

# NEWS IN brief

## 40 killed in DR Congo protests: HRW

Forty people have died in protests in the Democratic Republic of Congo against President Joseph Kabila, Human Rights Watch said yesterday, accusing security forces of using excessive force and then trying to remove evidence. HRW said that it has confirmed 36 dead in protests in the capital Kinshasa and four dead in the eastern city of Goma.

## Just five Ebola cases left in Liberia: govt

Liberia yesterday said it had just five remaining cases of Ebola, confirming it was close to eradicating an epidemic which has left thousands dead. At the height of the epidemic in August and September, Liberia was reporting more than 300 new cases a week. The worst outbreak of the virus in history has registered almost 9,000 deaths in a year.

## Anti-Muslim acts soar in France

The number of anti-Muslim incidents in France has soared since the Paris attacks, with 128 such acts registered over two weeks, almost the same amount as all 2014. The National Observatory Against Islamophobia said 33 acts against mosques in particular and 95 threats had been reported to authorities since the January 7-9 incidents.

## Spain nabs 4 'jihadists'

Police yesterday arrested four suspected Islamist extremists in the Spanish territory of Ceuta bordering Morocco and were investigating whether they were planning attacks in Spain.



A Shia Huthi rebel threatens Yemeni protesters during a rally against the control of the capital by Huthi rebels in the capital Sanaa, yesterday. Thousands of Yemenis took to the streets of Sanaa in the largest demonstration against Huthis since the Shia militiamen overran the capital in September.

# DEATH OF KING ABDULLAH World leaders flock to Saudi



World leaders headed to Saudi Arabia yesterday to offer condolences following the death of King Abdullah, with US President Barack Obama cutting short a trip to India to pay respects.

Obama will travel to Riyadh on Tuesday to meet new King Salman, the White House said. Since Abdullah took the throne in 2005, Saudi Arabia has been a prime Arab ally of Washington, and last year joined the coalition carrying out air strikes against the Islamic State jihadist group. One after another, foreign aircraft landed at a Riyadh military base where leaders from Africa, Europe and Asia descended a red-carpeted ramp to be welcomed by Saudi officials and served a traditional tiny cup of Arabic coffee.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif made a rare visit to the regional rival to offer condolences, television pictures showed. Others who came included French President Francois Hollande, Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani, Indonesian Vice-President Jusuf Kalla, and Spain's King Felipe VI. British Prime Minister David Cameron and Prince Charles were expected too.

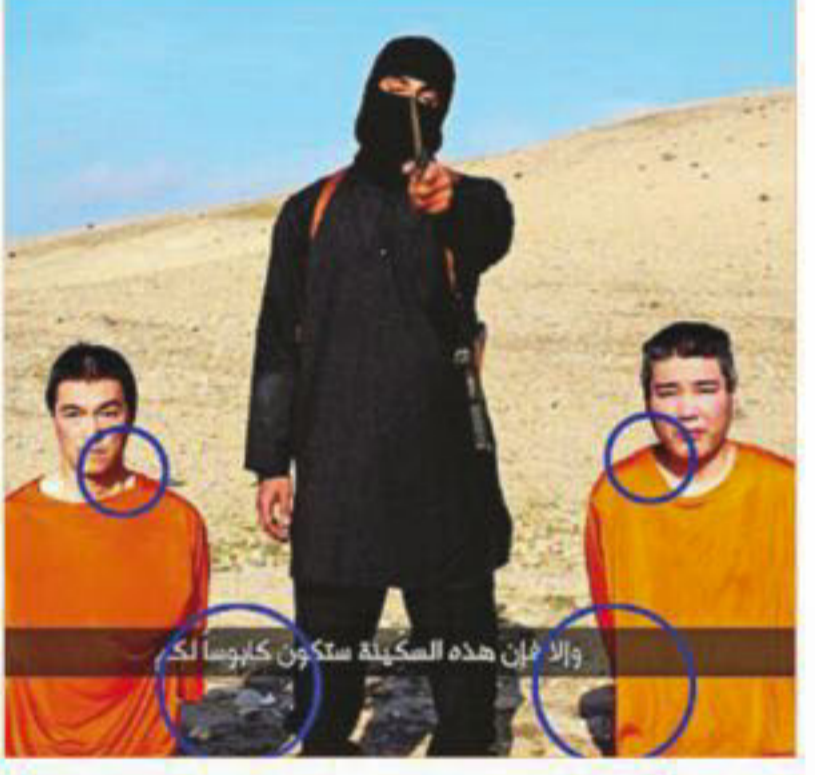
Abdullah died on Friday at the age of about 90 after being hospitalised with pneumonia. He was a cautious reformer who led the Gulf state through a turbulent decade in a region shaken by the Arab Spring uprisings and Islamic extremism.

World leaders have praised the king as a key mediator between Muslims and the West, but campaigners criticised his rights record and urged Salman to do more to protect freedom of speech and women's rights. Gulf rulers, and leaders including Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, attended Abdullah's traditionally simple funeral at Riyadh's Imam Turki bin Abdullah mosque on Friday. The body was quickly moved to nearby Al-Od public cemetery and buried in a grave marked only by a book-sized plain grey stone.

