

NEWSIN brief

Five killed in Malaysia worst flood in decades

AFP, Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia's worst flooding in decades forced some 118,000 people to flee. At least five people have been killed by the rising waters and there appeared little respite on the way yesterday, with forecasters predicting further heavy rainfall across previously unaffected southern parts of the country.

North Korea comedy 'scandalous': Russia

AFP, Moscow
Russia has slammed the United States over a raunchy comedy featuring a fictional plot to kill North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Un, saying Pyongyang's anger was understandable. On Christmas Day, "The Interview" -- which has become an unlikely symbol of free speech in the West -- opened in crowded US movie theatres.

Terror threat mail sent to 16 Indian ministers

NDTV ONLINE
The Rajasthan Police is investigating an email received by 16 ministers in their official mail accounts threatening a terror strike on January 26, Republic Day. The police said it is trying to verify whether it is a hoax to create panic in peak tourist season in the state.

AU troops killed in al-Shabab attack

BBC ONLINE
The African Union (AU) force in Somalia says three of its peacekeepers and a civilian contractor have been killed in an attack on its headquarters in the capital, Mogadishu. An AU statement said al-Shabab gunmen had entered the base disguised as Somali government troops. It said five attackers were killed and several others captured.

Lanka mudslides kill 14

AP, Colombo
At least 14 people have been killed in mudslides triggered by heavy rains in the central hills of Sri Lanka. Disaster-response officials say more than 60,000 people have been evacuated and 3,000 homes destroyed as floods and mudslides covered many parts of the Indian Ocean island in the last four days.

Sudan expels two senior UN officials

REUTERS, Khartoum
Sudan has ordered two senior United Nations officials to leave, the world body said on Thursday, in what appeared to be an escalation of President Omar Hassan al-Bashir's move against UN activities in the country. The reason for the expulsions was not immediately clear, but they come a month after Bashir called for peacekeepers from UNAMID, the joint UN-African Union Mission in Darfur, to leave, calling them a "security burden."

N Korea not guilty of Sony hack: experts

MAIL ONLINE

The FBI just last week confirmed what many Americans already assumed to be a forgone conclusion when they revealed there was conclusive evidence that North Korea's government was behind the hacking of Sony, an attack the government bureau said was carried out as a way 'to inflict significant harm on a US business and suppress the right of American citizens to express themselves.'

Then, in a press conference on Friday, President Obama went so far as to warn the country that America would retaliate in response to their actions.

Almost immediately the North Korean leader issued a statement denying involvement and demanding an apology from the United States for their 'evil doings.' And while that apology is probably never coming, it seems that Kim Jong-un may be right, at least according to numerous cybersecurity experts and hackers who have come forward to point out the



10TH TSUNAMI ANNIVERSARY
A Sri Lankan girl commemorates the victims of the December 2004 tsunami, offering flowers, prayers and alms during a special ceremony to mark the tenth anniversary in the southern coastal town of Peraliya yesterday, the tenth anniversary of the deadly Asian tsunami. Prayer recitals and solemn visits to mass graves marked the start of mourning yesterday across tsunami-hit nations for the 220,000 people who perished when giant waves decimated coastal areas of the Indian Ocean a decade ago.

PHOTO: AFP

ISIS 'governor' killed in Iraq

Coalition warplanes pounds jihadists; regime jets kill 52 in Syria

AGENCIES

The latest ISIS-appointed governor of Mosul was killed in coalition airstrikes on Thursday, reported CNN citing to Iraqi police.

In Syria, at least 53 civilians were killed when aircraft bombed a northern city controlled by the Islamic State.

Hassan Hassan Saeed Al-Jabouri, also known as Abu Talut, was killed 18 miles south of Mosul in the village of Qayyara, according to Maj Gen Watheq Al-Hamdani, a senior regional Iraqi police commander who is leading the government's efforts to retake Mosul from ISIS.

Jabouri is the second ISIS-appointed governor of Mosul killed by airstrikes and had been in office for less than 25 days. Earlier this month, US airstrikes killed one of his predecessors, Radwan Taleb Al-Hamdouni, according to US security officials, reports CNN.

Mosul is a key stronghold for ISIS fighters and was taken from Iraqi forces earlier this year. The Pentagon

said that it has a strategy to retake the city beginning in January.

Meanwhile, the US-led coalition pounded the ISIS jihadist group with 31 air strikes, including more than a dozen in the flashpoint Syrian town of Kobane, the Pentagon said.

The 13 strikes in Kobane, which is known as Ain al-Arab in Arabic, destroyed 19 fighting positions, as well as ISIS buildings, staging areas and a

WAR ON ISIS

vehicle, the Defense Department said in a statement.

Several tactical units were also hit by fighter and bomber aircraft, as well as drones, the statement said.

In Iraq, strikes destroyed an ISIS rocket system near the town of Al Asad in Anbar province. The jets and drones also targeted ISIS vehicles, fighting positions, equipment, tactical units, and a storage container, in a total of 15

raids across seven locations in Iraq.

