

NEWSIN brief

Modi wishes Sonia on her birthday

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday greeted opposition Congress party President Sonia Gandhi on her birthday, wishing her a long and healthy life. "Best wishes to Congress President Smt Sonia Gandhi on her birthday. May Almighty bless her with a long & healthy life," Modi said in a Twitter post. Sonia, who turned 68 yesterday, has said she will not celebrate her birthday this year to respect for those who lost their lives in terror attacks in Kashmir and the Maoist attack in Jharkhand.

Philippines typhoon toll hits 27

AFP, San Julian

A giant storm left the Philippines yesterday after killing at least 27 people and devastating remote coastal towns, but the government won praise for unprecedented preparations that were credited for saving lives. Hagupit hit the far eastern island of Samar on Saturday with winds of 210 kilometres an hour, making it the most powerful typhoon in the Philippines this year and threatening widespread destruction.

Cops to clear main HK protest site

AFP, Hong Kong

Police will clear Hong Kong's main pro-democracy protest camp tomorrow and urged demonstrators not to resist, after more than two months of rallies for free leadership elections brought parts of the city to a standstill. But some protesters have said they are determined to stand their ground until their demands are met.

Ukraine truce holds

AFP, Donetsk

Planned peace talks between Ukraine and pro-Russian rebels were postponed yesterday but a ceasefire appeared to be largely holding along the frontline in the ex-Soviet republic's war-shattered east. The Ukrainian foreign ministry said negotiations with the insurgents involving Russian and European envoys in the Belarussian capital Minsk had been delayed and would probably not be held until Friday.

Modi wins Time's readers' poll

PTI, New York

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has not made it to the list of eight finalists selected by TIME magazine for its annual 'Person of the Year' title. However, Modi has been named winner of this year's readers' poll, securing more than 16 per cent of the almost five million votes cast. TIME's editors will choose the Person of the Year on December 10.



Police clash with demonstrators protesting the Staten Island, New York grand jury's decision not to indict a police officer involved in the chokehold death of Eric Garner in July, inside the Barclays Center subway station, yesterday. A series of police killings of African American suspects in the United States has sparked widespread anger and ignited a national debate about race relations and police tactics.

PHOTO: AFP

WFP restarts food aid for Syria refugees

REUTERS, Beirut

The UN World Food Program is restarting food aid for 1.7 million Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt after it received enough donations to fund the halted program.

The WFP said on Dec 1 it was suspending the aid because it had run out of money. This meant electronic vouchers allowing refugees to buy food in stores were not topped up for December, putting them at risk of hunger during the harsh winter period.

The agency said yesterday that a fundraising drive since then had raised \$80 million, which will allow it to distribute new funds of around \$30 per family member by mid-December and also leaving some funding for next month.

"This outpouring of support in such a short time is unprecedented," WFP Executive Director Ertharin Cousin said in a statement.

Rights groups call for criminal prosecutions

AFP, Washington

Human rights groups called Tuesday for the criminal prosecution of US officials after a Senate report detailed a CIA torture program that was far more brutal than previously known.

The groups said the report shows the Central Intelligence Agency's secret efforts to extract information from detainees after the 9/11 attacks repeatedly violated international law and basic human rights.

"This is a shocking report, and it is impossible to read it without feeling immense outrage that our government engaged in these terrible crimes," said Anthony Romero, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union.

"The government officials who authorized illegal activity need to be held accountable."

Amnesty International said the report makes clear that the CIA was acting unlawfully "from day one" and its brutal interrogations were not a rogue operation.

Steven Hawkins, executive director of Amnesty's US branch, said the program "gave the green light to commit the crimes under

international law of torture and enforced disappearance -- with impunity. It's time for accountability, including a full investigation, prosecutions and remedy for victims."

Human Rights Watch executive director Kenneth Roth said the report "shows the repeated claims that harsh measures were needed to protect Americans are fiction."

He noted that President Barack Obama's administration has ended many of the practices described graphically in the report.

But he added: "Unless this important truth-telling process leads to prosecution of the officials responsible, torture will remain a 'policy option' for future presidents."

The ACLU urged the Obama administration to take several steps to redress the abuses described in the report "and help ensure that the United States never tortures again."

It also said that the government should apologize to and compensate victims of US torture policies, in compliance with international law. And it called for the release of the fully Senate report -- what was released Tuesday was a 524 page summary of the 6,000 page full report.

