

**NEWS IN**  
*brief*

**S Korea Ferry Tragedy: President apologises**

AFP, Seoul

South Korean President Park Geun-Hye yesterday apologised for her government's failure to combat systemic and regulatory "evils" blamed for the loss of about 300 lives in a ferry disaster. Two days after her prime minister resigned over the tragedy, Park's comments are another attempt to defuse growing public anger about the April 16 sinking of the 6,825-tonne Sewol.



**Obama ratings hit new low**

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama's approval rating has hit a new low as Americans disapprove of his policies on the economy, health care and the crisis in Ukraine, according to a new poll. Obama's rating sunk to 41 percent from 46 percent in the first three of the year, according to the Washington Post-ABC News poll released late Monday in a worrying sign for allied Democrats facing legislative

**N Korea holds live-fire sea drill**

AFP, Seoul

North Korea held a brief live-fire drill near its maritime border with South Korea yesterday, hours after US President Barack Obama wrapped up an Asia trip that Pyongyang had denounced as provocative. The drill came amid concerns that the North is preparing to conduct its fourth atomic detonation, with recent satellite images showing stepped-up activity at its

**Violent weather in US kills at least 29**

AFP, Washington

Americans in the southern and eastern US braced for more violent weather yesterday after a string of tornadoes and other storms killed at least 29 people, news reports said. Some 75 million people were at risk from storms that could unleash hail, winds and twisters on the affected regions, according to the

**Iraq goes to polls today amid violence**

AFP, Baghdad

Twin bombings killed 15 people northeast of Baghdad yesterday, the latest in a wave of deadly violence that has cast a pall over Iraq's first general election since US troops withdrew. The bloodshed came a day after a spate of blasts, including 10 suicide bombings, killed 64 people, raising questions over whether Iraq's security forces can protect upwards of 20 million eligible voters

**US reviving 'Iron Curtain' policies, says Russia**

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday accused the United States of seeking to revive Iron Curtain policies, saying Washington's latest sanctions over Ukraine would hurt bilateral cooperation in high-tech and space sectors.

While Russian officials acknowledged that the latest US sanctions would harm the country's economy and said Moscow would retaliate, they also sought to maintain a facade of bravado, saying the measures would consolidate Russia and improve production.

"The seriousness of these measures is absolutely obvious to us," Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said in an interview with online newspaper Gazeta.ru.

"All of that is a blow to our high-tech enterprises and industries," he said.

"This is a revival of a system created in 1949 when Western countries essentially lowered an 'Iron Curtain' cutting off supplies of high-tech goods to the USSR and other countries. Today, in 2014, the United States is attempting to do the same."

He said the sanctions would affect cooperation in the high-tech sector, supplies of US goods that can be used for both military and civilian purposes, and

the launch of US-made space vehicles. He said Moscow did not want to see a rupture in ties with Washington and Brussels but stressed that Russia would retaliate.

"We already have something and something will be introduced shortly. The question is, what the symmetrical answer will be, what will be part of it," said Ryabkov, adding that Moscow would punish the United States at its own pace.

**UKRAINE CRISIS**

New EU sanctions target army, Intel chiefs

Moscow says won't invade Ukraine

"You know, we would like to reflect on that. Why should we immediately, without a pause undertake something?"

Ramping up Moscow's rhetoric, Ryabkov called Washington and "several European capitals" Kiev's puppeteers but reiterated pledges that Russia will not invade eastern Ukraine.

Moscow yesterday accused the European Union of following the United States in the Ukraine crisis,

after the bloc unveiled a new set of sanctions against Moscow.

"Instead of forcing the Kiev clique to sit down at the negotiating table with the southeast of Ukraine over the future makeup of the country, our partners are doing Washington's bidding with new unfriendly gestures towards Russia," the Russian foreign ministry said in a statement.

"If that's how Brussels is hoping to stabilise the situation in Ukraine, then this is obvious evidence of complete incomprehension of the internal political situation in (Ukraine)," the statement said. "Are you not ashamed?" the ministry added.

Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin for his part called the sanctions an "absolutely counterproductive" measure which was driving the crisis towards "a dead end".

"Instead of this, it's necessary to make collective efforts and influence the Kiev authorities to start real dialogue with the Ukrainian regions and stop all sorts of military and special operations against their own people," Karasin said, the state RIA Novosti news agency.

Russia's Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika said the sanctions would only serve to fuel greater solidarity among Russians.

**Middle East peace deadline expires**

Kerry sorry for 'apartheid' remark

AFP, Jerusalem

Washington's deadline for reaching a peace deal expired yesterday with the sides bitterly divided and warnings that Israel risked becoming an "apartheid state" if it failed to make peace with the Palestinians.



As final date for the nine-month negotiation period arrived, peace hopes appeared more remote than ever with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas locked in a tactical game of fingerpointing, and US attempts to broker an extension in tatters.

After more than a year of intensive shuttle diplomacy by US Secretary of State John Kerry who had initially hoped for a deal by April 29, Washington's was reluctant to admit failure, acknowledging only a "pause" in the dialogue.

