

NEWS IN
brief

Syria regime barrel bombs kill 13

Thirteen people were killed in Syrian government raids using barrel bombs dropped by helicopter on a rebel-held area of central Homs province, a monitor said yesterday. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said two children were among the dead in the Wednesday attack on Hula.

India court frees Irom Sharmila

An Indian court yesterday reissued the release of Irom Sharmila, a campaigner staging a hunger strike for more than 14 years to protest human rights abuses in the country's remote northeast, her lawyer said. Sharmila has spent years in judicial custody over her fast, intended to draw attention to abuses allegedly committed by the military. The 42-year-old was expected to be released later today or tomorrow.

Pakistan arrests 38 Indian fishermen

Pakistani marine forces have arrested 38 Indian fishermen for violating territorial waters in the Arabian Sea, police said yesterday. Such arrests are frequently carried out by both countries, as the maritime border in the Arabian Sea is poorly defined and many fishing boats lack the technology needed to be certain of their precise location.

The Sun to continue page three

British tabloid The Sun published a photo of a winking topless model yesterday, shooting down reports it had ended the controversial tradition that has featured in the newspaper since 1970. Newspaper The Times, which like the Sun is part of billionaire media tycoon Rupert Murdoch's News UK group, reported on Tuesday that the page three feature had been shelved and the news welcomed by government ministers.



Members of the Ahrar movement, a coalition of various Islamist groups, take part in a demonstration yesterday at Talaat Harb Square in the Egyptian capital Cairo, following the release of ousted president Hosni Mubarak's two sons pending their retrial on corruption charges. The Ahrar movement is against the Muslim Brotherhood, military and remnants of former Mubarak's regime.

Egypt court frees sons of Mubarak

An Egyptian court yesterday ordered the release of ousted president Hosni Mubarak's two sons pending their retrial on corruption charges, a judicial official said. Their lawyer Farid al-Deeb told AFP Alaa and Gamal Mubarak were free to leave prison after the court order because they had served the maximum pre-trial detention period. Earlier this month, an appeals court ordered their retrial, along with their father, overturning a lower court conviction that saw the two given four-year jail sentences. Deeb said the elder Mubarak, who is in a military hospital, would also be a free man, but state media reported that there had been no orders yet for his release. In November, a court also dropped murder charges against the former president over the deaths of some of the roughly 800 protesters killed during the uprising that unseated him in 2011. Along with Mubarak, seven security commanders were acquitted of involvement in those deaths. Alaa and Gamal still face a separate trial for stock market manipulation.

Coalition meets after attacks

Iraq asks for more weapons; clock ticking for Japanese hostages

Top officials from the US-led coalition against the Islamic State group met in London yesterday for the first talks since the Paris attacks with the threat posed by homegrown jihadists high on the agenda.

The Paris attacks rekindled fears about the dangers posed by well-trained homegrown jihadists returning from foreign battlefields. European police agency Europol estimates up to 5,000 EU citizens have gone to join the ranks of militants in Syria and Iraq.

Looming over the meeting is also their safety," Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga told a press conference. Jihadist footage posted online Tuesday showed a knife-wielding militant looming over two kneeling Japanese men, apparently in a desert in Syria or Iraq. In a chilling echo of the group's videotaped beheadings of five western hostages last year, the man, who speaks English with a British accent, says the two captives' fate hangs in the balance over a \$200 million ransom.

US Secretary of State John Kerry and British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond co-hosted discussions involving 21 of some 60 countries that are working together to tackle the militant ISIS group in Syria and Iraq. Kerry said taming ISIS was "the challenge of our time". The US official also said that members of the coalition would now meet on a monthly basis, but not necessarily at a ministerial level. A US state department official said jihadists leaving home to fight with ISIS would be a "real focus" of the meeting and that an expert working group would be formed on sharing information to stop militants travelling.

The Japanese government said it was working to secure the release of freelance journalist Kenji Goto and self-employed contractor Haruna Yukawa, but with hours to go, admitted it had still not spoken to the Islamic State group. "We have not been able to confirm

Meanwhile, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi called on the international coalition to provide his country's forces with more weapons to fight the militants. "Iraq needs weapons and the international community has the ability to provide Iraq with the weapons it needs," he told reporters after a meeting of 21 coalition members in London. Abadi said the plummeting oil price had been "disastrous" for Iraq, which is on the frontline of the fight against IS militants who seized parts of his country and Syria last year.

UN reports significant drop in cases of disease

hit countries which have a creaky health infrastructure and were struggling to deal with the epidemic were now adequately equipped largely thanks to international help.

The deadly Ebola epidemic is slowing significantly in the three west African countries at its epicentre, the World Health Organization said Wednesday, adding that those countries were now adequately equipped to stem the tide. The UN health agency said in its latest update that a total of 8,626 people had died as of January 18, almost all of them in west Africa, since the epidemic broke out in December 2013. There were 21,689 confirmed cases.

They now have "sufficient capacity to isolate and treat patients," it said. The three countries have borne the brunt of the epidemic, representing 99 percent of the total deaths from the haemorrhagic virus. Hailing the dramatic fall in the transmission rate, the update said there were only 20 confirmed cases in Guinea last week against 45 the week before.

