

**NEWS IN brief**

**Syria launches assault in besieged Homs**

AFP, Damascus  
 Syrian troops and pro-regime militiamen fought their way into rebel-held neighbourhoods of the central city of Homs on Tuesday after besieging them for nearly two years. The assault on Homs comes a day after the army recaptured the Christian town of Maalula in the strategic Qalamun region. Meanwhile, rebels elsewhere in the country have received for the first time at least 20 US-made TOW anti-tank missiles from a "Western

**Thai journos face jail for Rohingya report**

AFP, Bangkok  
 Two journalists face jail if found guilty of defamation after citing a Pulitzer-prize winning report alleging Thai military links to people-smuggling, one of them said yesterday, raising fears for media freedom in the kingdom. Australian editor Alan Morison and his Thai colleague Chutima Sidasathian are due to appear in a court today. They could face up to two years' imprisonment for defamation and five years for breaching the Computer Crimes Act, as well as a \$3,100 fine. Reuters was this week awarded a prestigious Pulitzer prize for journalism for the investigation which said some members of the military were involved in trafficking Muslim Rohingya

**Female Afghan MP shot in Kabul**

AFP, Kabul  
 A female member of Afghanistan's parliament was recovering in hospital yesterday after being shot the previous night, officials and her sister said. The interior ministry said Mariam Koofi, a member of parliament from the northeastern province of Takhar, was shot in Kabul by a member of the security forces following an argument. It said police have detained a suspect and are investigating the

**Pak Taliban refuse to extend ceasefire**

AFP, Miranshah  
 The Pakistani Taliban yesterday said they would not extend a ceasefire called to help peace negotiations with the government, but insisted they were still committed to the talks process. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) announced a one-month ceasefire at the start of March as the government sought a negotiated end to their bloody seven-year

**NY cops end surveillance on Muslims**

AP, New York  
 A special New York Police Department unit that sparked controversy by tracking the daily lives of Muslims in an effort to detect threat threats has been disbanded, police officials said on Tuesday. In a statement, Mayor Bill de Blasio, a Democrat, called the move "a critical step forward in easing tensions between the police and the communities they serve, so that our cops and our citizens can help one another go after the real bad guys." The Demographics Unit assembled databases on where Muslims lived, shopped, worked and prayed. Plainclothes officers infiltrated Muslim student groups, put informants in mosques, monitored sermons and cataloged Muslims in New York. After a series of stories by The Associated Press detailing the extent of the NYPD's surveillance of Muslims, two civil rights lawsuits were filed demanding that the department halt the practice.



**Top**, The photo shows coast guard members searching for passengers near a South Korean ferry that capsized on its way to Jeju island from Incheon. **Bottom left**, helicopters hover over the sinking ferry to rescue the 476 passengers and crew aboard; **middle**, Rescuers trying to pick up victims of the tragedy as the ship was sinking fast; and **survivors** wrapped in blankets react as they are brought onto land.

PHOTO: AFP



**Tragedy as ferry sinks in S Korea**

AFP, Jinju  
 South Korean rescuers and dive teams worked frantically under floodlights as fears rose for nearly 300 people missing after a ferry sank yesterday with 462 on board, mostly high school students bound for a holiday island. National disaster agency officials said 174 people had been rescued, leaving 284 "unaccounted for". There were four confirmed deaths, including a female crew member and a student. There are concerns the death toll could rise sharply. The 6,825-tonne Sewol listed violently, capsized and finally sank -- all within two hours of sending a distress signal at 9:00am. "I'm afraid there's little chance for those trapped inside still to be alive," one senior rescue team official, Cho Yang-Bok, told YTN television as divers struggled to access the submerged multi-deck

ferry. Dramatic television footage showed terrified passengers wearing life jackets clambering into inflatable boats with water lapping over the rails of the vessel as it sank 20 kilometres off the southern island of Byungpoong. Some slid down the steeply inclined side of the ferry and into the water as rescuers, including the crew of what appeared to be a small fishing boat, pulled them to safety. The passengers included 325 students from a high school in Ansan just south of Seoul, who were travelling with their teachers to the popular island resort of Jeju. "I feel so pained to see students on a school trip... face such a tragic accident. I want you to pour all your energy into this mission," President Park Geun-Hye said on a visit to the disaster agency's situation room in Seoul. Many of the survivors were plucked from the water by fishing

and other commercial vessels who were first on the scene before a flotilla of coastguard and navy ships arrived, backed by more than a dozen helicopters. Lee Gyeong-Og, the vice minister of security and public administration, said 178 divers, including a

team of South Korean navy SEALs, were working at the site, but low water visibility and strong currents were hampering their efforts. The US 7th Fleet sent an amphibious assault ship on patrol in the area to help.

