

# NEWSIN brief

## Obama rules out new sanctions on Russia

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama said Thursday he was not about to impose new sanctions on Russia over the Ukraine crisis, but nevertheless signed a law giving him the authority to do so. Meanwhile, Kiev's military yesterday said five Ukrainian soldiers had been killed and seven wounded in attacks by pro-Russian separatists in the past 24 hours.

## Turkey court releases anti-Erdogan editor

AFP, Istanbul

An Istanbul court yesterday ordered the release of an anti-government newspaper editor but remanded the head of a national television network in custody in a controversial case that has strained relations with the European Union. Ekrem Dumanli, the editor-in-chief of the Zaman daily, was to be freed but Samanyolu TV (STV) chief Hidayet Karaca was placed under arrest after they were detained in weekend raids of suspects accused of plotting to overthrow President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

## UN chief kicks off tour of Ebola-hit west Africa

AFP, Monrovia

UN chief Ban Ki-moon yesterday arrived in Liberia on the first stop of a visit to Ebola-ravaged west African countries for a first-hand assessment of global efforts to fight the epidemic. Ban will also travel to Guinea, Sierra Leone and Mali, where the UN is leading the response to the health crisis.

## US concerned over Egypt mass trials

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama spoke to his Egyptian counterpart Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on Thursday and expressed concern over mass trials and the continued detention of journalists and peaceful activists. Hundreds of Morsi supporters have been sentenced to die in swift trials the United Nations has called "unprecedented in recent history."

## US won't back Palestinian resolution

AFP, Washington

The United States will not support the current resolution put forward by the Palestinians setting the terms of a peace deal with Israel, a US official said Thursday. Washington has seen the text of a draft resolution circulating in the UN Security Council and "it is not something that we would support," State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters.



## TALIBAN'S SCHOOL CARNAGE

Indian welfare activists hold placards and light candles in Amritsar yesterday, as they pose in tribute to Pakistan children and staff killed in a Taliban attack on a school in Peshawar. Top right, Pakistani Muslims pray for the victims during the Friday prayers in Peshawar; a Pakistani soldier looks at gathered bodies of militants killed in a military operation near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

