

NEWSIN brief

S Sudan rivals head for peace talks

South Sudan's President Salva Kiir and rebel chief Riek Machar prepared to meet yesterday for the first time since brutal civil war broke out nearly five months ago, amid mounting international pressure to stem bloodshed and avert famine. The expected talks come a day after the UN warned crimes against humanity had likely been carried out in the still raging conflict.

Berlusconi begins community service

Italy's Silvio Berlusconi began his community service for tax fraud yesterday in a spectacular fall from grace for the flamboyant ex-premier. The billionaire tycoon, who has been convicted last year and has been expelled from parliament, has been ordered to work four hours once a week for up to a year helping out in a hospice for Alzheimer's patients.

1 dead, 30 injured in Pakistan quakes

A series of small earthquakes hit southern Pakistan yesterday, killing at least one person and injuring 30 others, officials said. Three shallow quakes struck near the city of Nawabshah in Sindh province in the space of an hour starting at 3:51am, sending frightened residents running into the streets praying for their lives. The most powerful tremor was measured at 5.0 magnitude.

Tanzanian elephants may vanish in 7 yrs

Poachers are slaughtering Tanzania's elephants for their ivory at such alarming rates that the population could be completely wiped out in just seven years, conservationists told a conference yesterday. "Approximately 30 elephants a day are killed... at this rate the population will be exterminated by 2020," the Tanzanian Elephant Protection Society, an independent conservation group, said.

13 killed as train rams car in India

Thirteen people were killed and three persons seriously injured when a train rams into a jeep at an unmanned railway crossing in Maharajganj district of Uttar Pradesh state of India. The incident took



Russian soldiers salute Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev (inset) during a Victory Day parade at the Red Square in Moscow, yesterday. Thousands of Russian troops marched in Red Square to mark 69 years since victory in World War II in a show of military might amid tensions in Ukraine following Moscow's annexation of Crimea.

PHOTO: AFP



Putin takes victory lap to annexed Crimea

West, Kiev slam visit as 21 more killed in Ukraine's restive east

AFP, Sevastopol

President Vladimir Putin took a victory lap yesterday in his first visit to Crimea since its annexation by Russia, as fighting in eastern Ukraine left 21 dead just days ahead of a separatist vote. The visit drew a sharp rebuke from authorities in Kiev, who accused the Russian strongman of stoking tensions with his visit to Sevastopol, home to Russia's Black Sea fleet. "This provocation once again confirms that Russia deliberately seeks further escalation of tensions," the ministry said, calling the visit a "flagrant violation of Ukraine's sovereignty".

The White House also condemned the trip, with National Security Council spokesman Laura Magnuson saying it "will only serve to fuel tensions". With unease high ahead of an independence vote planned for Sunday in parts of eastern Ukraine, fighting between Ukrainian troops and pro-Moscow militants erupted in the southeastern port city of Mariupol. Interior Minister Arsen Avakov said on his official Facebook page that the fighting had killed 20 insurgents and one police officer. Five policemen were also wounded and four rebels captured.

An AFP reporter in the city said its police headquarters were a gutted wreck, with parts of the building on fire as firefighters struggled to douse the blaze. In Sevastopol, Putin reviewed Russian ships in the bay,

hailing the sailors on board with a "Hello comrades!" as he congratulated them on Friday's 69th anniversary of the Soviet victory over the Nazis in World War II.

Putin said 2014 "will go down in history" as the year when the "historic truth" of Crimea as part of Russia was recognised. "Much work remains ahead, but we will overcome all difficulties... because we are together. And that means we are even stronger," Putin told a cheering crowd.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in March set off the worst diplomatic crisis in the West's relations with Moscow since the end of the Cold War.

It has been followed by uprisings and fighting in eastern Ukraine that have raised concerns of a civil war erupting on Europe's doorstep. Despite a surprise call from Putin this week to delay independence referendums, rebels holed up in more than a dozen towns and cities in eastern Ukraine vowed to press ahead with votes this Sunday that are bound to increase tensions.

