

NEWSIN brief

CIA apologises for spying on US Senate

AFP, Washington

Lawmakers slammed the CIA on Thursday after the US intelligence agency admitted its officers had "improperly" spied upon Senate investigators probing allegations of torture. The CIA Director John Brennan has apologised to the head of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI), Senator Dianne Feinstein, and admitted her staff's computers had been accessed. Previously, Brennan had dismissed the allegations, insisting that "nothing could be further from the truth."

Hope fades for India landslide survivors

AFP, Malin

Rescue workers were losing hope of finding survivors yesterday amid the mud and debris from a major landslide in western India, where 150 people are feared to have been killed. Sixty bodies and eight survivors have now been pulled from the site where a village once stood in a remote part of Maharashtra state, but incessant rains and strong winds have hampered rescue efforts. The tragedy occurred on Wednesday.

Somali lawmaker shot dead in Mogadishu

AFP, Mogadishu

Somali gunmen shot dead a lawmaker, Sheikh Adan Madeer, in Mogadishu yesterday as he left prayers at mosque, police and witnesses said. Gunmen reportedly opened fire from a car in a drive-by shooting in the centre of the city, before racing off. Madeer, who was chairman of the parliamentary finance committee, is the fifth Somali deputy to be killed since the start of the year. There was no immediate claim of responsibility.

22 killed in Central Africa fighting

AFP, Bangui

At least 22 people were killed in clashes between rival anti-balaka (Christian) and Seleka (Muslim) militias in the Central African Republic this week, African peacekeepers said yesterday. Clashes between the two groups have plunged the country into a cycle of brutal sectarian violence that has left thousands of people dead and hundreds of thousands displaced.

Myanmar relieves 91 child soldiers: UN

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's army has freed 91 children and young people from its armed forces, the United Nations said yesterday, in the country's latest move towards ending the use of child soldiers. The reformist government of the formerly junta-run nation committed to ending the recruitment and use of children in its "tatmadaw" army in a June 2012 pact with the UN.

Karachi sea bathing tragedy toll hits 31

AFP, Karachi

Rescuers have recovered 10 more bodies in rough seas off Pakistan's biggest city Karachi as the search for a group of bathers who drowned earlier this week resumed yesterday, officials said. The authorities said the total number of corpses taken from the sea has now reached 31.

Blast at explosives factory kills 5 in India

AFP, Raipur

A massive blast at an explosives factory in central India killed five workers early yesterday, police said. The powerful explosion completely destroyed the factory, which supplied detonators and other explosives to mines in the mineral-rich state of Chhattisgarh. Police are investigating what caused the blast.



TAIWAN GAS BLAST

A general view shows the damaged road after the gas explosions in southern kaohsiung, yesterday. A series of powerful gas blasts killed at least 25 people and injured up to 267 in the southern Taiwanese city of Kaohsiung, overturning cars and ripping up roads, officials said. The blasts, believed to have been triggered by gas leaking from underground pipelines, were powerful enough to blow off roofs of some houses.

PHOTO: AFP

Standoff in no one's interest

Agree Putin, Obama; MH17 experts begin work amid clashes

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart Barack Obama agreed during a phone call on Friday the current standoff in Ukraine was not in the interest of their countries, the Kremlin said.

"The presidents agreed that the current situation is not in the interests of either country," said a Kremlin statement. Obama also expressed his "deep concerns about Russia's increased support for the separatists in Ukraine," the White House said.

Obama repeated his concern about Moscow's alleged breach of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, under which the US and Russia agreed not to develop medium-range cruise missiles.

"The president reinforced his preference for a diplomatic solution to the crisis in Ukraine, and the two leaders agreed to keep open their channels of communication," a White House statement said.

Meanwhile in his first comments on sanctions after the US and EU earlier this week slapped the toughest punitive measures on Russia since the Cold War, Putin characterised them as "counter-productive, causing serious damage to bilateral cooperation and international stability overall."

However, the Kremlin said the two presidents agreed on the

urgent need for an "immediate and stable halt to fighting in southeast Ukraine and the start of a political process."

They also agreed that tripartite contact group talks bringing together Ukraine, Russia and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) which is monitoring the situation in Ukraine should continue.

Tripartite talks held on Thursday and yesterday in the Belarussian capital Minsk reached agreement on freeing 20 prisoners from each side, according to Ukraine's representative cited by Russian news agencies.

Russia's annexation of Crimea and a pro-Russian rebellion in eastern Ukraine that Washington accuses Moscow of supporting has led to the severest crisis in relations between Russia and the West in decades.

