

NEWSIN brief

Head of Gaza war probe quits: UN

Canadian international law expert William Schabas, the head of a UN inquiry into the 50-day war in Gaza last year, has resigned after Israel accused him of a "conflict of interest", the United Nations said yesterday. The conflict ended with a truce on August 26 after the deaths of more than 2,140 Palestinians, most of them civilians, and 73 Israelis, mostly soldiers.

C'wealth backs Lanka's new war crimes probe

The Commonwealth yesterday welcomed Sri Lanka's plans to establish a "credible" inquiry into war crimes allegations. Secretary-General Kamallesh Sharma also offered Commonwealth assistance to set up the judicial inquiry into allegations troops killed thousands of Tamil civilians during the final stages of its ethnic war.

Mattarella sworn in as Italy president

Sergio Mattarella, a Sicilian constitutional court judge closely associated with the fight against organised crime, was sworn in as Italy's new president yesterday. Mattarella, 73, was elected by lawmakers on Saturday to succeed Giorgio Napolitano, who stood down two years into his second term citing fatigue at the age of 89.

Pakistan hangs 2 for sectarian murder

Pakistan yesterday hanged two sectarian militants for the murder of a Shia Muslim doctor in Karachi, officials said. A total of 22 people have now been executed since the government brought back hangings in terror cases amid public outrage over a Taliban massacre at a school that left 150 people dead.

France arrest 8 in anti-terror raids

French anti-terrorism police arrested eight people yesterday on suspicion of being part of a network linked to recruiting young people for jihad in Syria, Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve said. The government estimates that about 1,300 French citizens have links to recruitment cells for Syria and Iraq, of which about 400 are already fighting alongside militants.

Fiji to remove Union Jack from flag

Fiji is removing the Union Jack from its flag after almost 140 years of displaying the British colonial symbol. The Prime Minister of the former colony, Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama, said the symbols displayed are "no longer relevant" and a new flag is needed to assert the country's independence.



Residents dig their cars out from the snow in Chicago, Illinois. More than 3,000 flights were cancelled on Monday, as a fresh winter storm dumped snow, sleet and freezing rain across the northeastern US. A storm warning was in place for dozens of cities and the National Weather Service reported Boston was hit with record snowfall of 15.9 inches.

Crisis turns dangerous

US signals shift in stance on military aid; death toll mounts

AFP, Kiev

Fears grew of an escalation in the mounting bloodshed in east Ukraine yesterday as the United States mulled arming Kiev and pro-Russian rebels ordered a mass mobilisation. At least 16 civilians and five government troops were killed over the past 24 hours in fierce clashes across the conflict zone, government and pro-Russian rebel officials said.

The ferocious fighting remains focused around the battleground town of Debaltsevo, a strategic railway hub between the rebel strongholds Donetsk and Lugansk where separatists are fighting to encircle Ukrainian forces.

The latest casualties come as fighting has surged in recent weeks after separatists tore up a tenuous ceasefire deal and pushed into government-held territory.

The United Nations yesterday said the civilian death toll has risen by 224 in the past three weeks and that the total of those killed in the conflict since April now stands at over 5,358 people.

"Any further escalation will prove catastrophic for the 5.2 million people living in the midst of conflict in eastern

Ukraine," warned UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein.

Concerns over the spiralling conflict come as Washington says it is seriously considering providing arms and more military equipment to Ukraine.

President Barack Obama's administration had previously ruled out sending weapons to Ukraine's government but the failure of economic sanctions to force Russia to halt alleged military support for the separatists has

UKRAINE CONFLICT

prompted a second look at the option, officials told AFP.

"What's being discussed is perhaps we should begin providing defensive weapons, equipments to Ukraine," a senior official said.

Washington so far has provided non-lethal assistance to Ukraine, including flak jackets, medical supplies, radios and night-vision goggles.

US Secretary of State John Kerry is to jet into Kiev today for meetings with President Petro Poroshenko and Prime

Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk but no official announcement on weapons deliveries is expected.

Ukraine and its Western allies accuse Moscow of sending thousands of regular army troops and weapons to support the rebels and spearhead their latest offensive.

Moscow has repeatedly denied the allegations but the rebels, however, appear to be equipped with the heavy weaponry of a regular army.

As rebels continued to push their offensive, their leaders have announced a mass mobilisation aimed at boosting fighter numbers to 100,000.

The voluntary call-up -- which has been met with scepticism by some in rebel-held territory -- is set to start next Monday, insurgent leader Alexander Zakharchenko said.

