

NEWS IN
brief4 French journos
freed in Syria

AFP, Paris

Four French journalists taken hostage in Syria last year were freed yesterday after a 10-month ordeal in the world's most dangerous country for the media. The journalists -- Edouard Elias, Didier Francois, Nicolas Henin and Pierre Torres -- are in good health, French officials said. Around 30 foreign journalists covering the Syrian civil war have been seized since the conflict began in March 2011, and many are still missing.

Two UN employees
abducted in Karachi

AFP, Ians

Unidentified gunmen kidnapped two local employees of the UN in Pakistan's port city of Karachi late on Friday, police said. The gunmen abducted the employees from their car, reported Xinhua citing Geo News. The local employees were identified as Sami Nawaz and Farukh Salim. No group claimed responsibility for the incident.

Drone kills 18 in Yemen

AFP, Sanaa

A drone strike on Saturday killed 15 al-Qaeda suspects and three civilians in Yemen's central Baidha province, a stronghold of the extremist group, a security official said. The United States is the only country that operates drones in Yemen, but officials rarely discuss the covert programme.

Nigeria kidnapping:
85 girls still missing

AFP, Maiduguri

Boko Haram claimed responsibility for the deadliest attack ever in Nigeria's capital in a video obtained yesterday, as the search continued for 85 schoolgirls out of 129 still missing after a mass abduction by the Islamists. The bombing at a bus station packed with morning commuters early on Monday killed at least 75 people. Officials said a total of 44 have since escaped and are now safe.

Egypt cop killed in
Cairo blast

AFP, Cairo

An Egyptian police officer was killed on Friday evening when a bomb targeting a traffic police kiosk in Cairo exploded, security officials said, the latest of such attacks. A policeman and a civilian were also wounded when assailants threw the bomb from a nearby bridge onto the kiosk, located on a main square of the Egyptian capital, the officials said.

Bouteflika wins 4th
term in Algeria

AFP, Algiers

Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika clinched a fourth term on Friday, despite his poor health, winning a landslide victory in an election marred by low turnout and his rival alleging fraud. Bouteflika's victory had been widely expected. Friday's papers anticipated his re-election before the results were announced.

Tell the truth and save your life

AFP, Tehran

An Iranian woman on death row for the murder of an ex-intelligence official could be forgiven if "she tells the truth", the son of her alleged victim said yesterday.

Interior designer Reyhaneh Jabbari has been sentenced to death for the 2007 slaying of Morteza Abdolali Sarbandi, which a UN human rights monitor claims was done in self-defence against a potential rapist.

Judiciary officials say there is no date yet for her execution but her lawyer Abdolsamad Khoramshahi warned last week it could be "carried out within a month."



The avalanche that killed at least thirteen Sherpas is pictured as it barrels down a mountain in the Mount Everest Region on April 18, 2014. Inset, Relatives of victims grieve as bodies arrive at the Sherpa Monastery in Kathmandu, yesterday. Rescuers on Mount Everest found the body of a 13th Nepalese guide buried under snow yesterday as authorities ruled out hope of finding any more survivors from the deadliest single accident ever on the world's highest peak. Three Sherpas remain missing.

PHOTO: AFP

US, Russia wrangle
over stalled deal

Putin says better ties with West still possible

AFP, Donetsk

Russia was under US pressure yesterday to convince pro-Moscow rebels in Ukraine to cease occupying eastern towns, after Washington warned the situation in the former Soviet republic was in a "pivotal period".

But with the separatists' refusal to budge throwing a deal to defuse the crisis into doubt, and US sanctions looming large, Russia warned that its military was massed on Ukraine's border, ready to act.

In the nearly dozen Ukrainian towns the pro-Kremlin rebels were holding, the stalemate dragged yesterday.

In the major eastern city of Donetsk, gunmen remained barricaded inside the regional government building.

The failure to implement the agreement hammered out in Geneva on Thursday by the US, Russia, Ukraine and the EU threatened to deepen the worst East-West crisis since the Cold War.

The pact calls for the disarmament of "illegal armed groups" and the end to the occupation of seized buildings.

US President Barack Obama has said he wants to see progress within days, otherwise more sanctions would be imposed, on top of those already targeting the inner circle of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

However, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the US threats of more sanctions on Moscow were "absolutely unacceptable".

Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir

UKRAINE CRISIS

Eastern region against
joining Russia: Survey

52.2 percent inhabitants in Ukraine's pro-Russian protest hub Donetsk do not want to join Russia but consider the government in Kiev to be illegitimate, according to a poll published yesterday. 27.5 percent favoured rule from Ukraine's former Soviet master Moscow. Among the 3,200 respondents across Ukraine's entire Russian-speaking southeast, the number of those opposed to Moscow taking control rose to 69.7 percent, according to the poll from Kiev's Institute for International Sociology published in the Russian-language Weekly Mirror newspaper.

make that happen.

"I think there is nothing that would hinder a normalisation and normal cooperation" with the West, Putin said. "This does not depend only on us. This depends on our partners."

MH370 TRAGEDY
Mini-sub search
could end
within a week

REUTERS, Sydney/Perth

The current underwater search for missing Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370, focused on a tight 10 km circle of the sea floor, could be completed within a week, Australian search officials said yesterday.

Malaysia said the search was at a "very critical juncture" and asked for prayers for its success. A US Navy deep-sea autonomous underwater vehicle is scouring a remote stretch of the Indian Ocean floor for signs of the plane, which disappeared from radars on March 8 with 239 people on board.

After almost two months without a sign of wreckage, the current underwater search has been narrowed to a small area around the location in which one of four acoustic signals believed to be from the plane's black box recorders was detected on April 8, officials said.

Officials did not indicate whether they were confident that this search area would yield any new information, nor did they state what they would do if the underwater search were to prove fruitless.

SOUTH KOREA FERRY TRAGEDY
Arrested captain
defends action

AFP, Jindo

Divers began to locate bodies inside a submerged South Korean ferry yesterday as the detained captain defended his decision to delay evacuation of the ship when it capsized nearly four days ago with 476 people on board.

Investigators arrested captain Lee Joon-Seok and two of his crew early in the morning. All three have been criticised for abandoning hundreds of passengers trapped in the ferry, as they made their own escape. Lee was charged with negligence and failing to secure the safety of passengers in violation of maritime law.



Lee Joon-Seok

Thirty-three people have been confirmed dead in the disaster, but 269 are still missing -- most of them children on a high school holiday trip.

As the arrests were being made, dive teams who had spent two days vainly battling powerful currents and near zero visibility, finally penetrated the passenger decks of the 6,825-tonne Sewol. They have spotted bodies inside the ferry.

Earlier, captain Lee and the two crew members were paraded before TV cameras, dressed in dark raincoats with their hoods pulled up and their heads bowed.

Questioned as to why passengers had been ordered not to move for more than 40 minutes after the ship first founded, Lee insisted it was a safety measure.

"At the time a rescue ship had not arrived. There were also no fishing boats or other ships around to help," Lee said.

"The currents were very strong and the water was cold at that time in the area. I thought that passengers would fall into trouble if they evacuated," he added. Experts have suggested many more people might have escaped if they had moved to reach evacuation points before the ship listed sharply.

Jihadist schism
deepens in Syria

AFP, Dubai

Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has called for unity in a new interview amid widening divisions with a rival jihadist organisation rooted in the Syrian civil war.

The interview, which the SITE monitoring service dated to between February and April, was released after the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) accused al-Qaeda of having "deviated from the correct path."

"They have divided the ranks of the mujahideen (holy warriors) in every place," ISIL spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani said in a statement posted on jihadi forums.

Zawahiri rejected the allegations, suggesting that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime may have penetrated jihadist groups in order to sow sedition.

The split dates back to last year, when Zawahiri ordered ISIL to confine its activities to Iraq. He declared Al-Nusra Front to be the official Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria.

Syrian rebels initially welcomed battle-hardened jihadists to their struggle, but Islamist and non-Islamist groups alike turned on ISIL after it began kidnapping, torturing and killing activists and rival rebels, and imposing its strict version of Islam by force.

'Modi sent
emissaries to
separatist'

PTI, Srinagar

The Jamaat-e-Islami of Kashmir has categorically denied the claims of prominent separatist leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani that one of the leaders of Jamaat met a representative of BJP's prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi.

