cristina is in the centre of the scandal over allegedly fraudulent business dealings by her husband, former Olympic handball player Inaki Urdangarin. Cristina is the first direct member of the Spanish royal family in history to appear in a court as a suspect.

India, US should not derail
productive ties: Susan Rice

PTI, Washington

The US, in an apparent reference to the Devyani Khobragade issue, yesterday said such "challenges" should not be allowed to derail the future of its important relationship with India and the two countries needed to deal with differences in a constructive manner.

"Every meaningful partnership between powerful nations encounters setbacks. And, obviously, recent events have drawn more attention to our disagreements than to our cooperative efforts," National Security Advisor Susan Rice said in an apparent reference to the issue of the arrest of the Indian diplomat which created tension between the two countries.

"But, those difficulties should be minor compared to the breadth of our relationship and the magnitude of what we can accomplish together," she said in her address to the Aspen Institute US-India Dialogue being held in Washington.

"We must also deal with our differences in a constructive manner, commensurate with a relationship of this importance," Rice said, reiterating the commitment of the Obama Administration to strengthen and deepen the bilateral relationship between the two largest democracies of the world.

Devyani, 39, was arrested on December 12, on visa fraud charges, strip-searched and held with criminals, triggering a row between the two countries with India retaliating by downgrading privileges of certain category of US diplomats among other steps.

She was indicted on visa fraud and making false statements by a US grand jury. She returned to India after she was asked to leave the US by the State Department.

"The relationship between India and the United States can and should be, as President Obama has said many times, 'one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century' and, as I've experienced firsthand, it can also be one of our most productive partnerships," she said.

Given the hard work done by the governments of the two countries in the last two decades, Rice exuded confidence that the India-US relationship would continue to grow irrespective of the outcome of the upcoming elections.

"Let's build on the important steps we've already taken, such as: working together in the UN Human Rights Council to advance reconciliation in Sri Lanka; supporting elections in third countries; and helping found the UN Democracy Fund," Rice said.

Ukrainian's
bid to hijack
plane fails

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine yesterday launched a terror probe into a bid by an apparently drunk man to force an airliner flying to Turkey to land in Sochi where leaders gathered for the opening of the Winter Olympic Games.

Officials said the Ukrainian -- reported by one official in Kiev as being "in an advanced state of drunkenness" -- was opposed to the politics of President Viktor Yanukovych and his Russian counterpart and ally Vladimir Putin.

The Ukrainian investigator said the man demanded that the plane be flown to Sochi where Yanukovych was holding held crisis talks with Putin on the sidelines of the Games' opening ceremony.

The would-be hijacker "said the hands of Yanukovych and Putin were drenched in blood," said officials

The Ukrainian man -- born in 1969 -- brandished what he said was a detonator as he tried gaining access to the cockpit of an aircraft operated by Turkey's Pegasus Airlines which left from the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv with 110 people on board.

Turkey scrambled two F-16 jets to force down the airliner at Istanbul's Sabiha Gokcen airport. The man was immediately taken into custody and turned out to have neither a gun nor explosives.

Officials said the man was eventually tied up with rope by the crew after being tricked into believing that the plane's flight was being reversed toward Sochi.

AFGHAN WAR CAUSALITIES
Civilian death toll rises

AFP, Kabul

The number of civilians killed and wounded in Afghanistan rose 14 percent last year, the UN said yesterday, as Nato troops draw down after more than a decade of war.

A total of 8,615 civilian casualties were recorded in 2013, with 2,959 killed and 5,656 wounded, according to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan's annual report. The death toll almost reached the record of 2011, with UNAMA saying that civilians killed or wounded in the crossfire of fighting between government and Taliban-led insurgent forces marked a new trend last year.

UNAMA put this down to the reduction of ground and air operations by the US-led Nato force as it withdraws by the end of 2014.

Afghan forces have been taking an increasing role in the fight against the Taliban as the coalition pulls out. More than 50,000 NATO-led combat troops who are still in Afghanistan are due to leave by the year-end.