Hopes of defusing the conflict look more distant than ever after the latest attempt at truce talks collapsed in acrimony in the Belarussian capital Minsk over the weekend.

The rebels say they are willing to stop fighting only if Kiev agrees to redraw the demarcation line agreed in a September ceasefire deal to include gains they have made since in recent days.

UN TERROR CHARTER AGAINST PAK Xi, Putin back India

AGENCIES

In a significant development, China and Russia has decided to back India for moving a proposal at the United Nations that essentially goes against Pakistan on the issue of terrorism.

In order to corner Pakistan for sheltering and facilitating terrorists involved the 26/11 carnage and other attacks in the country, India seeks to move a resolution in the UN to punish those who shelter and finance terrorism. And on Monday, it enlisted the support of China and Russia for the same. "I see this as a major achievement," External affairs minister Sushma Swaraj told newsmen after a summit of the foreign ministers of Russia, India and China (RIC).

This is a rare occasion when China, a close ally of Pakistan, has taken a stand on an issue that is bound to rattle Islamabad. Beijing's move not only reflects the importance it accords to New Delhi, but is also an acknowledgment of its own problem of terrorism in Xinjiang province. China has often said that 'foreign forces' are helping terrorists in Xinjiang.

After the RIC summit - attended by Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov and Swaraj - a joint communique was issued which "underlined the need to bring to justice perpetrators, organizers, financiers and sponsors of terrorist acts".

The three foreign ministers called for early conclusion of negotiations on the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. India had moved this resolution 19 years back that has since remained inconclusive, Swaraj explained.

Russia and China also agreed to support a larger role for India in the United Nations, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). However, China and Russia did not specifically commit themselves on India's demand for a seat in the UN Security Council.

Egypt to free another Al Jazeera journalist

REUTERS, Doha

Egypt could free Canadian-Egyptian journalist Mohamed Fahmy within hours, Qatar-based news channel Al Jazeera English reported yesterday.

Al Jazeera said that Fahmy had renounced his Egyptian citizenship, in a move that paves the way for him to be deported under a presidential decree. Fahmy also has Canadian citizenship.

Fahmy's colleague, Peter Greste, an Australian citizen, was released on Sunday. A third journalist, Baher Mohamed, an Egyptian national, is still in prison in Cairo.

The news came after Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird said that Fahmy's release was "imminent" following the freeing of Greste.



