

NEWSIN brief

Ebola death toll climbs to 7,373

More than 7,370 people have now died from the Ebola virus, almost all of them in west Africa, the World Health Organization said Saturday. The UN health agency reported that as of December 16, there had been 19,031 cases of infection from the deadly virus in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, of which 7,373 people had died.

Violence kills 14 in Afghanistan

A roadside bomb and a Taliban attack on a police post have killed 14 people including children in Afghanistan, officials said yesterday. Seven civilians died when a bomb hit a pickup truck travelling from Asadabad, to Nari district near the border with Pakistan on Saturday.

Elton John weds after 21 yrs with partner

British pop legend Elton John, 67, married long-time partner David Furnish in Windsor yesterday, the ninth anniversary of their civil partnership, with the singer posting evidence on social media. A star-studded ceremony will take place at their Windsor home, west of London. Around 50 guests, including David and Victoria Beckham, Elizabeth Hurley and Ozzy and Sharon Osbourne, have been invited to the ceremony, according to British press reports.

US delivers 10 Apaches to Egypt

The United States has delivered 10 Apache helicopters to Egypt in recent weeks after lifting part of a freeze on aid to the north African nation, a US official said Saturday. The United States annually allocates some \$1.5 billion in aid to Egypt, including \$1.3 billion in military assistance.

French cops kill Muslim attacker

French police on Saturday shot dead a knife-wielding man who attacked three officers in a police station while shouting "Allahu Akbar" ("God is great"). The man wounded one officer's face at the entrance to the police station in Joue-les-Tours near the central city of Tours and injured two others before he was killed. The perpetrator was a French national born in Burundi.

Bullet that can change direction in mid-air

The United States Department of Defense has successfully tested a bullet that can change direction after it has been fired, apparently using fins built into the shell to direct it in the air and account for wind and targets moving. The Extreme Accuracy Tasked Ordnance weapon, known as Exacto, is made by American industrial company Teledyne Technologies. The firm is making the bullet for the American government's military research agency, Darpa. A video made by the company shows the bullet being fired twice, deliberately off target. The second time it swings back in towards the target and hits.



Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) activists rally for the victims of the Peshawar school massacre, in Lahore, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan executes 4 more When a gravedigger weeps

31 militants killed in air strikes, raids as anger simmers

AGENCIES

Four Pakistani terror convicts on death row were executed at a jail in Faisalabad yesterday, after the government ended a moratorium on the death penalty earlier this week.

The executed convicts - Zubair Ahmed, Rasheed Qureshi, Ghulam Sarwar Bhatti and Akhlaque Ahmed - had been found guilty in a case related to an attack on former President Pervez Musharraf, reports NDTV.

The executions were carried out in a district jail in Faisalabad after strict security measures were put in place.

The government ended the six-year ban on capital punishment for terror-related cases following a brutal terror attack on a school in Peshawar on Tuesday that killed 149 people, mostly children.

On Friday, two convicted terrorists - Aqil alias Doctor Usman and Arshad Mehmood - had been executed at the Faisalabad jail in Pakistan's Punjab province.

Aqil, who uses the name Doctor Usman, was convicted for an attack on the army headquarters in Rawalpindi in 2009. Arshad Mehmood was convicted for his involvement in a 2003 assassination attempt on former president General Pervez Musharraf.

On Thursday, Pakistan's military chief signed death warrants for six terrorists on death row after the government ended the death penalty moratorium on Wednesday.

Pakistan's decision to relinquish a ban on the death penalty in terror-related cases came as the country's political and military leaders vowed to wipe out the homegrown Islamist insurgency following the attack on the army school.

Meanwhile, at least 24 suspected militants were killed in air strikes on their positions in the stronghold of the banned Lashkar-i-Islam in Khyber Agency's Tirah valley on Saturday while raids by security personnel near Peshawar claimed seven lives.

According to some officials, a facilitator of the recent school attack and a brother of the mastermind lost their lives in the raids, reports Dawn.

The violence came as thousands of Pakistanis flocked to the Peshawar school yesterday to mourn the 149 people -- mainly children -- massacred by the Taliban and demand action against militants.

Pakistan has described Tuesday's bloody rampage as its own "mini 9/11", calling it a game-changer in the fight against extremism.

One of the gravediggers at Peshawar's largest graveyard has a rule. He says he never cries when he buries the dead. He's a professional, he says.

But as the dead bodies mostly children started coming in from a school massacre this week that killed 148 people, he began to weep.

"I have buried bodies of the deceased of different ages, sizes, and weights," Taj Muhammad told The Associated Press. "Those small bodies I've been burying since yesterday felt much heavier than any of the big ones I've buried before."

Muhammad spoke during a break from the digging, as he drank green tea with one of his colleagues and his two sons who work with him in the Rahman Baba graveyard, named after a beloved Sufi poet, in Peshawar.

Wearing a faded shalwar kameez, the 43-year-old Muhammad was covered in dust from a freshly dug grave.

The school massacre on Tuesday horrified Pakistanis across the country. The militants, wearing suicide vests, climbed over the fence into a military-run school, burst into an auditorium filled with students and opened fire. The bloodshed went on for several hours until security forces finally

AP, Peshawar

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were able to kill the attackers. The Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack.

For the first time "I couldn't control my tears. I cannot explain but I wept. I know it was against the rules of our profession but it was the moment to break the rules," the father of eight children said.

Muhammad said he usually charges 2,000 to 5,000 Pakistani rupees (about \$20 to \$50) to dig a grave. And it is money he needs. In the past six or seven months, his income has dropped with fewer bodies to bury, a sign of the lull in violence in the city until this week.

But he didn't charge anyone to bury the victims of Tuesday's attack.

It was like burying his own children, he said. "How could I ask or receive money for making the grave of my own child?"



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians await permission to enter Egypt as they gather inside the Rafah border crossing between Egypt and southern Gaza Strip, yesterday. Egypt is set to reopen the Rafah border crossing with Gaza for the second time in two months to allow those stranded in Egypt to enter the Palestinian territory, officials said.

US to review N Korea terror status: Obama

AFP, Washington

The United States is mulling whether or not to place North Korea back onto its list of state sponsors of terrorism President Barack Obama said in an interview aired yesterday following the communist nation's alleged cyber attack on Sony Pictures.

"We're going to review those through a process that's already in place," the president said in a pre-taped interview on CNN's "State of the Union." "And we don't make those judgments just based on the news of the day. We look systematically at what's been done and based on those facts, we'll make those determinations in the future."

Obama added that North Korea's hack of Sony Pictures was an act of "cyber vandalism" and not an act of war.

"No, I don't think it was an act of war. I think it was an act of cyber vandalism that was very costly, very expensive. We take it very seriously," Obama said in remarks released in advance.

Washington accuses Pyongyang of being behind a hacking at Sony which led to the release of embarrassing emails and caused executives to halt the release of the madcap comedy action film "The Interview." The film about a fictional CIA plot to kill the country's leader infuriated North Korea.

Obama's remarks, in the interview which taped on Friday, followed a call from a leading US senator to reconsider North Korea's terror designation.



CHILDREN TRAGEDY Aussie mother charged with murder

AFP, Cairns

The mother of seven of eight children killed in Australia was charged with their murder yesterday, police said, describing it as the most tragic episode in their career as a makeshift memorial saw an outpouring of grief.

The 37-year-old, named in local media as Mersane Warria, was charged with eight counts of murder after the bodies of the children -- four girls and four boys aged between two to 14 -- were found in the northern city of Cairns on Friday morning.

The murders have stunned Australia, still reeling from a dramatic siege in a central Sydney cafe this week, which left two hostages and a gunman dead, and prompted widespread shock and anger.

