

NEWS IN brief

Gun violence: 100 US children dies a year

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The toll of school shootings in the US is well-documented but a new report has revealed the staggering scale of accidental shootings, killing 100 children a year. A report by groups calling for tighter firearm controls claims that two children are killed on average every week, mostly in the family home or a car

Deadly attacks mar Libya election

AFP, Tripoli

A deadly attack on troops, the killing of a rights activist and low turnout of 47 percent marred a parliamentary election Libyan authorities hope will end the political turmoil since the ouster of Muammar Gaddafi. Lawyer and human rights activist Salwa Bugaighis was shot dead by unknown assailants at her home in Benghazi. She was vice president of a preparatory committee for national dialogue in Libya. The first results are expected on

Warrant needed for cell phone search: US SC

AFP, Washington

In a major civil liberties test in the digital age, the US Supreme Court ruled Wednesday that police must obtain a warrant before searching the cell phone of a suspect. Mobile phones deserve the same protection against "unreasonable searches and seizures" enshrined in the US constitution's Fourth Amendment as other personal property, such as homes, the top US

Koreas resume talks on industrial park

AFP, Seoul

North and South Korea resumed talks yesterday on managing their Kaesong joint industrial zone after a six-month hiatus caused by rising cross-border tensions, but appeared to make little headway. Since its last meeting on December 19, however, a joint committee set up for running the park has sat idle as tensions rose again with North Korea's angry protests over the South's annual military exercises



Nepal PM diagnosed with lung cancer

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese Prime Minister Sushil Koirala, 75, is suffering from lung cancer, the country's information minister said yesterday, contradicting earlier claims by his party that doctors had ruled out the illness. "The prime minister has been diagnosed with early-stage cancer of the lung, which is curable," said Minendra Rijal, minister for information and com-

Man lands in asylum for being atheist

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A Nigerian man has been committed to a mental institute in Kano state despite being given a clean bill of health because he declared he did not believe in God, a humanist charity has said. Mubarak Bala, a chemical engineering graduate, is being held against his will and forcibly medicated at the Aminu Kano Teaching Hospital, where he has been kept since 13 June, the International Humanist and Ethical

Under pressure, Iraq PM hints at political solution

Forces launch assault on militants in Tikrit

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki yesterday conceded that political measures are needed alongside military action to repel a Sunni insurgent offensive that is threatening to tear Iraq apart.



Nuri al-Maliki

He spoke as visiting British Foreign Secretary William Hague urged Iraqi leaders to unite in the face of the onslaught, led by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), that has killed nearly 1,100 people and displaced more than half a million more.

Iraqi forces launched a helicopter-borne assault aimed at opening the way to retaking militant-held Tikrit, hometown of former dictator Saddam Hussein.

A successful operation to recapture territory inside Tikrit would deliver the most serious blow yet against an insurgency which for most of the past two weeks has seemed all but unstoppable in the Sunni heartland north and west of Baghdad.

The president's office confirmed that a

new parliament elected two months ago would meet on Tuesday, the deadline demanded by the constitution, to begin the process of forming a government.

Maliki, whose Shia-led State of Law coalition won the most seats in the April election but needs allies to form a cabinet, is under strong pressure from the

United States and other countries to swiftly build a more inclusive government to undermine support for the insurgency.

Meanwhile, in an interview with the BBC, Maliki said the Syrian air force had carried out strikes against militants on the Syrian side of the Al-Qaim border crossing, controlled by ISIL. The premier said Baghdad had not requested the Syrian strikes, but he "welcomed" any such move against the ISIL-led militants.

Iraq appealed for US air strikes against the militants, but Washington has so far offered only up to 300 military advisers, the first of whom have begun work in Baghdad.

US trained ISIL in 2012: Report

AGENCIES

As the American government is contemplating on whether or not to launch an airstrike on ISIL that is threatening to destroy Iraq, reports have now surfaced that way back in 2012, the US Army had trained members of the same terrorist group in Jordan.

As per several corroborated reports, hundreds of ISIL militia were indeed trained by US instructors for covert operations to destabilize Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government, though the training was strictly for Syria.

Back in February 2012, WND had reported that the US, with the help of Turkey and Jordan, was running a training base for Syrian rebels in the Jordan.

German weekly Der Spiegel also confirmed in 2013 that the US was still training Syrian rebels in Jordan.

The German magazine had also reported that the US would be training a total of 1,200 members of the Free Syrian Army in two camps in the south and the east of Jordan. The Guardian had also reported back in March 2013 that US trainers were aiding Syrian rebels in Jordan, along with British and French instructors.

US gives Russia 'hours' to ease Ukraine crisis

AFP, Kiev

The United States yesterday warned Russia it had only "hours" to prove it was helping disarm Ukrainian insurgents whose tenuous truce with Kiev was due to expire by the weekend.

