

NEWS IN brief

Koreas hold high-level military talks

AFP, Seoul

North and South Korea yesterday held high-level military talks to air grievances over recent exchanges of fire across their land and sea borders, Seoul's defence ministry said. Government officials and officers up to the rank of general met for five hours at the border truce village of Panmunjom in what media reports described as the highest-level military exchange between the two rivals for seven years.

Gulf states plan joint naval force

AFP, Kuwait City

Arab states in the Gulf plan to launch a joint naval force, a top Kuwaiti defence official said yesterday, in a bid to protect waters shared with neighbouring Iran. The new force is expected to be formed in the "coming months", Major General Ahmad Yussef al-Mulla was quoted as saying by the official KUNA news agency.

Gender gap shrinking in schools, workplace

AFP, Paris

Global gender gaps have significantly decreased over the past 10 years, particularly in early education and the labour market, according to a new report published yesterday. The report showed that primary school attendance (age six to 11), had reached 91 percent worldwide. Large strides have also been made in closing the gender gap in the workplace with women's participation in the labour force growing overall from 54 percent in 2000 to 57 percent in 2012. Men's participation has remained steady at 81 percent over the decade. The number of women-run businesses has also increased -- with 41 percent of businesses run by women in 2011 versus 35 percent in 2004.

82m in China live on less than \$1 a day

AFP, Beijing

More than 82 million people in China still live on less than about \$1 a day, a senior official said, despite a decades-long boom that made it the world's second-largest economy. China's official poverty standard is an annual income of 2,300 yuan (\$375), close to the long-used benchmark of \$1 a day. The World Bank's own definition of poverty is \$1.25 a day, and Zheng said China's poor would rise to more than 200 million if "international standards" were applied.

Mars colonists 'would die after 68 days'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A Dutch entrepreneur's plan to launch a one-way trip to Mars funded by a reality TV show has been criticised by scientists who say that current technology means that the colonists would start dying after just 68 days.

A new report from a group of graduates at MIT found that the main problem of the Mars One project (which is still whittling down candidates and plans to make the trip to the Red Planet by 2024) is the plan to live to create an oxygen supply using food crops.

Although this sounds like a clever solution to creating liveable habitats, the constrained nature of the Mars "ecosystem" soon leads to all sorts of problems.

The students found that as the first wheat crop reached maturity the level of oxygen in the atmosphere would become a fire hazard, and if the colonists attempted to vent the oxygen they would unavoidably lose nitrogen too leading to either death by suffocation or the destruction of the habitat and suffocation on the planet's surface.



HONG KONG DEMOCRACY PROTEST

Police forces march toward pro-democracy protesters during a standoff outside the central government offices in Hong Kong. Top, from left to right, A pro-democracy protester shakes his fist at police officers; a cop sprays pepper spray at a protester; and a protester is being taken away by cops before being allegedly beaten up early yesterday. The BBC's website was blocked in China yesterday, hours after a video of Hong Kong police beating and kicking a pro-democracy protester began circulating online.

PHOTO: AFP

ISIS gains in Syria, Iraq

Obama warns of long fight after meeting with coalition leaders

AFP, Mursitpinar

Jihadists pushed to seize Syria's Kobane and an Iraqi town close to Baghdad yesterday as Washington warned of a long fight against the steadily advancing so-called Islamic State group.

In the town of Kobane on the Turkish border, the jihadists have been holding out in fighting with Kurdish militia despite stepped-up US-led air strikes, and calls have been growing for Turkey to take action.

In Iraq, ISIS militants were closing on the town of Amriyat al-Fallujah, one of the last still controlled by the government in the troubled Anbar province and only 35 kilometres from Baghdad.

With US military officials warning that ISIS had the "tactical momentum", President Barack Obama told Western and Arab allies fighting IS that they are facing a "long-term campaign".

"There are not quick fixes involved. We're still at the early stages," Obama said in Washington after meeting senior commanders from more than 20 allies involved in the campaign.