The cause of the accident in fine

**4 dead, 284 missing**  
 Victims mostly high school students

weather was not immediately clear, although rescued passengers reported the ferry coming to a sudden, shuddering halt -- indicating it may have run aground. "I heard a big thumping sound and the boat suddenly started to tilt," one rescued student said. Another spoke of luggage and vending machines crashing down on passengers as the vessel tipped over. Three giant floating cranes had been despatched to the site and would begin operations to raise the submerged vessel tomorrow, officials said. Scores of ferries ply the waters between the South Korean mainland and its multiple offshore islands every day, and accidents are relatively rare. In one of the worst incidents, nearly 300 people died when a ferry capsized off the west coast in

**Boston remembers victims one year on**

AFP, Boston  
 Boston paid solemn tribute Tuesday to the victims and survivors of the marathon bombings, observing a moment of silence and raising the US flag exactly one year after the attacks that stunned the nation. Vice President Joe Biden led an emotionally charged tribute at the Hynes Convention Center, just steps from the scene of the attack that left three dead and more than 260 others wounded. Biden and the crowd bowed their heads for a moment of silence before church bells tolled at 2:49pm, the time when the first bomb exploded, followed by strains of bagpipes. Just hours later, nerves were frayed when hundreds of people had to be evacuated after two unattended backpacks were found at the scene of the twin bombings. A male suspect had been taken into custody after he told an officer that he had a rice cooker in the bag, at which time the bomb squad was called in and rendered both bags safe. The attacks in the northeastern city of nearly one million were allegedly carried out by two brothers of Chechen descent who had lived in the United States for years. The brothers allegedly hid the explosive devices in backpacks.



**Men wearing military fatigues ride on armoured personnel carriers with Russian flags in the eastern Ukrainian city of Kramatorsk, yesterday.**

