

Spain's king abdicates

AFP, Madrid

Spain's King Juan Carlos signs an act of abdication to end his 39-year reign yesterday, as a flag-festooned Madrid spruces up its streets for the people to hail his 46-year-old son as their new king, Felipe VI today. The 76-year-old Juan Carlos puts his name to his last act of parliament in the late afternoon at Madrid's

West Africa Ebola death toll hits 337

AFP, Geneva

The death toll in west Africa's three-nation Ebola outbreak has risen to 337, the World Health Organization said yesterday, making it the deadliest ever outbreak of the haemorrhagic fever. Fresh data from the UN health agency showed that the number of deaths in Guinea, the hardest-hit country, has reached 264, while 49 had died in Sierra Leone and 24 in

12 Morsi supporters sentenced to death

AFP, Cairo

An Egyptian court sentenced 12 supporters of ousted Islamist president Mohamed Morsi to death yesterday on charges connected to the fatal shooting of a police general last year. Eight of them are in custody, while the other four are on the run and were tried in absentia. The death sentences are the latest of hundreds handed down against Islamists in the crackdown since Morsi's

Egypt readmitted to African Union

AFP, Addis Ababa

The African Union has readmitted Egypt, ending Cairo's nearly year-long suspension from the grouping because of the country's military coup, an official said yesterday. Egypt was suspended from the 54-member pan-African bloc last July, after former president Mohamed Morsi, the country's first freely elected president, was ousted

Israel okays 172 new settler homes

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel gave approval for the construction of 172 new homes for Jewish settlers yesterday in annexed east Jerusalem, a city councillor said, nearly two weeks after it announced thousands. Israel earlier unveiled plans on June 5 for 3,200 settler homes in east Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank, in retaliation for the formation of a Palestinian unity government backed by the Jewish

Boat sinks off Malaysia; five killed, 32 missing

AFP, Banting

Thirty-two people were missing yesterday and five were confirmed dead after an apparently overloaded boat carrying Indonesian illegal migrants headed home for Ramadan sank overnight in rough seas off western Malaysia. Officials said 60 people were rescued or made it to land by themselves after the accident around midnight near Port Klang,

Lankan cops arrest 49 over religious riots

AFP, Alutgama

Sri Lanka's police arrested 49 people overnight over deadly anti-Muslim riots in a tourist region where Buddhist hardliners have set shops and homes ablaze, a senior officer said yesterday. Both Buddhists and Muslims were arrested during a police crackdown in the southern resort towns, where two nights of violence have left four



Pakistani civilians, fleeing from a military operation in North Waziristan tribal agency, arrive in Bannu district, yesterday. More than 1,000 vehicles arrived in the town yesterday, a traditional haven for those fleeing violence in restive North Waziristan.

Pakistan readies major offensive; thousands flee

AFP, Bannu

Around 30,000 people fled a major military offensive against the Taliban in a Pakistani tribal area yesterday, after authorities eased a curfew in a sign the campaign is likely to intensify.

The military has deployed troops, tanks and jets in North Waziristan on the border with Afghanistan, in a long-awaited crackdown on the Taliban and other militants in the tribal area.

Adding to the pressure on the insurgents, two US drone strikes hit compounds in the area early yesterday killing five militants.

The military eased a curfew in parts of North Waziristan to let civilians leave, indicating a new and more intense phase of the anti-militant drive in which ground forces will play a greater role.

Tens of thousands of people had already fled the operation, which the military says has killed more than 200 militants, and a fresh exodus is under way.

Officials said 92,000 people have now fled North Waziristan since the military began air strikes

against the Taliban last month.

Registration points and camps have been set up to deal with the influx of people, but most prefer to travel on to stay with relatives in other areas.

A senior security official in northwest Pakistan told AFP the curfew was lifted to let people flee before a more concerted ground operation.

"Miranshah and Mir Ali have already been cordoned off. Ground troops will move in after civilians move to safe places," the official said. He said the operation would continue until every militant had been eliminated.

Thousands of people have also fled across the border into the Gorbaz district of Afghanistan's Khost province, according to local officials there, and are being given food and aid.

Pakistan's military launched the offensive -- a longstanding demand of the United States -- on Sunday, a week after an attack on Karachi airport claimed by the Taliban killed dozens and marked the end of a troubled peace process.

Chemical arms being used in Syria: OPCW

AFP, The Hague

Chemical weapons such as chlorine have likely been used in a "systematic manner" in Syria, according to a report by a team from the world's watchdog investigating alleged attacks there.

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) mission said evidence "lends credence to the view that toxic chemicals, most likely pulmonary irritating agents such as chlorine, have been used in a systematic manner in a number of attacks," according to a copy of the report obtained by AFP.

President Bashar al-Assad's regime and rebels have both accused the other of using chemical agents, including chlorine, in the bloody uprising that began in March 2011 and in spite of Damascus promising to hand over all its chemical arms.

Despite not being able to visit the alleged site of the chlorine attack on May 27, OPCW officials spoke to doctors in Kafr Zeyta "and obtained their verbal medical reports relating to the treatment of individuals allegedly affected by exposure to chlorine."

Syria has already shipped out 92 percent of its stockpile of chemical weapons under the terms of a UN-backed and US-Russia brokered deal agreed last year. However, eight percent of its stockpile remains at one site and cannot be taken to Latakia port because of the security situation.

The chlorine probe came after France and the United States alleged that Assad's forces may have unleashed industrial chemicals rebel-held village in recent months.



