

## Court orders retrial of Jazeera journos

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's top court yesterday ordered a retrial of three Al-Jazeera reporters whose imprisonment on charges of aiding the Muslim Brotherhood triggered global outrage, but kept them in custody pending a new hearing.

Australian Peter Grete, Egyptian-Canadian Mohamed Fahmy and Egyptian Baher Mohamed of the broadcaster's English service were detained in December 2013 for spreading false information.

Grete and Fahmy each got seven years, and Mohamed was jailed for 10.

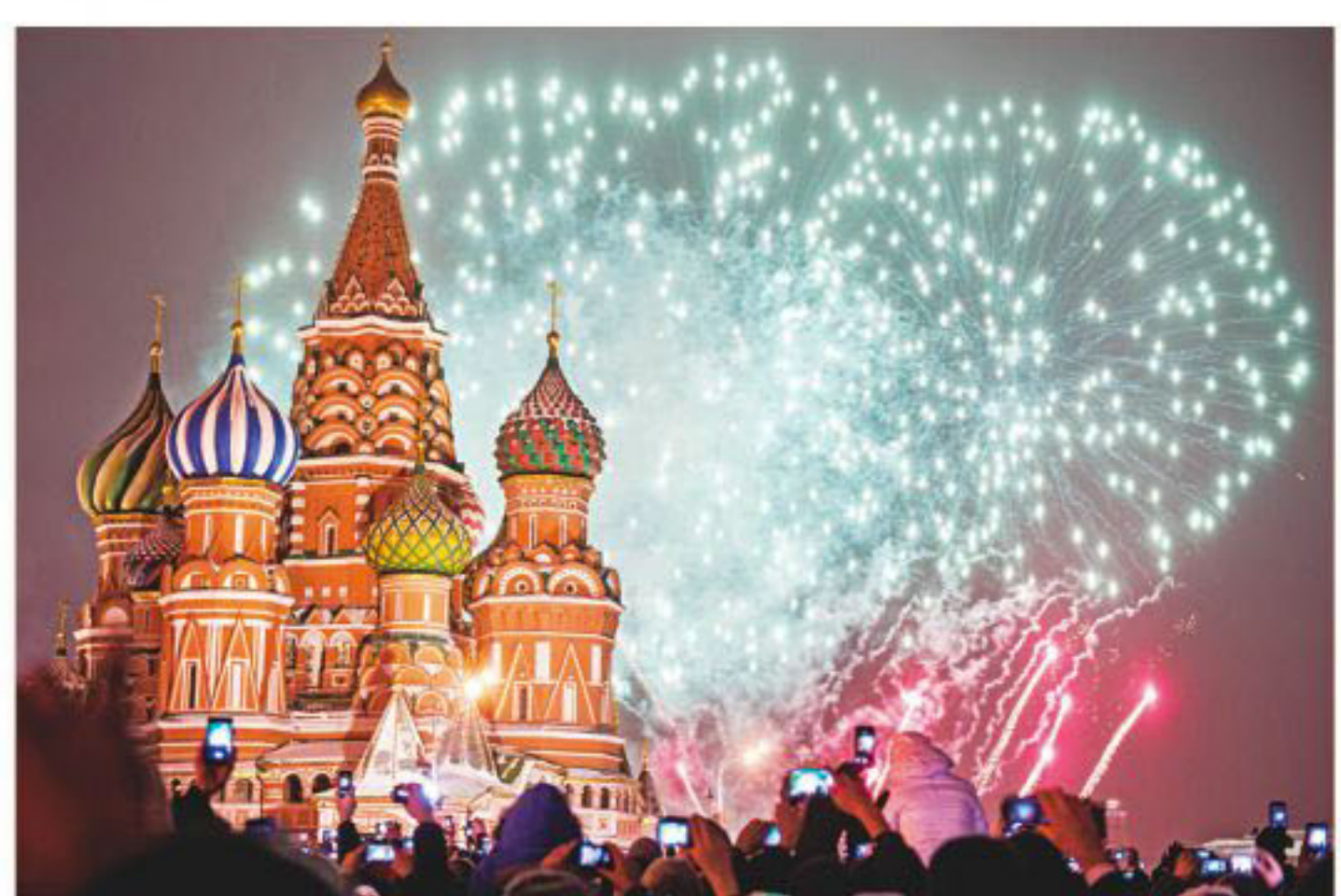
Hopes for the journalists' release have grown following a thaw in diplomatic relations between Cairo and Qatar, where their employer is based. Both the defence and the prosecution had requested a retrial.

