

NEWS IN brief

Catalonians to hold referendum today

AFP, Barcelona

One of Spain's biggest and richest regions, Catalonia will defy Madrid today when it holds a symbolic vote on whether it should break away as an independent state. The polls will be staffed by volunteers. There is no official electoral roll but the regional government says 5.4 million Catalans and resident foreigners aged 16 and over are eligible to vote.

Obama picks US's no 2 diplomat

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama on Friday nominated his deputy national security advisor Tony Blinken to become the number two to top diplomat John Kerry, ending a fierce behind-the-scenes tussle. If confirmed by Senate, Blinken will succeed Bill Burns as deputy secretary of state in a key role amid a wealth of global diplomatic challenges, the White House announced.

Robin Williams committed suicide

AFP, Los Angeles

Comic actor Robin Williams committed suicide by hanging himself and had no alcohol or illicit drugs in his system at the time of his death, coroners said Friday. The 63-year-old, known for high-energy, rapid-fire improvisation and clowning, was found dead on August 11 at his home in Marin County, north of San Francisco.

Mexico gang admits killing 43 missing students

AFP, Mexico City

Gang suspects have confessed to killing 43 missing Mexican students, burning their bodies for 14 hours and tossing their charcoal-like remains in a river, authorities said, in a case causing national revulsion. Authorities say the aspiring teachers vanished after gang-linked police attacked their buses in the southern city of Iguala on September 26. The police then delivered the 43 to members of the Guerreros Unidos drug gang who told investigators they took them in two trucks to a landfill and killed them.

17 militants killed in Pak tribal district

AFP, Peshawar

Pakistani security forces killed at least 17 militants in heavy overnight shelling in a restive northwestern tribal area, officials said yesterday. The militants were killed in Bara town, Khyber tribal district after security forces repulsed an attack on a check-post.

25 YEARS SINCE BERLIN WALL'S FALL



Sections of the Berlin Wall still stand as a reminder of the bricks which divided the continent. A quarter of a century after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the border between West and East has been lit up by 8,000 glowing balloons yesterday. The bright orbs are part of the lightborder art project, which has seen the balloons mark the dividing line that separated West and East Berlin for nearly 30 years. An eight-mile stretch of the former border will be lit up until dusk on Sunday, when the orbs will be untethered and released into the sky. **Bottom, right**, Palestinian youths break parts of the Israeli separation wall in the West Bank village of Bir Nabala -between Jerusalem and Ramallah- yesterday to mark the occasion.



Gorbachev warns of new East-West tensions

AFP, Berlin

Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev warned in Germany on Friday of new East-West tensions sparked by the Ukrainian crisis, speaking ahead of ceremonies commemorating the fall of the Berlin Wall.

"We now have to watch out that we don't miss the right moment, that we get a grip on the tensions that have emerged recently," he said at Berlin's former Checkpoint Charlie border crossing, an iconic Cold War site.

Gorbachev -- who is set to meet Chancellor Angela Merkel during his visit -- stressed the importance of good relations between Moscow and Berlin, which has been a key interlocutor in the Ukraine standoff.

"We always have to think of the lessons of the past," the 83-year-old said, according to a German translation.

"And we have learned from the past that when Russians and Germans understand each other ... when our relationship is good, then everyone is well off, not just our two peoples."

"That means, we should be careful it stays that way."

Moscow is locked in a confrontation with the West over its support for separatists in neighbouring Ukraine, with Washington and Brussels imposing several rounds of sanctions on Russia.

Gorbachev said on Thursday he would seek to defend President Vladimir Putin's policies while in Germany, saying he was "absolutely convinced that Putin protects Russia's interests better than anyone else".

US doubles troops in Iraq

Obama sends 1500 more troops for 'non-combat' role

AGENCIES

President Barack Obama has authorized the doubling of US troop levels in Iraq for the war against Islamic State (ISIS) militants, further straining his pledge against "boots on the ground".

On Friday, he unveiled plans to send 1,500 additional troops to Iraq to help Baghdad government forces strike back at Islamic State jihadists, roughly doubling the number of US soldiers in the country.

The move marked a deepening US commitment in the open-ended war against the ISIS group, three months since American aircraft launched air strikes against the Sunni extremists.

