

NEWSIN brief

Ukraine seals deal with EU

Putin warns of consequences; EU gives Russia 3-day ultimatum, warns of tougher sanctions

AFP, Brussels Ukraine's new leader yesterday sealed a landmark EU pact that drew immediate threats of retaliation by Russia in its high-stakes standoff over the ex-Soviet country's future with the West.

President Petro Poroshenko hailed the Association Agreement -- a 1,200-page document defining the political and trade terms under which Kiev will slip from the Kremlin's embrace -- as a turning point for a country that straddles a geopolitical fault line between Europe and Russia.

The deal also bursts Russian President Vladimir Putin's dream of enlisting Kiev in a Moscow-led alliance that could rival the European Union and Nato. The Kremlin immediately vowed to take "all the necessary measures" against Ukraine.

The European Union also sealed identical agreements with Georgia and Moldova -- two former Soviet nations with equally complex relations with Russia. The signing came just hours after the rebels released four unarmed

monitors from the Organisation and Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) they had abducted on May 26. A top rebel leader said another four European observers and their Ukrainian translator whose release Putin has personally

border into the conflict zone. But Putin is also facing the threat of imminent economic sanctions should he fail to show that he is backing Poroshenko's bid to end nearly two months of fighting that have claimed more than 440 lives. EU leaders gave

significant restrictive measures." The European Union argues that the free trade deal will boost Ukraine's exports to the 28-nation bloc by \$1.35 billion a year and save the nation of 46 million roughly half that amount in revoked customs duties.

But Russia has warned it will have no choice but to slap punishing trade restrictions on Ukraine after already nearly doubling its gas price -- a step Kiev disputed and that led to a cut in its supplies this month. The state-run gas giant Gazprom also warned central European countries negotiating emergency "reverse flow" deliveries to Ukraine that it would limit their own supplies should such shipments be made.

Putin for his part referred to the deadly winter protests that in February ousted a president who had preferred better relations with Russia an "anti-constitutional coup" that "pushed society to a split, to a painful internal confrontation."

On the ground, Ukraine's military said five more soldiers died overnight in attacks by rebels who have failed to honour the terms of a



Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko (C) poses with European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso (L) and European Council President Herman Van Rompuy at the EU Council in Brussels, yesterday.

sought would be freed in the coming days.

The Kremlin chief denies exerting control over the fighters and is yet to address in public reports from Kiev and Washington of rocket launchers and even tanks crossing the Russian

Russia until Monday to change policy on Ukraine or face the prospect of tougher economic sanctions.

A statement adopted yesterday underlined the leaders' "commitment to reconvene at any time for further

Israeli air raid kills two in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City An Israeli air strike targeting a car in the Gaza Strip killed two Palestinians yesterday, medics said, hours after a bomb exploded near troops manning Israel's security fence. Palestinian medical sources said the raids struck near the home of Ismail Haniya, former Hamas prime minister who stepped down June 2 when Gaza and the West Bank set up a

'Great Conciliator' dies in US

AFP, Washington Howard Baker, a former United States Senate majority leader and presidential



contender known for his ability to achieve compromise across the political aisle, died on Thursday. He was 88. Baker became the first Republican leader of the Senate in 26 years when he took the reins in 1981. He later went on to serve as chief of staff for president Ronald Reagan, to whom he lost the GOP nomination in

Xi holds talks with Thein Sein

AFP, Beijing Chinese President Xi Jinping and Myanmar's leader Thein Sein held talks yesterday as the relationship between the Asian giant and the longtime international pariah adapts to dramatic political changes. Thein Sein was given full military honours. Beijing was a traditional supporter of Myanmar for decades when the resource-rich Southeast Asian country was diplomatically isolated as human rights

Diamond the size of the Earth!

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK Astronomers have identified what might be one of the strangest stars in our galaxy: an incredibly cold, ancient and faint white dwarf that has crystallized into a diamond the size of Earth. In the case of this recently discovered white dwarf, astronomers believe that it has cooled and crystallized all the way to diamond, estimating that the once-fiery star is 11 billion years old -- making it the same age as the

US Middle East negotiator resigns

AFP, Washington Martin Indyk, the chief US negotiator between the Israelis and Palestinians, resigned yesterday after the collapse of peace talks.

Secretary of State John Kerry, announcing the resignation in a statement through a spokeswoman, said Indyk would return to his position at the Brookings Institution think

Xi heads to S Korea in 'message' to North

AFP, Beijing China's Xi Jinping will visit Seoul next week, both sides said yesterday, going to the South for his first presidential journey to the Korean peninsula as Beijing's frustrations mount with the nuclear-armed North and its confrontational young leader Kim Jong-Un.

China is the North's key ally, energy provider and diplomatic protector, their ties sealed in the Korean War, and sees its neighbour as a buffer against finding US troops stationed on its own border. The July 3-4 visit will discuss "ways to cooperate on issues related to the situation on the Korean peninsula, including the North Korean nuclear issue", South Korea's presidential Blue House said in a statement.

On the other hand there has been no Chinese summit with the North since the death of its then leader Kim Jong-Il, Kim Jong-Un's father, in December 2011. Kim inherited the North Korean leadership from his father, becoming the third member of the Kim dynasty to rule the hermit state, and his reign has so far largely been seen as provocative, capricious and destabilising.

The latest possible irritant came yesterday when the North's official news agency announced Kim had observed the test-firing of a newly developed, high-precision tactical guided missile.

Gas pipeline blast kills 16 in India

AFP, Hyderabad A massive explosion on a state-owned gas pipeline running through the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh killed at least 16 people and gutted scores of homes, a state minister said yesterday.

