

NEWSIN brief

German 'jihadist' goes on trial for Islamic State ties

AFP, Berlin

A 20-year-old German alleged jihadist goes on trial tomorrow on charges of fighting for Islamic State in Syria, in Germany's first court proceedings involving the militant group. The defendant, identified by the court only as Kreshnik B, was arrested last December at Frankfurt airport in western Germany on his way home from Syria. While in Syria, he allegedly underwent weapons training with the jihadists and fought in at least three battles against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's troops.

US general Allen to head anti-jihadist coalition

AFP, Washington

Retired US general John Allen, the cerebral ex-commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan who also led troops in western Iraq, has been named to lead the international effort against Islamic State extremists, officials announced Friday. Allen, 60, has been an unabashed hawk when it comes to Islamic State, urging a no holds-barred assault on the militants, who have employed brutal tactics in their advance across Syria and Iraq.

Uighur academic to appear in Chinese court next week

AFP, Beijing

A prominent Uighur academic, charged with separatism by Chinese prosecutors, will appear in court on Wednesday, his lawyer said. Ilham Tohti, who taught at a university in Beijing, has been a vocal critic of the government's policies toward his mostly Muslim Uighur minority, who are concentrated in the restive western Xinjiang region. Prosecutors in the Xinjiang region last month announced they were charging Tohti with separatism following his detention earlier this year, sparking renewed international calls for his release.

Boko Haram commander killed in rare Nigeria victory

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

A leading commander of Islamist extremist group Boko Haram has been killed along with 200 other militants in a rare victory for Nigeria's armed forces, according to reports. One Nigerian army officer said a feared commander known only as Amir was among the dead after a battle on Friday in Konduga town, 35 kilometres from Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state and birthplace of the extremist group. Also killed were a Boko Haram video journalist and a suicide bomber, he said.

Thai army dragnet douses peace hopes in rebel-hit south

AFP, Pattani

A bomb suspect held for two weeks without charge in Thailand's insurgency-battered south says an army dragnet following the coup is calcifying hostility towards the kingdom -- and undercutting a fresh bid for peace. The decade-long conflict has claimed more than 6,100 lives across Thailand's lush, forested Muslim-majority southern provinces, where shadowy rebels are fighting for a level of autonomy from the Thai state. Most of the victims are civilians caught up in the near-daily bombings, shootings -- and occasional beheadings -- that define a war largely ignored by Thais and forgotten by the wider world.



Lorries, part of a Russian humanitarian convoy, cross the Ukrainian border at the Donetsk-Izvarino custom control checkpoint as Ukrainian refugees look at them yesterday. The first 35 vehicles in a second Russian aid convoy heading for rebel-controlled eastern Ukraine have crossed the border, Russian news agencies reported.

PHOTO: AFP

Russian aid convoy crosses border into Ukraine: reports

CNN ONLINE

A convoy of more than 200 trucks that Russia says is carrying humanitarian aid has crossed the border into Ukraine without permission, a senior Ukrainian Border Service official said yesterday.

Col Serhiy Astahov, assistant to the Ukrainian Border Service chief, told CNN that 217 trucks have crossed the Ukrainian border.

Ukrainian border guards and customs officer did not have access to them to check what they were carrying, he said.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which has monitors in Ukraine, said that in total 220 vehicles -- 193 cargo trucks and 27 support vehicles -- had crossed the border overnight and into the morning.

"The first group of 40 trucks were quickly checked by the Russian border guard and customs services," an OSCE statement said.

"The 180 other vehicles were not inspected. All vehicles crossed into Ukraine without being inspected by Ukrainian border guard and customs officers or the International Committee of the Red Cross."

Russian state-run news agency Itar-Tass said the convoy had been cleared by Russian customs control staff, citing the press service of the Russian Southern Customs Department.

The news agency said 250 trucks in total were due to arrive in the eastern Ukrainian city of Luhansk by the end of yesterday. It reported that the first trucks were greeted by residents waving and even crying.

Russian Deputy Emergencies Minister Vladimir Stepanov said the convoy was carrying 2,000 tons of supplies, including food, water purifying equipment and power generators.

Kerry rallies support for US 'war' on IS

AFP, Cairo

US Secretary of State John Kerry said yesterday Egypt was on the frontline against "terrorism" after meeting its leadership to garner support to fight jihadists in Iraq and Syria.

Egypt's formidable army is unlikely to take part in a military coalition against the Islamic State jihadists, but it has closely cooperated with the United States on counter-terrorism.

The Arab world's most populous state boasts the prestigious Sunni Muslim authority Al-Azhar which Kerry said would fight back against the Islamic State's use of the religion.

Kerry, who flew in from Ankara, met President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Arab League chief Nabil al-Arabi.

Cairo's involvement in the coalition may help to soothe its relations with Washington, after the United States suspended -- then restored -- military aid when the army ousted elected Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in July 2013.

Morsi's successor, former army chief Sisi, is fighting Islamist militants in the restive Sinai Peninsula who have expressed support for the Islamic State.



"Egypt is on the frontline of the fight against terrorism, particularly when it comes to fighting extremist groups in Sinai," Kerry told a news conference with Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukri.

