

NEWS IN
brief

**Next-of-kin bash
MH370 declaration**

AFP, Beijing
Traumatised relatives of those aboard missing flight MH370 yesterday blasted the Malaysian government for declaring the passengers and crew dead without evidence of the plane's fate, and rejected compensation offers. Malaysian authorities a day earlier had said they were now classifying the unexplained disappearance of the plane as an "accident".

**Armed Dutch
teenager demanding
airtime apprehended**

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
A 19-year-old wielding a gun forced his way into the studios of the Netherlands' national broadcaster NOS on Thursday and demanded airtime, before he was quickly arrested, officials have said. He had hoped to address the nation during its most popular news broadcast, but instead was led to an empty studio by a quick-thinking security guard before anyone was hurt.

**Thai officials
prosecuted for human
trafficking**

AFP, Bangkok
More than a dozen Thai government officials -- including senior policemen and a navy officer -- are being prosecuted for human trafficking, junta officials said yesterday, as they vowed "zero tolerance" of the trade. Deputy Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai insisted the arrests -- which included police officers with the ranks of colonel and lieutenant colonel -- were proof that Thailand's generals were serious about pursuing officials involved in the trade.

**Jordan awaiting
proof pilot held
by IS safe**

AFP, Amman
Jordan's military said yesterday that it was still awaiting proof that a warplane pilot threatened with execution by the Islamic State group is safe. IS had vowed to kill F-16 airman Maaz al-Kassasbeh by sunset on Thursday unless Amman handed over an Iraqi female jihadist in return for captured Japanese journalist Kenji Goto. Jordan has demanded evidence that the pilot who crashed in Syria on December 24 is still alive before freeing would-be suicide bomber Sajida al-Rishawi who is on death row. "Jordan has so far received no information that proves the pilot Maaz al-Kassasbeh is safe and sound," military spokesman Mamdoh al-Ameri told AFP. Jordan has offered to free Rishawi, who was convicted for her part in triple-hotel bombings in Amman in 2005 that killed 60 people, if IS releases the pilot.



Pakistani security officials gather at the scene following a bomb attack at a Shiite Muslim mosque in Shikarpur in Sindh province, some 470 kilometres north of Karachi yesterday. A bomb tore through a busy Shiite mosque in southern Pakistan killing at least 20 people, officials said, in the deadliest sectarian attack to hit the country in a year.

PHOTO: AFP



**Natarajan
quits Congress**

*Verbally attacks
Rahul Gandhi*
OUR CORRESPONDENT

In a major setback to India's main opposition party Congress, former Environment Minister and senior leader Jayanthi Natarajan has decided to quit the party while making a scathing attack on Rahul Gandhi and accusing him of sending "specific requests" on environmental clearances for projects.

In a letter to Congress President Sonia Gandhi, Natarajan stated she received "specific requests" from Congress vice president Rahul Gandhi on environmental clearances and she consequently rejected big-ticket projects despite pressure from Cabinet colleagues seeking approval.

Addressing a press conference in Chennai, Natarajan said it was an "extremely painful" day for her as her family has been closely associated with Congress for four generations and hurt to break her association with the party.

She added it was because of Rahul and Sonia Gandhi's approach that she stopped some great investment projects and many in the cabinet were not pleased with this.

Meanwhile, in a counter-attack on Natarajan, Congress raised questions on the timing of her resignation and said serious allegations of corruption were behind her removal from the then UPA govt.

Congress spokesperson Abhishek Singhvi told reporters in Delhi that Natarajan was acting at the behest of her new "political masters" who may have got evidence against her.

Congress also rallied behind Rahul, dismissing as "completely baseless" the allegations of his interference in the work of Environment Ministry and accused Natarajan of having "ulterior motives".

Ukraine talks fail

Dozens killed and wounded in fighting

AFP, Kiev

Truce talks between Ukraine's government and pro-Russian insurgents appeared to collapse yesterday after 24 people, mostly civilians, were reported killed in heavy weapons fire in eastern Ukraine, prompting new European criticism of Russia.

Plans for the talks in the Belarusian capital Minsk were announced on Thursday, raising hopes of dialogue amid the collapse of a September truce in a war that has killed at least 5,100 people, according to the United Nations.

