

NEWS IN brief

Police fire water cannon at Ankara protesters

Turkish police fired water cannon at protesters in the capital Ankara yesterday...

Election posters fill Baghdad as campaign starts

Campaigning for Iraq's April 30 general election opened yesterday...

Lebanon army deploys in Tripoli

Lebanese troops backed by helicopters deployed in strength in Tripoli yesterday...

Kuwait slams US charge of funding jihadists

Kuwait's government has criticised a senior US official for having accused a minister of the Gulf state of funding jihadist fighters in Syria...

One dead in gun attack on Thai protesters

A Thai anti-government protester was shot dead and several others wounded yesterday when their convoy was attacked on a busy expressway...

Kerry to return to Mideast in bid to save peace talks

AFP, Jerusalem

Washington's top diplomat wrapped up a lightning visit to Israel yesterday but was to return within 24 hours as speculation grew that a jailed US-Israeli spy may be key to saving peace talks.

But as US Secretary of State John Kerry departed, Israel reissued a call for tenders for hundreds of settler homes in annexed east Jerusalem...

After flying in from Paris on Monday evening, Kerry met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for two hours before entering talks with Palestinian negotiators at his Jerusalem hotel.

Early yesterday, he held a second two-hour meeting with Netanyahu, with sources close to the talks saying they discussed a deal to free spy Jonathan Pollard as a way of breaking the logjam.

US peace efforts are teetering on the brink of collapse after Israel refused to free a fourth and final group of 26 veteran Palestinian prisoners which would have completed an agreement that brought the sides back to negotiations last July.

Furious Palestinian officials have warned that unless Israel changes its stance on the prisoner releases, they will break off negotiations, which are due to end on April 29 in any case.

And in another move likely to infuriate the Palestinians and put any continuation of talks in jeopardy, Israel reissued tenders for 708 homes in Gilo, a settlement neighbourhood of Arab east Jerusalem.

US efforts are currently focused on getting the parties to agree an extension to the end of the year.

The Palestinians have demanded a freeze on all settlement

construction, including in east Jerusalem. Kerry will return to the region today, heading for the West Bank administrative centre of Ramallah to meet Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters travelling with him.

Separate sources close to the negotiating teams confirmed Washington is considering a proposal to release Jonathan Pollard.

Pollard was arrested in Washington in 1985 and sentenced to life imprisonment for spying on America on Israel's behalf.

"The emerging deal... contains the following elements: the release of Jonathan Pollard before the Passover holiday (in mid April) and the extension of the negotiations with the Palestinians into 2015," one of the sources told AFP.

He said the fourth batch of prisoners would be freed -- "including Israeli Arabs" -- and Israel would also agree to free another 400 security prisoners not involved in deadly anti-Israeli attacks.

There was no immediate comment from the Americans. On Monday, Psaki had refused to be drawn on the issue.

US officials insist things are moving, saying only that there are a lot of complex pieces to put in place.

On Monday, the Palestinians gave Kerry a 24-hour deadline to come up with a solution to the prisoner row, warning failure to do so would see them turning to UN bodies to press their claims for statehood.

Palestinian negotiators say they will only agree to extend the talks if Israel frees another 1,000 prisoners, including political heavyweights, the sick, and women and children.



US ambassador to India resigns

REUTERS

The US ambassador to India has resigned following a row over the arrest of a junior Indian diplomat in New York that pushed relations between the world's biggest democracies to their lowest ebb in more than a decade.

US State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf denied on Monday that Nancy Powell's resignation was related to ongoing tensions after the December arrest and subsequent strip search of the Indian diplomat, Devyani Khobragade.

But analysts said it was clear the position of Powell, a career diplomat who has held several postings in South Asia and became the ambassador to India in 2012, had become untenable as a result of the affair.

The United States sees India as a natural ally on a range of issues and a potential counterbalance to China in Asia. In 2010, President Barack Obama declared that the US-Indian relationship would be "one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century."

Trade in goods was \$63.7 billion last year, and US Vice President Joseph Biden last year called for that to grow to half a trillion dollars in five years.

But trade relations were deteriorating even before the diplomatic row and in India's eyes, Powell's tenure never recovered from Khobragade's treatment. India took retaliatory measures against the US embassy, including removing the ambassador's exemption from airport security searches.

Many Indian officials felt Powell had mishandled the case, which was related to the low wages that Khobragade paid a domestic worker. Both the Indian government and Narendra Modi, the opposition candidate who is favourite to become India's next prime minister after elections that end in May, saw the arrest as US hypocrisy and arrogance.

In response, India clamped down on alleged legal infractions by the embassy.

