

# NEWSIN brief

## Toxic alcohol kills 63 in Kenya

AFP, Nairobi

At least 63 people have died in Kenya this week and dozens of others have become ill or even blind after drinking toxic homebrew alcohol, police and hospitals said yesterday. Deaths from toxic alcohol are relatively common in Kenya, with similar cases making the

## US changes visa rules to keep foreign talent

AFP, Washington

The United States said Tuesday it will soon start issuing work visas to the spouses of some foreign workers as part of a drive to retain highly skilled people. The change will affect the spouses of people with so-called H-1B visas, a limited-term working visa that employees obtain when they are sponsored by their companies. As it stands now, their spouses only get a "dependent" H-4 visa which allows them to live in the US but not to work. Under the changes, they can now apply

## Rohani vetoes WhatsApp ban

AFP, Tehran

Iran's President Hassan Rohani has vetoed a plan to ban WhatsApp, following a row over censorship of the popular messaging application, media reports said yesterday. Access to social networks, including Twitter and Facebook, are routinely blocked by Iranian authorities, as are other websites considered un-Islamic or

## Pak parliament lifts YouTube ban

THE HINDU ONLINE

Despite repeated assurances from the government on lifting the ban on YouTube, the website, though accessed through proxy servers, remains out of bounds for Pakistanis. Demands for the ban to be lifted have been made many times and on Tuesday the National Assembly passed a resolution demanding that it be lifted soon. YouTube was blocked in September 2012 following upload of a

## Nigeria kidnapping: US sends experts

AFP, Kano

The United States has sent military experts to Nigeria to help rescue hundreds of schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram Islamists three weeks ago, amid growing global pressure over their fate. Barack Obama made the announcement as it emerged that 11 more girls had been kidnapped late Sunday -- three more than originally thought -- in the



**A South African voter yawns while queuing with others at a polling station in the restive Bekkersdal township during the early hours of yesterday. South Africa's election commission said that polling stations in urban areas had reported a high voter turnout Wednesday, a scenario that could prove a boon for the ruling ANC's political opponents.**

PHOTO: AFP

# Air 'too dangerous to breathe': WHO

BBC ONLINE

The World Health Organization says air pollution in many of the world's cities is breaching its guidelines.

Its survey of 1,600 cities in 91 countries revealed that nearly 90% of people in urban centres breathe air that fails to meet levels deemed safe.

The WHO says that about half of the world's urban population is exposed to pollution at least 2.5 times higher than it recommends.

The WHO currently sets safe levels of air quality based on the concentration of polluting particles called particulate matter (PM) found in the air.

It recommends that levels of fine particles called PM2.5 should not be more than 10 micrograms per cubic metre on average over a year, and slightly larger pollutants, called PM10, should not reach more than 20 micrograms per cubic metre on average.

Some cities in Asia showed extremely high levels of pollution. Peshawar in Pakistan registered a PM10 level of 540 micrograms per cubic metre over a period of two months in 2010, while Delhi in India had an average PM2.5 of 153 micrograms per cubic metre in the same year.

Air quality was poorest in Asia, followed by South America and Africa.

"This air is dangerous to breathe," said Dr Flavia Bustreo, the WHO's assistant director-general for family, children and women's health.

The most recent figures suggest that seven million people around the world died as a result of air pollution in 2012. The WHO calls its the world's single largest environmental health risk, and links poor air quality to heart disease, respiratory problems and cancer.

# Putin tells separatists to delay referendums

AFP, Moscow

President Vladimir Putin yesterday told pro-Russian rebels fighting in east Ukraine to halt plans for independence referendums and said his troops had been withdrawn from the border, a potential breakthrough in the worst showdown between Moscow and the West since the Cold War.

The Russian leader also hailed a planned May 25 presidential election in Ukraine, previously criticised by the Kremlin, as a "move in the right direction".

The softer tone of the surprise comments -- delivered during a meeting in Moscow with the visiting head of the OSCE Didier Burkhalter -- suggested a potential resolution of the geopolitical confrontation and on-the-ground conflict in Ukraine that had been building towards war.

Putin's words came as fighting raged in east and southeast Ukraine, where troops were steadily pushing back pro-

Russian rebels who have seized more than a dozen towns in a stepped-up offensive.

The United States and Europe were also preparing sanctions to hammer whole swathes of the Russian economy, which is

## UKRAINE CRISIS



teetering on recession, if the Ukraine presidential poll was scuppered.

Putin said of the estimated 40,000 troops he had ordered to Ukraine's border two months ago: "We have pulled them back. Today they are not at the Ukrainian

border but in places of regular exercises, at training grounds."

However, his claim was later denied by Nato.

The insurgents in east Ukraine -- which the West sees as controlled by Moscow despite Russian denials -- had been planning two referendums Sunday to proclaim independent republics centred on the cities of Donetsk and Lugansk.