"As with any military effort, there will be days of progress and there are going to be periods of setback," he added.

Obama expressed special concern for Kobane, which has become a crucial symbolic battleground in the fight against ISIS, and about halting the IS advance in Iraq's western Anbar province.

Fighting continued to rage for Kobane early yesterday, with clashes concentrated in the east of the town where ISIS fighters established a stronghold after piercing its defences

last week.

An AFP reporter across the border in Turkey reported at least four fresh US-led air strikes, after the coalition said it had hit the jihadists in Kobane with 21 raids on Monday and Tuesday alone.

In Iraq, security forces warned late Tuesday their last position in Anbar province at the town of Amriyat al-Fallujah was under heavy pressure from the jihadists.

If the town were to fall, ISIS fighters would still have to capture a significant stretch of government-controlled land before reaching the capital.

But the loss of Anbar, where government forces have suffered a string of bruising military setbacks in recent weeks, would be a heavy blow to Iraqi ground forces battling ISIS.

Pro-government forces in northern Iraq have also been under pressure near the strategic Baiji oil refinery.

ISIS has seized control of large parts of Syria and Iraq, declaring a "caliphate" in June and imposing its harsh interpretation of Islamic sharia law. The group has committed widespread atrocities, including attacks on civilians, mass executions, torture and forcing women into slavery.

Russian troops withdrawing from Ukraine. Says Kerry ahead of Putin-Poroshenko meet

AFP, Paris

US Secretary of State John Kerry Tuesday said Russian troops were beginning to pull back from Ukraine but warned Moscow still needed to do more to see sanctions eased, as deadly shelling continued to undermine a fragile ceasefire.

Following more than three hours of talks with Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, Kerry laid down a series of conditions to lift sanctions over the crisis that has brought relations between the two to the lowest ebb since the Cold War.

Russian President Vladimir Putin -- due to meet Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in Milan today -- on Sunday called back from the Ukrainian border 17,600 soldiers he had stationed there when Kiev's forces were making their most significant gains this summer.

Reset in Russia-US ties 'impossible'

AFP, Moscow

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev thinks a reset in relations between Moscow and Washington is "impossible" while punishing Western sanctions remain in force, he said in an interview aired by US TV yesterday.

Medvedev blasted US and EU measures imposed on Russia over its role in the Ukraine crisis as "absolutely destructive" and "stupid" and said there was no chance of mending ties with the White House while they were in place.



Dmitry Medvedev

East-West relations have slumped to their lowest ebb since the end of the Cold War over accusations Moscow is backing a separatist uprising in eastern Ukraine.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Tuesday held three hours of talks with US counterpart John Kerry in Paris at which Washington's top diplomat laid down a series of conditions to lift sanctions.

"And at this point... many of them are happening now. The troops are pulling back, (but) the heavy equipment still has to be pulled back and the border is yet to be properly monitored and secured," Kerry said.

Aussie novelist wins Man Booker Prize

AFP, London

Novelist Richard Flanagan said he was ashamed to be Australian after winning the Man Booker Prize for his book "The Narrow Road to the Deep North", inspired by his father's experience as a prisoner of war.

The book tells the story of Dorrigo Evans, a surgeon imprisoned in a Japanese work camp on the Thailand-Burma railway.

"The two great themes from the origin of literature are love and war: this is a magnificent novel of love and war," said academic AC Grayling, who presented the award at a glitzy ceremony in London's Guildhall on Tuesday evening.

Flanagan is the third Australian to win the prize, which includes a trophy and an award of £50,000.

The author of "The Sound of One Hand Clapping" (1998) and "Wanting" (2008), Flanagan said the idea of the so-called "Death Railway" had influenced his life. Flanagan worked on the novel for 12 years, and his father died the day that it was finished.

The Man Booker prize, which began in 1969, guarantees a huge upsurge in book sales and a worldwide readership.



