

NEWSIN brief

ETA to hand over arms

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

The Basque separatist group ETA is expected to take a historic step towards handing over weapons and bomb-making equipment used in its terror campaign for independence that has claimed more than 800 victims over decades. Sources in the northern Basque region of Spain and elsewhere yesterday said mediators would declare that ETA had already made significant moves in readying itself for giving up or disabling weapons and was

Flooding kills nearly 70 in Burundi

CNN ONLINE

At least 69 people, including children, have been killed in the central Africa nation of Burundi because of torrential rains, an aid group said Thursday. More than 180 people have been injured, the group said, adding that it would expect to see more casualties as rescue teams reach more of

Steve Jobs will appear on a stamp

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

The US Postal Service is developing a stamp featuring Apple co-founder Steve Jobs, to be printed in 2015. Jobs, who died in



2011, appears on a list of future stamp subjects obtained by the Washington Post alongside Elvis Presley, the Anniversary of the US coast guard, and the great spangled fritillary, a butterfly.

Presidential chopper crashes in Ecuador

AFP, Quito

A military helicopter assigned to the presidency crashed in southern Ecuador, killing three people, President Rafael Correa has announced. The Indian-made Dhruv helicopter was on a flight between Guayaquil and Quito when it crashed in the region of Chimborazo, a military spokesman said. The cause of the crash was

Turkey abolishes military tribunals

AFP, Ankara

Turkey's parliament passed a law yesterday abolishing specially appointed courts that have convicted hundreds of military officers for coup plotting. The conciliatory move toward the military comes as Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is grappling with a high-level corruption scandal.

Presidential palace attacked in Somalia

AFP, Mogadishu

Somalia's al-Qaeda-linked Shebab rebels launched a major suicide attack yesterday against the heavily-fortified presidential palace, home to the country's internationally-backed government, police and witnesses said.

A huge car bomb exploded at the perimeter of the central Mogadishu complex, and a group of around a dozen suicide attackers breached the Villa Somalia compound. Shebab rebels immediately claimed responsibility. The UN's special envoy to Somalia said the country's president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, had telephoned to say he was unharmed in the attack. An official source said Somalia's former deputy intelligence chief and a close aide to the prime minister, were among the dead.



Peace deal signed

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine's embattled leader signed a deal with the opposition yesterday in a bid to end the ex-Soviet country's worst crisis since independence after three days of carnage left nearly 100 protesters dead.

But President Viktor Yanukovych's dramatic decision to hold early elections and form a new unity government while granting amnesty for those involved in the violence was met with scepticism or even hostility by nearly 40,000 protesters who gathered on central Kiev's main square -- many of them frustrated the leader was not stepping down.

"Elections in December are not enough -- he has to leave now," said one demonstrator, 34-year-old Oleh Bukoyenko. Ukraine's parliament adopted a flurry of opposition-backed laws within hours of the deal's signing. They need the president's backing before entering into force.

One of the unexpected key votes was to amend a law that could see opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko freed from prison where she has been since just after the president took power in 2010.

The chamber also approved a call on the president to dismiss acting Interior Minister Vitaliy Zakharchenko -- a hate figure in the opposition who is blamed for ordering the police to open fire on unarmed protesters.

The new unity government to be formed would have the authority to reverse the inflammatory decision Yanukovych made in November to ditch a historic deal promising a path to EU membership in favour of closer ties to former master Russia.

But many protesters told AFP that the deal represented too little and did little to repair days of vicious bloodletting in which police used snipers and armoured vehicles against demonstrators who fought back with bats while wearing makeshift protection.

Kiev authorities have put the death toll from the past few days at 77.

But opposition medics said more than 60 protesters were shot dead by police on Thursday alone -- a toll that combined with the 28 victims on Tuesday put the final count at nearly 100 dead.

Life appeared to be returning to normal in much of Kiev as the city's vital metro network resumed service after being shut

UKRAINE UNITY DEAL

Signatories to form a national unity government within 10 days.

Constitutional reform, balancing the powers of the president and parliament, will start immediately and be completed in September 2014.

Presidential elections will be held no later than December 2014.

New electoral laws will be passed and a new Election Commission will be formed.

Investigation into recent acts of violence will be conducted.

Both parties will refrain from the use of violence.

down to keep protesters from reaching Independence Square on Tuesday night.

The peace deal was worked out after two days of intense mediation by the foreign ministers of European powers France and Germany along with Ukraine's cultural ally Poland -- acting on behalf of EU officials who had earlier imposed travel bans on Kiev leaders responsible for the violence.

The pact was signed in the presidential palace's Blue Hall by Yanukovych and top opposition leaders who included charismatic boxer turned lawmaker Vitali Klitschko.

But Russian President Vladimir Putin's representative pointedly missed the meeting and his name card was taken off the table at the signature ceremony.

The Russian stance underlined tensions between the West and Russia over Ukraine. Each side accused the other of exacerbating problems in a nation whose population is divided in pro-West and pro-Russian camps.