Ethnic Russians who make up a large part of the population in the southeastern half of the ex-Soviet nation of 46 million had expressed fears about losing their language and other rights under a new pro-Western government that is likely to emerge after the vote.

Officials said 14 troops have been killed, 66 wounded and three helicopter gunships lost in the operation against the rebels, who are estimated to have lost more than 30 fighters.

Clashes and a resulting inferno in the southern port city of Odessa last Friday claimed another 42 lives, most of them pro-Russian activists, pushing the

# Syria rebels begin Homs evacuation

BBC ONLINE

Hundreds of rebels have been evacuated from their last stronghold in the central Syrian city of Homs.

Two convoys of buses have so far left the Old City and taken fighters to rebel-held territory to the north. The withdrawal is part of a UN-brokered deal that will also see rebels release dozens of captives and ease two sieges.

It marks the end of three years of resistance in the central city, once dubbed the "capital of the revolution" against President Bashar al-Assad.

Much of Homs fell to the opposition in 2011, but over the past two years government forces have gradually regained control by subjecting areas once home to tens of thousands to continuous siege and bombardment.

The rebel fighters and their families were sad and bitter as they said goodbye to a place they swore they would never leave. They buckled finally, our correspondent adds, after the government's forces employed the tactic of what some Syrian army officers called "surrender or starve".

Homs governor Talal al-Barazi told the BBC that the operation was scheduled to end yesterday.

More than 150,000 people are believed to have been killed in the three-year conflict. Another nine million have fled their homes.

Despite the conflict, the Syrian government is planning to hold a presidential election on 3 June. The opposition have dismissed the poll, which Assad is widely expected to win, as a farce.

# 'Israel spying on US alarmingly'

AFP, Washington

Israel spies on the United States more than any other ally does and these activities have reached an alarming level, Newsweek magazine reported Tuesday.

The main targets are US industrial and technical secrets, the weekly said, quoting classified briefings on legislation that would make it easier for Israeli citizens to get visas to enter America.

Newsweek said a congressional staffer familiar with a briefing last January called the testimony "very sobering ... alarming ... even terrifying", and quoted another as saying the behavior was "damaging."

"No other country close to the United States continues to cross the line on espionage like the Israelis do," said the staff, according to Newsweek.

It said that briefing was one of several in recent months given by the Department of Homeland Security, the State Department, the FBI and the National Counterintelligence Directorate.

Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman rejected the allegations.

"We're talking about lies and falsehood, simply label which is baseless and unfounded," he said.

Lieberman added Israel was not involved in any form of espionage against the United States, either direct or indirect in nature.

# Modi in power could bring India, China closer: Report

IANS, Beijing

If BJP prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi comes to power, it could bring India and China closer, says an influential state-run Chinese daily.

The Global Times in a write up says that Modi was once a "practical businessman". After he became chief minister of Gujarat he established good relations with China.

"A large number of Chinese enterprises invested in Gujarat, contributing to the economic development of the state. Therefore, ties between China and India may become closer under Modi's leadership," says the daily.

The article, titled 'Modi victory could cause disquiet in West', says that "there is still visible disquiet about the prospects of the election in mainstream western media".



It says that some western media and observers are "trying to foment discord between China and India by hyping up nationalist Modi's aggressive statements on the border issue between the two countries. They underscored the possibility that India will ally with Japan and Vietnam to contain China after Modi becomes the PM".

"In fact, it has been a policy for India to offset the negative effects of China's rise by enhancing strategic cooperation with countries around China. It's unlikely that Modi will change this policy.

The article says the Bharatiya Janata Party manifesto promises a multilateral diplomacy and the establishment of "a web of allies" to further India's best national interests, "which steers away from a tilt toward the US held by India in diplomacy in the past decades. This



**Indian Congress Party Vice President Rahul Gandhi (2L) speaks with residents near a polling station during voting in Amethi yesterday.**

PHOTO: AFP

## POLLS BYTES

### Ishrat Jahan Case: Amit Shah given clean chit

NDTV ONLINE

Bang in the middle of election season, this will be a welcome headline for Amit Shah, chief aide of Narendra Modi, the BJP's prime ministerial candidate. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) today stated in court that it has no evidence against Mr Shah in the Ishrat Jahan encounter case. Ishrat, a 19-year-old Mumbai student, was killed along with three men in the outskirts of Ahmedabad by Gujarat policemen who claimed they had been told by the Intelligence Bureau that the four were terrorists who planned to assassinate Narendra Modi, the chief minister of Gujarat.



### Two cases filed against Priyanka

PTI, Patna

Two Bihar BJP leaders yesterday filed separate cases against Priyanka Vadra for her neech rajniti (low-level politics) barb at Narendra Modi even as Rahul Gandhi countered the saffron offensive over the remark, saying people's actions are low, not their caste. The controversy over the remark also refused to die down with BJP and Congress sniping at each other. Congress lambasted Modi over his attempts for "opportunistic exploitation" of Priyanka's remarks and claimed that he tells the electorate to vote their caste

## Assam violence toll hits 43

AFP, Narayanguri

Indian police discovered five more bodies of women and children yesterday after a "barbaric" rampage by tribal separatists targeting Muslims in northeast Assam, taking the total number killed to 43, officials said.

