

NEWSIN

brief

Huge blast kills 35 in Syria

AFP, Damascus

A massive truck bomb claimed by rebels killed at least 35 people yesterday in a government-controlled village in the central Syrian province of Hama, state news agency SANA reported. More than 50 people were wounded in the attack in Al-Horra, it added. The Islamic Front, a rebel coalition, claimed responsi-

Flash floods kill 11 in Bulgaria

AFP, Varna

Flash floods in Bulgaria have killed at least 11 people including two children, with others missing after torrential rains lashed the east of the country, authorities said yesterday. The normally picturesque hillside area was submerged after torrential rain pounded the region on Thursday evening, clogging garbage-filled drainage canals and turning the steep

12 killed in Nepal landslides

AFP, Kathmandu

Landslides triggered by heavy rains killed at least 12 people overnight in Nepal, including nine members of the same family who were buried alive when their home collapsed, eyewitnesses and police said yesterday. Scores of people die every year from flooding and landslides during the

Saudi King meets Sisi in Cairo

AFP, Cairo

Saudi King Abdullah was to meet Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Cairo yesterday, diplomatic and security sources told AFP, his first visit since the 2011 overthrow of strongman Hosni Mubarak. Saudi Arabia welcomed the July military ouster of Islamist president Mohamed Morsi led by ex-army chief Sisi and has pledged billions of dollars in aid to Egypt's

Putin, Obama to discuss Ukraine, Iraq soon

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart Barack Obama will discuss the situation in Ukraine, Iraq and Syria "in the coming days," a top aide said yesterday. Speaking to reporters, Putin's top foreign policy adviser, Yuri Ushakov, did not provide further details about the upcoming phone call. Separately, Putin was to discuss the situation in Iraq with it's PM Nuri al-Maliki, Ushakov said, noting that the situation there "causes serious con-



REFUGEE CRISIS

A Syrian refugee man gestures as he begs in the street with a baby lying on his lap in Istanbul on Thursday. Nearly half of Syria's population has fled their homes since the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's rule erupted in March 2011. The UNHCR said there were 51.2 million forcibly displaced people at the end of 2013, a full six million higher than the previous year. (Story on Page 16)

PHOTO: AFP

Ceasefire declared in restive east

US chides Russia over redeployment of troops in border

AFP, Slovnyanogirsk

Ukraine's new Western-backed president yesterday declared a week-long unilateral ceasefire and unveiled a sweeping plan for curbing a pro-Russian insurgency that killed 13 more soldiers in fierce clashes in the eastern rustbelt.

Meanwhile, the United States yesterday warned it would not accept any use of Russian military forces in eastern Ukraine, amid reports they could be used to protect pro-Moscow civilians in the country.

"Today, on June 20, the ceasefire should begin. It will last through June 27," Petro Poroshenko told local residents in a small village that served as a popular lakeside resort before Kiev unleashed a full-scale "anti-terror" campaign on April 13.

The military operation's official spokesman said that Ukrainian forces would formally halt fire at 10:00pm.

But a senior rebel commander immediately rejected the terms of Poroshenko's plan for ending unceasing

battles that have killed more than 375 people and left the ex-Soviet country on the verge of splitting in two.

"No one will lay down their arms until a full troop withdrawal from our land," said Valeriy Bolotov of the self-declared Lugansk People's Republic.

The sense that tensions on the ground were rising was reinforced when Washington followed up similar charges from Nato by accusing the Kremlin of

UKRAINE CRISIS

stirring up new trouble along its neighbour's western frontier.

A senior US administration official said Russia had deployed "significant" military forces near Ukraine "to provide active support for separatist fighters".

The US official said the troops were "the closest they have been (to the border) since the invasion of Crimea" in March.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman had earlier confirmed

deploying some units to "reinforce the protection of the Russian border".

Poroshenko's ambitious push for peace followed two calls he had placed to Putin within 72 hours in the belief that no truce would work without the Russian strongman's support.

Poroshenko's announcement automatically enacted a 14-point plan that demands the rebels disarm and promises to decentralise power through constitutional reform.

The initiative drops criminal charges against fighters who committed no "serious crimes" and provides "a guaranteed corridor for Russian and Ukrainian mercenaries to leave" the conflict zone.

And it establishes a 10-kilometre border buffer zone to stem the flow of gunmen and military equipment that both Kiev and Washington claim have been flooding in from Russia in recent weeks.

