

NEWSIN brief

Assad renames Halqi as Syria PM

AFP, Damascus

President Bashar al-Assad yesterday renamed Wael al-Halqi as war-torn Syria's prime minister and asked him to form a new government, state media reported. Halqi first became premier in June 2012, succeeding Riad Hijab. Assad was sworn in for a new term on July 16, warning Western and Arab governments of the backfire they face for their support of the armed revolt in Syria.

Kerry vows support for Myanmar

AFP, Naypyidaw

US Secretary of State John Kerry yesterday said Myanmar faced "significant challenges" in its democratic transition but pledged Washington's support as the former pariah moves towards "benchmark" elections. "Next year's election will absolutely be a benchmark moment for the whole world to be able to assess the direction that Burma (Myanmar) is moving in," he told reporters at a press conference in the Myanmar capital Naypyidaw.

Tibet bus accident kills 44 people

AFP, Beijing

A tour bus plunged into a Tibetan valley on Saturday after hitting two vehicles, killing 44 people and injuring 11, China's official news agency Xinhua reported. "The 55-seat bus carrying 50 people fell off a 10-metre-plus-high cliff after crashing into a sports utility vehicle and a pick-up truck," the report said, citing the regional government.

Suicide attack on Nato convoy kills 4 civilians

AFP, Kabul

A suicide attacker targeted a Nato convoy in Kabul yesterday, killing four civilians and wounding at least 35 others, officials said, in the latest violence to hit the capital as politicians wrangle over election results. A spokesman for the Taliban said the insurgents claimed responsibility for the attack, in which the bomber detonated an explosives-packed vehicle on a main road as the Nato convoy passed by.

Typhoon rips through western Japan

AFP, Tokyo

Typhoon Halong slammed into western Japan yesterday, leaving dozens of people injured while the coastguard searched for a man who went missing apparently while surfing when the storm hit. Packing winds of up to 162 kilometres per hour, the typhoon was moving north-northeast at 40 kilometres per hour and expected to move away from the Japanese archipelago, the Japan Meteorological Agency said.



Left, A Yazidi man helps an injured woman while fleeing a mountain besieged by jihadists in northern Iraq on Saturday. The two photos released by the United States Central Command (Centcom), show a US military F/A-18 Hornet fighter jet strike on what the US army says is an Islamic State (IS) target at an undisclosed location in northern Iraq. At least 20,000 trapped civilians on the Mount Sinjar in northern Iraq have safely escaped to Syria and been escorted by Kurdish forces back into Iraq, officials said yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP, INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Pak cleric launches bid to oust govt

AFP, Lahore

A populist Pakistani cleric yesterday announced a march on Islamabad to overthrow the government, hours after being charged with murder for the death of a policeman injured in clashes with his supporters.

Tahir-ul-Qadri said he will take to the streets on the same day that opposition leader Imran Khan will hold a rally in the capital aiming to force the government to step down and hold a fresh election.

Both protest rallies will be held on Thursday when Pakistan celebrates its independence day.

"Our march will begin on August 14," Qadri told thousands of his supporters in a fiery speech in eastern city of Lahore, saying he would "struggle" along with Khan to topple the government.

"We would struggle together and would end the kingdom of cruelty," he said.

A spokesman for the cleric said he "will lead hundreds of thousands of people either on August 13 or morning of August 14 and march on Islamabad".

Earlier police in Lahore said they had charged Qadri with murder after a constable, who was wounded in Lahore on Friday in confrontations with his followers, died of his injuries late Saturday.

"A case of murder, inciting violence and treason have been registered against Tahir-ul-Qadri and his supporters," senior police official Zulfiqar Hameed told AFP.

Police said the Canada-based cleric faced many other accusations of attempted murder as well as inciting his followers to attack police and commit terrorist acts.

Violence broke out on Friday after hundreds of the cleric's baton-wielding supporters clashed with police to breach a blockade that authorities set up in front of Qadri's party headquarters in Lahore.

US won't confront China

Says official amid growing tensions over the South China Sea

AFP, Naypyidaw

The United States yesterday pressed its case for a freeze on hostile acts in waters contested by China and its Southeast Asian neighbours, but said it did not want to "confront" Beijing over its strategy in the region.

US Secretary of State John Kerry is pushing for an agreement to end all actions that risk further inflaming regional relations, following several tense encounters in the disputed South China Sea this year.

Washington's top diplomat is touring the region looking to reinvigorate its alliances in the Asia-Pacific as part of President Barack Obama's "pivot" east.

Sea disputes were likely to dominate security talks at the Asean Regional Forum in Myanmar's capital Naypyidaw yesterday afternoon.

