

# NEWS IN brief

## Al-Qaeda executes 14 soldiers in Yemen

REUTERS, Yemen

Al-Qaeda in Yemen posted a video online purporting to show the abduction and execution of 14 soldiers the Sunni Muslim militants alleged were Shi'ite Muslim "apostates".

The reported attack by the hardline Sunni militant group underscores the security vacuum and potential for sectarian violence in unstable Yemen, a country in political turmoil two weeks after the Shi'ite Houthi rebel group took control of the capital Sanaa.

Posted to Twitter on Sunday and reported by the SITE intelligence monitoring group, the video shows masked militants stopping a bus in the eastern city of Shibam and forcing several of its occupants to lie face down outside.

The video did not indicate when the attack happened.

## US lawmakers consider changes to secret service

AP, Washington

Key members of Congress are weighing dramatic changes to the embattled Secret Service, including moving it out of the Homeland Security Department and breaking up its mission.

The proposals come as lawmakers assess how to improve the agency after a series of scandals, including a White House break-in by a man with a knife last month. The agency's director, Julia Pierson, resigned amid the controversy, but lawmakers are promising they'll continue their focus once Congress reconvenes after the Nov. 4 mid-term elections.

In the latest development, The Washington Post reported yesterday on evidence implicating a White House advance team member in a prostitution scandal involving Secret Service agents in Colombia in 2012. White House officials have denied involvement by anyone on their team, but the Post story said White House officials were informed at the time.

## London underground strike called off

AFP, London

Britain's main rail union yesterday called off a 48-hour strike on the London Underground system planned for next week after "substantial progress" in talks with management.

Members of the 80,000-strong Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union had been due to walk out on October 14 over a long-running dispute over plans to close Tube ticket offices, which they said risked jobs and safety standards.

Their action threatened major disruption, particularly as it was due to take place at the same time as a separate strike by public sector workers.

"RMT has been able to secure significant movement in three key areas which have allowed our executive to suspend both the action scheduled for next week and the on-going overtime ban," said the union's general secretary Mick Cash.

Managers had agreed to further consultation on the planned closures, a cut in the number of posts threatened and guarantees to certain vulnerable staff, he said.

However, Cash added: "The union's core opposition to the austerity-led cuts on London Underground has not shifted an inch and we remain vigilant to further developments and their impact."

The British capital's subway train system is the oldest in the world and carries around three million passengers daily.

## EU, Japan press for war crimes probes in North Korea

AFP, United Nations

The European Union and Japan are asking the United Nations to press for war crimes prosecutions in North Korea following a report that laid bare Pyongyang's brutality, according to a draft resolution circulating yesterday.

The measure to be presented to the UN General Assembly in the coming weeks would also ask the Security Council to consider targeted sanctions against North Korean leaders "who appear to be most responsible for crimes against humanity."

The draft resolution, which was obtained by AFP, draws heavily from a UN rights inquiry released in February that revealed a vast network of prison camps and documented cases of torture, enslavement, rape and forced abortions among other violations.

## Putin may meet Poroshenko in Italy

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin may hold talks with his Ukrainian counterpart Petro Poroshenko on the sidelines of a summit in Italy later this month, his aide said yesterday.

Putin's top foreign policy adviser Yuri Ushakov said the Kremlin was working to put together a meeting that would also include German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande.

"A meeting in the 'Normandy format' -- Putin, Merkel, Hollande, Poroshenko -- is not ruled out," Ushakov told Russian news agencies.

The Kremlin "is now involved in this -- possible contacts are being worked out."



Clockwise from left: Smoke rises from an airstrike on the outskirts of the Syrian town of Ain al-Arab yesterday. Protesters demonstrate in Ankara against attacks launched by Islamic State (IS) group, targeting the Syrian city Ain al-Arab and lack of government action. Kurdish protesters clash with Turkish riot policemen in Istanbul early yesterday. Story on Page 1

# MH17 victim found with oxygen mask

## Says Dutch FM

AFP, The Hague

One of the people on the Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 shot down in Ukraine in July was found wearing an oxygen mask, the Dutch foreign minister and prosecutors said, raising the possibility that some passengers might have known their plane was doomed.

"You know that somebody was discovered wearing an oxygen mask and had time to put it on," Foreign Minister Frans Timmermans told a talk show on national television late Wednesday.

Dutch prosecutors confirmed yesterday they were investigating after the oxygen mask was discovered draped around the person's neck.

"How and when the mask ended up around the victim's neck is unknown," the prosecutors stressed.

"The Dutch Forensics Institute examined the mask looking for fingerprints, saliva and DNA, but the probe has not revealed any result," they said in a letter to victims' families which was published online.

None of the other victims of the fatal crash that killed all 298 on board -- 193 of them Dutch -- was wearing an oxygen mask, they added.

The Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777 was shot down on July 17 while flying over insurgent-held territory in conflict-racked eastern Ukraine.

The findings of an initial report by a Dutch-led team of air crash investigators appear to back up claims that the plane was hit by an anti-aircraft missile.

Kiev and the West have accused Moscow-backed separatists of shooting it down with a surface-to-air BUK missile supplied by Russia. Moscow denies the charge and has pointed the finger back at Kiev.

Forensics experts suspended their search for bodies due to clashes between Kiev and the pro-Russian rebels near the crash site northeast of Donetsk, but said they hoped to return once the fighting died down.

Timmermans, the new incoming vice-president of the European Commission, yesterday said he regretted making the announcement before victims' families had been informed by prosecutors.

"The last thing I wanted to do was increase their pain," he said.

"I should not have said it," Timmermans said in a press release after relatives reacted with horror to his comment.

Prosecutors, who sent their letter in reaction to Timmermans' comment, said they were still investigating the circumstances of the found oxygen mask.