The US government welcomed the peace deal and commended the "courageous opposition leaders" for their compromise.

The United States and the European Union urged immediate implementation of the deal.

Rice farmers call off protest in Thailand

AFP, Ayutthaya

Thousands of angry Thai rice farmers called off a threat to descend on Bangkok's main airport yesterday in a rare reprieve for the embattled government after months of opposition street protests.

A convoy of tractor-riding farmers had planned to head to Suvarnabhumi Airport unless they received a promise of payment under a rice subsidy scheme that has become a political nightmare for the government.

But they stopped north of Bangkok and agreed to return home after apparently reaching a deal with Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's administration. Local media said they had been promised they would get their payments next week.

Thailand's tourist industry still has painful memories of 2008 when opposition protesters paralysed Bangkok's main airports, stranding thousands of travellers.

The rice subsidy scheme, which paid farmers up to 50 percent above market rates, helped to propel Yingluck to power in 2011 on a wave of support from supporters in the rural north and northeast.

But the flagship policy has now become a political liability with farmers demanding payment after the government ran short of cash to buy their pledged crops late last year.

"It's very hard for me and my family because this government owes me 350,000 baht (\$10,700)," said Virat Pennapa, 43, a rice farmer from the central province of Uthai Thani who was part of the convoy.

"I have to pay for fertiliser, labour and daily expenses," he said. "I don't know when I can go back home. It depends on when we win."

The scheme has left the kingdom with a mountain of unsold rice after Thailand lost its competitiveness on international markets.

Peace proposals unacceptable

Palestine says about Kerry's initiative

AFP, Ramallah

Ideas proposed by US Secretary of State John Kerry to Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas cannot "serve as the basis for a framework accord" with Israel, a Palestinian official said yesterday.

"The ideas proposed cannot be accepted by the Palestinian side as the basis for a framework accord between the Palestinians and Israel as they do not take into account the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people," he told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity, after Abbas and Kerry met in Paris this week.

"The Palestinian position explained to Mr Kerry is that the proposed ideas, particularly the insistences on recognition of the state of Israel as the Jewish nation-state, are unacceptable," the official said.

Proposals for the future of Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, which the Palestinians claim as the capital of the state, are "vague", the official added.

Abbas, the official said, "restated the Palestinian position and his vision of a solution based on United Nations resolutions and the positions of the Palestinian leadership and the Arab League."

Kerry has spent months trying to get the Israelis and the Palestinians to agree on a framework to guide talks towards a full peace treaty, but the negotiations have shown little sign of progress, with each side blaming the other.

US ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro said on Friday that he expected Palestinian recognition of Israel's Jewish character to be part of that framework.

The US State Department described the Paris meetings on Wednesday and Thursday as "constructive", and said Kerry and Abbas had agreed to stay in touch in the coming weeks.



Rebakah Brooks denies affair with Coulson

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

UK PHONE-HACKING TRIAL

Rebekah Brooks has told the Old Bailey she did not have a six-year relationship with Andy Coulson, David Cameron's former spin doctor, as she described how her personal life had been a "bit of a car crash for many years".

She also denied knowing anything about phone hacking while editing Britain's News of the World tabloid, as she took the stand for the first time in her trial.

Brooks is charged with conspiring in voicemail hacking, conspiring to bribe public officials and two counts of trying to cover up her alleged crimes, although she was cleared Thursday of a fifth charge of approving a payment for a photo of Prince William in a bikini.

Brooks, in the witness box at the phone-

Musharraf's plea for military trial rejected

AFP, Islamabad

A special court in Pakistan hearing treason charges against ex-ruler Pervez Musharraf rejected his plea yesterday for trial in a military court and set a date next month to indict him.

Lawyers of Musharraf had challenged the right of the civilian court in Islamabad to try the former army chief who appeared in person before judges for the first time on Tuesday.

The three-judge bench ruled that he was no longer in the army and that high treason can be tried exclusively in a special court.

The 70-year-old faces treason charges, which can carry the death penalty, over his imposition of a state of emergency in 2007 while he was president.

The judges set March 11 as the date to indict the former general, who was ordered to appear in person to hear the charges being read out against him.

Musharraf became the first former army chief to appear in the court on February 18 in a case seen as a test of civilian rule over the country's powerful army.



Rebekah Brooks



Andy Coulson

hacking trial for a second day on Friday, told the jury she was "incredibly close" to Coulson and described him as her "best friend" but said it was wrong of the prosecution to characterise their relationship as a six-year affair.

She also revealed that she could not have children herself, that IVF treatment had failed and her cousin was the surrogate mother of her two-year-old daughter Scarlett.

Brooks told the court that she had several periods of "physical intimacy" with Coulson, but the police and prosecution had misinterpreted a letter she had written to him declaring her love for him.

