

NEWS IN brief

Indonesia resumes AirAsia search

AFP, Jakarta Indonesian rescuers yesterday resumed their search for 86 victims still missing from the AirAsia plane that crashed on December 28 with 162 people on board, an official said.

Japan launches new spy satellite

AFP, Tokyo Japan yesterday successfully launched a back-up spy satellite, its aerospace agency said, after cancelling an earlier lift-off due to bad weather.

Blast hits pilgrim bus in Damascus; 7 killed

AFP, Beirut At least seven people were killed when a blast ripped through a bus carrying Shiite pilgrims in a central district of the Syrian capital yesterday, a monitoring group said.

Moscow library fire guts million rare docs

AFP, Moscow A fire that ripped through one of Russia's largest university libraries is believed to have damaged over one million historic documents, with some describing the fire as a cultural "Chernobyl."

Bahrain strips 72 of citizenship

AFP, Dubai Sunni-ruled Bahrain said Saturday it had revoked the citizenship of 72 people convicted of "harming the interests of the kingdom", which has experienced unrest by its Shia majority since 2011.

Boko Haram menace Nigeria repels major attack ahead of polls

AFP, Kano An assault by Boko Haram aimed at taking over the key northeastern Nigerian city of Maiduguri has been repelled, the military said yesterday, roughly 12 hours after fighting began and just two weeks before national elections.

Ukraine peace hope fades

Death toll mounts after talks collapse in Belarusian capital; 19 more killed

AFP, Kiev At least 19 soldiers and civilians were killed in clashes across east Ukraine yesterday as fierce fighting raged between government forces and pro-Russian rebels following the collapse of ceasefire talks.



PHOTO: AFP

Ukraine's military said that 13 soldiers had died and 20 were wounded over the past 24 hours, pushing the military death toll over the past two days to 28.

Six civilians also died in fighting across the rebels' self-declared Donetsk People's Republic and in Kiev-controlled towns in Lugansk region, government officials and separatists said.

The latest casualty reports came as Ukraine's two warring sides looked further than ever from agreeing a peace deal after the collapse of truce talks Saturday.

Mediators and Ukrainian representatives accused the separatists of scuppering an agreement despite growing international pressure to defuse a bloody upsurge in fighting that has left scores dead in recent days.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which is involved in the talks along with Russia, said that rebel negotiators in Minsk "were not even prepared to discuss implementation of a ceasefire and withdrawal of heavy weapons."

Instead the insurgent representatives called for a total revision of an earlier Kremlin-backed peace plan signed in September that has formed the basis for all negotiations, the OSCE said in a statement.

The rebels say they now want to redraw the demarcation line between the two sides to include gains they have made since ripping up a shaky truce and pushing into Ukrainian territory.

A pro-Russian fighter visits a house yesterday after it was damaged by shelling the day before in Makiivka, in the suburbs of the eastern Ukrainian city of Donetsk.

Kiev has rebuffed this demand and said the rebels' position has thrown any future peace talks into doubt.

The fiercest fighting on the ground is focused around the strategic town of Debaltseve, a railway hub between rebel bastions Donetsk and Lugansk, where rebels are trying to encircle gov-

ernment forces.

Ukraine military spokesman Volodymyr Polyovyi said that "constant battles" were ongoing around the town but denied insurgent claims that they have trapped some 8,000 government troops.

Civilians who have fled describe increasingly dire conditions in the town -- which once had a population of some 25,000 -- with water and electricity cut and the remaining inhabitants living in underground shelters.

Western governments and Ukraine have accused Russia of sending regular troops and arms to bolster the rebels and spearhead the latest offensive -- claims Moscow has repeatedly denied.

The rebels, however, are equipped with the heavy weaponry of a regular army, hardware they claim to have captured from fleeing Ukrainian forces.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, French President Francois Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel talked to each other by phone ahead of the peace meeting on Saturday, urging the warring factions to agree a truce in fighting that has left at least 5,100 people dead.

Moscow -- suffering the economic impact of harsh Western sanctions over the Ukraine crisis -- reacted cautiously to the collapse of the talks, saying that they "needed time to evaluate them."

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.

US Secretary of State John Kerry is set to jet into Kiev on Thursday to pledge Washington's support for the war-torn nation during talks with President Petro Poroshenko and Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk.