CIA TORTURE REPORT

IVORY TRADE IN CHINA Elephants face extinction

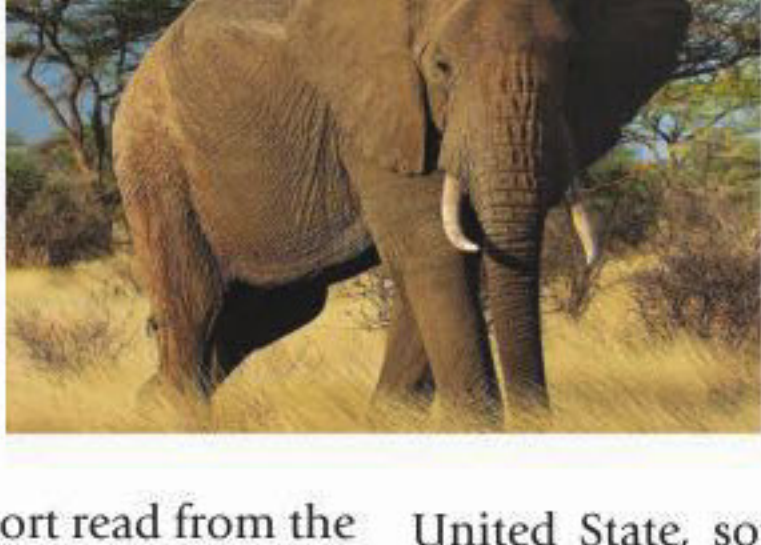
AFP, Nairobi

The slaughter of Africa's elephants and the illegal trade in ivory in China are "out of control" and could push wild elephants extinction within a generation, conservationists said Tuesday.

Soaring quantities of ivory are being sold in rapidly growing numbers of shops in China, with over 100,000 elephants killed from 2010 to 2012, the joint report read from the campaign groups Save the Elephants and The Aspinall Foundation.

"Skyrocketing demand for ivory in China -- the wholesale price of raw elephant tusks has tripled in just four years since 2010 --

have sparked a booming trade in smuggled ivory that is driving the unsustainable killing of elephants in Africa," said the report released in the Kenyan capital.



Organised crime syndicates and rebel militia increasingly use poaching to fund insurgencies, reaping the benefits of multi-billion-dollar demand, it added.

The report comes a day after Britain's Prince William, visiting the United State, sought US President Barack Obama's support for his campaign to end illegal wildlife trafficking.

China is making efforts to stem the trade, the report's authors said, but added that the measures were not going far enough.

Iraq appeals to US for more air power

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq yesterday appealed to visiting Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel for the United States to escalate its air war against the Islamic State group and to provide more powerful weapons.

Iraqi PM Haider al-Abadi made the request at the start of discussions with Hagel, who insisted the outcome of the war was up to the Iraqis themselves.

Hagel flew into Iraq from Kuwait, where US Lieutenant General James Terry on Monday told reporters that members of the anti-ISIS coalition meeting last week made initial pledges that would bring "close" to 1,500 additional forces to Iraq to train and assist the country's army. Terry did not indicate which countries from the coalition would provide the troops.

Amnesty accuses Israel of war crimes

AFP, London

The Israeli military committed war crimes during its Gaza offensive this summer and must be investigated, human rights monitor Amnesty International said yesterday.

The destruction of four multi-storey buildings during the last four days of the 50-day war were in breach of international humanitarian law, the group said in a report.

"All the evidence we have shows this large-scale destruction was carried out deliberately and with no military justification," said Philip Luther, director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa programme.

"War crimes must be independently and impartially investigated and those responsible should be brought to justice in fair trials."

Evidence including statements by the Israeli military at the time indicate the attacks were "a collective punishment against the people of Gaza" designed to destroy their livelihoods, Luther added.

However, Jerusalem has refused to cooperate with a United Nations inquiry into possible war crimes during the conflict, accusing it of bias.

The Israeli army has launched a series of criminal investigations into incidents in the war. But critics, however, have said that the investigations by Israel will not be independent.

More than 2,100 Palestinians, most of them civilians, were killed in the war between Israel and Hamas-led militants, which ended on August 26. On the Israeli side 73 people were killed, 67 of them soldiers.



Still possible to limit global warming : Ban

AFP, Lima

The world still has a chance to limit global warming to safer levels but time is running out, UN chief Ban Ki-moon told ministers yesterday grappling for a historic climate pact at talks in Peru.

"There is still a chance to stay within the internationally-agreed ceiling" of two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) over pre-industrial levels, Ban said, "but the window of opportunity is fast narrowing."

Ban opened a high-level segment of the December 1-12 UN talks with ministers in Lima, bringing much-needed political muscle to the final four days of a fraught process.

Parties remain far apart on key aspects of a deal they have vowed to ink in Paris in December next year and implement from 2020.

