

NEWS IN brief

Kurds gain ground from ISIS in Kobane

AFP, Beirut
 Kurdish fighters gained ground from jihadists of the Islamic State group in fierce battles in the Syrian town of Kobane overnight, a monitoring group said yesterday. The town on the border with Turkey has become a highly symbolic battleground in the war against ISIS with the US-led coalition launching near daily air strikes in support of its Kurdish defenders.

Three soldiers killed in east Ukraine

AFP, Kiev
 Three Ukrainian soldiers were killed and 24 wounded in fighting between government forces and Kremlin-backed rebels in the war-torn east over the past day, the military said yesterday. Government positions at strategic flashpoints around the conflict zone came under attack 56 times, the military said.

The mayor's office in the rebel-held industrial hub of Donetsk said 12 people were hospitalised with shrapnel wounds over the weekend as mortar fire continued to rock the city.

Palestinian youth attacked by Jews

AP, Jerusalem
 Three young Israelis attacked a Palestinian youth in Jerusalem yesterday, police say, the latest sectarian incident in the increasingly tense city. Police spokeswoman Luba Samri said the unidentified youth is in good condition in a Jerusalem hospital, and that police are investigating the attack.

Tensions in Jerusalem are spiking, mostly over Palestinian claims that the Israeli government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu wants to change the status quo at a sensitive holy site in the city by allowing Jews to pray there.

UN 'concerned' at heavy fighting in Myanmar's Kachin

AFP, Yangon
 The United Nations yesterday voiced alarm at an upsurge of fighting in Myanmar's northern state of Kachin, as shelling was reported near civilian areas and rebels said clashes could spread. There has been heavy fighting in Kachin, near the border with China, since the army's surprise artillery attack on a Kachin Independence Army (KIA) training camp last week, which cast doubt over faltering peace talks. The United Nations called for civilians to be protected in the fighting, which has caused around 100,000 people to flee their homes since a 17-year ceasefire ended in 2011.



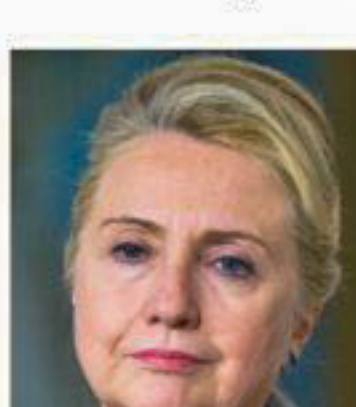
Japanese PM Shinzo Abe expresses sympathy to victims of earthquake as he visits a shelter at Hakuba village in Nagano prefecture, central Japan yesterday. Abe vowed to provide "firm" support for victims of November 22 earthquake. PHOTO: AFP

US police shoot dead boy with fake gun

AFP, Washington
 Police in the US city of Cleveland shot and killed a 12-year-old African American boy waving around what turned out to be a toy gun at a playground, officials and reports said Sunday. The shooting in Ohio comes amid high racial tensions in the United States, with a grand jury set to announce whether a white policeman will be indicted for the fatal shooting in August of an unarmed black teenager in the St Louis suburb of Ferguson in Missouri. In this latest incident, officers called to the scene Saturday fired at the boy twice, hitting him at least once in the stomach, after reports that he was pointing a gun at people. The boy, identified by the county medical examiner's office as Tamir Rice, died early Sunday, local newspaper The Plain Dealer reported. One of the police officers was in his first year in the force, it said. Audio released of a 911 call made to police records the caller saying the gun was "probably fake." "Upon arrival on scene, officers located the suspect and advised him to raise his hands," the statement said. "The suspect did not comply with the officers' orders and reached to his waistband for the gun. Shots were fired and the suspect was struck in the torso."

Hillary would be great president: Obama

BBC ONLINE
 He said the wife of former President Bill Clinton would make a "formidable" and "great" president. At the same time, he acknowledged that Mrs Clinton, who had served in his administration as secretary of state, might do things differently from him. "One of the benefits of running for president is you can stake out your own positions, and have a clean slate, a fresh start." He also admitted that voters would want what he described as a "new car smell" in the 2016 elections, hinting that he may not have a high-profile role in the campaign. Hillary Clinton played a prominent role in last month's mid-term elections, in which the Republicans took control of the Senate. For two months, she criss-crossed the country, campaigning hard to help Democrats in tight races. He said the wife of former President Bill Clinton would make a "formidable" and "great" president. At the same time, he acknowledged that Mrs Clinton, who had served in his administration as secretary of state, might do things differently from him. "One of the benefits of running for president is you can stake out your own positions, and have a clean slate, a fresh start." He also admitted that voters would want what he described as a "new car smell" in the 2016 elections, hinting that he may not have a high-profile role in the campaign. Hillary Clinton played a prominent role in last month's mid-term elections, in which the Republicans took control of the Senate. For two months, she criss-crossed the country, campaigning hard to help Democrats in tight races.