Putin flew to Sevastopol after overseeing the traditional Victory Day parade in Moscow's Red Square. Addressing some 11,000 troops who marched alongside tanks, armoured vehicles and mobile missile systems, Putin hailed Russia's "all-conquering patriotic force". The Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany 69 years ago

UKRAINE CRISIS

Last Syria rebels quit Homs City

Civilians return to ruins

AFP, Homs

The last Syrian rebels left Homs' Old City yesterday under an evacuation deal that hands the government a symbolic victory, as civilians began trickling back in to find neighbourhoods in rubble.

The pullout leaves the rebels confined to a single district on the outskirts of the central city, once "the capital of the revolution" against President Bashar al-Assad.

As troops moved in to clear out explosives, hundreds of civilians began returning to see what remained of their homes in Hamidiyeh, a Christian district in the Old Town, which has been under nearly daily bombardment during a two-year siege.

Many were shocked, with tears in their eyes, as they climbed over debris to inspect the ruins, said an AFP journalist at the scene.

Homs Governor Talal al-Barazi said "we have completed the evacuation of armed men from the Old City of Homs," referring to the withdrawal, which began Wednesday.

Most left Wednesday and Thursday, but buses carrying the last 250 rebels were delayed till Friday because fighters not involved in the deal blocked the pledged flow of food supplies into the Shiite towns of Nubol and Zahraa, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

As the aid convoys entered Zahraa Friday, the last rebels in Homs were finally allowed to leave.

Some 2,200 people were killed as near daily bombardment reduced the area to ruins, and people were reduced to surviving on little more than herbs.



Central African Republican (CAR) children gold miners sit next to a traditional mine in the village of Gam where gold mining is the main business activity. Children in the country are engaged in the worst forms of child labor, including being used as child soldiers in armed groups. Children are also commonly engaged in dangerous work in agriculture and mines. PHOTO: AFP

Sisi turns Islam on the Islamists

REUTERS, Cairo

As the Egyptian state presses its crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, the man expected to become president has deployed a new weapon in the battle with the Islamists: his own vision of Islam. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the former army chief who deposed the Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi and is expected to be elected president later this month, has cast himself as a defender of religion and taken aim at the doctrinal foundations of Islamist groups the state is seeking to crush.

Striking a pious tone that sets him apart from former president Hosni Mubarak, Sisi also appears to be taking on the mantle of a religious reformer. He has blamed outdated "religious discourse" for holding back Egypt. "I see that the religious discourse in the entire Islamic world has cost Islam its humanity," Sisi said in an interview televised on May 5. "This requires us, and for that matter all leaders, to review their



positions." With references to God and morality, Sisi may turn out to be the most outwardly pious of any of the military men to have governed Egypt since the republic was founded in 1953.

This does not mean he will inject more Islam into the government of a state whose laws and culture have long been shaped by religion. Sisi has said there is no such thing as a "religious state" - challenging a central Islamist concept.

But he seems certain to encourage the role played by religion in the public life of this conservative society.

And as the authorities try to curb Islamist influence by tightening control over mosques, Sisi's presidency could bring a sustained effort to reinforce state-backed, apolitical Islam, providing clerical cover for destroying his Islamist foes.

In the interview screened on May 5, Sisi said violent groups were a front for the Brotherhood, vowing that the movement would not exist once he was in power.

NIGERIA SCHOOLGIRL ABDUCTIONS Warnings of raid 'ignored: Amnesty

BBC ONLINE

Nigeria's military had advance warning of the attack on a school at which some 270 girls were kidnapped but failed to act, a rights group says.

Amnesty International says it was told by several credible sources that the military was given more than four hours' warning of the raid. Fifty-three of the girls escaped shortly after being seized on 14 April, leaving more than 200 still captive. The authorities have not yet commented on Amnesty's statement.

Teams of experts from the US and UK have arrived in Nigeria to help locate and rescue the abductees. Amnesty says the military in the Borno State capital, Maiduguri, was informed of the impending attack soon after 1900 local time - the school was attacked around midnight.

