

# NEWS IN brief

## Algeria votes in presidential polls

Algerians were voting in presidential elections yesterday, with incumbent Abdelaziz Bouteflika widely expected to win a fourth term despite chronic health problems, fraud warnings and calls for a boycott. More than 260,000 police have been deployed to protect the 50,000 polling booths set up across Africa's largest country, where 23 million Algerians are eligible to vote in a

## Attack on S Sudan UN base wounds several

Several people were wounded in South Sudan yesterday after gunmen attacked civilians sheltering inside a UN peacekeeping base in the war-ravaged town of Bor, the UN said. Almost 5,000 civilians are sheltering inside the fortified base of the UN mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in the town. The civilians fled into the base weeks ago amid

## India gets new navy chief

India appointed a new navy chief yesterday, nearly two months after his predecessor was forced to quit over a submarine accident that killed two sailors off the Mumbai coast.



The government installed Admiral Robin K Dhowan, 59, who has been acting in the job since the previous chief resigned over the submarine fire in February, the latest in a series of accidents to hit the navy.

## 15 Nigeria girls still missing after kidnap

A Nigerian school principal yesterday denied military reports that most of the girls kidnapped from her school by Islamist gunmen were now safe, as the parents of those taken voiced anger over the conflicting claims. Boko Haram militants, who opposes western education, abducted the girls from a secondary school in Borno state area late Monday. Defence spokesman Chris Olukolade said on Wednesday that all but eight of the 129 girls were safe, citing the principal of the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok. But the principal

## Thai journos charged over Rohingya article

Two journalists, including an Australian editor, were ordered yesterday to stand trial in Thailand on defamation charges linked to a Pulitzer Prize-winning article alleging Thai military involvement in people smuggling. Alan Morison and his Thai colleague Chutima Sidasathian could face up to two years' imprisonment for defamation and five years for breaching the Computer Crimes Act if the court in Phuket finds them guilty. The charges relate to an article in July last year by the Phuketwan news website, quoting an investigation by Reuters news agency which said some members of the Thai military were involved in trafficking Muslim Rohingya asylum-seekers who had fled

## Iraq violence kills 21

An Iraqi policeman sacrificed himself to shield army recruits from a suicide bomber northeast of Baghdad yesterday, as attacks targeting security personnel killed 21 people country-wide. Violence in Iraq has killed more than 2,650 people so far this year.



**FERRY TRAGEDY** South Korean relatives of passengers on board a capsized ferry cry as they wait for news about their loved ones, at a gym in Jindo, yesterday. Worsening weather fuelled the sombre mood, with persistent rain and choppy seas hindering dive teams already struggling with low visibility and strong currents. Eighteen people were confirmed dead, but with every hour that passed fears mounted for the 278 still unaccounted for after the multi-deck vessel with 475 on board suddenly listed, capsized and then sank within the space of 90 minutes on Wednesday morning. PHOTO: AFP

# Talks produce surprise deal

Russia, Ukraine, the US and EU reached a surprise deal yesterday on de-escalating the worsening Ukrainian crisis, in a ray of hope for the former Soviet republic that has plunged into chaos.

The agreement reached in Geneva comes as a strong contrast to earlier hawkish comments made by Russian leader Vladimir Putin, who left the door open for intervention in Ukraine. A ban by Kiev on all Russian males aged 16 to 60 from entering Ukrainian territory had also ratcheted up the tensions, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov calling the measure "disgusting".

But after half a day of talks, the four parties agreed on steps to "restore security for all citizens", including a call to disband armed groups that have taken over buildings in Ukraine "illegally". While not spelt out in the agreement, these groups could refer to pro-Kremlin separatists who have seized control of government buildings and taken over parts of Ukraine's south-east, destabilising the country.

"All illegal armed groups must be disarmed, illegally seized buildings returned to their rightful owners," Lavrov said as he briefed reporters about the deal reached with US Secretary of State John Kerry, Ukraine's Andriy Deshchytysa and EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton.

Washington and Kiev have accused Russia of supporting the militants who have occupied buildings such as police stations and government bases, but Moscow has always categorically denied this.

### UKRAINE CRISIS

Lavrov also said Russia had "no desire" to send troops into Ukraine, toning down earlier comments by Putin.

Warning that Ukraine was plunging into the "abyss" just hours after three separatists were killed in a gunbattle with troops in eastern Ukraine, Putin had stressed he hoped not to have to use his "right" to send Russian troops into its western neighbour.

The upper house of parliament on March 1 authorised the Russian leader to send troops into Ukraine after pro-

Kremlin president Viktor Yanukovich was ousted, and Moscow later went on to annex Ukraine's Russian-speaking Crimean peninsula.

Russia has now massed tens of thousands of troops at the border and has warned Kiev's untested new leaders -- whom it does not recognise as legitimate -- not to unleash force in Ukraine.

Accordingly, Kerry warned Russia that if there was no progress on de-escalating the crisis in Ukraine, "there will be additional sanctions, additional costs."

The United States and European Union have already imposed punitive sanctions on key Russian and Ukrainian political and business officials, including members of Putin's inner circle.