The move extends the US training and advising mission to new areas as Iraqi and Kurdish forces prime themselves to recapture ground lost to the IS group, including in the volatile Anbar province

WAR ON ISIS

Iraq forces advance in Baiji

US-led air raids hit jihadist-held Syria oil field

in the west where the Iraqi army has been on the retreat.

The reinforcements were "part of our strategy for strengthening partners on the ground" but the troops would have a "non-combat role," the White House said in a statement.

The United States already is carrying out air strikes against the ISIS group in Iraq and Syria but officials insisted the decision did not signal "mission creep" towards another all-out ground war.

The US forces will be carrying out the same mission that has been outlined from the start -- to help the Iraqi forces on the

ground, the official said.

Meanwhile, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights yesterday said US-led air strikes hit jihadist positions in the north and east of Syria, including an oil field.

The US-led coalition, which launched strikes against jihadist positions in Syria in September, also hit IS militants in Kobane.

Meanwhile, a suicide bomber killed a senior Iraqi police officer in Baiji on Friday as security forces regained ground from jihadists in the strategic northern town, officials said.

The bomber detonated an explosives-rigged tanker truck at a checkpoint in the Al-Sinai area which officers had said was retaken more than a week before, killing Major General Faisal Ahmed and three other policemen, and wounding six.

Modi to carry out major cabinet reshuffle today

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will carry out the first major reshuffle of his cabinet today since storming to power in May with the key defence portfolio likely to go former Goa chief minister Manohar Parrikar.

Right wing Bharatiya Janata Party's leading Muslim face Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi is also set to be inducted as a cabinet minister.

Parrikar, 59, a pass-out of prestigious Indian Institute of Technology, is tipped to take over as defence minister after he resigned today as chief minister of the coastal state of Goa.

Parrikar's likely portfolio would see Finance Minister Arun Jaitley giving up the charge of Defence.

The cabinet rejig would see several of Modi's ministers, who have

been handling multiple portfolios, giving up their additional responsibilities to new entrants.

The current strength of the Council of Ministers is 45 -- 23 of Cabinet rank, including the prime minister, and 22 Ministers of State.

'CLEAN INDIA' CAMPAIGN

Meanwhile, a little over a month after brooming a street here to launch a "clean India" campaign, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday used a spade to kick-start a drive to cleanse the Ganges river of pollution.

Modi, 64, reached the river ghat in his parliamentary constituency Varanasi, offered prayers and then took up the spade to begin the Ganges clean-up drive.

He said NGOs had assured him that the work he began today would be completed in a month.



Manohar Parrikar



Residents and survivors release lanterns as part of the memorial service to commemorate the first year anniversary of the devastating Typhoon Haiyan in Tacloban City, central Philippines, yesterday. **Inset**, A survivor of the strongest typhoon ever to hit land grieves at mass graves remembering the victims.

PHOTO: AFP

Iran's uranium stockpile grows: UN watchdog

REUTERS, Vienna

Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium gas has grown by 8 percent to nearly 8.4 tonnes in about two months, UN atomic inspectors say, an amount world powers probably will want to see cut under any nuclear deal with Tehran.

The International Atomic Energy Agency issued a confidential report on Iran to IAEA member states on Friday, less than three weeks before a Nov 24 deadline for Iran and six world powers to resolve their stand-off over Tehran's atomic activities.

Iran's holding of refined uranium gas is one of the factors that could determine how much time it would need for any attempt to assemble nuclear weapons. Iran says it has no such goal but the West wants verifiable action by the Islamic Republic to make sure it cannot produce an atomic bomb any time soon.

Iran and the six states will meet in Vienna from Nov 18 to try to seal a long-term agreement to end a dispute that over the last decade has often raised fears of a new Middle East war.

The IAEA report said Iran's stock of uranium gas refined to a fissile concentration of up to 5 percent stood at 8,390 kg, a rise of 625 kg since its previous report in September.

'Ebola cure may be in survivors' blood'

REUTERS, New York

A group of scientists including three Nobel laureates in medicine has proposed that US health officials chart a new path to developing Ebola drugs and vaccines by harnessing antibodies produced by survivors of the deadly outbreak.

The proposal builds on the use of "convalescent serum," or survivors' blood, which has been given to at least four US Ebola patients who then recovered from the virus. It is based on an approach called passive immunization, which has been used since the 19th century to treat diseases such as diphtheria but has been largely surpassed by vaccination.