Brooks came close to tears as she revealed the intimate details of her relationship with Coulson and her former husband, the actor

Bhutan welcomes 'green cars'

AFP, Thimphu

The remote Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan signed a deal with Japanese auto giant Nissan yesterday to become the ultimate showcase for electric cars, taking advantage of its abundance of hydropower.

The announcement was made during a visit by Nissan chief executive Carlos Ghosn to Thimphu, the picturesque capital of Bhutan.

Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay said electric vehicles would help meet a target of zero emissions.

"An important part of that plan will be sustainable and environmentally-friendly zero emission transport," he added at a joint press conference with Ghosn.

"We don't want to rely on and we don't want to buy fossil fuel," he added.

To mark the announcement which came on the birthday of Bhutan's revered king, Nissan said it was donating two of its Leaf electric vehicles to the government.

It will also supply Bhutan's pool of government cars and fleet of taxis with the same model for an undisclosed price.

Nissan plans to set up a network of charging stations across Thimphu, which industry experts see as vital in persuading motorists to shell out for an electric vehicle.

Wedge between India and China, the 'Land of the Thunder Dragon' is famed for its Gross National Happiness development model that specifically takes into account the environment as well as psychological well-being.

Landlocked and mountainous, Bhutan is teeming with rivers and waterfalls that enable it to operate four hydroelectric plants with a combined capacity of 1,400 megawatts -- equivalent to a powerful nuclear reactor.

Most of the electricity is sold on to India but Bhutan also has to import traditional fossil fuels to meet the needs of its motorists.

Ghosn said the deal would make Bhutan an environmental role model, predicting that the government investment would encourage consumers.

Tobgay, who came to power after winning Bhutan's second ever elections last July, sees electric cars as a way of becoming more self-sufficient and of demonstrating the rapid development of a nation that only introduced television in 1999.



BITTERSWEET REUNION

Kim Bong-Hak, right, of South Korea is fed by his sister Kim Pong-Oak of North Korea during a meeting at a venue in North Korean resort area of Mount Kumgang on the second day of family reunions between North and South Korea, yesterday. Around 80 elderly South Koreans met privately with North Korean relatives they haven't seen for 60 years, on the second day of a highly charged reunion for families divided by the Korean War. Tens of millions of people were displaced by the sweep of the 1950-53 Korean War. The chaos and devastation separated brothers and sisters, parents and children, husbands and wives.

PHOTO: AFP

Matteo Renzi formally accepts Italy PM post

AFP, Rome

Italy's Matteo Renzi formally accepted the role of prime minister yesterday, kicking off hopes for a revival in the eurozone's third-largest economy, which has been damaged by a deep recession.

"I am aware of the responsibility, delicacy and extraordinary honour which comes from creating a government capable of bringing hope," the former mayor of Florence told journalists after nearly three hours of talks with Italian President Giorgio Napolitano.

"I will do everything possible to deserve the trust of deputies, senators and millions of Italians who are waiting for this government to provide concrete answers," he said.

The 39-year-old has become Italy's youngest-ever prime minister

at the head of a coalition government, after helping engineering the downfall of his predecessor Enrico Letta, blamed for failing to carry out promised reforms.

Renzi unveiled his new 16-strong cabinet, which will be sworn in on Saturday, before the government goes to a vote in parliament next week.

The key post of finance minister has gone to Pier Carlo Padoa-Schioppa, the chief economist at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

The interior ministry remains in the hands of Angelino Alfano, the head of the New Centre Right (NCR) party, Renzi's coalition partner, while the post of foreign minister has gone to Federica Mogherini, a specialist on European relations.

Russia arrests 200 after protest verdict

AFP, Moscow

Two hundred people were arrested yesterday near a Moscow court as it convicted eight defendants of mass riots and attacking police at a protest against President Vladimir Putin, a case widely seen as a crack-down on dissent.

The eight defendants were found guilty of participating in mass riots and hitting policemen at an opposition rally the day before Putin returned to the Kremlin for a third term in 2012.

Around 200 people were detained over several hours, a spokesman for Moscow police said. An AFP correspondent saw dozens being detained for shouting or even just carrying balloons.

INDIAN DEATHS IN QATAR Amnesty seeks 'more detail'

BBC ONLINE

Human rights group Amnesty International has urged India to give "more transparent information" about the deaths of Indian workers in Qatar, the host nation for the 2022 World Cup.

India revealed on Monday that 455 Indians had died in 2012 and 2013, prompting concerns from labour groups.

It said the "overwhelming number" of deaths were due to natural causes. Indian and Qatari officials insist there is nothing abnormal about the death rate given the population there.

About 500,000 Indians live in Qatar and India's external affairs ministry said the "figures for the number of Indian deaths in the last five years remain consistent" and are not "in any way attributable to any one cause or the other".

Nevertheless Amnesty International said the government should provide more details about the deaths.

Following a freedom of information request by the AFP news agency, the Indian embassy in Doha published figures showing that 237 Indian workers had died in Qatar in 2012 and 218 in the first 11 months of 2013. On average, about 20 died per month, peaking at 27 in August.