

UKRAINE crisis

EU weighs up Russia World Cup boycott

AFP, Brussels

European nations have discussed hitting Russia with sporting sanctions including a boycott of Vladimir Putin's showpiece 2018 football World Cup as a penalty for stoking the crisis in Ukraine, sources and reports said yesterday. Moscow could also face suspension from Formula One races and other sporting events, under long-term plans circulated among European diplomats alongside proposals for immediate economic sanctions.

Paris halts warship delivery to Russia

AFP, Paris

France yesterday said "conditions" were not in place to deliver the first of two Mistral-class warships to Russia, a move planned later this year that has sparked controversy given the crisis in Ukraine. Paris agreed in 2011 to build and sell the two advanced helicopter assault ships to Russia for a total of \$1.6 billion with the first scheduled for delivery in October or November and the second in 2015. The US welcomed France's move calling it a wise decision. Paris has delayed the delivery of the Mistral-class warship at least for a month.

Australia bans uranium sales to Russia

AFP, Sydney

Australia yesterday banned uranium sales to Russia over its actions in Ukraine while announcing it will set up an embassy in Kiev and may offer military assistance. The announcement by Prime Minister Tony Abbott came just days after Canberra said it would toughen its sanctions against Moscow so they match those of the European Union.

'Ukraine peace deal soon'

Putin, Poroshenko say deal likely by Friday; Ukraine PM differs, say deal announcement aims to deceive West ahead of Nato summit

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday unveiled a peace plan for Ukraine that could be agreed by the weekend to end a devastating conflict that has all but severed East-West ties.

The surprise move could take the wind out of the sails of a high-stakes Nato summit on Thursday where Western leaders led by US President Barack Obama plan to step up their defence of eastern Europe in the face of Russian "aggression".

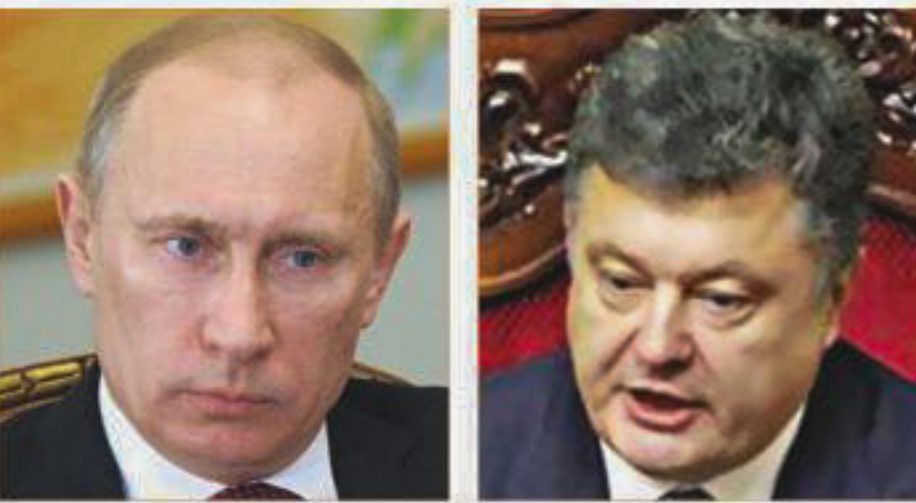
Putin appealed for both sides to lay down their weapons after nearly five months of fighting that has killed 2,600 people and been blamed by both Kiev and its Western allies on Putin's attempts to seize back former Soviet and tsarist lands.

The sudden glimmer of hope for an imminent end to Europe's worst crisis in at least two decades saw stocks in key markets rise and the Russian ruble rebound.

But there were signs that the truce deal -- which Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said was agreed during telephone talks with Putin -- lacked universal support.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk said Putin's announcement was meant to "pull the wool over the eyes of the international community ahead of the Nato summit and an attempt to avert the EU's inevitable decision to unleash a new wave of sanctions against Russia".

Obama, on a highly symbolic visit to former Soviet republic and new Nato member Estonia,



Vladimir Putin

Petro Poroshenko

said it was "too early to early to tell" if the ceasefire deal would hold on the ground.

