

NEWSIN brief

Egypt policeman kills hospitalised Islamist

AFP, Cairo

An Egyptian policeman was arrested Sunday for having shot dead an Islamist detained in a Cairo hospital with injuries from his arrest, the interior ministry said. The ministry, on its Facebook page, said the victim was a member of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood arrested as he tried to plant a bomb in the capital's Al-Waraq district, without giving a date.

Pan-Arab news channel off air after launch

AFP, Dubai

Programming at a pan-Arab news channel owned by Saudi billionaire Prince Alwaleed bin Talal was unavailable yesterday, hours after its first transmission from Bahrain. The satellite feed of Alarab News Channel showed only promotional material, and an Alarab executive declined to comment.

MH17 crash: Dutch to collect more remains

AFP, The Hague

A Dutch team is at the MH17 crash site in war-torn Ukraine to collect more remains of the 298 people killed when the Malaysia Airlines jetliner crashed in July, officials said yesterday. Most of those on board the Boeing 777 when it was shot down over eastern Ukraine on July 17 were Dutch, and just three of the dead have yet to be identified by forensics experts in the Netherlands.

Syria air strikes in Daraa kill 15 civilians

AFP, Beirut

Syrian government air strikes on an opposition-held town killed at least 15 civilians in the southern province of Daraa yesterday, a monitoring group said. The strikes come as a major rebel offensive has been underway in southern Syria for months.



UKRAINE CONFLICT

A Ukrainian serviceman throws a signboard over the gates as the flames are doused after fighters of the Aydar Ukrainian volunteer battalion, burn tyres at the entrance to the Ukrainian Defence Ministry in Kiev, yesterday during an action to prevent the possible disbandment of their battalion.

PHOTO:
AFP

Separatists against truce

AFP, Donetsk

Pro-Russian separatists vowed yesterday to mobilise up to 100,000 fighters for their latest east Ukraine offensive as the US mulled sending weapons to Kiev's out-gunned forces after the latest truce bid collapsed.

The ambitious pledge to dramatically escalate a nine-month conflict that has already left at least 5,100 people dead came as the rebels battled to encircle beleaguered transport hub Debaltseve. "There will be general mobilisation in the (separatist) Donetsk People's Republic in 10 days' time, we plan on mobilising up to 100,000 men," rebel leader Alexander Zakharchenko told the separatist news agency DAN.

The surge in fighting comes as Washington and NATO's military commander appear to be moving towards supplying arms to Ukrainian forces, The New York Times reported Sunday.

President Barack Obama's administration was reviewing whether to provide "lethal assistance", in addition to non-lethal aid such as body armour and medical equipment which it already supplies to Kiev, it said.

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

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.

French President Francois Hollande, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, speaking by phone on Sunday, expressed their regret for "the failure of the talks" in the Belarussian capital Minsk.

The three leaders again called for "an immediate ceasefire", according to

the French presidency.

Mediators and Ukrainian representatives accused the separatists of scuppering Saturday's truce talks despite growing international pressure to end a surge in violence in recent days.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation 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.

Hurdles stack up

AFP, Tehran

As uncertainty persists over talks aimed at ending the 12-year standoff on Iran's disputed atomic programme, hurdles to an agreement are stacking up.

In Washington, lawmakers are considering imposing new sanctions on Tehran despite calls from the White House to give the negotiations more time.

Hardline Iranian MPs have responded with threats of their own and are drafting two bills that would undermine the talks.

With the going already tough -- the level of uranium enrichment Iran can conduct and a timetable for lifting sanctions are said to be blocking a deal -- analysts say pressure is being ratcheted up.

In the Iranian capital, officials say the United States and other world powers need to show more flexibility in nailing down the hard details of a deal.

Pakistan tests nuclear-capable cruise missile

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday test-fired a cruise missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, just over a week after its arch-rival India reached a new civilian nuclear accord with the United States.

The military described the domestically-developed Ra'ad as a "low-flying, terrain-hugging missile" which can deliver nuclear or conventional warheads to targets up to 350 kilometres away with "pinpoint accuracy".

The agreement reached during President Barack Obama's visit to New Delhi broke a deadlock that stalled a civilian atomic power agreement for years.

But it drew condemnation from Pakistan, which said the deal could destabilise South Asian security.

The US and India in 2008 signed a landmark deal giving India access to civilian nuclear technology. But it had been held up since then by US concerns over India's strict laws on liability in the event of a nuclear accident.

India and Pakistan are both nuclear-armed in addition to operating civilian atomic plants. They have fought three wars since independence from Britain in 1947.

Iran's negotiators have given no indication a compromise is in the offing and supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the final word, last month voiced doubt that the US could be trusted.

Israel is lobbying hard against a final deal and Saudi Arabia is also wary, analysts say, and the negotiations could be scuttled if there is no definitive progress soon.

The biggest threat, they say, is the possibility of new US sanctions on Iran, which Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has said would effectively "torpedo" the talks.

Two US senators, Republican Mark Kirk and Democrat Robert Menendez, have said they will decide by March 24 whether to table new legislation.

In Tehran, MPs are considering two bills, one tearing up an interim deal that has reined in Tehran's nuclear activities and another allowing the Islamic republic's atomic scientists to speed up their operations.

IRAN NUCLEAR DEAL HURDLES

BANGKOK PIPE BOMBS

Thai junta steps up security

AFP, BANGKOK

Thailand's junta vowed yesterday to tighten security after two homemade pipe bombs detonated near a Bangkok shopping mall, the first major disruption to an uneasy peace imposed under martial law since last May's coup.

Authorities declined to speculate whether the small bombs -- which caused minor injuries to two passers-by when they exploded near the downtown Paragon mall on Sunday evening -- were linked to the nation's turbulent politics.

