

Iran nuclear talks to resume by mid-Oct

AFP, Tehran

Difficult talks between Iran and world powers on Tehran's nuclear programme will resume in Europe before mid-October, a senior Iranian official was quoted as saying yesterday. Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi said the negotiations -- aimed at brokering a historic deal by a November 24 deadline -- would resume in Vienna or Geneva within two weeks.

India, Israel PMs meet, pledge stronger ties

AFP, New York

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and India's new Prime Minister Narendra Modi pledged to boost cooperation Sunday in the most substantive interaction between the two countries' leaders in 11 years. New Delhi only established relations with Israel in 1992, a delay often attributed by analysts to potential concerns within India's Muslim minority and the developing nation's need to preserve relations with wealthy Arab states.

Japan volcano death toll rises to 36

AFP, Tokyo

Five more bodies were found near the peak of an erupting Japanese volcano yesterday, as rescuers suspended their search because of the growing danger from toxic gas. The grim discovery takes to at least 36 the total number of people feared to have died when Mount Ontake erupted without warning during a busy hiking weekend.

Hong Kong protesters dig in

AFP, Hong Kong

The ranks of Hong Kong democracy protesters who have paralysed parts of the city swelled into their tens of thousands yesterday, digging in for another night of confrontation with police in their campaign for free elections. In the worst unrest since the former British colony was handed back to China in 1997, demonstrators fought hours of running battles with police Sunday night, choking on clouds of tear gas as officers attempted to suppress the crowds.

Riot police retreated yesterday, handing demonstrators both a major morale boost and control of three major thoroughfares on the key financial hub's main island and across the harbour.

But protesters defied government calls to go home and instead readied themselves to counter any new attempt by police to retake the streets.

Pro-democracy groups are locked in a struggle with the city's authorities over China's refusal to grant unfettered democracy, in one of the most significant challenges to Beijing's authority since the bloody Tiananmen protests of 1989.

Students boycotted classes in the past week, and spearheaded the storming of the government's headquarters on the weekend, a move that prompted pro-democracy group Occupy Central to bring forward a mass civil disobedience campaign due to start on October 1.

Last month China said Hong Kongers could elect their next leader in 2017 but only candidates who had been vetted would be allowed to stand -- a decision critics branded a "fake democracy".

US underestimated ISIS threat

Admits Obama as US House speaker calls for a ground war; strikes keep pounding jihadists

AGENCIES

President Barack Obama has said that US intelligence agencies underestimated so called Islamic State (ISIS) activity inside Syria, which has become "ground zero" for jihadist terrorists worldwide, while overestimating the ability of the Iraqi army to fight such militant groups.

The president's words, extracted from a CBS interview, came as further US-led airstrikes were carried out in Syria and Iraq and John Boehner, the Republican speaker of the House of Representatives, called for a ground war against ISIS. The interview, for the 60 Minutes programme, was taped on Friday.

Citing comments by James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, to the Washington Post earlier this month, Obama said US intelligence underestimated what had been taking place in Syria after Islamic militants went underground when US marines defeated al-Qaeda in Iraq with help from Iraqi tribes.

"But over the past couple of years, during the chaos of the Syrian civil war, where essentially you have huge swaths of the country that are completely ungoverned, they were able to reconstitute themselves and take advantage of that chaos," Obama said. "And so this became ground zero for



Syrian Kurds, facing genocide, sit on a hill looking down on clashes between jihadists of the ISIS and Kurdish fighters, close to the Turkish-Syrian border in Sanliurfa province.

PHOTO: AFP

jihadists around the world."

Clapper was quoted by the Post as saying: "I didn't see the collapse of the Iraqi security force in the north coming. I didn't see that."

ISIS controls large areas of Syria and northern Iraq and has killed thousands of

people. The beheadings of two American journalists and one British aid worker by Isis militants have shocked the world.

US air strikes on Iraq began on 8 August, and more than 200 have since been carried out. Strikes on Syria, by a coalition which

includes Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, began on last Tuesday.

In Syria, the raids have increasingly targeted oil and other economic infrastructure that funds the jihadists as well as military targets.

Despite continued air strikes by the US-led coalition, jihadist fighters yesterday closed in to within only a few kilometres of a key Kurdish town on Syria's border with Turkey.

Meanwhile, Nato member Turkey's government said it would ask parliament to debate joining the coalition against the jihadists operating on the country's doorstep from as early as Thursday.

During Sunday night, coalition warplanes hit targets around the IS-held town of Minbej, including a complex of grain silos and a mill that the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said was being operated by civilians. The group said there were initial reports of civilian casualties in the raid, but no confirmed toll.

