

NEWSIN brief

National Guard deployed in Ferguson

AFP, Ferguson

Missouri's governor yesterday ordered National Guard troops to help restore order in Ferguson, hours after police hurled tear gas to disperse violent protesters in the town wracked by race riots. Ferguson has been engulfed in unrest since a white police officer on August 9 shot dead Michael Brown, an unarmed black 18-year-old.

Four Saudis beheaded for drug trafficking

AFP, Riyadh

Four Saudi men were decapitated by sword in Najran in the south west of the country yesterday after being convicted of drug trafficking, the interior ministry said.

Brothers Hadi and Awad al-Motleq and their accomplices Mufarraj and Ali al-Yami were found to have smuggled "a large quantity of hashish" into the kingdom, the ministry said in a statement carried by the official SPA news agency.

250 injured in strong Iran quake: media

AFP, Tehran

A strong 6.1 magnitude earthquake struck the province of Ilam in western Iran yesterday, injuring at least 250 people and causing extensive damage to buildings, Iranian media said.

The US Geological Survey, reporting the magnitude of the quake at 6.3, said it struck 36 kilometres (22 miles) southeast of the city of Abadan, near the border with Iraq. According to state television, the quake occurred at 7:02 am (0232 GMT) near the town of Mour-Mouri.

Donor conference in Cairo after lasting Gaza truce: Norway

AFP, Oslo

International donors will meet in Cairo to pledge funds for the reconstruction of Gaza as soon as a lasting ceasefire is reached between Israel and the Palestinians, Norway announced yesterday.

The funds raised under the aegis of Egypt and Norway will be released to Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, said Norwegian Foreign Minister Boerge Brende, whose country heads the international coordination committee for aid to the Palestinians.

Syria bombs jihadist positions

AFP, Beirut

Syrian war planes bombed positions belonging to the jihadist Islamic State group in the northern province of Raqa for a second day yesterday, a monitoring group said.

On Sunday, regime planes killed 31 jihadists and eight civilians in an unprecedented wave of aerial bombardment against the group in its Raqa bastion.

The bombing continued yesterday, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, with at least 14 raids against jihadist positions.

There was no immediate death toll in the renewed bombing.

Three raids targeted the area around the town of Tabqa in western Raqa and four hit near the Tabqa military airport, the only remaining regime-held position in the province.

The other seven strikes hit sites inside Raqa city, the provincial capital.

The raids involved the use of precision weapons rather than the explosive-packed barrel bombs that the regime has deployed to deadly effect in Aleppo province and elsewhere.

Barrel bombs have been criticised for being indiscriminate and killing civilians.



Lorries, part of a Russian humanitarian convoy, are parked not far from a checkpoint at the Ukrainian border some 30 km outside the town of Kamensk-Shakhtinsky in the Rostov region, yesterday. Tension between Moscow and Kiev is simmering over Russia's decision to try and deliver what it claims to be a huge humanitarian aid convoy that the Ukrainian authorities fear may be used to smuggle in arms to the pro-Kremlin insurgents.

PHOTO:
AFP

Kurds press anti-jihadist drive US, UK turn up heat in Iraq

AFP, Badriyah

Kurdish peshmerga fighters backed by federal forces and US warplanes pressed a counter-offensive yesterday against jihadists after retaking Iraq's largest dam, as the United States and Britain stepped up their military involvement.

The recapture of Mosul dam marks the biggest prize yet clawed back from Islamic State jihadists since they launched a major offensive in northern Iraq in June, sweeping Iraqi security forces aside.

US aircraft are carrying out strikes in support of the forces battling IS militants, who have declared a "caliphate" straddling vast areas of Iraq and Syria.

In Iraq, "the planes are striking and the peshmerga are advancing," a Kurdish fighter told AFP yesterday near the shore of the lake formed by the vast Mosul dam.

Fighting also broke out yesterday in an area south of the barrage while engineering teams worked to clear booby traps and bombs left by jihadists, said Kawa Khatari, an official

from Iraq's main Kurdish party.

And a senior peshmerga officer told AFP that there was sporadic fighting with militants in the town of Tal Kayf southeast of the dam, and that only a "small number" of jihadists remain in the area of the dam itself.

Iraqi security spokesman Lieutenant General Qassem Atta confirmed yesterday that Mosul dam was entirely liberated in a joint operation by Iraqi "anti-terrorism forces and peshmerga forces with aerial support".

The Mosul dam breakthrough came after US warplanes and drones at the weekend carried out their heaviest-yet bombing against IS militants in the north since they began launching air strikes on August 8.

