

NEWSIN brief

Ebola death toll rises to 1,427: WHO

AFP, Geneva

The death toll from the Ebola outbreak sweeping through west African countries has risen to 1,427 out of more than 2,600 cases, the World Health Organization said Friday. The latest tally found that 77 people had succumbed to the virus on Tuesday and Wednesday. The previous death toll was 1,350.

Boat sinks off Libya coast; 170 feared dead

AFP, Tripoli

A Libyan coastguard official said a boat carrying 200 illegal migrants from sub-Saharan Africa was feared lost at sea off the capital Tripoli on Friday, with 170 people still missing. Libya has been used as a launchpad for illegal migrants seeking a better life in Europe. Since the end of July, dozens of people who have set off on rickety boats from the Libyan coast have died at sea.

Gold mine collapses in CAR; 25 killed

AFP, Bangui

At least 25 people died when a gold mine collapsed in the south of the Central African Republic, police said yesterday. "In all, 27 people were buried in the collapse of the gold mine. Twenty-five bodies were found and dug out but two could not be found" after the accident on Thursday near Bambari, a police source said.

Japan landslide death toll rises to 46

AFP, Tokyo

The death toll from devastating landslides in western Japan rose to 46 yesterday, as rescuers worked around the clock to comb through destroyed houses searching for survivors. 41 people in the disaster-hit area of Hiroshima remain missing after heavy rain Wednesday triggered landslides.



Palestinian men look on as a bomb from an Israeli air strike hits a house in Gaza City yesterday. Inset, Debris scatters after the strike.

PHOTO: AFP

Hamas signs proposal to join ICC

AFP, Gaza City

Hamas has signed a proposal for the Palestinians to apply to join the International Criminal Court at which legal action could be taken against Israel, a senior official of the Islamist movement said yesterday.

"Hamas signed the document which (Palestinian) president (Mahmud Abbas) put forth as a condition that all factions approve, before he goes to sign the Rome Statute, which paves the way for Palestine's membership in the International Criminal Court (ICC)," Hamas deputy leader Mussa Abu Marzuq wrote on his Facebook page.

The Palestinian declaration came after two days of talks in Qatar between Abbas and Hamas supremo Khaled Meshaal, whose militant movement is the de facto ruler of the Gaza Strip.

Senior Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat told AFP that the Islamic Jihad, the second most powerful force in Gaza, "is currently the only Palestinian faction that has not signed" the document.

"They are studying the possibility of signing," he added.

Based in The Hague, the ICC opened its doors in 2003 and is the world's first independent court set up to try the worst crimes, including genocide and war crimes.

Since the July 8 outbreak of the latest war in and around Gaza, Israel and Hamas have accused each other of war crimes.

Joining the ICC would also expose Palestinian factions to possible prosecution.

The Palestinians had in 2009 asked the ICC's prosecutor's office to investigate alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Israeli military in Gaza.

There has so far been no probe as Palestine is not an ICC member state and its status as a state is uncertain in some international institutions.

Indo-Pak border fire kills four

AFP, Srinagar

Four people were killed when nuclear-armed rivals India and Pakistan traded heavy fire across their border early yesterday, with each country accusing the other of "unprovoked" military action.

"Two civilians were killed" and four people injured, including a paramilitary soldier, on the Indian side of the international frontier when Pakistani forces opened fire, Indian police inspector-general Rajesh Kumar told AFP.

On the other side of the frontier, two Pakistani civilians -- a woman and a 60-year-old man -- "were martyred" by Indian fire, a senior Pakistani military official said.

The neighbours accused each other of starting the pre-dawn firing.

The countries have been exchanging almost daily charges of violating a decade-old ceasefire since India scrapped last Monday bilateral talks with Pakistan.

New Delhi called off the talks over meetings between Pakistan's high commissioner (ambassador) and Kashmiri separatists.

The latest Pakistani fire targeted several Indian border posts, Indian police said. Many villagers living close to the border in the RS Pura area of disputed Indian Kashmir have been evacuated due to Pakistani firing, Kumar told AFP.

But Pakistani officials said Indian troops initiated yesterday's "unprovoked firing", hitting the Sialkot region facing the south of Indian Kashmir where another civilian was killed by Indian fire last month.

Israel steps up offensive

Airstrikes kill nine after Netanyahu vows to avenge death of Israeli boy; Egypt readies new ceasefire talks

AFP, Gaza City

Israel kept up the pressure on Hamas in Gaza yesterday, carrying out multiple air strikes that killed nine Palestinians, three of them children, as Egypt prepared to convene new truce talks.

