

NEWS IN brief

Obama grants \$1b to Pakistan
PTI, Washington

President Barack Obama has signed a massive annual defence policy bill which grants \$1 billion to Pakistan for the expenses made by its army in support of the US military operations in war-torn Afghanistan. The National Defence Authorization Act for the fiscal year 2015, signed by Obama on Friday, sets overall defence spending at \$578 billion.

North Korea to snub UNSC meeting
AFP, United Nations

North Korea said Friday it will not send a representative to a UN Security Council meeting next week to discuss the country's human rights record and calls to refer Pyongyang to the International Criminal Court. The 15-member council will hold its first-ever meeting tomorrow on the situation in North Korea, despite objections from China -- Pyongyang's key ally -- and Russia.

FBI mishandles US evidence: report
AFP, Washington

The FBI has mishandled large amounts of evidence in its offices across the United States. The New York Times reported Friday after reviewing an internal report from the investigative force. The FBI has failed to keep close track of the weapons, valuables, money and drugs it keeps as part of its criminal cases, the report said, adding that almost half of the evidence reviewed by an internal investigation had errors. The probe reviewed more than 41,000 pieces of evidence.

BJP against forcible conversions: Amit Shah
PTI, Kochi

BJP President Amit Shah yesterday said his party was against forcible conversions and asked other political parties in the country to support a bill in this regard if they were 'sincere' in their approach to secularism. "BJP is against forcible conversions and that is why we want to bring a law. So-called secular parties should support BJP's move," Shah told reporters here.

Four Afghan Gitmo prisoners repatriated
AFP, Washington

Four Afghans held for more than a decade at Guantanamo Bay have been sent home, the Pentagon said yesterday, edging President Barack Obama closer towards his goal of closing the controversial US military jail. The latest transfers leave 132 detainees at Guantanamo Bay, the Pentagon said.



Teachers run as Turkish police use water cannons and tear gas to disperse them as they make their way to Kizilay Square in the capital Ankara, to demonstrate against the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's education policy, yesterday. Dozens of demonstrators were arrested yesterday as police used force to disperse a protest in favour of secular education, which the teachers say are being threatened by the ruling party.

Israel hits Gaza for the first time since truce
AFP, Gaza City

Israeli aircraft hit Gaza for the first time since an August truce ended 50 days of war after a rocket hit the Jewish state, witnesses and the army said early yesterday.

A spokesman for Gaza's health ministry said there were no casualties in the air strike, which came just hours after the rocket hit an open field in southern Israel on Friday without causing casualties or damage.

Hamas did not claim responsibility for the rocket launch but Israel holds the Islamist movement responsible for any rocket fire from Gaza regardless of who carries it out.

The summer war between Israel and Hamas killed 2,140 Palestinians, most of them civilians, and 73 people on the Israeli side, most of them soldiers.

US bans trade with Crimea

Russia brands new sanctions roadblock to Ukraine peace

AGENCIES

US President Barack Obama has imposed sweeping sanctions on Russia-annexed Crimea with an executive order prohibiting American exports of goods or services to the contested peninsula and barring Crimean imports.

Russia yesterday accused the West of fuelling unrest in Ukraine by adopting anti-Kremlin sanctions that further erode the prospects of peace talks to end the separatist war.

The new measures also include sanctions on 24 Ukrainian and Russian individuals and on a number of companies deemed to be destabilising Ukraine. They include the Russian equity investment group, Marshall Capital Partners, and the Night Wolves biker group, over its involvement in Crimean military action.

Obama said the move showed the US would never accept Russia's annexation of Crimea in March.

Similar measures agreed by the European Union earlier this week came into effect on Saturday. Canada went a step further by also targeting Russia's vital oil and gas industry, which accounts for about half the government's tax revenues.

After the peninsula was annexed, pro-Russian separatists took control of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine in April, and later declared independence.

Some 4,700 people have died and another million have been displaced by fighting in recent months.

On Friday, five Ukrainian soldiers were killed in fighting - the highest death toll since the latest attempt at a ceasefire began on 9 December.

In addition to the goods, technology and services ban, US individuals or companies cannot now buy any real estate or businesses in Crimea or fund Crimean firms.