Egypt frees Al-Jazeera journo

BBC ONLINE

Jailed al-Jazeera journalist Peter Grete has been deported from Egypt, state media say, and is flying to Cyprus.

The Australian ex-BBC correspondent was arrested in December 2013 and imprisoned last June on charges that included spreading false news.

He was jailed with two other al-Jazeera men - Mohamed Fahmy and Baher Mohamed.

Presidential sources said Fahmy would be deported to Canada after his dual Egyptian nationality was dropped.

All the defendants denied the charges against them and said their trial was a sham.

They were accused of collaborating with the banned Muslim Brotherhood after the overthrow of President Mohammed Morsi by the military in 2013. The three men said they were simply reporting the news.

Al-Jazeera tweeted that it welcomed Peter Grete's release and demanded Fahmy and Baher be freed.

Mostefa Souag, acting director-general of al-Jazeera media network, said in a statement: "We're pleased for Peter and his family that they are to be reunited. It has been an incredible and unjustifiable ordeal for them, and they have coped with incredible dignity..."

"We will not rest until Baher and Mohamed also regain their freedom."

"The Egyptian authorities have it in their power to finish this properly today, and that is exactly what they must do."

Egyptian President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi had said in November he was considering the possibility of granting pardons to the two foreign al-Jazeera journalists. He had earlier signed a decree on repatriating foreign prisoners.

Then in January, Egypt's top court ordered a retrial of all three men.



Peter Grete

DNA clock can predict lifespan

PTI, London

Scientists can now almost accurately predict a person's lifespan.

A team of researchers from the University of Edinburgh have identified a biological clock that provides vital clues about how long a person is likely to live.

Researchers studied chemical changes to DNA that take place over a lifetime, and can help them predict an individual's age. By comparing individuals' actual ages with their predicted biological clock age, scientists saw a pattern emerging.

People whose biological age was greater than their true age were more likely to die sooner than those whose biological and actual ages were the same.

Four independent studies tracked the lives of almost 5,000 older people for up to 14 years. Each person's biological age

was measured from a blood sample at the outset, and participants were followed up throughout the study.

Researchers found that the link between having a faster-running biological clock and early death held true even after accounting for other factors such as smoking, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Scientists from the University of Edinburgh, in collaboration with researchers in Australia and the US, measured each person's biological age by studying a chemical modification to DNA, known as methylation. The modification does not alter the DNA sequence, but plays an important role in biological processes and can influence how genes are turned off and on. Methylation changes can affect many genes and occur throughout a person's life.



US boy, 3, shoots both parents

BBC ONLINE

A three-year-old American boy has shot his mother and father with the same bullet after pulling a gun from her handbag, police say.

The incident took place in a motel room on Saturday afternoon in Albuquerque in the state of New Mexico.

The toddler was apparently reaching for an iPod.

The bullet passed through his father's buttock and hit his mother, who is eight months pregnant, in the arm. Both parents are said to be recovering.

The boy's two-year-old sister, who was also in the room at the America's Best Value Inn, was unhurt.

Justin Reynolds told NBC News station KOB he and his girlfriend Monique Villescas were about to order a pizza when he heard the shot.

"The next minute I realised my girlfriend

was bleeding. Then I sat down and realised I was shot too."

He called emergency services and tried to staunch Ms Villescas's bleeding with towels.

He said: "I was more worried about my girlfriend than myself and anything else that was going on. And my son because I didn't know if he had shot himself or not. He was shocked and crying. It was traumatising."

Reynolds has been released from hospital and Ms Villescas is in a stable condition.

Albuquerque police said the district attorney's office would decide whether the parents would face negligence charges. The children have been taken into care.

In December a woman in the state of Idaho was killed after her two-year-old son accidentally shot her with a gun he found when reaching into her handbag in a Wal-Mart store.



Greece offers olive branch to creditors

AFP, Athens

Greece's anti-austerity government was to begin a European charm offensive yesterday aimed at building consensus on renegotiating its 240-billion-euro (\$270 billion) bailout, even as Germany insisted it would not support any debt relief.

Just hours before Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis headed to Paris to seek support for a renegotiation of the bailout, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras said he believed a deal could be reached with the EU and IMF.