Since a previous round of frantic Egyptian diplomacy collapsed, shattering nine days of calm, 84 Palestinians and a four-year-old Israeli boy have died as a result of the violence.

"Egypt is going to invite delegates to return to the negotiating table to consider a long-term truce," Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas said after talks with Egyptian leader Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

"What interests us now is putting a stop to the bloodshed," Abbas said. "As soon as a ceasefire goes into effect, the two sides can sit down and discuss their demands."

Abbas's meeting with Sisi came after he held two rounds of talks in Qatar on Thursday and Friday with exiled Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal, whose Islamist movement is the de facto ruler of Gaza.

Israel has vowed no let-up until it can guarantee the safety of its civilians, while Hamas insists that Israel must end its eight-year blockade of the territory as part of any truce.

At least 2,100 Palestinians and 68 people on the Israeli side, all but four of them soldiers, have been killed since July 8. The UN says 70 percent of the Palestinians who have died were

civilians.

Israel said it had carried out 35 air strikes over the Gaza Strip yesterday and that around 30 rockets and mortar rounds hit Israel, with another three intercepted.

The intensified air strikes came after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed harsh retribution for the killing of a four-year-old boy at his home in kibbutz Nahal Oz on Friday.

"Hamas will pay a heavy price for this attack. IDF [Israel Defence Forces] & ISA [Israel Securities Authority] will intensify ops against Hamas until the goal of #ProtectiveEdge is achieved," a spokesman for Netanyahu posted on Twitter on last night.

One Israeli child and at least 480 Palestinian children have been killed since the conflict began, UNICEF said, in the deadliest fighting since the 2005 end of the second intifada.

The military sent text messages, voice mails and leaflets warning Palestinians to stay away from "terrorists" and that "every house from which militant activity is carried out, will be targeted."

The deadliest air strike levelled a home in Al-Zawayda in central Gaza, killing a couple, their sons aged three and four, and a 45-year-old aunt, medics said. Neighbours said the family house had been bombed earlier in the conflict and that the family had returned to camp out in the ruins, when it was hit overnight by an F16.

GAZA
CRISIS



German Chancellor Angela Merkel speaks next to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in Kiev, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Merkel urges truce

Russian convoy returns home after delivering aid; German VP urges 'federal' Ukraine

AFP, Kiev

German Chancellor Angela Merkel pushed for a new ceasefire in crisis talks with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko yesterday, as a controversial Russian convoy returned home.

The visit by Merkel -- the most influential Western leader to call on Kiev since the crisis erupted in the ex-Soviet state -- came ahead of crunch talks next Tuesday between Poroshenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin alongside top EU officials.

Tensions surged on Friday when Russia sent scores of trucks it said were carrying aid to the stricken insurgent stronghold of Lugansk in an unauthorised move Kiev described as a "direct invasion".

Merkel called for a "bilateral ceasefire and effective border controls" to help stop four months of brutal fighting between pro-Russian rebels and government troops.

And in a show of support for Kiev's pro-Western leaders, she said the "territorial integrity and well-being of Ukraine is essential".

She also warned Russia -- already under punishing EU and US sanctions over its alleged meddling in Ukraine -- of further punitive measures.

"We cannot rule out thinking about further sanctions if things do not progress," she told journalists.

Poroshenko said the "time has come for

peace" in the war-torn east but ruled out sacrificing Ukraine's sovereignty to end a conflict that has cost more than 2,200 lives.

Russia has consistently denied arming the rebels and has demanded Ukraine halt its punishing military operations. It sent in the column of white trucks on Friday despite failing to get approval for a shipment it says was aimed solely at helping besieged civilians in Lugansk who have been without without water and power for weeks.

The West sharply rebuked Russia over the convoy, with Washington describing it as a "dangerous escalation" and warning Moscow it could face further sanctions.

Kiev and the West feared the shipment could be used to bolster the struggling rebels or provide Moscow with a pretext to stage a full-scale intervention.

Meanwhile, German Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel has said that establishing a federal Ukraine would be the only "viable path" to ending the crisis, a statement likely to set off alarm bells in Kiev where such ideas have been fiercely opposed.

Analysts said Merkel's visit aims to shore up EU support for Kiev in the run-up to the Poroshenko-Putin meeting in Minsk on Tuesday as they run the risk of Moscow exploiting differences between the two sides.