Hindus 'regained' empire of Delhi after 800 yrs

Says VHP patron as mass conversion in Modi's Gujarat sparks anger

AGENCIES

Amid a growing religious conversion row, Vishwa Hindu Parishad yesterday said that Hindu values would be restored in the country.

Speaking at a book launch, VHP patron Ashok Singhal said it was due to their "struggle" in the last 50 years that Hindus have "regained" the lost "empire" of Delhi after 800 years.

"Our culture and religion were subjugated and we struggled. In 800 years, a day has now come in which we can say we have a government which is committed to protecting Hindutva. Our values will be gradually established in the country," Singhal added.

Referring to the BJP government, he said Hindus have come back to power in Delhi after Rajput king Prithviraj Chauhan lost it in the 12th century.

Earlier, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat on Saturday described India as a Hindu rashtra (nation).

Addressing the first-ever public rally by Vishwa Hindu Parishad in West Bengal, Bhagwat said, "This is our own country, our Hindu 'rashtra' (nation). ... What we have lost in the past, we will try to bring it back. No one should be afraid of Hindus rising. Those who are raising their voice against the rise of Hindus are selfish and have vested interests. And if they oppose, there will be confrontation."

"Hindus have been tolerating crimes by Bangladesh or Pakistan. Our God says after 100 crimes, you must not forgive any crime," he said.

These comments are significant at a time when political parties in the opposition have unitedly stalled Rajya Sabha following 'ghar wapsi' programmes by saffron outfits.

Meanwhile, hardline Hindu groups came under fire yesterday after some 200 Christians were converted in the Indian prime minister's home state, amid increasing concern at the right-wing government's perceived pro-Hindu tilt.

The radical VHP said it converted Christian tribal people to their original Hindu faith in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's western home state of Gujarat late Saturday.

The mass event drew widespread criticism from Christian groups and Modi's political opponents. They accused radical organisations linked to Modi's ruling party, like the RSS, of forcing or enticing religious minorities to convert to Hinduism.

"Extreme right wing is flexing its muscles. VHP/RSS through Hindutva ("Hinduness") ... rewriting history and economic policies," Digvijay Singh, a leader of the opposition Congress party, posted on Twitter early yesterday.

It happened hours after Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its ideological mentor RSS called for a new law to ban "forced religious conversions".

The world's most populous democracy is a secular country under the constitution and religious freedom is considered a fundamental right.

A hardline group linked to the BJP was accused of converting some 50 slum-dwelling Muslim families about a week ago in the Taj Mahal city of Agra. One of the converts told AFP they were promised ration cards and other financial incentives if they switched religions.

Critics say Hindu hardline groups have become emboldened since the BJP was elected, promoting a Hindu-dominant agenda. Modi, who spent his early years in the RSS, has made no comment on religious issues since becoming premier.

India is 80 percent Hindu while Muslims make up 13.4 percent of the 1.2 billion population. Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs and other religions account for the rest.



Ashok Singhal



Mohan Bhagwat



Tunisia votes in presidential runoff

AFP, Tunis

Tunisians voted yesterday in the runoff of the country's first free presidential election, with authorities urging a big turnout to answer efforts to disrupt the final leg of a four-year transition.

Just hours before polls opened at 8:00 am, troops guarding ballot papers in the central region of Kairouan came under attack and shot dead one assailant and captured three, the defence ministry said.

The second round vote pits 88-year-old favourite Beji Caid Essebsi, leader of the anti-Islamist Nidaa Tounes party, against incumbent Moncef Marzouki, who held the post through an alliance with the moderate Islamist movement Ennahda.

Ahead of the vote, which sets Tunisia apart from the turmoil of other Arab Spring countries, jihadists had issued a videotaped threat against the North African state's political establishment.

It is the first time that Tunisians have freely elected their president since independence from France in 1956. After three hours of voting, turnout reached 14.04 percent, election organisers said. Polls were due to close at 6:00 pm and the result could be announced as early as today evening.