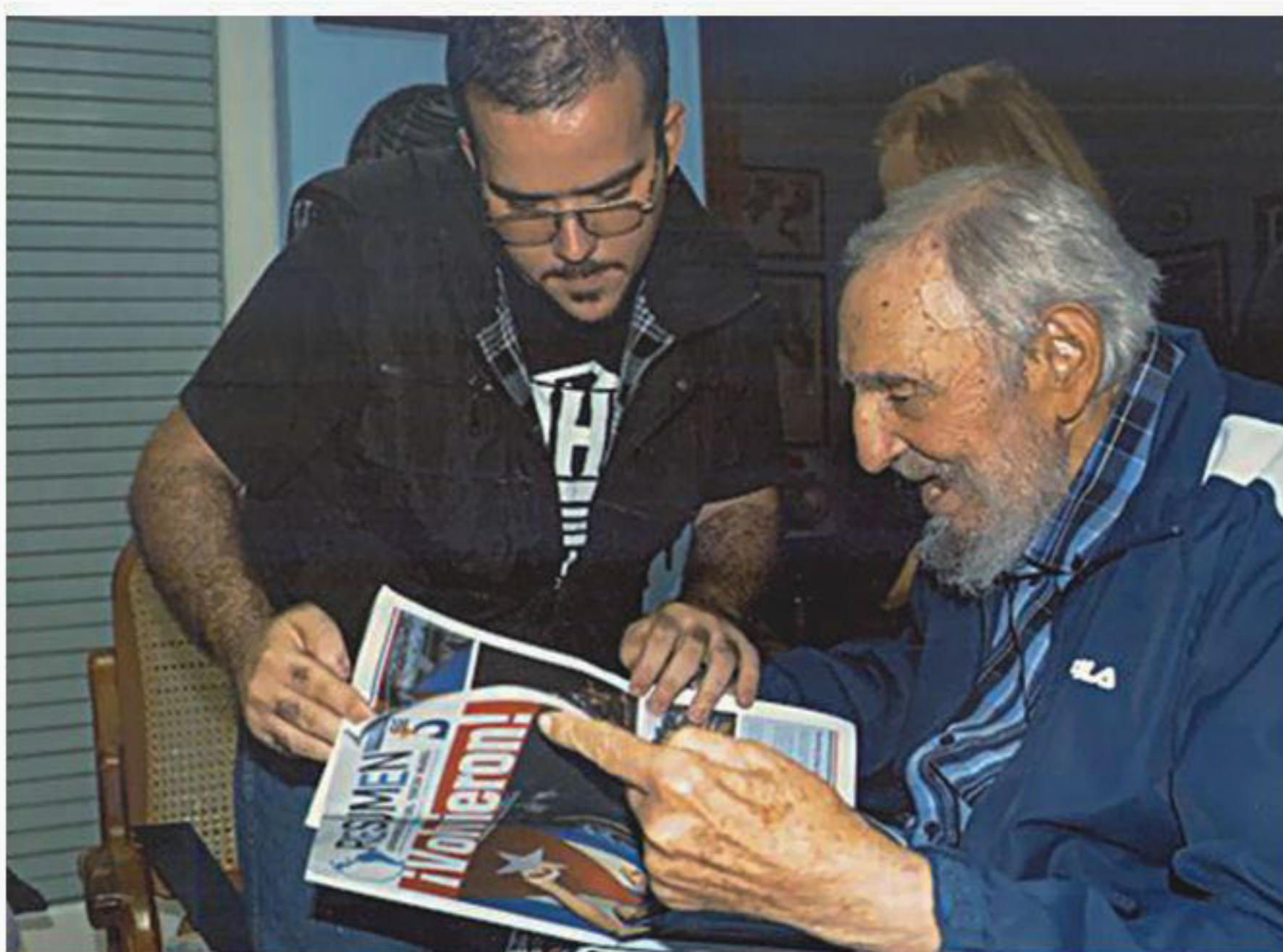
Mohamed Fahmy

Fahmy and Greste were arrested in December 2013 along with Egyptian producer Baher Mohamed, and later sentenced to up to 10 years in prison on charges of aiding the blacklisted Muslim Brotherhood.

Their jailing sparked a global outcry and proved a public relations nightmare for Sisi, who has cracked down on Islamists since toppling president Mohamed Morsi in July 2013.

A security source said on Sunday that Fahmy was expected to be released and deported to Canada within days.

Egyptian authorities accuse Qatar-based Al Jazeera of being a mouthpiece of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Qatari-backed movement which President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi toppled in 2013 when he was Egypt's army chief.



A leader of a students' union speaks with former Cuban President Fidel Castro during a visit to Castro's residence on January 23, 2015 in Havana. Cuban state media yesterday released the first photographs of Castro to be published in nearly six months late on Monday in a bid to quiet rumors that his health is failing.

'Mockingbird' author to publish second novel

AFP, New York

American author Harper Lee is to publish a second novel, 55 years after the release of her US classic "To Kill a Mockingbird," HarperCollins announced yesterday.

The novel -- "Go Set a Watchman" -- was written in the mid-1950s and recently rediscovered. It is to be released in July, the publishing house said.

Lee won the Pulitzer Prize for "To Kill a Mockingbird" -- a searing tale of racism in the Great Depression-era South -- in 1961. The novel -- standard reading in American classrooms for decades -- has been translated into more than 40 languages.

The second novel is in many ways a sequel to "Mockingbird" and features many of the same characters around 20 years later,

the publishing house said.

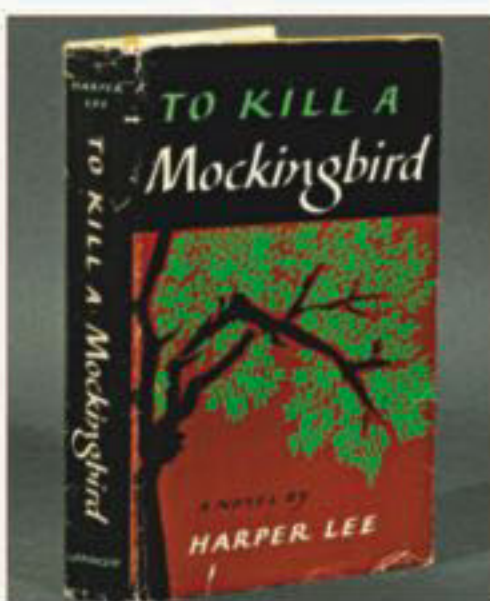
Lee, 88, said she was "humbled and amazed" that the manuscript was to be published after so many years.

"I hadn't realized it had survived, so was surprised and delighted when my dear friend and lawyer Tonja Carter discovered it," she said in a statement.

"After much thought and hesitation, I shared it with a handful of people I trust and was pleased to hear that they considered it worthy of publication."

