

NEWS IN brief

18 killed in Pak anti-militant offensive

AFP, Bannu
Pakistani jets and artillery pounded militant hideouts in a lawless tribal district, killing 18 foreign and local insurgents in a massive ongoing offensive against the Taliban, officials said yesterday. Last month Pakistan's military launched a long-awaited offensive in North Waziristan, aimed at wiping out longstanding militant strongholds in the area, which borders Afghanistan.

N Korea fires 2 more missiles into sea

AFP, Seoul
North Korea fired two short-range missiles into the sea yesterday, Seoul's military said, in an apparent show of anger at an upcoming joint military exercise between South Korea and the United States. The annual drill, from July 16-21, involves the US aircraft carrier George Washington, which arrived in the southern port of Busan on Friday. The North on Saturday bristled at the nuclear-powered carrier visiting the port, calling it a "reckless" act of provocation.

Iraq prostitution raid kills 25 women

AFP, Baghdad
Gunmen killed 25 women and wounded at least eight people Saturday when they stormed two buildings in a residential Baghdad compound reputedly used for prostitution, police and government sources said. "This is the fate of any prostitution," read an inscription on the door of the one of the raided buildings. It was not immediately clear who the killers were but similar raids killed 12 people in May 2013 and three women two months later in the same mainly Shia neighbourhood of the Iraqi capital.



The mother of a three-year-old Palestinian child carries her sons body during his funeral in Khan Yunis, in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday. Top right, Indian protestors hold placards as they take part in a rally against Israeli attacks on Gaza in New Delhi, yesterday and Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas (R) delivers a note to Robert Serry (L), the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, condemning the Israeli assault on Gaza in Ramallah, yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP

Put Palestine under int'l protection

Abbas urges UN
AFP, Ramallah
Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas is to ask the United Nations to put the state of Palestine under "international protection" in light of the worsening violence in the Gaza Strip, the PLO said yesterday. "President Abbas will present a letter to the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Robert Serry, addressed to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, to officially put the State of Palestine under the UN international protection system and to form a legal committee for immediate follow-up," it said in a statement.

Politicians fail again as militants gain ground

AFP, Baghdad
Iraq's fractious parliament yesterday met and again failed to make any progress toward forming a new government, even as militants gained ground north of Baghdad in a renewed drive. World powers and Iraq's top Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, have been piling pressure on MPs to put aside their differences, with the country facing a major jihadist-led onslaught that has overrun chunks of five provinces. But "no type of agreement was reached... between the various blocs" at yesterday's session, which was adjourned to tomorrow, acting parliament speaker Mahdi Hafez announced. The latest stalemate came despite the announcement late Saturday of an agreement among Sunni Arab lawmakers on a candidate for speaker, a post traditionally held by the minority group that must be filled before the government formation process can go ahead. Parliament's United for Change, a Sunni grouping, said Dr Salim al-Juburi had been selected, but it went on to pledge not to accept incumbent premier Nuri al-Maliki for a third term. The UN's Iraq envoy, Nickolay Mladenov, had warned that "failing to move forward on electing a new speaker, a new president and a new govern-

ment risks plunging the country into chaos". Sunday's session was the second time parliament has completely failed to make progress. A July 1 meeting broke down when MPs traded barbs and enough failed to return after a break that the legislature was left short of a quorum. As the highly paid deputies kept up their squabbling, militants launched a renewed push, seizing two towns northeast of Baghdad, while major attacks west of the capital were stymied by security forces and allied tribesmen. Militants attacked the town of Dhuluiyah, just 80 kilometres north of Baghdad, overrunning more than half of it and bombing three police stations, the local council headquarters, a court and a bridge, officials said. Six people, among them four policemen, were killed in the violence. Bombings and shelling in the Baghdad area and Diyala province killed at least six more people, including a police brigadier general, officials said. In a sign of Washington's concern, Vice President Joe Biden Saturday spoke by phone with Barzani and Nujaifi about the need for "all Iraqi political forces" to work to form a new government as soon as possible, the White House said. It is hoped a new more inclusive government will help drain resentment among Iraq's minority Sunni Arabs that plays into the hands of militant groups.