US Secretary of State John Kerry stressed in Paris that "it is critical for Russia to show in the next hours, literally, that they're moving to help disarm the separatists, to encourage them to disarm, to call on them to lay down their weapons and to begin to become part of a legitimate process."

The ultimatum was delivered a day before Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko signs the final chapters of an historic EU accord that nudges his country toward eventual membership and pulls it firmly out of Russia's reach.

The West is scrambling to save a temporary ceasefire and nascent peace talks that pro-Russian separatists who are now threatening the ex-Soviet state's survival agreed to at the start of the week.

The truce -- broken on repeated occasions but still having succeeded in tempering the worst of the violence in the Russified eastern rustbelt -- formally runs out today at 0700 GMT.

The Kremlin said Putin assured German Chancellor Angela Merkel shortly after Kerry's tough message that he fully backed a ceasefire's extension and resumption of meaningful dialogue between the warring sides.

The 11-week insurgency has killed more than 435 people and shattered the delicate system of trust that developed between Moscow and the West since the Cold War.

The US State Department added that sanctions would be also discussed by EU leaders yesterday when they sign the full Association Agreement with Ukraine that was ditched by the ousted pro-Russian president in November and now lies at the heart of the raging crisis.



A Syrian woman and youths, one of them carrying a wounded baby, flee the site of a reported barrel-bomb attack by Syrian government forces in the northern city of Aleppo, yesterday. Syria's war has killed more than 162,000 people and forced nearly half the population to flee their homes.

Thai army to appoint national assembly

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's army rulers will appoint a national assembly stacked with military officers to pick an interim government leader, officials said yesterday, as they seek to retain their influence over the kingdom's political transition.

In the first real hint of the shape the politically fraught country's next administration may take, army sources told AFP that the military will select the 200 assembly members and that the junta itself will not be dissolved.

"We have learned our lesson. By pushing power in other people's hands, they may not do what we expect them to do," said an official under the condition of anonymity.

The kingdom's generals are keen to avoid ceding as much power to the interim government as they did following the last coup in 2006.

Earlier this month junta chief General Prayut Chan-O-Cha said the regime would set up an interim government by September to oversee political reforms, including crafting a new constitution, followed by elections in about a year's time.

Pro-coup demonstrators have called for reforms that would rid the country of the influence of the Shinawatra family, whose political parties continually win during elections but are loathed by much of the country's powerful elite.

The junta -- formally known as the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) -- has now finished drafting an interim constitution, according to the military official.

The remarks came as a Thai opposition alliance set up to counter the nation's coup-making junta yesterday said it would establish an official base in a Western country by next month.

The Thai military seized power on May 22 after nearly seven months of protests saw 28 people killed and hun-

El Nino likely by end of year: UN

AFP, Geneva

The "El Nino" phenomenon, which sparks climate extremes around the globe, is likely to take hold in the Pacific Ocean by the end of the year and could even do so within weeks, the UN said yesterday.

There was an 80 percent likelihood that El Nino could start between October and November and 60 percent that it would do so between now and end of August, said the UN's weather agency, the World Meteorological Organization.

The El Nino phenomenon -- which can lead to extremes including droughts and heavy rainfall across the globe -- occurs every two to seven years, when the prevailing trade winds that circulate over surface waters in the tropical Pacific start to weaken.

The phenomenon, which last occurred between June 2009 and May 2010, can play havoc for farmers and global agricultural markets.

It affects countries like India, Indonesia and Australia drier, increasing chances of wildfires and lower crop production, while leading to heavier rainfall in the eastern Pacific and South American nations, raising the spectre of floods and landslides.

"El Nino leads to extreme events and has a pronounced warming effect," said WMO chief Michel Jarraud.

India court summons Gandhis

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian court yesterday summoned Sonia and Rahul Gandhi, leaders of the defeated Congress party, over allegations that they misused funds of a newspaper once run by the family.

The mother-son duo of the famed Nehru-Gandhi dynasty are due to appear in court next month after Subramanian Swamy, a politician from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, filed a petition accusing them of misusing funds of the National Herald newspaper which closed down in 2008.

The paper was launched by India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Sonia Gandhi, widow of Nehru's grandson Rajiv, later became the chief patron of the trust that ran the publication.

"I have found prima facie evidence against all the accused. The court has directed them to appear before it on August 7," said presiding judge Gomati Manocha, according to reports.

The newspaper, first published from the northern city of Lucknow in 1938, played a prominent role promoting nationalist sentiment before India's independence from Britain in 1947.

But dogged by bad management, MISUSE OF FUNDS



poor circulation and falling revenue, Congress president Sonia Gandhi finally decided to close the publication.