The US Central Command reported that the military had carried out 14 air strikes Sunday near the dam located on the Tigris river, which provides electricity and irrigation water for farming to much of the region.

Sunday's strikes destroyed 10 IS armed vehicles, seven IS Humvees, two

armoured personnel carriers and one IS checkpoint.

That military action followed nine US strikes near Arbil and Mosul dam on Saturday.

US President Barack Obama told Congress that the "limited" air strikes he has authorised on Iraq to support the fight for the dam protected US interests there.

British Prime Minister David Cameron described the Islamic State fighters sweeping across Syria and Iraq as a direct threat to Britain, and said all available tools must be used to halt their advance.

Cameron, writing in the Sunday Telegraph, said that while it would not be right to send an army into Iraq, some degree of military involvement was justified due to the threat that an expanding "terrorist state" would pose to Europe and its allies.

His Defence Minister Michael Fallon, in comments published yesterday, said Britain's Iraq involvement now goes beyond a humanitarian mission and is set to last for months.

All MPs of Imran's party to quit

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani opposition politician Imran Khan's party announced yesterday it is to renounce all its parliamentary seats, in a bitter row with the government over alleged poll rigging.

Former cricket star Khan claims last year's general election, in which his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party came third, was rigged and has demanded Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif resign and hold new polls.

The dramatic mass resignation came as the government tried to launch formal talks with Khan and populist cleric Tahir-ul-Qadri, who is leading a parallel protest, also calling for new elections.

Addressing his workers later in the evening, Khan said he would march on Islamabad's high-security "Red Zone" with his party workers and supporters on Tuesday.

"I will lead the march on the Red Zone and my workers will follow me," he told protesters, asking his party workers to remain peaceful during the march.

The heavily guarded Red Zone houses Pakistan's top government buildings and many foreign embassies.

Khan and Qadri on Saturday led thousands of supporters on a "long march" to the capital from the eastern city of Lahore, hoping to mobilise a mass movement to oust Sharif.



