

NEWS IN brief

Egypt's Sisi to stay on as defence minister

REUTERS, Cairo



Egyptian army chief Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi will keep his post as defence minister in a new government, an official source said yesterday, quashing speculation he was about to announce a widely expected bid for the presidency.

Sisi is tipped to win the upcoming presidential election but has yet to announce his candidacy. He must vacate the post of defence minister in order to run. The source said he would likely keep that job until an election.

Maduro seeks peace meet to end crisis

AFP, Caracas

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro sought to hold a "peace conference" yesterday in an attempt to end three weeks of at times deadly anti-government protests in the oil-rich but deeply divided country.

The protests have left at least 14 people dead and raised alarm in South America, the US and Europe. The country with the world's largest proven oil reserves has been rocked since February 4 by protests over rampant crime, runaway inflation, corruption and other woes.

Lee Rigby killer gets life sentence

AFP, London

A Muslim extremist was jailed for life and his accomplice for 45 years on yesterday for hacking British soldier Lee Rigby to death on a London street in a "terrorism" killing that shocked the nation.

Michael Adebolajo, 29, and Michael Adebowale, 22, were dragged from the dock in the Old Bailey court in London after they started screaming "Allahu akbar" at the judge during the sentencing. The pair of Muslim converts were found guilty in December of ploughing into Rigby with a car before attacking him with knives in broad daylight outside his barracks in Woolwich.

SUBMARINE ACCIDENT Indian Navy chief resigns

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Indian Navy chief Admiral D K Joshi resigned yesterday in the wake of an accident in a submarine off the coast of Mumbai in which two sailors went missing and another seven were injured.

Joshi's resignation has been accepted by the Defence Ministry and Vice Admiral Robin Dhawan will be the acting Navy chief.

Seven sailors suffered smoke inhalation and were



airlifted from the submarine for treatment. Navy spokesman Rahul Sinha said, without disclosing details of the incident.

The incident comes after 18 naval crew members were killed in August last year when Russian-built INS Sindhurakshak exploded in flames and sank in a military shipyard in Mumbai.

The disaster was thought to be the Indian Navy's worst since the sinking of a frigate by a Pakistani submarine during a war in 1971.

Last month, another submarine had run aground while returning to Mumbai harbour. No loss of life or damage was reported.

SYRIA CIVIL WAR

Army ambush kills 175 rebels

AFP, Damascus

More than 170 Islamist rebel fighters, including Saudis, Qataris and Chechens, were killed yesterday in a Syrian army ambush near Damascus, state news agency SANA reported.

The attack, apparently the deadliest against the rebels for months, took place in Eastern Ghouta, a key rebel stronghold targeted in a chemical attack in August 2013 that killed hundreds of people.

SANA said an army unit "spotted Al-Nusra Front (jihadist) and Liwa al-Islam (Islamist) terrorists" near Damascus, and "killed 175 of them and wounded several others."

Saudis, Qataris and Chechens were among the dead, it said.

State television had earlier reported "dozens" killed, mostly non-Syrians, in a "well-organised ambush" following a tip-off.

The army also seized the rebels' weapons, the broadcaster said, following the regime's practice of using the term "terrorists" to refer to the armed opposition.

Al-Nusra Front is al-Qaeda's official affiliate in Syria and is committed to the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad and the establishment of an Islamic state.

A government security source said most of the fighters were Jordanians or Saudis, and that they had crossed over into Syria from Jordan earlier the same day.

The Otaybeh area has seen several army ambushes in past months. Syria's war has since March 2011 killed more than 140,000 people and forced millions more to flee.



A picture released by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency shows residents of Syria's besieged Yarmuk Palestinian refugee camp, south of Damascus, crowding a destroyed street during a food distribution led by the UN agency yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

US threatens to pull out all Afghan troops

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama told Hamid Karzai on Tuesday that he is now planning for a full US troop withdrawal because of the Afghan leader's repeated refusal to sign a security pact.

But in a rare telephone call with President Karzai, Obama also held out the possibility of agreeing a post-2014 training and anti-terror mission with the next government in Kabul.

The US threat was the latest twist in a long political struggle with Karzai, who appears intent on infuriating Washington until the day he leaves office, sometime after elections in April.

