

NEWS IN brief

North Korea frees 2 Americans

AFP, Joint Base Lewis-mcchord
Two Americans, Kenneth Bae and Matthew Miller, released from lengthy prison sentences in North Korea arrived home Saturday, following a secret mission by US intelligence chief James Clapper to secure their freedom at Pyongyang's initiative.

India test-fires Agni-II missile

IANS, Bhubaneswar
India yesterday successfully test-fired its nuclear-capable Agni-II strategic ballistic missile from a military base in Odisha, a defence official said. The medium-range missile with a range of over 2,000 km has already been inducted into the army, and is part of the strategic forces arsenal for nuclear deterrence.

Queen leads UK in silent tribute to war dead

AFP, London
Queen Elizabeth II lead UK in paying silent tribute to the Commonwealth war dead on Remembrance yesterday, an annual event made particularly poignant this year on the centenary of the start of World War I. More than one million people from the British empire died in the four-year conflict, but the day has become a time to remember all the troops killed in wars since then.

Pakistan air strikes kill 13 militants

AFP, Islamabad
Pakistan's military yesterday said it killed 13 militants including an important rebel commander in air attacks in a troubled tribal district near the Afghan border. The strikes were mounted in Khyber district, the military said in a statement. It said 10 militant hideouts and an ammunition depot were also destroyed.



Israeli security forces detain Arab-Israeli youths during clashes in the town of Kfar Kana, in northern Israel yesterday, a day after security forces shot dead a 22-year-old Arab-Israeli man. The protest came a day after Europe's top diplomat Federica Mogherini called for a Palestinian state sharing Jerusalem as its capital with Israel. Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas' Fatah movement yesterday said it is cancelling this week's Gaza ceremonies marking the 10th anniversary of Yasser Arafat's death due to security concerns.

US president leaves US for key Asia tour

AFP, Washington
President Barack Obama departed for China yesterday, on a trip meant to help allay Washington's sometimes tense relations with Beijing. The US leader was accompanied on his eight-day trip, which also includes visits to Myanmar and Australia, by his national security adviser Susan Rice and several other top aides. The China leg of his trip will be dominated by Obama's meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing, where the White House said it expects "candid and in-depth conversations." Obama will also attend an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Beijing. In Myanmar, Obama will meet President Thein Sein and opposition icon Aung San Suu Kyi and attend a summit of Asean nations in Naypyidaw. When the president goes on to a G20 summit in Brisbane the unrest in Ukraine may also be a focus.

Obama signals 'new phase'

Fate of Baghdadi remains unknown after strikes target ISIS top brass

AFP, Baghdad
US President Barack Obama yesterday said that deploying additional troops to Iraq signals a "new phase" in the fight against the Islamic State group, as Baghdad investigated whether strikes killed the jihadists' leader.

After earlier unveiling plans to send up to 1,500 more US troops to Iraq to advise and train the country's forces, Obama told CBS News the US-led effort to defeat IS was moving to a new stage.

"Phase one was getting an Iraqi government that was inclusive and credible -- and we now have done that," Obama told CBS News on Sunday.

"Rather than just try to halt (IS's) momentum, we're now in a position to start going on some offence," the president added, stressing the need for Iraqi ground troops to start pushing back IS fighters.

"We will provide them close air support once they are prepared to start going on the offence against," Obama said.

Going on the offensive will be a significant challenge for Iraq's forces, which saw multiple divisions fall apart in the early days of the jihadist offensive, leaving major units that need to be reconstituted.

The additional troops announced by Obama would roughly double the number of American military

WAR ON ISIS



Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: Dead or wounded?

personnel in the country to about 3,100, marking a significant return of US forces to Iraq by a president who has hailed his role in their 2011 departure.

A US-led coalition has already been carrying out air strikes against IS in Syria and Iraq, where the extremist group has declared an Islamic "caliphate" in large areas of the two countries under its control.

Some of those strikes targeted a gathering of ISIS leaders near the northern Iraqi city of Mosul late on Friday, the Pentagon said, and Iraqi authorities were seeking to determine if the group's chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had been killed.

A senior Iraqi intelligence official said there was no "accurate information" on whether Baghdadi was dead but that authorities were investigating.

The death of the elusive ISIS leader would be a major victory for the US-led coalition but officials said it could take time to confirm the reports.

