

NEWS IN brief

Malawi flood death toll rises to 176

AFP, Blantyre
Floods in Malawi have killed 176 people and left 200,000 homeless, Vice President Saulos Chilima said Friday. "The death toll is now 176 and over 200,000 have been displaced after their houses were destroyed by the floods," Chilima said.

Sri Lanka lifts travel ban on foreigners

AFP, Colombo
Sri Lanka's new government Friday announced lifting a ban on foreign nationals visiting to the island's former war zones and scrapped an economic embargo on minority Tamil regions. President Maithripala Sirisena, just a week after taking office, removed the travel ban introduced by his predecessor three months ago, the defence ministry said.

22 killed as tugboat sinks in China

AFP, Beijing
Twenty-two people including eight foreigners have been confirmed dead after a tugboat sank on a trial voyage on the Yangtze, China's longest river, state media reported yesterday. The vessel was raised yesterday, 40 hours after it sank while undergoing testing with 25 people aboard in the Jiangsu province.

Most Americans for stronger Cuba ties

AFP, Washington
A total of 63 percent of Americans approve of recent moves by the United States and Cuba to restore diplomatic ties and two-thirds favor lifting the economic embargo altogether, a Pew Research Center survey released Friday said. Only 32 percent of Americans think that the warming of ties between the Cold War-era foes will lead to more democracy in Cuba.

US SC to take up gay marriage issue

AFP, Washington
The Supreme Court agreed Friday to rule whether same-sex couples across the United States should have the right to marry, setting the stage for a final historic decision. In a landmark decision in June 2013, the Supreme Court struck down a law denying federal benefits to homosexual couples. But it stopped short of legalizing same-sex marriage nationwide, leaving that question to the states. 36 states in US now allows same-sex marriage.

Because she is a girl!

Man tries to bury daughter

PTI, Agartala
A man was arrested on the charge of his attempt to bury alive his nine-year old daughter at Putia in Siphajala district of Tripura, police on Saturday said.



When Abul Hussain was forcibly trying to bury her daughter Rukshena in a pit in the backyard of his residence, a neighbour saw it and raised an alarm following which locals rescued the girl on Friday, SP (Control), Uttam Bhaumick said. Sources said Hussain was only interrupted when his wife returned home. The girl was admitted to a hospital where her condition is stated to be serious. Abul has been arrested, he said.



People run past a police truck Aset on fire by protesters during a demonstration against French weekly Charlie Hebdo's publication of a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed in front of the grand mosque in Niamey, yesterday. Top right, Somali protesters chant slogans holding placards reading "I am a Muslim" in Mogadishu and; Pakistani lawyers protest against the publication of its latest issue in Karachi.



Obama to use veto over Iran sanctions

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama on Friday urged Congress not to impose new sanctions on Iran over its disputed nuclear program, threatening to veto any such legislation that lands on his desk.

Obama told a joint press conference with British Prime Minister David Cameron that Iran was already chafing under existing sanctions and had not accelerated its program, and that he would strongly urge Congress not to torpedo the ongoing talks with Tehran.

However, both the leaders have agreed to keep sanctions on Russia until it stops its aggression in Ukraine.

Obama has faced mounting calls from Republican critics for tougher new sanctions on Iran, with lawmakers saying a debate on more stringent measures could take place in the US Senate within weeks.

But new sanctions would "jeopardize the possibility of... providing a diplomatic solution to one of the most difficult and long-lasting national security problems that we've faced in a very long time," Obama said.

"I will veto a bill that comes to my desk."

Cameron also spoke out against calls for further sanctions on Iran, saying negotiations needed "space" to succeed.

Iran and major world powers have given themselves until late June to reach a comprehensive agreement that would prevent Tehran from developing a nuclear bomb, a goal it denies having, in return for an easing of punishing economic sanctions.

Europe on guard over terror threat

Belgian, French militaries join police on streets as countries scramble to boost security

CNN ONLINE

Soldiers stood guard outside the Jewish Museum in central Brussels yesterday, as Belgium joined France in deploying its military alongside police to counter the threat of potential terror attacks.

Security has been stepped up across Europe in the wake of last week's shootings in Paris and a sweeping Belgian counterterror operation two days ago that left two suspects dead in the city of Verviers.

