

NEWS IN brief

Cyclone Nilofar fizzles out

India's Gujarat state yesterday heaved a sigh of relief as the severe cyclonic storm 'Nilofar' further weakened and will have no major impact except moderate rains along with windy weather in some coastal areas of the state. Earlier, authorities in India and Pakistan had swung into action and evacuated thousands of people living near coastal areas. Nilofar was to make landfall today morning.

Key UN climate panel report tomorrow

The UN's top panel on climate change was sifting yesterday through the final details of a report aimed at guiding policies on global warming for years to come, sources said. The document crowns a vast overview of the existing scientific evidence for global warming, predictions of its impacts, and solutions for curbing greenhouse-gas emissions which cause the problem. The report will be unveiled at a press conference in Copenhagen tomorrow.

Maharashtra gets first BJP CM

Forty-four year old Devendra Fadnis, Maharashtra's first chief minister from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) took oath at a lavish ceremony at the Wankhede cricket stadium presided over by Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday. After threatening to boycott the event, the BJP's estranged ally, the Shiv Sena caved in with party chief Uddhav Thackeray making an arrival.

US spy agencies spent nearly \$68b in 2014

US spy agencies spent nearly \$68 billion in fiscal year 2014, about the same level of spending on intelligence gathering in the previous year, the government said Thursday. Funding for the country's 17 intelligence agencies reached a peak of about \$80 billion in 2011 and has gradually declined since.

First lawsuit filed in Malaysia over MH370

A Malaysian family yesterday sued the government and beleaguered national carrier for negligence in the mysterious disappearance of flight MH370, in what is believed to be the first lawsuit filed over the disaster. MH370 disappeared on March 8 with 239 people aboard en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing.

I still laugh & smile

US right-to-die woman puts death on hold

A young American woman with terminal cancer who triggered shock and controversy when she said she would kill herself on November 1 now says she may wait a little longer. Brittany Maynard, a 29-year-old brain cancer sufferer, made headlines earlier this month when a video of her making her suicide threat went viral and was seen by millions of web-users. On Thursday she released a new video in which she said she might temporarily delay her exit. "I still feel good enough and I still have enough joy and I still laugh and smile with my family and friends enough that it doesn't seem like the right time right now," she said. But she said the time is not far away. In January, Maynard was given six months to live and told her death would be painful because of the aggressive nature of her cancer. Maynard and her husband moved from their home in California to Oregon, one of a handful of states with a "right-to-die" law. A doctor could therefore prescribe her the medication she needs to end her own life, surrounded by her family in the bedroom she shares with her husband.



Brittany Maynard



Myanmar President Thein Sein shakes hands with Aung San Suu Kyi prior to their meeting at persident resident office in Naypyidaw, yesterday.

Myanmar moots changing charter

Myanmar's parliament will consider amending the country's constitution -- which currently bars opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi from becoming president -- ahead of crucial elections next year, an official said yesterday. Suu Kyi is trying to change key sections of Myanmar's charter ahead of 2015 polls that are widely expected to be won by her National League for Democracy (NLD), if they are free and fair, after decades of disastrous military rule. The move to moot constitutional reform was discussed during unprecedented talks between President Thein Sein and his political rivals, including Suu Kyi, as well as top army brass and election officials. "They agreed to discuss the issue of amending the constitution in parliament, according to the law," a presidential spokesman told reporters after the meeting in the capital Naypyidaw. The NLD has focused on altering a provision in the constitution that ensures the military in the former junta-ruled nation has a veto on any amendment to the charter.

Move may open up presidency for Suu Kyi as historic talks convenes

It believes revising the clause will open the way for further changes to other constitutional provisions, including the ring-fenced proportion of soldiers in parliament and the effective bar on Suu Kyi becoming president. As it stands, she is ineligible because of a clause in the 2008 charter blocking anyone whose spouse or children are overseas citizens from leading the country. The Nobel laureate's late husband was British, as are her two sons. To alter the constitution there needs to be support from a 75 percent majority in parliament, which is dominated by military. Suu Kyi, however, downplayed the outcome of the meeting in comments to reporters. "I do not know how they stated the meeting was a success," she said, adding the NLD would like to see a more focussed discussion with a smaller group of people. The discussions came a day after the White House said US President Barack Obama spoke to Thein Sein and Suu Kyi about the elections, which are seen as a key test of democratic reforms under the quasi-civilian government. Obama "underscored the need for an inclusive and credible process for conducting the 2015 elections" White House added.