Meanwhile, Dutch and Australian experts gathered more remains from the crash site of downed flight MH17 in east Ukraine, as they scrambled to make up for lost time amid deadly clashes between government troops and pro-Russian rebels.

The Ukrainian military said an overnight ambush by insurgents in Shakhtarsk, a town 25 kilometres from the main impact site, left 14 people dead, including at least 10 soldiers.

Seventy police investigators finally managed to comb the scattered wreckage in the fields where the Malaysia Airlines plane was downed two weeks ago killing all 298 people on board.

UKRAINE CRISIS

Patients have 'right to fun'

French hospital to open wine bar

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A hospital may seem like the most unlikely place to find a wine bar but "medically supervised" tipples will soon be allowed for patients in France.

Fine wines, champagne and whisky will be among the choices at the unusual establishment being opened in September.

The bar will be in the palliative care centre at Clermont-Ferrand University Hospital in Puy-de-Dôme, central France, which offers comfort for people with chronic and terminal illnesses.

Dr Virginie Guastella, the centre's manager, said she was defending "the right to have fun" and hopes the idea will catch on in other hospitals to brighten up the lives of patients and their families.

Acknowledging French people's traditionally "hedonistic" relationship with food and wine, she said there was no need to enforce a ban on the joys of life, especially when it could be reaching its end.

Staff at the hospital unit will be specially trained to manage patients' needs at the bar and hope it will offer terminally ill people a happier and more relaxed space to share their final days with family and friends.

Ties that bind them together

AFP, Washington

US politicians mired in Washington gridlock agree on virtually nothing these days. Nothing, it seems, apart from their unquestioned support for Israel.

With the death toll soaring in Gaza, Israel has come in for harsh criticism in many parts of the world including Europe, where pro-Gaza demonstrations descended into anti-Semitic riots.

Not so in Washington. The United States is Israel's chief backer at the United Nations, where it routinely blocks Security Council resolutions condemning the Jewish state.

Washington has funnelled more than \$100 billion in aid to Israel since its formation in 1948, and consistently provides its chief Mideast ally with up-to-the minute weaponry. Money to Israel flows through Congress largely uncontested -- including now, with lawmakers signalling intention to commit \$225 million for Israel's Iron Dome missile defense shield.

In short, "America's got Israel's back," US National Security Advisor Susan Rice assured a gathering of Jewish leaders Monday in Washington. "If there is a rocket on Israel, there is a rocket on America," said Kevin McCarthy, who next week becomes the number two House Republican.

Why are Washington politicians in lock step with Israel? Chief reasons include democratic principles, shared values, vocal evangelical Christians, and pressure from the powerful pro-Israel lobby.

The United States recognized Israel 11 minutes after it proclaimed independence.

Since 1967, through bitter wars, deadly terror attacks, failed peace initiatives, and deeply controversial Jewish settlement expansions, Washington has sought to be a force for dispute resolution in the region. Middle East stability was paramount, and Washington partnered accordingly with Israel to keep the region off the boil.

Most US presidents since 1948 have acknowledged the special relationship, but Rabbi William Gershon believes it is actually centuries old.

"I would argue it started back in 1654, when Jews came to this country and were very involved in supporting the American Revolution," Gershon, president of the Rabbinical Assembly of the world's Conservative movement, told AFP.

Early Jewish Americans embraced democratic principles, and the country's Founding Fathers hewed closely to Hebrew traditions, rooting the modern republic on the Bible while insisting on religious tolerance.

Early pilgrims fleeing persecution in England described their arrival in the new world as a virtual re-enactment of the Exodus. Many Americans, Gershon said, see the Jewish state embracing the same ideals and values that have come to define America. American Christians provide a broad flank of support for Israel, arguing that the Holy Land has been part and parcel of Judaism -- and by extension Christianity -- for millennia.

LatAm comes out in force against Israel

AFP, Montevideo

Latin America's leaders are among the most vehement in condemning Israel's Gaza offensive -- labelling the Jewish state "terrorist", recalling ambassadors, and offering near-unanimous, unwavering support to Palestinians.

"I can't remember another similar situation where (all the countries in the region) have reacted practically as a bloc," said political scientist Reginaldo Nasser, a professor at the Pontifical University in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

One of the most symbolic recent developments came from Bolivian President Evo Morales -- one of the leaders of Latin America's far left -- who put Israel on its list of "Terrorist States" and eliminated a visa waiver program for Israeli citizens.

More than 1,400 Palestinians have been killed and 8,000 injured, two-thirds of them civilians, in Gaza in 24 days of fighting between Hamas and Israel. The conflict has also cost the lives of 61 Israeli soldiers, as well as two civilians and a Thai farm worker killed by rocket fire.