"Once they appear they will have to take bail and deposit passport," Swamy tweeted yesterday.

Swamy first filed the case in 2001, blaming the Congress top bosses of illegally acquiring the newspaper's assets by floating a new private company, Young Indian, using their party funds.

He alleged that the Gandhis aimed to grab property worth \$332 million owned by the newspaper's publishing firm, Associated Journals, using fraudulent papers.

Both Gandhis are directors of the new company, owning 76 per cent stake in it and the remaining shares are owned by four other Congress members, who have also been summoned to court.

Congress party spokesman Abhishek Manu Singhvi dismissed Swamy's charges as "baseless and motivated", telling reporters that the case would be "legally demolished".

The Nehru-Gandhis have provided three prime ministers and its Congress party has dominated Indian politics since independence but was routed in recent elections that brought the BJP back to power.

ODDLY enough

Kim Jong-un comedy an 'act of war'

AFP, Seoul

On Wednesday, North Korea denounced a new Hollywood comedy about an assassination bid on leader Kim Jong-un as a "wanton act of terror" and warned of a "merciless response" unless the US authorities banned the film.



"The Interview" stars Seth Rogen and James Franco as two tabloid TV journalists who land an interview with Kim in Pyongyang and are then tasked by the CIA with killing him.

The film is due to be released in the United States on October 14.

In a statement KCNA, a foreign ministry spokesman said the film was the work of "gangster moviemakers" and should never be shown.

"The act of making and screening such a movie that portrays an attack on our top leadership ... is a most wanton act of terror and act of war, and is absolutely intolerable," the spokesman said. He called on the US administration to ban the film from being screened and warned that failure to do so would trigger a "resolute and merciless response".

Myanmar monks propose inter-faith marriage curbs

AFP, Yangon

Proposals by radical Buddhist monks to criminalise inter-faith marriage in Myanmar face strong opposition from women's rights groups in a tussle over the nation's religious identity that has sparked international alarm.

Buddhist nationalists, feeding off the fear and uncertainty caused by successive waves of anti-Muslim violence, have issued fiery pronouncements that the very fabric of the country's main religion is under threat, casting a dark shadow over ongoing democratic reforms.

The marriage law is one of four bills suggested by a hardline faction within the Buddhist clergy and put to the fledgling parliament by the president.

To "protect" Buddhism -- the religion of more than 80 per cent of the population -- radical monks have urged boycotts of Muslim businesses, including of Qatari telecoms firm Ooredoo, despite its promise to bring much-needed affordable mobile access.

"calibrated for emotional impact", said Nicholas Farrelly, a research fellow at the Australian National University.

"These calls help to generate a mood of crisis that radicalises those who would otherwise be relatively apathetic about other religions in Myanmar," he told AFP.

While the country is dominated by ethnic Bamar Buddhists, it has sizeable religious minorities thanks in part to the legacy of British colonial rule.

Christians make up around four per cent of the population, and Muslims are thought to account for between four and 10 per cent.

Conflict flared between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in western Myanmar's Rakhine state in 2012, leaving more than 200 people dead and 140,000 displaced. The displaced were mainly Rohingya, who had already been subject to marriage restrictions and a "two-child policy" in some areas.

The proposed restrictions -- on marriage, religious conversion, polygamy and birth rate -- were put forward by a 200-strong group of monks called "Mabatha", or the Committee for the Protection of Nationality and Religion.

MH370 was on autopilot when it crashed: Report

AFP, Sydney

Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 was almost certainly on autopilot when it ran out of fuel and crashed, with the crew likely "unresponsive", Australian officials said yesterday, announcing the search for wreckage would shift further south.

Investigators have been grappling with the mystery of the Boeing 777's disappearance on March 8 with 239 people on board, spending months scouring the Indian Ocean in vain.

An expert group has reviewed all the existing information and Australian Deputy Prime Minister Warren Truss said it was now "highly, highly likely that the aircraft was on autopilot" when it went down.

Michelle Obama used 'racial slur'

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Michelle Obama has come under some fire for allegedly using a racial slur during a recent interview.

The First Lady of the USA was being questioned about her experience as a working mother by ABC news reporter Robin Roberts at the White House Summit on Working Families on Monday when she apparently used the term "gypped".

Speaking about living on a part-time wage, she said: "The first thing I tried to do, which was a mistake, was that I tried the part-time thing... I realised I was getting gypped on that front. "What happened was that I got a part-time salary but worked full-time."

Derived from the word "gypsy" in reference to the Romani people, "gypped" is often thought of as derogatory term because it means to cheat someone out of something.

A number of media outlets and political blogs, including the Daily Caller, have criticised the First Lady's seemingly light use of the word.



A spokesperson for the First Lady Michelle Obama is yet to respond to a request for comment.