PHOTO: AFP

**Civil war fear grows**

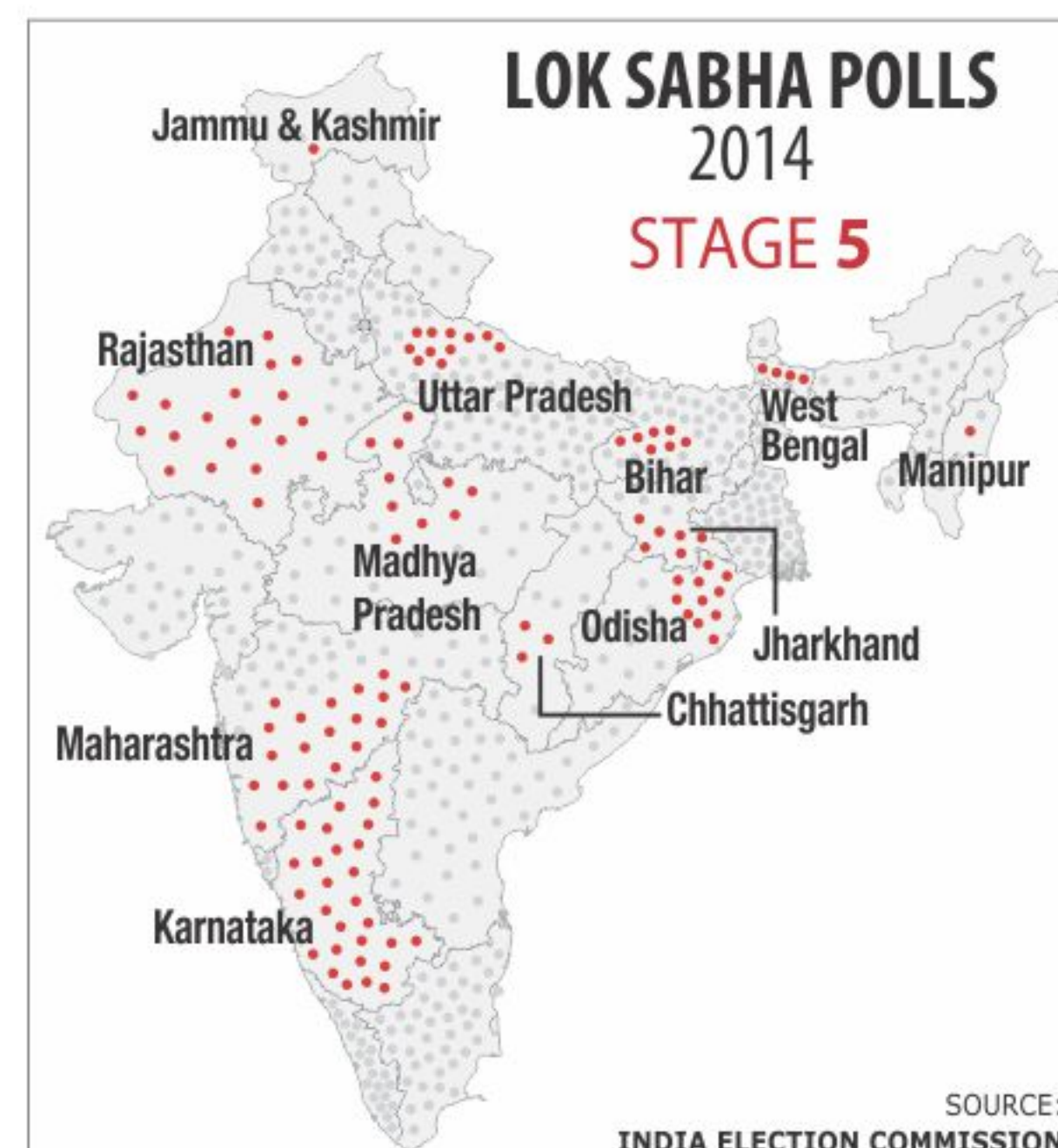
AFP, Slaviansk  
 Ukrainian and pro-Russian forces flexed their military muscles in the restive east of the country yesterday, a day ahead of high-level international talks on the escalating crisis. A concerned Nato said it planned to deploy more forces in eastern Europe and called for Russia to stop "destabilising" the former Soviet satellite, which has been in deep turmoil since the ouster of the pro-Kremlin leadership in February. Russian President Vladimir Putin has warned that Kiev's decision to send in troops this week to put down a separatist uprising in its industrial heartland had dragged the country to the brink of civil war. An AFP reporter in the flashpoint town of Slaviansk saw at least six APCs and light tanks, some flying Russian flags, in the city centre with dozens of armed men in camouflage stationed around them claiming to be volunteers and Ukrainian army defectors. Ukraine's defence ministry confirmed the vehicles were seized from its forces after they were blocked by local pro-Russian activists. An AFP reporter in the nearby town of Kramatorsk said a column of 14 armoured vehicles still controlled by the Ukrainian army was deployed, although these were too being blocked by a crowd of pro-Moscow protesters. Military jets could be seen flying low over

both towns in an additional show of strength. Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk demanded Moscow halt its alleged support for the separatists but said Kiev remained committed to today's crunch talks between the top diplomats of Russia, the European Union, the United States and Ukraine. On Tuesday, authorities in Kiev launched what they called an "anti-terrorist operation", sending tanks towards Slavyansk -- which remains effectively under the control of pro-Russian gunmen -- in a high-risk strategy sharply condemned by the Kremlin but supported in Washington. But the move drew a sharp response from Putin in a telephone conversation with German leader Angela Merkel. "The Russian president remarked that the sharp escalation of the conflict has placed the country, in effect, on the verge of civil war," the Kremlin said in a statement. But both Putin and Merkel "emphasised the importance" of today's talks. Analysts are saying that a forceful military response by Kiev could prompt a devastating counterstrike by Russian troops who are waiting to act on Putin's vow to "protect" Russian-speakers in the neighbouring state. The breakaway move could potentially see the vast nation of 46 million people break up along its historic Russian-

**UKRAINE CRISIS**  
 Putin warns of civil war  
 Nato to deploy more forces in eastern Europe  
 Key 4-way talks to today  
 Civilians block Ukrainian troops

**Global media gives thumbs down to Modi**

TNN, New Delhi  
 The international media has been largely unsparing towards BJP PM candidate Narendra Modi. The most recent issue of The Economist had the PM hopeful on the cover, with a strongly worded editorial inside that said: "This newspaper cannot bring itself to back Mr Modi for India's highest office." In an April 14 article in the Guardian titled 'Narendra Modi: Britain can't simply shrug off this Hindu extremist', author Priyamvada Gopal made a case for the UK severing its links with the man. She writes: "In the face of a global resurgence of the right we must be alert to all its extremist forms." A piece by Thane Richard in the Quartz also went viral on social media last month. It spoke of how India would cross the "moral line of no return" if Modi becomes PM. Taking on Modi's insistence on leveraging development over other issues, Richard writes: "Has India become so desperate for rapid economic growth... that she has forgotten basic humanity?"