The European Union announced its own sanctions against the region on Thursday. All investment in Crimea is banned, as is participation in Russian oil and gas exploration in the Black Sea. European cruise ships will not be able to visit the peninsula's ports.

But like the EU, Obama said he would not yet impose new sanctions on Russia itself, urging it again to de-escalate the tension in eastern Ukraine.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that "threatening new sanctions against Russia could undermine the possibility of normal cooperation between our countries for a long time".

"We advise Washington and Ottawa to think about the consequences of such actions," the Russian foreign minister said yesterday. "The sanctions are directed to disrupt the political process," it added.

The Ukraine crisis began a year ago, when pro-Moscow leader Viktor Yanukovich abandoned an agreement on closer trade ties with EU in favour of closer co-operation with Russia. This decision sparked pro-EU protests in the capital Kiev, eventually toppling Yanukovich in February. Russia annexed Crimea after his removal.

UKRAINE CRISIS

ROW OVER SONY PICTURES HACK

N Korea wants joint probe

REUTERS, Seoul/washington

North Korea said US accusations that it was involved in a cyberattack on Sony Pictures were "groundless slander" and that it was wanted a joint investigation into the incident with the United States.

An unnamed spokesman of the North's foreign ministry said there would be "grave consequences" if Washington refused to agree to the joint probe and continued to accuse Pyongyang, the official KCNA news agency reported yesterday.

On Friday, President Barack Obama blamed North Korea for the devastating cyberattack, which led to the Hollywood studio cancelling "The Interview", a comedy on the fictional assassination of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

The president declined to be specific about any actions under consideration.

In its first substantive response to the accusation, the isolated North Korea said it could prove it had nothing to do with the massive hacking attack.

"We propose to conduct a joint investigation with the US in response to groundless slander being perpetrated by the US by mobilizing public opinion," the North

Korean spokesman said.

It was the first time the United States had directly accused another country of a cyberattack of such magnitude on American soil and set up a possible new confrontation between the longtime foes.

Obama said he wished that Sony had spoken to him first before yanking the movie, suggesting it could set a bad precedent.



AUSTRALIA CHILDREN MURDERS

Mother arrested for killing eight

BBC ONLINE

The mother of seven of eight children found dead at a house in Cairns, Australia, has been arrested on suspicion of murder. Mersane Warria, 37, is talking to officers. She has not been charged. She was found at her home with stab wounds, alongside the bodies of the eight children. A coroner is due to conduct post-mortem examinations.

The victims were aged 18 months to 14 years. Police have not said how they died. The eighth child was her niece.

Confirming the arrest, Cairns Detective Inspector Bruno Asnicar said: "The 37-year-old mother of several of the children involved in this incident has been arrested for murder overnight and is currently under police guard at the Cairns Base Hospital."

Identified by the local media, Warria remains in a stable condition in hospital recovering from stab wounds.

"At this stage we're not looking for anybody else - we're comfortable that the community at large is safe," police said. Police found a number of weapons at the scene, including knives, which are being examined.

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott said in a statement it was an "unspeakable crime". The deaths come just days after the siege of a cafe in Sydney which ended with the gunman and two hostages dead.



Pakistani children arrive at their school in Peshawar yesterday, after three days of mourning for the children and staff killed by Taliban militants in an attack on an army-run school. The massacre is "Pakistan's 9/11", the country's top foreign policy official told AFP, saying the assault that left 149 dead would change the country's approach to fighting terror.

Pak Taliban chief killed?

IANS, Islamabad

Even as the Pakistani army intensified its anti-terrorism operations in the wake of Tuesday's Taliban attack on a Peshawar school that left 148 students and teachers dead, unconfirmed reports said that Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) chief Mulla Fazlullah was killed in an air strike inside Afghanistan early Saturday.

An unverified Twitter account of the Pakistan defence ministry stated early yesterday: "News of Fazlullah's killing is being confirmed by ministry of defence."

However, according to sources, only the director general of the Inter-Services Public Relations is authorized to issue statements related to terror strikes.

ISIS executes 100 foreign jihadists

AFP, London

The Islamic State extremist group has executed 100 of its own foreign fighters who tried to flee their headquarters in the Syrian city of Raqqa, the Financial Times newspaper said Saturday.