But decrypting the figures revealed rare good news in the worst ever outbreak of the disease which sparked a health scare the world over. "Case incidence continues to fall in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone," the WHO said. Liberia, for instance, which had a peak over 300 new cases per week in August and September, only notched up eight last week. The UN agency also said the three hardest-

EBOLA CRISIS | The figure for Sierra Leone was 117 last week against 184 a week ago, it said, but added that the west of the country remained a problem area with the capital Freetown accounting for 30 of last week's cases. Mali, which along with Senegal and Nigeria had a minor Ebola scare, was able Monday to declare itself Ebola-free after 42 days without any new cases. Senegal and Nigeria had previously already done so.

Divers find bodies belted in seats near fuselage

AFP, Pangkalan Bun

Indonesian divers yesterday recovered six bodies, some still belted into their seats, near the main section of an AirAsia plane that crashed into the Java Sea last month, but failed again to reach the fuselage. Flight QZ8501 went down on December 28 in stormy weather with 162 people on board as it flew from the Indonesian city of Surabaya to Singapore. A total of 59 bodies have so far been recovered. "We have found six bodies, four of whom were females and two males, all adults," SB Supriyadi, a rescue agency official coordinating the search, told AFP. He said they were found among debris, with some still strapped into their seats, not far from the jet's main section. The main body of the Airbus A320-200

was spotted on the seabed by a military vessel last week following an arduous search in shallow Indonesian waters, but strong underwater currents and rough seas have prevented divers from reaching it. Search and rescue teams again failed to reach the fuselage yesterday, Supriyadi said. The jet's black boxes -- the cockpit voice recorder and flight data recorder -- were recovered last week, and investigators are analysing them. Indonesian Transport Minister Ignasius Jonan said this week that the plane climbed abnormally fast before stalling and plunging into the sea. Just moments before the plane disappeared off the radar, the pilot had asked to climb to avoid a major storm but was not immediately granted permission due to heavy air traffic.



Ukrainian forces servicemen check passengers of a car at a checkpoint in the eastern Ukrainian city of Kurakhove, near Donetsk, yesterday.



Obama won't meet Israel PM during US tour

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama will not meet Benjamin Netanyahu when the Israeli prime minister makes a controversial visit to the United States in early March, the White House said yesterday. National Security Council spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan said it was a "matter of long-standing practice and principle" that the president not meet candidates or incumbent leaders while they on the campaign trail. The Israeli leader is up for re-election on March 17, two weeks after his slated visit to Washington. "The president will not be meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu because of the proximity to the Israeli election," said Meehan. Netanyahu has been invited to address a joint session of Congress, to speak about the threat from Iran -- which is accused of building a nuclear weapon, a charge Tehran denies. The topic causes heartburn for the White House, which along with European allies, is engaged in the final phase of talks with Iran to end a decennial nuclear standoff.

Worst yr for rhinos

AFP, Pretoria

A record 1,215 rhinos were poached in South Africa in 2014, a 21 percent increase from the previous year, environmental authorities said yesterday. "During 2014, the number of 1,215 rhinos were killed, this is a rise in the number of poached rhino from 1,004 in 2013," said Minister of Environmental Affairs Edna Molewa. Over two thirds of the animals were killed in the famed Kruger National Park. Molewa said some of the animals were moved to neighbouring countries to save the animals but what the result would be is yet to know.



Fighting escalates amid peace calls

Blame game as shelling on bus, attacks kill 41; Kiev troops abandon key airport

AFP, Donetsk

At least 41 people were killed in Ukraine's east yesterday, one of the deadliest days in the separatist war, with a bloody bus shelling in Donetsk as government forces abandoned their defence of the city's strategic airport. In a graphic illustration of the degenerating nine-month conflict, pro-Russian rebels also paraded some 20 captured Ukrainian soldiers through Donetsk and forced them to kneel before enraged locals who threw snowballs and glass at them, some of it from the shattered bus. The trolleybus shelling in the rebel bastion city was the day's bloodiest incident, with 13 civilians killed and Kiev alleging that ultimate blame for the tragedy rested with Russia. The violence came only hours after peace talks in Berlin called for a

ceasefire and as the toll from the conflict surpassed 5,000 dead, with a million people also forced from their homes. Another 10,000 have been wounded by rocket and mortar strikes raining down daily on the industrial region's residential districts, Michael Bocurkiw of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe told Ukrainian radio. With intensifying clashes rocking Donetsk airport in recent days, Ukraine's military said early Thursday that its troops had abandoned most of the site. The airport had become the symbolic prize of the conflict, with the army and rebels continuously battling for control. Defence officials said fighting continued around the ruins of the air

hub -- once one of eastern Europe's most modern and busiest -- but they admitted that government forces controlled little more than a few isolated buildings on its outskirts. The trolleybus shelling was among the bloodiest incidents involving civilians in recent months in a conflict that has devastated the ex-Soviet republic's industrial heartland and brought Ukraine's economy to its knees. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called the attack "a monstrous crime" whose ultimate responsibility rested with "the party of war" in Kiev and its foreign sponsors. Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk made similar charges against Moscow, accusing the insurgents of committing "a horrible act against humanity."

The strike occurred just south of Donetsk's city centre far from the front line, with concerns having been raised over shelling that has at times moved closer in from the airport northwest of the city, putting civilians in increasing danger. The violence came hours after the foreign ministers of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France ended a crisis meeting in Berlin with a joint call to cease hostilities, but no breakthrough agreement to stop the bloodshed. The talks had been held against the unpromising backdrop of fresh clashes and after Ukraine's president accused Moscow of fuelling the war with fresh troops and tanks. US Secretary of State John Kerry accused the rebels of attempting "a blatant land grab", while Washington's UN envoy Samantha Power said Russia was pursuing an "occupation plan" in the east.

