

NEWSIN brief

N Korea rejects UN rights report

AFP, Seoul

North Korea on Friday "categorically" rejected a UN report on its human rights record, accusing it of being a "sheer fabrication" invented by the United States and its allies. A UN report released Monday said North Korea's leaders should be brought before an international court for a litany of crimes against humanity.

Iceland to drop EU membership bid

AFP, Reykjavik

Iceland will drop its EU membership bid without holding a referendum that was earlier promised by the two ruling Euro-sceptic parties, the government said Friday. The centrist Progress Party and the right-wing Independence Party agreed on a draft bill asking the government "to retract the application for membership of the European Union", which the island nation presented in 2010.

US bans Indian 'bidis'

AFP, Washington

US regulators on Friday banned four types of small cigarettes known as bidis made by an Indian company, marking the Food and Drug Administration's first-ever oversight action against a tobacco product. Bidis are small, hand-rolled cigarettes that contain tobacco wrapped in leaves from a tendu tree, and may come in various flavors. US authorities say bidis contain levels of nicotine, tar and carbon monoxide several times greater than normal cigarettes.

Pak prisoner dies in Indian jail

AFP, Srinagar

A Pakistani prisoner who was arrested by authorities in India for trespassing more than two years ago has been found hanging inside a jail in Indian Kashmir, an official said yesterday. Showkat Ali, 42, a resident of Sialkot in Pakistan, had been lodged in a jail in Amphala, about 300 kilometres from the region's main city of Srinagar, since December 2011. He was arrested on charges of illegally crossing the de facto border between the two rival countries.

Sacking of 1,000 cops 'routine': Turkey

AFP, Istanbul

Turkey's interior ministry said 1,000 police officers have been removed in the wake of a major corruption probe against key government allies but said these were only "routine" re-assignments. The government has embarked on a mass purge of police and prosecutors in the wake of the probe launched on December 17 targeting several members of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's inner circle.



A man suspected of being a member of pro-government forces is forced by protestors to pay his respects to a mourning place of a victim killed in the recent clashes in Kiev, yesterday. Inset, Ukraine's jailed pro-Western opposition icon Yulia Tymoshenko leaving the hospital in Kharkiv. (Story on page 16)

PHOTO: AFP

UNSC adopts Syria aid resolution

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council yesterday adopted a unanimous but non-binding resolution calling for humanitarian aid convoys to be allowed access across war-torn Syria, but diplomats immediately voiced doubt about its effectiveness.

Syria's staunch ally Russia, with support from China, has blocked three previous resolutions aimed at pressuring the Damascus regime since the crisis began in March 2011, with an estimated half of all Syrians urgently awaiting immediate help.

But Moscow and Beijing did not do so this time, sending a strong message to President Assad.

OPCW SPLIT ON ACTION
The executive council of the Hague-based watchdog tasked with destroying Syria's chemical weapons arsenal failed to reach agreement on what to do about Damascus's delays, because of divisions between Syria's allies and the West.

Sources close to the talks at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) said China, Iran and Russia wanted flexibility over the timetable, but the US and the EU insisted on being strict. So far, just 11 percent of Syria's 1,200 tonnes of chemicals have been taken out of the country.

Assange's ghost writer breaks silence



THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

The ghostwriter who collaborated with Julian Assange on his abortive 2011 autobiography has broken his silence to describe his months working with the WikiLeaks founder, which culminated in the acrimonious collapse of one of the highest profile and most lucrative book deals of recent times.

Three years after he was first introduced to the Australian, Andrew O'Hagan has now spoken out about how he worked with Assange on the book, which he said the publishers Canongate had sold in more than 40 countries for a total of US\$2.5m before the deal dramatically imploded. In a lengthy, nuanced essay for the London Review of Books, a version of which he delivered in a lecture in London on Friday, O'Hagan describes working with a mercurial character who was, by turns, passionate, funny, lazy, courageous, vain, paranoid, moral and manipulative.

The book deal ultimately collapsed, O'Hagan writes, because "the man who put himself in charge of disclosing the world's secrets simply couldn't bear his own. The story of his life mortified him and sent him scurrying for excuses. He didn't want to do the book. He hadn't from the beginning."

OBAMA- DALAI LAMA MEET

China fumes over US 'meddling'

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday accused the United States of meddling in its domestic affairs after President Barack Obama met the Dalai Lama at the White House, and said it is up to Washington to take steps to avoid further damaging ties.

"The US seriously interfered in China's internal affairs by allowing the Dalai's visit to the United States and arranging the meetings with US leaders," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang said in a statement.

"We urge the US to take China's concerns seriously, stop tolerance and support of anti-China separatist forces, cease interfering in China's internal affairs and immediately take measures to eliminate its baneful influence to avoid further impairment to China-US relations."

China had warned on Friday after news broke of the planned meeting that an encounter between Obama and the Dalai Lama would damage relations between Washington and Beijing, and urged the US to cancel it.

Beijing considers Tibet an integral part of

its territory and regards the Dalai Lama as a separatist. The Dalai Lama has lived in exile in India since 1959 after a failed uprising against Chinese rule.

