

NEWSIN brief

Deadly Balkan floods recede; toll hits 51

AFP, Belgrade

Floodwaters slowly receded in the Balkans yesterday after the region's deadliest natural disaster in living memory, revealing widespread devastation and allowing the mammoth task of cleaning up to begin. The first evacuees got a green light to return home, among the 150,000 who fled as the Sava river burst its banks and laid waste to parts of Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia. The death toll from the Balkans' worst floods in more than a century stands

Boko Haram kills 29 in village attack

REUTERS, Maiduguri

Suspected Boko Haram gunmen have shot dead 29 farm workers as they tilled their fields in a village in the remote northeast, a police source and witnesses said yesterday. The police source said around 10 more people had been wounded in Wednesday's attack on Chukku Nguddoa, in which most of the village, including its grain store, were razed.

Underwater MH370 search resumes

AFP, Sydney

A mini-sub searching for missing Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 recommenced its operations yesterday after technical problems, as it enters its final week of scouring the Indian Ocean seabed for signs of the aircraft. Australia is leading the search for the plane which vanished on March 8 en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing with 239 people onboard and is using the Bluefin-21 mini-sub until new equipment can be obtained.

HUNT FOR NIGERIA GIRLS

US deploys troops in Chad

AFP, Abuja

Protesters were taking their call for the release of more than 200 schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram to Nigeria's president yesterday, as US military personnel headed to Chad as part of the rescue effort. Demonstrators said they were intending to march on Goodluck Jonathan's presidential villa in the capital, Abuja, to maintain pressure on the embattled head of state to secure the girls' safe release. Previous street protests in Abuja have led to meetings with lawmakers at the national parliament, Nigeria's national security adviser and military top brass. The planned march comes after US President Barack Obama announced that 80 military personnel had been deployed to Chad to help find the 223 girls still missing since their abduction on April 14. Obama said in a letter to Congress that the military contingent would stay in Chad until their support in ending the crisis that has triggered worldwide outrage "is no longer required". "These personnel will support the operation of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft for missions over northern Nigeria and the surrounding area," he wrote. The deployment marks a significant boost to an existing US military effort which includes the use of surveillance drones as well as manned aircraft over Nigeria.



Thai soldiers inspect a motorist at a checkpoint near the pro-government "Red shirts" camp site on the outskirts of Bangkok, yesterday. Inset, Anti-government protesters celebrate at their camp outside Government House after Thailand's army chief announced that the armed forces were seizing power, in Bangkok, yesterday. (Story on page 01)

EU POLLS

Far right, anti-EU parties top the ballot

REUTERS, Brussels

The European Union's marathon parliamentary election kicked off yesterday when polls opened in Britain and the Netherlands, where far-right, anti-EU parties are forecast to top the ballot, spearheading a surge in protest votes across the continent. After two months of campaigning that opinion polls suggest has largely failed to inspire the electorate, up to 380 million Europeans are entitled to vote in 28 countries, choosing 751 deputies to represent them in the European Parliament. Despite efforts to mobilise voters, pollsters forecast a low turnout, possibly below the 2009 nadir of 43 percent. With Europe struggling to recover from economic crisis, the election is expected to produce a surge in support for Eurosceptics on both the far-right and hard left. In Britain, the UK Independence Party, which wants to withdraw from the EU and impose tighter immigration controls, is expected to win the vote, pushing the governing Conservatives into third place behind Labour, latest opinion polls show. That could raise pressure on Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, who has promised an in/out referendum on EU membership in 2017 if he is re-elected next year, to take a tougher line on reducing the EU's powers. A similar story is expected in the Netherlands, where Geert Wilders' anti-Islam and anti-EU Freedom Party - which plans to forge an alliance with France's far-right National Front - is expected to win with up to 23 percent of the vote. The Dutch were scheduled to release exit polls yesterday evening, but Britain will only announce its results late on Sunday,

