

NEWSIN brief

Gunmen kill 8 in Pakistan's Karachi

AFP, Karachi

Gunmen on motorcycles Sunday shot dead eight people including an eight-year-old girl at a faith healer's house in the southern Pakistani port city of Karachi, police and doctors said.

At least 12 others were also wounded in the shooting at Baldia Town.

S Sudan peace talks postponed

AFP, Addis Ababa

The second round of peace talks on South Sudan, which was scheduled to start yesterday, has been postponed, officials said.

"The talks are not resuming today," South Sudan government spokesman Michael Makuei told AFP.

US unveils \$300 m in Afghan aid

AFP, Kabul

The United States unveiled \$300 million yesterday in new aid initiatives for Afghanistan, a US official said.

The first tranche of some \$77m aims to enhance trade and fiscal sustainability to support Afghanistan's accession to the WTO later this year.

Rebels kill 21 in Syrian village

AFP, Beirut

Opposition fighters from Islamist brigades have killed at least 21 civilians and 20 pro-regime fighters in an Alawite village in Syria's Hama province, an NGO said yesterday.



Leading cultural theorist Stuart Hall dies

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

One of Britain's leading intellectuals, the sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall, has died age 82.

Known as the "godfather of multiculturalism", Hall had a huge influence on academic, political and cultural debates for over six decades.

Hall had been suffering ill health for some time, and had retreated from public life.

Jamaican-born Hall was professor of sociology at the Open University from 1979 to 1997, topping off an academic career that began as a research fellow.

His impact was felt far outside the realms of academia. His writing on race, gender, sexuality and identity, and the links between racial prejudice and the media in the 1970s, was considered groundbreaking.

Not trying to be toppled: Kejriwal

NDTV ONLINE

"I am not trying to be toppled", said Indian Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal as his confrontation with the Congress party appears to be breaching danger levels.

Kejriwal plans to submit the anti-corruption Jan Lokpal Bill to the Delhi legislature on Sunday, while the Congress says that any legislation that's being reviewed by the Delhi Assembly must first be cleared by the union government.

He says his stand on the Jan Lokpal Bill, which creates an ombudsman to investigate and prosecute corrupt government officers, is non-negotiable.



ALEPPO AIR STRIKES

A man reacts to the destruction of his home, following a reported Syrian government forces air strike the day before, in the northern city of Aleppo yesterday. The peace talks made little visible progress towards reaching a political settlement for the nearly three-year war, which has claimed more than 136,000 lives and displaced millions of people.

Kerry heads Thursday on new Asia visit

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State John Kerry will make his fifth trip to North and Southeast Asia on Thursday, stopping in China, South Korea and Indonesia for climate change and North Korea talks.

The globe-trotting top US diplomat will also visit Abu Dhabi at the end of his February 13-18 voyage, his spokeswoman Jen Psaki said in a statement.

In Seoul, Kerry will "discuss ways to expand our cooperation on regional and global issues, and continue our close coordination... on North Korea," Psaki said.

In Beijing, Kerry will highlight the role that the United States and China -- the world's top emitters of greenhouse gases blamed for global warming -- can play in combating climate change.

Kerry will also "relay the message that the United States is committed to pursuing a positive, cooperative, comprehensive relationship and welcomes the rise of a peaceful and prosperous China that plays a positive role in world affairs," Psaki said.

The Beijing visit, also his second as secretary of state, comes however amid growing regional tensions over China's territorial ambitions after it unilaterally extended its air defense zone over the South China Sea.



Iran detonators deal only a 'first step': IAEA

New centrifuges; missile programme non negotiable

AFP, Vienna, Tehran

Iran's promise to clarify its use of detonators marks only an initial step by Tehran to address long-standing allegations of past nuclear weapons research, the UN atomic watchdog said yesterday.

"This is the first step that is taking place now," International Atomic Energy Agency chief inspector Tero Varjoranta told reporters at Vienna airport after returning from Iran.

On Sunday, Iran and the IAEA agreed a new seven-step plan to increase transparency, including a pledge by Iran to provide "information and explanations for the Agency to assess Iran's stated need or application for the development of Exploding Bridge Wire detonators".

These detonators can have "non-nuclear applications", noted IAEA in a November 2011 report, but mostly they are used in weapons research and therefore Iran's stated development of them "is a matter of concern".