BJP too has denied having sent any emissaries to Geelani or any other separatist leader for arranging a meeting with Modi or to get a commitment for resolution of Kashmir issue.

BJP said the claim is "mischievous" and without any basis, PTI reported.

The statement said, the BJP's stand that Jammu and Kashmir was an integral part of India was very clear and there was no room for deliberations on this.

Syed Geelani, who is chairman of a faction of the Hurriyat conference, had on Friday claimed that BJP prime ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi had sent two of his emissaries to him (Geelani) on March 22 to get a commitment for resolution of the Kashmir issue.

Geelani has said he rejected the proposal.

Geelani claimed Modi had sent his representatives to other separatist groups as well.

LOK SABHA POLLS 2014



Narendra Modi is surrounded by security personnel as he arrives at an election rally in Assam, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Won't back third front
Congress says will search for new allies; eyes at 120 seats

AGENCIES

With stability weighing heavily on its mind, Congress will go in for the search of new allies to form a UPA-III government and has no intention to support a third front government.

A senior party leader, who declined to be identified, insisted that the party has become wiser by the experiments of 1990-91 and 1996 during which it gave support from outside to the governments led by Chandra Shekhar, HD Deve Gowda and IK Gujral.

Noting that those were "not exactly happy" experiences, the leader said if the situation arises the Congress would have only a UPA-III government and the question of giving outside support to a minority government does not arise.

Two days back, party general secretary Ajay Maken had dismissed the possibility of support to third front in forming the next government at the Centre insisting that the UPA-III coalition will rule the country after Lok Sabha polls.

His remarks had assumed significance as they came close on the heels of Uttar Pradesh chief minister Akhilesh Yadav claiming that the third front will form a "stable government" with Congress' support after Lok Sabha elections.

BRIEF ON
INDIAN POLLS'No vacancy' for
Priyanka in Congress

PTI, New Delhi

With Sonia and Rahul Gandhi at the top, Congress has "no vacancy" for a leadership role, party leader Shashi Tharoor said yesterday amid speculation that Priyanka Gandhi could assume a bigger responsibility in the organization. "Congress has a president and a vice-president who are active," Tharoor told reporters, adding that she herself had restricted her role to the two seats. Asked if this meant Priyanka was not required, Tharoor said "there is no vacancy at the moment."

Mamata shielding
scamsters: Rahul

IANS, Malda

Claiming that big scams are happening in West Bengal, Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi yesterday launched a scathing attack on the Trinamool Congress government in the state accusing it of shielding scamsters. "Bigger scams are happening in Bengal. You all know about the Saradha (chit fund) scam, 20 lakh people have suffered losses. But the government here is taking no action, rather, it is shielding them," Gandhi said at a party rally in Shamsi of Malda district.

Obama set to
bolster US's
Asia pivot

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama will use an Asian tour beginning next week to bolster US alliances in the region at a time of increased geopolitical tension.

Obama is scheduled to visit Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and the Philippines, and will be under duress to address maritime territorial disputes between US allies and China.

Aides said on Friday that the president would restate staunch US support for its friends, underline its role as a Pacific power, and seek to reassure the region that his Asia "rebalancing" strategy is not running out of steam.

Obama will also attempt to make progress in dragged out negotiations over the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal, and reassure potential partners that he could get it endorsed by a reluctant Congress.

Obama is set to travel to Asia on Tuesday, but will certainly remain preoccupied by simmering foreign policy crises elsewhere, especially in Ukraine and in the Middle East.

"The president's trip to Asia is an important opportunity to underscore our continued focus on the Asia-Pacific region," said Obama's national security advisor Susan Rice.

"At a time of ongoing regional tensions, particularly with regard to North Korea and territorial disputes, the trip offers a chance for the United States to affirm our commitment to a rules-based order in the region.

"There's a significant demand for US leadership in that region, and our strategy of rebalancing to Asia includes economic, political, security and cultural interests in Northeast and Southeast Asia," she said.

Obama would emphasize that Washington wants maritime disputes in the South and East China seas settled peacefully, in accordance with the rule of law, Rice said.

Obama's trip will be his first to the region since Beijing declared an Air Defense Zone in the South China Sea last year, which Washington branded as illegitimate.