

NEWS IN brief

WELCOME 2015

Putin wishes Obama on New Year

AFP, Moscow
Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday sent a New Year's greeting to US counterpart Barack Obama, saying the two countries share mutual responsibility to ensure world peace. In a statement showing Putin's New Year's messages to heads of state across the world, the Russian leader addressed Obama despite the crisis in US-Russian relations over Ukraine, saying the "Russian-American partnership could have been developing successfully."

Philippines floods toll hits 53

AFP, Manila
The death toll from flooding and landslides in the Philippines wrought by tropical storm Jangmi rose to 53 yesterday, officials said, with some regions saying they were caught off guard by the deluge. Jangmi affected 121,737 people, of which 80,186 are in evacuation centres, according to the national disaster monitoring agency.

Ailing Saudi king admitted to hospital

AFP, Riyadh
Saudi Arabia's ailing King Abdullah was admitted to hospital yesterday for "medical checks," the royal court said, with the country's stock market falling sharply following the news. The king is believed to be around 90 although his exact age is unknown.

US transfers 5 Gitmo inmates to Kazakhstan

AFP, Washington
Two Tunisian and three Yemeni detainees have been transferred from the US-run prison at Guantanamo Bay to Kazakhstan, the Pentagon said. Their transfer is part of President Barack Obama's push to close the controversial military prison. The transfer of the five detainees leaves 127 inmates at the prison, located at a US naval base in southeast Cuba.

Essebsi sworn in as Tunisia president

AFP, Tunis
Anti-Islamist Beji Caïd Essebsi, 88, was sworn in as Tunisia's first freely elected president at a ceremony in parliament yesterday. Essebsi's victory over outgoing moderate Islamist president Moncef Marzouki capped Tunisia's sometimes troubled transition to democracy and has won praise from Western leaders.



New Year's fireworks erupt over Sydney's iconic Harbour Bridge and Opera House during the traditional fireworks at midnight yesterday. From Hong Kong to London and New York to Rio, millions around the world will celebrate when the clock ticks past midnight, ringing in 2015 with massive fireworks displays, concerts and light shows.

PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians to join ICC as statehood bid fails at UN

AFP, Ramallah
President Mahmud Abbas yesterday signed a Palestinian request to join the International Criminal Court, seeking a new avenue for action against Israel after a failed UN resolution on ending the occupation. The Palestinians hope ICC membership will pave the way for war crimes prosecutions against Israeli officials for their actions in the occupied territories. But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu swiftly hit back, saying the Palestinians have "more to fear" than Israel from the Hague-based court referring to Hamas. The ICC can prosecute individuals accused of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, and Palestinian plans to become a party to the court have been strongly opposed by Israel and the United States.

US yesterday said it 'strongly opposes' Palestinian ICC membership bid. Abbas signed the request along with applications to join 20 other international conventions during a meeting broadcast live on Palestinian television. It came one day after the UN Security Council rejected a resolution on ending the Israeli occupation. The resolution would have set a 12-month deadline for Israel to reach a final peace deal with the Palestinians, and called for a full withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Palestinian territories by the end of 2017. Council heavyweights China, France and Russia were among eight countries voting in favour, while the United States and Australia voted against. Nigeria, which had been expected to support the resolution, was among five abstentions, which included Britain, Rwanda, Lithuania and South Korea.

Israel yesterday summoned the French ambassador, saying it was "disappointed and perplexed" by his country's support for the UN resolution. The failure to win the nine votes necessary for adoption spared Washington having to wield its veto, which would have caused it embarrassment with key Arab allies. But it was also a diplomatic blow for the Palestinians, who had counted on the symbolic victory of nine votes, even though the resolution would in all likelihood have been vetoed by the United States. But Russia denounced the outcome of the UN vote as "a strategic error." Arab League chief Nabil al-Arabi also expressed regret, criticising the African nations that abstained and pledging to continue "intensive Arab diplomatic activity" in support of the Palestinian cause.

They were left alone to die Italy rescues 900 migrants from catastrophe

AFP, Gallipoli
Italy's coastguard yesterday said it had narrowly averted a catastrophe after people smugglers set a cargo ship with 900 people on board on a collision course with the country's rocky southern shoreline. In a tweet to Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, the coastguard revealed that the ship's engine had been locked on with the steering set on a direction that would have meant it would have crashed ashore somewhere in the Puglia region on the "heel" of Italy. The coastguard scrambled two helicopters overnight after realising that the ship, the Moldovan-registered Blue Sky M, was headed for disaster. Six coastguard officers boarded the vessel and, after some frantic moments, were able to unlock the engines and bring the boat under control. The migrants on board, mostly from Syria and including a heavily pregnant woman whose waters broke during the drama, were taken to the port of Gallipoli as an inquest began into how the alarming incident had occurred.