The meet brings together Southeast Asian foreign ministers and key partners, including the US, Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea, Russia and the European Union.

A senior US administration official said

concern among its Southeast Asian allies about "Chinese behaviour was at an all time high".

But the official insisted there would not be a "showdown" between the two world

ASEAN SUMMIT



John Kerry



Wang Yi

superpowers.

"We don't want to confront China. But we have a series of interests and principles that drive our approach in the region where they diverge with China," the official said.

The US waded in to the South China Sea row following a series of maritime incidents

between China and rival claimants, including Beijing's positioning of an oil rig in waters also claimed by Vietnam which sparked deadly riots in the Southeast Asian nation.

China claims sovereignty over almost the entire sea, which lies on key shipping routes and is believed to be rich in mineral and oil deposits. But its claims overlap with Asean states Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam, as well as Taiwan.

Asean said it was "seriously concerned" over the maritime disputes, in a statement by foreign ministers yesterday.

While China says it is not the aggressor in the disputed waters, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on Saturday warned that "the Chinese side is bound to make clear and firm reactions" if provoked.

Wang held a bilateral meeting with his American counterpart on Saturday.

In a statement released by the Chinese embassy following the talks, Beijing welcomed "the constructive role" played by the US in regional affairs, adding that it "hopes that the US can respect China's legitimate rights and interests in this region".

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION Erdogan wins big in Turkey

AFP, Ankara

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan won an outright victory in the first round of presidential elections yesterday, promising to be a powerful head of state amid fears his country is creeping towards one-man rule.

Erdogan won 51.8 percent of the vote, way ahead of his main opposition rival Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu on 38.6 percent, according to official results based on a 99 percent vote count.

The third contender, Kurdish candidate Selahattin Demirtas, won 9.6 percent of the vote. Erdogan's inauguration is set for August 28.

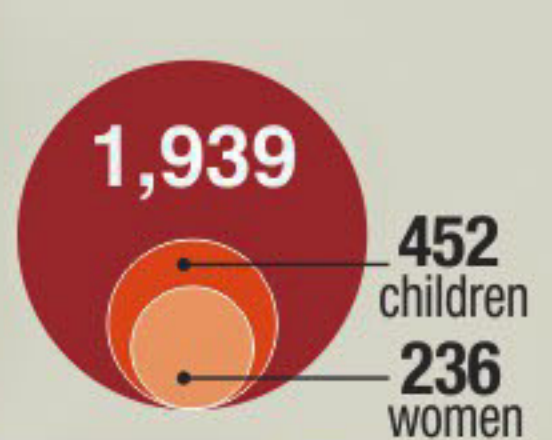
The result marked a personal triumph for Erdogan, 60, who has served as premier since 2003 and could potentially now be president for two mandates until 2024.

He has promised to be a powerful president with a beefed-up mandate, in contrast to the ceremonial role played by his recent predecessors.

The polls are the first time Turkey -- a member of Nato -- has directly elected its president.



GAZA CONFLICT PALESTINIANS KILLED



373,000 Children in need of psychological help

255,400 People in emergency shelters

65,000 People homeless (houses destroyed)

The family members of a Palestinian who was reportedly shot dead by Israeli soldiers, mourn during his funeral yesterday in the al-Fawwar refugee camp on the outskirts of the West Bank town of Hebron.

PHOTO: AFP

SURGE OF MILITANTS IN ME Hillary blames Obama policies

AFP, Washington

Former secretary of state Hillary Clinton blamed the rise of Islamist militants in Iraq and Syria on failures of US policy under President Barack Obama, in an interview published yesterday.

Hillary specifically faulted the US decision to stay on the sidelines of the insurgency against Syria's President Bashar al-Assad.

"The failure to help build up a credible fighting force of the people who were the originators of the protests against Assad - there were Islamists, there were secularists, there was everything in the middle -- the failure to do that left a big vacuum, which the jihadists have now filled," Hillary told the Atlantic.

Hillary, widely considered an undeclared presidential candidate, was an unsuccessful advocate of arming the Syrian rebels when she was secretary of state during Obama's first term.

She suggested in the interview that Obama lacked a strategy for dealing with the jihadist threat.

"One of the reasons why I worry about what's happening in the Middle East right now is because of the breakout capacity of jihadist groups that can affect Europe, can affect the US," she said. "Jihadist groups are governing territory. They will never stay there, though. They are driven to expand. Their raison d'etre is to be against the West, against the Crusaders, against the fill-in-the-blank-and we all fit into one of these categories.

Her arguments, seen as an attempt to distance herself from Obama, echoed those of Republican critics who accuse Obama of allowing a power vacuum to develop by failing to bring US leadership to bear in conflicts from Syria to Iraq to Ukraine.

