

AFGHAN CRISIS Ghani's 100 days produce no cabinet

AFP, Kabul
Afghan President Ashraf Ghani marked his first 100 days in power yesterday, still struggling to form a government after a unity deal with rival Abdullah Abdullah after an election mired by fraud and disputed results. The deal was seen as saving Afghanistan from the risk of imminent civil war, but it was soon bogged down in disagreements over which side's loyalists would take key posts such as interior and defence minister. Ghani has repeatedly missed his own deadlines on forming a government and asked Afghans to show patience. Even the Taliban yesterday mocked Ghani and Abdullah for "making fools of themselves" over the cabinet delay. "They will say it is because the weather is too cold... they need more time until it gets warmer," the group said in a statement.

Thousands flee as clashes intensify

10 killed in last week's violence; Pakistan rejects India's terror boat allegations

AGENCIES
Thousands of Indians have fled from their homes as fighting between India and Pakistan spread along a 200-km (124 mile) stretch of the border in the disputed region of Kashmir.

Tension between the nuclear-armed rivals has risen since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi called off peace talks in August and clashes along stretches of their border have been erupting intermit-



tent ly since October. It escalated last week when an Indian border guard and two Pakistani paramilitary soldiers were killed during exchanges of heavy fire. Indian shelling killed four Pakistani civilians including a teenage boy and a woman near the eastern city of Sialkot on Monday, a military spokesman in Islamabad said. Earlier in the day, an Indian paramilitary soldier was killed in another clash along their tense border in disputed

Kashmir. At least 10 Indian and Pakistani soldiers and civilians have been killed in fighting over the past week. About 6,000 civilians in Indian-controlled Kashmir fled from their homes late on Monday as fighting moved to civilian areas, said Shantmanu, the divisional commissioner of Jammu region. About 4,000 left after fighting began last week. "We had a narrow escape and there is a war-like situation," Sham Kumar, 54, from Sherpur village told Reuters. "Pakistani troops are using long-range weapons. It is the first time we have seen such intense shelling."

The violence comes days before US Secretary of State John Kerry is due to visit India. President Barack Obama is also due to visit India later this month. The United States offered its condolences on the deaths, calling for greater dialogue between the two countries. "Our thoughts would go out to the families of any lives who have been lost," Jen Psaki, a spokeswoman for the State Department, said. "We certainly remain concerned and watch over tensions along the border. And we encourage dialogue between the countries," Psaki said.

Indian and Pakistani forces again exchanged gunfire and mortar bombs across parts of their border yesterday, an Indian Border Security Force official said. "The firing is going on and we are giving a befitting reply to Pakistani shelling," the official said. Pakistani officials were not immediately available for comment. The rivals, who have fought two wars over Muslim-majority Kashmir, blame each other for the upsurge in clashes since October.



Indians flee heavy shelling from Pakistan in Kashmir, yesterday.

PHOTO: AP



Sunanda pushkar was killed: cops

NDTV ONLINE
The Delhi Police has filed a murder case in the death of Sunanda Pushkar, who was married to Congress lawmaker and former minister Shashi Tharoor. Tharoor said that he is "stunned" and has assured the police of his "full cooperation." The FIR or First Information Report does not mention any individual. Describing Pushkar's death as "unnatural", Delhi Police Commissioner BS Bassi said "relevant people will be questioned." He said Sunanda appears to have died of poisoning which could have been injected or drunk by the 52-year-old. Viscera samples are being sent abroad to determine the sort of poison that killed her. He has sought copies of the post-mortem and other reports, saying none of those have been made available to him or Pushkar's family. The police says the murder case has been registered based on medical reports from Delhi's All India Institute of Medical Sciences where Pushkar's post-mortem was conducted after she was found dead in a five-star hotel in Delhi on January 17 last year. Tharoor's party, the Congress, said that "everybody who is remotely connected should be questioned. Congress leaders like Singhvi and Rashid Alvi have also asked why took the police a year to register a case. Pushkar was found dead in a hotel suite a day after she accused a Pakistani journalist of having an affair with Tharoor in an angry Twitter exchange.

Pak charter amended 'to fight terror'

MPs approve military courts; Islamists, Imran Khan abstain voting

REUTERS, Islamabad
Pakistan's parliament yesterday passed legislation allowing military courts to try insurgents, one of a raft of measures aimed at clamping down on increasingly brutal attacks after Taliban gunmen massacred 134 children last month. With the unanimous vote of all lawmakers present in the lower house and the senate, the bill secured a two-thirds majority it required. Lawmakers from religious parties and an opposition party led by former cricketer Imran Khan stayed away. The law is now expected to be signed into law by the president this week. It will stay on the books for two years, allowing military courts to try anyone accused of terrorism offences. Most politicians in Pakistan agree that military courts must be used to curb Taliban attacks because civilian courts are too cowed and corrupt to jail militants. But some have raised concerns about the dramatic expansion of military powers in

the coup-prone country. The army is often accused of only targeting groups that stage attacks in Pakistan while tolerating others focused on neighbors India and Afghanistan.



The courts will have a limited mandate, Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan said last week. "Military courts will not be used against any politician, seminary, businessman, media person or common citizen," he said. "Nor is it a forum for dispensation of jus-

tice." On Monday, the Pakistani Taliban leader Mullah Fazlullah released a video vowing more attacks on children. The government and the military say Pakistan's Taliban insurgency amounts to a war, so there is a precedent for the use of military courts. Later, Pakistan's provincial Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) government announced a bounty worth Rs10 million rupees (US\$100,000) for information leading to the arrest or death of Fazlullah, officials said. The KP government had prepared a list of 615 high profile militants and was offering a combined bounty of Rs760 million (US\$7.5 million). Senator Afrasiab Khattak, a human rights activist, said he reluctantly supported the law. "We have always stood for the independence of judiciary, but unfortunately they cannot deal with the hard-core terrorists," he said, citing attacks on judges and prosecutors.

I would be 'alone at sea'

AirAsia victim's final birthday wish haunts family

AFP, Surabaya
When fashion store owner The Meiji Thejakusuma bid goodbye to relatives before boarding AirAsia's Flight 8501, she light-heartedly quipped she would "spend time alone at sea" on her birthday, which she planned to mark with a New Year's cruise. Soon after the plane crashed into waters off the island of Borneo and her body was recovered from the Java Sea. On January 3, when Thejakusuma would have turned 45 on the celebratory cruise visiting Malaysia and Thailand, instead her body was returned to her extended family in Surabaya. Her nephew Eric Edi Santo, a cafe owner, relayed his aunt's haunting last words to him as he spoke to AFP at the funeral parlour where a vigil was being held, attended by about 100 friends and relatives. Thejakusuma got on the plane in her home city of Surabaya on December 28 with her husband, mother, three children and prospective son-in-law. They were headed for Singapore where they would start their cruise, but 40 minutes later disaster struck and the aircraft crashed into the water. The bodies of Thejakusuma and her 10-year-old daughter Stevie are among the 37 that have so far been recovered, with teams still searching for the remains of the other 125 passengers, most of them Indonesian. Search teams including divers took advantage of a let-up in bad weather yesterday to try to reach the wreckage of an AirAsia jet, but nine days after the plane crashed officials said there was still no sign of the crucial black box flight recorders.

NEWS IN brief

Imran admits marriage

TNN, New Delhi
Former Pak cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan has confirmed his marriage to a former BBC anchor Reham Khan. "I am going to Pakistan to share the good news of my marriage with the nation. I have nothing to hide," he was quoted as saying by Pakistani media, which spoke to him at Heathrow airport late on Monday.

FAILED GAMBIA COUP US charges 2 for plotting

AFP, Washington
US prosecutors on Monday charged two men with conspiring to overthrow the government of Gambia in a failed coup ostensibly aimed at restoring democracy to the small west African nation. US-Gambian dual national Papa Faal and US resident Cherno Njie were arrested in the United States after they returned from Gambia, where they had traveled to help launch a December 30 coup attempt against President Yahya Jammeh's government, according to the US Justice Department. "These defendants stand accused of conspiring to carry out the violent overthrow of a foreign government, in violation of US law," US Attorney General Eric Holder said in a statement. Faal identified Njie as one of the coup's leaders and main financiers, and told the FBI agent that "Njie was also planning to serve as the interim leader of The Gambia upon the successful completion of the coup."



A demonstrator holds a crucifix (C) in the colors of Germany during a rally by a mounting right-wing populist movement called Pegida in Dresden, eastern Germany. Counter-demonstrations were called for several cities against the group "Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident", or PEGIDA, whose weekly anti-immigrant street protests have been condemned by church, business and political leaders.