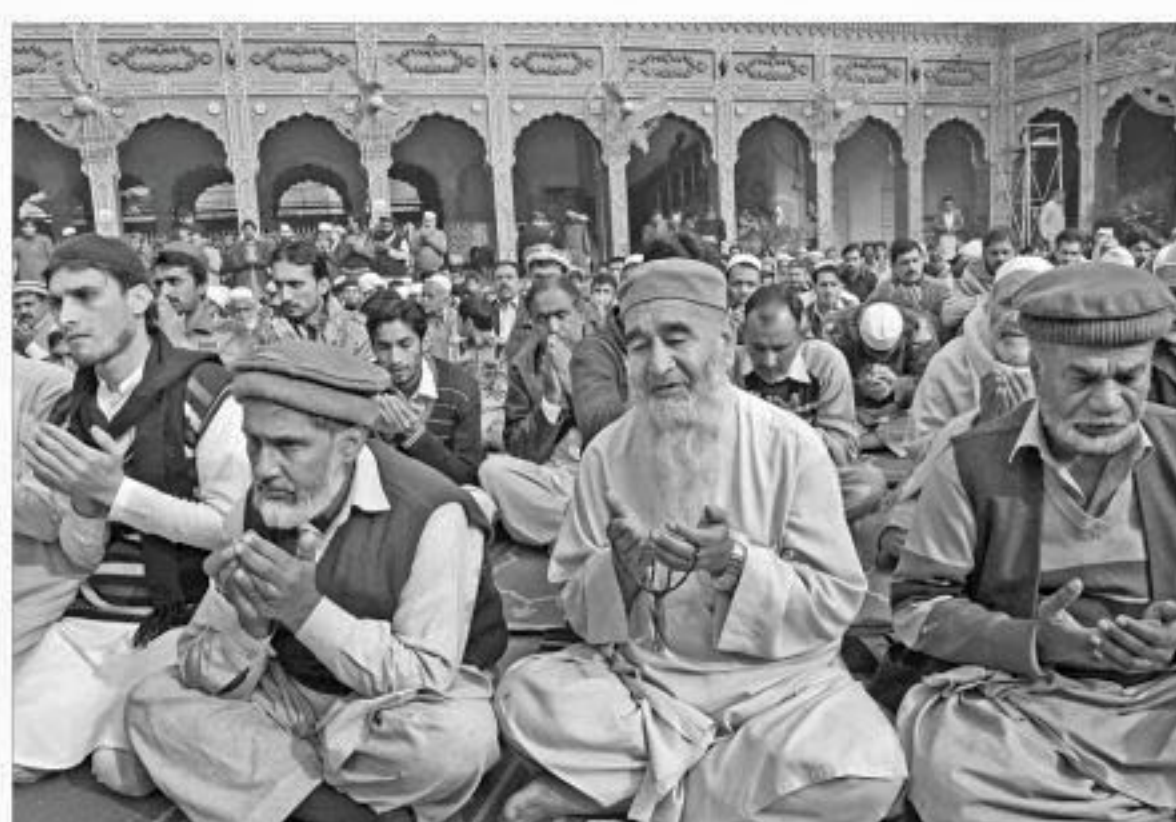


PHOTO: AFP

# Massacre 'Pakistan's 9/11' 26/11 'mastermind' to remain in jail

Says minister; army chief asks Nawaz Sharif to hang 3,000 terrorists in 48 hours

### AGENCIES

Pakistan's de facto foreign minister Sartaj Aziz yesterday told AFP the Taliban school massacre that killed 149 people is his country's own "mini 9/11" and a game changer in its fight against terror.

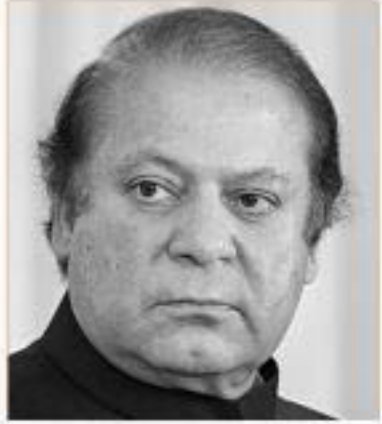
Meanwhile, from a Twitter account purported to be of Pakistan Army chief, Gen Raheel Sharif "asked PM Nawaz Sharif to hang all terrorists. More than 3,000 terrorists should be hanged in next 48 hours," reports the TNN.

Gen Sharif, who has frontally taken on the Taliban, is credited to have changed the army's approach towards extremist groups, from one of using them as allies -- as "strategic assets" against "enemies" like India -- to launching an uncompromising offensive against them.

Gen Sharif's Twitter profile makes for interesting reading. Overcome by the sheer horror of the Peshawar attack, he announced, "Enough is enough, now strict action should be taken against those who speak in

favour of terrorists."

Even as his soldiers were battling the terrorists in the school, Gen Sharif announced on Twitter that the army "has launched massive air strikes in Khyber on the intelligence reports. More than 10 air strikes have been carried out in last 1 hour."



Nawaz Sharif



Raheel Sharif

Threatening strong retribution against Taliban, Sharif tweeted, "#PakArmy will come at you #Taliban & will destroy you. And they will not target women & children. They are not coward like you."

Promising to go after terrorists, Sharif asked for popular support. "Dear people of Pakistan. Stand & support Pak Army.. We will surly eliminate TTP from our homeland

InshaAllah!"

In another tweet, Gen Sharif threatened Tehrik-i-Taliban, saying, "Message to TTP. You kill our child. Now you will see the deadly consequences and (be) ready to pay the price. Pak Army will revenge (sic) each & every single drop of blood of little departed angels. It's my promise."

Following the chief of army staff and the prime minister's vows to eradicate terrorism from the country, Pakistani security forces yesterday killed more than 50 suspected militants.

An ambush by security forces in the northwest yesterday left at least 32 militants dead, the military said, to add to 27 killed in air strikes and ground operations on Thursday.

In a separate operation on Friday, 18 more militants were killed in Khyber, the military said.