"I can't absolutely confirm that Baghdadi has been killed," General Nicholas Houghton, the chief of staff of the British armed forces, told BBC television on Sunday.

"Probably it will take some days to have absolute confirmation," he said. A spokesman for US Central Command, which oversees American forces in the ME, said the raids had intentionally targeted the group's leadership. The aim was to squeeze the group and ensure it had "increasingly limited freedom to manoeuvre, communicate and command," he added.

Meanwhile, a senior Iraqi officer said that government forces now hold "more than 70 percent" of the key oil town of Baiji, which is near where Iraqi soldiers have been holding out for months against a jihadist siege of Iraq's largest oil refinery.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a monitoring group, meanwhile said that fighting for the town of Kobane in Syria had now killed more than 1,000 people, most of them jihadists.

IRAN-US NUKE NEGOTIATIONS 'Big gap' remains as talks kick off

AFP, Muscat
The United States and Iran held high-level talks in Oman yesterday ahead of a looming deadline for a nuclear deal, but President Barack Obama warned that a "big gap" remained.

US Secretary of State John Kerry met Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in the Gulf sultanate, with both sides facing political pressure at home over the long-running negotiations which have appeared close to deadlock for months.

Iran and world powers have set November 24 as a deadline to turn an interim agreement into a long-term settlement, but Obama warned it may not be possible.

"Are we going to be able to close this final gap so that (Iran) can re-enter the international community, sanctions can be slowly reduced and we have verifiable, lock-tight assurances that they can't develop a nuclear weapon?" Obama told CBS News in an interview broadcast Sunday.

"There's still a big gap. We may not be able to get there." Domestic politics are hanging heavily over the process, given the loss in midterm elections of the Senate by Obama's Democrats to the Republican party, members of whom have consistently bridled at the White House's negotiations with Iran.

Zarif and Iranian President Hassan Rohani are already under pressure from hardliner lawmakers sceptical of the interim deal who have also demanded that any final agreement must be ratified by parliament.



Trucks without license plates tow 122mm howitzer artillery pieces through Makiivka, Ukraine.

All-out war fears grow in Ukraine

Gorbachev warns of new Cold War amid heavy fighting

AFP, Donetsk
Armoured convoys headed to bolster rebel positions in east Ukraine yesterday as shelling rocked separatist stronghold Donetsk and fears mounted of a return to full-scale fighting.

Reflecting growing concerns, the European Union's foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, said reports of military reinforcements in Ukraine's separatist areas were a "very worrying development" and called on Russia to prevent further movement of "troops, weapons and equipment."

Shelling rumbled on throughout the afternoon on the edge of Donetsk, where government forces regularly exchange heavy fire with insurgent fighters, but was less intense than overnight when mortar fire was heard close to the centre for around two hours, an AFP journalist reported.

It was among the fiercest combat in the city since the September 5 signing of a frequently-violated ceasefire that halted all-out confrontations across most of the conflict zone but failed to end constant bombardments at strategic hotspots.

An AFP crew saw a convoy of 20 military vehicles and 14 howitzer cannons without

number plates or markings driving through the rebel town of Makiivka in the direction of the nearby frontline around Donetsk.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) voiced concern Saturday after its monitors witnessed unmarked columns of tanks and troop carriers moving through east Ukraine in territory held by pro-Russia separatists.

The OSCE reports from the east came as fears mounted of a total breakdown in the two-month truce, with the war having already killed some 4,000 people.

The conflict has sent relations between Western backers of Ukraine and Russia to their lowest level in decades.

The last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, said at an event Saturday marking the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall that the world "is on the brink of a new Cold War" sparked by Ukraine.

Russia's economy is suffering from European Union and US sanctions imposed in response to Moscow's support for the separatists. With Russia welcoming last week's rebel elections, the sanctions look set to remain in place -- and possibly be reinforced.

VOTE FOR INDEPENDENCE 2m Catalonians defy Madrid

AFP, Barcelona
More than two million Catalans turned out yesterday to vote on independence from Spain in a symbolic ballot, defying challenges from the Spanish government.

Voters of all ages lined up around the block, some applauding, as polling stations opened after weeks of tense legal wrangling with Spanish authorities.

In one of Spain's richest but most indebted regions, a long-standing yearning for independence has swelled over recent years as recession and political corruption scandals have shaken Spain.