In Syria, regime air strikes killed at least 52 civilians, including seven children, in strongholds of the Islamic State jihadist group, a monitoring group said yesterday.

The raids struck Al-Bab and Qbasin Thursday in the northern province of Aleppo, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which relies on a network of activists on the ground.

Previously the toll had stood at 37 dead.

The regime air force has killed thousands of people since it was first deployed in the war in July 2012.

Activists accuse the government of killing more civilians than jihadists in the raids.

The UN and international rights groups have repeatedly called on the government to refrain from using its air force against inhabited areas.

The country's multi-sided civil war has killed an estimated 200,000 people and displaced half of its population.

Pakistan's crackdown on terror intensifies

Key planner of school massacre killed

AGENCIES

Pakistani security forces have killed a Taliban commander who allegedly facilitated the Peshawar school massacre, which left 150 people dead in the country's worst ever terror attack, officials said yesterday.

Named only as "Saddam", the militant was killed Thursday night in a gunfight with security forces in the restive Khyber tribal area, which borders the northwestern city of Peshawar where last week's horrific attack took place.

"Commander Saddam was a dreaded terrorist, who was killed in an exchange of fire with the security forces in Jamrud town of Khyber tribal region," top local administration official Shahab Ali Shah told a press conference in Peshawar.

"Six of his accomplices were injured and arrested."

He added that Saddam is believed to have facilitated the school attack, although the extent or capacity of his alleged involvement was not yet known.

He described Saddam as an important commander in the Pakistani Taliban, or Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and said he had masterminded several bomb attacks.

Meanwhile, a US drone strike on a Taliban compound in North Waziristan killed at least 7 militants yesterday, officials said, the second such incident in a week. Another drone strike in North Waziristan on December 20 killed at least five mili-

tants, officials said.

The Pakistani military says it has killed more than 1,700 militants so far in its heavy offensive in the tribal zone, with 126 soldiers having lost their lives.

Pakistan has ramped up its anti-terror strategy in the wake of the December 16 slaughter at an army-run school in Peshawar.

Pakistan government will take nearly 7,000 suspects into custody for having links with banned militant outfits across the country, a media report said yesterday. The interior ministry has issued orders to all four provinces and the Islamabad administration for taking into custody 6,777 suspects, majority of them from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The suspects are likely to be arrested during the next 24 hours for having links with and facilitating terrorists.

Pakistan's security agencies have foiled a plan of militants to attack Kot Lakhpat Jail where at least 50 death row terrorists including five dreaded one are lodged and arrested two women and a man linked with the plot.

lifted a six-year moratorium on the death penalty, reinstating it for terrorism-related cases.

Officials said Monday that Pakistan plans to execute around 500 militants in the coming weeks.

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DEVELOPMENTS

US missile strikes

kill 7 militants

Govt moves to arrest

7,000 terror suspects
in nationwide crackdown

Terrorists' plan

to attack jail foiled

Fears of another war grow in Gaza

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The sermons were about the sacrifice made by the Saviour, an affirmation of faith and belief in redemption, as befits a service on Christmas Day. But this is Gaza and there were also reminders of shared suffering and sorrow, the need for unity at a time of turbulence -- a message reaching out to all fellow Palestinians.

Those gathered at St Thomas's Catholic Church had gone through a bloody and brutal war in the summer. They gave thanks for their survival through the dark times and, afterwards, they spoke about the hardship inflicted by living in a state of siege.

Ever present was the feeling that the conflict will reignite soon, an apprehension reinforced by border clashes on Christmas Eve involving warplanes and tanks.

There are just over 2,200 Christians left in Gaza: the church was filled with around 700 people for the Christmas Eve service which was followed by a show at the church hall and excited games of bingo that went on until three in the morning. There were fewer people attending on Christmas morning.

There was stringent security in place: Father George Hernandez, the resident priest at the church, said there had been "trouble" in the past, but refused to elaborate.

Archbishop Alexios of Tiberias and Gaza said, "The problem is that the situation continues to be very bad, for Christians and Muslims both, with the blockade by Israel... But it is not just the war -- people here have had to face this now for a long while now. It is times like these that the devil does his work."



Warrant issued for radical Lal Masjid cleric

TNN, Islamabad

A Pakistani court yesterday issued arrest warrant against extremist cleric Maulana Abdul Aziz for threatening activists protesting outside his Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad.

The activists were protesting the cleric's pro-Taliban stance in the wake of Peshawar massacre at a sit-in outside the mosque last week.

The mosque came into prominence in 2007 when Pakistani army commandos stormed it for challenging the state's writ. Aziz's brother was killed in the operation, which is widely believed to have prompted retaliatory Taliban strikes on public places, mosques and military installations. Aziz was arrested while trying to escape from the mosque wearing a face veil and paraded on national TV in the same attire. He was released on bail in 2009.