But deputy prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan warned the public will now face stepped up security.

A team of forensic police yesterday sifted through the debris created by the blasts, which struck at around 8 pm (1300 GMT) on Sunday on a walkway leading to the busy Paragon shopping centre.

"They were pipe bombs... low pressure explosive devices," national police spokesman Prawut Thavornsiri told reporters.

"They did not aim to cause major damage... they were used to create trouble," he added.



A Syrian man carries an injured child at a makeshift hospital in the rebel held area of Douma, north east of the capital Damascus, following reported air strikes by forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



China opposes Dalai Lama meeting foreign leaders

AFP, Beijing

China said yesterday it opposed foreign leaders meeting the Dalai Lama "in any form", ahead of a public appearance by the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader with US President Barack Obama.

Obama will attend the National Prayer Breakfast with the Dalai Lama in Washington on Thursday, the White House previously said.

"We are opposed to any foreign leaders meeting with the Dalai Lama in any form," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei said at a regular press briefing in Beijing, decrying foreign interference in China's "domestic affairs".

"We hope that the American side will act upon its commitment on Tibet-related issues and properly deal with relevant issues in keeping with the overall interests of bilateral relations."

White House officials tried to play down the simultaneous appearance, stressing the two men have met three times before. There was no "specific meeting" between them to announce, they said.

Previous meetings have been held behind closed doors and outside the Oval Office, in a move designed to limit the diplomatic fallout with China.

Reference to religious divide "Unfortunate"

But Rajnath still endorses Obama's statement

THE HINDU ONLINE

While union home Minister Rajnath Singh termed as "really unfortunate" that a reference to religious divide in India was made in US President Barack Obama's farewell address, he however said he "endorsed"

and will be committed to tackle issues that would divide people on communal lines" He said. He further added that "the government under any circumstances will not entertain such acts by any group or individual"

The union government has taken steps to maintain good diplomatic relations with all the countries across the world and the move would definitely play crucial role in tackling complicated issues like border disputes with neighboring countries, terrorism and internal security of the nation.

Answering to a question on bringing back black money from different countries bank accounts, the Minister stated that it was a major poll agenda of the party during MP elections and after coming to power the government has formed Special Investigation Team (SIT) which has made considerable progress in sorting out the issue. The government is committed on its assurance and brings back all the black money.



Kejriwal candidature in question

THE HINDU ONLINE

The Delhi High Court yesterday issued notices to Aam Aadmi Party chief Arvind Kejriwal, Election Commission, Delhi Chief Electoral Officer and others on a writ petition questioning the legality of his candidature from the New Delhi seat for the upcoming Assembly elections.

Congress candidate from New Delhi, Kiran Walia, has moved the petition alleging Kejriwal had submitted a false affidavit to the Election Commission in regard to his home address only to be able to run for the Delhi polls.

Walia contended that the AAP chief's name should be deleted from the list of candidates as well as the electoral rolls and a probe be ordered into the matter.



'Upadravi Gotra' a Political Metaphor

Says BJP on Anti-AAP Ad Row

NDTV ONLINE

After controversy over another cartoon for the Delhi elections, days after the BJP said it would focus on a "positive campaign only," the party yesterday accused the Aam Aadmi Party of giving "casteist meaning" to a metaphor.

AAP has accused the BJP of targeting its chief Arvind Kejriwal's caste or 'gotra' in a cartoon-based ad that shows him threatening to disrupt the Republic Day parade one year and asking for a VIP pass for the next.

"AAP is trying to misconstrue a metaphor used in the political context," said the BJP's Piyush Goyal, insisting that the word 'gotra' was not intended to mean caste but to describe "AAP's disruptive politics."

"The BJP targeted my children in their ad, but I kept quiet, didn't react... the BJP has been launching personal attacks on me through their ads, but today they referred to the entire Agarwal Samaj as 'Upadravi' [rioters]," Kejriwal alleged yesterday.

AAP leader Ashutosh demanded that the BJP withdraw the ad or they would be "forced to take action, will go to the EC."

In a counter attack, Goyal alleged that it is Kejriwal, who has in his campaigns described himself as a 'baniya' attempting to use his caste to appeal to the trader community, seen as a traditional BJP votebank.

The ruling BJP has already been struggling to address the community's misgivings over Foreign Direct Investment in retail. Kejriwal positioning yesterday's ad as an insult to the entire community will add to the BJP's jitters with the Delhi elections just five days away.

US to rebuild ties with Lanka

AFP, Colombo

A top US diplomat promised yesterday that Washington would be a friend and partner of Colombo as she made the first visit by a senior American official since the toppling of Sri Lanka's long-time strongman.

In the build-up to last month's presidential elections, a top lieutenant to then president Mahinda Rajapakse accused the United States of trying to bring about "regime change", marking a new low in bilateral relations.

But since Rajapakse was beaten at the ballot box, the United States has moved swiftly to rebuild ties with a country that has become increasingly close to China over the past decade.

Speaking on a visit to Colombo, Assistant Secretary of State Nisha Biswal said the US was ready to help Sri Lanka on a range of issues, including its human rights record, which was hugely contentious under Rajapakse.

Speaking to reporters after talks with Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera, Biswal stressed the new government could count on US support to meet "difficult challenges ahead".

She did not directly refer to the pending US-initiated probe into allegations that up to 40,000 ethnic Tamil civilians were killed by Sri Lankan forces while defeating Tamil separatists in 2009.

However, she said Washington wanted to work with Colombo to "find constructive ways forward on all the areas of interest between our two nations".

Samaraweera said he would be travelling to Washington for talks with Secretary of State John Kerry next week.

"We want to raise the relationship between our two countries to a new level of cordiality and I hope to continue this dialogue in Washington," he said.