"This is a remarkable literary event," said Jonathan Burnham, Harper publisher and seniorvice president.

"The existence of 'Go Set a Watchman' was unknown until recently, and its discovery is an extraordinary gift to the many readers and fans of 'To Kill a Mockingbird'," he added.



ISIS video purports to show Jordanian pilot burnt alive

REUTERS, Cairo/amman

Islamic State militants released a video yesterday purporting to show a captive Jordanian pilot being burnt alive, and Jordanian state television said he was murdered a month ago.

Reuters could not immediately confirm the video, which showed a man resembling the captive pilot standing in a black cage before being set ablaze.

The pilot, Mouath al-Kasaesbeh, was captured by Islamic State insurgents after his plane crashed over Syria while on a bombing mission against the group in December. Jordanian state TV said Kasaesbeh had been killed on January 3.

There was no further comment from the Jordanian government. The head of the Jordanian armed forces broke the news of the pilot's killing to his family, a member of the family told Reuters.

The pilot's fate has gripped Jordan and provoked rare protests against King Abdullah over the government's handling of the case.



U.S. President Barack Obama said the video, if real, would redouble the determination of a U.S.-led alliance to degrade and destroy Islamic State. He said it would be another sign of the "viciousness and barbarity" of the militants.

"Whatever ideology they're operating off of, it's bankrupt," Obama told reporters.

In the video, the burned man wore orange clothes similar to those worn by other foreign Islamic State captives

who have been killed since a US-led coalition started bombing the militants in July.

Islamic State or ISIS has released videos showing the beheadings of several Western hostages and said that it has killed two Japanese captives.

The militants have come under increased military pressure from air strikes and a push by Kurdish and Iraqi troops to reverse their territorial gains in Iraq and Syria.

In the video, Kasaesbeh is interviewed, describing the mission he was due to carry out before his jet crashed. The video also showed footage of the aftermath of air strikes, with people trying to remove civilians from debris.

A man resembling Kasaesbeh is shown inside the cage with his clothes dampened, apparently with flammable liquid, and one of the masked fighters holds a torch, setting alight a line of fuel which leads into the cage.

The man is set ablaze and kneels to the ground.

Outcry as 183 sentenced to death in Egypt

AFP, Cairo

An Egyptian court has confirmed death sentences against 183 men convicted of killing 13 policemen, in a verdict the European Union denounced as a violation of the country's human rights obligations.

The verdict came on Monday as another court announced that deposed Islamist president Mohamed Morsi would stand trial on February 15 in an espionage case -- the fourth trial he is facing.

The policemen were killed in an attack on a police station in Kerdesa, a town on the outskirts of Cairo, on August 14, 2013.

The attack took place on the same day that security forces killed hundreds of demonstrators in clashes as they dismantled two massive protest camps in Cairo supporting Morsi.

The court had in December issued a preliminary verdict against 188 defendants in a mass trial, of whom two were acquitted on Monday while one, a minor, was sentenced to 10 years in prison. Two more were already deceased.

Monday's verdict, which can be appealed, came after the initial sentences were sent to the grand mufti, the government's official interpreter of Islamic law, for ratification.

QUOTE of the day



"Hating is not the role of humans; judgment is God's domain"

Executed Japanese journalist Kenji Goto's 4-year-old tweet goes viral after pacifist Japan vows revenge on Islamic State

Modi faces poll defeat in Delhi: Survey

REUTERS, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is facing his first state election defeat since taking charge last year, opinion polls show, a result that would dent his chances of consolidating power needed to speed up an economic recovery.

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party has ordered scores of its top national and state leaders to campaign for this weekend's high-profile election to the Delhi assembly where a small anti-corruption party is threatening to stop its momentum.

But even the appointment of Finance Minister Arun Jaitley to oversee the campaign while he is writing this month's federal budget may not be enough.

"This is the first time that we may see Modi's momentum stopped and that will be a shock," said Satish Misra, a political analyst at the Observer Research Foundation.

Modi needs to win most of the state elections over the next four years to gain control of both houses of parliament to deliver on his promise of jobs and economic growth. The upper house, where his party is in a minority, is frustrating his efforts to pass laws related to tax and foreign investment.

The Aam Aadmi, an anti-corruption party, is on course to win between 36 and 41 of the 70 seats in the Delhi assembly, according to three opinion polls published this week. The BJP is on course to win between 27 and 32 seats and the Congress party, which has dominated politics over the last century, will win between two and seven seats, its worst-ever performance in the city, the polls show.

The vote will take place on Feb 7 and the results will be announced three days later.