The bodies were found as authorities continued their search of two



**Indian Chief Minister of Assam Tarun Gogoi (2L) visited the affected area yesterday.**

PHOTO: AFP

districts in the remote tea-growing state where masked gunmen last week shot dead Muslim villagers including babies as they slept.

Police have accused tribal Bodo rebels of killing the Muslims whose migrant community has been locked for years in land disputes with the

indigenous group in the state that borders Bhutan and Bangladesh.

Local media have reported that Bodos attacked the Muslims as punishment for failing to vote for their candidate last month in the country's mammoth, staggered election that is drawing to a close.

"So far the death toll is put at 43. The killings were indeed barbaric with even five-month-old baby not spared," Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi told reporters from the worst-hit Narayanguri village.

"It is unfortunate that bodies are still being recovered and we have reports that 11 more people are missing," Gogoi said.

The death toll has climbed from at least 32 on Sunday after a series of bodies were discovered in recent days, while several people wounded in the carnage on May 1 and May 2 have also died in hospital.

Security forces have launched a massive hunt for the Bodo guerrillas blamed for the violence which has forced several thousand people to flee their homes in fear, officials have said.

Police blamed the attacks on the outlawed National Democratic Front of Bodoland, which has been demanding a separate homeland for decades, but the group has denied it

## India's first voter fulfils his duty

PTI, Shimla

India's first voter, Shyam Saran Negi, yesterday casted his vote at a polling booth in his native place Kalpa.

The 97-year-old Negi reached the polling booth at 6.55 a.m. accompanied by his wife Hira Mani (92).

Shyam Saran Negi became the first voter of the country when elections were held for the first time on October 25, 1951 in Kinnaur. The polling was held in phases and other parts of the country went to the polls in February 1952.

The State Election Commission had recently appointed him as its brand ambassador for the poll campaign in the tribal region.

Negi's name was registered at serial no 123 in polling booth no 50 on Wednesday. Incidentally, the booth was set up in the school from where he had retired after serving for 23 years.

He was the first person to cast his vote there, followed by his wife.

Kinnaur Deputy Commissioner DD Sharma welcomed Negi at the polling station and honoured him by presenting a cap and scarf when he came out of the polling booth.



## High turnout in 8th phase

PTI, New Delhi

High polling was registered yesterday in the penultimate phase of Lok Sabha elections in 64 constituencies in a highstake battle where the fates of 1,737 candidates including Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi, his cousin Varun, Ram Vilas Paswan and Rabri Devi, were decided.

One person was killed when police opened fire outside a polling booth in Bihar's Sitamarhi district in a bid to prevent its capture.

The highest turnout in the 8th phase was 81.28 per cent in the six seats in West Bengal, which Trinamool Congress is trying to wrest from Left Front, followed by 76 per cent in Seemandra, where voters chose 25 representatives to Lok Sabha and 175 members of the proposed assembly simultaneously.

Two key battleground states -- Bihar, where seven constituencies went to poll on Wednesday, and Uttar Pradesh, where 15 seats were up for grabs -- recorded impressive voters' turnout of 58 per cent and 55.52 per cent.

Congress hopes to retain as much ground as possible in yesterday's phase covering central UP in the face of a strong surge by BJP, playing the caste and religion cards, and a desperate BSP and SP seeking to hold on to their Muslim-OBC-dalit vote base.

After the phase, voting has been completed in 502 of the total of 543 constituencies and the remaining 41 seats will go to

polls in the last round on May 12.

The talking point of yesterday's polling was Amethi in Uttar Pradesh, where Rahul Gandhi is contesting for the third time in a row. In Amethi, 55.2 per cent polling was recorded.

Rahul, who has represented the seat since 2004, for the first time toured polling booths in Amethi on the voting day, apparently in the face of a tough challenge posed by his rivals -- Smriti Irani of BJP and Kumar Vishwas of Aam Aadmi Party.

Modi had made an aggressive campaign in Amethi, the bastion of Gandhi family for more than three decades, on the last day of electioneering for the 8th phase on April 5.

In neighbouring Sultanpur constituency -- where Rahul's cousin and BJP's Varun Gandhi is in fray -- 57.2 per cent voters cast their votes.

Barring sporadic clashes between workers of YSR Congress Party and TDP and alleged attacks on policemen in Rayalaseema districts, polling has been largely peaceful for the 175 assembly and 25 Lok Sabha constituencies in Seemandra where Congress is battling hard to repeat its 2009 impressive show apparently as a price for bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh.

Prominent among the 118 candidates in Bihar were LJP chief Paswan from Hajipur and former Bihar chief minister and RJD candidate Rabri Devi from Saran where she is pitted against Rajiv Pratap Rudy of BJP.

## LOK SABHA POLLS 2014