The coalition also struck the entrance of the country's main gas plant in the eastern city of Deir Ezzor in an apparent warning to IS militants to abandon the facility.

In Iraq, ISIS fighters are reportedly just one mile away from Baghdad.

"The Islamic State are now less than 2km away from entering Baghdad," a spokesperson of Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East said.



UK PM mulling Syria air strikes

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

David Cameron has given his broadest hint yet that he wants to extend the fight against Islamic State (ISIS) to Syria and that only a lack of political consent at Westminster is holding the government back. The prime minister said on Sunday he was sympathetic to the argument mounted by former chief of the defence staff Sir David Richards, that Isis had to be defeated in Syria as well as Iraq.

The former army general had told the Sunday Times: "You cannot possibly defeat ISIS by only tackling them in Iraq. How the hell do you win the war when most of your enemy end up in a country you cannot get involved in?"

Cameron said on BBC1's Andrew Marr Show: "I have a lot of sympathy with that view, which is why I have said we support what the Americans and the five Arab nations have done in Syria. We have a Syria strategy which is to build up the Free Syrian Army [and] the Syrian National Coalition to achieve a political transition in Syria. But I wanted to take the House of Commons proposals that I could achieve consensus with to make sure Britain was playing its role in this coordinated action across both parties."

Cameron said he agreed that boots on the ground were needed but insisted they must not be British ones. "We are not trying to defeat Isis [ISIS] from the air alone. We believe you do need troops on the ground but they should be Iraqi troops, they should be Kurdish troops. We are part of a large international coalition to degrade and ultimately destroy this organisation."

Spain moves to foil Catalans dream

AFP, Barcelona

The Spanish government yesterday rolled out a legal roadblock to stop the Catalonia region voting on independence, branding the planned ballot an affront to the sovereignty of Spain.

After Catalonia's president Artur Mas staked his leadership on the issue by calling the vote for November 9, the national government responded by filing a constitutional challenge.

Conservative Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy said he "deeply" regretted Mas's move.

"I regret it because it is against the law, it bypasses democracy and divides Catalans, it alienates them from Europe and the rest of Spain and seriously harms their welfare," Rajoy said.

He said the government had sent the appeal to the country's Constitutional Court and that Mas's measures would be suspended as soon as that tribunal accepted the appeal, pending a final decision by its judges.

The appeal did not put off supporters of independence, who vowed to continue preparing for the vote regardless. Fired up by Scotland's plans to hold its referendum earlier this month, 1.8 million people turned out in Barcelona on September 11 to demand their own vote.

Scottish voters eventually chose not to be independent from Britain.

Ukraine truce deal in doubt

Poroshenko vows response as violence kills 12 soldiers

AFP, Kiev

The shaky truce between pro-Russian rebels and the Ukrainian military was challenged yesterday when 12 soldiers and civilians were reported killed in a surge of fighting across the separatist east.

A week after talks in the Belarussian capital Minsk yielded an agreement for a ceasefire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons and troops from the frontline, a lasting solution to the conflict which has killed more than 3,200 people seemed no closer.

National Security and Defence Council spokesman Andriy Lysenko said rebels had killed nine soldiers over the last 24 hours. Some died in a rebel attack on an armoured vehicle carrying Ukrainian paratroopers.

Three civilians were killed in the main rebel stronghold of Donetsk, according to city hall.

The European-brokered deal finalised a week ago in Minsk commits the



PHOTO: AFP

A Lenin statue in Kharkiv, Ukraine before it was brought down by nationalists on Sunday.

Ukrainian army and the rebels to stop firing and establish a 30-kilometre buffer zone between the warring sides.

However, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko stressed that the army

would continue fighting if the insurgents failed to silence their guns.

In a highly symbolic act, activists in Ukraine's second largest city of Kharkiv, an eastern hub of 1.5 million which avoided the conflict after an initial outbreak of unrest, toppled the country's largest statue of Bolshevik revolutionary Vladimir Lenin in the main square.

Kharkiv, which lies city close to the Russian border, is considered by Moscow as culturally Russian and President Vladimir Putin declared it part of "Novorossiya" (New Russia), which according to him became part of Ukraine artificially in the early 20th century.

Statues of Lenin, seen as symbols of the totalitarian Soviet past, were toppled throughout central Ukraine, including Kiev, during last winter's pro-Europe protests, which led to the ouster of the unpopular former president Viktor Yanukovich.

Ghani sworn-in as Afghan president

AFP, Kabul

Ashraf Ghani, a one-time US-based academic, was sworn in as new president of Afghanistan yesterday and used his inaugural speech to call for Taliban insurgents to join peace talks after 13 years of war.

