

**NEWS IN**  
*brief*

**Governor's rule imposed in J&K**  
THE HINDU ONLINE

President's rule was imposed on Jammu and Kashmir yesterday. Indian President Pranab Mukherjee approved the recommendation of J & K Governor N N Vohra as deadlock continued in the State over formation of the new government after voters handed a fractured verdict in assembly elections, government sources said here.

**Egypt announces election dates**  
AFP, Cairo

Egypt is to hold a parliamentary election in stages from March 21 to May 7, organisers said Thursday, its first since the July 2013 ouster of Islamist president Mohamed Morsi. The vote is expected to help consolidate the regime of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who ousted Morsi.

**Cuba frees at least 35 political prisoners**  
AFP, Havana

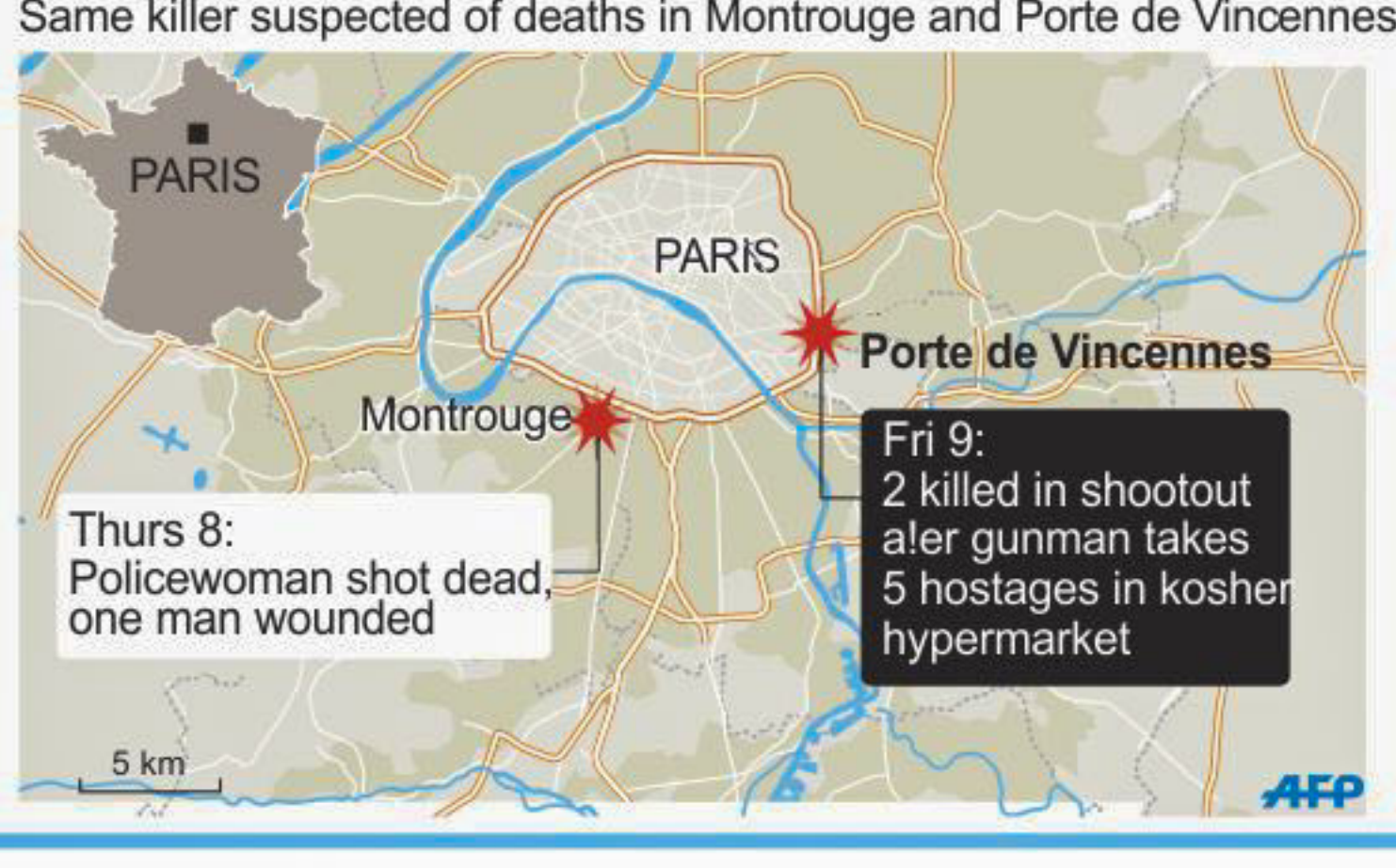
At least 35 Cuban political prisoners have been released in the last two days, dissident leaders said Thursday, as Cuba moves towards normalizing ties with the United States. Washington and Havana announced a historic bilateral rapprochement in mid-December in which Cuba agreed to free 53 political prisoners as part of a deal to end a five-decade standoff with the United States.

**Boko Haram razes 16 Nigerian towns**  
AFP, Kano, Nigeria

Boko Haram destroyed at least 16 towns and villages in a major attack in northeast Nigeria, local officials said Thursday, as President Goodluck Jonathan kicked off his campaign for re-election. There were fears of heavy casualties in the Wednesday assault in the remote north of Borno state, which came after the militants captured the town of Baga in Borno state on Saturday, forcing at least 20,000 people to flee.



**Gunman on rampage in Paris**  
Same killer suspected of deaths in Montrouge and Porte de Vincennes



French police special forces evacuate local residents in Saint-Mande, near Porte de Vincennes, eastern Paris yesterday, after a gunman, suspected of killing a police woman on Thursday, took at least five people hostage at a kosher grocery store. Inset, A cop takes position near the store. France yesterday grappled with two hostage dramas as police cornered the brothers suspected of carrying out the Charlie Hebdo massacre.

**Yingluck defies iron curtain**

**Launches defiant impeachment defence risking political ban**

AFP, Bangkok

Ousted Thai prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra launched a defiant defence yesterday at the first hearing of impeachment proceedings that could see her banned from politics for five years and deepen the country's bitter divisions.

Yingluck, Thailand's first female premier and the sister of self-exiled former leader Thaksin Shinawatra, was dumped from office by a controversial court ruling shortly before the army seized power in a coup on May 22.

She faces impeachment by the military-stacked National Legislative Assembly over her administration's loss-making rice subsidy programme which -- while popular among the rural power base -- cost billions of dollars and was a driving force behind protests that toppled her government.

Analysts say the impeachment move is the latest attempt by Thailand's royalist elite to neuter the political influence of the Shinawatras.

A guilty verdict from the assembly carries an automatic five-year ban from politics, but could also galvanise her family's 'Red Shirt' supporters to protest after months of silence under martial law.

Yingluck, dressed in a black suit and pink shirt, arrived at the hearing flanked by security and a handful of her party members.

"I ran the government with honesty and in accordance with all laws," she told the assembly, rejecting the allegation of dereliction of duty by the nation's anti-graft body that resulted in the impeachment bid.

"The rice pledging scheme... aimed to address the livelihood of rice farmers, their debts and falling rice prices," she said, describing it as part of the "social contract" which she claimed helped 1.8 million rice farmers.

She ended a detailed and impassioned defence by urging the assembly to "deliberate with virtue, without prejudice or a hidden political agenda".



**Qaeda plotting attacks on West**

Says MI5 chief; France says it is at 'war' with terrorism, not religion

REUTERS, London

Al-Qaeda militants in Syria are plotting attacks to inflict mass casualties in the West, possibly against transport systems or "iconic targets", the head of Britain's MI5 Security Service said.

His comment came as France is on highest alert after a spate of terror attacks. And French Prime Minister Manuel Valls yesterday said his country is at "war" with terrorism, but not religion, said yesterday.

"We are in a war against terrorism. We are not in a war against religion, against a civilisation," Valls said.

The country has been left reeling after the massacre Wednesday of 12 people at a satirical weekly magazine by two brothers shouting Islamist slogans. Police yesterday cornered two suspected Islamist gunmen near Paris.

In Britain, MI5 boss Andrew Parker warned a strike on the United Kingdom was highly likely.