Currently, "no conclusions can be drawn from the discovery," prosecutors said.



Frans Timmermans

# Bionic arm restores sense of feeling

BBC ONLINE

Advances in bionic hands have restored a sense of touch to two patients for more than a year, report US scientists.

The men can now delicately pluck the stalks out of cherries.

Sensors on the artificial hand are used to send signals directly to the nerves, the study, published in Science Translational Medicine, said.

Meanwhile, a Swedish team has made a separate breakthrough in artificial limbs - anchoring bionic arms directly on to the bone to improve control.

One of the beneficiaries of the American work was Igor Spetic, who lost his right hand in an accident four years ago.

He was fitted with a bionic replacement, but it was incapable of feeling the world around him.

He had to carefully watch what he was doing and judge by eye whether he was squeezing too hard.

A team at Case Western Reserve University attached sensors to the bionic hand and in surgery fitted "cuffs" around the remaining nerves, which were capable of delivering electronic stimulation.

The team could send different patterns of electronic stimulation to the nerves using a computer. These were interpreted in the brain as different sensations.

The team "mapped" these sensations to 19 different locations on the hand, from the palm to the tip of the thumb, and matched the sensors to the different electronic patterns of stimulation.



They then moved on to pressure and textures. Spetic can tell, while blindfolded, whether he is handling different materials such as Velcro or sandpaper.

He has been using the sensing hand for two-and-a-half years. Another patient has been using the system for one and a half years.

Lead researcher Prof Dustin Tyler told the BBC: "They can do really fine delicate tasks now."

"We believe within five to 10 years we will have a system completely implanted so we would see a person in the morning, they would have the procedure to put electrodes on each nerve and a device for their pocket, so that when they turn it on they can feel their hands."

Spetic said: "I would love to feel my wife's hand, just to hold hands would be the ultimate."

In both patients the modified hand had the added bonus of eliminating "phantom limb pain", in which patients still feel pain from the hand that is no longer there.

# Venezuela press freedoms at risk

## Press group warns

AFP, Miami

Venezuela is on the verge of becoming a "second Cuba" in terms of press freedom with the imminent closure of one of its last independent newspapers, a regional press group warned yesterday.

The Inter-American Press Association said the imminent closure of the Tal Cual newspaper's print edition is "cinching almost completely the siege of the critical or independent press in Venezuela," which has struggled to survive under the leftist government of President Nicolas Maduro.

The Venezuelan daily said this week it has only enough newsprint to publish for two more weeks, leaving it with a digital edition.

Independent newspapers have suffered because the government has shut off access to dollars needed to import newsprint.

"Other newspapers have already halted operations and those that are left have either been sold to friends of the powers that be, or have reduced pages to the absolute minimum, such as El Nacional," said Claudio Paolillo, the head of IAPA's press freedoms committee.

The Miami-based press group represents editors and publishers of newspapers throughout the Western hemisphere.

"Venezuela, with all its TV channels already under government control, along with most radio stations, is decidedly on a path to become the second Cuba in Latin America in terms of freedom of the press," Paolillo said in a statement.

# 600 'terrorists' to face trial in Tunisia

AFP, Tunis

The first trials of prisoners accused of "terrorism" in Tunisia since the 2011 revolution could open later this month, with 600 defendants facing prosecution, its justice minister said yesterday.

Hafedh Ben Salah told AFP in an interview that the defendants included Al-Qaeda-linked jihadists who have been battling the Tunisian army near the Algerian border for nearly two years.

Since the uprising that ousted former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, Tunisia has seen a proliferation of jihadist militias suppressed under the former dictator.

These groups have been blamed for a wave of attacks, including the assassination last year of two opposition lawmakers whose murders plunged the country into a protracted political crisis.

In July, militants killed 15 soldiers in the restive border region, the bloodiest day in the army's history.

# Hong Kong protesters vow to fight on as talks collapse

AFP, Hong Kong

Crunch talks between Hong Kong democracy protesters and the government were called off yesterday just hours after demonstrators vowed to ratchet up their occupation of key parts of the city if their demands were not met.

The collapse of the talks, which were due to take place today, plunges the vital financial hub into fresh crisis with protesters refusing to retreat from their barricades and an equally intransigent government rejecting further negotiations.

Parts of the southern Chinese city have been paralysed for more than a week by demonstrations calling for Beijing to grant the former British colony full democracy and for the city's Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying to resign.

Under plans unveiled by China in August, Hong Kongers will be able to vote for Leung's successor in 2017, but only two to three vetted candidates will be allowed to stand.

Although protester numbers have dwindled in recent days, small groups still control multiple intersections across the city in what has become the most concerted challenge to Beijing's rule since Hong Kong's handover in 1997.

Hopes of a breakthrough were dashed yesterday evening as Leung's deputy, Chief Secretary Carrie Lam, announced the government was pulling out of talks with the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS), one of the leading protest groups.

"The basis for constructive dialogue has been undermined. It's impossible to have a constructive meeting tomorrow," she said.

Two and a half hours earlier a coalition of pro-democracy leaders had gathered at the main protest site and vowed to increase their civil disobedience campaign if the talks broke down.

"Hong Kong people will not retreat. And there's no reason for anyone to ask us to retreat. Therefore the Occupy movement must be ongoing," HKFS president Alex Chow told the crowd.

"Also the students will go into different Occupy areas," to discuss potential future plans for further civil disobedience, he added.

Pro-democracy lawmakers also threw their weight behind the protests yesterday saying they would use their powers to disrupt the workings of the Hong Kong government inside the city's parliament by gridlocking the committees they currently control.



A pro-democracy demonstrator wearing a T-shirt printed with a slogan saying "Not made in China" looks on near a barricade in Hong Kong yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP