

NEWSIN brief

US, Nato end Afghan combat command

The US and Nato closed their combat command in Afghanistan yesterday, more than 13 years after invading the country in the wake of the Sept 11 terror attacks to target Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. Though quickly routing the Taliban-led government that sheltered the militants, the US-led coalition soon found itself spending billions of dollars rebuilding a country devastated by almost 30 years of war while an insurgency grew as the invasion and occupation of Iraq quickly took America's attention.

Yemen military chief fired as militia digs in

Yemeni President Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi has fired his armed forces chief of staff as Shia militiamen delay their withdrawal from the capital they seized in September, media reports said yesterday. Under a presidential decree, General Hussein Naji Hadi Khairan replaces Ahmed Ali al-Asouel, who moves to the Majlis al-Shura (consultative council), the lower chamber of parliament.

Iran president warns corruption threatens state

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani warned yesterday that corruption poses a threat to the Islamic republic, pinning the blame in a thinly-veiled attack on powerful monopolies that control the economy. "The people made the revolution in order to wipe out corruption," Rouhani told delegates at a conference in Tehran. "Continuation of corruption and the spread of corruption would mean the system and fundamentals of the revolution are in danger."

HuffPost launches in India

The Huffington Post launched an Indian version of its news website yesterday, seeking to tap the country's exploding number of Internet users, and announced its next big goal was a Chinese edition. The AOL-owned website featuring news, entertainment, health and blogs, has allied with The Times of India Group to launch HuffPost India, its 13th edition worldwide.

Risks of nuclear war rising

Urgent action is needed to minimise the risk of a nuclear war, more than 120 senior military, political and diplomatic figures from across the world have warned. Ahead of the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, which starts today, the experts wrote in a letter that the danger of such a conflict was "underestimated or insufficiently understood" by world leaders. The signatories include people from across the political spectrum such as former Conservative Defence Secretary Lord King, a Labour counterpart Lord Browne, former Foreign Secretaries Margaret Beckett and David Owen, and former Liberal Democrat leader Sir Menzies Campbell. John McColl, former Nato Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe, Lord Richards, former Chief of the Defence Staff, and General James Cartwright, former Vice-Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, also signed the letter. "Tensions between nuclear-armed states and alliances in the Euro-Atlantic area and in both South and East Asia remain ripe with the potential for military miscalculation and escalation," says the letter to Sebastian Kurz, Austria's Minister for Foreign Affairs.



Children play on top of a fallen coconut tree blocking a highway in San Julian town, Eastern Samar province central Philippines yesterday in the aftermath of typhoon Hagupit.

UN appeals for record \$16bn in aid

The UN appealed yesterday for \$16.4 billion (13.4 billion euros) to provide aid to nearly 60 million people worldwide next year, with almost half the amount aimed at helping victims of Syria's drawn-out conflict. "The rising scale of need is outpacing our capacity to respond," warned United Nations humanitarian chief Valerie Amos, stressing that 2014 has been marked by a sharp rise in the number of people affected by violent conflicts. Some 102 million people worldwide were in need of aid at the end of November, she told reporters in Geneva. The global appeal from UN agencies and other humanitarian organisations aims to gather funds to help at least 57.5 million of the most vulnerable across 22 countries. Yesterday's appeal did not however include the needs in Djibouti and the nine countries in Africa's Sahel region including Nigeria and Mali, which will be addressed in a separate appeal in February, the UN said. A full \$7.2 billion of the amount requested for 2015 will be aimed at helping an estimated 18.2 million people victimised by Syria's bloody civil war, which erupted in March 2011. The appeal is calling for \$2.8 billion to help 12.2 million people inside the war-ravaged country next year, including 7.6 million people who have been internally displaced. Another \$4.4 billion will be needed to help more than three million Syrian refugees and some three million vulnerable people in overwhelmed host communities in neighbouring countries, the appeal said. Helping millions of people affected by other crises will also require a large cash injection next year, with Syria's neighbour Iraq figuring high on the list.

Storm churns towards Manila after killing 23

Millions of people in the Philippine capital hunkered down yesterday as a major storm churned towards the megacity, after claiming at least 23 lives while ripping apart homes in remote island communities. Soldiers and aid workers rushed to reach devastated coastal villages on Samar island, where Typhoon Hagupit crashed in from the Pacific Ocean at the weekend with winds of 210 kilometres an hour. In Metro Manila, a sprawling coastal megalopolis of 12 million people that regularly endures deadly flooding, well-drilled evacuation efforts went into full swing as the storm approached yesterday. "We are on 24-hour alert for floods and storm surges," Joseph Estrada, mayor of Manila, the original city of two million within Metro Manila, told AFP. Thousands of people, mostly the city's poorest residents who live in shanty homes along the coast and riverbanks, crammed into schools and other government evacuation centres across Metro Manila. Across the megacity, schools were suspended, the stock market was closed, many office and government workers were told to stay at home, and dozens of commercial flights were cancelled. The preparations were part of a massive effort led by President Benigno Aquino to ensure minimum deaths, after a barrage of storms in recent years claimed many thousands of lives. The worst was Super Typhoon Haiyan, the strongest storm ever recorded on land, which claimed at least 7,350 lives as it devastated large parts of the central Philippines in November last year. To avoid another massive death toll, millions of people in communities directly in the path of Hagupit were sent to evacuation centres or ordered to remain in their homes. Hagupit, the strongest storm to hit the Philippines this year, has claimed at least 23 lives so far, with 18 of those deaths on Samar, Philippine Red Cross secretary-general Gwendolyn Pang told AFP. Sixteen people drowned during flooding in Borongan, a city on Samar of about 60,000 facing the Pacific Ocean that was almost in Hagupit's direct path, according to Pang. Footage aired by local television network GMA showed children standing beside landslide-choked roads in Borongan yesterday carrying signs reading: "Help us, help us". The death toll was widely expected to climb, with damage assessments from some badly hit areas yet to come in, and the storm not expected to fully cross the archipelago of 7,100 islands until today.

YEMEN HOSTAGE RESCUE US 'won't review' raids policy

The US will not be reviewing its operations to free Americans held by militants despite recent failures, says Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel. US journalist Luke Somers and South African teacher Pierre Korkie were killed by al-Qaeda in Yemen gunned during a US-led operation on Saturday. Hagel defended the rescue attempt, saying such raids were risky but that there was no need for a policy review. It was the third failed rescue attempt of a US hostage in the past six months. The family and friends of both men have criticised the armed raid. The US says the raid in southern Yemen was launched because intelligence suggested there was an immediate threat to Somers's life. But Penny Bearman, his step-mother, told The Times newspaper that Somers "would have given support to the ongoing discussions [to secure his release] in Yemen rather than the conflict approach". US special forces had already sought to rescue Somers in November. They also attempted to free US journalist James Foley in Syria, weeks before he was beheaded by Islamic State militants in August. Hagel said there was no need for a review of the process leading to rescue attempts because that process "is about as thorough as there can be". "Is it imperfect? Yes. Is there risk? Yes. But we start with the fact that we have an American that's being held hostage and that American life is in danger," he told reporters during a trip to Afghanistan.



Uber banned in Delhi over taxi driver 'rape'

Authorities in the Indian capital, Delhi, have banned international taxi-booking service Uber after a driver allegedly raped a female passenger. A transport department official said the company had been "blacklisted" for "misleading customers". The 26-year-old woman used the smartphone app to book a taxi home on Friday but says she was taken to a secluded area and raped. The driver has been remanded in custody for three days. He was arrested on Sunday and appeared in court on Monday afternoon. Some who had gathered outside the court tried to attack him as he was brought out, but police rushed him to a waiting van and took him away. Police say they will charge him with raping the finance company employee on Friday night when she used the taxi to take her home from a restaurant. Police personnel escort taxi driver (wearing mask), accused of raping a female finance company executive, as he is taken to court in New Delhi, 08 December 2014. Uber, which is growing in popularity in India, has been accused of failing to conduct adequate checks on its drivers. "(The) Transport Department has banned all activities relating to providing any transport service by the www.Uber.com with immediate effect," news agency AFP reported, quoting from government statement. The ban means any Uber taxi in Delhi will now attract a fine or even be impounded, officials say.



Sri Lanka's main opposition presidential candidate Maithripala Sirisena waves to supporters outside the Election Commission office yesterday after handing in his nomination papers to the election commissioner ahead of the forthcoming January polls in Colombo.

Yemen migrant boat sinks 70 people killed

A boat carrying African migrants has sunk off Yemen's western coast, killing 70 people, Yemeni officials say. The boat, carrying mostly Ethiopian migrants, sank off Yemen's al-Makha port due to strong winds and rough waves, security officials said. Tens of thousands attempt to cross the Red Sea into Yemen every year, often in rickety, overcrowded vessels. Hundreds have died making the journey. Yemen is viewed by many migrants as a gateway to the Middle East or Europe. The latest sinking occurred on Saturday, with reports of the incident emerging on Sunday. The Red Sea crossing between the Horn of Africa and Yemen is one of the world's major migration routes, BBC Arab affairs editor Alan Johnston says. Migrants dream of finding jobs and better lives in rich places like Saudi Arabia but they are in the hands of unscrupulous people smugglers and, too often, never reach the Yemeni shore, our correspondent adds. In October, the UN refugee agency said that more than 200 people had died at sea in 2014 while attempting to reach Yemen. "There have been frequent reports of mistreatment, abuse, rape and torture, and the increasingly cruel measures being adopted by smuggling rings seem to account for the increase in deaths at sea," the UN said at the time.

NIGERIA JAILBREAK Gunmen free 200 inmates

Gunmen have freed more than 200 prisoners in Nigeria's latest jailbreak, police said Sunday. Police recaptured at least 10 escapees from the medium security prison at Tunga, in central Niger state, by Sunday morning, said Deputy Superintendent Ibrahim Gambari. Saturday's attack was the third in the past two months in the West African nation, where jailbreaks are frequent and police only capture a fraction of those who escape. More than 300 inmates broke out of a prison bombed by gunmen in southwest Ekiti state on Dec. 1; 144 escaped from south-central Kogi state on Nov. 3 when gunmen bombed a prison wall. The two earlier jailbreaks were blamed on the Boko Haram Islamic extremist group. It is not known how many hundreds of Boko Haram suspects are held in Nigerian jails. The vast majority of people held in Nigerian jails have never been charged and are awaiting trial, some of them for many years, even though it is illegal to hold someone for more than 48 hours without bringing charges or presenting them to a magistrate. Only 18,042 of 56,785 inmates have been convicted of a crime, according to statistics dated June 30 and posted on the website of the Nigeria Prisons Service. Officials have said how appalled they are about conditions in the jails, where inmates often sleep on cement floors without mattresses or bedding, food is in short supply and most medical services are non-existent.

Latin America pledges to reforest 20 mn hectares

Seven Latin American countries pledged Sunday to replant nearly 20 million hectares of forest by 2020 amid a UN climate conference in Lima. The deal, dubbed "20x20," which private investors pledged to support with \$365 million, aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions generated by deforestation and land-use changes. The area is equivalent to more than 49 million acres. It came at a meeting held in parallel to the conference, with the agriculture and environment ministers from Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru. "In Peru, we are losing forests at an impressive speed," said Agriculture Minister Juan Manuel Benites Ramos, citing illegal mining, overgrazing and coca planting as the driving factor behind the tree clearings. The region needs to work on replanting the forests and moving toward "a carbon-neutral agriculture." His Argentine counterpart, Roberto Delgado, also urged putting the brakes on deforestation. "In addition to restoring soil, it is important to stop losing hectares," he said. Mexico made the biggest pledge, promising to restore 8.5 million hectares, followed by Peru, which promised 3.2 million, Guatemala, 1.2 million, and Colombia, one million. Ecuador promised 500,000 hectares, Chile another 100,000, and Costa Rica 50,000. In addition, a plan to conserve the Patagonia region -- which stretches across southern Argentina and Chile -- would aim at restoring 4.1 million hectares of forest. Experts say Latin America is one of the regions most vulnerable to climate change. Ministers and the UN chief fly into Lima this week to bolster negotiators in a final push for consensus on key elements of a world pact to curb potentially disastrous global warming. With a week of talks gone, and five days left, parties remain deeply divided on key aspects of the deal they have committed to signing in Paris in December 2015, to take effect in 2020.



S Africa court drops Dewani murder case

A judge has dismissed the case against Shrien Dewani, who was accused of arranging the murder of his wife Anni in South Africa. Judge Jeanette Traverso said the evidence presented by the prosecution fell "far below the threshold" of what a reasonable court could convict on. She said the evidence of the prosecution's main witness was "riddled with contradictions". Anni's family said they had been failed by the justice system. Announcing her ruling, the judge said the only reason not to grant the application would be in the hope that Dewani would implicate himself if he gave evidence. But to do so would be a "manifest misdirection", she said. Dewani, from Bristol, was extradited to South Africa this year to face trial accused of planning the murder of his wife in November 2010. He listened intently as key evidence against him was criticised by the judge as she gave her ruling over almost three hours. Dewani, 34, went straight down to the cells to prepare for his release, following the decision, as his family embraced. It is believed he left the court, without making a comment, through a side entrance. Dewani's family, who had said it would be a "nightmare" if the trial did not continue, immediately left the courtroom.

