

NEWSIN brief

George HW Bush, 90, in hospital

AFP, Washington

Former US president George HW Bush, 90, has been admitted to a Texas hospital suffering shortness of breath, a family spokesman said Tuesday. He is under observation as pre-caution, sources said. The 41st US president and the oldest of the four living former US presidents, Bush has seemed frail in recent public appearances.

Obama's immigration case dismissed

AFP, Washington

A US federal judge handed a victory to President Barack Obama late Tuesday, throwing out a lawsuit over controversial actions he took last month shielding millions of undocumented migrants from deportation. The suit brought by Joseph Arpaio, the conservative sheriff of Maricopa County, Arizona, challenging the constitutionality of the president's actions, was dismissed by Judge Beryl Howell.

Australian charged over terrorism plot

AFP, Sydney

An Australian man was charged yesterday with possessing documents connected to a planned terrorist attack on government targets in Sydney, but police insisted people should not be afraid. Sulayman Khalid, 20, who also goes by the name Abu Bakr, was arrested following raids last week which uncovered a large number of documents, a rifle, and two shotguns.

Omar Abdullah resigns as J&K CM

NDTV ONLINE

Omar Abdullah has resigned as Jammu and Kashmir chief minister yesterday after a hung verdict in the assembly elections on Monday. With 15 seats only, Abdullah has made clear he will not take the lead for talks on government formation. The People's Democratic Party (28 seats) is expected to explore government formation. The BJP has won 25 seats in its best performance in J&K ever.



World's oldest FB user dies aged 114

CNN ONLINE

A woman believed to be the world's oldest Facebook user has died at the age of 114, her family said. Anna Stoehr of Plainview, Minnesota, gained widespread attention in October when she said she'd had to lie about her age to sign up for the social network. Facebook responded by celebrating her impressive longevity on her birthday. Anna Stoehr -- who leaves 5 children, 27 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren -- died Sunday.

SA president Zuma hints at 5th wife

AFP, Johannesburg

South Africa's President Jacob Zuma, 72, has hinted he may be ready to take a fifth wife to accompany him through old age, a newspaper reported yesterday. During a visit to a Durban township Tuesday Zuma said: "I do have wives but I'm yet to marry my last one". Zuma, who has around 20 children, has married six times but currently has four wives on the state's budget, despite criticism from some tax-payers.

BLACK TEEN SHOT AGAIN

Police scuffle with as many as 100 protesters at the scene of the latest fatal police shooting in Berkeley, Missouri, on late Tuesday. *Inset*, mother of Antonio Martin, the deceased, reacts after hearing the news. Police yesterday said Martin was shot dead after he allegedly pointed a gun at an officer. (Story on page 16)

PHOTO: AP



ISIS downs coalition plane, captures pilot

AGENCIES

The Islamic State group yesterday shot down a warplane from the US-led coalition over northern Syria and captured a Jordanian pilot, a monitoring group said.

Jordan's military confirmed that one of its pilots was captured by the jihadist group after his plane went down in Syria, official news agency Petra said.

It was the first warplane by the US-led coalition to be shot down. The coalition has carried out hundreds of airstrikes against ISIS positions in Syria since Sept 23, reports AP.

"During a mission Wednesday morning conducted by several Jordanian Air Force planes against hideouts of the ISIS terrorist organisation in the Raqa region, one of the planes went down and the pilot was taken hostage" by ISIS, Petra quoted a source from the military's general staff as saying.

The official did not say why the plane went down, but both the jihadists and a monitoring group said it had been shot with an anti-aircraft missile, reports AFP.

ISIS released photographs of the captured pilot and showed a military card identifying him as 26-year-old First Lieutenant Maaz al-Kassasbeh.

His father Youssef was quoted by Jordanian news website Saraya as saying the family had been informed by the air force of his capture.

He said he was told the military was "working to save his life" and that Jordan's ruler, King Abdullah II, was following events.



The Britain-based Observatory, which relies on a wide network of sources inside Syria, said ISIS had used a missile taken from Syrian rebels who have been battling President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Jordan is among a number of countries that have joined the US-led alliance carrying out air strikes against ISIS after the jihadists seized control of large parts of Syria and Iraq. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Bahrain are taking part in the air strikes in Syria alongside the United States.

Iraq blast kills 26 anti-ISIS fighters

AFP, Baghdad

A suicide bomber attacked Sunni anti-jihadist fighters south of Baghdad yesterday, killing at least 26 people, while a senior counter-terrorism officer was shot dead in north Iraq, officials said.