Meanwhile, Iran has developed a new generation of centrifuges which are 15 times more powerful than those currently being used to enrich uranium, its atomic chief Ali Akbar Salehi said yesterday. He said the development was not in violation of a November 24 agreement between Iran and six world powers that has imposed curbs on Tehran's nuclear drive.

Iran's ballistic missile programme will not be discussed in nuclear negotiations with world powers, the deputy foreign minister said in statements published yesterday.

The remarks by Abbas Araqchi came a week before negotiations were to resume on a comprehensive accord over Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

US lead negotiator in the talks, Wendy Sherman, last week told a Senate hearing that Iran's ballistic missile programme would be addressed in the comprehensive deal.

"The defence-related issues are a red line for Iran. We will not allow such issues to be discussed in future talks," said Araqchi.

Warring sides brace for fresh peace talks

Homs evacuations preparation on

AFP, Geneva

Syria's warring sides headed yesterday into a new round of UN-brokered peace talks, 10 days after a debut session managed little beyond a pledge on evacuating civilians from the besieged city of Homs.

After government and opposition delegates arrived at their Geneva hotels Sunday, they held separate closed-door meetings with UN and Arab League mediator Lakhdar Brahimi.

The Algerian veteran peacemaker, who in late January brought the two sides to the table for the first time since the war began in 2011, was scheduled to hold talks with the opposition at 10:00 am (0900 GMT) yesterday.

Then at 11:30, he was to meet with the government delegation helmed by Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, who was also in charge of the regime's team in the first round.

It was not clear yesterday if the two sides would sit down together for a meeting under the auspices of Brahimi, nor how many days the round was expected to last.

The aim is to build on an international conference held in the Swiss city in 2012 at which world powers called for political transition in Syria.

Aid teams, meanwhile, prepared to enter the besieged Old City of Homs in central Syria to evacuate civilians yesterday, braving fighting that saw mortar fire rain down during operations a day earlier.

A source at the Syrian Red Crescent said discussions were still underway on whether an initial three-day truce would be extended to allow the humanitarian operations to continue yesterday.

"Today we will continue the evacuation of civilians via the same routes or new ones," the source said.

"A meeting between the UN and the governor of Homs is underway. In principle, the ceasefire will be extended, and we will try to get civilians out as soon as possible," the source added.

He said aid would also be delivered to besieged neighbourhoods of the Old City of Homs and had been loaded into the buses that would evacuate civilians.

PAK-TALIBAN PEACE TALKS

Taliban sets rigid terms

AFP, Miranshah

Taliban insurgents have set tough terms for peace talks with Pakistan's government including the release of all imprisoned fighters and the withdrawal of troops from tribal areas, a militant source said yesterday.

The Taliban outlined their demands to a team of Islamist clerics who are holding talks with the government on the militants' behalf about ending a seven-year insurgency that has claimed thousands of lives.

Negotiating teams held a first meeting on Thursday, but the dozen conditions now laid down by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan will raise further doubts about the chances of success.

The chief negotiator representing the Taliban, Maulana Sami-ul-Haq, told reporters in the northwestern town of Akora Khattak the meeting had been "positive". The next round of talks with government negotiators would take place within two days, he said.



A Thai farmer carries bales of rice as he protests against the government's repeatedly delayed payments for rice submitted to the pledging scheme at the Government's temporary office in the permanent secretary for defence suburb of Bangkok yesterday.

Thai police arrest first protest leader

AFP, Bangkok

Thai police yesterday arrested an anti-government protest leader, their first such move after months of defiant rallies in Bangkok aimed at ousting Yingluck Shinawatra's beleaguered government.

Protest leaders have flouted arrest warrants and an emergency decree to deliver caustic daily speeches, lead marches, block roads and occupy government buildings in their bid to topple Yingluck's government.

Sontiyon Cheunruethainaitam was arrested yesterday morning at a hotel in Bangkok, according to the head of the Department of Special Investigation Tarit Pengdith.

"He was the first arrest for defying the state of emergency," he told AFP.

Authorities have repeatedly stated their reluctance to arrest protest leaders. They fear it could spark clashes with the crowd who are occupying key intersections in Bangkok for the fifth week of a self-styled "shutdown" -- albeit in diminishing numbers.

Throughout the three months of protests police have adopted defensive tactics, a move which analysts say is intended to avoid violence and the possibility of provoking a military coup.

Dozens of arrest warrants have been issued against leaders of the anti-government movement, who want to topple Yingluck and curb the influence of her divisive billionaire brother Thaksin on Thai politics.