150 Iraqis executed

UN reports surge in numbers of foreign jihadists

The bodies of more than 150 men killed by Islamic state (ISIS) militants were recovered from a ditch in the city of Ramadi, west of Baghdad, on Thursday in the latest of a series of mass executions of tribal figures who oppose the group. Iraqi officials said the men had been captured in the town of Heet, west of Ramadi, over the last week. All were members of the Sunni Albu Nimr tribe, which had faced off against ISIS and had played a prominent role in fighting al-Qaeda and its offshoots in Anbar province since 2007. At least 60 more tribal members were killed in Heet earlier this week, in an execution videotaped and uploaded to the internet by the executioners. Mass killings have become synonymous with the jihadists' rampage through western Iraq and eastern Syria, in which large numbers of captured soldiers and civilians on both sides of the border have been murdered and their bodies gruesomely displayed. Meanwhile, citing UN, Britain's Guardian newspaper yesterday reported

that foreign jihadists from more than 80 countries have flocked to fight in Iraq and Syria on an "unprecedented scale. Around 15,000 people have travelled to fight alongside ISIS and other hardcore militant groups from "countries that have not previously faced challenges relating to al-Qaeda," said the report. The US Central Intelligence Agency last month announced figures showing that there were around 20,000 to 31,500 ISIS fighters active in Iraq and Syria, much higher than previous estimates. A US security official estimated that there were close to 2,000 westerners among the 15,000 foreign fighters. Previous figures showed there were 7,000 foreign jihadists fighting in March and 12,000 in July suggesting 1,000 a month were travelling to fight, despite the launch of US air strikes three months ago. The report was produced by a committee that monitors al-Qaeda, and concluded that the once mighty and feared group was now "maneuvering for relevance" following the rise of the even more militant IS, which was booted out of al-Qaeda by leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.



BURKINA FASO UNREST Army ousts president

Burkina Faso's embattled President Blaise Compaore announced on Friday that he was stepping down to make way for elections after a violent uprising against his 27-year rule. His resignation came as tens of thousands of protesters demanded that he quit immediately after a day of unrest that saw mass demonstrations, with protesters storming and setting fire to parliament. Observers have drawn a parallel between the protests and the Arab Spring, while the situation is being closely watched across Africa, where at least four heads-of-state are pushing constitutional change to cling to power. Army chief said he would take power "in line with constitutional measures", a move which will prove hugely unpopular with the protesters, who see him as a close ally of Compaore. A French diplomatic source said Compaore had left the capital Ouagadougou and fled south, although he was still in the country.



AFP, Ouagadougou

Beating Ebola is in your genes

The Ebola virus is often deadly, but not always, and a study on mice Thursday suggested that genetics may play a role in the severity of the illness. At a high-security, state-of-the-art biocontainment laboratory in Hamilton, Montana, scientists infected mice with a mouse form of the same species of the Ebola virus that is sweeping West Africa. Seventy percent of the mice got sick, and more than half of this group died, some due to liver inflammation and others due to internal hemorrhage, according to the study in the US journal Science. About 19 percent of the mice lost weight initially but then regained it in two weeks and made a full recovery. The remaining 11 percent showed a partial response to the virus and less than half in this group died. Scientists said the variability in outcomes resembled what has been seen in the human epidemic sweeping West Africa this year, killing more than 4,900 people and infecting more than 13,000. They were also able to find associations in disease outcomes and mortality rates according to specific genetic lines of mice. "Our data suggest that genetic factors play a significant role in disease outcome," said Michael Katze from the University of Washington Department of Microbiology. Those that died showed more activity in genes that promoted blood vessel inflammation and cell death, leading to more serious illness. Those that survived tended to show more activity in genes responsible for blood vessel repair and making infection-fighting white blood cells. Specialized types of liver cells might have also helped stop the virus from reproducing, the study said. "We hope that medical researchers will be able to rapidly apply these findings to candidate therapeutics and vaccines," Katze said.



Israeli security forces stand guard as Palestinian Muslim worshippers perform traditional Friday prayers on a street outside the Old City in east Jerusalem yesterday, following restrictions by Israeli police to allow entry only to Muslim men over 50, wanting to access the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound. Israeli police deployed heavily around Jerusalem's flashpoint Al-Aqsa mosque compound as it yesterday reopened for Muslim prayers after a rare closure during clashes over the killing of a Palestinian by security forces.

Back to Cold War!

