

NEWS IN brief

Protesters clash with cops at HK legislature

BBC ONLINE

Clashes have taken place between Hong Kong police and a small group of protesters who tried to break into parliament early yesterday. The police said they arrested four people, while three officers were injured. Some protesters said that they attempted the break-in because they were angry about the earlier clearance of part of the main protest site at Admiralty.

France gets power to impeach president

AFP, Paris

French lawmakers now have the power to launch a US-style impeachment of their president under a new law passed yesterday. The impeachment process first requires 10 percent of upper house senators and 10 percent of lower house deputies to sign a resolution. A two-thirds majority in both houses of parliament must then vote to convene a special session of select lawmakers known as the High Court. The court would have a month to decide the issue, with another two-thirds majority required.

Kenya arrests 109 at mosque raids

REUTERS, Mombasa

Kenyan police found explosives at three mosques in Mombasa yesterday and arrested 109 people on suspicion they were undergoing militant training, in the latest in a series of raids in the port city. Kenya is looking to break up Islamist militant networks it blames for a series of attacks in the capital Nairobi as well as along its Indian Ocean coastline, saying many of the recruits are inspired by al Shabaab, an al Qaeda-linked Somali group.



These pictures show the havoc people in US are suffering from heavy snowfall. Temperatures in all 50 US states dipped to freezing or below yesterday while heavy snow prompted a state of emergency in western New York and contributed to the deaths of eight people in the northeastern United States.

PHOTO: AP



Don't meddle in our affairs

Putin tells US; Ukraine rules out direct talks with separatists

AGENCIES

President Vladimir Putin yesterday urged Washington's new envoy not to interfere in Russia's affairs as he accepted credentials from US ambassador John Tefft amid raging tensions.

"We are ready for practical cooperation with American partners along various directions guided by the principles of respect for each other's interests, equal rights and non-interference into domestic affairs," Putin said.

He spoke at the Kremlin where Tefft, Washington's new ambassador to Russia, presented his letter of credence along with envoys from several other countries including North Korea.

Tefft -- known for backing the pro-Western aspirations of former Soviet states -- succeeded Michael McFaul, who abruptly quit his post in February after just two years on the job.

McFaul, a Stanford university professor, frequently sparked Russia's fury with critical comments on Twitter and meetings with Russian opposition activists.

Cold War-era rivals Russia and the United States are locked in a tug-of-war over the fate of ex-Soviet republic Ukraine, with Washington imposing sanctions and US President Barack Obama branding Moscow's actions over Ukraine a "threat to the world".

Russia yesterday urged Ukraine's leaders to talk directly to separatists to end the conflict in the east, but Kiev rejected the call and told Moscow to stop "playing games" aimed at legitimizing "terrorists".

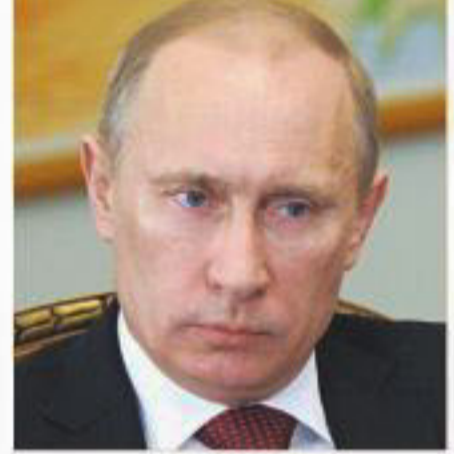
Kiev and the West accuse Russia of destabilizing Ukraine by providing the rebels with money, arms and reinforcements. The West has imposed sanctions on Moscow over the conflict in which more than 4,000 people have been killed since mid-April.

Russia backs the separatists but denies it is directly involved in the conflict in the Donbass region.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseny Yatseniuk hit back, accusing Moscow of trying to push Ukraine into recognizing the pro-Russian rebels who are fighting government troops to split parts of the eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions from Kiev.

Speaking at a government meeting, he declared Kiev would not speak directly to the separatists and repeated the phrase slowly in Russian for emphasis, saying: "We will not hold direct talks with your mercenaries."

A ceasefire was agreed on Sept 5 in the Belarussian capital of Minsk as part of a wider deal between Moscow, Kiev and the rebels under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) - with a former president representing Kiev to avoid formal recognition of the rebels.



'Don't focus too much on Ebola'

MAIL ONLINE

The Queen on Wednesday warned that focusing too much attention on the Ebola outbreak could lead to an upsurge in other deadly diseases such as malaria.

At an event alongside world leaders in the science of infectious diseases, she asked 'piercing' questions about how the disease ought to be controlled.

And the monarch said she worried that Ebola, which has claimed 5,000 lives already, risked overshadowing the risk from other deadlier diseases like malaria, which kills the same number every week.

