

NEWS IN brief

Mubarak's sons released from prison

BBC ONLINE
Alaa and Gamal Mubarak walked free from Cairo's Tora Prison early yesterday and headed to their homes in the suburb of Heliopolis, security officials said. Last week, a court ordered that the two men be freed pending retrial along with their father for embezzlement.

40 plus Philippine cops killed in clash

AFP, Manila
A total of 43 commandos were killed Sunday in the remote town of Mamasapano, a known rebel stronghold, on Mindanao island in the south, the national police chief Leonardo Espina told a news conference yesterday. Regional police spokeswoman Judith Ambong told AFP separately the bodies of 49 policemen were recovered.

Karachi cop shot dead guarding polio workers

AFP, Karachi
Gunmen yesterday killed a policeman guarding a polio vaccination team in Karachi, police officials said, the latest blow to efforts to stamp out the crippling virus in Pakistan. The attackers on a motor-bike shot the policeman in the western neighbourhood of Papoosh Nagar and then fled, senior police official Chaudhry Asad told AFP.

IS urges new attacks

AFP, Beirut
The Islamic State yesterday urged Muslims to carry out new attacks in a recording by its spokesman posted online. Abu Mohamed al-Adnani said in the recording, "We promise that in the Christian bastions they will continue to live in a state of alert, of terror, of fear and insecurity... You have seen nothing yet."

Lebanon's migrants hope for union to end abuse

AFP, Beirut
Subjected to beatings and rape, and often driven to suicide, migrant domestic workers in Lebanon are trying to form a labour union in what would be a first for the Arab world. More than 200 women from Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and other countries joined the founding conference of their hoped-for union in Beirut on Sunday. Their initiative is unprecedented in the Arab world, which the United Nations says is home to some 30 million migrant workers. Labour Minister Sejaane Azzi told AFP that Lebanese law does not allow foreigners to set up a union, but "new laws are needed to improve the situation of housemaids".

Ukraine crisis: NATO holds 'extraordinary' meeting

AFP, Brussels
NATO said it would hold an "extraordinary" meeting of the alliance's Ukraine Commission yesterday, after an upsurge in fighting between pro-Russian rebels and Kiev left dozens of people dead. Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg would separately meet with EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini yesterday as the deepening crisis put pressure on Brussels to tighten sanctions against Russia. Over the weekend, NATO's Stoltenberg urged Russia to "stop destabilising Ukraine and respect its international commitments." "Fighting in eastern Ukraine has sharply escalated with indications of a large-scale offensive by Russian-backed separatists," he said.



Demonstrators protest against the French Economy minister Emmanuel Macron's draft law in Paris yesterday. The reforms, which includes the extension of Sunday shop opening, have proved highly controversial within the country and even within Macron's own ruling Socialist Party. PHOTO: AFP

Obama joins Modi at Delhi Republic Day parade

BBC ONLINE

US President Barack Obama has attended India's Republic Day parade in Delhi, the first US head of state to do so.

Obama was chief guest at the annual military parade. He arrived on Sunday for a three-day visit seen as a sign of warming ties between the two countries.

After talks on Sunday, both sides announced a breakthrough on a pact that will allow US companies to supply India with civilian nuclear technology.

Indian PM Narendra Modi said it was a "new journey" of co-operation. Obama met with the main opposition Congress party leaders later yesterday and also spoke at a business summit.

Republic Day marks the adoption of India's constitution in 1950, three years after independence from Britain. Uniformed soldiers in colourful headgear marched down Rajpath, or King's Avenue, where Obama watched the parade with Modi inside a bullet-proof glass enclosure.

The BBC's Sanjoy Majumder in Delhi says the ceremony showcased India's military might with soldiers marching in formation and the latest weapons on display, including several made in America.

"Warm hugs" have set the tone for the visit, as the BBC's Yogita Limaye reports

Helicopters showered petals on the crowds and brass bands and dancers filed past the guests on a foggy, rainy morning.

"The day is all about patriotism and I'm lucky to be a part of it," Ajith Kumar, a student watching the parade, said. "The fact that we have a guest like Obama has made it all the more special."