While the fierce fighting of recent days appeared to have eased, the booms of combat could be heard around the eastern rebel stronghold Donetsk that Ukrainian troops had surrounded before being pushed back by the resurgent militias in recent days.

Putin's message seemed partially calculated at taking the sting out of the Nato meeting opening in Wales today where Western leaders are due to address a wave of reports that Russia was secretly shuttling troops and heavy weapons into eastern Ukraine to help the pro-Kremlin separatists.

The 28-nation alliance plans to unveil a new rapid response force for eastern Europe that Moscow has branded a direct national security threat.

Obama said Nato must send an "unmistakable message of support" to Ukraine, which has been in turmoil since the February ouster of a Kremlin-backed president by pro-Western

protesters.

Ukraine will also host US-led military drills September 13-26 aimed at showing the Kremlin the degree to which Kiev is determined to break its dependence on its former Soviet masters in Moscow.

The Kremlin denies giving anything more than moral support to the insurgents who launched their uprising against Kiev's new Western-backed leaders in April.

But Western powers say Moscow has been orchestrating the insurrection as part of a land grab that started with its annexation of Ukraine's strategic Crimea peninsula in March.

Poroshenko said the seven-point blueprint was agreed during a phone exchange between the two leaders that appeared to underscore Putin's influence in a conflict in which he denies playing any role.

But there were doubts about whether the loose band of rebel commanders who have been routing Ukraine's army in recent fighting were willing to either disarm or disband.

One separatist leader in Donetsk said militias would halt fire only if government forces retreat from eastern cities they had been shelling in recent weeks.

Western leaders have learned to their chagrin that they have few actual options in helping Ukraine.

Obama has ruled out direct military intervention and economic sanctions imposed on Russia have yet to show any sign of changing the Kremlin's hawkish ways despite hitting the economy hard.



BEHEADING OF US JOURNOS US, Britain vow to destroy IS

AGENCIES

The United States and United Kingdom yesterday unveiled their intention to fight Islamic State until it is no longer a force in the Middle East.

Islamic State released a video on Tuesday showing the beheading of a US journalist, the second American hostage to be killed within weeks, in retaliation for US air strikes in Iraq. Is has also threatened to behead another hostage who is British in nationality.

UK Prime Minister David Cameron yesterday vowed that Islamic State will "be squeezed out of existence", and promised to build a coalition in the region against it that cannot be mistaken for a western-led intervention.

His remarks appeared to be preparing the ground for a US-led broad coalition that includes Britain, to drive out IS following a formal invitation from the Iraqi government in Baghdad.

Vowing the country will never give into terrorism, the prime minister also braced the population for further potential bad news about the British hostage.

Cameron's tone and language echoed that of US President Barack Obama, who vowed yesterday that the US will not be "intimidated" by the beheading of the American journalist Steven Sotloff.

"The bottom line is this, our objective is clear and that is to degrade and destroy (Islamic State) so that it's no longer a threat not just to Iraq but also the region and to the United States," Obama told a news conference in Estonia.

Obama however said destroying the militant group will take time because of the power vacuum in Syria, the abundance of battle hardened fighters that grew out of al-Qaeda in the Iraqi war, and the need to build coalitions, including with local Sunni communities.

"Whatever these murderers think they will achieve with killing innocent Americans like Steven, they have already failed," Obama said. "They failed because, like people around the world, Americans are repulsed by their barbarism. We will not be intimidated."

US and British officials both examined the video, showing the same British-accented executioner who appeared in an Aug 19 video of the killing of US journalist James Foley, concluding it was authentic.

"Those that make the mistake of harming Americans will learn that we will not forget and that our reach is long and that justice will be served," he said.



David Cameron

Obama seeks to reassure Baltics over Russia

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Barack Obama has proclaimed an unwavering and permanent US commitment to the security of its Nato allies as he mounted a show of solidarity with European nations anxious about Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

During a visit to Estonia, Obama also announced the US would send more air force units and aircraft to the Baltics, and called Estonia's Amari air base an ideal location to base those forces. Standing shoulder to shoulder with the Estonian president, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, Obama ticked through a list of US military resources already at work in the region, and said the US had a duty under the Nato charter to the alliance's collective defence.