"A group of core al-Qaeda terrorists

in Syria is planning mass casualty attacks against the West," Director General Parker said in a rare public speech at MI5 headquarters in London.

"Although we and our partners try our utmost, we know that we cannot hope to stop everything," he added.

In the speech, planned before the killings in Paris, Parker said seasoned al-Qaeda militants in Syria aimed to "cause large-scale loss of life, often by attacking transport systems or iconic targets" in the West.

Al-Qaeda killed nearly 3,000 people by attacking the United States with hijacked passenger planes on September 11, 2001. Militants inspired by the group killed 52 commuters in London on July 7, 2005 with suicide bombs.

Parker said around 600 British extremists had travelled to Syria, many joining the militant group which calls itself "Islamic State" and has taken control of swathes of Iraq and Syria.

Islamic State militants in Syria were

plotting attacks on Britain and making sophisticated use of social media to incite British nationals to carry out violence, Parker said.

Twitter and Facebook are so important to militants that technology giants should give security services greater access to their networks, the head of Britain's GCHQ eavesdropping agency said last year.

"The dark places from where those who wish us harm can plot and plan are increasing," Parker said. "We need to be able to access communications and obtain relevant data on those people when we have good reason."

Meanwhile, US President Barack Obama on Thursday told the French people Americans would "stand united" with them in the fight on terror, as he offered condolences over the deadly Charlie Hebdo attack.

"Vive la France!" Obama wrote in a book of condolence in a surprise visit to the French embassy in Washington, one day after the attack in Paris.

**Taliban 'reject offer of Afghan govt posts'**

BBC ONLINE

The Taliban have been offered posts in the new Afghan government but have turned them down, the BBC understands.

The offer came from new President Ashraf Ghani in a bid to end the insurgency that threatens the recovery of the country.

More than three months after coming into office, President Ghani is due to announce the shape of his cabinet. The process has been delayed because of disagreements with President Ghani's partner, Abdullah Abdullah.

The president's spokesman has denied that the jobs were formally offered.

But a source close to President Ghani said the government should be drawn "not just from the two teams, but from all parties in Afghanistan".

The three men whom President Ghani had hoped to draw into his government were Mullah Zaeef, the former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, who has lived relatively openly in Kabul for some years,

Wakil Muttawakil, the former Taliban foreign minister, and Ghairat Baheer, a close relative of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, whose forces are allied to the Taliban.

The ministerial posts earmarked for them were rural affairs, the borders, giving the Taliban responsibility for collecting customs, and the Hajj, the religious pilgrimage to Mecca.

There have also been negotiations over appointing Taliban governors to three southern provinces - Nimruz, Kandahar and Helmand.

This would have been the most contentious part of the deal for the international community. Most of the Nato casualties suffered in Afghanistan, including 453 British lives, were lost in an effort to keep the Taliban out of the south.

But the offer has been turned down. A source close to the Taliban leadership said security deals signed by the new government allowing some international troops to remain in Afghanistan when combat troops left at the end of 2014 were the main stumbling block.

**AIRASIA FLIGHT 8501 TRAGEDY**  
**Pings detected from black box**

AFP, Pangkalan Bun

Signals believed to be from the black box data recorders of crashed AirAsia Flight 8501 were detected yesterday, Indonesian authorities said, offering the strongest lead to explain the disaster.

However more of the bad weather that has plagued the 13-day search for the doomed plane stopped divers from quickly tracking the ping signals to the black boxes, and frustrated efforts to lift the plane's tail from the floor of the Java Sea.

"A ship detected the pings. The divers are trying to reach it," said S B Supriyadi, a director with the National Search and Agency who is stationed at search headquarters in the town of Pangkalan Bun on Borneo Island.

"The location of the ping is reported to be near where the tail was found."

The plane crashed on December 28 during stormy weather as it flew from the Indonesian city of Surabaya to Singapore, claiming the lives of all 162 people on board.

The tail of the plane, where the black boxes were housed, was discovered on Wednesday partially buried in the seabed 30 metres underwater.

But no pings were initially detected.