# ISIS 'executes Japan hostage'

Claims new video; Tokyo condemns militant's 'intolerable violence'

Japan was yesterday scrambling to verify a video posted online claiming that one of two men held hostage by Islamic State jihadists had been executed, as Prime Minister Shinzo Abe condemned the militant's "intolerable violence". Abe called an emergency meeting of senior ministers that began at around 1.20am (1620 GMT Saturday) as his government demanded "the remaining" hostage be immediately set free.



The government is currently working to confirm the authenticity of the video, added defence chief Gen Nakatani. The video was not posted on any of the ISIS group's official channels and it does not bear the group's black and white flag. The purported execution of Yukawa is also not shown.

Several supporters of the ISIS group on social media channels have contested the veracity of the video, while Rami Abdel Rahman, director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said negotiations for the two men's release are still ongoing. If Yukawa's death is confirmed, it would mark a very grave turn of events for Japan, which has been on edge since the Islamic State group released a video on Tuesday demanding a \$200 million ransom within 72 hours.

There had been no news of the fate of freelance journalist Goto or self-employed contractor Yukawa since the deadline expired at 0550 GMT on Friday. The jihadist group, which rules large swathes of Iraq and Syria under a strict form of Islamic law, has murdered five Western hostages since August last year but this is the first time it has threatened Japanese captives.

Did ISIS doctor this footage? The Islamic State recording showing two Japanese men held hostage by militants may have been filmed in separate locations before being combined into a single video, experts claim.

Inconsistencies with the shadows of Haruna Yukawa, fellow captive Kenji Goto and the masked killer known as jihadi John suggest images of the hostages were recorded separately and then added together for greater effect. In the video, Yukawa and Goto sit kneeling on either side of jihadi John. But the shadows three lean in different directions. And perhaps most tellingly, the shadows of the hostages' heads are cast down onto opposite sides of their necks.

# Stars aligning for India-US ties

Says Obama in an interview published ahead of historic tour



US President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama board Air Force One prior to departing from Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, yesterday.

President Barack Obama said "the stars are aligned" to enable the United States and India to forge a global partnership in an interview published Friday ahead of his visit to New Delhi.

Obama, who begins an unprecedented second visit by a serving US president on Sunday, told the India Today magazine that he hoped to make "concrete progress" with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on a range of issues.

But while outlining areas where the world's two biggest democracies share common goals, Obama put pressure on Modi to do more to help secure a global climate pact. "I firmly believe that the relationship between the United States and India can be one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century," Obama said in the interview conducted by email.

"We're natural partners. As two great democracies, our strength is rooted in the power and potential of our citizens. As entrepreneurial societies, we're global leaders in innovation, science and technology. "That's why, when I addressed the Indian Parliament on my last visit (in 2010), I outlined my vision for how we could become global partners meeting global challenges... I'd like to think that the stars are aligned to finally realise the vision I outlined."

While observers do not expect any major policy breakthroughs on the three-day trip, both sides say the invitation to Obama for Monday's Republic Day celebrations emphasises a new closeness in sometimes tetchy ties. Climate change however has been a source of friction, with India insisting it will not sign any deal to cut greenhouse gas emissions that threatens its growth at UN climate talks in Paris in December.

It has stuck to its guns even though China and the US have unveiled emissions pledges. India, which suffers regular electricity cuts, is heavily dependent on coal-fired power plants. "I believe that part of being global partners means working together to meet one of the world's urgent challenges -- climate change," said Obama. Speaking to the NDTV network Thursday, India's Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said the two sides had "different approaches to climate change".

# Top US official meets Cuba dissidents

The highest-ranking US official to visit Cuba in three decades met with leading dissidents on Friday.

Roberta Jacobson, the State Department's top official for Latin America, met with seven government critics under crystal chandeliers at the lavish mansion of the head of the US Interests Section in Havana. The meeting came a day after Jacobson attended landmark talks with Cuban officials, in which the Cold War rivals agreed to meet again in their bid to reopen mutual embassies and normalize ties that broke in 1961.

Jacobson told reporters the get-together with dissidents allowed her to "listen well to their discrepancies or support for the new policy." Obama, who begins an unprecedented second visit by a serving US president on Sunday, told the India Today magazine that he hoped to make "concrete progress" with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on a range of issues.

# Greece faces moment of truth

Greece yesterday stood on the brink of a make-or-break general election that could sweep the anti-austerity Syriza party to power and set the country on a collision course with its international creditors.

Syriza wants to renegotiate Greece's massive 318 billion euro (\$356 billion) debt and put an end to years of wage cuts and public spending reductions linked to an international bailout. The possibility of Alexis Tsipras' left-wing party winning today's vote has sparked fears that Greece could fail to keep up its debt repayments and leave the euro.