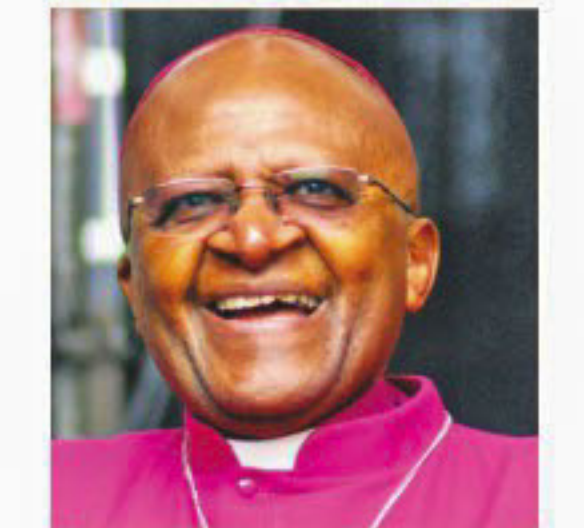
IRAQ CRISIS

Hamas eyes profit

AFP, Gaza City
Mired in economic crisis and sidelined by former allies, the Palestinian Hamas movement has little to lose and much to gain in its latest conflict with Israel, analysts say. The flare-up in violence has exacted a heavy human toll in Gaza, with more than 1,300 Israeli strikes having killed 166 people as the operation entered its sixth day yesterday. Hamas has seen its leaders and military capabilities targeted, but analysts say it was in a position of such weakness before the war that it only stands to gain from this round of fighting. Its one-time key ally Egypt has largely turned against the Islamist movement following the ouster of president Mohamed Morsi last year and a subsequent crackdown on his Muslim Brotherhood, which had backed Hamas. Since then, ties between Hamas and the Cairo government, now headed by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, have deteriorated significantly. Egypt has systematically destroyed the tunnels running between Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula, while keeping the official Rafah crossing mostly closed, contributing to a disastrous drop in

Hamass's revenues from smuggling. On the domestic front, Hamas -- which has governed Gaza for the past seven years -- recently signed a reconciliation deal with its Palestinian rivals in the West Bank. The agreement effectively loosened Hamas's grip on power in Gaza, with the Islamist movement dissolving its government in favour of a consensus government of independents that is largely based in Ramallah. Under such circumstances, the current conflict could be something of a boon for the group, said Akram Attallah, an independent analyst in Gaza. "What Hamas wants from this war is to show it is still able to defend its people," he told AFP, saying the conflict could leave it "both more popular and better off financially". The high-profile conflict could now see an influx of aid that would enable cash-strapped Hamas to once again return to its traditional role of provider for Gaza's 1.7 million residents. And it could even offer an opportunity -- by means of a truce agreement -- for Hamas to secure an easing of Israel's eight-year blockade, which has contributed to the economic crisis.

GAZA CRISIS



Desmond Tutu backs assisted suicide

AFP, London
South Africa's Anglican archbishop emeritus Desmond Tutu yesterday said he supported assisted dying for the terminally ill, the day after the Church's former leader backed a bill to legalise it in Britain. But the Church remains officially opposed to the legislation and has called for a public inquiry into the issue. Writing in Britain's Observer newspaper, Tutu explained that he had been convinced by the case of Craig Schonegevel, a 28-year-old South African who suffered from neurofibromatosis and ended up killing himself because doctors were unable to end his life. "Some people opine that with good palliative care there is no need for assisted dying, no need for people to request to be legally given a lethal dose of medication," said the Nobel Peace laureate. "That was not the case for Craig Schonegevel. Others assert their right to autonomy and consciousness - why exit in the fog of sedation when there's the alternative of being alert and truly present with loved ones?" He revealed that he had asked his family not to prolong his life artificially, and slammed the treatment of former president Nelson Mandela during his final days. "What was done to Madiba was disgraceful," he wrote.