But separatist negotiator Denis Pushilin said the talks, mediated by European and Russian envoys, had been scrapped and he blamed the Ukrainian government for not sending representatives.

"The foreign ministry of Belarus confirmed today that Kiev will not come. The talks have been cancelled," Pushilin told reporters prior to boarding a flight out of Minsk.

Ukrainian foreign ministry spokesman Yevgen Perebyynis told AFP by telephone that the government "has not been informed about today's talks being called off".

While the leaders bickered over the Minsk talks, fighting in Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland intensified, with separatists pushing deeper into government-held territory.

Local officials and the Kiev military said 19 civilians and five Ukrainian soldiers died in the latest wave of clashes across the separatist Lugansk and Donetsk regions since Thursday afternoon.

Some of the worst violence was centred around Debaltseve -- a key government-held town of 25,000 people that was built around a railroad connecting the two rebel centres of the Russian-speaking southeast.

Donetsk insurgency commander Alexander Zakharchenko told Russian state television that Ukrainian troops in the town were "surrounded" and unable to receive supplies or send their wounded for treatment in regional hospitals.

French President Francois Hollande and Polish Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz reiterated calls for an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine and told Russia to stop supporting separatists.

Moscow yesterday accused Brussels of adopting a "one-side reading" of the

conflict and warned that further sanctions would only backfire.

The 28-nation EU on Thursday extended through September a first wave of targeted sanctions it had slapped on Moscow and Crimean leaders in the wake of Russia's March seizure of the Black Sea peninsula from Ukraine.

EU foreign ministers also agreed to start work on further "appropriate action" if Moscow and the rebels continued breaching the original terms of the collapsed September truce.

Russia accuses the West of manipulating the Ukrainian government, which came to power in elections after the ouster in huge street demonstrations last year of a Kremlin-backed leader.

The Kiev government has angered Moscow by seeking closer ties with the EU and future membership in NATO, which would bring the Western military alliance into a huge section of the former Soviet Union.

"It is time for the European Union to really think about the lack of prospects for the sanctions standoff, which only harms the people and the economies of our countries," the Russian foreign ministry said.

**SA apartheid assassin
given parole**

BBC ONLINE

South African apartheid-era death squad commander Eugene de Kock has been granted parole after 20 years in jail.

He was nicknamed "Prime Evil" for his role in the killing and maiming of activists fighting white minority rule in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Justice Minister Michael Masutha said De Kock would be released "in the interests of nation-building".

De Kock, 66, was sentenced in 1996 to two life terms in prison and a further 212 years for the crimes he committed.

Masutha said the time and place of De Kock's release would not be made public.

The justice minister stressed that his decision was guided by South Africa's constitution.

De Kock confessed to more than 100 acts of murder, torture and fraud, taking full responsibility for the activities of his undercover unit.

He was granted amnesty for most offences but the TRC only had the power to grant amnesty to human rights violators whose crimes were linked to a political motive and who made a full confession.

Whilst in prison he did a radio interview in 2007, accusing South Africa's last white ruler FW de Klerk of having hands "soaked in blood" for ordering specific killings.

The former president denied the allegations, saying his conscience was clear.

De Kock also made contact with some of his victims' families while in jail, asking for forgiveness.



Turkey ready 'to pay price'

If found guilty of Armenian massacres says Erdogan

AFP, Istanbul

Turkey is ready to "pay the price" if found guilty of the mass killings of Armenians a century ago, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said.

In a live interview with state-run TRT channel on Thursday, Erdogan said his country would take the necessary steps if historians conclude that it was at fault for the World War I-era massacres that Armenians say amounted to genocide.

"If the results actually reveal that we have committed a crime, if we have a price to pay, then as Turkey we would assess it and take the required steps," Erdogan said.

Turkey has vehemently rejected the genocide claim and says up to 500,000 Armenians died in fighting and of starvation after Armenians sided with invading Russian troops. It claims a comparable number of Turks were also killed.

Last year, Erdogan offered an unprecedented expression of condolence for the massacres when he was prime minister but



this did little to satisfy Armenians, who want the deaths of an estimated 1.5 million people recognised as genocide.