Palestine opens way for Gaza war probe

Recognises ICC jurisdiction
AFP, The Hague
The International Criminal Court on Monday said Palestinian authorities had formally recognised the court's jurisdiction to investigate crimes allegedly committed during last summer's Gaza war. The legal declaration would allow the ICC to scrutinise offences allegedly committed since June 13, 2014, the start of Israel's military operation, but does not mean the court would automatically launch an investigation, it said. The Palestinians have formally requested to join the Hague-based court in a move which opens the way for them to file suit against Israeli officials for alleged war crimes in the occupied territories, a request that has infuriated Israel. Acceptance of the ICC's jurisdiction differs from accession to the Rome Statute, the Court's founding treaty. The UN is still reviewing documents submitted by the Palestinians to join the Court. "On 1 January 2015, the Registrar of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Herman von Hebel, received a document... by the Palestinian government declaring Palestine's acceptance of the jurisdiction of the ICC since 13 June 2014," the ICC said in a statement. It was on June 13 that Israel began a massive crackdown on the West Bank after the kidnapping and subsequent murder of three Israeli teenagers, triggering a series of events which led to a seven-week Gaza war that killed nearly 2,200 Palestinians and 73 Israelis. The ICC can prosecute individuals accused of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes committed since July 1, 2002, when the Rome Statute came into force.

Ebola toll tops 8,000

AFP, Geneva
The death toll from the Ebola outbreak in west Africa has risen to 8,153 out of 20,656 cases recorded, the WHO said Monday. Almost all the deaths and cases have been recorded in the three west African countries worst hit by the outbreak: Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea.

Boston blast trial opens

AFP, Boston
The long-awaited trial of Boston Marathon bombing suspect Dzhokhar Tsarnaev began Monday with jury selection, 20 months after the shocking attack that killed three at the city's signature race. Tsarnaev, a 21-year-old Muslim of Chechen origin, faces the death penalty if convicted.

2 more NY cops shot

AFP, New York
Two plainclothes New York police officers were shot late Monday as they investigated a robbery, local media reported. Their injuries were not life-threatening and the gunman apparently did not deliberately target them simply because they were police, the New York Times reported.

Child, 4, survives four-storey fall

NDTV ONLINE
A four-year-old child in Gujarat has survived a horrific fall from the terrace of her apartment building in Valsad. Her parents confirm she has no major injuries. "This is a miracle," said MM Kureshi, the doctor who attended to the child. The incident - which took place on December 30 - was captured on CCTVs in the building's parking lot, where Mahi Desai landed. NDTV is not using the footage, which is very disturbing. Mahi was playing on the roof in the afternoon, supervised by her grandparents, when she accidentally fell over the side of a low wall and plunged four floors. The CCTV footage showed the child drop on the concrete floor. A neighbour can be seen on camera rushing to pick her up. What saved Mahi was a plastic awning over a part of the parking area. Although the plastic ripped, it helped break her fall. The child is in a local hospital, where she is under observation. "I consider this a second birth for my daughter. She is my only child. It is a miracle," said her father Hemant Desai.

158 injured in Brazil train collision

AFP, Rio De Janeiro
Two trains serving Brazil's much-criticized commuter rail service collided outside Rio de Janeiro, injuring 158 people, authorities said yesterday. The accident occurred Monday around 8:20pm when a train stopped at a station was struck from behind by another in Mesquita, 34 kilometers (21 miles) outside Rio, state transportation chief Carlos Osorio said. The Supervia commuter service is the target of regular criticism from users who deride its often dilapidated infrastructure. Osorio added that Supervia would be fined over the incident but did not specify how much. Rescue authorities said most of those hurt had suffered minor injuries, including cuts and bruises.

Kurds seize key district from ISIS in Kobani

Syria complains to UN over McCain, Kouchner visits
AGENCIES
Kurdish fighters captured a vital area of Kobani on Monday, as the battle against Islamic State militants in Syria continues. Kobani official Idriss Nassan and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Syrian Kurdish forces had captured the town's "security quarter", an area of Kobani which houses the police headquarters and other government buildings. ISIS took control of the zone on October 10 but have been losing parts of the area to the Kurds ever since. The Kurdish counter-offensive has slowly been advancing in Kobani with the help of Iraq's peshmerga forces as well as the US-led coalition. Nassan and the Observatory said Syrian Kurdish fighters now control about 80 percent of the town. They added that "hopefully within days" the Kurds would control the whole of Kobani. In Iraq, two suicide bombings followed by clashes in Iraq's Anbar province west of Baghdad killed 23 security personnel yesterday, officers and a doctor said. 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 jihadists. Meanwhile, Syria has complained to the United Nations after US Senator John McCain, former French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner and other prominent figures entered the country without visas. Syria's UN ambassador Bashar Jaafari said in a letter to the Security Council that countries must take "immediate measures" against nationals who travel to his country illegally. McCain paid a surprise visit to Syria in May 2013, meeting with rebels after crossing the border from Turkey. Jaafari said the Republican Senator met with leaders of the Al-Nusra Front, which the Security Council has designated a terrorist organization. Kouchner traveled to Kurdish areas in northern Syria in November last year.