

NEWS IN brief

Italy president resigns
REUTERS, Rome

Italian President Giorgio Napolitano handed in his resignation as head of state yesterday, leaving Prime Minister Matteo Renzi with the politically delicate task of finding a successor. The 89-year-old Napolitano had always been expected to step down before the end of his second term in office because of his advanced age.

Obama to be in India from Jan 25-27
PTI, New Delhi

US President Barack Obama will have a tight schedule during his three-day visit in India starting January 25. He will hold talks with top leadership in New Delhi on ways to make progress on key issues such as defence and civil nuclear agreement and attend the Republic Day celebrations as the Chief Guest, among other engagements.

Rajapakse faces graft charges
AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Marxist opposition party has filed corruption complaints against former president Mahinda Rajapakse and his family and asked the anti-graft body to prevent them from leaving the country, a spokesman said yesterday. The election was partly fought on claims of misuse of public funds and nepotism, with the Rajapakse family accused of amassing huge wealth during his 10-year rule.

North Korea offers direct talks with US
AFP, United Nations

North Korea on Tuesday offered to hold direct talks with the United States on its proposal to suspend nuclear tests, and suggested dialogue could pave the way to changes on the Korean peninsula. The envoy called on the United States to drop its "hostile" policy and make the "bold" choice of opting for a new approach.

Indian minister jailed for poll rule violation
THE HINDU ONLINE

Indian Union Minister of State for Minority Affairs Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, along with 19 others, was convicted by a Court for breaching prohibitory orders during the 2009 Lok Sabha polls. Naqvi, who is currently in the Court custody, got bail. They were charged for unlawful assembly under sections of the Indian Penal Code.

Death toll in Malawi floods hits 48
AFP, Blantyre

The death toll from flooding in Malawi has risen to 48 and nearly 70,000 people are now without homes, the country's president announced as he appealed for international assistance.

The floods caused by heavy rains have affected half of the southern African country's 28 districts - mostly in the south of the nation which is among the world's poorest.



Pope Francis waves to people as he arrives to lead a canonisation mass for Joseph Vaz in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo, yesterday. Top, from left, Pope Francis kisses a sick child; a girl prays during the canonisation; and an elderly lady takes blessing from the spiritual head of millions of Christians. Many worshippers had waited all night for a glimpse of Francis, who canonised Sri Lanka's first saint, the 17th century missionary Joseph Vaz, during a colourful ceremony on Colombo's imposing Galle Face Green overlooking the Indian Ocean.

PHOTO: AFP

FRANCE TERROR ATTACKS

Syria says West to blame for attacks

France arrests 54 for defending terror; newspaper sells out

AGENCIES

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said Western "shortsightedness" and "support for terrorism" in the revolt against his rule were to blame for last week's attacks in Paris, state media reported yesterday.

In his first reaction to the attacks on the Charlie Hebdo magazine and a Jewish supermarket which killed 17 people, Assad said he had repeatedly warned Western governments that their support for rebel groups in Syria risked a blowback of violence at home.

"We need to remind many in the West that we have warned of such incidents since the beginning of the crisis in Syria," he told Czech newspaper Literarni Noviny in an interview to be published on Thursday.

"We kept saying you must not support terrorists or give them political cover, or else this will impact your countries and your peoples," he said in excerpts carried by the Syrian Arab News Agency.

Ever since a revolt broke out against Damascus in 2011, Assad has made no distinction between peaceful and armed opponents.

Assad said that Western leaders, like those of Syria's former colonial ruler France, who had championed his removal had been "short-sighted and narrow-minded".

"What happened in France has proven that everything we said was right," he said.

Meanwhile, Charlie Hebdo's defiant new issue sold out before dawn yesterday around Paris, with some scuffles at kiosks over dwindling copies of the satirical paper fronting the Prophet Muhammad. In a city still shaken after deadly Islamic terror attacks, authorities said 54 people had been detained for defending or glorifying terrorism.

The arrests are part of a broader French crackdown that includes a government push for tougher anti-terrorism measures after the attacks, the worst in France in decades.

Main body of plane traced

AFP, Pangkalan Bun

A Singaporean navy ship yesterday located the main body of the AirAsia plane that crashed into the Java Sea last month, raising hopes that bodies of most of the 162 victims will now be found.

Underwater photos showed the cracked fuselage and part of a wing of Flight QZ8501, that went down on December 28 in stormy weather during a short trip from the Indonesian city of Surabaya to Singapore.