Iran nuke talks end with no deal

Deadline extended to end of June
 AGENCIES
 The deadline for an Iran nuclear deal has been extended to the end of June after talks in Vienna failed to reach a comprehensive agreement, diplomats say. UK Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond said good progress had been made, but it was "not possible to get an agreement by the [original] deadline". Six world powers want Iran to curb its nuclear programme in return for the lifting of UN sanctions. Tehran says it is not seeking nuclear weapons, but wants atomic energy, reports BBC. The six countries - the US, UK, Russia, China, France and Germany - have been in negotiations with Iran to finalise a preliminary deal reached last year in Geneva. Speaking after the Vienna talks had ended, Hammond said that negotiations would resume in December, and would be extended until 30 June 2015. Iran would be allowed to continue accessing \$700m (£450m) per month in frozen assets during that period. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said he expected the "basic principles" of the nuclear deal to be agreed within three to four months. US Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif agreed Sunday to start discussion on the extension as it became clear that it would be hard to bridge the differences between them in the time before the deadline, reports AP. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said yesterday negotiators were still having "consultations" on a final agreement that meets both US demands for strict curbs on Tehran's nuclear program and Iran's push for sanctions relief, also suggesting that moves toward an immediate deal had not yet been abandoned. International negotiators are worried that Iran is using its nuclear development program as a cover for developing nuclear weapons, and they have imposed economic sanctions on Tehran. Iran denies that, saying it is only interested in producing power. Wang arrived yesterday, joining the foreign ministers of the other countries negotiating with Iran - the US, Russia, Britain, France and Germany, in a top-level diplomatic effort to push the talks forward. A deal could begin a process in which the "relationship not just between Iran and us but the relationship between Iran and the world, and the region, begins to change," Obama said in an ABC News interview Sunday. But a last-ditch diplomatic blitz in Vienna in recent days involving US Secretary of State John Kerry and other foreign ministers appeared to have failed to bridge the remaining major differences, reports AFP.



US Secretary of State John Kerry (L) and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi shake hands prior to a bilateral meeting of the closed-door nuclear talks with Iran in Vienna, Austria, yesterday.



A cyclist shows his support as he rides past striking health workers (R) as they take part in a four hour strike outside the Manchester Royal Infirmary in north west England, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Tunisia set for runoff in landmark polls

AFP, Tunis
 The battle for an expected runoff for the Tunisian presidency got under way yesterday before the first round results were even in from the landmark post-Arab Spring election. Veteran anti-Islamist politician Beji Caid Essebsi, whose party placed first in a parliamentary election last month, looked set to fall short of the 50 percent threshold required to win outright, his campaign team conceded. He is poised to face off against incumbent Moncef Marzouki, a secular politician who has made common cause with the Islamists against what he says is an attempt at a comeback by former loyalists of the autocratic regime overthrown in 2011. The election is a milestone for the North African nation, whose ouster of long-time strongman Zine El Abidine Ben Ali set off a chain of revolts that saw several Arab dictators toppled by citizens demanding democratic reform. US Secretary of State John Kerry hailed an "historic moment" in Tunisia's transition to democracy, and pledged Washington's support for the next government, whoever leads it. Tunisian leaders pride themselves on the fact that the country has been spared the bloodshed that has ravaged other Arab Spring countries such as Libya and Yemen and, despite fears of disruption by Islamist militants, polling day passed off peacefully.



Modi reaches out to the opposition

THE HINDU ONLINE
 Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday voiced hope that the opposition will cooperate in Parliament to make it a "fruitful and result-oriented" winter session, despite several parties making it clear they will resist reform measures. "People of the country have given us responsibility to run the government, but they have also given the responsibility to all those sitting in Parliament to run the country," Modi told reporters outside Parliament House on the first day of the Winter session. Praising the "positive role" played by the opposition in running the budget session, Modi sought the "same" cooperation from the lawmakers. "I have confidence that a lot of good work for the betterment of the people will be done with a cool mind and in a cool atmosphere," the Prime Minister said. Modi said he believes that those who have responsibility of running the government and those having the responsibility of running the country will together work for the country's progress. "I hope this session will be fruitful and result oriented," he said. "In the last session, the positive role of the opposition has resulted in good work, I am hopeful that this time too we will experience the same," Modi said.