Separatists kill 17 troops

Nato reports partial Russian troops withdrawal ahead of polls

AFP, Volgograd

Pro-Russian rebels firing mortar shells and grenades killed 17 Ukrainian soldiers yesterday, the blackest day yet for the military and a dramatic ratcheting up of tensions just three days before a crunch election. The attacks in the eastern industrial belt near the Russian border underscored the difficulties of the embattled Kiev government in resolving a crisis that is threatening to tear the country apart. Ukraine's Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk accused Russia of trying to "escalate the conflict" and disrupt Sunday's vote, calling on the UN Security Council to hold an urgent meeting on the crisis. He said the Kremlin's announcement of a troop withdrawal from the border was merely a "bluff", and that even if soldiers were redeploying,

Ukraine was still being infiltrated by "armed terrorists".

Adding to the chaos in the east, armed separatists seized four coal mines in the first such confirmed attack on the main economic engines of the former Soviet republic.

Western governments have pressured Russia not to meddle in the

UKRAINE CRISIS

snap election, seen as crucial to preventing all-out civil war erupting on Europe's eastern flank. Russia set Western nerves on edge when it massed some 40,000 troops on the border, raising fears of an invasion into eastern Ukraine after its seizure of the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea in March. Russia's defence ministry yesterday said four trains and more than a dozen

planes were taking troops and equipment away from the border in what President Vladimir Putin said were measures to create "favourable conditions" for Sunday's election.

Nato chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen said he had seen some evidence of limited Russian troop activity that he hoped was "the start of a full and genuine withdrawal".

But rebels in Ukraine's heavily-Russified eastern industrial regions of Donetsk and Lugansk are showing no signs of scaling back resistance to what they and the Kremlin regard as an illegitimate government in Kiev.

Kiev's interim government launched its so-called "anti-terrorist" operation in mid-April aimed at crushing the rebels who have seized more than a dozen eastern cities and towns and declared sovereignty in Donetsk and Lugansk.

UK PRINCE'S PUTIN-HITLER REMARK Moscow demands official explanation

AFP, London

Russia angrily demanded an official explanation from Britain at talks yesterday after Prince Charles reportedly compared President Vladimir Putin's actions in Ukraine to those of Adolf Hitler.

Moscow said the comments were "not worthy of a future British monarch", while a senior Russian diplomat was heading for the Foreign Office in London to lodge a protest over the heir to the throne's remarks.

Charles, 65, made the apparently unguarded comment during a trip to a museum in Canada, in a private conversation with a Polish-born woman who had fled the Nazis as a child, the Daily Mail newspaper reported.

"I had finished showing him the exhibit and talked with him about my own family background and how I came to Canada," 78-year-old Marianne Ferguson told the paper. "The prince then said: 'And now Putin is doing just about the same as Hitler.'"

The leaders of Britain's three main political parties -- Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, Liberal Democrat Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg and Labour leader Ed Miliband -- all backed Charles's right to express private views despite his role as future head of state.

Biggest attack in yrs kills 31 in Xinjiang

REUTERS, Urumqi

Explosives hurled from two vehicles which ploughed into an open market in China's troubled Xinjiang region killed 31 people yesterday, state media reported, the deadliest act of violence in the region in years.

China called the attack in the regional capital of Urumqi a "serious violent terrorist incident" and domestic security chief Meng Jianzhu vowed to strengthen a crackdown on the "arrogance of terrorists". Ninety-four people were wounded.

China has blamed a series of knife and bomb attacks in recent months on separatist militants from Xinjiang, the traditional home of the ethnic Muslim Uighurs.

The cross-country vehicles rammed into shoppers in an open market, Xinhua news agency reported, citing witness reports. Explosives were flung out of the windows, and one of the vehicles exploded.

At the rainsoaked scene of the attack late in the evening, surrounded by police vans, elite police units guarded a cordoned-off candlelight display for victims.

Police kept away onlookers trying to take photographs and blocked foreign reporters from approaching the area.

Xinjiang has been plagued by violence for years, but rights activists and exile groups say the government's own heavy handed policies in the region have sowed the seeds of unrest.

