

NEWS IN brief

Man shot dead in Thailand mosque attack: police

AFP, Bangkok

Gunmen opened fire at a mosque in insurgency-hit southern Thailand yesterday, killing one man and injuring another a day after Muslims began observing the holy month of Ramadan, police said.

The pre-dawn attack by suspected militants in Pattani province appeared to target a Muslim deputy village chief but instead fatally wounded a 66-year-old man after morning prayers, said Police Lieutenant Colonel Somchai Janyoung.

Rebel fire kills 14 in Syria's Idlib

AFP, Beirut

Rebel mortar shells pounded Syria's northwest city of Idlib yesterday, killing 14 people, state television said, a day after 27 people died in regime air raids on a nearby opposition-held area.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights confirmed the attack, but gave a higher toll of 15 civilians, and said an unknown number of children were among the dead.

Taiwan set to open two islands off China

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan yesterday placed two military outposts facing China under civilian control, in a significant step towards opening them to tourists and another sign of the warming ties between the two former bitter rivals.

Ta Tan and Er Tan -- two tiny fortified islands in the Kinmen group, just a few miles from the southern Chinese coastline -- were transferred by Taiwan's defence ministry to the local Kinmen county government.

Indonesia ruling party backs Prabowo's presidential bid

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesia's ruling party yesterday threw its support behind presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto ahead of elections next week, a further boost for the ex-general and a blow to frontrunner Joko Widodo.

"The Democratic Party central executive board has decided and instructed... members and all supporters across Indonesia to give their full support and vote to presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto," party chairman Syarif Hasan said in a statement on the party's website.

The party of outgoing President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, which won 10 percent of the popular vote at legislative elections in April, had previously pledged to stay neutral in the July 9 election.

An Egyptian police officer looks on following a bomb blast in the vicinity of the Ittihadia palace in the Egyptian capital Cairo, yesterday. Two Egyptian police officers were killed defusing bombs near the presidential palace in Cairo, almost a year to the day after a military takeover unleashed a wave of repression and militant attacks.

PHOTO: AFP



Europe to pressure Putin in talks

Truce runs down

AFP, Donetsk

France and Germany yesterday looked set to ramp up pressure on Russia to stem the Ukraine conflict in frantic negotiations as the clock ticks down on a shaky truce.

French President Francois Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel were due to hold four-way telephone talks with Kremlin strongman Vladimir Putin and new Kiev leader Petro Poroshenko ahead of a 1900 GMT deadline for an unsteady ceasefire to end in violence-hit eastern Ukraine.

The last-minute talks follow a two-hour conversation between the quartet on Sunday in which Merkel and Hollande reiterated a warning from the EU that it could slap punishing sanctions on Moscow yesterday if Putin did not explicitly pressure pro-Kremlin rebels to stop fighting.

The two European heads and Putin agree on the need to extend a ceasefire that they say

is a key first step towards ending 13 weeks of bloodshed that has claimed some 450 lives.

Ukraine's national security council said yesterday it would make a decision on whether to extend the ceasefire before it expires at 1900 GMT.

On the ground though, the supposed truce has done little to stem the violence with both sides accusing each other of carrying on firing.

Russian state TV station Channel One said yesterday that its cameraman Anatoly Klyan, 68, died after being shot in the stomach by Ukrainian troops on an overnight reporting trip with insurgents at a military base near the rebel-controlled city of Donetsk.

Russia's foreign ministry said the death showed that Ukrainian forces "clearly do not want a de-escalation in the armed conflict in the east."

Meanwhile, Ukrainian forces said that attacks by the insurgents over the weekend killed five of its soldiers.



PAK-TALIBAN CONFLICT

Pak army begins ground offensive

AFP, Bannu

Pakistan's military launched a ground assault in the North Waziristan tribal area yesterday, beginning a new phase in its offensive against Taliban militants, officials said.

Troops moved on Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan, around 9:30 am (0430 GMT), officials said, after two weeks of air strikes and artillery bombardment of insurgent targets. Washington has long urged Islamabad to tackle militant sanctuaries in North Waziristan, a haven for Pakistani Taliban and Al-Qaeda-linked insurgents.

Security officials in Miranshah told AFP troops moved on the town after six hours of artillery shelling, which began at 3:30 am.

"They are using tanks and armoured vehicles for ground movement. The forces have also taken over the civil hospital in Miranshah and have destroyed four hideouts in the artillery firing," a security official said on condition of anonymity.

Other security officials in Peshawar, the main city of northwest Pakistan, confirmed the advance.