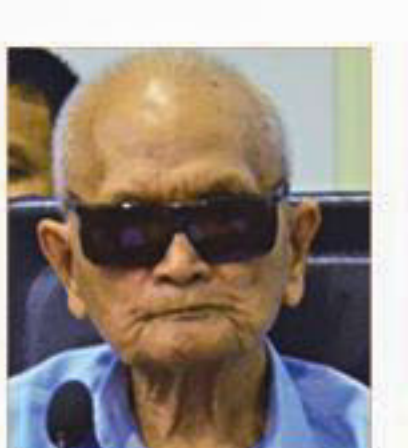
Women not equal to men: Erdogan

AFP, Istanbul
 Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday declared that women are not equal to men and launched a bitter attack against feminists in Turkey, claiming they reject the concept of motherhood. Speaking at a summit in Istanbul on justice for women, the devoutly Muslim president said that biological differences between women and men meant they cannot serve the same functions in life. "Our religion (Islam) has defined a position for women (in society): motherhood," Erdogan told an audience of Turkish women including his own daughter Sumeyye. "Some people can understand this, while others can't. You cannot explain this to feminists because they don't not accept the concept of motherhood." He recalled: "I would kiss my mother's feet because they smelled of paradise. She would glance coyly and cry sometimes. 'Motherhood is something else.'" He went on to say that women and men cannot be treated equally "because it is against human nature." "Their characters, habits and physiques are different.... You cannot place a mother breastfeeding her baby on an equal footing with men." "You cannot get women to do every kind of work men can do, as in Communist regimes. Erdogan was apparently referring to the practise during and after World War II for women in Communist states like the USSR to do heavy manual work in factories or in roles such as tram drivers.



Khmer Rouge court adjourns genocide trial

AFP, Phnom Penh
 Cambodia's UN-backed court yesterday adjourned the genocide trial of two ex-Khmer Rouge leaders until January 2015 after lawyers for one of the defendants continued to boycott proceedings. Nuon Chea, 88, known as "Brother Number Two", and former head of state Khieu Samphan, 83, were given life sentences in August for crimes against humanity. The pair were the first top figures to be jailed from a regime responsible for the deaths of up to two million Cambodians from 1975-1979. Both men have lodged appeals against the convictions. A second trial, in which they face genocide charges for the killings of ethnic Cham Muslims and Vietnamese as well as fresh counts of crimes against humanity and war crimes, began in July. But it has been delayed since mid-October due to a boycott by lawyers for the defendants, who have demanded the disqualification of the trial judges and more time to file full appeal documents. The motion to disqualify the judges was dismissed earlier this month, and Nuon Chea's defence team returned to court last week. But Khieu Samphan has continued to instruct his lawyers not to take part in proceedings, saying it would affect his "right to a fair trial". The trial chamber Friday again ordered Khieu Samphan's defence team to resume the trial. But after they still refused to attend the hearing yesterday, judge Nil Nonn, president of the trial chamber, said the court had "no reasonable alternative but to adjourn the case." "The trial is adjourned until 8 January 2015," he said, adding the court would pursue misconduct proceedings against Khieu Samphan's lawyers. The complex case against Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan was split into a series of smaller trials in 2011 in a bid to get a faster verdict for reasons including their advanced age and the large number of accusations.



US Defense Secretary Hagel to step down

CNN ONLINE
 Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel will step down from his position, a senior administration official confirmed to CNN yesterday. The White House announced yesterday that Obama will make a personnel announcement from the White House State Dining Room at 11:10 am. The New York Times reported yesterday that Obama asked Hagel to step down last Friday, seeking to reassure critics of his foreign policy with the move. The move, White House officials told the Times, was meant to acknowledge that the new national security threats facing the nation - most notably the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria - call for different capabilities than those possessed by Hagel. "The next couple of years will demand a different kind of focus," an administration official told the paper. A critic of the Iraq war, Hagel was brought on to oversee withdrawal from Afghanistan and a smaller Pentagon budget than ever before. Hagel wasn't fired, a White House official told the Times, but rather mutually agreed with the president that it was time for him to go. But Hagel's aides have said the Defense Secretary, the last remaining Republican on Obama's national security team, had planned to serve out his full four years in office. Hagel, a former Republican Senator from Nebraska, has been in office since February 2013.