"At least 16 people are dead. We have recovered 13 bodies so far," state home minister N Chinna Rajappa told AFP after the blast near a refinery in the East Godavari district. The fire on the 18-inch pipeline owned by the Gas Authority of India Limited was extinguished by mid-morning and the gas had been cut off, a senior administrative officer told AFP by telephone from the scene. At least 15 people were hospitalised with injuries from the explosion, officials said.

British PM fails to stop EU nominating Juncker

REUTERS, Brussels European Union leaders nominated Jean-Claude Juncker for European Commission president yesterday by an overwhelming majority over the fierce objections of British Prime Minister David Cameron, who called it "a sad day for Europe".

Cameron forced an unprecedented vote at an EU summit to dramatise his opposition both to the way the former Luxembourg prime minister was chosen and to his suitability for the most powerful EU job. He warned it could influence British voters' eventual decision on whether to leave the European Union. Juncker, 59, a veteran deal-broker at EU summits for more than two decades, will now go before the European Parliament for a confirmation vote on July 16, where he is likely to win a majority of centre-right and centre-left lawmakers.

A British official said all leaders had given their views and the vote was 26-2 for Juncker, with only Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban joining Cameron in voting "no". "I've told EU leaders they could live to regret the new process for choosing the Commission president," Cameron tweeted

from inside the meeting. "I'll always stand up for UK interests." The British leader has said the nomination was the result of a power grab by the European Parliament and that Juncker, seen by London as an old-fashioned federalist bent on taking power from nation states, lacked the will and the skills to reform the EU, warning of unspecified 'consequences'.

Cameron, who is under pressure from a surge in anti-Europe sentiment at home, stopped short of threatening to campaign for a "No" vote in a referendum on EU membership that he has promised to hold in 2017 if he is re-elected next year.

But a British official said he reminded leaders that support for staying in the EU was "wafer thin" despite a recent uptick in numbers who say they want the country to remain.

The dispute was one of the most public and personal the European Union has experienced in a decade, damaging efforts to present a united front at a time when the bloc is recovering from an economic crisis and keen to bolster its global image.

The Dutch and Swedish leaders, who agreed with Britain's concerns on the process, backed Juncker in the end, as did the bloc's most powerful figure, centre-right



Claude Juncker



David Cameron

US moves to phase out landmines

AFP, Washington The United States yesterday signaled its intent to eliminate its stockpile of anti-personnel landmines and to eventually join a global treaty banning them, boosting efforts to rid the world of the weapons.

The high-profile announcement was made at a conference in Mozambique, which was aimed at ultimately ensuring no armed forces use anti-personnel mines by 2025.

The number of people killed or maimed by landmines fell in 2012, the global watchdog Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor says, but was still at 4,000. In many cases, the mines are leftovers from wars that ended decades earlier.

"Today at a review conference in Maputo, Mozambique, the United States took the step of declaring it will not produce or otherwise acquire any anti-personnel landmines (APL) in the future, including to replace existing stockpiles as they expire," National Security Council spokeswoman Caitlin Hayden said a statement.

In 2009, Washington said it was reviewing its position on landmines but -- along with rivals Russia and China -- has failed to sign the Ottawa Convention that bans the use of APLs and envisions their eventual elimination.

Nuclear powers India and Pakistan have also not signed up, and nor has arch-foe Iran.

The White House gave no timeline as to when it might eventually sign the treaty.

The United States has provided more than \$2.3 billion in aid since 1993 in more than 90 countries for conventional weapons destruction programs, Hayden noted.

MH370 passengers likely died of suffocation

REUTERS, Sydney The passengers and crew of the missing Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 most likely died from suffocation and coasted lifelessly into the ocean on autopilot, a new report released by Australian officials on Thursday said.

In a 55-page report, the Australian Transport Safety Board outlined how investigators had arrived at this conclusion after comparing the conditions on the flight with previous disasters, although it contained no new evidence from within the jetliner. The report narrowed down the possible final resting place from thousands of possible routes, while noting the absence of communications and the steady flight path and a number of other key abnormalities in the course of the ill-fated flight. "Given these observations, the final stages of the unresponsive crew/hypoxia event type appeared to best fit the available evidence for the final period of MH370's flight when it was heading in a generally southerly direction," the ATSB report said.

All of that suggested that the plane most likely crashed farther south into the Indian Ocean than previously thought, Australian officials also said, leading them to announce a shift farther south within the prior search area.

The new analysis comes more than 100 days after the Boeing 777, carrying 239 passengers and crew, disappeared on March 8 shortly after taking off from Kuala Lumpur bound for Beijing. Investigators say what little evidence they have to work with suggests the plane was deliberately diverted thousands of kilometres from its scheduled route before eventually plunging into the Indian Ocean.

Now, Assange on a catwalk

TNN, London WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange who has been holed up in the Ecuadorean Embassy for over two years is expected to make his London Fashion Week debut this September.



Assange will model for Vivienne Westwood's son Ben Westwood at a fashion show which will take place inside the Ecuadorean Embassy so that the Scotland Yard can't arrest him. Ben said, "Julian's been in the embassy for two years and it's important that he doesn't slip into obscurity. I want to highlight his plight. What happened to him is totally unfair."

"I've designed something for him along those lines and will be getting him to wear it," he added. Assange has been holed up in the embassy since June 2012 avoiding extradition to Sweden where he is wanted over sexual offence allegations.



US President Barack Obama sits down for lunch in Matt's Bar with accountant Rebekah Erlar in Minneapolis, Minnesota on Thursday. Erlar is a mother of two young boys who wrote a letter to Obama telling of her struggles to make ends meet.

PHOTO: AFP