Draft texts were unveiled Monday that encapsulated a broad variety of views on how best to slash greenhouse gas emissions in the quest to curb global warming.

These documents will form the basis for political negotiations among ministers, starting yesterday with the tough issue of climate finance. It will be followed today by the even thornier issue of "differentiation" -- how to share out the burden between rich and poor countries.



Nobel Peace Prize laureates Kailash Satyarthi (R) and Malala Yousafzai sign the Nobel guest book during a signing ceremony at the Norwegian Nobel Institute in Oslo, yesterday. They will receive their prizes today.

PHOTO: AFP

WORST WWII FRENCH MASSACRE Case dismissed against German

AFP, Berlin

A German court yesterday threw out the case against an 89-year-old former soldier over the Nazis' worst atrocity on French soil, the 1944 massacre in the village of Oradour-sur-Glane.

In a move that met with anger and disappointment among survivors, the regional court in the western city of Cologne said it would not try the pensioner, citing a lack of evidence.

The man, who was identified in media reports as Werner Christukat, was charged in January with the murder of 25 people committed by a group, and with aiding and abetting the murder of several hundred people.

SS troops slaughtered 642 people in the tiny village in western France on June 10, 1944, in a horrific World War II crime that deeply scarred the French nation.

The tribunal said it had examined whether the available evidence would

likely be sufficient to lead to a conviction. "The court determined with today's decision that this was not the case," it said.

Both the prosecution and co-plaintiffs representing victims' families have the right to appeal the ruling within a week.

Christukat, who was 19 at the time, had acknowledged that he was in Oradour-sur-Glane and a member of the SS but disputed any involvement in the murders.

The male victims were mowed down with machine guns in a barn, with any survivors shot at close range with pistols before the barn was set ablaze.

Prosecutors had said that the suspect then went to the village church where several hundred women and children were being held prisoner.

The village has been a ghost town ever since the atrocity, deliberately preserved in its ravaged state as a memorial to those who died on one of the darkest days of World War II.



A view of Oradour-sur-Glane village in central France.

PHOTO: AFP



'Russia ordered spy to seduce Snowden'

ANI, London

A defector has revealed that Russian sex bomb spy Anna Chapman was ordered by her Russian spy bosses to seduce US whistleblower Edward Snowden.

According to former KGB major Boris Karpichkov, if Snowden accepted, he would have a right to Russian citizenship, which would have locked him in Russia. He said that the pair had met just once, but Snowden had become concerned about what the consequences would have been.

The 32-year-old spy even proposed marriage to Snowden on the orders of Russian intelligence high command on Twitter.

Mars rover finds strong potential for life

AGENCIES

For lifeless chemical compounds to organize themselves into something alive, scientists generally agree, three sets of things must be present.

- Standing water and an energy source.

- Five basic elements: carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, phosphorus and nitrogen.

- And time, lots of time.

In its search for environments where life might have started on Mars, the Curiosity rover has nailed the standing water, the energy and the key elements with the right atomic charges. As a result, scientists have concluded that at least some of the planet must have been habitable long ago.

But the period when all conditions were right was counted in hundreds to thousands of years, a very small opening by origin-of-life standards.

That has now changed. John P

Grotzinger of Caltech, the project scientist for the mission, reported at a news conference on Monday that the rover's yearlong trek to Mount Sharp provided strong new evidence that Gale Crater had large lakes, rivers and deltas, on and off, for millions to tens of millions of years. The geology shows that even when the surface water dried up, plenty of water would have remained underground, he said.

Moreover, the team concluded, numerous delta-like and lakelike formations detected by orbiting satellites are almost certainly the dried remains of substantial ancient lakes and deltas. None of this proves that life existed on the planet, but the case for an early Mars that was ripe and ready for life has grown stronger.

Nasa's Mars Science Laboratory Project uses Curiosity to assess ancient, potentially habitable environments and the significant changes the Martian environment has experienced over millions of years.



Gale Crater on the planet Mars as it is today.

Malaria deaths halved since 2000: WHO

AFP, Geneva

The number of people dying from malaria has almost halved since 2000, although progress in west Africa risks being reversed by the Ebola outbreak, the World Health Organization said yesterday.

The UN agency also warned of continuing gaps in access to mosquito nets and anti-malaria treatments, as well as worrying signs of resistance to insecticides and drugs.

Global mortality rates fell by 47 percent between 2000 and 2013 and by 53 percent in children under the age of five, the WHO said in its annual report on the disease.

WHO attributed the progress in large part to increasing financial and political commitment, as well as improvements in diagnosing and treating.