

NEWSIN brief

'Qaeda' attack on Yemen palace kills 5

AFP, Sanaa

Suspected al-Qaeda militants attacked Yemen's presidential palace Friday, killing five guards and triggering a fierce gunfight as the jihadists hit back at an army offensive aimed at crushing them.

President Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi was not at the palace in the capital when gunmen attacked a checkpoint manned by guards outside the compound, a security source

ANC wins South Africa vote

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

The African National Congress (ANC) has brushed off political scandals and economic discontent to win a fifth consecutive South African election, results showed on Friday. With all votes counted, the ANC had a 62.2% share of the vote, down from the 65.9% it won in the 2009 election, according to EC. The result guarantees a second five-year term for the controversial president, Jacob Zuma.

Dubai bus crash kills 15 Asian workers

AFP, Dubai

A bus overturned and hit a lorry parked on the hard shoulder of a motorway outside Dubai yesterday, killing 15 Asian workers on board, state media said. Police did not immediately specify the nationalities of the dead in the accident in the Dubai suburb of Ruwayyah.

MH370: Underwater quest to resume

AFP, Perth

A mini-sub hunting for missing Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 will be back in the search zone within days, an official said yesterday, as the Australian ship carrying the device prepared to leave on the mission. Australian vessel Ocean Shield is carrying the US Navy Bluefin-21 mini-sub which had been scouring the seabed for the plane which disappeared on March 8 carrying 239 people until it docked to resupply early this week.

US panel backs Venezuela sanctions

AFP, Washington

A US congressional panel passed a bill Friday that would impose sanctions on those responsible for human rights abuses against anti-government protesters in Venezuela. The House Foreign Affairs Committee's vote came after 42 people died protesting against President Nicolas Maduro's socialist government's inaction against rampant crime, runaway inflation and shortages of basic goods.

I see our daughters in them

US first lady says about abducted Nigerian girls

AGENCIES

Michelle Obama has taken the rare step of delivering her husband's weekly video address to express outrage over the plight of more than 250 schoolgirls kidnapped by Islamist militants in Nigeria.

The US first lady began the address condemning the crime. "This unconscionable act was committed by a terrorist group determined to keep these girls from getting an education – grown men attempting to snuff out the aspirations of young girls," she said.

The militant Islamist group Boko Haram kidnapped 276 girls from a secondary school in Chibok in remote northeastern Nigeria on 14 April and has threatened to sell them into slavery, while eight girls were taken from another village earlier this week.

The abductions have drawn international condemnation and promises of special forces assistance to find the girls from the US and UK.

"I want you to know that Barack has directed our government to do everything possible to support the Nigerian government's efforts to find these girls and bring them home," the first lady said. "In these girls, Barack and I see our own daughters. We see their hopes, their dreams, and we can only imagine the anguish their parents are feeling right now."

Meanwhile, the UN Security Council on Friday strongly condemned the abduction of hundreds of Nigerian schoolgirls, as the world body's secretary general dispatched an envoy to help find them.

The unanimous UN Security Council declaration said the mass kidnappings "may amount to crimes against humanity" under international law, but made no explicit reference to charges in the International Criminal Court.



Syrians return to the Juret al-Shayah district of the central city of Homs yesterday after the last Syrian rebels left the city's neighbourhood under an evacuation deal that hands the government a symbolic victory. Thousands of people walked through the devastated streets of their former neighbourhoods, some appearing shellshocked by the scale of the damage.

PHOTO: AFP

'Red Shirts' vow to defend democracy

Warn of civil war if government falls

AGENCIES

Thousands of pro-government "Red Shirts" massed in Thailand's capital yesterday to challenge attempts by opposition protesters to hand power to an unelected regime, warning that the kingdom was lurching towards "civil war".

The dismissal of prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra and nine ministers by the Constitutional Court last week for the improper transfer of a top security official has plunged the restive kingdom deeper into crisis.

Officials said about 3,000 police officers were on standby for the pro-government rally on the western outskirts of Bangkok yesterday, with turnout expected to peak in the evening. Red Shirt leaders are saying that they came to the streets to protect democracy in Thailand.

"The Red Shirts cannot accept the undemocratic and unconstitutional appointment of a prime minister," said chairman Jatuporn Prompan, denouncing a call by the opposition for judges, the Senate president and other prominent figures to choose a new premier.

"It would be the beginning of a disaster for the country that will lead to civil war," he said.

Protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban, a former deputy premier in a government run by the pro-establishment Democrat Party,

called his supporters out onto Bangkok's streets on Friday for what he says will be a final push to get the government out.

He then wants to install a "people's council" to oversee reforms aimed at excluding Thaksin from politics.

"The caretaker government is unlawful ... Thailand has no real government," Suthep told reporters at a rally.

He called on the upper house Senate, the judiciary and Election Commission to appoint a neutral prime minister.

Suthep's supporters held rallies and blocked some roads yesterday but there were no reports of violence. Both the pro- and anti-government camps have armed activists within their ranks and the rival protests this weekend, even though they are far apart, have raised fears of trouble.

"If they install an interim prime minister we will escalate our fight for sure. We will not stand for it," Prompan told Reuters.

A day after Yingluck was thrown out of office she was indicted by an anti-corruption agency for negligence over a rice subsidy scheme that ran up huge losses. The upper house Senate is expected to impeach her for that, which would result in a five-year ban from politics.

But Yingluck's Puea Thai party still runs a caretaker government and is hoping to organise a July 20 election that it would probably win.



Thai pro-government "Red Shirts" protesters attend a rally in Bangkok, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

'Kim Jong-un has no real power'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The mystery surrounding the North Korean regime has deepened after a defector claimed that dictator Kim Jong-un is not actually in control of the alienated state.