The US offered condolences to victims of the "terrorist attack". Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed condolences over what he called the "terrorist act" in Urumqi in a telegram to Chinese President Xi Jinping.

President Xi said police would tighten security at possible targets and vowed to "severely punish terrorists", Xinhua reported.

The attack was the deadliest in a recent series targeting crowded public places in China. In March, 29 people were stabbed to death at a train station in the southwestern city of Kunming.



Indian activists from Hindu Senstep on burning posters of Bollywood film actor Shah Rukh Khan during a protest demanding the actor leave the country, in New Delhi, yesterday. During the national election Khan allegedly said in a challenge to the entire world that if Baratiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Narendra Modi become's the next prime minister of India then he would leave not only twitter but India also forever.

PHOTO: AFP

'Nuke deal likely by July deadline'

AFP, Shanghai

Talks between Iran and six world powers on a comprehensive deal over its nuclear programme are "very likely" to reach a successful conclusion by a July 20 deadline, Iranian President Hassan Rohani said yesterday.

"The signs that we have been receiving in the last few days are telling us we are very likely to come to an agreement by the end of July," Rohani told reporters in Shanghai, speaking through a translator. "We can achieve this."

Iran insists its nuclear technology activities are aimed at civilian use, while Western powers suspect its drive masks military objectives.

Rohani's comments came after an apparently largely fruitless fourth round of negotiations in Vienna last week.

But the UN atomic watchdog said Wednesday that Iran has agreed to address some of the many long-held allegations that it conducted research into making nuclear weapons before 2003 and possibly since. The International Atomic Energy Agency



said that Iran, which denies ever having sought nuclear weapons, has undertaken to implement "practical measures" by a separate deadline of August 25.

"It takes time" to resolve outstanding issues, Rohani said a day after attending an Asian security forum in China's commercial hub of Shanghai.

"We cannot expect it to be resolved in a few meetings."

He did not specify problems in the talks with the five United Nations (UN) Security Council permanent members plus Germany -- known as the P5+1 group. But he said outstanding issues had been a

"matter of contention for years", suggesting they involved Iran's nuclear programme.

According to media reports, among those gaps are the scope of Iran's enrichment of uranium, which if further purified could be used to trigger a nuclear explosion, and its unfinished Arak research reactor, whose by-product waste could provide an alternative route to an atomic bomb.

Rohani criticised unnamed countries for acting slowly and creating obstacles in the nuclear talks.

"There are certain countries behind the scenes that want to create problems. If they are not given a chance to sabotage talks, then we have enough time to achieve the ultimate success," he said.

But he also said the July 20 deadline could be extended if agreement could not be reached in time.

"Let's say we don't come to an agreement by that deadline, we can extend that interim agreement by another six months," he said.

Rohani met Chinese President Xi Jinping for bilateral talks yesterday. China is party to the nuclear talks as a permanent UN Security Council member.

UN attempt to refer Syria to ICC fails

Watchdog says last chemical agents packed and ready

AFP, United Nations

China and Russia yesterday vetoed a draft UN Security Council resolution to refer Syria to the International Criminal Court for crimes committed by both sides in the three-year civil war.

Western powers pressed for the resolution in the face of mounting atrocities in Syria, including chemical attacks, systematic torture, barrel bombings and blocked aid access.

It was the fourth time China and Russia have blocked Western resolutions on the conflict, paralyzing Security Council efforts to end a war estimated to have killed more than 160,000 people.

China and Russia vetoed the bill saying that forcibly referring both sides to international justice would complicate efforts to find a political solution and fan the flames of war.

The text, drawn up by France, was co-sponsored by 60 countries, including members of the EU, Japan, South Korea and several African states.

Meanwhile, Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons yesterday said the last of Syria's chemicals agents, Some 100 metric tonnes or nearly 8 percent of Syria's declared stockpile, are packed and ready to be taken to Latakia port and out of the country when the security situation permits. Syria has already shipped out 92 percent of its stockpile.

Under a UN-backed and US-Russia brokered deal agreed last year, the Syrian chemical weapons stockpile has to be destroyed by June 30 deadline.