Turkish leftist demonstrators hold pictures of people who were executed or died in jail during the military rule that followed the 1980 coup in Turkey, in front of a courthouse in Ankara, yesterday. A court yesterday handed life sentences to two ageing generals behind a 1980 military takeover. Kenan Evren, 96, and Tahsin Sahinkaya, 89, were found guilty of setting the stage for a military intervention, ousting the civilian government by force and committing acts against the forces of the state.

PHOTO: AFP

Afghan election in peril over vote rigging claims

Front runner demands halt to vote count

AFP, Kabul

Afghan presidential election candidate Abdullah Abdullah yesterday demanded a halt to vote-counting over fraud allegations, taking the country to the brink of a political crisis during its first democratic transition of power.

Abdullah ramped up his complaints over alleged fraud in Saturday's run-off election by accusing his opponent Ashraf Ghani, outgoing President Hamid Karzai and the Independent Election Commission (IEC) of all being involved.

A smooth election was seen as a key test of the 13-year international military and aid effort to develop Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001.

But Abdullah's statement on Wednesday fuelled a growing dispute that could trigger instability as the bulk of US-led troops withdraw from Afghanistan by the end of the year.

"We suspend engagement with the

(election) commission and we have asked our monitors to leave their offices," Abdullah said.

"We are asking for the counting process to be stopped immediately."

The arguments erupted despite pleas from the United Nations and the United States for Abdullah and Ghani to give officials time to conduct the count and adjudicate on fraud complaints.

Abdullah, a former resistance fighter and foreign minister, believes fraud denied him victory in the 2009 presidential race, and has often said that only ballot-rigging could stop him from winning this time.

Counting the votes is due to take weeks, pitching Afghanistan into a period of uncertainty as the Nato combat mission ends this year and the aid-dependent economy falters.

The preliminary result is on July 2, before the official complaints period begins, and the final result is scheduled for July 22.



Abdullah Abdullah

ABDUCTION OF ISRAELI TEENS Palestinians' unity bid suffers blow

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel further tightened its grip on the West Bank yesterday, arresting another 65 people, as Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas lashed out at those behind the kidnapping of three Israeli teenagers triggering a sharp response from Hamas.

As the hunt for the youths entered its sixth day, there was no let-up in Israel's drive to deal a crushing blow to the West Bank infrastructure of Hamas, which it has blamed for the kidnapping.

Abbas blasted those behind the teens' disappearance whom he said were trying to "destroy" the Palestinian people. And he defended the coordination between the Palestinian security forces and their Israeli counterparts, sparking a furious denunciation by the Islamist Hamas movement.

Hamas denounced his remarks as "harmful" to a fledgling reconciliation deal between it and the Palestinian leadership, which saw an interim government of technocrats replace rival administrations in the West Bank and Gaza earlier this month.

The exchange was the first public sign of a major dispute between the sides since the unity deal was signed in April, ending years of bitter and sometimes bloody rivalry.

UN raises alarm over Rohingya camps in Burma

AFP, Yangon

A top United Nations envoy has raised the alarm over "appalling conditions" in west Myanmar displacement camps, which hold thousands of Rohingya Muslims made homeless in communal unrest two years ago.

Some 140,000 people, mainly the stateless Rohingya, are trapped in miserable camps in Rakhine state following violence between Buddhists and Muslims in 2012 that left around 200 dead.

"In Rakhine, I witnessed a level of human suffering in (displacement) camps that I have personally never seen before, with men, women, and children living in appalling conditions with severe restrictions on their freedom of movement, both in camps and isolated villages," said assistant secretary general Kyung-Wha Kang.

The UN official, who visited Myanmar last week, said many people had "wholly inadequate access to basic services including health, education, water and sanitation", in a statement released in Myanmar on Wednesday.

In March, medical aid group Doctors Without Borders (MSF) was expelled from the state, where it provided essential healthcare to hundreds of thousands of Rohingya.

Later that month Buddhist extremists, accusing international aid groups of bias towards Muslims, raided warehouses and destroyed property causing most humanitarian organisations to pull out their staff.

The UN says only 60 percent have been able to return.

Kang, who urged Myanmar to prosecute those behind the violence against aid groups, said hundreds of thousands of people in Rakhine depend on humanitarian help because of restrictions that stop them from fishing, farming and



Ukraine to offer ceasefire in separatist east

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine's new President Petro Poroshenko yesterday announced that he would soon order a unilateral ceasefire in the separatist east to help end the 10-week pro-Russian insurgency.

He took a further step toward relieving tensions with Russia by deciding to replace acting Foreign Minister Andriy Deschchysya -- a hate figure in Moscow -- with his current envoy to ongoing OSCE-mediate negotiations with the Kremlin.

But the Western-backed leader also appealed for US and EU help to secure his crisis-torn country's porous border with Russia and stem the influx of arms and militants into the conflict zone.

Ukraine's acting Defence Minister Mykhailo Koval added that the ceasefire order would be issued "literally within days".

Poroshenko's comments followed a phone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday in which the two discussed a long-term solution to the pro-Kremlin uprising gripping Ukraine's eastern rustbelt.

Interfax-Ukraine said Poroshenko told reporters in Kiev that the ceasefire was meant to be a temporary measure to give the pro-Russian militants a chance to disarm.

The rebels have previously rejected similar calls and vowed to continue a campaign to join Russia that has killed more than 325 civilians and fighters on