The desire to break away has been sharpened by resistance from Madrid.

"This is an opportunity we could not miss... We have been demanding it for a very long time," said Martin Arbaizar, 16, queueing to vote in a school in Barcelona.

Spain's conservative government challenged the vote in the courts, forcing Catalan leaders to water it down from a non-binding referendum to a symbolic vote organised by volunteers.

Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, who has vowed to defend the unity of Spain as it recovers from recession, said the vote "will not have any effect".

But voters were undeterred, fired up by the independence referendum held in Scotland in September, despite most Scots voting 'no'.

"Even though it may not be official, the important thing is that they listen to us," said Arbaizar. "The more people vote, the more noise we make, the better."

Most polls were due to stay open until 1900 GMT. Proud of its distinct language and culture, Catalonia, a region of 7.5 million people, accounts for nearly a fifth of Spain's economy.

Demands for greater autonomy there have been rumbling for years, but the latest bid by the region's president Artur Mas has pushed the issue further than ever before.

He said after voting that he hoped yesterday's vote was a step towards a full referendum.



Football coach Pep Guardiola cast his ballot at a polling station in Barcelona, yesterday.

'Dreams can come true'

AFP, Berlin
Merkel says the fall of Berlin Wall is a message to world



German Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday said that the fall of the Berlin Wall 25 years ago was a message to a conflict-torn world that "dreams can come true".

She spoke as Germany celebrated the milestone on November 9, 1989, that ended its Cold War division by throwing a huge open-air party at Berlin's iconic Brandenburg Gate.

More than a million people were expected in the reunited capital, many flocking to see rock stars and anti-communist dissidents on stage amid fireworks to recall the peaceful breach of the despised barrier.

Merkel, 60, who grew up in the East, said: "The Berlin Wall, this symbol of state abuse cast in concrete, took millions of people to the limits of what is tolerable,

and all too many beyond it. It broke them."

"Little wonder that after the border opened, people took apart the hated structure with hammers and chisels."

In an unusually emotional speech at a memorial for Wall victims, Merkel said: "We can change things for the better -- that is the message of the fall of the Berlin Wall."

This is true for Germany and "for the people in Ukraine, Syria, Iraq and in many, many other regions of the world where liberty and human rights are threatened or being trampled," she said.

Merkel said the events inspired hope that the world can tear down "walls of dictatorship, violence, ideology and hostility".

"Too good to be true? A daydream that will burst like a bubble? No, the fall of the Wall has shown us that dreams can come true."

Taliban targets Kabul police HQ; 1 killed

AFP, Kabul
A Taliban suicide bomber yesterday walked into the offices of Kabul's police chief and detonated his explosives, killing a senior aide in an attack that highlighted poor security in the Afghan capital.

City police chief Zahir Zahir, who was at work when the blast erupted, said the attacker had evaded several checkpoints at the force's heavily-guarded headquarters.

Zahir said closed-circuit cameras showed that the attacker was only stopped when he tried to enter the police chief's room.

Kabul is regularly hit by Taliban bombings, with the military, police and government officials among those targeted despite heightened security with multiple checkpoints, blast walls and armed guards.

Yemen political chaos deepens

AFP, Sanaa
Yemen's new cabinet was sworn in yesterday despite calls by former autocratic president Ali Abdullah Saleh and Shia militias allied to him for it to be boycotted.

Twenty-nine ministers including members of Saleh's powerful General People's Congress (GPC) and others seen as close to the Shia Huthi insurgents attended the inauguration at the presidential palace, participants said.

The line-up was sworn in before President Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi, who succeeded Saleh after he was forced to resign in early 2012 following a year of Arab Spring-inspired protests.

Saleh's GPC had on Saturday urged cabinet nominees from the party to turn down their ministries, as it rejected newly imposed UN Security Council sanctions against him.

The GPC has also sacked Hadi from its leadership, apparently in retaliation after accusations he had solicited the sanctions announced Friday against Saleh and two Huthi commanders for threatening peace.

The new 36-member cabinet was formed as part of a UN-brokered peace deal under which the Huthis, also known as Ansarullah, are supposed to withdraw from Sanaa, which they seized on September 21.

On November 1, the main parties signed an agreement brokered by the UN envoy to Yemen, Jamal Benomar, for the formation of a government of technocrats.