

NEWS IN brief

Lanka to re-investigate high-profile killings

Sri Lanka's new government will re-investigate high-profile assassinations, including that of a newspaper editor and politicians during the previous administration that were alleged to have had state backing. Cabinet Minister Rajitha Senarathne yesterday told reporters that new investigations will examine the killings of Lasantha Wickrematunge, editor of the Sunday Leader newspaper, Tamil lawmakers Joseph Pararajasingham and Nadaraja Raviraj, and then-Highways Minister Jeyaraj Fernando.

UK 'most transparent' country in the world

UK topped a list of most transparent countries in the world, according to a global rankings compiled by web inventor Sir Tim Berners-Lee. India is ranked as low as 39 and Pakistan ranked 67th. China stands at 46. At the bottom of the whole table are Mali, Haiti and Myanmar, also known as Burma. However Berners-Lee said public access to official data has become even more difficult.

Boko Haram 'leader' claims Baga raid

A man purporting to be the leader of the Boko Haram Islamist group has said in a video that his fighters carried out a deadly attack on the Nigerian town of Baga earlier this month that said to be killed 200 people. The man said to be Abubakar Shekau said people were killed "as our Lord instructed us", threatening more raids not only in Nigeria but also in neighbouring countries.

Syrian hackers hack French paper

French newspaper Le Monde said its Twitter account and publishing tool were hacked by Syrian Electronic Army, an amorphous hacker collective that supports Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Later, Le Monde sent out a tweet saying it has taken back control of its computers.

US boy, 5, kills baby with gun

A 5-year-old boy shot his 9-month-old brother, killing him with his grandfather's handgun on Monday in the tiny rural town of Elmo in northwest Missouri. Reportedly, the weapon was not locked up and the older sibling had easy access to it. The shooting is believed to be accidental.

UK delays Iraq war report, sparks anger

A further delay in a report into Britain's role in the Iraq war sparked angry claims of a cover-up yesterday, illustrating the lingering controversy over a conflict in which 179 British soldiers died. Six years after the inquiry started and 12 years on from the 2003 war, its chairman John Chilcot said there was "no realistic prospect" of delivering the report before May's general polls.



Syrian men carry injured victims following a reported air strike on the besieged rebel-held town of Douma, northeast of the capital Damascus, yesterday. Rebel-held towns such as Douma face frequent aerial and tank bombardment and the siege means food is scarce and medical facilities are ill-equipped to handle either illness or injury.

Cuba, US open historic talks

The United States and Cuba yesterday opened two days of historic talks in Havana to end decades of Cold War-era animosity and reestablish diplomatic relations. The meetings in Havana follow the historic decision by US President Barack Obama and Cuban leader Raul Castro in December to seek normal diplomatic relations. US deputy assistant secretary of state Alex Lee and Cuban foreign ministry official Josefina Vidal sat down for the first day of closed-door talks in the capital's Convention Center, which will focus on migration issues. Their opening remarks were not broadcast. The reopening of mutual embassies, closed since relations broke in 1961, will be at the center of today's talks, which will be led on the US side by Roberta Jacobson, the US assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs. Jacobson will be the highest-ranking American official to visit the communist island since 1980 when she lands later Wednesday. An unnamed senior Cuban foreign ministry official told local media: "We hope to establish civilized relations between countries that have different political concepts, but which can get along while respecting these differences." The migration talks will tackle an issue that has vexed both nations for years, with Cubans regularly hopping on rickety boats to reach Florida, 145 kilometers (90 miles) away. The Cuban foreign ministry official said Havana will express its concerns about a US policy that gives Cubans quick access to permanent residency when they set foot on US soil. Ordinary Cubans hope the rapprochement will improve their lives in a country where supermarket shelves often lack basic goods and people make \$20 a month on average.