The Obama administration said its preferred option is to leave behind a residual US force when its combat teams depart Afghanistan after America's longest war at the end of this year.

But it will not do so without legal protections enshrined in the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) agreed between the two governments, which Karzai will not endorse.

The White House had previously warned that Karzai's intransigence on a deal painstakingly negotiated last year meant it had no choice but to mull the "zero option."

The statement said Obama was reserving the possibility of concluding a BSA with Afghanistan later this year should the new government be willing.

It was the most concrete sign yet that Washington could wait out the Afghan electoral process before making a final decision on a future role in Afghanistan.

It's not East-West battle

Say US, Britain
AFP, Washington

The United States and Britain said that Ukraine should not be a battleground between East and West and voiced support for the country after protests that ousted pro-Moscow president Viktor Yanukovich was toppled as president of Ukraine.

World powers are seeking to ease tensions over Ukraine as the interim authorities in Kiev grapple with the threat of economic collapse and separation.

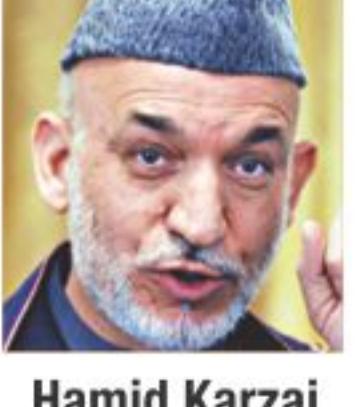
British Foreign Secretary William Hague, after talks with his American counterpart John Kerry, backed Ukraine's territorial integrity, with fears the nation -- which has strong links to Russia -- could be torn apart.

"This is not a zero-sum game, it is not a West versus East," said Kerry after the two men met at the State Department.

"This is about the people of Ukraine and Ukrainians making their choice about their future," he added.



Barack Obama



Hamid Karzai

Ukraine boiling

Tensions high as Putin puts Russian troops on alert

REUTERS, kiev

President Vladimir Putin put Russian combat troops on high alert for a drill yesterday, the Kremlin's most powerful gesture yet after days of sabre rattling since its ally Viktor Yanukovich was toppled as president of Ukraine.

Thousands of ethnic Russians, who form the majority in Ukraine's Crimea region, demonstrated for independence for the peninsula that hosts part of Moscow's Black Sea Fleet. They scuffled with rival demonstrators, mainly from the Tatar minority, who support the new authorities in Kiev.

With the political turmoil hammering Ukraine's economy, the hryvnia currency tumbled 4 percent yesterday, with ripples spreading to Russia where the rouble fell to five-year lows and bank shares took a hit.

Moscow denounced what it described as the rise of "nationalist and neo-fascist sentiment" in the country's mainly Ukrainian-speaking western areas, where it said Russian speakers were being deprived of rights. It has repeatedly expressed concern for the safety of Russian citizens in Ukraine.

"In accordance with an order from the president of the Russian Federation, forces of the Western Military District were put on alert at 1400 (1000 GMT) today," Interfax news agency quoted Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu as saying.

Since Yanukovich's downfall on Saturday, all eyes have been on Putin, who ordered an invasion of neighbouring Georgia in 2008 to protect two self-declared independent regions with many ethnic Russians, which he then recognised as independent states.

Any military action in Ukraine, a country of 46 million

people that has close ties with European powers and the United States, would be far more serious - arguably the closest the West and Russia have come to outright confrontation since the Cold War.

Ukraine's new pro-Western leaders pledged to unveil a unity cabinet yesterday after disbanding the feared riot police as they sought to build confidence in the splintered and economically ravaged ex-Soviet state.

The International Monetary Fund has said it is prepared to send a team of negotiators to Kiev, but a government must first be formed there and request the aid. US Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, visiting Kiev, said American financial experts were already in the country looking for ways to help.

Yanukovich fled his luxurious palace on the outskirts of Kiev on Friday night after days of violence in which scores of his countrymen were killed, including demonstrators shot dead by police snipers from rooftops.

His downfall, three months after he abruptly turned his back on a free trade pact with the European Union to seek closer ties with Russia, has infuriated Moscow, which describes the new authorities as extremists who seized power through force with the aid of Western powers.