An activist opposed to both ISIS and the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who is well-known to the British press in October, said he had "verified 100 executions" of foreign ISIS fighters trying to leave the jihadist group's de facto capital.

ISIS fighters in Raqqa said the group has created a military police to clamp down on foreign fighters who do not report for duty. Many jihadists have been arrested for that, the FT reported.

Some jihadists have become disillusioned with the realities of fighting in Syria, reports have said.

According to the British press in October, five Britons, three French, two Germans and two Belgians wanted to return home after complaining that they ended up fighting against other rebel groups rather than Assad's regime. They were being held prisoner by ISIS.

In total, between 30 and 50 Britons want to return but fear they face jail, according to researchers at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King's College London.

Since a US-led coalition began a campaign of air strikes against ISIS in August, the extremist group has lost ground to local forces and seen the number of its fighters killed rise significantly.

No question of resigning

Indian diplomat tells NDTV after losing her post

NDTV ONLINE

Diplomat Devyani Khobragade, who was stripped of her duties over unauthorised statements to the media, told NDTV yesterday that she was not going to resign from her post, despite facing an administrative inquiry.

"There is no question of resigning (from the Foreign Service). I have not violated any service rules," the diplomat told NDTV.

Reports on Saturday said Khobragade has been removed from her current post in the foreign ministry for an unauthorised media interview and for not disclosing that her children held US passports.

The Indian government's action comes a week after the mother-of-two spoke to NDTV about her arrest and strip search in New York last December while serving as India's deputy consul-general on charges of mistreating her servant.

She had denied the charge and subsequently returned to India, but the incident triggered fury in New Delhi and led to the resignation of then US ambassador Nancy Powell. The row saw weeks of feisty

exchanges that strained bilateral ties and left resentment on both sides.

On whether she considered her decision to speak to the media a mistake, Khobragade said, "I have spoken under the ambit of conduct rules. The rules clearly stipulate that you have to mention (during such interviews) that you are expressing your personal views, which I did. You do not say anything that can be taken as a negative view of government policies; I have not done anything like that".

"It is true that she has been placed on compulsory wait," a source in the foreign ministry told news agency Agence France-Presse, adding that Khobragade now faces an administrative inquiry. Compulsory wait implies that Ms Khobragade remains in ministerial service but without a specific job.

During the interview to NDTV last week, she said that her "kids were born in the US and are considered US citizens", a statement that reportedly took the ministry by surprise.

"If there is any appealable action against me, I will appeal," she added.



Devyani Khobragade

US issues worldwide travel alert

AFP, Washington

The United States issued a worldwide travel alert Friday, warning Americans to be vigilant during the holiday period, especially in the wake of a deadly siege in Australia.

"The lone wolf attack in Sydney, Australia... resulting in the deaths of two hostages, is a reminder that US citizens should be extra cautious, maintain a very high level of vigilance and take appropriate steps to enhance their personal security," the State Department alert read.

The agency said an analysis of past attacks "strongly suggests" terrorists this holiday season are focusing not only on US government facilities but also on hotels, shopping areas, places of worship and schools.

Xi, in Macau, pushes 'one China' idea

AFP, Macau

Chinese President Xi Jinping warned Hong Kong and Macau yesterday to remember they are part of "one China", as pro-democracy campaigners in both semi-autonomous territories call for free leadership elections.

Dozens of protesters marched through Macau's historic centre yesterday afternoon as Xi wrapped up his two-day visit, just days after police cleared the last remaining protest sites in neighbouring Hong Kong.

Xi yesterday warned both territories against a "misguided approach".

"We must both adhere to the 'one China' principle and respect the difference of the two systems," Xi said at the inauguration of Macau's chief executive Fernando Chui, who was selected for a second term by a pro-Beijing committee in August.

"At no time should we focus only on one side to the neglect of the other. This is the only way leading to sound and steady progress. Otherwise a misguided approach from the beginning, just like putting one's left foot into the right shoe, would lead us to nowhere," Xi said.

Security has been tight during the trip with reporters on the airport tarmac waiting for Xi's arrival Friday not allowed to hold umbrellas and handed raincoats instead.

Both Macau and Hong Kong enjoy freedoms unseen on the mainland -- but their leaders are selected by a loyalist committee.



Xi Jinping