Marlboro Boys of Indonesia

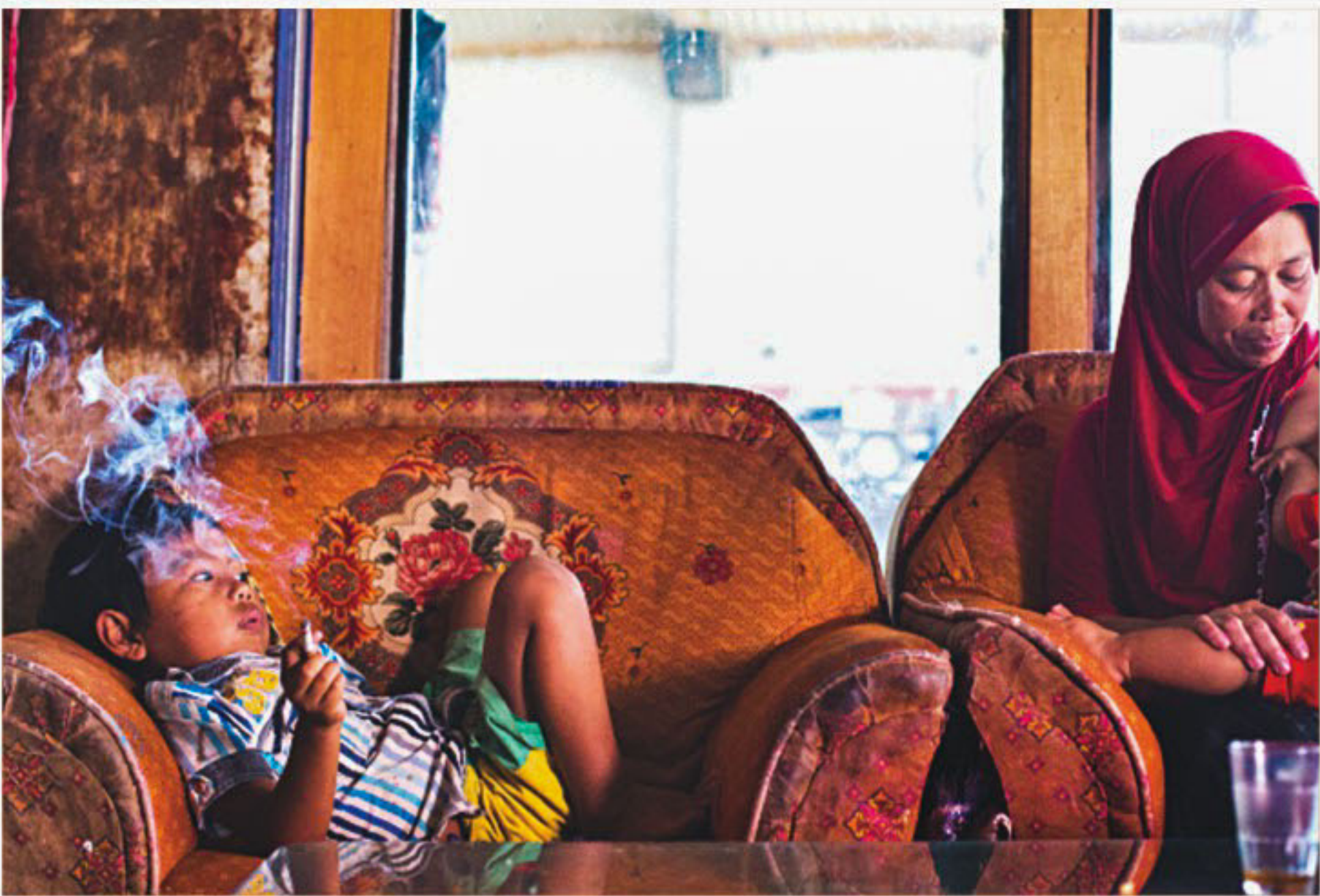
TIME ONLINE

While smoking rates are declining in many western countries, the opposite is happening in the Republic of Indonesia, where over 60% of the male population regularly smokes and uses tobacco. When Canadian photographer Michelle Siu heard about this alarming statistic, she felt it was something she needed to document.

Smoking has become ingrained in Indonesian culture where some children are having their first cigarette by the age of four, Siu tells Time. "Tobacco consumption in Indonesia is a complex issue as it is intertwined in the country culturally, politically and economically. You can't take 10 steps before seeing a tobacco advertisement or someone smoking."

Indonesia's economy is dependent upon the tobacco industry, which has proven to be extremely profitable.

In Marlboro's Boys, Siu examines the loss of innocence that these young smokers exhibit. "They inhale and exhale like old men that have been smoking for years - some of them have been smoking two packs a day since they were little kids."



SARADHA SCAM Aparna Sen quizzed

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Eminent Indian actress-director Aparna Sen was questioned yesterday by the Enforcement Directorate in connection with the multi-crore-rupee Saradha chit fund scam.

Sen, who was the editor of film magazine "Paroma," published by the Saradha group, appeared before the Enforcement Directorate office in Kolkata after being summoned by the agency which is probing the scam.

Trinamool Congress leader and West Bengal Textile Minister Shyamapada Mukherjee is also slated to appear before the agency for questioning during the day.

The first state minister to be questioned in the scam, Mukherjee has been summoned regarding the transaction of a plot of land with the Saradha group in 2009.

The Saradha Group went bust in April last year, leaving thousands of small investors without their savings in ponzi schemes.

Shyamapada Mukherjee has denied any links with Saradha Group and said he had sold some land in Bankura to the Saradha group 2009.

While the ED is investigating alleged violations of the companies act by the Saradha group, the Central Bureau of Investigation is simultaneously investigating criminal offences in connection with the scam.



Jewish-Muslim wedding brings out bitter Israel tensions

AFP, Rishon Letzion

Mahmud and Morel never imagined that on the happiest day of their lives, they would walk down the aisle to racist chants by extremists opposed to the marriage of a Muslim and a Jew.

Their Sunday night wedding near Tel Aviv was marred by the bitter shouting of several hundred young protesters who joined a rally called for by Lehava, an extremist rightwing Israeli group that fights against intermarriage.

Dressed in T-shirts bearing racist slogans and whipped up by weeks of war in Gaza, the demonstrators played cat and mouse with around 100 policemen trying to stop them from insulting and abusing the happy couple and their guests.

Supporters of the young couple handed out flowers and waved signs reading: "Love conquers all" and "Jew and Muslims refuse to be enemies."

"Death to Arabs!" yelled back the protestors who waved giant Israeli flags.

The ugly confrontation made headlines and was carried live on national television in microcosm of the tensions which have been tearing at the seams of Israeli society, particularly over the past two months.

The love story between this 26-year-old Israeli Romeo and his 23-year-old Juliet began five years ago when businessman Mahmud Mansur met Morel Malka.

He is Muslim, she is Jewish, but has since converted to Islam.

Although they knew their union would spark family tensions, they had no way of knowing that it would become a catalyst for nationwide tensions further exacerbated by weeks of deadly fighting in Gaza.

And they had no idea of the storm that would erupt after they posted details of their forthcoming nuptials on Facebook, triggering calls by Lehava for demonstrators to storm their wedding hall.