The US president received a warm welcome on Sunday when Modi greeted him at the airport with a bear hug.

The two men spent several hours discussing defence and trade ties, and then announced the breakthrough on the civilian nuclear deal.

The pact was agreed in 2008 but has been held up for six years because of differences over the liability US firms would face in India in the event of a nuclear accident.

Now a large insurance pool will be set up, without the need for any further legislation.

The two sides have also pledged to increase their bilateral trade five-fold, from the current \$100bn a year, and build co-operation on defence projects.

Obama's visit to India has been shortened so he can visit Saudi Arabia and pay his respects following the death of King Abdullah. It means he and his wife, Michelle, will not now visit the Taj Mahal.

'Don't fall into US's trap' China tells India

THE HINDU ONLINE

China has offered to lift its strategic partnership with India to a "higher level," and prompted New Delhi to avoid a "zero-sum trap" that was being set up by Washington and its allies.

In a message, on the occasion of 65th Republic Day, to President Pranab Mukherjee, his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping expressed China's willingness "to make concerted efforts with India to lift their strategic cooperative partnership oriented to peace and prosperity to a higher level."

The felicitations coincided with the New Delhi visit of US President Barack Obama.

An article on Monday that appeared in the Global Times and People's Daily, cautioned India, not to fall into the "trap" that was being laid, to pit New Delhi against Beijing, by Washington, as part of its "pivot to Asia" doctrine.

The commentary noted that "the second visit by a sitting US President to India, the first time on record, has undoubtedly drawn wide attention from the international community".

It added that many Western media reports "have pointed out that the U.S., regardless of historical complications, is putting more efforts into soliciting India to act as a partner, even an ally, to support Washington's "pivot to Asia" strategy, which is mainly devised to counter China's rise.

In a further elaboration, the daily pointed to the West's "ulterior motives" to frame the "Chinese dragon" and the "Indian elephant" as natural rivals. "The West is egging India on to be fully prepared for "threats" posed by its large neighbour.

Considering the fact that both sides still have territorial disputes and will probably have wider engagement at many levels, this so-called rivalry between India and China will not stop making headlines in Western media."

However, it cautioned India that it was facing a carefully positioned "trap". "Although craftily set, it will be revealed eventually."

The daily advised both countries to put aside their "debates over specific issues," and ensure that "their relations cannot take a life-or-death struggle as a foothold."



Yemenis gather around a burnt car after it was targeted by a drone strike killing three suspected al-Qaeda militants yesterday between the Marib and Chabwa provinces, a desert area east of Sanaa. The drone strike saw an unmanned aircraft, which only the United States operates in the region, fire four missiles at a vehicle killing the three suspected militants, a day after Washington vowed to continue its campaign against the jihadist group despite the Arabian Peninsula country's ongoing political crisis. PHOTO: AFP

Tsipras sworn in as Greek PM

AFP, Athens

Alexis Tsipras was sworn in yesterday as Greek prime minister at the helm of an anti-austerity coalition after an election win that has sent shockwaves through Europe.

Tsipras's radical leftwing Syriza party cruised to victory in Sunday's vote, setting the country on a collision course with international creditors over plans to renegotiate its massive bailout deal.

Syriza took 149 out of the 300 seats in parliament, becoming the first party to take power in Europe that openly rejects spending cuts and austerity measures.

Tsipras -- characteristically wearing an open-necked shirt without a tie at his investiture -- also broke with tradition by taking a civil instead of a religious oath.

The 40-year-old former Communist youth activist pledged to "always serve the interests of the Greek people" as he became the country's youngest prime minister for 150 years. Having fallen two seats short of an absolute majority, Syriza quickly forged a coalition with the small right-wing Independent Greeks (ANEL) party.