"It is unbreakable, it is unwavering, it is eternal. And Estonia will never stand alone," Obama said in Tallinn, Estonia's port capital.

Later on Wednesday, Obama and Ilves were to hold broader security talks that include the leaders of Latvia and Lithuania. Then Obama departs for Wales, where a two-day Nato summit will begin on Thursday.

Nato allies plan to agree during the summit to a stepped-up response to Russia, including the rapid response force, which will involve positioning more troops and equipment in the Baltics and elsewhere in eastern Europe. It is unclear whether the plan will satisfy the concerns of the Baltic nations, who have been pressing Nato for permanent bases in the region.

IS militants vow to 'de-throne' Putin

MAIL ONLINE

Vladimir Putin was directly and personally threatened by the Islamic State because of his close ties to Syrian leader Bashar Hafez al-Assad.

In a video on Al-Arabiya TV channel, an ISIS rebel sits in the cockpit of a captured Russian-made fighter aircraft in the Tabak area of the Syrian province of Rakka.

A second fighter warns: "This message is addressed to you, oh Vladimir Putin. These are your aircraft which you sent to Bashar, and with the help of Allah we will send them back to you."

The message of hate to Putin follows his strong support for Assad. Putin is also loathed by Islamic extremists and terror groups for crushing attempts to set up an Islamic state in Chechnya, and in other mainly Muslim regions of southern Russia such as Dagestan.

The Russian leader has long argued that the West has missed the danger of such extremist groups while criticising him for human rights abuses in his clampdown.

Iran vows to bypass West's sanctions

REUTERS, Tehran

Iranian Oil Minister Bijan Zanganeh said Tehran would continue to bypass sanctions after the United States penalised a number of companies for violating sanctions imposed on Iran, mostly in connection with its nuclear programme.

On Friday, the United States imposed a fresh round of curbs on a number of Iranian and foreign companies, banks and airlines. The new measures came just over two weeks before talks between Iran and six world powers on Tehran's nuclear programme resume in New York.

Washington said the firms were helping Iran's nuclear programme, which Tehran says is peaceful but the West suspects may be aimed at developing a nuclear weapons capability. They included Goldentex FZE, a UAE-based firm working with Iran's shipping sector, and an Italian firm, Detin SpA, which it said was working with Iran's petrochemical industry.

"The sanctions are cruel and illegal and we fulfil our duty for circumventing the sanctions," Zanganeh was cited as saying by the oil ministry's news website Shana.

"We do not recognise the sanctions," he said, referring to Friday's new curbs.

Western sanctions imposed on Iran to hamper its nuclear programme have blocked sales of its oil to the West and made it increasingly difficult for Iran's fleet to obtain insurance and financing for deals with Asian buyers.

Despite that, Iran shipped 29.4 percent more crude to major Asian customers in July from a year earlier, with China, Tehran's biggest client, accounting for most of the increase.



Secretary of State John Kerry (3R) leads former secretaries of state (L-R) Hillary Clinton, Madeleine Albright, Henry Kissinger, James Baker and Colin Powell in a ceremonial groundbreaking for the future US Diplomacy Center at the State Department's Harry S Truman Building in Washington, DC, yesterday. When completed, the Diplomacy Center will be a museum and education center that will 'demonstrate the ways in which diplomacy matters now and has mattered throughout American history.'

PHOTO: AFP

NEWSIN brief

900 killed in anti-Taliban ops: Pak army

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's military yesterday said it had killed more than 900 militants and lost 82 soldiers since the start of a major operation against the Taliban in the tribal northwest in June. Air strikes, artillery, mortars and ground troops have all been used to retake territory in North Waziristan, which had become a haven for fighters with Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other terror outfits.

Ebola death toll tops 1,900: WHO

AFP, Washington

More than 1,900 people have died in the Ebola epidemic sweeping through West Africa, the head of the World Health Organization said yesterday. "As of this week, we are reporting 3,500 cases confirmed in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia and more than 1,900 deaths -- and the outbreak is rising," Margaret Chan told reporters in Washington. The latest toll represents a significant increase from the 1,552 deaths and 3,069 cases reported by the Geneva-based organization just days ago.

Govt air strike kills 10 children in east Syria

AFP, Beirut

Sixteen people, including 10 children, were killed in a government air raid in east Syria yesterday, a monitor said, but state media blamed the deaths on jihadist militants. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitor, said an air strike hit a bus on the road between eastern Deir Ezzor province and Damascus as it passed through the Shula area. The group said most of the children were under the age of 10.

Qaeda declares new branch in Indian sub-continent

AFP, Washington

Al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri yesterday declared in a video message that the global Islamist extremist movement has launched a new branch to lead its struggle in the Indian sub-continent.

In the video, found in online jihadist forums by the SITE terrorism monitoring group, Zawahiri said the new force would "crush the artificial borders" dividing Muslim populations in the region.

Al-Qaeda is active in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where its surviving leadership are thought to be hiding out, but Zawahiri said "Qaedat al-Jihad" would take the fight to India, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

"This entity was not established today but is the fruit of a blessed effort of more than two years to gather the mujahedeen in the Indian sub-continent into a single entity," he said.

Founded by Osama bin Laden, who was killed in Pakistan by US commandos in May 2011, al-Qaeda has long claimed leadership of the jihadists fighting to

restore a single caliphate in Muslim lands.

But since the death of its figurehead, it has been somewhat eclipsed, first by its own offshoots in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, and now by the so-called "Islamic State" fighting in Iraq and Syria.

But, in launching "Qaedat al-Jihad in the Indian sub-continent," in a video partly in his native Arabic and partly in the Urdu of his presumed Pakistani base, Zawahiri attempted to regain some of the limelight.

"It is an entity that was formed to promulgate the call of the reviving imam, Sheikh Osama bin Laden. May Allah have mercy upon him," Zawahiri said.

He called on the "umma," or Muslim nation, to unite around "tawhid," or monotheism, "to wage jihad against its enemies, to liberate its land, to restore its sovereignty and to revive its caliphate."

He said the group would recognize the overarching leadership of the Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar, be led by Pakistani militant Asim Umar, and employ a spokesman.



al-Zawahiri

Another horrific gang-rape in India

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Police in the Indian state of West Bengal are investigating the alleged rape and murder of a teenage girl who had previously been humiliated by a village council.

The 15-year-old had protested with village elders who were set to beat her father for failing to repay a loan he had taken to buy a tractor. The village elders instead turned on her, forcing her to spit on the ground and lick it up.

Soon after the incident, the teenager went missing. Reports said the body of the girl was discovered on Tuesday morning near to a railway track in Jalpaiguri.

The relatives of the girl have filed a complaint with police naming a total of 13 people, said to be members of the kangaroo court. Police have detained three people for questioning.

Kerry presses Israel over new 'illegal' settlements

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

John Kerry has called the Israeli prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, amid a US effort to persuade Israel to reverse the go-ahead for the largest appropriation of land on the occupied West Bank since the 1980s.

The secretary of state's call followed the disclosure that the US had officially requested Israel to reverse the decision, the move both internationally and within Netanyahu's own cabinet.

Kerry is preparing to meet Palestinian negotiators seeking a firm deadline for Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories to the pre-1967 borders. Failing that, Palestinian officials have warned they will seek a UN resolution setting a three-year deadline for the end of the occupation.

The talks will be Kerry's first face-to-face discussions with Palestinian negotiators since Washington found itself sidelined from ceasefire talks in July when Kerry -- the top US diplomat -- failed to broker a truce in the war between Israel and Palestinian

militants in the Gaza Strip.

The announcement on Sunday that the land in the Gush Etzion settlement block near Bethlehem would be expropriated -- the first step towards building a significant new settlement there -- has seen strong protests from the UK and European governments including France and Spain, and from Italian foreign minister Federica Mogherini, who was just appointed the EU's next foreign minister.

The move has been widely interpreted by Israeli analysts as a political gesture designed to shore up support for Netanyahu on the right wing, which has criticised him for his handling of the war in Gaza.

For his part, the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, has said if there is no progress on peace negotiations to settle the borders of a future Palestinian state, Palestinians will push forward with unilateral steps towards recognition and have threatened to pursue Israel for war crimes in the international criminal court -- both moves opposed by the US.