After securing the backing of 10 Arab governments this week, Washington is seeking a stamp of approval for its campaign from Egypt and its religious institutions, which include Al-Azhar university.

"As an intellectual and cultural capital in the Muslim world, Egypt has a critical role to play in publicly denouncing the ideology that ISIL disseminates," Kerry said, using another acronym for IS.

Egypt has branded its Islamist political opposition as well as militants as "terrorists" vaguely linked to regional militant groups.

"We of course monitor the relation between the different organisations, and their ideology is linked," Shoukri said.

Kerry said he also had a "frank" discussion on human rights in Egypt amid a bloody crackdown on the government's opponents, and the jailing of three Al-Jazeera television journalists and secular dissidents.

US Congress wary of greenlighting 'Iraq 2.0'

AFP, Washington

US lawmakers will likely give President Barack Obama authority to train Syrian rebels to combat jihadists, but Democrats and many Republicans are wary of repeating America's Iraq war debacle.

Mindful of the risks of war in the Middle East, Congress will rally to an embattled commander in chief's strategy to defeat the Islamic State extremist group, but seek to keep his war powers in check.

This has led to an introspective mood in Washington, where lawmakers have only a few days before hustling home to hit the campaign trail, essentially leaving the US Capitol empty until after November's congressional election.

Republican Senator Mark Kirk reflected the mood of many, saying he supports a swift vote backing Obama's effort to train and arm vetted, moderate rebel forces in

Syria as a key plank in battling IS.

But, he told AFP, "my constituents are understandably concerned about Iraq 2.0."

A chief architect of the 2003 US invasion that plunged Iraq into chaos, former vice president Dick Cheney, visited Washington this week urging Obama to get "back on offense in the war on terror."

And House Republican Peter King urged the president to brace Americans for a war that could last "10 or 15 years."

House Speaker John Boehner, who habitually clashes with Obama, struck a unifying tone by urging lawmakers to "give the president what he's asking for" on counter-terrorism measures.

But skepticism and outright resistance abounds. Who better to convey the angst over potentially triggering another war than the lawmakers who now regret voting for the Iraq invasion?



A FAREWELL TO ARMS Pope pleads for peace Visits cemetery of grandfather's interred WW1 comrades

MAIL ONLINE

A hundred years ago, Giovanni Bergoglio fought in some of the fiercest battles of the First World War.

Luckily he survived, but his grandson Jorge Mario Bergoglio, now Pope Francis, remembers how the old man would only speak of the 'painful memories' of the Great War.

And yesterday the pontiff made a holy pilgrimage to Italy's largest war memorial to pay homage to the sacrifices made by Giovanni and millions of others.

Standing amid row upon row of tombstones dedicated to Italian soldiers who fell during the First World War, Francis reiterated his calls for peace among nations amid new threats from

the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

He recalled the trauma suffered by his own grandfather, who fought during Italy's bloody campaign along the Isonzo River, close to the graveyard, before emigrating to Argentina after the war.

The pontiff prayed among gravestones in an Austro-Hungarian cemetery, before visiting Italy's largest war memorial where he held an open-air mass beside a Fascist-era monument to 100,000 fallen soldiers.

Francis' grandfather, Giovanni Bergoglio, was one of thousands of Italians who fought in the trenches near the Isonzo River, which was part of Austria at the time, but now part of Slovenia close to the border with Italy.

BYPOLLS IN INDIA Stakes high for Modi, BJP

TNN, New Delhi

Voting is under way in byelections to three Lok Sabha and 33 assembly constituencies spread across ten states, seen as a test of Narendra Modi government's popularity, especially as BJP braces for polls in two states next month.

Amid elaborate security arrangements, polling was being held in 11 assembly seats and one Lok Sabha seat in Uttar Pradesh, where the stakes are high for BJP.

The three Lok Sabha bypolls are in Vadodra (Gujarat), Mainpuri (Uttar Pradesh) and Medak (Telangana). Among the assembly seats, nine in Gujarat, four in Rajasthan, two in West Bengal, five in Northeastern states and one each in Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh are going to polls on Saturday.

Counting of votes is scheduled for September 16.

Polling percentage in 11 assembly constituencies and one Lok Sabha seat in Uttar Pradesh remained moderate until 1pm yesterday.

Polling in Mainpuri, the Yadav bastion, also remained moderate, with 35.6% voters coming out to vote until 1pm.

About 40 per cent electorate today cast their franchise till 1pm in insurgency-hit Antargarh assembly seat of Chhattisgarh, where a gunbattle took place between ultras and security personnel in Amabeda forests.

Altogether 47 per cent polling was recorded till 1pm in the byelection to three Assam assembly constituencies of Silchar, Lakhimpur and Jamunamukh today to decide the fate of 25 contestants, election office here said. Over 30 per cent polling was reported till noon in Medak parliamentary constituency in Telangana. In Nandigama assembly segment in Andhra Pradesh too, over 30 per cent polling was reported.



