

NEWSIN brief

Apartheid assassin 'Prime Evil' refused parole

AFP, Pretoria

Apartheid-era assassin Eugene de Kock, a police colonel known as "Prime Evil", was refused parole yesterday after serving 20 years in prison. De Kock was sentenced to two terms of life imprisonment plus 212 years for murder and other crimes as head of a police death squad targeting anti-apartheid activists. De Kock is one of a handful of apartheid-era officials prosecuted after being refused amnesty by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which was set up in 1995 to consider amnesty for those who openly confessed their

1m strike in Britain over pay and cuts

AFP, London

More than one million public sector workers went on strike in Britain yesterday over pay and spending cuts by the government imposed as part of its austerity programme, trade unions said. The strike, the biggest since Prime Minister David Cameron's coalition government took power in 2010, involves a wide range of workers from teachers and civil servants to street sweepers and park

MERS unlikely to spread in Asia: WHO

AFP, Manila

Asian countries should keep their guard against the deadly Middle East respiratory virus, although it is unlikely to spread to the region, a World Health Organization expert said yesterday. The Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) appears to be less infectious than originally thought even though it has already killed 287 people. The WHO said 15 countries have reported MERS cases, with the virus widely circulating in the Arabian

UAE pledges \$25 mn in aid to Gaza

AFP, Abu Dhabi

The United Arab Emirates yesterday pledged \$25 million in humanitarian aid to "support the steadfastness" of Palestinians in Gaza where Israeli strikes have killed more than 70 people in three days. The Emirati Red Crescent will supervise delivery of the aid, WAM state news agency said, adding that the aid organisation will also set up a field hospital in Gaza "to help the victims of the

Germany kicks out top US intel officer

AFP, Berlin

Germany yesterday expelled the US secret services station chief in Berlin in an escalating row over alleged American spying against its long-time European ally. The worst diplomatic rift in years comes after two suspected US spy cases were uncovered in less than a week in Germany, where anger still simmers over the NSA surveillance scandal sparked by fugitive intelligence contractor Edward Snowden.

"The representative of the US intelligence services at the embassy of the United States of America has been told to leave Germany," government spokesman Steffen Seibert said, announcing a highly unusual move among Nato allies.

The demand was based on two probes by German prosecutors of suspected US spying "as well as outstanding questions over the last several months about the activities of the US secret services in Germany", said Seibert.

"The government takes these developments very seriously," he added in a statement.

The White House refused to comment, but the US embassy in Berlin and the National Security Council both stressed that it is "essential" that cooperation continue on security matters as "it keeps Germans and Americans safe".

Merkel -- whose mobile phone was in the past targeted by the US National Security Agency (NSA) -- pointedly reminded the United States that security "depends on trust" between allies.

Merkel later said that "common sense tells us that spying on one's allies... is a waste of energy. We have so many problems that we should, in my view, focus on the essentials".

In the latest case, German police on Wednesday searched the Berlin-area home and office of a man who, local media reported, is a German defence ministry employee accused of passing secrets to the United States.

The case followed news last Friday that a 31-year-old German BND foreign intelligence service operative had been arrested, suspected of having sold over 200 documents to the CIA.

SPY ROW



Burma journos jailed over chem weapons report

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar jailed five journalists to 10 years in prison with hard labour yesterday over a report accusing the military of producing chemical weapons, a sentence denounced by campaigners as "outrageously harsh".

The reporters for the Unity Weekly News were convicted by a court in central Magway region under the former junta-run country's official secrets act, amid concerns that Myanmar is backsliding on press freedoms.

The article alleged that the country's military was operating a chemical weapons factory in the town of Pauk in Magway, under the instructions of former strongman junta chief Than Shwe.

The jailed men were arrested in February just days after the article was published.

Reporters Without Borders described the verdict as "very worrying for press freedom" in Myanmar.

Ukraine warns eastern push may last a month

Army nears rebels in Donetsk

AFP, Olenivka

Ukraine warned yesterday that its assault on pro-Russian insurgents may last another month and rejected calls for a ceasefire as it moved tanks within striking distance of the rebels' two remaining strongholds.

An AFP team about 20 kilometres south of the eastern hub of Donetsk -- to which most of the militias have retreated -- saw heavy armoured vehicles fan out across the rolling corn and sunflower fields of the economically-vital rustbelt.

A vast column of tanks and military vehicles arrived in the area on Wednesday in an apparent push to surround Donetsk and the neighbouring city of Lugansk -- both capitals of their own "People's Republics".

An earthmover's engine stuttered in the stifling heat as it dug trenches to help troops dodge artillery strikes from thousands of insurgents who are refusing to give up their bloody three-month drive to join Russian rule.

"We arrived here last night," said a balaclava-wearing soldier named Yuriy as his comrades stretched electric cables to a nearby farm to power up their equipment. He remained tight-lipped about his unit's immediate plans but vowed to fulfil "all orders".

The Ukrainian military said three servicemen had been killed and 27 wounded in the previous 24 hours. Two died when their armoured vehicle hit one of the numerous land mines separatists have planted to slow Kiev's relentless advance.

"We can now make a forecast about how long it will take to pull troops back from Donetsk and Lugansk," interior ministry advisor Stanislav Rechinsky told Ukrainian state television.

"Presumably, this can be done within a month," he said.