India cancels Pak talks in row over Kashmir

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday cancelled talks with Pakistan scheduled for later this month, in an angry reaction to a meeting between Pakistan's high commissioner and Kashmiri separatists.

The foreign ministry said yesterday's meeting between the Pakistani envoy and separatist leaders in Indian-administered Kashmir had undermined efforts by the new Indian government to engage with Islamabad.

"I can confirm the foreign secretary-level talks between India and Pakistan have been called off," foreign ministry spokesman Syed Akbaruddin told AFP.

Akbaruddin later told reporters that the high commissioner's meeting with separatist leaders "undermines the constructive diplomatic engagement initiated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on his first day in office".

Relations between the two neighbours broke down after attacks by Pakistani gunmen on India's commercial hub Mumbai in 2008 in which 166 people were killed.

But Modi's surprise move to invite his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif to his swearing-in ceremony in May spurred hopes that peace talks between the two countries could resume.

Last month, the two countries scheduled talks between Indian Foreign Secretary Sujatha Singh and her Pakistani counterpart Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry for August 25.

The unresolved territorial dispute over Kashmir in the Himalayan region has for decades been a major source of tension between the two neighbours, who have fought three wars since partition in 1947.

Ukraine says rebels killed fleeing civilians as talks fail

AFP, Donetsk

Ukraine yesterday accused pro-Russian rebels of shelling a convoy of civilians fleeing the war-torn east, leaving "many" dead, as crisis talks to halt months of bloodshed failed to make a breakthrough.

Kiev's military said "many people died, including women and children" when insurgents shot at residents escaping fierce fighting around the besieged separatist city of Lugansk with "Grad rocket launchers and mortar guns given by Russia."

The allegations came after a five-hour meeting between the foreign ministers of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany broke up without agreement on how to end more than four months of conflict that has killed over 2,100 people and left the region facing a humanitarian catastrophe.

Moscow has demanded that Ukraine government forces halt an offensive against main separatist strongholds. Meanwhile Kiev accuses Russia of pouring in more arms to save the unravelling insurgency.

Russia's top diplomat Sergei Lavrov said the ministers would meet again and hoped that some agreement "on paper" was possible soon.

Ukraine's foreign minister Pavlo Klimkin said there had been "five hours of most difficult discussion" and suggested more meetings were needed "to move forward".

Meanwhile, a massive aid convoy sent from Moscow was still waiting to be checked near Ukraine's restive border as talks dragged on about allowing them to cross into rebel-held territory.

Kiev and the West fear the convoy could be a Russian ploy to prop up the ailing insurgency but Moscow insists it just wants to get desperately-needed aid to the stricken region.

'Will leave Ecuador embassy soon'

AFP, London

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange said yesterday he would "soon" leave Ecuador's embassy in London but his organisation played down the comment, saying he would not depart until there was an agreement with Britain's government.

His comments came after British media reported, quoting a WikiLeaks source, that he was suffering from the potentially life-threatening heart condition arrhythmia and had a chronic lung complaint as well as dangerously high blood pressure.

Assange, 43, insisted he would not be leaving for the reasons "reported by the Murdoch press" and did not elaborate further on how or when any departure would happen.

But speaking after the press conference, WikiLeaks spokesman Kristinn Hrafnsson indicated that Assange would remain at the embassy until an agreement was brokered in his case.



Saudi prince robbed at gunpoint in France

AFP, Paris

Heavily armed robbers attacked the motorcade of a Saudi prince in Paris, making off with 250,000 euros (\$335,000) in cash and reportedly stealing "sensitive" documents, French police said yesterday.

The spectacular robbery took place in northern Paris late on Sunday as the motorcade was making its way from a plush hotel on the Champs Elysees to an airport in Le Bourget, said police, who confirmed there were no injuries.

A gang of "between five and eight" thieves in two BMWs hijacked the first of around 10 vehicles in the convoy, driving off with the three occupants before letting them go, police said.

A police source and Le Parisien daily had said the men were armed with Kalashnikov rifles but an official later clarified to say they were carrying hand guns.

The Saudis' Mercedes and one of the thieves' BMWs were later found abandoned and burned out in the village of Saint-Mesmes, to the north-east of Paris, approximately 40 kilometres from the scene of the crime. Police found two 500 euro notes, documents in Arabic and medication near the wreckage.

A source close to the investigation confirmed the theft of diplomatic documents but told AFP: "For the moment, we have no details about the nature of these documents. They could be sensitive documents but they could equally well be unimportant."

The Saudi embassy in Paris could not be immediately reached for comment.

Romain Nadal, a spokesman for the French foreign ministry said only: "An investigation is under way into this unacceptable attack." No suspects have yet been apprehended.