Shadow of crisis has passed, says Obama

Lifting the embargo on Cuba, raising taxes on America's richest and hunting down Isis terrorists were themes of a sweeping State of the Union address by President Barack Obama on Tuesday night that opened with a wish-list of measures to boost the fortunes of the poor and middle class. "Will we accept an economy where only a few of us do spectacularly well?" Obama asked. "Or will we commit ourselves to an economy that generates rising incomes and chances for everyone who makes the effort?" Even as he faced a Congress that for the first time since his election is under Republican control in both of its chambers, Obama was spirited if not almost rambunctious as he celebrated the progress the United States has made on the economic front saying that the "shadow of crisis" had passed. If it was a liberated president at the podium it was for reasons he himself explained. "I have no more campaigns to run... I know because I've won both of them," he declared in one of the lighter moments of a speech that ran for just over one hour. He used the moment to appeal to Republicans to end the "old patterns" of partisan enmity in Washington and back his plans for lifting a middle class that still hasn't felt the full impact of economic recovery. Obama specifically proposed increasing capital gains and inheritance taxes the wealthiest Americans to raise \$320 billion over ten years that would be used to fund significant tax cuts for the middle class and help make community college tuition free



STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS

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Proposes to tax the rich to breach the gap
- ISIS THREAT**
Urges new powers to fight jihadists
- TERROR ATTACKS**
US stands with victims 'from Pakistan to Paris'
- GUANTANAMO**
Vows again to close prison
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Bats against new sanctions
- UKRAINE CRISIS**
'Big nations can't bully small,' he tells Russia
- CUBA**
Urges Congress to end embargo

for millions of young Americans. But if he asked for harmony, Obama was also unabashed about his willingness to block any Republican efforts in Congress to undo progress he has already made for instance on universal healthcare and relief for illegal immigrants in America without papers. There was, however, strong bipartisan applause when Obama defended free speech and members of Congress waved yellow pencils to show their solidarity with Paris as it continues to grieve the murder of journalist at the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. As well as defending the deal struck with Cuba last month to resume diplomatic ties and exhorting Congress to take steps to dissolve the more than 50-year-old embargo against the island, Obama also returned to his quest to close the US prison at Guantanamo Bay. "I will not relent in my determination to shut it down," he said. On the ongoing terror threat, Obama asked for congressional approval and funding for military action against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. "I call on this Congress to show the world that we are united in this mission by passing a resolution to authorise the use of force against ISIL," he declared, referring to the Islamic State group. While even the White House knows that there is zero chance of Republicans in Congress approving his taxation changes, it is also confident that the pitch for relief for the poor and middle class will resonate with many Americans and may provide the next Democratic candidate for president - widely thought to end up being Hillary Clinton - the first building blocks of a 2016 campaign that will put the Republicans on the defensive.

Davos elite gather in shadow of terror attacks, global crises

The world's political and business elite gathered for their annual meeting in the glitzy Swiss ski resort of Davos yesterday, with the shadow of the Paris attacks and ongoing global conflicts looming large. French President Francois Hollande and US Secretary of State John Kerry will be among the 2,500 movers and shakers thrashing out the burning issues of the day next to the frozen slopes, exactly two weeks after the deadly attacks on French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. The bloodshed in France, which left 17 people dead, and efforts by Western countries to prevent returning jihadists planning attacks on home soil will be high on the agenda of the four-day Davos meeting. The "World Economic Forum" meeting comes as storm clouds gather over the global economy, with the International Monetary Fund slashing its world growth forecasts. However, unlike previous years, when the economy took centre stage, geopolitical concerns will be the hot topic at the World Economic Forum

(WEF). Participants from more than 140 countries are expected to attend. Almost 900 experts identified protracted global disputes as the "major threats affecting mankind". Conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East were singled out as being of particular concern. Environmental threats, including

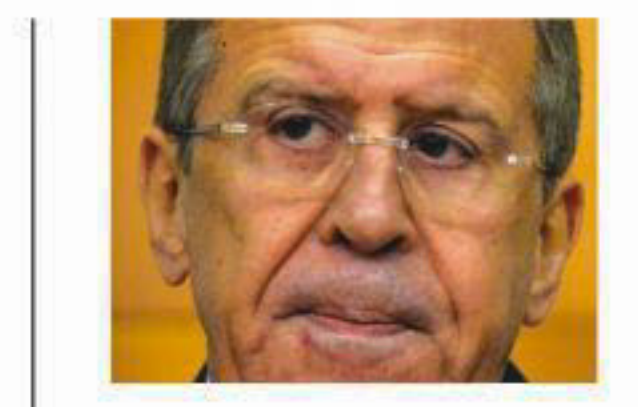


water shortages and the spread of infectious diseases, have also been highlighted in the WEF's annual Global Risks report. Alongside top European and US leaders such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel -- whose country foiled an attack plot last week - the topic will be broached at a global

level with Iraqi leaders including Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi and Kurdish leader Massud Barzani. The raging Ukraine conflict will also feature high on the agenda, but President Petro Poroshenko looked under pressure to leave the alpine resort early as events in Eastern Ukraine turned sharply for the worse. "Both terrorism and geopolitics are likely to cast their shadows on this year's meeting. Both are serious threats to political stability in Europe and in the Middle East and North Africa," Nariman Behravesh, chief economist at the IHS consultancy group, told AFP. The deadly Ebola epidemic in west Africa is also under the spotlight, with top experts firing off harsh criticism of the World Health Organisation at breakfast talk. Greek election where anti-austerity leftists may come out on top will also be a top topic, as will the recent plunge in the price of oil. Ahead of the meeting, a report by charity Oxfam that wealth accumulated by the richest one percent will exceed that of the rest of the world in 2016, made headlines around the world.



An Israeli man is treated by medics after he was stabbed by a Palestinian who wounded at least 12 passengers in a stabbing rampage on a Tel Aviv bus, yesterday. The attacker struck in the morning rush hour in the heart of Israel's commercial capital before being shot by a passing prison officer, Israeli police said.



US 'wants to dominate the world': Russia

Russia yesterday responded disparagingly to President Barack Obama's annual State of the Union address, claiming it showed that the United States wanted to dominate world affairs. "Americans have set a course for confrontation," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told reporters. "Obama's address yesterday shows that there's just one thing at the heart of (their) philosophy: 'We are number one' and the rest should acknowledge that." In his keynote speech on Tuesday, Obama said that "big nations can't bully small", a reference to Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also said he would seek an immediate ceasefire to the conflict in eastern Ukraine at talks in Berlin later. He said Russia did not want a new Cold War and that the West would not be able to isolate his country. Violence has escalated in eastern Ukraine in the last week. Ukraine said Russian forces had attacked two checkpoints near a town in Luhansk on Tuesday. Russia denies sending troops into Ukraine. Yesterday, five civilians were killed and at least 30 wounded in shelling of several districts of the rebel-held city of Donetsk the local authority said.

Plane's alarms 'screaming' before plunging into sea

Investigators describe the last moments of the ill-fated plane. The revelation came a day after Indonesian Transport Minister Ignasius Jonan said that the plane had climbed abnormally fast before stalling and plunging into the sea, as it flew on December 28 in stormy weather from Indonesia's Surabaya to Singapore with 162 people on board. "In the final minutes, the plane climbed at a speed which was beyond normal," the minister told reporters. Analysts said the AirAsia jet's rapid ascent had echoes of the crash of an Air France jet into the Atlantic in 2009, with the loss of 228 lives. Air France flight 447 vanished en route from Rio to Paris at night during a storm. The Airbus A330's speed sensors were found to have malfunctioned, and the plane climbed too steeply, causing it to stall. The investigation into AF447 found that both technical and human error were to blame.



France takes raft of anti-terror steps after attacks

Paris to sue Fox News for reports on Muslim 'no-go zones'. Announcing new counter-terrorism resources, Valls said security forces would be provided with better weapons and protection, including bullet-proof vests. France has deployed more than 10,000 troops across the country to protect public spaces and sensitive sites such as schools, synagogues and mosque. Authorities in several European countries apprehended terrorist suspects following the Paris attacks. In Belgium, two men alleged to have been planning an attack against the police were shot dead in an anti-terror raid last week. Meanwhile, The city of Paris said Tuesday it plans to sue US chain Fox News for reports that there were "no-go zones" in the French capital that police and non-Muslims avoid. The reports have been widely derided and prompted Fox to issue an on-air apology for suggesting parts of Paris and the English city of Birmingham were run under Islamic Shariah law.