Tsipras' first priority will be to deliver on his pledge to renegotiate the terms of the country's massive 240-billion-euro EU-IMF bailout despite universal opposition from Greece's European allies. Renewed fears that Greece could be forced out of the eurozone if it defaults on its debt repayments saw the euro hit an 11-year low against the dollar while Greek stocks closed down more than three percent. Tsipras said Sunday his victory would see Greece "leaving behind disastrous austerity". Syriza mocked claims by former prime minister Antonis Samaras' New Democracy party that the country would grind to a halt if it elected the radical left-wing party. "The sun is shining, the bank cash dispensers are working and people are at work," said party spokesman Panos Skourletis.

Moscow to ease rebel-Kiev tensions

AFP, Moscow

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said yesterday that Moscow is working to promote contacts between Kiev and the pro-Russian separatists in the next few days.

"Certain contacts are planned within days as far as I know. We are trying as far as we have the powers and opportunities to facilitate these contacts," Lavrov told at a televised news conference in Moscow.

Russia is "convinced that the peace process must be revived and for that we are making the necessary efforts, primarily in order to finally start full, stable and direct dialogue between Kiev and the rebels," he said.

At the same time, Lavrov used fiery rhetoric to condemn Ukraine, accusing it of attempting to derail the peace process with military action in the eastern separatist region.

"We see attempts to derail the peace process. We see again and again attempts made by the Kiev authorities to solve the problem through crushing the south-east by force."

"These attempts have no future and most importantly lead to more and more victims among civilians." Russia's top diplomat said Moscow was counting on Western countries, specifically Germany, France and the United States "not doing anything that gives the Kiev authorities the impression that all their actions automatically get Western support."

At the same time he accused Western countries of a "chronic" habit of blaming all violent attacks on the separatist rebels.

Syria's Assad dismisses US plans to train rebels

AFP, Beirut

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said US plans to train vetted rebels to fight the Islamic State group were "illusory" as they would eventually defect to the jihadists, in an interview published yesterday.

The Syrian leader also questioned talks to be held in Moscow this week, telling Foreign Affairs magazine that his government would attend but was not convinced the opposition figures taking part represented Syrians on the ground.

Washington has backed the Syrian opposition since early in the uprising and has unveiled plans to train more than 5,000 vetted rebels in Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to fight IS.

Assad said the planned US-trained force would be "illegal" and would be treated like any other rebel group.

"They are going to be fought like any other illegal militia fighting against the Syrian army," he said. "Bringing 5,000 (fighters) from the out-

side will make most of them defect and join ISIS (Islamic State) and other groups.

"The idea itself... is illusory." "The idea itself... is illusory." "The idea itself... is illusory." "The idea itself... is illusory." "The idea itself... is illusory."

Assad questioned the seriousness of the US-led campaign against the jihadists.

"What we've seen so far is just, let's say, window-dressing, nothing real," he said.

"Did the United States put any pressure on Turkey to stop the support of Al-Qaeda? They didn't," Assad said.

He was referring to his government's longstanding accusations that Ankara has backed rebel groups including IS's jihadist rivals in Al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Nusra Front.

Assad said the nearly four-year-old conflict could only be ended with a political solution, but cast doubt on the value of talks being organised this week by his key ally Russia.



Hackers target Malaysia Airlines

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The website of Malaysia Airlines was commandeered for several hours yesterday by hackers who referenced the Islamic State jihadists and threatened to expose data taken from the carrier's servers.

The attack, whose motivation remained unclear, was claimed by the "Lizard Squad", a group that has taken credit previously for denial-of-service attacks around the world.

It was not clear why the troubled airline was targeted, but the Lizard Squad said on its Twitter feed that it was "Going to dump some loot found on malaysiaairlines.com servers soon."

Visitors to the website were re-directed to another page bearing an image of a tuxedo-wearing lizard and reading "Hacked by LIZARD SQUAD -- OFFICIAL CYBER CALIPHATE".

It also carried the headline "404 - Plane Not Found", an apparent reference to the airlines' puzzling loss of flight MH370 last year with 239 people aboard which tipped the already struggling carrier into crisis.

Media reports said versions of the website takeover in some regions included the wording "ISIS will prevail". Normal access to the site appeared to be restored later yesterday, but it marked another bout of bad press for the beleaguered national carrier.