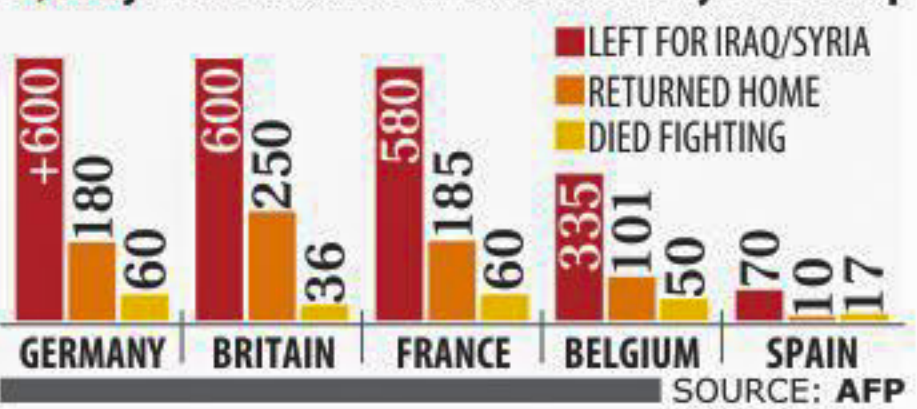
Soldiers in camouflage gear and police could also be seen by the Great Synagogue of Europe in Brussels and some roads in the area were closed to traffic. There are reports that troops are also being deployed in Belgium's largest city, Antwerp, to protect the Jewish district there.

Belgium said Friday it was putting 150 troops on standby for anti-terror operations, following a series of police raids that authorities said had targeted a terror cell on the brink of carrying out an attack against police officers.

Overall, authorities made 17 arrests related to the Belgium threat -- 13 in Belgium and four at two locations in France. And in London, authorities were mulling

EUROPEAN JIHADISTS

3,000 jihadists are believed to be in Syria or Iraq



"further measures" to protect police "given some of the deliberate targeting of the police we have seen in a number of countries across Europe and the world," said Mark Rowley, head of counter-terrorism for the British police.

British police officers, for the most part unarmed, might be equipped with taser guns as part of reinforced security measures, according to the local press.

Traffic was suspended in the Channel Tunnel between France and Britain after smoke was spotted, but there was no immediate indication if there was a link to recent attacks.

Meanwhile, France has deployed more than

10,000 troops alongside thousands of police officers as it responds to the deadly attacks in Paris last week, in which 17 people were killed.

A total of 122,000 police officers, gendarmes and military personnel are deployed across France as part of the security plan, Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve said.

Two men in their early 40s were also arrested Friday in Berlin on suspicion of links to ISIS, police said.

European counterterrorism agencies are scrambling to assess the potential terrorism threat from people with suspected links to Islamic extremists.

As many as 20 sleeper cells of between 120 and 180 people could be ready to strike in France, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, an intelligence source told CNN.

ISIS, the extremist Islamist group that controls swathes of Iraq and Syria, may present an even greater threat. Officials are monitoring groups of men who have returned from fighting in Syria.

It is believed ISIS directed operatives to return to Europe to launch attacks in retaliation for airstrikes against the terror group in Syria and Iraq, according to the official.

Prophet cartoons went too far

Says French mag's co-founder

CNN ONLINE

A co-founder of Charlie Hebdo disagreed with the French magazine's decision to publish cartoon depictions of the Prophet Mohammad and says he is upset with the magazine's slain editor, Stephane Charbonnier.

12 people were killed in the attack, including Charbonnier. Roussel, now 80, called Charbonnier "brilliant" but "stubborn." He said he thought the magazine went too far with its provocative images, particularly after the 2011 firebombing of the office. That incident also came after the magazine published a cover depicting the prophet.

"What made him feel the need to drag the team into overdoing it?" Roussel asked, according to an English translation of his letter in the French magazine *Nouvel Obs*.

Roussel's remarks mimic the public debate about the appropriateness of Charlie Hebdo's depictions of the prophet.

ISIS brutally executes 15 people in Syria, Iraq

BBC ONLINE

The Islamic State (ISIS) militant group is reported to have executed 15 people over the past 24 hours in Syria.

Some of the victims were shot and crucified, according to the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Horrifying images have also emerged from ISIS-controlled territory in Iraq showing its fighters throwing two men off a high building.

The Syrian Observatory said the executions were carried out in Deir al-Zour, Raqqa and other towns in eastern Syria.

Most of those killed are understood to have been shot before their bodies were crucified and put on public display.

The two men who were pushed to their deaths in Iraq were said to have carried out homosexual acts, which the militants have banned. A sequence of pictures on social media starts with one that shows masked militants forcing the men to the edge of the roof of a high building.

The next image captures one of the victims in mid-air as a crowd of people below watch.

The BBC's Alan Johnston says these appalling and very public punishments are used by ISIS to enforce their extraordinarily harsh rules.