A statement from the military's communications wing said the assault began "after the evacuation of all civil population", and infantry troops were carrying out house-to-house searches. Troops have killed 15 militants so far in the ground attack, the military said.

The conflict zone is off-limits to journalists at the moment, making it impossible to verify the number and identity of those killed.

IRAQ CRISIS

Netanyahu calls for Jordan support, Kurdish independence

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asked the international community on Sunday to support Jordan in the fight against "Islamic extremism" and to back the independence of Iraq's Kurds.

"We need to support efforts by the international community to strengthen Jordan and support the aspirations of the Kurds for independence," Netanyahu said in a speech to the Institute of National Security Studies think-tank in Tel Aviv.

"I think it's our common interest to make sure that a moderate, stable regime like (Jordan) is able to defend itself."

His remarks follow reports in Israeli media that officials in Tel Aviv fear Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) militants may extend their control to areas of Jordan after seizing parts of Iraq in recent weeks.

Iraq jihadists 'selling oil to Assad', says France

AFP, New Delhi

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said yesterday that jihadists spearheading a militant offensive in Iraq have sold oil from captured areas to the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Fabius said the sale was evidence of the "confusing" nature of the escalating conflict in the Middle East in which Assad and the jihadists are in theory on opposing sides.

The rebels, previously known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), declared a "caliphate", or Islamist state, straddling Iraq and Syria at the weekend.

"We have proofs that when ISIL has taken over oil it has sold oil to the (Assad) regime," Fabius told a news conference in New Delhi, without elaborating.

Other revenues and weapons have been seized during the advance by the Islamist fighters, particularly in the town of Mosul.

Iraq PM re-election bid in tatters amid militant offensive

AFP, Baghdad

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's days in office may be numbered, his reputation battered by a militant offensive and increasingly vocal charges of sectarianism as deputies begin choosing a new government.

The incumbent may have won by far the most seats and personal votes in April 30 polls, but events since then have left him increasingly isolated, as pressure piles on Iraqi leaders to swiftly form a government to help see off the jihadist-led advance.

With parliament due to open its first session today, Iraq's 328 MPs were to choose a new speaker, a national president and a prime minister.

But Maliki's Sunni and Kurdish rivals are refusing to grant him a third term, while his own bloc -- less cohesive than during the previous 2010 election -- has been subsumed into a pan-Shiite alliance, thereby lessening his clout.



Palestinian militants of the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas' armed wing, attend the funeral of militant Mohammed Obied during his funeral in the town of Deir al-Balah, in the central Gaza Strip yesterday. Palestinian security sources said a drone strike targeted a group of armed men, killing one militant yesterday in the town of Khan Yunis in southern Gaza Strip after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned that operations could be expanded in the enclave in response to surging rocket fire.

PHOTO: AFP



France first in India as West courts Modi

AFP, New Delhi

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said yesterday he expected progress on a \$12 billion deal to sell fighter jets to India, setting his hopes on changes promised by the newly installed government.

Fabius, the first Western minister to hold talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration, raised the slow-moving Rafale jet deal during talks with his Indian counterpart Sushma Swaraj in New Delhi.

"We are pretty confident in swift developments and it would be very important because stemming from this contract we can develop a large partnership in the domain of defence," Fabius told a press conference.

He underscored that the new right-wing government, which swept to power in May with the strongest mandate in 30 years, was "keen on the efficiency and implementation of decisions".

"The notion of efficiency in the new government approach is completely shared by us," he added.

The reform-minded Modi has been

widely courted by Western governments since his election in May, with his plans to open up the economy and spur economic growth raising hopes for foreign investors.

European governments and the United States boycotted him for a decade over religious riots which occurred while he was running his home state of Gujarat. They are now redoubling efforts to make up for lost time.

Japan, which has longstanding ties with Modi, is widely seen as the best poised to profit, but Fabius noted how he had been accommodated before European rivals.

Britain's William Hague is expected in the next few weeks.

"It's an honour," Fabius told AFP. "It shows the depth of the ties between India and France."

The deal to supply 126 Rafale fighter jets manufactured by Dassault Aviation has been under final negotiations since January 2012.

The complicated contract, which involves technology-sharing and the production of most of the planes in India, has been making slow progress through numerous stages of vetting and evaluation.



West Bengal Governor resigns after CBI grilling

NDTV ONLINE

MKNarayanan resigned as the Governor of West Bengal after being questioned by the CBI in connection with an alleged swindle centered on the sale of 12 helicopters to India by AgustaWestland, an Anglo-Italian defence manufacturer.