The plan was the product of 10 days of European-mediated talks in Kiev

Obama lacks will to combat terrorism: Iran

AFP, Tehran

US President Barack Obama lacks "serious will" to combat terrorism, a top Iranian official said yesterday after an Iraqi appeal for American airstrikes went unanswered.

Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian's comments followed a statement from Obama on the Iraq crisis in which he pledged to send military advisors to Baghdad but stopped short of further action at this stage.

Fighters from the Sunni extremist Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and their allies, have made swift territorial gains in Shia-majority Iraq in a push that began last week.

ISIL considers Shias, also a majority in neighbouring Iran, to be apostates.

"Delaying the fight against terrorism and ISIL and putting conditions on it have fuelled suspicions and doubts about the United States' objectives in Iraq," Abdollahian said, according to the state broadcaster's website.

"Obama's comments show the White House lacks serious will in fighting terrorism in Iraq and the region," he added.

On Thursday, Obama had warned Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and Iran against promoting sectarianism after Tehran vowed to help Iraq against the fighters and defend Shia holy sites located in its western neighbour.

But Abdollahian accused Obama of fuelling sectarianism. "Instead of focusing on fighting terrorism and national unity and strengthening of government institutions, the US is spreading sectarianism," he said.

SYRIA CIVIL WAR

UN chief demands arms embargo

AFP, New York

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon yesterday urged the Security Council to impose an arms embargo on Syria, in a rallying cry for action to end the country's devastating civil war.

The South Korean diplomat outlined a six-point agenda demanding an immediate end to the violence, unfettered humanitarian access and a principled -- and united -- international response.

The conflict, which has now killed more than 160,000 people, has paralysed the UN Security Council, riven by sharp disagreements between Western nations and Damascus ally Russia.

"It is essential to stem the flow of arms pouring into the country," Ban said in a speech at the Asia Society in New York.

"It is irresponsible for foreign powers and groups to give continued military support to parties in Syria that are committing atrocities."

"I urge the Security Council to impose an arms embargo. If divisions in the Council continue to prevent such a step, I urge countries to do so individually," he added.

"Syria's neighbors should enforce a firm prohibition on the use of their land borders and airspace for arms flows and smuggling into Syria."

Iran and Russia are the main arms providers to the Syrian government, as Gulf states are to the opposition.

Asked for his reaction to Ban's call, Russian Ambassador Vitaly Churkin told reporters it was unrealistic and drew parallels with the uprising against Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

"In Libya there was an arms embargo and weapons were flowing freely to various opposition groups and are still floating all over Africa," he said.

"We do not want to go in that direction."

Four Western resolutions on Syria have been vetoed by Russia, blocking efforts to enforce the delivery of aid and refer both sides to the International Criminal Court.

Ban spoke of his "anger and disappointment" at calculations that so little can be done to end the conflict, saying the world must not abandon Syrians and the region "to never-ending waves of cruelty."

The UN chief said there could never be a permanent military victory to the war in Syria and promised that the United Nations would not abandon Syrians who desired peace.

Ban also demanded that the regional overflow and al-Qaeda-linked extremist threat must be addressed, pointing to the flow of arms and fighters across the porous border into crisis-stricken Iraq.

He warned that military strikes against Iraq's jihadists could prove counterproductive without any movement toward inclusive government in the country of Sunni Arabs, Kurds and Shiites.



The mother of Mohammed Dudin, a 14-year-old Palestinian shot dead by Israeli troops in overnight clashes in Dura, weeps during his funeral in the Palestinian village, south of the West Bank city of Hebron, yesterday. Inset, Doctors treat a baby at a hospital following an Israeli air strike in Gaza City yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



US lawmakers pass bill to curb NSA

AFP, Washington

The US House of Representatives approved late Thursday a bill that would restrict the electronic surveillance powers of the National Security Agency (NSA).

The margin was wide, 293 to 123, for the bill attached to the defense budget for 2015, which begins October 1.

For now, however, the bill will have no effect on the NSA as it has not been debated by the Senate.

But the message from the lower house is clear.

It wants to embrace a court ruling and bar the National Security Agency from using personal electronic information from US citizens without a prior court order.

As it currently stands, under the so-called Prism program, the NSA focuses on foreign targets on the Internet via Facebook, Gmail and other services.

But the NSA has acknowledged it used information taken from the servers of such companies, without approval from a judge.

The Constitution and US laws require that the government obtain a court order before searching among data of US citizens.

Thursday's amendment would bar the NSA from carrying out any search without a court order, including information from Americans, even if their communications were picked up inadvertently.