The scientists propose using new genetic and other technologies to find hundreds or thousands of different Ebola antibodies, determine their genetic recipe, grow them in commercial quantities and combine them into a single treatment analogous to the multi-drug cocktails that treat HIV-AIDS.

That contrasts with current drug development, which focuses on finding one molecule, or a small number, to defeat the Ebola virus that has killed nearly 5,000 people in West Africa and infected thousands more since March.

Nobel laureates David Baltimore, an expert in the molecular biology of the immune system, James Watson, co-discoverer of the double helix that is DNA, and Jim Simons, who founded hedge-fund Renaissance Technologies and was a pioneer in the quant revolution on Wall Street, are among the advocates of the idea. It was outlined in a letter that was reviewed by Reuters.

WAR CRIME PROBE Lanka rejects UN criticism

AFP, Geneva

Sri Lanka yesterday angrily rejected accusations by the UN rights chief that it was sabotaging a war crimes probe into the country's brutal separatist war, calling the charges "extremely regrettable."

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein on Friday accused Colombo of creating "a wall of fear" and repression to scuttle the UN-mandated probe by subjecting civil society groups and rights activists to surveillance, harassment and other forms of intimidation.

But Sri Lanka denied the charge.

The UN Human Rights Council last March ordered an international investigation into allegations that up to 40,000 ethnic Tamil civilians were killed by government troops in the final months of fighting in the civil war, which ended in 2009.

TERRITORIAL, HISTORIC DISPUTES Hope rises as China, Japan agree to mend differences

AFP, Beijing

The foreign ministers of China and Japan held their first formal talks in more than two years yesterday, a day after the Asian powers agreed to reduce tensions over territorial and historical disputes.

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi and Japanese counterpart Fumio Kishida met on the sidelines of the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, reports in both countries said.

The meeting, the first at such a level since September 2012, just before ties soured over an escalating territorial dispute, came after Tokyo and Beijing agreed on a four-point accord to improve their relationship.

Wang called the agreement "a major step" in talks with Kishida, Xinhua said.

Kishida, meanwhile, said the talks were meaningful. "This created an important momentum to shift gears to bring Japan-China relations back to a normal track," he said in remarks shown on Japanese national broadcaster NHK.

He said he had stressed the importance of a meeting between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping, Japan's Kyodo news agency reported.

Friday's agreement was widely seen as setting the stage for a summit between the two leaders on the sidelines of the upcoming APEC summit in Beijing, though no official announcement had yet been made.

US Secretary of State John Kerry, speaking to reporters, welcomed the Asian powers' Friday deal.

Relations between the world's second- and third-largest economies have plunged in the face of rows over disputed islands in the East China Sea and Japan's 20th-century aggression against China.

A key point of contention is that Tokyo has long refused to formally acknowledge that there is a sovereignty dispute over the islands, which it controls and calls the Senkakus, but which are claimed by Beijing as the Diaoyus.

The Chinese statement Friday said the two "acknowledged that different positions exist between them regarding the tensions" over the islands, while the Japanese text said they "recognised that they had different views as to the emergence of tense situations".

Each used only their own name for the outcrops but both said they would set up a "crisis management mechanism" to keep the situation at bay.

Saudi Arabia could lift ban on women drivers

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

It's the only country in the world where women are not allowed to drive, but that could be about to change.

The advisory council to King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has recommended the country's government lift the long-standing ban on women drivers despite decades of cracking down on protests.

But, even if the Shura Council's recommendations are taken up by the autocratic king, the ban will still remain in place for women under 30 -- an anonymous council member told The Associated Press.

For those old enough to get behind the wheel there would still be other constraints. They would only be allowed to drive between 7:00am and 8:00pm from Saturday to Wednesday and from midday to 8pm on Thursday and Friday, the weekend in the oil rich kingdom.

Permission from a male relative -- a husband or father, brother or son -- would be required and outside of the cities women could not drive without a man present in the car.

Women drivers would also have to be conservatively dressed and wearing no make-up, according to the official.

The recommendation marks a surprising shift in attitudes towards women. Within Saudi Arabia, genders are segregated under the strict interpretation of Islamic Shariah law known as Wahhabism.

Women are required to wear a headscarf and loose, black robes in public and need male permission to travel, get married and even enroll in higher education.