The discovery of the fuselage is the latest boost in a lengthy search operation in Indonesian waters hampered by bad weather. Just 50 bodies have so far been recovered with most of the victims believed to be trapped inside the Airbus 320-200's main body.

It followed the retrieval this week of both the plane's black boxes, which contain vital information to help investigators determine what caused the crash.

AirAsia boss Tony Fernandes confirmed the fuselage had been found

in a tweet, saying: "It is so so sad though seeing our aircraft. I'm gutted and devastated."

"We hope all our guests are there," he added.

Singapore's Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen said in a Facebook post that the MV Swift Rescue had located the wreckage, which was 26 metres (85 feet) long and



about two kilometres from where the plane's tail was found earlier.

On the photos accompanying the post, taken by the ship's remotely operated vehicle, the words "now" and "everyone" are visible, apparently from AirAsia's motto "Now Everyone Can Fly" painted on the plane's exterior.

Indonesia's national search and rescue chief Bambang Soelistyo said

that divers would head to the main body today.

He added that two more victims were found yesterday, meaning 50 bodies have so far been retrieved.

The Singapore navy ship was part of a huge international hunt for the plane, which also included US and Chinese ships.

The so-called black boxes -- which are actually orange in colour -- have been flown to Jakarta, where Indonesia's National Transport Safety Committee is leading a probe into the accident, helped by experts from countries including France and the United States.

The country's meteorological agency has said bad weather may have caused the crash but only the black boxes will be able to provide definitive answers.

Investigators have started retrieving data from the recorders and converting it into a usable format, which will take around a week, before the lengthy analysis process can begin, committee head Tatang Kurniadi told AFP.

ISIS moves into Afghanistan

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Isis, the militant group that claims to have established a "caliphate" across Iraq and Syria, has now reportedly extended its territories into Afghanistan for the first time.

According to the Afghan military, the organisation that calls itself "Islamic State" is actively recruiting and operating across the south of the country.

Officials say a man identified as Mullah Abdul Rauf has been claiming to represent Isis in the region, setting up a network of followers who are inviting people to join them across the southern Helmand province.

But they have clashed with the local Taliban, military sources claim, whose leaders have warned people to have nothing to do with Rauf.

General Mahmood Khan, the deputy commander of the army's 215 Corps, told the Associated Press: "A number of tribal leaders, jihadi commanders and some ulema (religious council members) and other people have contacted me to tell me that Mullah Rauf had contacted them and invited them to join him."

Amir Mohammad Akundzada, the governor of the Nimroz province adjacent to Helmand, said Rauf was a former Taliban commander -- as well as a relative who he had not seen for two decades.

Both military and government officials said Rauf was a former Guantanamo Bay detainee who was arrested after the fall of the Taliban in the US-led invasion.

"People are saying that he has raised black flags and even has tried to bring down white Taliban flags in some areas," said Saifullah Sanginwal, a tribal leader in Sangin district. "There are reports that 19 or 20 people have been killed" in fighting between the Taliban and the IS group, he said.

On Saturday, a video emerged online that appeared to show militants in both Afghanistan and Pakistan pledging their allegiance to Isis. Such claims tend to be driven by opportunism, though, and regional analysts told the Associated Press it would be difficult to establish a new extremist outfit in a region where there are already long-established militant groups with tribal links.

Akundzada said: "People who want to fight in Afghanistan just create new names -- one day they are wearing white clothes (of the Taliban) and the next day they have black clothes and call themselves [Isis], but they are the same people."



Obama renews push for law

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama said Tuesday the hacking of Sony and the Pentagon Central Command's Twitter feed highlight the urgent need to pass new cybersecurity laws.

"Cyber threats are an urgent and growing danger," Obama said as the White House unveiled a proposal to revive cybersecurity legislation stalled over the past few years.

"This is a matter of public safety of public health, and most of this infrastructure is owned and operated by the private sector. So neither government nor the private sector can defend the nation alone. It's going to have to be a shared mission -- government and industry working hand in hand."

Obama, who spoke at a Department of Homeland Security coordination center, has launched a fresh effort to persuade Congress to pass legislation to encourage better cooperation between the government and private sector, an effort stalled since his first proposal in 2011.

