

NEWS IN
briefEncephalitis toll
passes 150 in India

AFP, New Delhi

Recent outbreaks of encephalitis in India have killed more than 150 people, with health officials on alert fearing the death toll could rise further, state government directors said.

Many of the deaths have occurred since the onset of the monsoon season in June when mosquitoes breed in large numbers.

Iraqi lawmakers stall
presidential vote

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi lawmakers yesterday postponed choosing a new president for their ailing country while air strikes, suicide car bombs and summary executions yielded their daily grim crop of bodies. Parliament adjourned without even broaching the election of a new head of state and agreed to meet again today, their last chance to pick a new leader before the week-long Eid al-Fitr Muslim holiday.

Xi ends LatAm tour
in Cuba

AFP, Havana

Chinese President Xi Jinping yesterday ended his Latin American tour in Cuba. As part of his regional charm offensive, Xi extended a hand to his Cuban communist ally with the signing of 29 bilateral agreements. Xi, during his tour, reached out to countries often shunned by US and European investors, including Argentina, Cuba and Venezuela.

Britain still exporting
arms to Russia: MPs

AFP, London

Britain is still exporting arms and military equipment to Russia, according to a parliamentary report released yesterday just hours after Prime Minister David Cameron rapped France for selling weapons to Moscow. However the report found 251 licences were still in place for the sale to Russia of controlled goods worth at least \$225 million.

Indonesia election
result challenged

AFP, Jakarta

The ex-general who lost Indonesia's presidential election to Joko Widodo will challenge the result in court, his campaign team said yesterday, a move that could spell weeks of uncertainty for the world's third-biggest democracy. Widodo was named the winner Tuesday after results showed he resoundingly defeated his only rival Prabowo Subianto.

'Devil encouraged
al-Jazeera journos'

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

The judge who sent three al-Jazeera English journalists to jail in Egypt has accused them of being in league with the devil in a 57-page explanation of his verdict.

Judge Mohamed Nagy Shehata sentenced Mohamed Fahmy, Peter Greste and Baher Mohamed last month to between seven and 10 years in jail on charges of aiding terrorists and falsifying news. At the time, diplomats and rights observers described the charges as baseless, the process as flawed and the trio's jailing as an attack on free speech.

In his first statements since the trial, Shehata said "the devil encouraged them to use journalism and direct it towards actions against this nation".

He claimed the journalists had doctored footage by "collecting audio and visual recordings and editing them by removing parts and adding it to [footage of] different events". He said this "served the interests of one of the banned terrorist groups [the Muslim Brotherhood], by showing the country – contrary to the truth – in a situation of chaos and upheaval, [and] by portraying it as a lost country suffering from division and internal fighting".

None of the footage shown in court corroborated claims that al-Jazeera English had falsified its reports. Some of it was not even made by al-Jazeera.

All three are expected to appeal their verdicts, a process that could take months.

Hopes of a presidential pardon receded after Egypt's new head of state, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, declined to intervene the day after their conviction. A few days later, he told Egyptian editors he wished the jailed journalists had been deported rather than arrested, raising hopes of an intervention further down the line.

Blasts kill 82
in northern
Nigeria

REUTERS, Kaduna

Two bomb blasts in the north Nigerian city of Kaduna killed at least 82 people yesterday, officials said, in attacks that bore the hallmarks of violent Islamist group Boko Haram.

A suicide bomber targeting a moderate Muslim cleric killed at least 32 of the cleric's congregation on a busy commercial road. Shortly after a second bomb blast killed 50 people in the crowded Kano market, a local Red Cross worker on the scene, who declined to be named, told Reuters.

Thousands were gathered for prayers with Sheikh Dahiru Bauchi in Murtala Muhammed square, and when his convoy pulled up, the bomber lunged at him before being stopped by his private security, witnesses and police said. Bauchi escaped the blast.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for either blast, but Boko Haram has been staging attacks, especially with explosives, outside its northeastern heartlands in the past three months.



Ukrainian soldiers carry a coffin with the remains of a victim of the Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 crash to a military plane during a ceremony at the airport of Kharkiv, Ukraine, yesterday. Right, A Dutch woman mourns the victims of the plane crash. The first bodies from flight MH17 arrived in the Netherlands yesterday almost a week after it was shot down over Ukraine killing 298 people on board. Story on page 16.



PHOTO: AFP

Ukraine in civil war: ICRC

Separatists shot down two Ukrainian jets as tension boils

AFP, Geneva

the term "non-international armed conflict" for civil war.

It came as Pro-Russian rebels yesterday shot down two Ukrainian fighter jets in the insurgent-held area where Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 was downed.

"Terrorists have shot down two Ukrainian Su-25 jets," the press office for Kiev's military campaign against the insurgents said in a statement.

The planes were hit by missiles fired by rebels close to the village of Dmytrivka, some 45 kilometres south-east of the MH17 crash site towards the Russian border, as they were providing air support for government infantry, the statement said.

