NEWS IN brief

Iran nuke talks before UN Assembly meet

AFP, *Vienna*

Iran and six world powers will hold a new round of nuclear talks before the UN General Assembly, which starts on September 16, a spokesman for lead negotiator Catherine Ashton said yesterday. Last month after several months of talks Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany decided to extend their self-imposed deadline of July 20 to strike an agreement until

Thai 'Yellow Shirt' founder jailed

AFP, *Bangkok*

A controversial media mogul who founded Thailand's royalist "Yellow Shirt" street movement was jailed yesterday after an appeal court refused him bail over a 20-year sentence for corporate fraud, his lawyer said. Sondhi Limthongkul, who led protests which helped trigger a 2006 army coup that toppled then premier Thaksin Shinawatra and plunged Thailand into a near-decade of political turmoil, was sentenced in

Prince William returns to the skies

AFP, *London*

Britain's Prince William is to get back behind the controls of a helicopter and become an air ambulance pilot, Kensington Palace announced yesterday. William, the Duke of Cambridge, is to be based in the city, responding to emergencies ranging from road traffic accidents to

Pakistan arrests Indian border guard

AFP, *Lahore*

Pakistani security forces have arrested an Indian border guard for allegedly violating their de-facto border in the disputed Himalayan territory of Kashmir, officials said yesterday. Tasnim Aslam, a spokeswoman for the Foreign Office, confirmed the incident, which

Saif Ali Khan may lose Padma honour

TNN, *New Delhi*

The Indian government is examining a demand for withdrawing the Padma honour conferred on Bollywood actor Saif Ali Khan following a Mumbai court framing charges against him. RTI activist S C Agrawal had filed a complaint with the Union home ministry on March 14, demanding that the actor be stripped of the award conferred in 2010 as a Mumbai court had framed charges against him for alleged

Russia slaps food sanctions on West

Threatens to block airspace as invasion fear mounts

AGENCIES

Russia retaliated against tough new Western sanctions yesterday, banning most food imports from the United States and the European Union and threatening to block flights over its airspace.

But the 28-member European Union swiftly denounced the measures as "clearly politically motivated" and said it was ready to take action in response.

The tit-for-tat moves further heighten tensions between Russia and the West over the conflict in Ukraine, where heavy shelling was reported in the rebel-held eastern city of Donetsk yesterday.

Russia's food embargo would affect "imports of beef, pork, fruit and vegetable produce, poultry, fish, cheese, milk and dairy products from the European Union, United States, Australia, Canada and Norway," Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev told a government meeting in televised remarks.

The ban exempts only baby food and will last one year unless "our partners demonstrate a constructive approach" with regards to sanctioning Russia, he said.

Putin's approval rating soars

Russian President Vladimir Putin's domestic approval rating has soared to 87 percent, pollsters said yesterday, the highest level in six years as Russia is locked in a standoff with the West over Ukraine. The figure is just one percent lower than the Kremlin strongman's historic popularity peak in August 2008 when Moscow fought a

Russia imports 35 percent of all the food it consumes, taking 10 percent of food industry exports from the European Union worth 12 billion euros a year.

In another potential strike against the West, Moscow is considering banning the use of Russian airspace for European airlines, the so-called overflight rights needed to take the shortest route between Europe and Asia.