Instead, an "old boys' network" wields power from the shadows, according to Jang Jin-Sung, a former regime insider and Kim Jong-il's poet laureate and propagandist.

Jang told CNN's Christiane Amanpour that the outside world had been deceived by the handover of power after Kim Jong-il died.

"When Kim Jong-il died and Kim Jong-un succeeded him, people saw the transfer of power from father to son", he said.

"What they did not see also was what happened to the apparatus of the totalitarian system that supported the rule of Kim Jong-il."

According to Jang, the apparatus is called the Organisation and Guidance Department (OGD) – an "old boys' network" full of Kim Jong-il's university friends.

But he said Kim Jong-un, who was educated in Switzerland, does not have the support of the OGD and is therefore little more than a political figurehead reliant on his fathers' advisers.

East braces for secessionist vote

AFP, Mariupol

France and Germany yesterday warned Russia of "consequences" if Moscow continued to sow unrest ahead of Ukrainian elections later this month, on the eve of "illegal" referendums the West fears will split the country apart.

Ukrainian acting President Oleksander Turchinov told eastern regions gripped by a pro-Russian uprising that they would be courting catastrophe if they voted "yes" in today's separatist referendum.

The vote, organised on a largely ad hoc basis with no clear control of authenticity of ballot papers or voter lists, could have serious consequences for Ukraine and relations between Moscow and the West. It risks turning isolated clashes into civil war.

In a joint statement, French President Francois Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel also urged Ukraine's security forces to stop their offensive on rebel-held positions ahead of the planned May 25 presidential election.

The warnings suggested the West might soon move to broaden its sanctions regime to include whole sections of the recession-bound Russian economy.

While the diplomatic pressure on Russia intensified, the situation on the ground remained combustible as the southern city of Mariupol observed a day of mourning for up to 21 people

killed in clashes on Friday between Ukrainian authorities and pro-Russian separatists.

An AFP reporter in Mariupol said passions were running high as the rebels set alight a captured Ukrainian army armoured vehicle, causing the ammunition inside to explode.

Meanwhile, preparations were in full swing for the disputed referendums in the two eastern regions of Donetsk and Lugansk, home to 7.3 million of Ukraine's total population of 46 million.

Merkel and Hollande dismissed the referendums as "illegal", amid Western fears it will hasten the break-up of Ukraine and could lead to all-out civil war on Europe's fringes.

Voters in today's referendums will first be asked if they support the creation of two independent republics that many see as a prelude to joining Russia, as happened in Crimea.

Vyacheslav Ponomaryov, the rebel mayor of the city of Sloviansk said he expected a 100 percent turnout. Immediately after the referendum, "the Republic of Donetsk will begin to function" and cultivate "friendly relations" with Russia, he added.

A poll released Thursday by the Pew Research Centre in the United States suggested 70 percent of Ukrainians in the east want to stay in a united country, while only 18 percent back secession.

UKRAINE CRISIS

Asean voices alarm over China sea spat

AFP, Naypyidaw

Southeast Asia's regional bloc voiced alarm yesterday over escalating tensions in the South China Sea after members Vietnam and Philippines squared off against Beijing in the disputed waters.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) foreign ministers "expressed serious concerns over the on-going developments" in the sea, which is subject to a web of bitter overlapping claims, on the eve of a leaders' summit in Naypyidaw.

Beijing claims sovereign rights to almost the whole of the South China Sea, which is believed to sit atop vast oil and gas deposits.

Tensions in the South China Sea soared this week after Beijing moved a drilling rig into waters that are also claimed by Hanoi, sparking a stand-off in which Vietnam said its boats were attacked.

S Lanka to implement UN demands except probe over 'war crimes'

PTI, Colombo

President Mahinda Rajapaksa has said Sri Lanka is in the process of implementing all demands made by the sponsors of the UNHRC resolution against it except for allowing an international probe into alleged human rights violations during the last phase of the war with the LTTE.

The assertion was made by the Sri Lankan President during a meeting on Friday with Seiji Kihara, Japan's Parliamentary Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Rajapaksa told the Japanese minister, "Please tell this truth to rest of the world. Except for an international inquiry we are in the process of implementing all other demands made by sponsors of the Resolution."

The President's office quoted Kihara as saying that the UNHRC resolution was unhelpful to Sri Lanka.

"We are not ready to accept biased reports prepared by international bodies. We are confident that Sri Lanka is capable of solving its problems one by one. What is needed is to engage the international community," Kihara said.

Japan along with India was one of the 12 countries which abstained in the UNHRC vote in Geneva in March.

The US-sponsored resolution was adopted with 24 countries voting in favour.

The resolution demanded the setting up of an international investigation into alleged war crimes in Sri Lanka during the last phase of the nearly three decades-long conflict with the LTTE.

Sri Lanka has vowed not to cooperate with the investigation.



Indian PM sends farewell letters to world leaders

PTI, New Delhi

As he prepares to demit office, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has written farewell letters to leaders of various countries, including US President Barack Obama, former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Manmohan, who also wrote to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, has generally conveyed his thanks to them while recalling how they had worked together all these years, sources said.

After serving as the PM for 10 years, Manmohan declared his retirement and said that he will not be a candidate for the top post even if the UPA government comes back to power.

However, he will reportedly continue to retain his seat and complete his term in the Rajya Sabha. The term of PM's Rajya Sabha membership ends in 2018.



India's Congress Party Vice President Rahul Gandhi (3rd L, on truck) shakes hands with supporters as he campaigns with party candidate Ajay Rai (2nd R) in Varanasi yesterday. Campaigning in India's bitterly fought election ended yesterday ahead of next week's final voting with the Hindu nationalist opposition already scenting victory. (Story on page 16)

PHOTO: AFP