The reporters, who authorities say lacked proper accreditation, were sentenced in June for aiding the Muslim Brotherhood after the army ousted Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013.

The Brotherhood, which saw electoral success after the overthrow of longtime strongman Hosni Mubarak in 2011, has since been declared a "terrorist organisation" in Egypt.

Analysts said the retrial appeared to be a step towards the release of the journalists.

"The question is now about time ... how quickly will the retrial be conducted," H.A. Hellyer of the Centre for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution in Washington told AFP.



Fireworks explode over Munich during the New Year's Eve celebrations. Bottom (from left) People enjoy the fireworks on Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro; Novice Buddhist pose with Happy New Year placards in Bodhgaya, India; New Year celebrations at the Red square in Moscow. Millions of revelers took to the streets from Sydney to New York to usher in 2015 yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

## North Korea's Kim moots summit with South

AFP, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un proposed the "highest-level" talks with South Korea yesterday, opening the way to a historic summit as his communist country battles to fend off UN prosecution over its human rights record.

The sudden move, made during Kim's traditional New Year message, would clear the path for the first inter-Korean leaders' meeting since a 2007 summit in Pyongyang.

"Depending on the mood and circumstances to be created, we have no reason not to hold the highest-level talks," Kim said in the televised speech, calling for a thaw in icy relations between the two Koreas, which remain technically at war.

Seoul welcomed the overture as "meaningful", coming after the North's state media had previously used sexist and personal language in attacks on South Korea's first female president, Park Geun-Hye.

President Park has repeatedly said the door to dialogue with Pyongyang is open, but insists the North must first take tangible steps towards abandoning its nuclear weapons programme.

"Our government hopes South and North Korea will hold dialogue without further ado in the near future," Ryooh Kihl-Jae, the South's unification minister in charge of inter-Korean affairs, told a briefing.

Any talks should feature "practical and frank discussions on all issues of mutual concern", he said.

Kim also urged Washington to take a "bold shift" in its policy towards Pyongyang and denounced the United States for leading an international campaign over the North's dismal human rights record.

He described nuclear weapons as the guardian of his country and vowed to sternly retaliate against "any provocations" threatening its dignity.



## Activist arrests revive US-Cuba tensions

AFP, Havana

A Cuban crackdown on dissident activists caused a new rift with the United States on Wednesday, the first diplomatic scuffle since this month's historic announcement of a renewal in ties.

Authorities arrested 51 dissidents Tuesday to stop them from attending an open mic session convened for Cubans to speak out about their future, said Elizardo Sanchez, the head of the officially banned Cuban Human Rights and National Reconciliation Committee.

Most were later released, although around 10 to 12 were still being held into the evening, Sanchez said.

The crackdown is the first since US President Barack Obama and Cuban counterpart Raul Castro announced two weeks ago that the two countries would revive diplomatic relations severed during the Cold War and move to ease the five-decade US trade embargo.

In a stern reaction, Washington condemned Havana's "lack of respect" for human rights.

## PALESTINIANS' ICC MOVE

# Diplomatic battle looms

AFP, Ramallah

The Palestinians were facing a fresh diplomatic battle yesterday after taking steps to join the International Criminal Court in a move which was strongly condemned by both Washington and Israel.

The dramatic move to join the Hague-based court, which could pave the way for the Palestinians to sue Israeli officials for war crimes, came less than 24 hours after the UN Security Council rejected a resolution seeking to set a deadline for ending the occupation.

The resolution's failure was hailed by Israel as a success, but Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas quickly moved to sign a request to join the court, finally making good on a threat which has been in the offing for years.

The Palestinians hope that joining the court will pave the way for them to seek justice against Israel for its actions in the occupied territories.

The move drew a sharp reaction from the US State Department and a derisive response from Israel, setting the stage for a new confrontation over Palestinian diplomatic efforts to end the decades-long occupation.

"We will rebuff this attempt to force diktats on us just as we repelled the Palestinian appeal to the UN Security Council," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said late on Wednesday.

State Department spokesman Jeffrey Rathke said Washington was "deeply troubled" by the attempt to join the ICC, warning it would only "push the parties further apart."

"Today's action is entirely counterproductive and does nothing to further the aspirations of the Palestinian people for a sovereign and independent state," he said.