Syriza have a lead of at least four points over the incumbent conservative New Democracy party of Prime Minister Antonis Samaras, according to opinion polls. In his final appeal to voters on Friday, Tsipras pledged to restore "dignity" to Greece. Samaras told his party's supporters in his closing rally that it would be crazy to elect Syriza just when the fiscal reforms he has supported could be about to pay off. "Syriza will turn all of Europe against Greece.... They don't understand Europe, they don't believe in Europe," he said. Greece has endured deep budget cuts tied to its 240 billion euro bailout from the so-called troika -- the European Union, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank (ECB). Unemployment is around 25 percent and the economy has shrunk by a quarter since the start of the eurozone crisis. Tsipras has said he wants to work out a solution on the debt with the ECB by July, and has promised to cut the amount by half. Campaigning is banned on the eve of a Greek election, so Tsipras met journalists covering his campaign. A Syriza official told AFP the party was heading for victory and was confident of forming a coalition government if necessary.

## GENERAL ELECTION



ment if necessary. "Polls show we are five to 10 points ahead of New Democracy. What remains to be seen is whether we will have a clear majority," the official said. Samaras was greeted by a media scrum as he visited New Democracy party workers in rainy central Athens. He said up to 14 percent of voters remained undecided and predicted they would choose the "stability" he represented. Greek newspapers said the country was at a potentially crucial point in its modern history. "Fasten your seatbelts" said the Proto Thema weekly. It warned that Greece would have "one foot outside the eurozone" if it failed to stick to the ECB's debt repayment schedule. The pro-government Kathimerini newspaper said whichever party won, Greece faced "suffocating deadlines" imposed by its international creditors. A victory for Syriza could pave the way for other anti-austerity parties to break through in Europe. The leader of Spain's radical Podemos movement, Pablo Iglesias, appeared with Tsipras at an Athens rally this week.



# Gates predicts AIDS miracles by 2030

BLOOMBERG ONLINE

Bill Gates, the world's richest man, said he expects a pair of advances by 2030 that will eliminate most of the damage from AIDS, the global epidemic that has killed more than 36 million people. Improved treatment and the development of a vaccine to prevent new infections are the "two miracles" needed to help turn the tide, the billionaire co-founder of Microsoft Corp. (MSFT) said Friday at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. "We won't see the end of AIDS," Gates said at the forum. "But, both for malaria and AIDS, we're seeing that the tools that let us do a 95 percent to 100 percent reduction, those tools will be invented during this 15-year period."

Gates and his wife, who run the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, predicted in their annual letter this week that conditions for the world's poorest people will improve more between now and 2030 than at any other time in history. He cited advances in agriculture, banking and medicine.

Expanding treatment to 90 percent of people with HIV by 2020 from 38 percent now will help reverse the epidemic, preventing 21 million deaths and 28 million infections in the following decade, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, or UNAIDS, wrote in a report in November. The number of annual AIDS-related deaths has declined each year since 2005 because of advances in treatment and expanded access.

# Ukraine rebels launch new offensive

Rocket attacks kill 30 in key port as conflict takes new turn; EU warns Russia

Pro-Kremlin rebels announced a major new offensive yesterday after Grad rocket fire killed at least 30 people in a strategic government-held Ukrainian port linking separatist territory with Russian-occupied Crimea. The local mayor's office said 97 people were also wounded in the city of Mariupol by dozens of long-distance rockets that smashed into a packed residential district early in the morning and then again shortly after noon.

immediately asked the UN Security Council to censure Russia for allegedly spearheading the militants' advance on the biggest pro-Kiev city left standing in the decimated war zone. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko vowed



People light candles to mourn people who died in the Mariupol shelling in Kiev, yesterday.

"Obviously, everyone in the city is very scared," Mariupol native Eduard told AFP. A fellow resident named Pavlo described dazed survivors helping wounded victims climb out from the concrete rubble of Soviet-era apartment blocks and navigate the shattered glass-covered streets.

"Today, we launched an offensive against Mariupol," Russia's RIA Novosti news agency quoted Donetsk separatist leader Alexander Zakharchenko as saying. But he added a few hours later that his forces were still "saving their strength" and had "conducted no active operations in Mariupol." But he called the potential capture of the industrial port "the best tribute possible for all our dead."

Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk in a separate statement to deliver a "full victory" over the Russian-backed force. The spiralling violence also drew condemnation from both the European Union and OSCE

monitors who are trying to mediate an end to one of the continent's deadliest and most diplomatically-explosive crises since the Cold War. EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini warned in Brussels that the latest escalation "would inevitably lead to a further grave deterioration of relations between the EU and Russia."

A rebel assault on the port in August saw Kiev repel the attack at a heavy cost that prompted President Poroshenko to agree to a September 5 ceasefire. That truce was followed by still more clashes that killed at least 1,500 people and was ultimately rejected by the rebels on Friday.

The separatist leader of Donetsk said on Friday he was ripping up the September agreement and launching an offensive aimed at seizing eastern lands still controlled by the pro-Western authorities in Kiev.

His announcement came just a day after his men scored their most symbolic victory to date by flushing out Ukrainian troops from a long-disputed airport in Donetsk that Kiev had clung on to since May.

Western diplomats linked that advance to a new infusion of Russian troops -- firmly denied by the Kremlin -- designed to expand separatist holdings before the signing of a final truce and land demarcation agreement.