The attack on the fighters, known as Sahwa, near a military base in the Madain area also wounded at least 56 people.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack, but suicide bombings are a tactic almost exclusively employed by Sunni extremists in Iraq, including ISIS group, which Sahwa militia forces have fought against.

The Sahwa, or "Awakening" in Arabic, dates back to the height of the US-led war in Iraq, when Sunni tribesmen joined forces with the Americans to battle both Sunni and Shia insurgents.

Ukraine peace talks resume in Minsk

Russia slams Nato's war-mongering

AFP, Minsk

Ukrainian and rebel envoys prepared for intense talks yesterday aimed at ending a pro-Russian uprising that has left the ex-Soviet republic in ruins and upset East-West ties.

A successful round of preliminary negotiations in the Belarusian capital Minsk could pave the way for a second meeting on Friday at which a final agreement is signed.

But sharply contrasting visions of Ukraine's place in Europe and its system of government as a whole, threaten to block a solution to the eight-month crisis.

Pro-Russian militias rose up in the industrial east after Kiev's historic shift towards Europe last winter, and the subsequent ouster of an unpopular Moscow-backed president.

Separatist commanders in Lugansk and Donetsk since have declared their own republics and will settle for no less than Ukraine becoming a loose federation in which they manage most of their own affairs.

Meanwhile, Russia yesterday said Nato was turning Ukraine into a "frontline of confrontation" and threatened to sever remaining ties with the Atlantic military alliance if Ukraine's hopes of joining it were realized.

The Kiev parliament's renunciation of Ukraine's neutral status on Tuesday in pursuit of Nato membership has outraged Moscow. It is likely to take years for Ukraine to meet the technical criteria for accession to Nato and, even then, there is no certainty that the alliance is ready to take on such a political hot potato.

PESHAWAR ATTACK

Pak to name schools after slain children

IANS, Islamabad

Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province Chief Minister Perviz Khattak has announced that government educational institutions in the province would be named after the children killed by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants in the barbaric attack December 16 on the Army Public School in Peshawar.

"Government schools and colleges will be named after the deceased school children in the areas they belonged to," Dawn online quoted Khattak as saying during an event held late Tuesday at the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly building to mourn the killing of more than 140 students and teachers.

The event was attended by treasury and opposition lawmakers and assembly employees.



Vajpayee to get Bharat Ratna

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday conferred its highest civilian honour on former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who is credited with bringing about a thaw in relations with Pakistan.

The charismatic former leader from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who turns 90 today and is in ill health, was premier first in 1996 and again from 1998 to 2004.

Known for his consensual approach, his nearly five decades of parliamentary experience earned him respect across the political spectrum, including from the rival Congress party.

Current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, also of the BJP, said he was "delighted" by the decision to award Vajpayee the Bharat Ratna.

"A guide, inspiration & giant among giants. His contribution to India is invaluable," Modi tweeted.

The Bharat Ratna is also being conferred on the late Indian educationist Madan Mohan Malviya, who established India's renowned Banaras Hindu University and also took part in the country's independence movement.

Just 43 people have been honoured with the title since its inception, including scientist C V Raman and star cricketer Sachin Tendulkar.

Israel strikes Gaza again

Approves 380 new east Jerusalem settler homes

AFP, Gaza City

Israel yesterday launched an air strike in southern Gaza and killed a Hamas militant after a sniper attack on a patrol seriously wounded a soldier, the army and medics said.

It was only the second time Israel had struck Gaza since a 50-day war ended with a truce on August 26, after witnesses reported a first strike early on Saturday.

The Israeli military said it acted after its troops came under fire from a sniper while they were on the Israeli side of the border fence.

"In response to the firing at our forces, who were east of the fence in the southern Gaza Strip, we carried out immediate attacks against the relevant targets. There was an air strike and one by a tank," it said.

Palestinian medical sources said Tayseer al-Ismary, 33, was killed "as a result of gunfire and shrapnel from a tank shell". Hamas

sources said he was a member of its military wing, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades.

Nearly 2,200 Palestinians were killed during the July-August war, mostly civilians, and 73 on the Israeli side, most of them soldiers.

Meanwhile, Israeli authorities yesterday gave final approval to the construction of 380 new settler homes in two areas of annexed east Jerusalem, a local official said.

Despite repeated warnings from Washington that it is fuelling tensions, Israel has approved a series of plans for new settler homes in east Jerusalem in recent months.

Israel seized east Jerusalem during the 1967 Six-Day War and later annexed it in a move never recognised by the international community.