Speaking to one of the world's top epidemiologists, Professor David Heymann, she told him she worried that those with feverish symptoms which could be malaria are being turned away from hospitals because they were too busy dealing with Ebola patients.

Professor Heymann investigated the first Ebola outbreak in 1976 and has worked on three subsequent outbreaks since then.

Accompanied by the Duke of Edinburgh, the Queen was visiting foreign affairs think tank Chatham House to launch a new leadership academy.



UN calls for North Korea rights probe

AFP, United Nations

The United Nations yesterday adopted a landmark resolution condemning North Korean rights abuses and laying the groundwork for putting the Pyongyang regime in the dock for crimes against humanity.

A resolution asking the Security Council to refer North Korea to the International Criminal Court passed by a resounding vote of 111 to 19 with 55 abstentions in a General Assembly human rights committee.

North Korea reacted angrily to the vote and announced that it was breaking off talks on improving human rights with the European Union, which drafted the resolution with Japan.

The non-binding measure will go to the full General Assembly for a vote next month.

China and Russia voted against the resolution on Tuesday along with Cuba, Iran, Syria, Belarus, Venezuela, Uzbekistan and Sudan, who complained that the measure unfairly targeted North Korea.

Co-sponsored by more than 60 countries, the resolution drew heavily on the work of a UN inquiry which concluded in a 400-page report released in February that North Korea was committing human rights abuses "without parallel in the contemporary world."

The year-long inquiry heard testimony from North Korean exiles and documented a vast network of harsh prison camps holding up to 120,000 people along with cases of torture, summary executions and rape.

Responsibility for these violations lies at the highest level of the secretive state, according to the inquiry led by Australian judge Michael Kirby, who concluded that the atrocities amounted to crimes against humanity.



An Indian policeman keeps watch as followers leave the ashram of self-styled 'godman' Rampal Maharaj, inset, in Hisar, some 175 kilometres north of New Delhi, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

India arrests 'godman' after violent stand-off

AFP, Barwala

Police yesterday arrested a guru after a violent stand-off with thousands of followers at his sprawling ashram in northern India, where the bodies of four women and a child have been found.

Supporters of self-styled "godman" Rampal Maharaj, who is wanted on a series of charges including conspiracy to murder, had guarded the ashram for days armed with stones, petrol bombs and other weapons after a court ordered his arrest.

Police finally detained him late yesterday, more than 24 hours after they stormed the heavily guarded ashram using water cannon and tear gas.

Ranjit Singh, a local police spokesman, told AFP the 63-year-old had been taken away from the ashram in an ambulance and would be sent for medical checks before appearing before a court.

More than 100 people are being treated in hospital after clashes between followers and police who forced their way into the compound 175 kilometres northeast of New Delhi, where Rampal was hiding out.

SN Vashist, the director general of police for Haryana state, said earlier Wednesday that officers had found the bodies of four women and a child in the ashram.

The child appeared to have died of natural causes but it was unclear how or when the four women lost their lives, and a post-mortem will be performed on their bodies.

Another woman died after being taken to hospital apparently suffering from a heart condition, Vashist said.

It remains unclear how many people were holed up in the ashram with Rampal, but thousands have poured out of the 4.8-hectare compound since police stormed in on Tuesday.

Several said they had to fight their way out of the ashram, while police claimed they had been used as human shields to protect the guru.

Britain 'not optimistic' on Iran nuclear talks

AFP, Vienna

Britain expressed doubts yesterday that a nuclear deal could be reached with Iran by a looming deadline, as Tehran and six world powers haggled in a final round of talks in Vienna.

British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond, speaking in Latvia, indicated the most to be hoped for was enough progress to justify putting yet more time on the clock beyond Monday's cut-off point to get a deal.

"I am not optimistic that we can get everything done by Monday," he said.

"But I think if we make some significant movement, we may be able to find a way of extending the deadline to allow us to get to the final deal, if we are making good progress in the right direction."

He added: "There will need to be some considerable further flexibility shown by the Iranian negotiators over the next four or five days if we are going to get to that deal."

Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany have been negotiating since February to turn an interim accord with Iran reached a year ago into a lasting agreement before November

Such a deal is aimed at easing fears that Tehran might develop nuclear weapons under the guise of its civilian activities -- an ambition it denies.

It could resolve a 12-year standoff, silence talk of war, help normalise Iran's relations with the West and mark a rare foreign success for US President Barack Obama.

Some areas appear provisionally settled, such as the future of the Arak nuclear reactor and tighter UN inspections to better detect any attempt to build a bomb.

But two key issues remain: uranium enrichment -- rendering uranium suitable for peaceful uses but also, at high purities, for a weapon -- and the pace at which sanctions on Iran would be lifted under a deal.

Iran wants to massively ramp up the number of enrichment centrifuges -- in order, it says, to make fuel for a fleet of future reactors -- while the West wants them dramatically reduced, reportedly by half.