On Friday, civil judge Saqib Jawad issued the warrant against the cleric after hearing a petition of the activists, who protested outside the mosque throughout last week.

The cleric had refused to call the terror victims martyrs and described the attack a "reaction" to the ongoing anti-Taliban operations.

Aziz's spokesman, Hafiz Ehtisham, said his followers would resist his arrest. "Before arresting Maulana Aziz, Nawaz Sharif, Imran Khan and Punjab's CM Shahbaz Sharif should be arrested," he said.

Activist Jibran Nasir, who organized last week's protests, warned of a "new plan" if the cleric was not arrested. Aziz had last week warned of backlash in the event of executions of convicted terrorists.



More action needed for reform

Says Suu Kyi

BBC ONLINE

The Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi has told the BBC that the international community must do more to aid reform.

Speaking to the Today programme in Yangon, she said that the world has "really lost interest in reform". She also called for the constitution to be amended to allow her to stand for the presidency.

The 66-year-old spent almost two decades under house arrest because of her efforts to introduce democracy. A clause in the new constitution states that anyone whose spouse or children are foreign citizens cannot run for the top job.

Suu Kyi's late husband was British and her two sons are British citizens. Elections will be held in late 2015.

Suu Kyi said she believed that the majority of the people of Myanmar were in favour of changing the law in order for her to stand.

"We believe absolutely that the constitution will be amended in the right way, sooner or later. And the sooner the better. I do believe in the influence of the people over a so-called democratic form of government."

Her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won a landslide victory in the by-elections in 2012. It did not contest the November 2010 general election because of laws it said were unfair.



Indian security personnel (foreground L and R) keep watch as demonstrators shout slogans against militants during a procession at Biswanath Chariali in northeastern Assam state's Sonitpur district, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Ukraine, rebels swap hundreds of captives

AFP, Kostyantynivka

Ukraine and pro-Russian rebels swapped hundreds of prisoners yesterday as part of a new push for peace in one of Europe's bloodiest conflicts in decades.

The exchange on a stretch of a dusty road north of the devastated eastern rebel stronghold of Donetsk came as negotiators from both sides held Skype video talks aimed at reviving stalled negotiations.

A round of talks mediated by European and Russian envoys in the Belarussian capital Minsk on Wednesday was due to have been followed by a final one on Friday at which a comprehensive peace accord was signed.

But Wednesday's acrimonious session broke up after five hours with a deal reached on only the least contentious of the four agenda points: a prisoner swap involving 222 guerrillas and 145 Ukrainian troops.

The Skype consultations have so far failed to produce a new date for direct talks. Yet the prisoner handover went off without a hitch and now stands out as a rare example of cooperation between the two bitter rivals.

It also came as the Kremlin published a revised military doctrine that decries the "reinforcement of Nato's offensive capacities on Russia's borders", and insists that the alliance is the fundamental threat to Russian security.

flaws in the FBI's investigation.

The problems with the FBI's investigation are best explained by Marc Rogers in an article he wrote for The Daily Beast.

Working as both the director of security operations for DEF CON, the world's largest hacker conference, and the principal security researcher for global CDN and DNS provider Cloudflare, Rogers may be one of the foremost experts when it comes to hacking.

The first FBI claim that Rogers tears down also happens to be one the strongest that the FBI has, saying in their statement; 'The malware used in this attack revealed links to other malware that the FBI knows North Korean actors previously developed.'

There are two problems with this according to Rogers.



hacker to find.

He then takes aim at the FBI conclusion that since the IP addresses used in the attack are addresses used by North Korea in previous attacks, they must be responsible. But he also found this naive as any expert hacker can use the proxies. And this has been the case in many past incidents.

Kurt Stammberger, a senior vice president with cybersecurity firm

First, while a similar malware may have been used in a previous cyber attack that North Korea has been linked to, that does not serve as definitive proof that this attack was carried out by North Korea. What's more, the coding for one of the two malwares, Shamoon, was leaked according to Harris, and would not be difficult for any

hacker to find. He then takes aim at the FBI conclusion that since the IP addresses used in the attack are addresses used by North Korea in previous attacks, they must be responsible. But he also found this naive as any expert hacker can use the proxies. And this has been the case in many past incidents.

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Norse, echoed many of Harris' statements in a separate interview, and said that given the severity of the hack it had to have been an inside job.

But information so far gathered point to a different direction, experts argue.

First of all, there is the fact that the attackers only brought up the anti-North Korean bias of "The Interview" after the media did -- the film was never mentioned by the hackers right at the start of their campaign.

The hackers dumped the data. Would a state with a keen understanding of the power of propaganda be so willing to just throw away such a trove of information?

You don't need to be a conspiracy theorist to see that blaming North Korea is quite convenient for the FBI and the current US administration. It's the perfect excuse to push through whatever new, strong, cyber-laws they feel are appropriate, safe in the knowledge that an outraged public is fairly likely to support them.