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman insisted last month that Israel would never consider the building of Jewish settlements in Jerusalem as "settlement activity".



WHERE SANTAS ARE TEAR-GASSED

This was the scene in Bethlehem earlier yesterday as Palestinian protesters, some of whom were dressed as Father Christmas, clashed with Israeli security forces. The Palestinian Christians demanded an occupation free Palestine.

PHOTO: INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Abe returns as PM after election win

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's parliament yesterday confirmed Shinzo Abe for another term as prime minister after his election triumph, but the return to power stirred warnings from China over a bid to change the pacifist constitution.

The lower house voted overwhelmingly for 60-year-old Abe with 328 votes against 73 for acting opposition leader Katsuya Okada. That was followed by an upper house poll which officially confirmed Abe as premier.

His new cabinet was largely unchanged with Taro Aso returning as deputy premier and finance minister, Fumio Kishida as foreign minister and Yoichi Miyazawa in the industry minister post.

Industry is a key portfolio that oversees Japan's nuclear power sector, as Abe looks to restart more atomic reactors shuttered after the 2011 crisis at the Fukushima plant.

The only new face was Gen Nakatani, replacing Akinori Eto as defence minister after Eto declined reappointment in the midst of a political funding scandal.

Nakatani, 57, headed the defence agency -- later upgraded to a government ministry -- in 2001-2002.

"The environment surrounding Japan has been drastically changing, so I was told to prepare security legislation to enable seamless responses," Nakatani said at the prime minister's office, quoted by Kyodo News.

On top of trying to kickstart the world's number three economy, Abe has vowed to pursue a nationalist agenda, including persuading a sceptical public of the need to revise the pacifist constitution.

Adivasis retaliate, kill 2 Bodos in restive Assam

Death toll of Tuesday's attacks climb to 65

TNN, New Delhi

Two Bodos have been killed by adivasis in retaliatory killings in Assam. The adivasis have also torched a Bodo village in Kokrajhar district yesterday.

The retaliatory killings come a day after Bodo militants killed 65 adivasis in twin attacks. Union home minister Rajnath Singh condemned the violence in Assam.

"Incident in Assam is condemnable, this was an act of terror and that is how we plan to look at it as," Rajnath said.

Earlier yesterday, three adivasis protesting against attack by Bodo militants were killed in police firing. An earlier version of this story said that five protesting adivasis were killed in police firing.

However, Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi talking to reporters said that only three people were killed in clashes with police.

Adivasis also set ablaze houses allegedly belonging to the people of the Bodo community in Phuloguri area under Bishwanath Chariati police station in Sonitpur district.

Curfew has been clamped since Tuesday night in areas under four police stations in Sonitpur district. Late at Tuesday night, the Army was called in to maintain law and order in the troubled areas.

Protest rallies were also taken out yesterday by thousands of tea garden workers, armed with bow and arrows, and a seven-km stretch of National Highway 15 was blocked by the protestors near Dhekiajuli in Sonitpur.

Gogoi has directed state ministers Neelamani Sen Deka and Basanta Das to visit Kokrajhar and ministers Rockybul Hussain, Tanka Bahadur Rai and Pritibi Majhi to Sonitpur district.

He said the militants will no longer be allowed to "hit and run" and the prime minister and the home minister have assured him all help.

Police said the killings started around 5:00pm on Tuesday at Maitalubasti in Sonitpur district in northern Assam, bordering Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan.

Union home minister Rajnath Singh, along with MoS Kiren Rijiju, visited Assam yesterday afternoon to take stock of the situation.



Sony releases Kim- comedy online

BBC ONLINE

Sony Pictures is distributing its film The Interview online, after a cyber-attack and a row over its release.

The film is being offered through a dedicated website - seetheinterview.com - as well as via Google and Microsoft but is only available in the US. Sony had previously pulled the film, whose plot centres on a plan to assassinate North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

The cancellation had been criticised by US President Barack Obama. Since then, several hundred independent cinemas across the US have come forward offering to show the title.

The digital deal means the film is available through Google services YouTube and Play, and Microsoft's Xbox Video platform.

The film costs \$5.99 (£3.80) to rent, or \$14.99 to buy, Sony said.

Shortly after going live, the seetheinterview.com website was rendered inaccessible, most likely due to heavy traffic. Sony Pictures had suffered an unprecedented hacking attack at the hands of a group calling itself the Guardians of Peace.

Last week, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) said its analysis pointed the finger at North Korea. However, many cybersecurity experts have come forward to dispute this assertion.

North Korea denied being behind the attack but described it as a "righteous deed".