"No side is seeking conflict and it has never been our intention to act unilaterally on Greek debt," Tsipras said in a statement issued to Bloomberg News.

In its first meeting with creditors since it took office a week ago, the Greek government clashed with the head of the eurozone finance ministers on Friday over its plans to rethink its rescue package and to halve Greece's debt.

Tsipras, who will visit Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and French President Francois Hollande next week, said his plans did not mean Greece would renege on its commitments to the European Union and International Monetary Fund.

"On the contrary, it means that we need time to breathe and create our own medium-term recovery programme," he said.



HONG KONG RALLIES FOR DEMOCRACY

Demonstrators march for democracy in Hong Kong yesterday. Tens of thousands of people took part in the march to continue pushing for democracy in the first major rally since mass demonstrations shut down parts of the city for more than two months.

PHOTO: AFP

Frosty ties between Obama, Netanyahu worsens

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Benjamin Netanyahu, one presumes, has a keen sense of history. Therefore, Israel's Prime Minister might reflect on what happened when an earlier best friend of the United States overstepped the diplomatic bounds.

Back in 1793, at the height of the French revolution, Edmond Genet arrived as the new French ambassador to the US, with instructions to get the country that France had helped to independence barely a decade earlier to take its side in the gathering conflict with Britain. The self-styled "Citizen Genet", however, went about his task too enthusiastically, scorning President George Washington's declaration of American neutrality, and going over the head of the government to foment popular support for his cause. The result was a massive

diplomatic crisis, in which even Washington's foes, basically sympathetic to Genet's cause, rallied to the president's support, and the ambassador came within an ace of being expelled.

History, as Mark Twain noted, doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes. So skip forward 222 years. This time it's not Israel's ambassador but the country's very leader who's coming to Washington in March to inject himself directly into US politics and press for tougher US action to ward off a nuclear Iran. The result: another diplomatic crisis, this time between America and its one true friend in the Middle East.

It's no secret that no love is lost between the current US President and Netanyahu. Indeed, open loathing might be a better term. Barack Obama's six years in office have been marked by a succession of spats and snubs: from Israel's

announcement of new settlements in East Jerusalem at the very moment Vice-President Biden was on a 2010 visit to plead for a settlement slowdown, to the time Obama walked out of a working dinner with Netanyahu,

invitation from House Speaker John Boehner to address a joint session of Congress on the menace of Iran, could take the biscuit. The play was cooked up by Boehner and Ron Dermer, Israel's ambassador to Washington, with no word to the White House. Not surprisingly, the White House was incandescent with rage, making clear Obama would not meet Netanyahu during the latter's stay.

Normally, Netanyahu wouldn't have the slightest problem on Capitol Hill, overwhelmingly supportive of the Israeli cause. Assuming the address goes ahead, it would be his third to Congress. On his last one, in May 2011, he received 29 standing ovations.

This time, however, the usual routine may not apply. Netanyahu will calculate that the dust will settle and the relationship will continue as always. And he's right; the symmetry of interests between

Israel and the US are too compelling, the ties too instinctive. But Obama will be President for two more years, and Americans are rallying round him: not just Democrats, obliged to choose between supporting one of their own in the White House and backing Netanyahu's demand for immediate new sanctions, but many Republicans as well. Even Fox News disapproves of the planned speech.

This proves that even in a time of polarisation, political bipartisanship is not dead. Until now, unquestioning support for Israel was one thing on which everyone agreed. Now, they discover, they agree on something else -- that no foreign leader should make a humiliating end-run around the president of the United States.

Edmond Genet learnt that lesson in 1793. Netanyahu is learning it now.



and the occasion in 2011 when the Prime Minister, answering reporters' questions in the Oval Office, delivered his host a condescending lecture on Israeli history as Obama visibly seethed alongside him.

Iraq violence killed 1,375 in January: UN

AFP, Baghdad

Violence in Iraq killed 1,375 people in January, month eight of the battle against jihadists who swept through large areas of the country last summer, the United Nations said yesterday.

UNAMI said at least 1,101 people were killed in December, capping the most violent year for Iraq since 2007, when sectarian bloodshed between the Shia majority and Sunni Arab minority was at its peak.

The UN mission cautioned that the real toll could be higher as the conflict between Iraqi forces and the Islamic State group had hampered efforts to verify casualty information.