The bill would bar the NSA and the CIA from including secret "back doors" allowing the NSA to skirt coded gateways and gain access to users' personal data. The NSA is accused of having done this for several years.

A year after the revelations made by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, Congress is still debating how to reform US surveillance programs.

Not an expression of goodwill

UNICEF goodwill ambassador resigns after offensive tweet

AFP, Bogota



Dutch actress Nicolette Van Dam resigned as a UNICEF goodwill ambassador Thursday, after a scandal erupted over her tweet of a doctored photo appearing to depict two Colombian football players snorting cocaine.

"Ms. Van Dam resigned as goodwill ambassador for UNICEF and regrets the message forwarded yesterday," UNICEF's Colombia office posted on its own Twitter page.

In a statement, the organization also offered its "most sincere apologies" to Colombian footballers Radamel Falcao Garcia and James Rodriguez, who were in the photo, for "the shameful and offensive post" from Van Dam.

Colombia had earlier demanded UNICEF sack the actress and model over the tweeted photo, in which the two players are prostrate on the football pitch and appear to snort the spray that World Cup referees are using to draw lines at free kicks, as if it were a line of cocaine.

The tweet, posted on Wednesday, has been deleted and Van Dam asked Colombians to accept her "sincere apologies."

Israel troops kill 14-year-old in West Bank raid

Palestine says Israel overreacting on missing teens

AFP, Hebron

Israeli soldiers killed a Palestinian 14-year-old in the occupied West Bank yesterday as they pressed a crackdown on the Islamist Hamas movement in their search for three missing teenagers.

Troops also wounded two Palestinians in a refugee camp just outside Jerusalem as clashes flared in the face of the massive military operation in which they have detained 330 Palestinians over the past week, medical sources said.

Israel accuses Hamas of last week's abduction of the two 16-year-olds and a 19-year-old from a hitch-hiking stop in the West Bank, an allegation the Islamist group has dismissed as "stupid".

But Israel has seized on the opportunity to drive a wedge between Hamas and the Palestinian leadership, who formed a merged administration for the West Bank and Gaza Strip just this month for the first time in seven years.

Palestinian security and medical sources said 14-year-old Mohammed Dudin was shot in the chest in a clash that erupted after Israeli soldiers arrived to conduct arrests in the village of Dura, south of the West Bank

city of Hebron. The Israeli army said villagers had thrown stones and Molotov cocktails at troops on an arrest mission in Dura, who had responded with live fire.

Palestinian foreign minister Riyad al-Malki yesterday accused Israel of overreacting in its response to three missing teenagers and said it had yet to prove Hamas was behind their disappearance.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accuses Hamas of last week's abduction of the two 16-year-olds and a 19-year-old from a hitch-hiking stop in the West Bank.

Hamas has lashed out at the Palestinian leadership for its decision to maintain security coordination with Israel despite the massive wave of searches and arrests.

Since the start of the operation last week, troops have "scanned about 1150 locations in search for the abducted boys and for terror elements."

"Approximately 330 suspects were detained, out of which 240 terrorists associated with Hamas," the army said.

Overnight, the Israeli military also carried out a series of air strikes in the Gaza Strip in retaliation for rocket fire against southern Israel late Thursday.

Japan keeps wartime sex slave apology

AFP, Tokyo

Japan yesterday said it would not change a landmark 1993 apology over wartime sex slavery despite an inflammatory review that said there was no corroboration of evidence given by former "comfort women".

South Korea's foreign ministry swiftly expressed "deep regret" at the review results, which it said "distorted facts" and "undermined" Japan's 1993 apology.

Japan's move, which observers say is a messy compromise that looks set to satisfy no one, came as South Korea put on a show of force, holding a rare live-fire drill near islets at the centre of its territorial dispute with Tokyo.

The government of conservative Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said earlier this year it would not reverse the apology, known as the Kono statement, which was issued under a liberal government and acknowledged official complicity in the practice for the first time. The review, launched as an apparent sop to fellow right-wingers, was putatively established to examine how the decision to apologise was reached, and on what historical facts it was based.

Around 200,000 women, mainly from Korea but also from China, Taiwan and Indonesia among others, were forced to work in brothels as "comfort women", serving imperial troops as Japan stomped across Asia before and during World War II.

While mainstream Japanese opinion holds that the wartime government was culpable, a small but vocal tranche of the political right -- including Abe -- continues to cast doubt, claiming the brothels were staffed by professional prostitutes.

The equivocation is a huge bugbear in Tokyo's relations