ASSEMBLY POLLS High turnout in 2 Indian states

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

A large number of Indians yesterday cast their votes to elect legislatures in Maharashtra and Haryana states in the biggest test of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity since he came to power in May.

Five months after Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a landslide victory in parliamentary polls, a record turnout of 73 percent was witnessed in Haryana state in the north and an estimated 60 percent in Maharashtra in the west, of which Mumbai is the capital.

Maharashtra has a 288-member assembly while Haryana has 90-member assembly.

Modi had campaigned extensively in Maharashtra and Haryana where the elections came in the backdrop of reverses suffered by BJP in a string of by-polls in some states in the last five months.

As in the nationwide vote, BJP is hoping to benefit from anti-incumbency towards Congress party in Haryana and Maharashtra. Congress was voted out of power at the Centre in May and has held power in Maharashtra for 15 years and in Haryana for a decade.

BJP has taken the risk of fighting the polls in both the states after snapping ties with its allies, including Shiv Sena, its partner in Maharashtra for 25 years.

And Congress and its ruling ally NCP in Maharashtra have been dogged by accusations of corruption.

The results in both states are due to be announced on Sunday.

US, Iran seek magic formula in nuke talks

US, Russia trade barbs over deadline extension

AFP, Vienna

Kerry said.

"We're not talking about an extension at the moment," a senior US State Department official echoed yesterday. "There is still time to get this done... if everyone can make the decisions they need."

But Lavrov said in Paris on Tuesday that the November deadline was not "sacred", in the strongest suggestion yet from one of the P5+1 powers.

Iran, reeling from sanctions, denies seeking to build the atomic bomb and says it wants to expand its nuclear programme in order to generate electricity and help cancer patients.

Last November, the two sides agreed an interim deal and set a July 20 target to agree a lasting accord, but after drawn out talks they gave themselves four more months.

Progress appears to have been made on changing the design of a new reactor at Arak so that it produces less weapons-grade plutonium, as well as on enhanced UN inspections and on the fortified Fordo facility.

The main bone of contention however remains Iran's enrichment capacity, a process rendering uranium suitable for power generation but also, at high purities, for a nuclear weapon.



Nurse 'killed 38 patients she found annoying'

AGENCIES

A nurse was arrested for killing as many as 38 patients because she found them or their relatives annoying, police said.

Daniela Poggiali, a 42-year-old resident of the Italian town of Lugo, was taken into custody over the weekend and booked for the alleged slaying of 78-year-old patient Rosa Calderoni, who died from an injection of potassium.

Tests showed she died with a high amount of potassium, which can provoke cardiac arrest, in her bloodstream.

Her death triggered an investigation, which found that 38 others had died mysteriously while Poggiali was on duty, the news agency reported.

One of Poggiali's colleagues said the accused nurse was once reported for giving powerful laxatives to patients at the end of her shift to make work tougher for nurses working after her.

TRAGEDY IN HIMALAYAS

Avalanche, storm kill 17 in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

A snowstorm and avalanche in Nepal's Himalayas has killed 17 trekkers and guides -- nine foreigners and eight Nepalis -- on a popular hiking route, while more than 100 others remain out of contact, officials said yesterday.

Severe weather triggered by the tail end of Cyclone Hudhud, which battered neighbouring India's east coast, hit trekking groups on the Annapurna circuit as well as mountaineers trying to scale the avalanche-prone Mount Dhaulagiri in central Nepal on Tuesday.

As the weather cleared in the remote Mustang and Manang districts yesterday, rescuers trudging through waist-deep snow found 27 stranded trekkers, an official said.

But some 168 foreign tourists were registered to hike in the districts and authorities are now trying to track the rest of them down, said a police official.

Another official said he hoped those trekkers still unaccounted for had simply been cut off by the blizzard and poor telecommunications.

Thousands of trekkers visit the Annapurna region every October, when weather conditions are usually favourable for hiking. However, the region has seen unusually heavy snowfall this week as a result of Cyclone Hudhud.