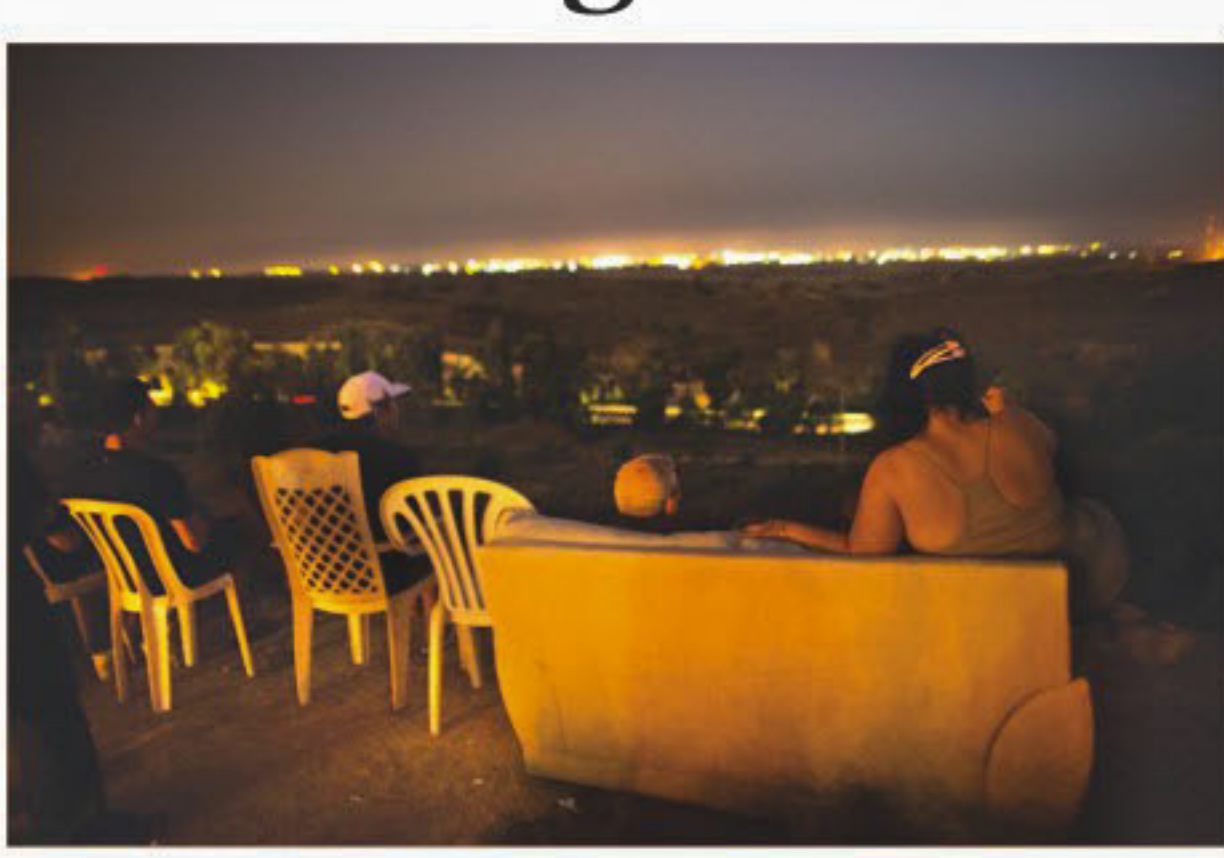


US Secretary of State John Kerry, left, and Afghan presidential candidates Abdullah Abdullah, centre, and Ashraf Ghani smile as they speak at a press conference announcing an audit of the votes cast in the country's general election at the United Nations Compound in Kabul on late Saturday.

Afghan rivals agree to end poll dispute

AFP, Kabul
Afghanistan's two presidential rivals have agreed to a historic deal to audit all eight million votes cast in the disputed election after two days of intense shuttle diplomacy by top US diplomat John Kerry. An audible gasp rippled through a packed press conference held Saturday at the UN headquarters in Kabul as Kerry made the surprise announcement after hours of waiting, saying that vote-checking would begin within the next 24 hours. Both candidates have vowed to stand by the results of the audit, with the winner to be declared the country's next president, who will immediately begin work to form a national unity government. The details of that are yet to be worked out. The first ballots to be audited will be those gathered already in Kabul, while ballot boxes from all the country's provinces will be brought under high security to the Afghan capital by Nato and Afghan security forces and kept under tight guard. Ghani, Abdullah and Kerry joined hands at the end of the news conference and raised them in triumph after securing the breakthrough, which follows a bitter standoff that raised fears of fresh violence along ethnic lines. Abdullah draws his support from Tajiks and other northern Afghan groups, while Ghani is backed by Pashtun tribes of the south and east. Preliminary results of the second-round vote released on Monday put Ghani in the lead, but Abdullah declared himself the true winner, saying massive fraud robbed him of victory. The new count will take time, and Kerry said that outgoing President Hamid Karzai had agreed to delay the inauguration which had been due on August 2.