The army has been waging a major offensive against longstanding Taliban and other militant strongholds in the restive tribal areas on the Afghan border for the last six months.

# Kurds 'break' ISIS siege of Mount Sinjar

US airstrikes kill 'several top jihadist leaders' including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's top aide

AFP, Nahyat Al-ayadhiya

Kurdish forces pressed their biggest offensive against the Islamic State group so far yesterday, buoyed by US reports that jihadist supremo Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's top aide in Iraq has been killed.

Kurdish peshmerga forces were securing the surroundings of Mount Sinjar after breaking a months-old jihadist siege of the northwestern region while fighting was also reported near the city of Tall Afar further east.

The Pentagon said Thursday that US strikes had killed several top leaders of the group that proclaimed a "caliphate" straddling Syria and Iraq six months ago and rose to be the world's most feared

jihadist organisation.

"I can confirm that since mid-November, targeted coalition air strikes successfully killed multiple senior and mid-level leaders," spokesman Rear Admiral John Kirby said.

US officials said among those killed was Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, who was Baghdadi's deputy in charge of Iraq and would be the most senior ISIS leader to fall this year.

Kirby said strikes against the group's leadership were disrupting the jihadists' "ability to command and control current operations against" Iraqi federal and Kurdish forces.

The leaders of autonomous Kurdistan described the operation



they have spearheaded since Wednesday as the most successful so far against the jihadists.

After the US-led coalition paved the way with some 50 air strikes, around 8,000 peshmerga reclaimed some 700 square kilo-

metres in the Zumar and Sinjar regions in two days.

Late Thursday, they reached Mount Sinjar, where thousands of fighters and civilians from the Yazidi minority had been besieged for months.

"The peshmerga have liberated around 70 percent of the areas around Mount Sinjar, but the southern part of the Sinjar region is still under ISIS control," said Faisal Saleh, a Yazidi who has been stranded on the mountain.

According to a US military statement, two of the five air strikes carried out by coalition warplanes on Thursday targeted ISIS vehicles near Tall Afar.

Kurdish officers have said the latest peshmerga-led operation forced many ISIS militants to seek refuge across the Syria border or in their main hub of Mosul, Iraq's second city, around which they have been building berms and trenches.

## We've killed all, what next?

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Haunting details have emerged from the final conversation the Peshawar gunmen had with their handler moments before the end of Tuesday's brutal school massacre in Pakistan.

After slaughtering 132 school children and nine members of staff, militants contacted their commanders to say: "We have killed all the children in the auditorium. What do we do now?"

Wounded children have spoken from hospital of how many of their classmates were killed when the gunmen, wearing explosives strapped to their bodies, started to fire indiscriminately on students and their teachers.

Military spokesman Major General Asim Bajwa said many students were gathered for an event in the auditorium. Around 100 bodies were later recovered from this room alone, he said.

In the exchanges, reported by the Pakistan newspaper Dawn, one gunman called Abuzar appeals for directions from his handler, identified by officials as senior Taliban commander for the Peshawar region Umar Adizai.

Asked what the gunmen should do next, Umar responds: "Wait for the army people, kill them before blowing yourself up."

This, the officials said, was one of the final conversations intercepted between the gunmen and their handlers, taking place moments before the two remaining militants charged the army's special operatives.

The transcripts have been released as part of an intelligence dossier Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif shared with officials in Afghanistan on Wednesday.

General Sharif travelled to Afghanistan to share "vital elements of intelligence", a statement said, because officials believe the school massacre was ordered by the Pakistan Taliban leader Maulana Fazlullah.



## Modi 2nd among top-performing world leaders

PTI, Beijing

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was placed No 2, behind Chinese President Xi Jinping, in a list of 30 top-performing world leaders by a Japanese market research firm.

German chancellor Angela Merkel was on the third place in the list that also measured the confidence of citizens in their leaders.

The survey of more than 26,000 respondents, conducted this fall by Tokyo-based GMO Research rated Xi, Modi, and Merkel the top-performing world leaders, with scores of 7.5, 7.3, and 7.2 respectively on a scale of one to 10.