The ICC can prosecute individuals accused of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, committed since July 1, 2002, when the court's founding treaty, the Rome Statute, came into force. To become a party to the court, the Palestinians must sign then ratify the treaty.

The request was signed by Abbas during a leadership meeting at his West Bank headquarters in Ramallah which was broadcast live on Palestinian television. At the same time, he also signed applications to join 20 other international conventions.

The applications were made less than 24 hours after the Security Council failed to pass a Palestinian-drafted resolution setting a 12-month deadline to reach a final peace deal and demanding a full Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories by the end of 2017.

Israel hailed the rejection as a victory, saying it dealt a blow to Palestinian efforts to diplomatically "embarrass and isolate" the Jewish state, but the Palestinians denounced the vote as "outrageously shameful."

Security Council heavyweights China, France and Russia were among eight countries voting in favour, while the United States and Australia voted against. Five other countries, including Britain, abstained -- among them Nigeria which had been expected to vote in favour but changed its stance at the last minute.

## No aliens, it was us

# CIA says at least half of all UFO sightings were spy planes

MAIL ONLINE

The CIA announced on Monday that they are responsible for at least half of the UFO sightings reported in the 1950's and 60's.

"#1 most read on our #Bestof2014 list: Reports of unusual activity in the skies in the '50s? It was us," the government agency tweeted yesterday.

Over the last few days, the CIA has been tweeting out links to its top ten most-read 'Best of 2014' documents.

The CIA explained that the UFO sightings of the past were directly correlated to them testing U-2 spy planes at altitudes of over 60,000 feet, once thought an impossible height to fly.

UPI reports that the CIA soon realized that UFO sightings lined up with the place and time the U-2 planes were flying but that they purposefully chose not to let people know that what they were seeing were not aliens but spies.

'High-altitude testing of the U-2...led to an unexpected side effect -- a tremendous increase in reports of unidentified flying objects,' Venture Beat reports the CIA said in 1998.

According to an article from The New York Times written in 1997, the U-2 planes were developed to photograph enemy targets from secret bases in California and Nevada.

The spy planes never ventured towards nor did they come from outer space.



Family members of Hayati Lutfiyah Hamid, first identified victim of the ill-fated Malaysian air carrier AirAsia flight QZ8501, cry upon receiving her remains at the police hospital in Surabaya, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Plane may have managed to land on water: experts

AFP, Jakarta

As search teams hunt for the black boxes of AirAsia Flight QZ8501, analysts say the pilot may have managed to make an emergency water landing, only for the plane to be overcome by high seas.

The Airbus A320-200 left the Indonesian city of Surabaya early Sunday and disappeared from radar over the Java Sea during a storm, but it failed to send the transmissions normally emitted when a plane crashes or is submerged.

Experts say this suggests the experienced former air force pilot, Captain Iriyanto, conducted an emergency water landing which did not have a destructive impact.

"The emergency locator transmitter (ELT) would work on impact, be that land, sea or the sides of a mountain, and my analysis is it didn't work because there was no major impact during landing," said Dudi Sudibyo, a senior editor of aviation magazine Angkasa.

"The pilot managed to land it on the sea's surface," he added. Indonesia's search team scoured the sea

for more than 48 hours before the first debris was spotted off the island of Borneo after a tip-off from fishermen.

So far the search team has found eight bodies which appear to be intact, strengthening idea that the plane had a soft landing.

An emergency exit door and an inflatable slide were among the first items recovered by the search team, suggesting the first passengers may have started the evacuation process once the plane landed on water.

Former transport minister Jusman Syafii Djalal was convinced the discovery of the floating exit door meant "someone had opened it".

The cause and more details of the crash will remain unclear until investigators find the all-important black boxes, which will answer questions such as why the underwater locator beacon did not work.

If found, the cockpit voice recorder should detail the conversations of the pilots for the whole of the short flight and reveal their last moments.

"We can only find out from the black box," said Sudibyo.

## 76,000 killed in Syria's deadliest year

AFP, Beirut

More than 76,000 people were killed in Syria's brutal conflict in 2014, making it the bloodiest year yet in the country's nearly four-year war, a monitor said yesterday.

The conflict that began in March 2011 shows no sign of abating. The war has become a multi-front conflict and contributed to the rise of jihadist groups such as the Islamic State.

In Syria, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a monitoring group, recorded 76,021 deaths last year.

The majority of the deaths were combatants, including nearly 17,000 jihadists, 15,747 rebel forces and 22,627 regime troops and militiamen.