Narayanan, 80, was interrogated for two hours as a witness on Friday at his official residence in Kolkata. He was in a pool of about 12 governors appointed by the previous government whose exit from office is being sought by the new Modi administration. Three have resigned already; Narayanan is the fourth.

Narayanan had completed four of his five-year term as West Bengal governor.

Narayanan was the National Security Advisor in 2005 and attended meetings where technical specifications were amended for the 12 helicopters that the government wanted to buy for the use of the prime minister and president among others. The changes ensured that AgustaWestland qualified for the contract.

The 3600-crore deal was signed in 2010. It was cancelled in January this year by India over allegations that kickbacks were paid by AgustaWestland and its parent company, Italian defence giant Finmeccanica.

Narayanan's resignation is expected to facilitate the Centre's task of replacing the present set of governors, all of whom were appointed by the previous UPA government, with its own nominees.

British Airways loses Indian maestro's Sarod

AFP, New Delhi

Legendary Indian musician Amjad Ali Khan said yesterday British Airways had misplaced his beloved Sarod, a string instrument he has played on for 45 years.

The 68-year-old maestro realised the instrument was missing when he flew to Delhi with the airline on Saturday.

"After damaging my Sarod in 1997, British Airways now misplaces my Sarod. 48 hours and I still wait anxiously for some news. Still not traced," he tweeted.

The classical musician, who was awarded India's second highest civilian honour in 2001, had gone to London with his wife to perform at a function on June 21.

Recalling his ordeal, Khan said he waited for nearly five hours at the airport as the airline tried to trace his "priceless" instrument, but in vain.

"Being an artist, I communicate through my sarod, which was with me for the last 45 years.... How can such a big airline be so irresponsible?" Khan told the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency.



THAI COUP Court issues warrant for anti-coup spokesman

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's military court has issued an arrest warrant for the spokesman of an anti-coup group over alleged arms offences, an accusation firmly rejected by the former minister.

The warrant against Jakrapob Penkair, a prominent member of the "Red Shirt" movement affiliated to the government ousted by the military in May who lives in exile, follows the launch of an opposition alliance to counter the junta.

The "Organisation of Free Thais for Human Rights and Democracy" has vowed to press for the restoration of democratic rule from an as yet undisclosed Western country as attempts to take on the regime within Thailand are stifled.

"The military court Friday night issued arrest warrants for four people, including Jakrapob, for links with war weapons seized in Thailand during the past month," deputy national police chief Somyot Poompanmoung told AFP on Sunday.

Thailand's army justified the military takeover as necessary to restore peace after months of often-violent protests between pro- and anti-government factions, and had warned they would crack down on armed groups in the run-up to the May 22 coup.

Jakrapob, also once a spokesman for the government of tycoon-turned-populist premier Thaksin Shinawatra -- who was deposed in a previous coup in 2006 -- sharply rejected the allegations against him.

Toll hits 20 in India building collapse

AFP, New Delhi

Rescuers yesterday plucked two survivors from the ruins of a southern India apartment block that collapsed at the weekend, as they raced against the clock to find dozens more feared trapped in the rubble.

The confirmed death toll from Saturday's disaster on the outskirts of Chennai rose to 20 as authorities blamed shoddy construction for what was the second deadly building collapse in India within a matter of hours.

Karuna Sagar, a senior officer with the Tamil Nadu state police force said that, six people were arrested in the case on account of negligence.

"Forty-three bodies were retrieved, of them 20 were dead and 23 were alive," Sagar told AFP in a phone interview yesterday.

Suu Kyi races to change Myanmar constitution

REUTERS, Yangon

With elections looming next year, Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi is stepping up efforts to change a constitution that bars her from the presidency and gives substantial political power to unelected military members of parliament.

She remains wildly popular at home, but is nonetheless unable to fulfil her wish to become president due to a constitutional clause written to exclude her from office. Now, she says, her priority is to change another clause that grants the military de-facto power over constitutional amendments.

"If we don't change [section] 436, it means that the military has virtual veto power over what can or cannot be changed within the constitution," Suu Kyi told Reuters on Sunday.

Suu Kyi has received a boost from a surprising source: a USDP-dominated parliamentary committee examining constitutional amendments.

The panel voted to change the 75 percent majority required to a two-thirds majority, one member said yesterday, speaking on condition of anonymity as the committee's affairs are meant to be kept secret.

That could make it easier for the NLD to push through further amendments, including eliminating the clause that prevents anyone with a child or spouse with foreign citizenship from being president.