The meeting went ahead, however, with Obama on Friday offering his "strong support" for the protection of Tibetans' human rights in China.

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui late Friday summoned the charge d'affaires at the US embassy to protest the meeting, the ministry said in a separate statement.

"China expressed strong indignation and firm opposition" to the "erroneous acts" of the US in interfering in China's internal issues, the ministry quoted Zhang as saying.

"Tibetan issues fall purely into the domestic affairs of China," Zhang said. "The US has no right to interfere."

The meeting with the Dalai Lama "will seriously sabotage China-US relations and surely impair the interests of the US itself," he said.

"The US must take concrete actions to win the trust of the Chinese government and its people."

Morsi urges 'revolt' from caged dock

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's deposed Islamist president Mohamed Morsi called on his followers yesterday to continue their "peaceful revolution", during his trial on charges related to jailbreaks and attacks on police.

Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood still stages diminishing weekly protests despite a crackdown that has killed more than 1,400 people since the military overthrew him in July. The court adjourned the trial, one of four for Morsi, until February 24.

A defiant Morsi had interrupted past hearings to declare that he was still Egypt's president.

"The revolution of the people won't stop -- continue your peaceful revolution," he said from the dock yesterday.

THAI POLITICAL CRISIS

Business linked to PM targeted

REUTERS, Bangkok

Some Thai anti-government protesters followed the advice of their leader yesterday, shunning products of firms linked to the family of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and handing back cellphone SIM cards.

The protesters have blocked main Bangkok intersections with tents, tyres and sandbags, seeking to unseat Yingluck and halt the influence of her billionaire brother, Thaksin Shinawatra, an ousted former premier regarded by many as the real power behind the government.

This week, they targeted businesses linked, or once linked, to the Shinawatra family, sending stock prices tumbling and on Saturday some answered protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban's call to return their SIM cards belonging to mobile phone company Advanced Info Service Pcl (AIS).

The company promptly sent a text message to clients saying it no longer had any connection with the Shinawatra family.

Aunjit Wongsampan, 65, lined up in central Bangkok to hand in her SIM card.

"I think the signal is poor and I am changing it because the company is too wealthy," she told Reuters.

When shown the company's text message, she said: "I don't believe them any more. I have made my choice."

Yingluck's supporters denounced the targeting of business when the protests have already taken a toll on the economy, on tourism in particular, with arrivals in Bangkok sharply down.



THE FINAL SPLIT

The pictures show the emotions that no language has the power to depict. North and South Korean families held a final farewell after they were reunited for the first time since war divided them 60 years ago, knowing they will almost certainly never be together again. In perhaps the most traumatic moment of the emotionally-charged event, 80 elderly South Koreans and their 174 Northern relatives were separated, many at first refusing to let go of their loved ones' hands. The chaos and devastation separated brothers and sisters, parents and children, husbands and wives.

PHOTO: AFP

Out of a Bollywood script

Indian rickshaw-puller kills US wife, sets self on fire

AFP, Agra

An Indian rickshaw-puller stabbed his American wife to death before setting himself ablaze, police said yesterday, in a violent end to a whirlwind romance scripted in the backdrop of the Taj Mahal.

Bunty Sharma, 32, killed 35-year-old Arian Willinger from Pennsylvania on a deserted roadside in the tourist city of Agra after the couple had a fight late Thursday, senior police officer Shalabh Mathur told AFP.

Sharma later committed suicide by setting himself on fire, he said.

The couple first met when Willinger visited Agra last July with her friends to see the Taj Mahal, the world famous monument of love. Romance blossomed, they got married and began living together but



soon had a falling out over suspicions of infidelity.

Sharma accused her "of smoking too much, talking to other men and not staying at home", the Indian Express reported.

The US embassy in New Delhi refused to comment on the case but said the victim's has been informed about her death.

The case grabbed headlines yesterday with local newspapers offering details of their Bollywood-style romance.

Italy's youngest-ever PM Renzi sworn in

AFP, Rome

Italy's youngest-ever prime minister Matteo Renzi and his fresh-faced cabinet were sworn in yesterday, amid widespread scepticism that the new government has the political maturity to tackle the country's formidable challenges.

The former mayor of Florence was accompanied by his wife and three children -- dressed in the colours of the Italian flag -- to the formal ceremony in Italy's presidential palace, and smiled widely as he watched his new team sworn in by President Giorgio Napolitano.

The centre-left leader takes over



the reins of the eurozone's third largest economy in a period of increasing frustration among ordinary Italians hard hit by a deep recession and weary of broken political promises.

In his 16-strong cabinet, half of the new ministers are women and -- with an average age of 47.8 years -- it is the youngest government in Italy's history.

Renzi is "gambling on freshness, newness and energy", but "doubts must be raised over the government's experience and ability to have a bearing on the worst post-war economic crisis Italy has known," said political watcher Mario Calabresi in La Stampa daily.



PHOTO: AFP

A protester lights a barricade next to a poster of Venezuelan late President Hugo Chavez during an anti-government demo, in Caracas on Friday. The death toll from escalating anti-government protests in Venezuela jumped to nine, as President Nicolas Maduro's leftist administration threatened to cut off fuel to areas "under fascist siege."