More than 245 of the dead Palestinians were children, UNICEF has said.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians look at an unexploded Israeli shell that landed on the main road outside the town of Deir Al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip.

Brazil President Dilma Rousseff this week called the Israeli military operation a "massacre."

Tensions between the two countries had already escalated a week earlier, when Brazil recalled its envoy from Tel Aviv, a move that prompted Israel's foreign ministry spokesman to call the Latin American powerhouse a "diplomatic dwarf".

Rousseff's condemnation did not go as far as some of her peers. Venezuela President Nicolas Maduro denounced "a war of extermination that has lasted nearly a century" against the Palestinian people. Peru, Ecuador, Chile, and El Salvador have also recalled their ambassadors for consultations, while Costa Rica and Argentina, which have the largest Jewish populations in the region, called the Israeli ambassador for meetings at their foreign ministries.

On Thursday, Uruguay President Jose Mujica asked for "an immediate withdrawal" of Israeli troops from Gaza and suggested it may also recall its envoy in Tel Aviv.

Other politically leftist Latin American countries had years earlier broken diplomatic relations with Israel, including Nicaragua in 2010, Venezuela and Bolivia in 2009, after a previous military campaign in Gaza, and Cuba, in 1973, after the Yom Kippur War.

In recent weeks, several protests across the region, from Mexico to southern Chile, have seen thousands of Latin Americans take to the streets in support of Palestinians.

These pro-Palestinian protests have been larger in Europe and Latin America than in Arab countries, Nasser noted. Bras said the protests are "an identification with pain, a sentiment of solidarity with what is happening in Latin America," where feelings of oppression are widespread.



Saudi king slams world's silence

REUTERS, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah criticised yesterday international inaction over Israel's offensive in Gaza, which he described as involving mass slaughter and "war crime against humanity", in a speech read out on his behalf on state television.

"This (international) community which has observed silently what is happening in the whole region, was indifferent to what is happening, as if what is happening is not its concern. Silence that has no justification," he said in his speech.

He also slammed militants who he said were killing innocent people and mutilating their bodies in contravention of Islamic teachings and called on the region's leaders and religious scholars to prevent Islam from being hijacked by militants.

King Abdullah named no groups but was apparently referring to violence in neighbouring countries, including Iraq and Syria, where the Islamic State has captured swathes of territory, killing scores of people and forcing Christians to flee.

Saudi Arabia, birthplace of Islam, sees itself as a leader of the Sunni Muslim world and a main player in the Middle East. But the world's largest oil exporter and U.S. ally has played only a low-key role in diplomatic efforts to end the conflict in Gaza, leaving the main Arab efforts to its close ally Egypt and fellow Gulf monarchy Qatar.

Israel launched its offensive in Hamas Islamist-dominated Gaza on July 8, unleashing air and naval bombardments in response to a surge of cross-border rocket attacks. Tanks and infantry pushed into the territory of 1.8 million on July 17.



An Indian child plays in muddy water during 'Splash Puddle Day' celebrations at The Somaiya School in Mumbai, yesterday. According to a statement released by the school, mud play benefits children in various ways, it connects them to nature and is educative.

PHOTO: AFP

GOODBYE 'magic realist'



THE HINDU ONLINE

Nabarun Bhattacharya, the 66-year-old Bengali writer, who achieved a cult status in his lifetime in Bengal, passed away in a city hospital on Thursday evening. He had been suffering from pancreatic cancer over the last few months and his condition deteriorated over the weekend.

He was often described a 'magic realist' and compared with Russian anti-establishment writer of 20th century, Mikhail Bulgakov.

The only child of late actor-playwright Bijon Bhattacharya and Magsaysay award-winning writer Mahasweta Devi, Bhattacharya won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1997 for his novel Herbert, which many critics have called anarchic. It was later made into a film with the same name by Suman Mukhopadhyay.

Born in Baharampur in Murshidabad district, Bhattacharya was greatly inspired by his father, writer of the legendary play Nabanna on the Bengal famine.

The philosophy of his life, political leanings, and artistic faculties were greatly influenced by the time he spent with famous filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak, a close relative.

Bhattacharya flowered as a writer in Kolkata, where he relentlessly wrote about those marginalised sections living on the city streets, in slums and dark alleys, using satire, dark humour, and fantasy to telling effect to highlight oppression and exploitation. His writings very often brought him in conflict with the powers that be, but till the end he remained a fearless voice against power and its misuse.