Ukraine has suffered an identity crisis throughout two decades of independence from the Soviet Union. With borders drawn by Bolshevik commissars, it is split between a largely Ukrainian-speaking west, including areas annexed by the Soviets from Austria and Poland, and eastern provinces where Russian is spoken, mainly Russian territory since the middle ages.

AFGHAN'S PROTEST TALIBAN

Afghan activists chant slogans condemning the killing of 21 Afghan National Army soldiers during a demonstration in Kabul yesterday. The massacre in Kunar triggered widespread patriotic tributes to Afghanistan's fledgling security forces as they take over responsibility for crushing the Taliban's 13-year insurgency.

PHOTO: AFP

'Lanka stepping up repression'

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka has instilled a "climate of fear" as it intensifies its repression of critics in the build-up to Colombo's expected censure by the UN's Human Rights Council, Amnesty International said yesterday.

In a new report, the London-based advocacy group documented the cases of several human rights defenders who had been targeted for harassment and surveillance by the Sri Lankan regime, including death threats.

"The pattern of harassment, surveillance and attacks against those opposing the Sri Lankan authorities is deeply disturbing and shows no sign of letting up," said Polly Truscott, Amnesty deputy director for the Asia-Pacific region.

"Repression usually intensifies whenever Sri Lanka's human rights situation is in focus internationally, something we are already seeing ahead of the UN Human Rights Council next month."

In its 16-page report, Amnesty detailed the intimidation against the prominent rights activist Nimalka Fernando, including a state radio broadcast that called for her "elimination".

It added that Colombo had deported several foreign visitors for allegedly participating in human rights-related meetings.

The UN rights chief Navi Pillay has already asked member states to order an international investigation into allegations that Sri Lankan forces killed up to 40,000 civilians in the final stages of their battle



Pakistan to press ahead with Taliban offensive

Unveils first ever counter-terror policy

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday vowed to press on with deadly air attacks on Taliban militants as it unveiled its first ever counter-terrorism policy after battling a homegrown Islamist insurgency for a decade.

Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan announced the "national security policy" in parliament a day after it was approved by the cabinet, ending years of waiting for a set of unified rules of engagement against terror.

Every act of violence by militants will in future be met with retaliation against their bases under the new policy. The move comes as talks between the government and the Taliban that began earlier this month have stalled following the killing of 23 soldiers held by the militants.

The policy document is 100 pages long and is split into three parts, one of which would remain secret, said the minister.

Commenting on the status of the dialogue between the government and Taliban representatives, Khan said talks have been put on hold but would "resume anytime soon and both negotiations and targeted strikes will go hand in hand."

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India SC orders arrest of Sahara group boss

AFP, New Delhi

India's top court yesterday ordered the arrest of the head of the giant Sahara business group for failing to appear in a case involving repayment of billions of dollars illegally collected from small investors.

The Supreme Court issued the order after Subrata Roy's lawyer said the flamboyant billionaire could not appear because his elderly mother was ill, the latest twist in the 18-month-long case.

"The arms of this court are very long. We can get him, we are issuing a warrant against him," said Judge K S Radhakrishnan, rejecting the lawyer's argument and ordering Roy to appear on March 4.

On Tuesday the court rejected Roy's request for an exemption from appearing in person over delays in repaying money collected from

rural savers through bond sales.

Sahara raised around 200 billion rupees from millions of savers in a process judged by authorities in 2012 to be against the law.

The court then ordered the group to hand over money to the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), the securities regulator, which is overseeing the repayment process.

In February last year Sebi ordered the bank accounts of two of Sahara's companies to be frozen.

During the hearing on Tuesday, the court said Sebi could go ahead with sales of Sahara properties to recover some of the money.

Roy's Sahara empire extends from a stake in a Formula 1 racing team to a sprawling Indian luxury township, and once included the iconic New York Plaza Hotel.

ODDLY enough

Couple finds \$10m while walking their dog

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A couple from northern California were walking their dog when they discovered \$10million in gold coins.

The unnamed couple found 1,427 rare, mint-condition gold coins buried in the shadow of an old tree on their property, NBC News reported.

Although the face value of the gold pieces only adds up to about \$27,000, some of them are so rare that coin experts say they could fetch nearly \$1 million apiece.

"I don't like to say once-in-a-lifetime for anything, but you don't get to handle a treasure like this, ever," veteran numismatist Don