And the European Parliament yesterday said the European Union should act "against Russian firms and their subsidiaries, especially in the energy sector, and Russia's EU assets".

So far, though, any further sanctions appear to have been put on hold.

Separately, the European Union yesterday announced it had agreed to hold talks with Russia on its gas supplies to Europe through Ukraine, warning Moscow its reliability as an

## SEARCH FOR MH370 Sub completes scan of Indian Ocean floor

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

A robotic submarine has completed its first successful scan of the seabed in the hunt for the missing Malaysian plane, but investigators say tests have ruled out that a nearby oil slick came from the aircraft.

The Bluefin-21's first two missions were cut short by technical problems and deep water, but the unmanned submarine managed to complete a full 16-hour scan of the seabed far off Australia's west coast overnight. Data was still being analysed but nothing of note had yet been discovered. The sub has now scanned 90 sq km (35 sq miles) of the Indian Ocean floor.

Separately, the joint agency search co-ordination centre said the oil analysis done in the western city of Perth came up empty when the samples tested negative for aircraft oil or hydraulic fluid. The oil was collected earlier this week from a slick about 5.5km (3.4 miles) from the area where equipment picked up underwater sounds consistent with an aircraft black box.

It was hoped that the oil would be evidence that officials are looking in the right place for MH370, which vanished on 8 March while en route from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to Beijing. Searchers have yet to find any physical proof that the sounds that led them to the ocean floor where the Bluefin has been deployed were from the ill-fated jet.

## POSITIVE IAEA REPORT US releases \$450m of frozen Iranian funds

AGENCIES

The United States has taken steps to release a \$450 million (267.9 million pounds) instalment of frozen Iranian funds following a report from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) verifying that Iran is living up to its part of a landmark nuclear pact with world powers, the US State Department said yesterday.

State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said that "all sides have kept the commitments made" under the agreement. She said that "as Iran remains in line with its commitments," the United States, France, Germany, Britain, China, Russia and the European Union "will continue to uphold our commitments as well."

The report by the UN nuclear agency showed that Iran had - as stipulated under

the November 24 agreement - diluted half of its higher-grade enriched uranium reserve to a fissile content less prone to bomb proliferation. Tehran has also continued to convert the other half of its stock of uranium gas refined to a 20 percent fissile purity, the IAEA report said.

"Based on this confirmation and consistent with commitments that the United States made under the Joint Plan of Action (November 24 pact), the Department of Treasury took the necessary steps pursuant to the JPOA to facilitate the release of a \$450 million instalment of Iran's frozen funds," Harf told reporters.

Under the November deal, Iran agreed to freeze parts of its nuclear activities, including limiting enrichment. Enriching uranium can be part of a peaceful atomic drive but can also produce weapons-grade material for a bomb.

## Alaska 'too cold' to annex: Putin

AFP, Moscow

In a patriotic fervour, Russians are asking President Vladimir Putin to bring back the US state of Alaska, sold off to the United States in Tsarist times. Putin's answer? It's too cold.



During Putin's annual marathon phone-in session Thursday, when Russians pose questions to the Russian leader, a pensioner asked him to possibly follow the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine with the taking of Alaska.

"Faina Ivanovna, dear, why do you need Alaska?" Putin asked the pensioner. "Alaska is cold too," he said. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

Alaska was settled by Russians since the 18th century after Russian boats reached it from the Russian Far East territories of Kamchatka and began fur trading with the indigenous population.

Since its purchase by the United States in 1867, people in some small Alaskan villages still use random Russian words and there is even a Russian Orthodox seminary.



## Mother spares life of son's killer with a slap

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

When he felt the noose around his neck, Balal must have thought he was about to take his last breath. Minutes earlier, crowds had watched as guards pushed him towards the gallows for what was meant to be yet another public execution in the Islamic republic of Iran.

Seven years ago Balal, who is in his 20s, stabbed 18-year-old Abdollah Hosseinzadeh during a street brawl in the small town of Royan, in the northern province of Mazandaran. In a literal application of qisas, the sharia law of retribution, the victim's family were to participate in Balal's punishment by pushing the chair on which he stood.

But what happened next marked a rarity in public executions in Iran, which puts more people to death than any other country apart from China. The victim's mother approached, slapped the convict in the face and then decided to forgive her son's killer. The victim's father removed the noose and Balal's life was spared.

Photographs taken by Arash Khamooshi, of the semi-official Isna news agency, show what followed. Balal's mother hugged the grieving mother of the man her son had killed. The two women sobbed in each other's arms - one because she had lost her son, the other because hers had been saved.

The action by Hosseinzadeh's mother was all the more extraordinary as it emerged that this was not the first son she had lost. Her younger child Amirhossein was killed in a motorbike accident at the age of 11.

Hosseinzadeh said a dream prompted the change of heart. "Three days ago my wife saw my elder son in a dream telling her that they are in a good place, and for her not to retaliate ... This calmed my wife and we decided to think more until the day of the execution."

Many Iranian public figures, including the popular TV sport presenter Adel Ferdosipour, had called on the couple, who have a daughter, to forgive the killer. Although they did so, Balal will not necessarily be freed. Under Iranian law the victim's family have a say only in the act of execution, not any jail sentence.



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