Israelis 'cheered as missiles strike Gaza targets'



Israeli residents sit on a hill overlooking the Gaza Strip on Saturday to watch the fighting between the Israeli army and Palestinian militants.

PHOTO: AFP
INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
An image that appears to show a group of Israelis on a hilltop cheering and applauding as they watch the deadly aerial bombardment of Gaza has caused international outrage after it was shared by thousands on Twitter. Taken by the Middle East correspondent for a Danish newspaper, the picture shows rows of people sitting on plastic chairs looking out over the Gaza Strip as rockets and explosions light up the night sky. Allan Sorensen, who posted the image, wrote that it showed a kind of "cinema" on the hilltop outside the Israeli town of Sderot, and a caption added: "Clapping when blasts are heard." Sorensen's newspaper, the Kristeligt Dagblad, reported that the gathering involved more than 50 people who had transformed the hill into something "most closely resembling the front row of a reality war theatre". It said that people were seen taking popcorn up onto the hill with their chairs, and that they sat cheerfully smoking hookahs. "We are here to see Israel destroy Hamas," said Eli Chone, a 22-year-old American who lives in Israel. Sorensen's tweet was met with anger by fellow Twitter users. One user wrote: "If this is true then God help us all. What's become of the human race?" Another said: "This is the most gruesome image I've seen the last few days." Meanwhile, Israel yesterday launched its first ground offensive in a bid to destroy a rocket-launching site in northern Gaza. Troops were sent in early on Sunday, in a brief raid which left four soldiers slightly wounded after an exchange of gunfire, the military said. The Israeli army tweeted this morning: "We warned civilians in N. Gaza to move away from Hamas targets. Hamas told civilians to ignore our warnings & remain in the line of fire." It comes after the United Nations Security Council called for a ceasefire to the bloody conflict which has left 166 Palestinians dead.

Ukraine clashes kill 18 civilians

AFP, Kiev
Escalating clashes between pro-Kremlin separatists and Ukrainian forces yesterday killed 18 civilians and forced the new Western-backed leader to cancel a pivotal meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the World Cup in Brazil. An explosive security crisis on the eastern edge of the European Union that has claimed more than 550 lives and enflamed East-West relations has since Friday threatened to spiral into an all-out civil war. Militias that the West and Kiev allege are being armed by the Kremlin used a Grad multiple-rocket system late Friday to mow down 19 Ukrainian soldiers and wound nearly 100 near the Russian border. Further attacks killed 18 more troops and 20 civilians -- 12 of them in what Kiev said were missile and other overnight rebel strikes staged across the eastern rustbelt -- in violence that appeared to shatter any hope of a truce. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has vowed to kill "hundreds" of gunmen for every lost soldier and ordered an air-tight military blockade of Lugansk and Donetsk -- both capitals of their own "People's Republics" that want to join Russia.

Major disputes remain in Vienna nuke talks

Say US, Iran; Israel warns West over deal
REUTERS, Vienna
US Secretary of State John Kerry yesterday said major differences persist between Iran and six world powers negotiating on Tehran's nuclear programme, remarks echoed by Tehran, with a July 20 deadline for a deal approaching. The United States, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China want Iran to reduce its nuclear fuel-making capacity to deny it any means of quickly producing atom bombs. In exchange, international sanctions that have crippled the large OPEC member's oil-dependent economy would gradually be lifted. Iran says it is enriching uranium for peaceful energy purposes only and wants the sanctions removed swiftly. "Obviously we have some very significant gaps still, so we need to see if we can make some progress," said Kerry. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi delivered a similar message. He was quoted by Iran's Arabic language al-Alam television as saying that "disputes over all major and important issues still remain. We have not been able to narrow the gaps on major issues and it is not clear whether we can do it." Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday warned that any nuclear deal leaving Iran with the capability to enrich uranium would be "catastrophic." Netanyahu's comments in an interview with Fox News Sunday came as foreign ministers of the United States, France, Britain and Germany gathered in Vienna to face off with Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif. A six-month interim deal with Iran expires July 20 and US Secretary of State John Kerry said "significant gaps" remain before a final deal can be reached.