The militant threat in Kabul was underlined by a suicide attack outside the airport's main entrance that killed four members of the security forces and three civilians shortly before the inauguration.

The ceremony at the presidential palace marked the country's first democratic transfer of power and opened a new era after the rule of Hamid Karzai, president since the Taliban regime was ousted in 2001.

"We ask opponents of the government, specially the Taliban and Hezb-e-Islami (another militant group), to enter political talks," Ghani said after being sworn in.

Ghani's government will sign a long-delayed deal today to allow some US troops to stay in Afghanistan into next year, an adviser to the new president told AFP.

The BSA (bilateral security agreement) became a symbol of frayed US-Afghan ties when President Hamid Karzai refused to sign the deal last year, infuriating Washington and other international allies.

"The BSA will be signed tomorrow, not by the president but by a senior minister," Daoud Sultanzyoy, a senior aide of Ghani's, told AFP.

"The signing sends the message that President Ghani fulfils his commitments. He promised it would be signed the day after inauguration, and it will be," Sultanzyoy added.

Jayalalithaa launches appeal on graft case

AFP, Bangalore

Indian politician Jayalalithaa Jayaram yesterday launched a flurry of appeals against a four-year jail sentence, in a long-running corruption case against the highly popular but controversial figure, an aide said.

Jayalalithaa, a former film star and long-time head of the prosperous southern state of Tamil Nadu, lodged the appeals against her jailing and conviction on Saturday in the corruption case that started 18 years ago.

Jayalalithaa's party installed her loyal finance minister as her replacement as Tamil Nadu chief minister, who was sworn in yesterday.

Known as "Amma" (Mother) to supporters, Jayalalithaa was also fined one billion rupees (\$16 million) and disqualified from holding office for illegally amassing wealth -- including gold, properties, shoes and saris.

Politicians are rarely convicted of corruption in India despite seething public anger

over endemic graft that permeates every level of life in the country.

Commentators have applauded the ruling, but her supporters have staged street protests in Tamil Nadu as well as the city of Bangalore where the verdict was handed down.

At least 16 people committed suicide or died of cardiac arrest across Tamil Nadu after the court verdict.

Police said three people hanged themselves, one AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) supporter committed suicide by self-immolation, one person ended his life by jumping in front of a bus and one person died after consuming poison after the court pronounced its verdict. Ten others died of cardiac arrest, apparently due to shock after Jayalalithaa's conviction, a police officer said.

AIADMK emerged as the third biggest force in May's general election. The court is expected to take up the appeals this week in Bangalore where the 66-year-old has been locked since Saturday.



200 arrested for religious clashes in Gujarat

AFP, New Delhi

Indian police in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state of Gujarat have arrested more than 200 people after violence between majority Hindus and minority Muslims, a senior officer said yesterday.

The clashes in the western city of Vadodara were sparked by a distorted image posted on social media that offended Muslims, prompting authorities to block mobile Internet and bulk text messaging, the officer said.

The violence coincides with Modi's visit to the United States where he is expected to meet President Barack Obama during a trip to push for foreign investment to promote economic growth.

Karadzic 'driving force' of Bosnia's ethnic cleansing UN court told as trial nears end

AFP, The Hague

Former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic was the "driving force" behind ethnic cleansing during Bosnia's bloody civil war, including some of the worst atrocities since World War II, the Yugoslav war crimes court heard yesterday.

"The policy of ethnic cleansing has been fully exposed as has Dr Karadzic as its driving force," UN prosecutor Alan Tiger said during closing arguments at the marathon five-year trial before the Hague-based court.

"The tragedies, one-by-one-by-one, are his responsibility," Tiger told judges at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

Dressed in a crumpled charcoal suit, purple shirt, purple striped tie and sporting his trademark bouffant hairdo, the one-time president of the self-proclaimed

Bosnian Serb republic and alleged mastermind of the Srebrenica massacre listened intently, his glasses perched on his nose.

Karadzic, 69, is facing 11 charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity for his role in the brutal 1990s Bosnian war which claimed more than 100,000 lives and displaced 2.2 million people.

Prosecutors say Karadzic, along with late Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic and Bosnian Serb general Ratko Mladic, acted together to "cleanse" Bosnia's Muslims and Croats from Serb-claimed territories after the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991.

Members of the Mothers of Srebrenica group representing victims of the 1995 massacre, in which almost 8,000 Muslim men and boys were slaughtered by Bosnian Serb forces, listened to closing arguments from the public gallery.