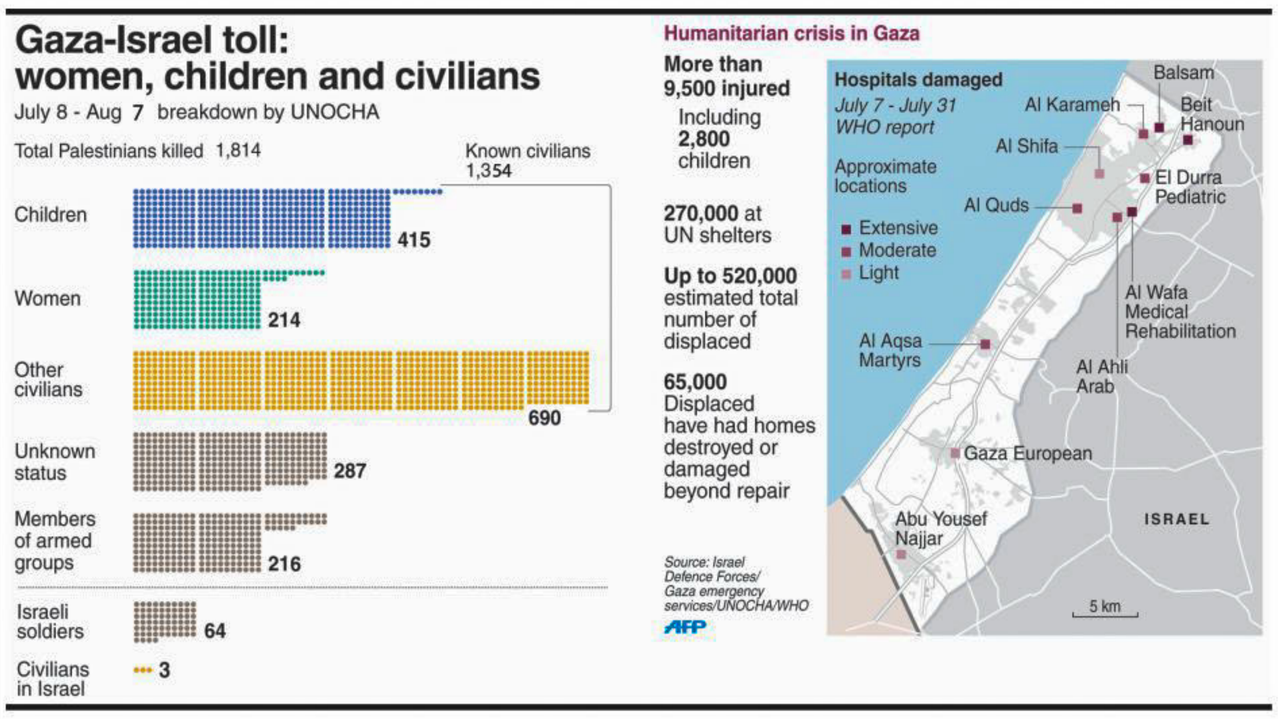
"Russia is ready to review the rules of using Transsiberian routes," Medvedev said. "Of course this is a severe measure. Nevertheless, we need to mention it," he added.

US airlines have not been allowed to use Siberian airspace for years and have been pushing the Russian government to review its policy.

The developments came as Nato on Wednesday said Russia has amassed around 20,000 combat-ready troops on Ukraine's eastern border and could use the pretext of a humanitarian or peace-keeping mission to invade the country.

Stating the conflict in Ukraine was fueled by Russia, Nato said in a statement that the troop build-up had further escalated "a dangerous situation".

Refugees from south-eastern Ukraine wait after arriving at a refugee camp set in a Russian border city yesterday. PHOTO: AFP



British MP declares his area 'Israel-free zone'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The MP for Bradford West's of Britain George Galloway claims to have "declared Bradford an Israel-free zone", saying that he wants the city to reject all Israeli goods, services, academics – and even tourists.

Reportedly speaking at a meeting of the Respect Party in Leeds at the weekend, Mr Galloway urged the people of that city "to do the same".

Galloway's comments were captured on video and posted to YouTube, and have since been met with an angry backlash on Twitter.

According to the footage, which was posted on the Guido Fawkes blog, Galloway told activists: "We have declared Bradford an Israel-free zone."

He said: "We don't want any Israeli goods. We don't want any Israeli services. We don't want any Israeli academics, coming to the university or the college.

"We don't even want any Israeli tourists to come to Bradford, if any of them had thought of doing so.