Iran refuses IAEA access to Parchin base

AFP, Tehran

Iran will not give UN nuclear inspectors access to a military base outside Tehran that they have been seeking to visit since 2005, Defence Minister Hossein Dehghan said yesterday.

Dehghan's comments come just two days before a deadline for Iran to give its response to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) over historic allegations of a military dimension to its nuclear research.

IAEA inspectors have been given access to a string of declared nuclear sites as part of an interim nuclear deal reached with the major powers last November.

Access to Parchin was not agreed under the terms of that accord but the IAEA has been seeking to visit the base as part of their job.

BID TO OUST GOVT IN PAKISTAN

Zardari pledges support to Nawaz

AGENCIES

Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and former president and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari yesterday said that any solution to the ongoing political deadlock should be within the limits of the country's constitution.

Cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan and populist cleric Tahir-ul-Qadri have led thousands of supporters demonstrating outside the legislature this week calling for Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to go.

The political leaders met for lunch at the premier's Raiwind residence as Zardari reached Lahore from Karachi.

"Zardari has fully supported PM Nawaz... for the supremacy of the constitution and democracy," Pakistan's Finance Minister Ishaq Dar said in a press conference after the meet. "There is no compromise on extra-legal steps."

When asked what the PPP leader had to say about Imran Khan's demand that the premier resign, Dar responded by saying: "Zardari is clear



on this -- there is no question of the prime minister's resignation."

Pakistan's government and opposition groups made little headway in overnight talks aimed at dispersing protesters seeking the fall of the prime minister, as their negotiations entered a fourth day yesterday.

A government delegation met Qadri's team early yesterday to discuss the demands of the cleric's Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) movement, but the PAT came away dissatisfied.

Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) held their own talks with the government late on Friday, which

proved equally fruitless.

Those talks came hours after the PTI, the third largest party in the National Assembly, submitted the resignations of their 34 lawmakers in the assembly to the parliament's speaker.

Khan insists the May 2013 general election, which swept Sharif to power, was rigged and therefore the prime minister should step down, though observers rated the vote free and credible.

Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-N party insist he will not quit and accuse the protesters of undermining the country's fragile democracy.

The standoff has raised fears of possible military intervention in the country, which has seen three coups since its creation in 1947.

However analysts say the army is more likely to use the crisis to assert influence behind the scenes than stage an outright power grab. Both movements have failed to mobilise mass support beyond their core followers, and opposition parties have shunned Khan's call to unseat the government and begin a campaign of civil disobedience.

John Lennon's killer denied parole again

AFP, New York

The man who shot dead Beatles star John Lennon was denied parole for an eighth time after being deemed likely to violate the law again, prison authorities said Friday.

Mark David Chapman was convicted in 1981 to between 20 years to life in prison for shooting Lennon five times on December 8, 1980.

The legendary singer-songwriter had been walking with his wife, Yoko Ono, to their Central Park apartment building in New York when he was killed.

Chapman, 59, was interviewed via videoconference by the parole board on Wednesday from the Wende Correctional Facility where he is held.

He first became eligible for parole in 2000, and has applied unsuccessfully for release every two years since then. He is eligible for another parole review in August 2016.

Lennon's wife has repeatedly demanded that Chapman not be released from jail.



Nepal eyes largest human flag record

AFP, Kathmandu

More than 35,000 Nepalese yesterday made a bid to form the world's largest "human national flag" as they sought to set a new international record.

As the country's anthem played, participants held up crimson, blue and white coloured cardboard for 10 minutes on an open ground in Kathmandu's city centre to form the national flag.

Cries of "Nepal!" rang out as participants threw the cardboard pieces in the air to celebrate after the attempt.

Nepal's flag is the world's only one which is not a quadrilateral. Instead it is comprised of two triangles.

Nepal is in the process of drafting a new constitution, a key step in a stalled peace process begun after the end of a ten-year civil war in 2006. Leaders have promised an inclusive constitution and federalism, ending gender and caste-based discrimination.

He said the group will now submit its



claim with photographic and video evidence for a new record to the headquarters of Guinness World Records in London.

They expect Guinness World Records to give a ruling on their submission within two months.

The current record for the world's largest human national flag was set in February 2014 when 28,957 people gathered in Lahore, Pakistan, to create a Pakistani flag, according to Guinness World Records.