Threatened by West, Russia probes Nato defences like the old days

Nuclear-capable Russian bombers in European airspace, Nato intercepts, a foreign submarine in Swedish waters -- the fall-out from the Ukraine crisis feels like a return to Cold War days. Nato has intercepted Russian aircraft on more than 100 occasions so far this year, three times more than all 2013, its new head Jens Stoltenberg said on Thursday. The US-led military alliance has deployed more aircraft, ships and personnel, aiming especially to reassure newer members such as the Baltic states and Poland, once ruled from Moscow, who have been unnerved by Russia's intervention in Ukraine. Viewed from Moscow, there is no cause for concern -- Russia is simply asserting its position after long years of decline and Nato and the West had better get used to it. "Before, our aircraft did not fly. Now they do," said Igor Korotchenko, a member of the Russian defence ministry's advisory group. "It is a game of brinkmanship... trying to get your opponent to make concessions," said Pavel Felguenhauer, a military analyst based in Moscow. In this case, Russia wants to get the West to reverse the tough economic sanctions imposed over the Ukraine crisis and which have caused real pain to an already struggling economy, Felguenhauer said. To do that, it aims to "frighten the Europeans, to make them believe that Russia is ready to do anything to get what it wants," he added. It all started in Germany, with the fall of Berlin wall. Swept along by the excitement as the Berlin Wall was torn down, former top Soviet officials now say, 25 years on, they feel stabbed in the back by the West. The Wall's collapse ushered in the end of communist East Germany and the country's reunification the following October. But the other events that followed -- the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the expansion of Nato to the east -- now cast a long shadow over the memory of those momentous times. "The reunification of Germany was a logical step but it was done on the condition that the USSR would participate in the new European order and Nato would not move closer to our border," said a former diplomat Maximychev. "Gorbachev set those conditions himself and the Western leaders assured him that was the case," he recalls. "Unfortunately he never signed any concrete deals about this." Western leaders from the period have consistently rejected claims that they ever struck a deal with the Kremlin, and say no deal was ever broken. Now looking back, for Maximychev it was "a period of grand illusions" when leaders in Moscow "took the West at its word."



Russia, Ukraine seal gas accord

BRUSSELS Russia agreed to resume gas deliveries to war-torn Ukraine through the winter in an EU-brokered, multi-billion dollar deal signed by the three parties in Brussels on late Thursday. In a hard-fought accord the EU hopes will ease the broader crisis over Ukraine, Russia agreed to ensure supplies until the end of March. EU Energy Commissioner Guenther Oettinger called the deal a "real breakthrough" that was reached with cool heads against the backdrop of a seven-month war in eastern Ukraine pitting Kiev against pro-Moscow rebels. The deal caps two days of marathon talks that had stalled before dawn on Thursday when Russia demanded that the EU first agree with Ukraine how to pay Kiev's outstanding bills and finance gas deliveries through to March. He said the terms of the agreement confirmed the tentative outlines of one he reached earlier in the month whereby Ukraine would pay \$3.1 billion by the end of the year to settle a large portion of its outstanding bills to Russia. In return, Russia agreed a base reference price for deliveries through to March 2015 of \$385 per 1,000 cubic metres, a discount of about 100 dollars.

Modi skips Indira Gandhi's memorial event

Says 'Mahatma incomplete without Sardar Patel' Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday skipped the event commemorating the death anniversary of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at the Shakti Sthal memorial where President Pranab Mukherjee, Vice-President Hamid Ansari and top leaders of the Congress paid floral tributes to her. The dignitaries including Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi drove to the memorial where they placed floral wreaths at the spot where she was laid to rest even as Modi flagged off a 'Unity Run' to mark 139th birth anniversary of Sardar Patel. In the past Atal Behari Vajpayee as Prime Minister had visited Indira Gandhi's memorial to pay homage on her death anniversary. Earlier in the day, Modi tweeted: "I join my fellow countrymen & women in remembering former PM Smt. Indira Gandhi on her Punya Tithi." In his address at the Rajpath to commemorate birth anniversary of Patel, India's first home minister, Modi had referred to the day as Indira Gandhi's death anniversary. The Modi government recently decided that it would be involved in commemoration of birth and death anniversaries of Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Patel while leaving it to trusts and societies to mark the memory of other leaders. Government had also decided that no memorials will be built in memory of other leaders. "When we see Ramakrishna Paramhansa he appears to be incomplete without Swami Vivekananda. Similarly when we see Mahatma Gandhi, he also appears incomplete without Sardar Patel," he said.



PHOTO: AFP