Pro-democracy lawmakers are being taken away after they interrupted the policy address of Hong Kong Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying by staging a protest in the legislative council in Hong Kong, yesterday. Leung took a hard line on political reform in his annual policy address yesterday, saying the city does not have "absolute autonomy" from China.



PHOTO: AFP

Musharraf indicted in Bugti murder case

TNN, Islamabad

A Pakistani anti-terrorist court in Quetta yesterday indicted former Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf in the the murder case of Baloch tribal leader Akbar Bugti.

The court in provincial capital Quetta charge-sheeted Pervez Musharraf and adjourned the hearing till February 4. The judge said that the case would be heard on a daily basis from February 4 onward.

Bugti, former chief minister of Balochistan and head of this tribe, was killed in 2006 in a military operation ordered by Musharraf who was president and army chief at the time.

His killing sparked nationwide protests and further fuelled an armed insurgency that began in 2004 in Balochistan.

Two co-accused - Musharraf's interior minister Aftab Khan Sherpao and ex-provincial home minister Shoaib Nuserwan - were also indicted for their alleged role in murder of the Baloch tribal leader.

Musharraf never appeared in the court during the entire legal process which has been in progress since 2009. This led to his indictment. He was absent when the charge-sheet was read out in the court.

Musharraf is already facing murder charges in the case of former premier Benazir Bhutto who was assassinated in 2007.



UN hosts 'last chance' Libya peace talks

AFP, Geneva

The United Nations gathered Libya's rival factions for talks in Geneva yesterday, amid warnings they could be the last chance to halt intensifying fighting for the country's main cities and oil wealth.

The North African nation has been gripped by deepening conflict since the overthrow of dictator Muammar Gaddafi in a Nato-backed uprising in 2011, with rival governments and powerful militias battling for control.

It has taken the United Nations months to get the opposing sides back to the negotiating table after a single round of talks in September.

But analysts warned that the Geneva negotiations between Libya's political rivals were unlikely to have any impact on the ground unless the leaders of the warring armed groups become directly involved.

'Go Imran Khan go' Parents stop Imran from entering Peshawar school

TNN, Peshawar

In a huge embarrassment for cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan, parents yesterday stopped him from entering the Army School in Peshawar where 142 children were killed in a terror strike.

Parents blocked Imran Khan's entry in the school and shouted slogans of "Go Imran Go".

Pakistani children returned on Monday to the school where Taliban gunmen killed 150 of their classmates and teachers last month, clutching their parents' hands tightly in a poignant symbol of perseverance despite the horrors they had endured.

It was the first time the school had reopened since the assault and security was tight. The nation has been reeling from the December 16 terrorist attack in Peshawar -- one of the worst Pakistan has experienced. The violence carried out by seven Taliban militants put a spotlight on whether the authorities can end the stubborn insurgency that kills and maims thousands every year.

The massacre also horrified parents across the nation and prompted officials to implement tighter security at schools.

A ceremony was held at the school to mark its reopening, but classes were to restart yesterday. Security was tight, part of a countrywide effort to boost safety measures at schools in the wake of the attack.



US, Iran hold talks to hasten nuclear deal

AFP, Geneva

Top diplomats from Iran and the United States yesterday met for "important" talks aimed at speeding up negotiations for a nuclear deal as a new July 1 deadline for an historic accord looms.

US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif huddled in an upscale Geneva hotel, ahead of full negotiations with global powers which resume on Sunday.

They are seeking to break a stalemate which has caused them to miss two previous deadlines for a full agreement to rein in Iran's suspect nuclear programme.

Zarif told reporters yesterday's talks were "important."

"I think it will show the readiness of the two parties to move forward to speed up the process."

But asked if there would be a comprehensive deal by the July 1 deadline, he remained cautious replying: "We'll see."

Past negotiations have stumbled reportedly over Iran's insistence that it retain the right to enrich some uranium -- which can in some cases be used to make an atomic bomb -- for what it says is a peaceful civilian programme.

There has also been disagreement over global sanctions, with Tehran calling for an end to an iron-fisted regime which has crippled Iran's economy, while the US has insisted on a temporary, gradual suspension.

Kerry has said the aim of his talks with Zarif on Wednesday is to "take stock" and provide guidance for their negotiating teams ahead of fresh discussions by global powers known as the P5+1 here on Sunday.

The top US diplomat, who was accompanied to yesterday's talks by his chief negotiators Wendy Sherman and Bill Burns, also told reporters earlier this week that he hopes to "accelerate the process to make greater progress."