But Israel and the Palestinians were under no illusions about the fate of the latest US-led peace effort, with analysts saying it was a case of back to square one.

Israeli analysts said the collapse of the talks was a direct result of Israel's relentless settlement construction on land which was the subject of negotiations.

Figures published yesterday by settlement watchdog Peace Now showed that in parallel with the negotiations, the Israeli government approved plans for nearly 14,000 new settler homes, describing it as an "unprecedented number".

Kerry has found himself at the centre of a political storm after reportedly saying that if Israel didn't seize the opportunity to make peace soon, it risked becoming an "apartheid state" with second-class citizens.

"Apartheid" refers to South Africa's 1948-1994 oppressive and racially segregated social system.



**SYRIA CIVIL WAR**

Emergency personnel and civilians inspect the site following a car bomb explosion in the Abbasiyah neighbourhood of Syria's central city of Homs yesterday. The car bomb ripped through a crowded area of the country's third biggest city followed shortly afterwards by a rocket attack on the same neighbourhood, the provincial governor told AFP. At least 59 people were killed in attacks in Syria's Damascus and Homs yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

**Megacities sinking**

BBC ONLINE

Subsiding land is a bigger immediate problem for the world's coastal cities than sea level rise, says scientists. In some parts of the globe, the ground is going down 10 times faster than the water is rising, with the causes very often being driven by human activity. Decades of ground water extraction saw Tokyo descend two metres before the practice was stopped. Speaking at the European Geosciences Union General Assembly, researchers said other cities must follow suit. Gilles Erkens from the Deltares Research Institute, in Utrecht, in the Netherlands, said parts of Jakarta, Ho Chi Minh City, Bangkok and numerous other coastal urban settlements would sink below sea level unless action was taken. His group's assessment of those cities found them to be in various stages of dealing with their problems, but also identified best practice that could be shared. "Land subsidence and sea level rise are both happening, and they are both contributing to the same problem - larger and longer floods, and bigger inundation depth of floods," Dr Erkens told BBC News. "The most rigorous solution and the best one is to stop pumping groundwater for drinking water, but then of course you need a new source of drinking water for these cities. But Tokyo did that and subsidence more or less stopped, and in Venice, too, they have done that." The famous City of Water in north-east Italy experienced major subsidence in the last century due to the constant extraction of water from below

**PENDING ELECTRICITY BILLS Pak PM, president thrown into darkness**

AFP, Islamabad

The Pakistani government yesterday cut off the electricity supply to several major official buildings for non-payment of bills, including parliament, the prime minister's offices and the president's official residence. Pakistan is blighted by rolling power cuts, caused in part by people not paying their bills, with government offices among the worst offenders. Ordinary people struggle without electricity for 12 to 18 hours a day in the blistering heat of summer, but up to now little action has been taken against recalcitrant bureaucrats working in air-conditioned offices. Minister for water and power Abid Sher Ali announced an "indiscriminate drive" to recover unpaid bills and warned that all offices and customers who had defaulted would be cut off. The President's Secretariat, which is the head of state's office and residence, owes 28 million rupees, while lawmakers' residential block, Parliament Lodges, had to pay 20 million rupees to the Islamabad Electricity Supply Company, he added. Power company officials said that electricity supply to more than 100 government offices had been disconnected over non-payment of bills.

**LOK SABHA POLLS 2014 Priyanka outshines Rahul**

AFP, New Delhi

As India's ruling Congress heads for what could be its worst ever election defeat, Priyanka Gandhi, sister of lacklustre campaign leader Rahul Gandhi, has stepped up to lead a fightback by the political dynasty. Priyanka, 42, has traditionally ceded the limelight to her older brother Rahul, 43, the diffident scion of the country's most famous political family and frontman for the Congress's campaign. But with the party flailing in opinion polls and the election entering its final stretch, Priyanka has emerged swinging against Narendra Modi, prime ministerial candidate of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party. Priyanka -- who looks like her imperious grandmother, late four-time premier Indira Gandhi -- has called the battle against Modi and the BJP a "fight for the heart" of Hindu-

majority but constitutionally secular India.

Finally heeding calls to play a more prominent role in the campaign, Priyanka declared at the weekend that she was "here to thwart him (Modi)" in



his "negative" agenda.

"The ideology of Congress is to unite people... while that of the opposition is to divide," she said.

Modi is seen as a deeply polarising figure due to his Hindu nationalist rhetoric and failure to swiftly curb deadly 2002 anti-Muslim riots that swept Gujarat during his early years as chief

minister of the prosperous western state.

While Priyanka, a mother of two children, has replaced her brother Rahul in the headlines with her attacks on Modi, analysts say her appearance has come too late to rescue the party from a humiliating rout.

Furthermore, the financial dealings of her husband Robert Vadra have given the BJP a new opportunity to hammer away at its anti-corruption message after the Congress-led coalition's two scandal-plagued terms in office.