Thousands escape Iraq death trap

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months of jihadist expansion.

"The peshmerga have liberated Makhmur and Gwer," peshmerga spokesman Halgord Hekmat told AFP, adding that "US aerial support helped".

The past week saw jihadist fighters make dramatic gains, seizing Iraq's largest dam, repeatedly defeating the peshmerga and taking over large swathes of land.

The US air strikes which Obama announced on Thursday stopped the rot just as the militants moved close enough to the autonomous Kurdish region to cause a panic in Arbil, where some US personnel are stationed.

IS attacks have displaced 200,000 people since August 3, including all the residents of Iraq's largest Christian town Qaraqosh.

Among the others affected were a large contingent of Iraq's small Yazidi minority, whose main hub Sinjar was attacked last weekend.

According to leaders and witnesses, several dozen men were executed and groups of women abducted, although reliable information from IS-held areas is scarce.

When the militants entered Sinjar, tens of thousands of people ran up the nearby mountain to hide.

Thousands were still there a week later, trying to survive in searing heat with little food or water.

The siege of Mount Sinjar, which local legend holds as the final resting place of Noah's Ark, as and a poignant appeal by Yazidi MP Vian Dakhlil to save her community from extermination have captured the West's attention. Obama justified his deci-

sion to send warplanes back over Iraqi skies three years after the last troops pulled out partly because of the risk of an impending genocide.

The US intervention appeared to yield early results on that front too as officials said around 20,000 people had escaped the siege and been escorted to safety by Kurdish troops since Saturday.

Foreign aid groups operating in the region confirmed several thousand survivors of the Mount Sinjar siege had transited through Syria and crossed back into Iraq, many of them traumatised and dehydrated.

US and Iraqi cargo planes have been air dropping food and water over Mount Sinjar, a barren 60-kilometre ridge.

Britain and France joined the effort overnight Saturday with its first air drop of food and water.

At pains to assure war-weary Americans he was not being dragged into a new Iraqi quagmire, Obama put the onus on Iraqi politicians to form an inclusive government and turn the tide on jihadist expansion which has brought Iraq closer than ever to breakup.

His comments were yet another nudge for Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to step aside and allow for a consensus government by abandoning what looks like an increasingly desperate bid to seek a third term.

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius and UN chief Ban Ki-moon hammered home the same message.

Obama did not give a timetable for the US military intervention but said Saturday that Iraq's problems would not be solved in weeks. "This is going to be a long-term project," he said.

EBOLA OUTBREAK WHO foresees vaccine by 2015

AFP, Geneva

Clinical trials of vaccines for the deadly Ebola virus should soon get underway and will likely be ready for widespread use by early next year, the World Health Organization said Saturday.

"I think it's realistic," Marie-Paule Kieny, assistant director-general of the UN health agency, told AFP.

There is currently no available cure or vaccine for Ebola, one of the deadliest viruses known to man, but Kieny said she expected a vaccine to be rushed through the trial process and become available by 2015.

Vaccine chief at WHO, told French radio RFI earlier Saturday that British pharma giant GlaxoSmithKline appeared set to start clinical trials of a vaccine next month.

Religion's roll call of death Wole Soyinka explains how religious fanatics pose danger for religion itself

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Atrocities carried out by fanatics such as Nigeria's Boko Haram show the dangers of religious belief with the "scroll of faith ... indistinguishable from the roll call of death", according to the Nobel prize-winning author Wole Soyinka.

In a video address to the World Humanist Congress, at he was presented with its main award yesterday, Soyinka argued that even moderate religious leaders may be "vicariously liable" for sectarian hatred if they have failed to argue against it.

The actions of the Islamist extremists of Boko Haram -- bombing churches, killing civilians and abducting girls -- are a warning to the world, Soyinka said.

"The conflict between humanists and religionists has always been one between the torch of enlightenment and the chains of enslavement," said Soyinka. "Those chains are not merely visible, but cruelly palpable. All too

often they lead directly to the gallows, beheadings, to death under a hail of stones. In parts of the world today, the scroll of faith is indistinguishable from the roll call of death."

He added that Boko Haram's members considered abducting 200 girls to be "virtuous" and moderate Muslims could not simply disavow their actions with "pious incantations" that "these are not the true followers of the faith". "We have to ask such leadership penitents: 'Were there times when you kept silent while such states of mind, overt or disguised, were seeding fanaticism around you? Are you vicariously liable?'" said Soyinka. "The lesson of Boko Haram is not for any one nation. It is not for the African continent alone. The whole world should wake up to the fact that the menace is borderless, aggressive and unconscionable."

He will be presented with the International Humanist Award at the secular body's annual conference, attended by more than 1,000 delegates from 67 countries.