The survey results were published by Harvard Kennedy School's Ash Centre for Democratic Governance and Innovation, and were analysed by Anthony Saich, a China expert at the school.

The top three were followed by French President Francois Hollande (6.3), Japanese PM Shinzo Abe (6.1), and Putin (6.0) at the bottom. Obama (6.6) received middling marks, just ahead of British PPM David Cameron (6.5).

In regards to the confidence citizens have in how their leaders handle domestic and international affairs, Xi topped the list in both categories at 94.8 percent and 93.8 percent respectively, with Modi slightly trailing behind with 93.2 percent and 93.3 percent respectively.

## COMEDY FILM ON KIM JONG-UN



## Obama: We will respond

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama yesterday warned North Korea it would face retaliation over a cyber attack on Sony Pictures, as an envoy for Pyongyang denied involvement.

Obama, addressing reporters after the FBI said Pyongyang was to blame, said Washington would never bow to "some dictator" but admitted he believed Sony had erred in pulling the film.

"We will respond. We will respond proportionately and we'll respond in a place and time and manner that we choose," Obama said.

"I'm sympathetic to the concerns that they faced. Having said all that, yes, I think they made a mistake," he said.

"We cannot have a society in which some dictator some place can start imposing censorship here in the United States."

A Sony source had told AFP that the studio also believes Pyongyang was behind the attack.

## FBI accuses North Korea for Sony hack

BBC ONLINE

The US Federal Bureau of Investigation yesterday said North Korea was behind a cyber-attack on Sony Pictures over a film about its leader Kim Jong-un.

The agency said analysis of malware showed links to North Korea. Earlier the White House labelled the Sony breach a serious national security matter.

Sony withdrew The Interview, a new comedy film about North Korea's leader, after threats from hackers. Hackers have already released sensitive information stored on Sony computers.

They later issued a warning to members of the public planning to see The Interview. Referring to the 11 September 2001 terror attacks, they said "the world will be full of fear" if the film was screened.

Many cinemas scrapped plans to show The Interview, and Sony then cancelled the release of the film altogether - moves criticised in Hollywood as an attack on the freedom of expression.

The Interview, made by Sony Pictures, features James Franco and Seth Rogen as two journalists who are granted an audience with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. The CIA then enlists the pair to assassinate him. The film was due to have been released over Christmas.

## US-CUBA TIES White House open to Castro visit

AFP, Washington

A US visit by Cuban President Raul Castro is a possibility, the White House said Thursday, a day after he and US President Barack Obama announced a historic bilateral rapprochement.

With developments proceeding apace, a high-level US diplomat, Assistant Secretary of State Roberta Jacobson, revealed she will travel to Havana in late January for the first direct talks to "begin the process of restoration of diplomatic relations."

But amid celebrations on Havana's streets and plaudits ringing out from China to Chile over the prospects of burying a final vestige of the Cold War, American lawmakers smothered prospects of any rapid roll-back of the trade embargo at the heart of the dispute.

Obama, who said Washington will move to "end an outdated approach that for decades has failed to advance our interests," on Wednesday raised the previously unthinkable possibility of his visiting the island.

When reporters Thursday broached the subject of a Castro visit to the United States, White House spokesman Josh Earnest said: "I wouldn't rule out a visit from President Castro."

## Putin in love again

MAIL ONLINE

Vladimir Putin on Thursday admitted he is in love, fuelling rumours over a relationship with Olympic gymnast Alina Kabayeva.

Denying he had 'completely gone wild' in his romantic life, the divorced strongman revealed that he 'loves' and is loved in return, but refused to disclose the identity of his mystery partner.

If true, it could mean that Russia's 'most eligible man' is no longer available. Putin has been leading bachelor's life for more than a year since he split with wife Lyudmila after 30 years of marriage.

The subject of Putin's private life has been seen as taboo in Moscow but yesterday he was asked by a journalist at his annual press conference if he had time for the opposite sex. The 62-year-old replied: 'I do, I tell you'.

Whatever the case, Putin says he remains close to Lyudmila and their children.



Vladimir Putin and Alina Kabayeva.

PHOTO: MAIL ONLINE