Nepal elects new PM

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's fractious lawmakers elected veteran politician Sushil Koirala as prime minister yesterday, with the 75-year-old promising to steer through a long-delayed new constitution for the Himalayan nation within a year.

The silver-haired bachelor easily won a vote in the constituent assembly, which was elected last November in only the second national polls since the end of a civil war in 2006.

Koirala, from the family that dominates Nepal's oldest party the Nepali Congress, won 405 out of 553 votes cast after winning the support of the influential leftist Unified Marxist-Leninist at the weekend.

"We will deliver the constitution through agreement, unity and reconciliation," Koirala, who was once jailed over the hijacking of a plane in India, told reporters after the election.

"We would try to include all the parties in the process and would work to safeguard peace and democracy," said the partly Indian-educated politician, wearing his trademark black cap and glasses.

He earlier told the assembly that the impoverished nation would rely on its two giant neighbours, China to the north and India to the south, "as well as other friends to complete our responsibilities".

Since Nepal's first post-war elections in 2008, five prime ministers have served brief terms, the country has had no leader for long periods, and the constituent assembly has been perpetually deadlocked.

Iraq speaker targeted in blast

21 militants killed

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's parliament speaker narrowly escaped an attack in his hometown yesterday while 21 militants died when a car bomb they were readying mistakenly went off in renewed nationwide violence.

Foreign leaders have pressed the Shiite-led government to reach out to the disaffected Sunni minority to undermine support for militants, but Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has taken a hard line ahead of April elections.

A convoy carrying Parliament Speaker Osama al-Nujaifi yesterday, Iraq's most senior Sunni Arab politician, was hit by a roadside bomb in the main northern city of Mosul, his office said.

One of Nujaifi's bodyguards was wounded, a police captain and a medical source said, but the speaker himself escaped unharmed.

Mosul and surrounding Nineveh province is one of Iraq's most violent areas, with attacks regularly targeting security forces, government officials as well as civilians.

Also north of Baghdad, a car bomb mistakenly went off in a militant compound, killing 21 insurgents including a suicide bomber, an anti-Qaeda militia leader and a police officer said.

The group were filming a propaganda video of the would-be suicide attacker when a technical glitch set off the car bomb in the Jilam area south of Samarra, according to Majeed Ali, the head of the Sahwa militia force in the city, and a police officer.

Not guilty of child rape

Pleads French consular official in India

AFP, Bangalore

French consular official Pascal Mazurier pleaded not guilty yesterday to charges of raping his three-year-old daughter -- the case dating back to June 2012 -- when he appeared for a pre-trial hearing in a court in the city of Bangalore, a prosecutor said.

Sessions Court judge Shubha Gowdar formally framed the charges of rape during Mazurier's brief appearance after ruling last month that there was sufficient evidence for him to face trial.

The judge adjourned the case until February 15 when she will fix a date for the trial to start.

Mazurier, 40, was arrested in June 2012 on a complaint filed by his wife and spent four months in jail before being released on bail.

US, French presidents call for 'ambitious' climate change deal

AFP, Washington

The presidents of France and the United States issued a joint call yesterday for other nations to join them in seeking an "ambitious" agreement to curb climate change.

Presidents Barack Obama and Francois Hollande, writing in an article in the Washington Post and Le Monde, called for support "in pursuit of an ambitious and inclusive global agreement" to reduce greenhouse gas emissions "through concrete actions" at a climate conference in Paris in 2015.

Cooperation on a host of global issues -- which include the Syrian crisis, Iran's nuclear program, and security in Africa -- has resulted in France and the United States enjoying a "model" relationship, the presidents wrote.

The joint opinion piece comes as Hollande traveled to the United States yesterday for a state visit.

"Rooted in a friendship stretching back more than two centuries, our deepening partnership offers a model for international cooperation," the presidents wrote.



Barack Obama



Francois Hollande

"Transnational challenges cannot be met by any one nation alone. More nations must step forward and share the burden and costs of leadership."

Ties between the two countries have warmed considerably since chilling over France's refusal to support the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq under president George W. Bush.

"A decade ago, few would have imagined our countries working so closely together in so many ways. But in recent years our alliance has transformed," the presidents wrote.

The two countries "have been able to take our alliance to a new level because our interests and values are so closely aligned," they said.

Regarding climate change, even as the United States and France "reduce our own carbon emissions, we can expand the clean energy partnerships that create jobs and move us toward low-carbon growth. We can do more to help developing countries shift to low-carbon energy as well, and deal with rising seas and more intense storms," they wrote.