**Editor quits over Modi**

TNN, New Delhi  
 India TV editorial director Qamar Waheed Naqvi's resignation over an allegedly "fixed" interview of BJP prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi acquired deep political overtones on Tuesday with Congress claiming that it showed the kind of pressures journalists faced from BJP. AAP was also active on the social media congratulating Naqvi for his "courage". Naqvi quit on April 13, hours after Modi was featured in Aap Ki Adalat on the evening of April 12. The interview programme is hosted by India TV chairman Sharma. Sources in India TV said that the channel's pro-Modi bias was clear in the news bulletin line up with the pieces loaded heavily in favour of BJP. "If there were 10 negative stories against Rahul Gandhi or Arvind Kejriwal, there would be one against Modi," a source with the channel said. He said Naqvi had expressed his reservations to Sharma on several occasions.

**'Polls battle between two ideologies'**

PTI, Rae Bareilly  
 Priyanka Gandhi yesterday kick-started the poll campaign in her mother Sonia Gandhi's constituency Rae Bareilly projecting the Lok Sabha polls as a battle between two ideologies and making a veiled attack on Narendra Modi, saying only one man takes all decisions in BJP. "There is one ideology under which we want to empower common people. All our schemes have been made keeping in mind the objectives that you should be strengthened. "On the other hand, there is another

ideology in which all powers are centred in one person's hand where one man's decision will be applicable to all and all government policies and programmes will be aimed at some selected people. This is a separate ideology," she said, without naming Modi. She said the decision which the people are going to take about voting in this Lok Sabha elections has two parts. "While the one is the practical aspect of their and their region's development, the second part is about what will be the future of the nation," she said.



**Priyanka Gandhi**

**Sonia Gandhi**

Search for MH370

**Mini-sub aborts mission again**

AFP, Kuala Lumpur  
 Hopes that Malaysia's missing jet might soon be found are yielding to the sobering realisation of the immense challenge of searching an uncharted seafloor at depths that push deep-sea technology to its limits. "I have compared it to sending a man to the moon. We know how to do it, but we can't just do it in three weeks," said Erik van Sebille, an oceanographer at the University of New South Wales. Twice in two days, an advanced US Navy mini-submarine has had to abort its search of the remote Indian Ocean for wreckage from the Boeing 777, which vanished on March 8. The unmanned Bluefin-21 bounced back to the surface on Tuesday after hitting its maximum depth of 4,500 metres (15,000 feet), and Wednesday's search was cut short due to technical trouble. The hitches have raised the spectre of a prolonged, difficult search that may require even more sophisti-

**BRIEF ON INDIAN POLLS**

**Bollywood urges voters to shun BJP**

AFP, Mumbai  
 More than 50 Bollywood filmmakers, actors and writers yesterday urged Indians not to vote for BJP. The group signed an appeal calling on Indians to choose a "secular" party, without naming Modi's BJP. Critics fear the BJP could stoke religious tensions if it comes to power. The letter was endorsed by directors Imtiaz Ali, Mahesh Bhatt and Zoya Akhtar, actress Nandita Das and singer Shubha Mudgal. Last week a group of Indian artists and academics, including author Salman Rushdie, wrote to Britain's Guardian newspaper to express "acute worry" over Modi becoming prime

**Voter turnout breaks all records**

AFP, New Delhi  
 Turnout in India's multi-phase election is so far almost eight percentage points higher than last time, data showed Wednesday, reflecting enthusiasm for polls expected to bring the opposition Hindu nationalists to power. Polling in four of the ten phases has been completed, with the biggest day of voting set for today. "The aggregation of figures from these 111 seats gives a 2014 polling percentage of 68.29, almost 8.0 percentage points higher from 60.39 percent for the same seats in 2009," Akshay Rout, director general of the national election commission, told reporters. A total of 814 million adults are eligible to vote in the ongoing elections.