Rechinsky added "there will be no air or artillery strikes" against either city because of the toll in a low-scale war which has claimed 478 civilians and more than 200 Ukrainian soldiers as well as an undisclosed number of gunmen.

The Ukrainian health ministry said Thursday that another 1,392 civilians had been wounded during Kiev's "anti-terrorist operation" in the east.



Palestinian mourners carry the body of five-year-old boy Abdallah Abu Ghazal during his funeral in the northern Gaza town of Beit Lahiya yesterday after he was killed in an Israeli air strike. Inset, Israelis hide in a large concrete pipe used as a shelter during a Palestinian rocket attack on the southern Israeli village of Nitzan, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

US GUN VIOLENCE

Texan shoots dead 6, including his children

AFP, Chicago

A Texas man shot and killed four of his children and two adults looking after them before surrendering to police after a standoff during which he held a gun to his head, officials said.

A fifth child, a 15-year-old girl, was also shot and was in critical condition after the Houston-area shooting Wednesday evening, said Sgt. Thomas Gilliland of the Harris County Sheriff's Office.

The reason for the latest chapter in the epidemic of gun violence plaguing the United States was not immediately known, but police suspect family troubles led to the bloodshed.

All four of the children were either biological or adopted children of the suspect, Gilliland told reporters at the scene.

The man was separated from his wife, who lived out of state, authorities said, according to CNN.

US media showed a photo of a heavy-set blond man with his arms raised in the air after he got out of his car in suburban Houston as the standoff ended.

ABC News said the slain children were boys aged 13 and 4 and two girls aged 9 and 7. One of the children died after arriving at hospital.

The shooting happened in Spring, outside Houston.

Before being taken to hospital, the 15-year-old girl was able to tell authorities where the suspect was headed, triggering a police chase. She said her father intended to kill her grandparents at another home.

US strike kills 6 Pak militants

AFP, Miranshah

Pakistan's military says its anti-militant offensive in a northwestern tribal area has now taken control of 80 percent of a strategic town, as a US drone strike yesterday killed six suspected insurgents.

The armed forces have been waging a long-awaited assault on North Waziristan for the past three and a half weeks to eradicate hideouts militants have used to launch attacks across the restive nuclear-armed country.

The army says it has retaken most of Miranshah, the main town of North Waziristan which had been under effective militant control for years.



MODI GOVT'S FIRST BUDGET

India hikes defence spending by 12pc

Invites foreign investment in the sector

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday announced it would lift the cap on foreign direct investment in the defence sector to 49 percent and announced a 12-percent rise in military spending as part of efforts to modernise its armed forces.

In his first budget, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley raised defence spending for the current financial year to 2.29 trillion rupees (\$38.3 billion), up from 2.03 trillion rupees budgeted in the 2013-2014 year.

Jaitley, who is also defence minister, said he planned to open up the military industry to foreign investment, lifting the limit from 26 percent to 49 percent, with Indian companies retaining management and overall control.

"There can be no compromise with the defence of our country," Jaitley told parliament.

"Modernisation of the armed forces is critical to enable them to play their role effectively in the defence of India's strategic interests," he added.

The budget also included 10 billion rupees (\$167 million) for railway lines in border areas that is expected to be targeted at areas neighbouring rivals Pakistan and China. India has eyed Chinese investment in railways near its border anxiously, with Beijing ploughing billions of dollars into infrastructure in Tibet.

India overtook China to become the world's biggest importer of arms in 2010, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, which monitors the global arms trade. The US has displaced Russia as India's biggest arms supplier, importing \$1.9 billion of military kit from the US in 2013, according to research from IHS Jane's.

Jaitley said last month he aimed to speed up buying in the interests of "national security", while experts expect a more muscular foreign policy under the new administration.

India's military has grown increasingly frustrated at the state of its equipment as it looks to defend itself against an increasingly assertive China and from Pakistan.

The right-wing government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled the budget promising a new era of fiscal discipline, higher growth and greater opportunities for foreign investors. Jaitley vowed to raise the pace of economic growth to 7-8 percent in three to four years from less than 5 percent now.

The budget was a "roadmap" to where the two-month-old government is headed -- toward lower borrowing, more privatisation, greater openness to foreign investment and faster expansion, Jaitley told parliament.

IRAQ CRISIS

Kurds say PM Maliki must go

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's Kurds said Thursday Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki was "hysterical" and not fit to run the country, further dimming the prospect of a new leadership uniting to face jihadist fighters.

The worsening political discord comes three days ahead of a planned parliamentary session meant to revive the process of replacing what has effectively been a caretaker government since April elections.

Maliki "has become hysterical and has lost his balance", a statement from the office of Kurdish regional president Massud Barzani said, reacting to accusations by the prime minister a day earlier that his administration was harbouring militants.

Kurdish troops moved into disputed areas vacated by federal forces that failed to stop a Sunni militant onslaught that began on June 9.

The Kurds have since said those swathes of land were theirs to keep, and announced plans to hold a referendum on independence.

Maliki has accused Barzani of exploiting the chaos created by the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group's military offensive, but the Kurdish president said the security collapse was of the premier's own making.

Since IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed a "caliphate" twice the size of Israel on land straddling Iraq and Syria, militants have not made any further significant advances.

But Iraqi forces have also struggled to reclaim lost ground, and the front lines north and west of Baghdad were increasingly looking like the de facto borders of a partitioned Iraq.