Pope Francis (C) wears a plastic poncho as he waves to well wishers after a mass in Tacloban yesterday. Inset: A plane, with the Pope's staff, is stranded at the tarmac of the international airport in Tacloban after a mishap due to bad weather. Pope Francis was forced to flee a fierce storm in the Philippines that killed a papal volunteer, cutting short a mercy mission Tacloban.

PHOTO: AFP



POLITICAL CHAOS IN LIBYA Militias agree truce after Geneva deal

AFP, Tripoli

An Islamist-backed militia alliance announced a ceasefire in conflict-strewn Libya, following an agreement at UN-brokered peace talks between warring factions.

The militias have agreed to "a ceasefire on all fronts" in the North African country on condition that "the other parties respect the truce", Fajr Libya (Libya Dawn) said in a statement.

It also pledged to open up "safe passages to channel humanitarian aid", especially in Libya's besieged second city of Benghazi.

The alliance, which did not take part in the first round of the Geneva talks, called on the international community to step up efforts to prevent "foreign fighters from flooding" into Libya.

The announcement came just hours after the United Nations announced that the warring factions had agreed on a roadmap to form a unity government following two days of peace talks in Geneva.

Libya has been wracked by conflict since the overthrow of dictator Muammar Gaddafi in a 2011 uprising, with rival governments and powerful militias battling for control of key cities and the country's vast oil riches.

The UN special envoy to Libya, Bernardino Leon, had warned at the start of the Geneva talks that they were a last-ditch effort to prevent all-out chaos.

After the meeting, the rival parties, agreed to work towards the release of abducted people, providing and allowing humanitarian aid to reach affected regions, opening airports and securing land and maritime navigation.

The delegates will return to Geneva for a fresh round of talks next week after consultations.

Japan seeks closer maritime defence ties with India

AFP, New Delhi

Japan's foreign minister used a visit to India yesterday to push for tighter maritime security ties between the two nations, as Tokyo seeks to shore up its relationships in Asia to counter an increasingly powerful China.

Fumio Kishida, who met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday, is on his first overseas visit since Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe secured a landmark victory in national elections last month.

"Japan and India have been increasing cooperation in the field of maritime security... It is important to further strengthen our cooperation," Kishida said in a speech to the Indian Council of World Affairs in New Delhi on Saturday.

In Cairo, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday pledged \$2.5 billion in humanitarian and development aid for the Middle East as he launched a regional tour that includes visits to Jordan and Israel.

In a speech, Abe pledged \$200 million in non-military assistance for countries affected by the Islamic State (IS) group's bloody expansion in Iraq and Syria, which spurred an exodus of refugees to neighbouring countries.

Both India and Japan have signalled a



keenness to beef up their defence ties in recent months to counter an increasingly assertive China.

The two governments are expected to discuss the possible manufacturing of US-2 amphibian aircraft in India and Japan's continued participation in India-US maritime exercises.

The issue of China's growing might is also likely to figure when Kishida meets his Indian counterpart Sushma Swaraj for the eighth strategic dialogue later, India's foreign ministry confirmed.

Kishida also urged closer economic collaboration with India, a subject close to both Modi and Abe, who have been compared for their economic reform zeal.

"Under Abenomics the government of Japan supports the overseas advancement of Japanese enterprises, while India has been strengthening its manufacturing industry by attracting investment under Modinomics," the Japanese foreign minister said.

Prime Minister Modi, who chose Tokyo for his first bilateral visit outside South Asia in August-September, was on that trip offered public and private investment worth \$35 billion over next five years by his Japanese counterpart.

2014 was hottest in modern history

AFP, Miami

Record-breaking temperatures scorched the planet last year, making 2014 the hottest in more than a century and raising new concerns about global warming, US government scientists said Friday.

The much-anticipated report by scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) was confirmed by an independent analysis from the US space agency NASA that reached the same conclusion.

"Record warmth was spread around the world," said the NOAA report.

"The globally averaged temperature over land and ocean surfaces for 2014 was the highest among all years since record keeping began in 1880."

For the year, the average temperature was 1.24 degrees Fahrenheit (0.69 Celsius) above the 20th century average, beating the previous record-holding years of 2005 and 2010 by 0.07 F (0.04 C).

Parts of the world that saw record heat included Russia, western Alaska, the western United States, parts of interior South America, the western eastern and western coastal Australia, north Africa and most of Europe.

Experts said the report offers more evidence that humans are driving global warming. The research group Climate Central said the odds were one in 27 million that the warming trend -- in which 13 of the hottest 15 years on record have all occurred since 2000 -- could have happened randomly, without human-driven influence on the planet's temperatures.