Despite the warning, reinforcements were not sent to help protect the school in the remote Chibok area, Amnesty says. Militant Islamist group Boko Haram has said it captured the girls, saying they should not have been in school and should get married instead.

Boko Haram, whose name means "Western education is forbidden" in the Hausa language, began its insurgency in Borno state in 2009. At least 1,200 people are estimated to have died in the violence this year alone.



Modi camp confident as election near finale

AFP, New Delhi

India's right-wing opposition voiced growing confidence of a decisive victory in a marathon election as potential partners distanced themselves from the favourite to become prime minister, Narendra Modi.

"There's no need to wait until the 16th as the people have already decided," a bullish Modi told supporters a week ahead of the announcement of results from the world's biggest general election.

"It will be a Modi government this time. Good days are ahead of you," he added in a rally in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, which will host part of the final round of voting on Monday.

Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is widely expected to win the most seats, but is unlikely to gain a majority on its own in the 543-seat parliament. Some analysts are predicting the party will have to find new allies in order to form a government.

Several potential allies have been distancing themselves from Modi during the final days of the election contest.

But Modi's top aide Amit Shah yesterday quashed any suggestion that his boss might step aside after the elections for a compromise candidate that would be acceptable to other parties who have cool relations with Modi. "The NDA will get more than 300 seats in

these elections," Shah said in reference to an existing BJP-led opposition grouping in parliament known as the National Democratic Alliance.

"We will get a clear majority and our prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi will be the prime minister," Shah added in comments carried by the CNN-IBN network.

Although the ruling Congress party is expected to be ousted after a decade in power, Modi's hopes of becoming premier could still be thwarted if leaders of powerful regional parties refuse to do business with him.

One potential partner, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) leader Mayawati, told reporters on Friday that she would not countenance any deal with Modi.

The West Bengal-based Trinamool Congress, another party that has been talked about as a BJP partner, also kept up its recent cold war against Modi by saying the "doors are shut" towards a government led by him.

The 63-year-old, who is chief minister of the thriving state of Gujarat, remains a polarising figure, and is feared by many Muslims after communal riots erupted in Gujarat 12 years ago soon after he came to power. More than 1,000 people were killed, mainly Muslims.

LOK SABHA POLLS 2014

EC sends notice to Rahul over hate speech

AGENCIES

Noting that he prima facie violated the Model Code of Conduct, the Election Commission yesterday issued a show cause notice to Congress leader Rahul Gandhi for his alleged remarks that if BJP comes to power, 22,000 people will be killed in violence.

The Commission has asked him to respond to the notice by May 12 morning, saying if he does not present his case by 11:00AM on Monday, the poll panel will take further action without further reference.

According to the notice, addressing an election rally in Solan, Himachal Pradesh on May 1, Rahul had reportedly said: "If there is BJP, there will be violence. If there is BJP, 22,000 people will die, because they spread anger... this question was never raised before." The BJP had moved the EC against

BANGLADESHI IMMIGRANT ISSUE Modi should be in jail: Mamata

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee yesterday said had her party been in power at the Centre in Delhi, she would have sent BJP's prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi to jail for his remark on illegal Bangladeshi immigrants.

"Had I been in Delhi in place of Congress, I would have sent Narendra Modi to jail by tying a rope around his waist," she told an election rally in Berhmapore in Murshidabad district bordering Bangladesh.

Mamata hit out again at the BJP Prime Ministerial candidate for his remark that illegal Bangladeshi immigrants would be deported after May 16 when results of Indian national elections are announced.

"Had Congress party initially exerted pressure on BJP, it would not have dared to talk so much now," Mamata said and charged that Congress was 'cocooned in fear' and did not have the guts to act against BJP.

Taunting Modi, she said "I tell you, get ready with your baggage. When counting of votes is over, the people of Bengal will drive you (Modi) out."

"I am in charge of government in Bengal. Even by becoming the PM, he (Modi) has no right to bypass the state government to take a decision (Modi). It is a law and order subject, it is not your subject," she said. Under the Indian Constitution, law and order comes under the jurisdiction of a state government and the federal government cannot interfere without concurrence of the state government.