Excessive lust leads to divorce: Sena warns BJP

NDTV ONLINE

In the middle of tense talks over seat-sharing for the October 15 Maharashtra polls, Sena chief Uddhav Thackeray has delivered a sharp warning to long-time ally BJP, saying - "Excessive lust leads to divorce."

In an editorial in the Sena mouthpiece Saamna yesterday, Thackeray said allies in a coalition must dream of a victory. "For this, all parties must give up the lust for more seats. To say we will stay in the coalition only if we get 'so many seats' is not right," he said.

"Remember, excessive lust leads to divorce. We all want a change of regime. Even if someone has got fewer seats to contest, then too, they will get a proper share in government. But for that, one needs to come to power first," he added.

After scoring a big victory in Maharashtra in the national election, the two parties have been wrangling over a pact for the state polls next month. The BJP wants to contest a greater share of the state's 288 seats, crediting the May election verdict to a wave in favour of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It also wants the Sena to accommodate other allies from its share of seats.

The BJP's refusal to compromise telegraphs the party's worry that conceding the Sena's demands could mean giving up its claim on the Chief Minister's post.

BJP leader and Union Minister Prakash Javadekar had said on Friday that an announcement on the seat sharing arrangement will be made soon. "Announcement on seat sharing always happens after election result is announced."

Cuba's Ebola aid latest example of 'medical diplomacy'

AFP, Havana

Cuba's pledge to deploy a 165-strong army of doctors and nurses to help fight the Ebola outbreak is the latest example of the Communist country's decades-old tradition of "medical diplomacy."

Since 1960, when Cuba dispatched a team of doctors to help with the aftermath of an earthquake in Chile, the Caribbean island has sent more than 135,000 medical staff to all corners of the globe.

The latest batch being sent to help in west Africa's Ebola crisis are part of a 50,000-strong foreign legion of Cuban doctors and healthcare workers spread across 66 countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa, according to Cuba's Health Ministry.

Cuban Health Minister Roberto Morales Ojeda told reporters in Geneva on Friday some 62 doctors and 103 nurses were being sent to Sierra Leone to tackle the outbreak.

World Health Organization director general Margaret Chan welcomed the Cuban aid, the largest offer of a foreign medical team from a single country during the outbreak.

"Money and materials are important, but those two things alone cannot stop Ebola virus transmission," said Chan. "Human resources are clearly our most important need."

Ukraine forces 'repel rebels in Donetsk airport'

PM says Russia wants to 'eliminate' Ukraine

BBC ONLINE

Ukrainian government troops say they have repelled an attack by pro-Russian rebels on Donetsk airport.

All morning gunfire was heard from the area yesterday, controlled by government forces despite rebel victories in the rest of the eastern city.

Correspondents say the fresh violence is a big challenge to a fragile ceasefire agreed on 5 September.

Meanwhile Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk has accused Russia of wanting to "eliminate" his country.

He said Ukraine was "in a stage of war", with the "key aggressor" being Russia.

Yatsenyuk said the goal of Russian President Vladimir Putin "is to take the entire Ukraine", adding that Nato was the "only vehicle" that could protect his country.

Ukraine and Western countries accuse Russia of intervening on the side of pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine. Russia denies this.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday described as "nonsense" reports that Russia was intent on creating a buffer

zone in eastern Ukraine.

Russia, he said, wanted Ukraine to be a "prosperous, neutral and friendly country".

And he accused the US of "trying to use the crisis in Ukraine to break economic ties between the EU and Russia and force Europe to buy US gas at much higher prices".

The BBC's Paul Adams, in Donetsk, says most of the gunfire around the airport sounded like artillery, but that multiple rocket launchers have also been in use.

On Friday night, he also heard a volley fired from somewhere much closer to the centre of the city.

There are additional reports of plumes of black smoke rising above the airport.

A couple of hundred Ukrainian army troops have been holed up at the airport since June - but our correspondent says that something more concerted now appears to be going on there.

Yatsenyuk's comments come after the US government imposed new sanctions on major Russian banks, defence and energy companies.

The sanctions, announced on Friday, mean that US citizens will not be able to provide loans lasting longer than 30 days to Sberbank, Russia's biggest bank.

FLOOD FURY IN J&K Time to assess damage at bases

PTI, Srinagar

Along with civilian population, security forces deployed in Kashmir from various parts of the country were also hit badly by the ravaging floods.

They lost their belongings and their weapons were damaged or left useless after water entered their camps across the Kashmir Valley.

Hundreds of AK rifles, INSAS rifles and SLR rifles, along with ammunition, are still submerged at various places across the Kashmir Valley, so are bombs and hand grenades.

Some reports said 26 AK rifles from an Army camp have been washed away in the floods. In the area of Gogji Bagh in uptown Srinagar, one of the worst hit parts of the Valley, about 400 personnel of a central paramilitary force had to leave their camp after gushing waters engulfed it last Sunday.

With water level receding, they are now making rounds of their complex to locate the weapons.

Similar was the fate of Army camps in other places in the Valley.

However, as they come to terms with what happened, their colleagues work almost round-the-clock to save marooned civilians and deliver relief material to those who refuse to come out of their submerged houses for fear of theft and looting.