The pilots from both jets managed to parachute out, it said, giving no further details about their condition. A spokesman for the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic told AFP its fighters had shot down the two aircraft.

The downing of the government jets comes just six days after the insurgents were accused of shooting down the Malaysian passenger plane using a

surface-to-air missile, killing all 298 people on board.

The rebels have denied that they downed flight MH17, accusing the Ukrainian military of being responsible for hitting the jet.

Russia starts reinforcing naval fleet in Crimea

Russia yesterday announced that it had begun expanding and modernising its Black Sea fleet based in Crimea with new ships and submarines, just months after annexing the peninsula from Ukraine.

"Today we have started forming a powerful Black Sea fleet with an absolutely different level of air service, coastal missile and artillery troops and marines," said Alexander Vitko, the Black Sea fleet commander, in a message to servicemen.

Vitko said the modernisation of the fleet "lays the foundation for the future of the fleet, both in the short term and looking far ahead."

REVIVAL OF PEACE TALKS
India, Pak FM to meet in August

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Foreign Secretaries of India and Pakistan will meet in Islamabad on August 25 in a bid to revive peace talks between the two nuclear-weapon countries which have remained stalled for nearly two years.

The decision to resume the talks at the level of Foreign Secretaries was taken by Indian Foreign Secretary Sujatha Singh and her Pakistani counterpart Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry through a telephonic conversation.

An understanding that the foreign secretaries of the two countries will be in touch to see how to move forward on bilateral relations had been reached during the visit of Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif here in May to attend the swearing-in of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The two leaders had a bilateral meeting for 45 minutes, a day after the ceremony.

Announcing the decision to hold Indo-Pak Foreign Secretaries meet, Syed Akbaruddin, Spokesperson in the External Affairs Ministry, told the media that "the two Foreign Secretaries had... a telephonic discussions and as part of that discussion they also discussed how they should move forward. And based on that telephonic conversation, they agreed that they will meet in Islamabad on August 25."

He noted that since there have been incidents of firing along the international boundary, Foreign Secretary Singh used the opportunity to raise the issue.

Singh said "incidents of this nature will impede the positive work" the political leaders of both the countries wish to undertake, according to the Spokesperson.

Sisi defends
Egypt peace
efforts for Gaza

AFP, Cairo

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi yesterday defended Egypt's role in trying to broker a Gaza truce between Israel and Hamas, which accuses him of proposing a ceasefire favourable to Israel.

Unlike his Islamist predecessor Mohamed Morsi whom he toppled and detained last year, ex-army chief Sisi has sought to isolate the militant Palestinian movement in the neighbouring Gaza Strip.

The Cairo government worked to contain the crisis even before it escalated into a full-blown conflict on July 8 that has killed more than 700 Palestinians and at least 35 Israelis, Sisi said.

"Egypt has sacrificed, for the Palestinian cause and the Palestinians, 100,000 martyrs," he said in a televised address, referring to casualties in Egypt's wars with Israel between 1948 and 1973, before Cairo signed a 1979 peace treaty.

"So it is difficult for anyone to engage in one-upmanship, not just regarding (our role) with the Palestinian brothers but also the Arab region," he said in a speech to mark the 1952 military overthrow of the monarchy in Egypt.

Since Morsi's overthrow in July 2013, Egypt has been at odds with Turkey and Qatar, both of which back his Muslim Brotherhood and have been critical of Sisi's stand on the Gaza conflict.

Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has called Sisi a "tyrant" who could not be trusted to mediate a truce, while Hamas demands a role for Ankara and Doha, which hosts its political leadership, in any true negotiations.



A Palestinian child screams in pain at the Kamal Adwan hospital in Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip yesterday after she was hit by shrapnel during an Israeli military strike near her family house. The death toll of the 16-day conflict passed 700, reports said.

PHOTO: AFP

Uproar as Shiv Sena MP 'force-
feeds' fasting worker in India

AFP, New Delhi

India's parliament erupted in anger yesterday after television footage showed a hardline Hindu nationalist lawmaker apparently trying to force-feed a Muslim man during the fasting month of Ramadan.

Opposition Congress MPs launched raucous protests in the parliament, saying the lawmaker had violated the man's religious beliefs by aggressively trying to shove a chapati or piece of bread in his mouth.

"It is absolutely reprehensible and should be condemned in the strongest possible manner," Congress party spokesman Manish Tewari later told reporters.

The lawmaker is from the hardline Hindu nationalist outfit Shiv Sena, a key ally of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party which swept to power in May elections.

The incident is likely to fan concern among Muslims and other religious minorities over Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party government.

The footage, aired on national television, showed a group of Shiv Sena lawmakers confronting a catering supervisor last Thursday in New Delhi.



The lawmakers were complaining about the quality of food offered at a guest house for officials from the state of Maharashtra, where Shiv Sena is based.

The footage showed lawmaker Rajan Baburao Vichare attempting several times to push the bread into the supervisor's mouth as a crowd gathered.

Vichare said he was not trying to break the supervisor's religious fast. Instead he was trying to demonstrate that the chapatis being served were too hard.