Greece's coastguard had on Tuesday afternoon received a distress call from someone on board the boat who reported that it was being navigated by heavily armed men. A navy frigate, a helicopter and two patrol vessels were dispatched to intercept the boat off the island of Corfu. But after what now appears to have been a very cursory check, the boat was allowed to continue towards Italy. A spokesman for Greek port police told AFP at the time that an inspection had revealed "no (mechanical) problems and nothing suspicious on the boat." The drama came as Italy and Greece were coping with the aftermath of Sunday's Norman Atlantic ferry disaster, which has left at least 13 people dead and dozens more unaccounted for. Italy's coastguard has vast experience in rescuing migrants from the often unseaworthy boats that people smugglers use to ferry people fleeing conflict or poverty in the Middle East, Africa and Asia to Europe's southern shores. More than 170,000 migrants have landed in Italy this year and hundreds have perished at sea while attempting to make the crossing.

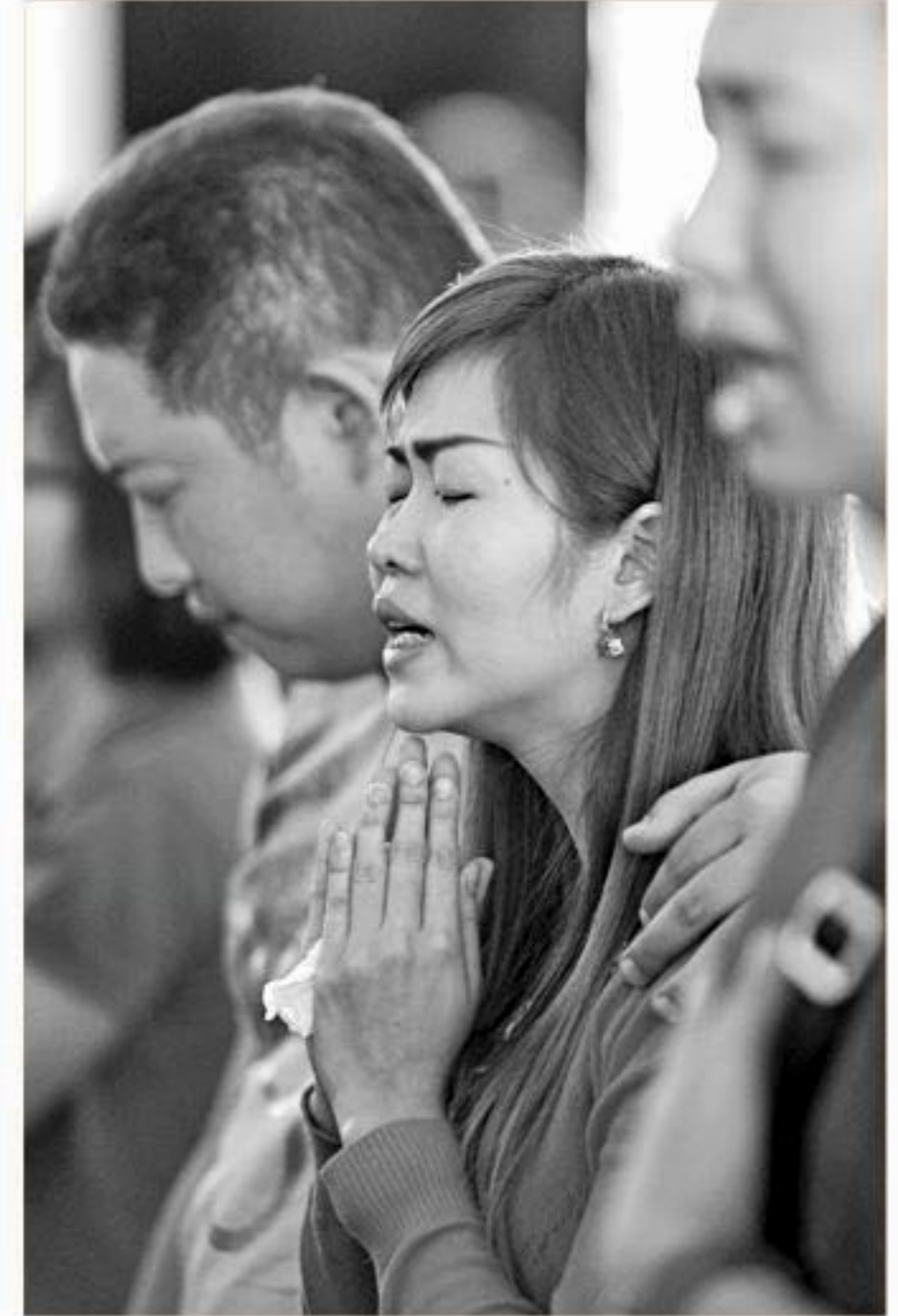
Two-year-old fatally shoots mother in US

AFP, Los Angeles
A two-year-old in a shopping cart at a Walmart store shot and killed his mother with a handgun taken from her purse, in the latest US shooting tragedy. The accident took place Tuesday in Hayden, Idaho, where the victim, Veronica Rutledge, was shopping with her children and other family members. "Her son was seated in the shopping cart and accessed the victim's concealed weapon from her purse and discharged it, striking the victim," Kootenai County Sheriff Ben Wolfinger said in a statement. "Once on scene, deputies found a 29-year-old victim was deceased from an apparent gunshot wound." Rutledge, who was spending the holidays in the area, had a concealed weapons permit, the sheriff's office confirmed, allowing her to legally carry the gun. Sheriff's department lieutenant Stu Miller told local television KHQ that in "instances like this, you know I'm a big proponent of a concealed weapon for your own safety. However, you have to be responsible. Unfortunately, in this case, that just wasn't." Walmart said it was "fully cooperating with the Kootenai County Sheriff's deputies as they investigate this matter."



Indonesian military personnel carry coffins of victims recovered from the ill-fated Malaysian air carrier AirAsia flight QZ8501, upon their arrival at the military airbase in Surabaya, East Java, yesterday. Bad weather hampered efforts to recover scores of bodies from the crash site of AirAsia Flight QZ8501, as distraught relatives waited for news and gave their DNA to help identify loved ones.

PHOTO: AFP



'Humans may be an endangered species'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
Of all the problems Sir David Attenborough has witnessed throughout the natural world, he sees none so pressing as the one facing our own species, which he believes could die out if we don't tackle booming populations. Himself a patron of Population Matters, a UK charity advocating sustainable human populations, Attenborough believes more women around the world urgently need to be given political control of their bodies. "It's desperately difficult, the dangers are apparent to anybody," he told The Independent. "We can't go on increasing at the rate human beings are increasing forever because the Earth is finite and you can't put infinity into something that is finite. "So if we don't do something about it then the world will do something about it - the natural world that is - we will starve. The naturalist's next series, Conquest of the Skies, sees him explore the evolution of

flight, from stalking bird to gliding reptile, from parachuting mammal to the humble fly. He said: "The only straw of comfort or of hope, and even that is pretty fragile, is that wherever women are given political control of their bodies, where they have the vote, education, appropriate medical facilities and they can read and have rights and so on, the birth rate falls, there's no exceptions to that. "There are still quite a lot of parts of the world where those things don't apply, so those of us who live in the parts where they do apply ought to help the others to have that possibility." But Attenborough fears that however extensive our efforts, they may not be sufficient in turning the tide. "It won't be enough," he lamented, "But does that mean we don't do something about it? Attenborough acknowledges that nature documentaries are changing fast in the digital age, but insists he won't be changing his approach to them.



David Attenborough

'Senseless murders' shock Canada

Depressed man kills himself after killing 8
AFP, Montreal
Police in western Canada were investigating yesterday the "senseless mass murder" of six adults and two children, who were apparently slain by a depressed man who later killed himself. Police Chief Rod Knecht said killings -- the worst ever in Edmonton -- were "planned and deliberate" and apparently were carried out during a domestic dispute. The killings began late Monday in the southern part of Edmonton, a city of nearly one million people in Alberta province, where a man shot to death a woman in her 30s, Knecht said. The man then headed to a residence in the north of the city, where he killed another seven people -- three women, two men, a girl and a boy. Alerted by reports of a disturbance, police went Monday initially to a home in Edmonton where they discovered the body of the first female victim. They went later that evening to investigate reports of a "suicidal male" at a house in the north of the city. An initial visit to the house showed nothing that appeared out of the ordinary, but when police returned a few hours later and entered the home, they discovered the bodies of the seven murder victims. The body of the suspected killer, an apparent suicide, was found early Tuesday in a Vietnamese restaurant in Fort Saskatchewan, a northeastern suburb of Edmonton.

Pakistan worst country for media

REUTERS, Brussels
The International Federation of Journalists has termed Pakistan the most dangerous country for media, with 14 journalists killed in the country in 2014 alone. The overall number of journalists who died in targeted killings, bomb attacks or shootings around the world rose to 118 in 2014 from 105 the year before, IFJ said. Another 17 died in accidents or natural disasters while on assignment. Pakistan was followed by Syria, where 12 journalists were killed. Nine killings each occurred in Afghanistan and the Palestinian territories, the federation said. Eight journalists each were killed in Iraq and Ukraine.

Pak terrorist heavens dismantled: Sharif

One more terrorist executed
AGENCIES
Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday said the ongoing Zarb-i-Azb operation has dismantled terrorist networks and their infrastructure in Waziristan, said a report published on Radio Pakistan. The PM was speaking to an eighteen-member delegation of the Afghan Parliament in Islamabad, reports Dawn. Meanwhile, Pakistan yesterday hanged a man convicted of attempting to assassinate former military ruler Pervez Musharraf, the seventh execution since the country lifted a moratorium on capital punishment after its bloodiest-ever terror attack. "Niaz Mohammad, 40, was executed today and his body was handed over to relatives," an official at Peshawar's high-security Central Jail told AFP. Mohammad was convicted of attacking Musharraf in Rawalpindi, the official said on condition of anonymity as he was not authorised to speak to media. Airstrikes kill 23 militants
Meanwhile, at least 23 militants were killed when Pakistani fighter jets bombed their hideouts in the country's trouble northwest bordering Afghanistan, military said. The attacks also destroyed four militant hideouts in Shawal, in the North Waziristan tribal district, where the military has been mounting an offensive against Taliban strongholds since June.