Last year also marked the highest casualties for women and children with a 36-percent increase in women and 34-percent increase in children's casualties, the report added.

Most of the casualties to women and children were caused by "ground engagements" and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), the Taliban's weapon of choice.



VIOLATION OF IRAN SANCTIONS

US penalises dozens of entities

THE HINDU ONLINE

The Obama administration penalised nearly three dozen companies and individuals in eight countries, accusing them of evading sanctions on doing business with Iran as the UN nuclear agency and Tehran met yesterday for more talks.

It was the administration's most extensive enforcement action to target Iran since a temporary international agreement on that country's disputed nuclear program was completed in November and put into effect last month.

Announced by the Treasury Department office on Thursday that oversees sanctions enforcement, the punishments were at least partly devised to send a message that the US is not relaxing economic pressures on Iran, apparently to blunt an atmosphere of optimism that has resulted from the temporary nuclear agreement. This week, Secretary of State John Kerry criticised France after it sent a large trade delegation to Iran.

Under US sanctions laws and regulations, violators face severe penalties, including restrictions on doing business in the United States and the seizure

of any property under US jurisdiction.

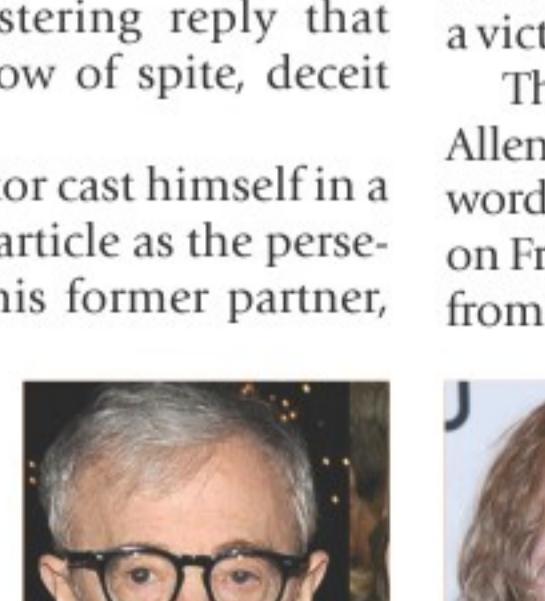
Eighteen businesses and 14 individuals were identified as violators in the Treasury announcement, in a list of countries that included Turkey, Spain, Germany, Georgia, Afghanistan, the United Arab Emirates and Liechtenstein.

In Tehran, the UN nuclear agency and Tehran met for talks on allegations of past Iranian weapons work and to seek additional safeguards to allay international concerns over its nuclear ambitions.

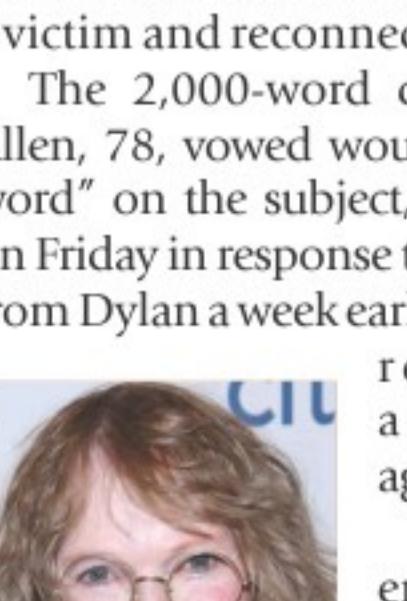
The meeting came as the Islamic republic's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, demanded tolerance from critics of President Hassan Rohani ahead of fresh talks with world powers.

Negotiations between Iran and the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are building on a framework deal agreed in November that required Tehran to take six practical steps by next Tuesday.

Chief inspector Tero Varjoranta and four experts are assessing the implementation of those measures, Iranian Atomic Energy Organisation spokesman Behrouz Kamalvandi said.



Woody Allen



Mia Farrow

cal toll on this lovely young woman, and Soon-Yi [Allen's wife] and I are both