Rahul was groomed for the leading political role by Italian-born Sonia, but he has shown strong reluctance to take up his dynastic mantle and a leaked US diplomatic memo in 2007 said he was "widely viewed as an empty suit".

"Priyanka clearly has got the BJP a little shaken up and the campaign no longer looks like such a walkover, but she's been brought out too late," said Subhash Agrawal, founder of think

**Man ablaze hugs politician on TV**

AFP, Lucknow

A television debate show in northern India ended in horror after a spectator set himself ablaze and embraced a local politician, leaving both men fighting for their lives, police said yesterday.

The election show on India's state-owned national TV channel Doordarshan was being pre-recorded in a park on Monday in Sultanpur, a town about 160 kilometres from the city of Lucknow.

A man, named by police as Durgesh Kumar Singh, emerged from a crowd of about 150 onlookers, doused himself in petrol and then grabbed the local leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party, Kamruzzama Fauji. Singh sustained burns on 95 percent of his body which doctors say are likely to be fatal, while Fauji was in critical condition with 75 percent burns, police said.

"This man suddenly came on the stage, poured petrol on himself and set himself on fire before tightly hugging one of the political guests," local photographer Pankaj Kumar Gupta told AFP.

**Congress a sinking ship: Modi**

AGENCIES

BJP's prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi said that the Congress was a sinking ship and that the days of the mother-son duo (Sonia and Rahul Gandhi) were over.

Talking exclusively to Zee News, Modi said, "When the polls were announced the Congress thought that there would be a hung parliament. They have been saying that we will not let Modi become PM, we will back a Third Front government. From their comments it seems that they have already lost the polls and the days of mother-son duo are over."

"The Congress realises that their ship is sinking given the kind of voting that has taken place till now. They have no agenda, so they abuse me," he added.

Meanwhile, Congress may consider dropping its claim to lead the next 'secular' coalition at the Centre and lend support to a non-BJP front in order to deny Narendra Modi the prime ministership.

A formal indication of a 'come-what-may' strategy to prevent a BJP-led NDA government at the Centre came from key Sonia aide Ahmed Patel in an exclusive interview to TOI.

"Congress is not hankering for power. The party can consider all options necessary to deny power to communal forces (read BJP). The final decision will be taken by the Congress president after due consultation with all colleagues," said Patel, who is political secretary to the party president and a key strategist.

**Obama ends Asia tour Ignites Chinese anger as he warns against force**

AFP, Manila

Barack Obama ended an Asian tour yesterday with a warning to China against using force in territorial disputes, as Chinese authorities accused the US president of ganging up with "troublemaking" allies. The barbs ensured a tense finish to a four-nation trip dominated by the worsening maritime rows between China and US allies in the region, which have triggered fears of military conflict. "We believe that nations and peoples have the right to live in security and peace, to have their sovereignty and territorial integrity respected," Obama told a gathering of US and Filipino troops in Manila. "We believe that international law must be upheld, that freedom of navigation must be preserved and commerce must not be impeded. We believe that disputes must be resolved peacefully and not by intimidation or force." Close American ally the Philippines has



been embroiled in one of the highest-profile territorial disputes with China, over tiny islets, reefs and rocks in the South China Sea.

China claims nearly all of the South China Sea, which is believed to contain huge deposits of oil and gas, even waters and islands or reefs close to its neighbours.

The Philippines and the United States signed an agreement on Monday that will allow a greater US military presence on Filipino bases.

Nevertheless, an editorial in the state-run China Daily newspaper yesterday signalled that Chinese authorities viewed Obama's trips to Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and the Philippines as a tour of anti-Chinese hostility.

"It is increasingly obvious that Washington is taking Beijing as an opponent," the editorial said as it summarised his visit.

"With Obama reassuring the US allies of protection in any conflict with China, it is now clear that Washington is no longer bothering to conceal its attempt to contain

**BRIEF ON INDIAN POLLS**

**Dead candidate can be declared winner!**

TNN, Hyderabad

In perhaps a first in the country, a political party is set to campaign for a candidate who is no more and the electorate is likely to cast votes in favour of the dead candidate. The Election Commission of India (ECI) on Monday cleared the confusion surrounding the Allagadda Assembly constituency in Kurnool district where YSR Congress nominee Bhumu Shobha Nagi Reddy was killed in a road accident on April 23. The ECI ruled that Shobha will remain in the fray and if she polls the maximum votes, will be declared the winner. However, the election would be countermanded and a bypoll will be held, it was clarified.

**Gang-raped for campaigning!**

AFP, Patna

A Muslim woman in eastern India has alleged she was gang-raped by more than a dozen men because of her work helping the Hindu nationalist opposition in ongoing elections, police said yesterday. The woman from Jharkhand state has filed a complaint with police that a mob attacked her in her home on Monday and also assaulted her 13-year-old daughter. Her husband was allegedly handcuffed during the attack. The victim, in her 30s, was part of a so-called "minority" wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) designed to attract Muslim voters to the party, which is expected to sweep the