"We reject this illegal, barbarous, savage state that calls itself Israel. And you have to do the same."

CAIRO TRUCE TALKS: KEY DEMANDS

AFP, *Jerusalem*

Israeli and Palestinian officials are holding indirect talks through Egyptian mediators in Cairo seeking to extend a temporary truce in Gaza before it expires today.

Here are their key demands and seemingly irreconcilable positions:

- THE BLOCKADE -

Hamas and the Palestinian Authority want Israel to end a land and sea blockade imposed on Gaza in 2006 after Hamas captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

Israel tightened the blockade in summer 2007 after Hamas forcibly took over Gaza, ousting forces loyal to president Mahmud Abbas. Israel eased restrictions on imports of food and construction materials in 2010 following international outcry over a botched Israeli raid on a Gaza-bound flotilla which was trying break the blockade, which left 10 Turks dead.Some restrictions were further eased after the last Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza in 2012.Hamas wants fishing zones extended, and to have a port and an airport.

-BORDER CROSSING WITH EGYPT-

The Palestinians want Egypt to reopen the Rafah border crossing, where Israel has no jurisdiction. Gaza residents have only two ways to access the outside world: through the Rafah crossing with Egypt or through the northern Erez crossing into Israel. There is also a goods terminal at Kerem Shalom, at the southernmost point of the Israel-Gaza border.There are four other crossing points into Gaza which have been closed for years: Sufa in the south, Kissufim in central Gaza and Karni and Nahal Oz in the north. The Palestinians want all of them reopened.

-DEMILITARISATION -

Israel says it is ready to ease the blockade only if its security needs are guaranteed.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has demanded the demilitarisation of the Gaza Strip. Hamas has flatly refused. Netanyahu wants strict controls on goods crossing into Gaza and international oversight on materials imported for reconstruction to ensure that Hamas cannot rebuild a complex network of cross-border tunnels .

- PRISONERS -

Hamas wants Israel to free around 60 prisoners, who were released in a prisoner swap deal in 2011 then re-arrested in June after three Israeli teenagers were kidnapped and murdered in the West Bank. They are also asking for the release of 37 Palestinian MPs who have been arrested by Israel over the years, all but two of them Hamas members. They are also asking for the release of scores of Palestinian MPs who have been arrested by Israel over the years. Israel has refuses to release them.

-ROLE OF PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY -

Hamas and the Palestine Liberation Organisation of president Mahmud Abbas are officially negotiating as one in Cairo. In April, Hamas signed a unity agreement with the PLO, which is dominated by Fatah and which has been at odds with Hamas for years. The reconciliation saw the former rivals setting up a consensus government that took office in June, ending seven years of separate administrations. Israel wants Abbas's security forces to retake control of Gaza and deploy on the Palestinian side of the Egyptian border crossing and for international donor money to be dispersed through Abbas. That could amount to a U-turn for Netanyahu who has so far refused to cooperate with the unity government on grounds that it was backed by Hamas.

Jihadists storm Syria army base, kill dozens

AFP, *Beirut*

Jihadists from the Islamic State group have seized parts of a military base in Syria's Raqa province in fierce fighting that left dozens dead, a monitor said yesterday.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the extremist group was engaged in heavy fighting with troops at Brigade 93 in Raqa, where IS already controls the regional capital and significant amounts of territory.

The monitor said at least 27 regime forces had been killed, along with 11 jihadists, including three who launched the assault by blowing themselves up at the entrance to the base and around it on Wednesday night.

The Observatory said IS fighters "were in control of large parts of the base".

Many regime troops had withdrawn to Brigade 93 last month, after IS seized the Division 17 base in fighting that left at least 85 soldiers dead, according to the Observatory.

That assault left nearly all of Raqa province under IS control, except Brigade 93 and Tabaqa military airport, which were still held by the army.

The two-day assault on Division 17 saw more than 50 troops summarily executed, including some who were beheaded, with jihadists later putting their severed heads on display.