The six powers say Iran has no such need in the foreseeable future. Russia is contracted until 2021 to fuel Iran's only power reactor at Bushehr and last week signed a deal to build -- and fuel -- several others.

HONOUR KILLING Pak family gets death sentences

REUTERS, Lahore

Four relatives of a pregnant woman who bludgeoned her to death outside one of Pakistan's top courts were sentenced to death yesterday for the crime, their defence lawyer said.

The 25-year-old's family attacked her because they objected to her marriage. Farzana Iqbal's murder in May this year briefly focused attention on Pakistan's epidemic of violence against women.

Her father, brother, cousin, and another relative were all sentenced to death and a \$1,000 fine, said defence lawyer Mansoor Afridi.

Women are murdered every day in Pakistan for perceived slights against conservative social traditions. The crime is so common it rarely rates more than a paragraph in newspapers.

US Senate blocks govt's surveillance reform bill

AFP, Washington

US Senate Republicans yesterday blocked a sweeping overhaul of a National Security Agency program that would have ended the government's controversial bulk collection of data about Americans.

The vote marks a blow for President Barack Obama, who had supported the reforms, and sets up a showdown in 2015 when crucial surveillance provisions are set to expire.

The USA Freedom Act, also backed by Silicon Valley groups and major technology firms, marked an ambitious bipartisan effort to reform the nation's surveillance apparatus following the revelations of government spying by former security contractor Edward Snowden.

The measure earned a majority, 58-42, with four Republicans joining all but one Democrat in favor. But it fell short of the 60-vote threshold to overcome blocking tactics.

It would have reined in the NSA, whose clandestine program has been scooping up vast amounts of electronic data on innocent US citizens as it pursues information on terror threats.

It also would have replaced the NSA's blanket authority with a far narrower one allowing it to obtain call records from phone companies but only in specific cases.

Proponents had been eager to progress before January, when they envision a more difficult path for the bill in a new Congress controlled by Obama's Republican foes, after the GOP swept to victory this month in midterm elections.

The bill would have crucially modified the Patriot Act, hastily approved in the aftermath of the September 2001 attacks on the United States, by changing the secret Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court to include a panel of advocates who would argue for civil liberties.

Israel launches crackdown after attacks

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel began a crackdown in east Jerusalem yesterday, a day after an assault by Palestinians on a synagogue killed five people, razing the home of a resident behind an earlier deadly attack.

The demolition, which took place before dawn, was carried out after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promised a harsh response to the synagogue attack which killed four rabbis at prayer and a policeman.

Two Palestinians wielding meat cleavers and a gun ran amok in the rare assault on a place of worship which was the city's bloodiest attack in six years.

It came as Israel struggles to contain a wave of unrest in annexed Arab east Jerusalem that has seen a growing number of deadly attacks by lone Palestinians.

"I have ordered the destruction of the homes of the Palestinians who carried out this massacre and to speed up the demolitions of those who carried out previous attacks," Netanyahu said late on Tuesday.

Several hours later, Israeli forces went to the flashpoint east Jerusalem neighbourhood of Silwan and demolished the third-floor apartment of the family of Abdelrahman Shaludi, who deliberately rammed his car into a crowd of pedestrians last month, killing a young woman and a baby.

Shaludi was shot by police at the scene after his October 22 rampage.

Punitive house demolitions have been used by Israel for years in the West Bank but the policy was halted in 2005 after the army said they had no proven deterrent effect.

Until now, razing homes has never been adopted as a matter of policy in annexed Arab east Jerusalem.

Human rights groups have denounced the practice as collective punishment targeting not the perpetrators but their families.



'Black widow' arrested in Japan

Report says she might have killed 7 husbands for benefits

AFP, Tokyo

A 67-year-old millionaire was arrested yesterday on suspicion of poisoning her husband with cyanide as it emerged six former partners had already died, in Japan's latest apparent "black widow" case.

Chisako Kakehi has been the beneficiary of a combined 800 million yen (\$6.8 million) over the last two decades, Jiji Press said -- insurance money and other assets she received after the seven men's deaths.

Husband number four Isao Kakehi fell sick suddenly at home and was confirmed dead at a hospital in December last year, less than two months after the couple married.

An autopsy found highly toxic cyanide compounds in his blood. Kakehi has denied any involvement in his death.

That came after the September death of a 75-year-old boyfriend, who fell suddenly ill after the couple ate together at a restaurant, Jiji said.

Kakehi's dalliance with death began in 1994 when her first husband passed away at the age of 54.

In 2006 her second husband, whom she had met through a dating agency, died of a stroke aged 69, while the third marriage ended in 2008 with the death of her 75-year-old partner, Jiji said.

"We suspect she did it for money," a police investigator on the latest death said without giving details of the amount involved.