CRIMEA CRISIS

Ukraine moves to disarm protest groups

Ukraine's parliament yesterday met a key demand of both Russia and the West by voting to disarm self-defence groups that sprang up during months of deadly protests against Kiev's pro-Kremlin regime.

The decision came in the wake of a nighttime police raid on the central Kiev hotel headquarters of a far right nationalist organisation that was instrumental in the February rise to power of a new team of pro-European leaders who are seeking to end decades of Russian dominance over the ex-Soviet state.

Balaclava-clad members of Pravy Sektor (Right Sector) still roam the barricade-clogged capital with clubs in hand -- an ominous presence Russia has used in its campaign to delegitimise Ukraine's new authorities.

But the culturally splintered nation of 46 million has also seen armed Slavicide groups such as Oplot (Bastion) emerge in heavily Russified eastern regions that are looking at the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea with envy and hoping to break their own ties with Kiev.

Agitated lawmakers representing both Russian and Ukrainian speakers unanimously agreed yesterday that it was time for the police to break up these "armed formations" and reestablish a semblance of stability after four months of unrest.

"The Ukrainian people are demanding order," acting president Oleksandr Turchynov said ahead of the 256-0 vote.

"Those who carry arms -- besides the police, the security services and the national guard -- are saboteurs who are working against the country."

A top member of Pravy Sektor later told AFP that his group intended to keep the weapons it has legally register but could give up those it seized during protests from the fallen government's police force.

No 'quick' fix in Crimea crisis: German FM

Germany's foreign minister said yesterday that he saw no quick solution to the crisis over Russia's annexation of Crimea, nor the likelihood of Ukraine joining NATO.

"We can't promise we'll be in a position to resolve this conflict in the short term," Frank-Walter Steinmeier told reporters, with his French and Polish counterparts following their talks as part of the so-called Weimar

Putin to look into Tatar rehabilitation

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday promised a top Tatar official in Russia he would consider rehabilitation for the Crimean Tatars, a painful issue for a people deported under Stalin.

Putin made the comment in a meeting with Rustam Minnikhanov, the president of the Russian republic of Tatarstan on the Volga which is thousands of kilometres from Crimea but whose Tatar population are close ethnic kin of the

NATO sees no Russian troop pullout

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen yesterday said he could not confirm the withdrawal of Russian troops from near the Ukrainian border as announced by the Kremlin.

Ukraine and the United States have accused Russia of massing thousands of troops near the border and have expressed concern that Moscow intends to seize southeastern parts of Ukraine that are home to large populations of ethnic Russians, following the

Jolie to co-host rape summit

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Angelina Jolie has said she hopes a global summit on sexual violence she will co-host in London with the UK government will bring lasting change to global peacekeeping and war crimes prosecutions, deterring the use of mass rape as a weapon in future conflicts.

The four-day summit, beginning on 10 June, will bring together governments from 141 countries to discuss how to improve and standardise the investigation of large scale sexual violence in wartime, to bring an end a culture of impunity that has severely limited prosecutions up to now.

Speaking to The Guardian during a visit to Bosnia, Jolie said: "I would hope that years down the line when war breaks out, people who are considering raping a man, woman or child would be very aware of the consequences of their actions, and that a woman crossing a checkpoint would be aware there was someone collecting evidence and that evidence would have a... result for her."

"When that begins to happen on masse, then things will change. That's why it's important that this effort isn't just one

single [approach]. We are working with everyone who has worked on this issue for years, with every NGO and every government, to assist these people on all fronts."

Jolie visited Bosnia at the end of last week with Britain's foreign secretary, William Hague, as part of a two-year partnership aimed at preventing sexual violence in conflict. In the course of the trip she spoke in private to several women survivors of the 1995 massacre in Srebrenica, where the slaughter of 8,000 Muslim men and boys has overshadowed another crime against humanity committed at the same time, the systematic rape of women and girls.

The meeting with the Srebrenica women took place in a disused battery factory where in July 1995, thousands of Bosnian Muslims sought the shelter of Dutch UN peacekeepers. The UN promise of protection proved hollow and the factory is now echoing and empty apart from a sombre memorial -- two black boxes each as big as a house. In a cemetery outside a stone monument records the names of the 8,000 men and boys slaughtered by General Ratko Mladic's Serb army.



'No death penalty for Rajiv Gandhi's killers'

TNN, New Delhi

The Indian Supreme Court on yesterday dismissed Centre's petition seeking review of judgment commuting death penalty to life imprisonment of Rajiv Gandhi assassination case convicts Murugan, Santhan and Perarivalan.