Russia grants Snowden three-year residence

AFP, *Moscow*

Fugitive US intelligence operative Edward Snowden has been granted a three-year residence permit in Russia, his lawyer said yesterday, in the latest blow to Moscow's deeply strained relations with Washington.

"The request was accepted and accordingly Edward Snowden was given a three-year residence permit" which allows him to move about freely and travel abroad, lawyer Anatoly Kucherena told journalists.

"In the future Edward will have to decide whether to continue to live in Russia and become a citizen or to return to the United States," Kucherena added.

The 31-year-old US fugitive is wanted in the United States on espionage charges.

The former National Security Agency contractor shook the American intelligence establishment to its core with a series of devastating leaks last year on mass surveillance in the US and around the world.

The revelations sparked a massive row over the data sweeps conducted by the United States domestically and in allied nations, including of their leaders.

Relations between Washington and Berlin, for example, have faced rare turbulence because of revelations that German Chancellor Angela Merkel's cell phone was tapped.

He was initially granted permission to stay in Russia for one year, and the rapid deterioration in the country's ties with the US made it increasingly unlikely that Snowden -- a major public relations trophy for Moscow -- would be forced to leave.

Snowden will be eligible to apply for Russian citizenship in four years. He has opted for the residence permit rather than seeking permanent refugee status.

Monkey selfie sparks row

AFP, *London*

The Wikimedia Foundation yesterday insisted it would not remove from its website a "selfie" taken by a mischievous monkey, despite claims from the British photographer whose camera was used that it breached his copyright.

David Slater says he is the owner of the photo of the grinning black crested macaque that went viral when he posted it online in 2011, and is threatening to sue Wikimedia for lost earnings of up to $30,000.

Slater was with a party of Dutch researchers on a small group of Indonesian islands when the curious primates began rummaging through his possessions.

He described how one snatched his camera and began pressing the shutter button, in the process taking a perfectly composed selfie.

US mulling airstrikes

UNSC calls meet as ISIS siege largest Christian town

AFP, *Washington*

The United States yesterday warned a jihadist offensive in northern Iraq could provoke a "humanitarian catastrophe," amid reports that President Barack Obama was considering US military action.

"It is a situation that we are looking at very closely," White House spokesman Josh Earnest said, following reports that Obama was talking with military advisors about options for intervention.

IRAQ CRISIS

Earnest would not confirm the reports that US air strikes are on the table, but said American personnel were studying conditions on the ground in cooperation with Iraqi security forces.

He would not be drawn on the likelihood of strikes, but compared the situation to that in Libya in 2011, when US jets joined Nato allies in a bombing campaign sold as heading off a massacre of civilians.

US media, citing senior White House officials, said Obama was weighing military options for strikes against the jihadists and aid drops to the displaced and besieged civilians.

The UN Security Council was to hold emergency talks on the crisis later yesterday, and France has pledged support for forces "engaged in battle" against the IS radicals.

The group, along with allied Sunni factions, is at war with Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's mainly Shia government forces and with the peshmerga forces of the Kurdish autonomous region of the country.

In late June it proclaimed a "caliphate" straddling rebel-held areas of Syria and Iraq and seized the major city of Mosul. In recent days it has seized towns formerly populated by Christians and Yazidis.

Iraqi religious leaders say Islamic State militants have forced 100,000 Iraqi Christians to flee and have occupied churches, removing crosses and destroying manuscripts.

Meanwhile, several thousand Yazidis, members of an ancient pre-Muslim religious minority, are stranded on high ground after being driven out of their home town of Sinjar by IS fighters.

The Yazidi are a closed community that follows an ancient faith rooted in Zoroastrianism and are referred to by jihadists as "devil worshippers".

A statue of Jesus Christ is seen on a bag of a Iraqi Christian who fled the violence in the village of Qaraqush sit in Saint-Joseph church in the Kurdish city of Arbil, in Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region, after their arrival, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP