

NEWS IN brief

Khamenei has prostate surgery

AFP, Tehran

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei successfully underwent prostate surgery it was announced yesterday, in an unprecedented public statement about his health, which has long been the subject of speculation. The 75-year-old cleric, who has ruled since the death in 1989 of the Islamic republic's founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, had a routine operation, according to IRNA, Iran's official news agency.

Political unrest will hit Hong Kong economy: Moody's

AFP, Hong Kong

Ratings agency Moody's warned yesterday prolonged discord in Hong Kong over China's refusal to grant the key financial hub full democracy was still likely and would hurt the city's economy. Activists in the former British colony had their hopes for genuine democracy dashed after China announced last week that the city's next leader would be vetted by a pro-Beijing committee.

Elderly Italian nuns murdered in Burundi

AFP, Bujumbura

Three elderly Italian nuns were sexually assaulted and murdered in twin attacks in their convent in the capital of Burundi, police said yesterday as a hunt was launched for their killers. Police initially reported that two nuns were stabbed to death on Sunday afternoon. The killer then battered one of the two with a rock, before fleeing the convent. But in the early hours of yesterday morning, another nun in the same convent was killed, her body beaten and head hacked off.

Amnesty urges action over 'abuses' by pro-Kiev militias

AFP, Kiev

Rights group Amnesty International called on Ukraine's leaders yesterday to act against "abuses and war crimes" committed by volunteer militias fighting against pro-Russian rebels in the east.

Amnesty said it had documented a growing number of abuses, "including abductions, unlawful detention, ill-treatment, robbery, extortion, and possible executions" by one pro-Kiev battalion fighting in the Lugansk area.

Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who met Amnesty chief Salil Shetty during his visit to Kiev, pledged that the government would hold those responsible to account, saying "all perpetrators of crimes are equal before the law".

In a report on the Ukraine conflict on Sunday, Amnesty said both warring sides were committing human rights abuses and war crimes, in particular accusing Russia of "fuelling separatist crimes".

But it also highlighted violations by the army and the numerous volunteer battalions fighting against the pro-Kremlin separatists in control of large parts of eastern Ukraine.

"The failure to stop abuses and possible war crimes by volunteer battalions risks significantly aggravating tensions in the east of the country and undermining the proclaimed intentions of the new Ukrainian authorities to strengthen and uphold the rule of law more broadly," Shetty said yesterday.

Amnesty highlighted the actions of the Aidar battalion in the northern Lugansk area, one of about 30 volunteer militias loosely integrated into Ukrainian security forces.

It recounted cases where the fighters abducted local men accused of collaborating with the rebels, beating them and holding them in makeshift detention centres and often demanding ransoms for their release or stealing their valuables.

Iraq MPs poised for key govt vote

Obama vows strategy

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's parliament was to meet yesterday under pressure to approve an inclusive government to win broad support against jihadists, as President Barack Obama prepares to unveil a strategy to defeat them.

The outgoing government has faced criticism that by alienating the Sunni Arab minority, it helped create conditions that revitalised Sunni militants including the Islamic State group, which led a June offensive that seized much of the Sunni heartland.

Washington and the United Nations have repeatedly called on premier-designate Haidar al-Abadi to form a broad-based government.

Giving Sunnis a greater stake in power could help encourage them to join a counter-offensive against the jihadists.

The key parliament session was due to open at 1700 GMT and end with a vote on a new government line-up.

There has been no word from Abadi's office on the names to be put to lawmakers, and the political horse-trading was expected to go down to the wire.

Obama, who made his political career opposing the war in Iraq and pulled out US troops in 2011, promised to unveil a long-

awaited strategy tomorrow to tackle IS in both Iraq and neighbouring Syria.

"We are going to systematically degrade their capabilities. We're going to shrink the territory that they control. And ultimately we're going to defeat them," Obama said in an interview aired Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press".

He said he would not announce the return of US ground troops to Iraq and would focus instead on a "counter-terrorism campaign".

But the difficulties Washington faces were underlined by a report from a Britain-based research group which found that IS fighters were using captured US military-issue weapons supplied to other rebel groups in Syria by Saudi Arabia.

The issue of Kurdish participation in the government is perhaps the biggest potential sticking point, and their delegation flew from Baghdad to the city of Sulaimaniyah in Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region yesterday to discuss the issue with senior political leaders.

With Shiite militiamen playing a key role alongside the regular army in fighting the jihadists, one of their commanders is apparently seeking to turn military gains into political capital, which could complicate efforts to bring Sunnis on board.

IRAQ AND SYRIA IS CONFLICT

Islamic State fighters using US arms: study

AFP, London

Islamic State fighters appear to be using captured US military issue arms and weapons supplied to moderate rebels in Syria by Saudi Arabia, according to a report published yesterday. The study by the London-based small-arms research organisation Conflict Armament Research documented weapons seized by Kurdish forces from militants in Iraq and Syria over a 10-day period in July.

Head of Al-Azhar says IS are 'criminals'

AFP, Cairo

The head of Egypt's Al-Azhar, Sunni Islam's highest seat of learning, said yesterday that jihadists of the Islamic State were "criminals" serving a "Zionist" plot to "destroy the Arab world."

"These criminals have been able to transmit to the world a tarnished and alarming image of Muslims," Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyeb said. "These fundamentalist terrorist groups, whatever their names, and their backers are colonial creations that serve Zionism in its plot to destroy the Arab world."

Jihadists want to create 'house of blood': new UN rights chief

AFP, Geneva

The jihadist militants who have seized large swaths of Iraq and Syria are intent upon creating "a house of blood", the UN's new human rights chief said yesterday. In his maiden address to the UN Human Rights Council, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein lashed out at the IS, which has carved out a stronghold and declared a "caliphate" in an area straddling the border of the two conflict-torn nations.

Arab governments agree to 'confront' IS

AFP, Cairo

Arab states agreed Sunday to take the "necessary measures" and were prepared to cooperate internationally to confront Islamic State militants, Arab League chief Nabil al-Arabi said. At the start of a foreign ministers' meeting in Cairo, Arabi had called for a political and military confrontation with the jihadists and other militants he said threatened the existence of Arab states. He later stopped short of explicitly backing US air strikes targeting IS jihadists who control swaths of Iraq and Syria.

Turkey fears PKK could obtain arms sent to Iraq

AFP, Istanbul

Weapons sent by Western countries to forces fighting Islamic militants in Iraq may end up in the hands of Kurdish rebels in Turkey, Turkish foreign minister warned yesterday. Branded a terrorist organisation by Turkey and its Western allies, the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) has joined forces with other Kurdish units in the US-backed operation to halt the advance of Islamic State militants in Syria and Iraq.

New UN Syria envoy to visit Damascus today

AFP, Damascus

The new United Nations envoy on the Syria conflict, Staffan de Mistura, is to make his first trip to Damascus today, Syrian media and activists said. De Mistura will hold three days of talks on the "prospects for a solution" to the conflict that has ravaged Syria since March 2011, the Al-Watan newspaper, which is close to the government, reported yesterday.

Suicide bombers, gunmen kill 18 in Iraq town

AFP, Samarra

Militants, including two suicide bombers, attacked a town north of Baghdad that has resisted jihadists, killing 18 people yesterday, police and a doctor said. A first suicide bomber blew up a vehicle packed with explosives to breach a barrier in a southern neighbourhood of Dhuluiyah, which the second bomber then penetrated, the sources said. Security forces and allied tribesmen then clashed with the militants in the Jubur neighbourhood.

EU calls new meeting over Russia sanctions split

AFP, Brussels

EU officials called a fresh meeting yesterday to discuss a new round of sanctions against Moscow after failing to reach unanimous agreement on the measures, diplomatic sources said.

European capitals were supposed to give formal approval yesterday to the sanctions, which include limiting access to financial markets by Russian oil giants, but had failed to do so, the sources said.

The delay comes as some of the EU's newer member states in eastern Europe -- still dependent on Russian trade and energy ties -- were uneasy at ratcheting up the sanctions, and as a tenuous Ukraine ceasefire appeared to be holding.

"There will be an extraordinary meeting of the (member state) ambassadors on the sanctions at 6:00 pm (1600 GMT)," an EU diplomat told AFP, after talks apparently did not produce the required unanimous support of all 28 nations.

The new meeting of the ambassadors will "discuss the modalities of implementation

of the Russia sanctions", said the diplomat, who asked not to be named.

When EU officials agreed the new sanctions package Friday, EU heads Herman Van Rompuy and Jose Manuel Barroso had left open the possibility they could be lifted quickly if the ceasefire held, setting the stage for further peace efforts.

Diplomatic sources said the differences apparently revolved around this point, with some member states seeking to incorporate language in the sanctions text that would keep options open for lifting the sanctions.

The new EU sanctions agreed by officials Friday would limit access to financial markets by Russian oil companies such as Rosneft and Transneft plus the petroleum unit of gas giant Gazprom, diplomatic sources said yesterday.

The new sanctions build on those agreed at the end of July when EU leaders, stung into action by the shooting down over Ukraine of a Malaysia Airlines plane, decided to target whole economic sectors on top of travel bans and asset freezes against individuals.

'Impossible to win conflict by military means alone'

Says Proshenko

AFP, Mariupol

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said yesterday it was impossible to win the conflict in the east by force alone, and called for the removal of Russian troops.

"It is impossible to win the conflict just by military means," he said on a visit to the Ukrainian port city of Mariupol, where sporadic fighting has flared between government forces and pro-Russian rebels despite a ceasefire.

Poroshenko told reporters that the quickest way to achieve "stability and peace" in Ukraine was simple: "Withdraw foreign troops and close the border and within a week we (will) find a compromise... I think the peace initiative is bringing us to this result," he said in English.

Poroshenko had earlier announced the release of 1,200 captives held by rebels, although it was not immediately clear if this was part of the ceasefire backed by Kiev and Moscow that was signed in Minsk on Friday.

He said there had been 10-12 violations of the truce each day but that if the accord was bringing home prisoners of war and saving the lives of civilians and soldiers "this means the ceasefire works. I think we win (the war) but... more accurately we win the war."

JAMMU, KASHMIR FLOODS

Massive rescue operation on way, Srinagar submerged

PTI, Srinagar/Jammu

Massive rescue operations were under way yesterday to evacuate tens of thousands of people stranded in floods in Jammu & Kashmir as the situation remained grim with most parts of Srinagar city still under water and bad communication lines and high water levels posing a big challenge.

As authorities struggled to deal with the calamity, a landslide was reported from Pachori village in Udhampur district and mitigation forces have reached the area to rescue the few people trapped there.

A total of 25 boats have been launched in flooded areas of Srinagar city to ferry people out even as over 5,100 people have been rescued from the state which is reeling under heavy floods.

Flood fury has so far claimed the lives of about 150 people and damaged many buildings, including hospitals, and snapped road and communication links, cutting off many areas. The Army cantonment, civil secretariat and the high court in Srinagar have also been inundated.

"We are facing a big problem of communication as all links are down. We are not able to communicate with our teams sent on ground in this flood-ravaged areas. Also, as water level is high in many places our personnel are not able to reach the stranded," National Disaster Response Force chief O P Singh told reporters in Delhi.

A total of 5,183 people have been rescued till now from the flood waters which includes children and women, he said.



INDIA, PAKISTAN FLOODS

Pakistani residents use a boat to rescue flood-affected residents at Jalalpur Bhattian in the Hafizabad district in Punjab province yesterday. Desperate residents were huddled on rooftops yesterday as they tried to escape flood waters which have already claimed more than 350 lives in India and Pakistan and left tens of thousands homeless.

PHOTO: AFP

AAP claims BJP trying to 'buy' support

Releases video footage

TNN, New Delhi

The Aam Aadmi Party yesterday released video footage allegedly showing one senior Delhi BJP leader offering money to AAP MLA Dinesh Mohania for abstaining from voting, in the eventuality of a trust vote. AAP's national convenor Arvind Kejriwal said they will file FIR against BJP and also approach the election commission to demand action in the matter.

Mohania alleged he was approached by the said BJP leader about a month ago. "I informed the party leadership about this and together we decided to record all conversation. The last meeting took place on Sunday at the residence of BJP leader Sher Singh Dagar where he offered Rs four crore," he alleged.

Responding to AAP's charges, BJP leader Vijender Gupta said all allegations are baseless. Meanwhile, according to sources in the BJP, the party has asked all 28 of its MLAs not to go out of the city until further orders.

Thai rights groups denounce martial law

AFP, Bangkok

Rights activists yesterday renewed calls for an end to martial law imposed since Thailand's coup, accusing the military of overseeing a judicial "twilight zone" following their power grab.

Army chief General Prayut Chan-O-Cha introduced the draconian law two days before the May 22 coup which he led swept the elected government from power.

He cited the need to restore peace and order after months of protests. Prayut is now also prime minister and is due to lead the first meeting of a military-stacked cabinet today.

Martial law bans political gatherings, allows the detention of dissidents for up to seven days without charge and permits trials in a military court. In the days and weeks following the coup more than 570 people were ordered to report to authorities, according to a report submitted by the Thai lawyers for Human Rights to the interior ministry.

It said more than 260 people were arrested with 87 now facing legal action, 61 of them in military courts.

Martial law "is tantamount to a twilight zone of judicial process during which the officials have broad powers without checks and review", the report said, adding such powers may lead to "serious violations... of fundamental human rights".

The release of the study, "The Human rights Situation 100 Days After the Coup", was scheduled last week but authorities warned its authors to postpone publication.

The report expressed particular concern over trials in military courts and the use of a controversial royal defamation law to protect key members of the monarchy.

CHINA SEA ROW

Philippines' Aquino to seek Europe's help

AFP, Manila

President Benigno Aquino will seek European support for Philippine efforts to resolve maritime territorial disputes with China during a week-long visit to EU nations including France and Germany, a foreign ministry official said yesterday.

Aquino will also raise his proposal to stop China from further escalating tensions in the strategically-vital South China Sea, assistant foreign secretary Zeneida Collinson said.

"In all the meetings starting with Spain, we will seek their continued support on the Philippine position in the West Philippine Sea," she told reporters, using the local term for the South China Sea.

"It's important for our president to have the opportunity to apprise these world leaders directly on what is happening in... the South China Sea," when he visits Spain, Belgium, France and Germany from September 13 to 20, she said.

Such support can be "tactic" and did not need to be contained in a formal document, she added.

China claims almost all of the South China Sea, a vital shipping lane and fishing ground that is believed to hold vast mineral resources.

This conflicts with the territorial claims of the Philippines as well as Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam.

In recent years, tensions between the Philippines and China have risen as Beijing has aggressively pressed its claim, citing "historical facts" and occupying and fortifying outcrops and islets.

Proof of human telepathy?

MAIL ONLINE

With a blindfold covering his eyes, and ear-plugs cancelling out almost all sound, Dr Michel Berg sat in a state-of-the-art laboratory at the University of Strasbourg in north-eastern France, and began to think on March 28 this year.

Nearly 5,000 miles away, at a research facility in the Indian city of Kerala, a young Spanish man called Dr Alejandro Riera pulled on a tightly fitting hat, placed a laptop computer on a white table, and also began to think.

They instead to achieve what scientists call 'mind-to-mind direct technological communication' — and the rest of us would recognise by a single, tantalising word: telepathy.

The experiment in speaking via 'thought' happened in conditions of absolute secrecy. Until recently, only a small team numbering a dozen researchers (including Dr Berg and Dr Riera) were even aware of its existence.

That all changed a few days ago, however, when PLOS ONE, a website little known outside academia, published a peer-reviewed scientific paper detailing its outcome.

On that afternoon in March, Dr Berg and Dr Riera were indeed able to achieve 'telepathic conversation in human history'.