In a short order dismissing Centre's review petition, a three-judge bench headed by CJI said, "we find no merit in the review petition." "We have carefully gone through the review petition and the connected papers. We find no merit in the review petition and the same is accordingly dismissed," a bench of Chief Justice P Sathasivam and justices Ranjan Gogoi and SK Singh said.

Guinea's Ebola victims wait for death

AFP, Gueckedou

Isolated from the outside world in a medical centre in Ebola-hit southern Guinea, victims of one of the deadliest viruses known to mankind wait listlessly for the merciful release of death.

The makeshift clinic in Gueckedou, a market city of 220,000 people near the Liberia and Sierra Leone borders, is on the front line of Guinea's increasingly desperate struggle to contain one of the worst outbreaks of haemorrhagic fever in history.

The medical charity Doctors Without Borders, commonly known by its French initials MSF, has set up two corrugated iron buildings in a tent village, currently with 20 beds, and a capacity for 50 patients. One of the buildings houses suspected cases, while in the other medics care for patients confirmed to have Ebola, including two who died on Monday.

Rose, aged 12, has been among the suspected cases for six days but has just tested positive for Ebola and is being moved to join her mother and aunt in the other building where the prospect of making it out alive is rather grim.

It is rare for the worst strains of Ebola to leave behind survivors -- as many as nine in 10 of those infected in previous outbreaks have died -- and the epidemic has claimed at least 80 lives across Guinea since the start of the year. Patients suffer a particularly unpleasant death, succumbing to severe fever and muscle pain before their organs break down. In the worst cases the agony is accompanied by profuse, unstoppable internal and external bleeding.

Malaysia says may sue over 'false' MH370 media reports

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's authoritarian government, said yesterday it would compile "false" media reports over the crisis and consider filing lawsuits.

Transport and Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein said on his Twitter feed the country's attorney general had been instructed to "compile evidence and advise" on possible legal action.

Earlier in the day Hishammuddin was quoted by the Malay Mail newspaper as saying: "We have been compiling all the false reports since day one. When the time is right, the government should sue them."

The MH370 saga and resulting world attention has put Malaysia's long-ruling government in the unaccustomed position of having to answer tough questions from reporters. Hishammuddin has repeatedly denied various anonymously-sourced reports revealing details of Malaysia's investigation into the March 8 disappearance of MH370 with 239 people aboard.



INDIAN LOK SABHA POLLS 2014

'Gujarat model will burst after polls': Rahul

IANS, Ranchi

Congress vice president Rahul Gandhi said yesterday the Gujarat model of development would burst after the Lok Sabha election -- as the BJP's India Shining had burst after 2004 and 2009 polls.

"In 2004, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was banking on the India Shining but it burst after the elections," Rahul said while addressing an election rally in Jharkhand's Godda district.

"In 2009, the BJP again went to people with the shine India (India Shining) campaign. We also went to people and asked them to continue our services as we provided the MNREGA and they pressed button for us. Now the opposition has come out with the Gujarat model and pumping air in the balloon and blowing it up. The model will also burst after the elections."

He reminded people about the performance of the UPA-I and UPA-II governments in the last 10 years.

Rahul promised that the Women's Reservation Bill would be passed if UPA III comes to power.

Modi sees conspiracy in flight delays

NDTV ONLINE

Narendra Modi yesterday alleged a conspiracy after his private flights from Delhi and Uttar Pradesh were delayed, reportedly due to lack of clearances.

"My helicopter was not allowed to take off for over three hours in Bareilly. I want the Election Commission to investigate," he said at a rally in Madhya Pradesh, apologizing to people for arriving late.

The BJP's prime ministerial candidate, who addressed a string of rallies in UP and Madhya Pradesh for the national election from next week, said he was also forced to wait at the Delhi airport.

The BJP mirrored his anger and blamed the Centre for the hold-ups. "Such indirect measures should not be taken to stall or stop any politician," said the party's Piyush Goyal.

Aviation ministry sources, however, attributed the delays to the Ahmedabad-based Karnavati Aviation Limited, which had arranged Modi's trips yesterday. They said the company submitted the flight plan just 10 minutes before it was to take off in Delhi, so the Air Traffic Control refused to clear it. This delay reportedly continued when Modi was to fly from Bareilly to Rewa in Madhya Pradesh.



Afghan women hold portraits of presidential candidate Abdullah Abdullah and his allies during a campaign rally at a stadium in the northwestern city of Herat yesterday. Afghanistan will vote on April 5 to choose a successor to President Hamid Karzai and to decide the make-up of 34 provincial councils in elections seen as a benchmark of progress since the Taliban were ousted from power in 2001.

PHOTO: AFP