Dozens of elite Indonesian Marine divers have tried but failed to thoroughly search the tail, in a task complicated by powerful currents and the fact it is partially buried in the seabed.

Those problems continued throughout yesterday, with efforts to lift the tail using floatation devices scuppered by rough seas.

Indonesian authorities have also brought a crane to the KRI Banda Aceh Navy vessel stationed close to the tail site, in hopes of using that to lift the wreckage.



**EBOLA OUTBREAK**  
**Human trial proven safe': WHO**

AFP, Geneva

Human tests of two possible Ebola vaccines have proven safe and now tests to measure their efficiency will begin within weeks in the three west African countries ravaged by the deadly virus, the World Health Organization said Friday.

"These trials are about to begin for the two lead vaccines," WHO assistant director general Marie-Paule Kienny told reporters, adding that the vaccines would be tested on tens of thousands of people across Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

The Phase III testing to ensure the vaccines actually provide protection against the virus that has killed 8,259 people in the three African countries is set to begin in Liberia by the end of the month, she said.

Separate tests are scheduled to start in Sierra Leone and Guinea in February, she added.

There is no licensed treatment or vaccine for Ebola, and the WHO has endorsed rushing potential ones through trials in a bid to stem the epidemic.

The two potential vaccines that have been undergoing Phase 1 safety tests on humans are ChAd3, made by Britain's GlaxoSmithKline, and VSV-EBOV, manufactured by the Public Health Agency of Canada and developed by Merck.



Supporters of Sri Lanka's newly elected president Maithripala Sirisena gather and celebrate as he is sworn in at Independence Square in Colombo yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

**Maithripala Sirisena**



1971 Jailed for nearly two years after arrest on suspicion of leading a revolt against the government

1989 Enters parliament

2004 Becomes leader of the house of parliament

2010 Becomes minister of health under the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse

Nov 2014 Defects to opposition after giving up post as health minister

Jan 8, 2015 Stands against Rajapakse in presidential vote

Jan 9, 2015 Takes oath as president

**Lanka vote a 'symbol of hope': Obama**

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama yesterday praised Sri Lanka's "successful and peaceful" presidential elections and congratulated the outgoing administration on a "swift and orderly transfer of power."

"Beyond the significance of this election to Sri Lanka, it is also a symbol of hope for those who support democracy all around the world," the president said in a statement.

President Mahinda Rajapakse, Asia's longest-serving leader, conceded defeat in Sri Lanka on Friday, after a bitter campaign in which he faced allegations of corruption and a failure to bring about post-war reconciliation.

"I congratulate the people of Sri Lanka on the successful and peace-

ful conclusion of Sri Lanka's presidential election and incoming President Maithripala Sirisena on his victory," Obama said.

"I also commend the outgoing administration of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa for facilitating a swift and orderly transition of power."

The US leader highlighted the relatively violence-free voting process, which was monitored by international and domestic observers.

"Sri Lankans from all segments of society cast their ballots peacefully, and the voice of the people was respected."

"At this moment of hope, the United States looks forward to deepening its partnership with the people and government of Sri Lanka and to working with President Sirisena to

advance peace, democracy, and prosperity for all Sri Lankans."

Despite sporadic campaign violence including the death of one opposition party worker, the vote passed off largely peacefully.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's Tamils yesterday celebrated their key role in ousting Mahinda Rajapakse, whose 11th-hour charm offensive and exhortation to vote for "the known devil" was too little, too late.

Rajapakse was strongly resented among Tamils in Sri Lanka after ordering a brutal military suppression of a separatist insurgency in which thousands of civilians are said to have died.

With the majority Sinhalese vote split between the president and his successful challenger Sirisena, Sri

Lanka's largest minority group emerged as kingmakers in the polls.

Rajapakse had travelled to Jaffna last week for a campaign rally, as the extent of support for the opposition among majority Sinhalese became clear.

During a campaign rally he told residents that Sirisena was a stranger to the region, while he had travelled there at least 11 times after first becoming president in 2005.

"The devil you know is better than the unknown angel," he said in Sinhala.

The somewhat mangled metaphor appears to have rung true for many Tamils, who came out in unusually large numbers to vote for Sirisena despite some reports of intimidation.