But Erdogan said in the interview: "It is impossible to accept such thing. We are not obliged to recognise so-called Armenian genocide on someone's orders."

He also reiterated that the mass killings should be studied by historians on the basis of documents and archives, and not politicians.

"If you are really sincere in this matter, let us give it to the historians. Let the historians deal with the matter. We have opened our archive and presented more than a million documents," he said.

"If Armenia also has an archive, then they should open it too.... Then we can sit and talk as politicians," he said.

Earlier this month Erdogan said Ankara would "actively" challenge a campaign pressuring Turkey to recognise as genocide the mass killings, on the 100th anniversary of the tragedy this year.



People stand beside the body of a man killed after a shell hit a residential area, killing two civilians in Donetsk's Kybivshvsky district, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

New Saudi king in major govt shake-up

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia's new King Salman has tightened his hold on power, firing two sons of his predecessor and replacing the heads of intelligence and other key agencies in a sweeping shakeup.

The appointments, which analysts said supported signs the kingdom will chart a steady course on foreign and oil policy, came a week after Salman, 79, took the throne following the death of King Abdullah.

Top officials from the Ports Authority, the National Anti-Corruption Commission and the conservative Islamic kingdom's religious police were among those let go late Thursday.

Salman, a half-brother of Abdullah, named a 31-member cabinet whose new faces include the ministers for culture and information,



social affairs, civil service, and communications and information technology, among others.

Oil Minister Ali al-Naimi, Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, and Finance Minister Ibrahim al-Assaf stayed in the cabinet of the world's leading oil exporter.

A nearly 60 percent fall in global oil prices since last June has left Saudi Arabia projecting its first budget deficit since 2011, but government spending is set to continue.

Salman merged the ministries of higher education and education, naming Azzam bin Mohammed al-Dakheel to head the super-ministry.

With most of the changes in the fields of education and culture, the appointments indicate that the kingdom's foreign and oil policies "will remain unchanged," said Anwar Eshqi, head of the Jeddah-based Middle East Centre for Strategic Studies.

Along with other countries in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia has joined a US-led air campaign against the Islamic State group that has seized parts of Syria and neighbouring Iraq.

Saudi Arabia is trying to improve its basic education system and has built more universities as it seeks to diversify its oil-dependent economy.

The former head of the ultra-conservative kingdom's notorious religious police, Shaikh Abdul Latif Al Shaikh, was replaced by Abdulrahman al-Sanad.

**Will not hand
Guantanamo
back to Cuba: US**

AFP, Washington

Efforts to improve ties with Cuba will not extend to handing control of Guantanamo Bay back to Havana, the White House said on Thursday.

"The president does believe that the prison at Guantanamo Bay should be closed down," said White House spokesman Josh Earnest. "But the naval base is not something that we wish to be closed."

The base, on Cuba's southeastern tip, is currently the site of a large naval base as well as a deeply controversial prison used to detain terror suspects without trial.

Cuban President Raul Castro on Wednesday said handing back control of the 45 square mile site was a precondition for normalizing ties with the United States.

Castro and Obama simultaneously announced on December 17 their intention to end a half-century of animosity and normalize ties that broke off in 1961.

**Israel to build 450 new
West Bank settler homes**

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday published tenders to build 450 new settler homes in the occupied West Bank, a watchdog said, in a plan denounced by the Palestinians as a "war crime".

Settlements watchdog Peace Now tied the move to Israel's March 17 general election in which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud is competing with other rightwing parties for the settler vote.

"It is a pre-election grab to establish facts on the ground made by the Netanyahu government," a Peace Now statement said.

It said the inevitable US condemnation would add to strains over Netanyahu's acceptance of a controversial invitation to address Congress on Iran that has sparked a bitter row with the White House.

"After embarrassing the Obama administration with the invitation to the congress, Netanyahu adds another slap in the face of the Americans, and shows no respect to Israel's closest ally," it said.

Daniel Seidemann, head of the Terrestrial Jerusalem group which also monitors settlement, said the latest plans were the first of their kind to be announced in several months and unlikely to be the last before the election.

Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) official Wassel Abu Yusef slammed the project.

"What the Israelis announced is part of a wider war... against the Palestinian people," Abu Yusef told AFP.