

NEWSIN brief

Iraq ends years-old Baghdad curfew

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has ordered an end to a years-old nightly curfew in Baghdad in a bid to ease restrictions on daily life despite persistent violence, officials said yesterday. Abadi wants there "to be normal life as much as possible, despite the existence of a state of war," his spokesman Rafid Jaboori said, referring to the battle against the Islamic State jihadist group.

13 killed in Libya oil field attack

Gunmen in Libya killed 13 people, including five foreigners, in an overnight attack on an oil field partially owned by France's Total, a chief security officer said on Wednesday. "Eight Libyans, three Filipinos and two Ghanians were killed in the attack" at the Al-Mabruk field, said officer Hakim Maazzab, the head security guard at a nearby oil complex. "All of them had their throats slit apart from one Libyan, who was shot dead," he added. A spokesman for the guards at Libya's oil installations, Ali al-Hassi, accused militants loyal to the Islamic State group of carrying out the attack, without providing details.

US Korea, US hold joint naval drill

The United States and South Korea kicked off a joint naval exercise yesterday involving a US nuclear submarine that is certain to draw a sharp response from Pyongyang. The submarine joined South Korean naval vessels in an exercise focused on detecting enemy submarines and surface vessels in waters near the Korean Peninsula.

UK sees record level of anti-Semitic incidents

A record number of anti-Semitic hate incidents were reported in Britain last year, fuelled by the conflict in Israel and Gaza, a charity that monitors such crime reported yesterday. The Community Security Trust, which records anti-Semitism and provides security for Britain's Jewish community, said that 1,168 anti-Semitic incidents were reported over 2014.

Oil tanker hijacked off Nigeria, one dead

Pirates have hijacked a crude oil tanker off the Nigerian coast, taking three hostages and killing the vessel's Greek deputy commander, the Greek coast-guard said Wednesday. The Malta-flagged Kalamos was anchored and awaiting fresh cargo from Qua Iboe, an oil terminal in Nigeria's southeastern region operated by ExxonMobil, when it was boarded on Tuesday.

US drone in Yemen kills top Qaeda militant

Al-Qaeda said yesterday that one of its top militants, Harith al-Nadhari who threatened more attacks on France after the Charlie Hebdo killings, died in a US drone strike in Yemen. Nadhari and three other militants were killed in a January 31 "crusader" American drone strike against their car in Shabwa province of southern Yemen, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula said on Twitter.

Kerry to hold nuclear talks in Iran tomorrow

US Secretary of State John Kerry will hold talks with his Iranian counterpart tomorrow on efforts to secure a deal over Tehran's nuclear programme, the state department said yesterday.



Minority Indian Christians hold placards during a protest outside the Sacred Heart Cathedral following recent attacks on churches in New Delhi, yesterday. Hundreds of minority Christians protested outside a church in the Indian capital yesterday as priests and demonstrators said they feel insecure under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government after a series of unsolved attacks on churches in the city.

Climate summit hosts press India on emissions

The French hosts of a UN climate summit later this year insisted yesterday that combating global warming would not undermine efforts to fight poverty as they lobbied for India's support in cutting emissions. Speaking in New Delhi, France's Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said he was confident India would play a lead role in efforts to create a low carbon economy, adding to pressure on the right-wing government after similar calls last week from US President Barack Obama. "Taking action against climate disruption and for poverty reduction should not be regarded as two separate and contradictory goals," Fabius told a climate conference in the Indian capital. India, third largest emitter of greenhouse gases, has resisted pressure to commit to a timeline for capping emissions after China and the United States announced a bilateral pact in November. Later in an interview with AFP, Fabius emphasised that India needed to strike the right balance between curbing emissions and development for its 1.2 billion people -- a discussion, he said, he would have with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit. He added that he was confident that the Indian leader would provide valuable contributions in December which would make the Paris talks "a success". In a speech in New Delhi last week, Obama said the world does not "stand a chance against climate change" unless developing countries such as India reduce their dependence on fossil fuels. But during Obama's visit, Modi stressed that India did not feel itself under pressure on climate change from other countries, while insisting it was responding to the challenges presented by global warming. Speaking at the same conference as Fabius, Indian Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar reiterated his government's commitment to battling climate change, highlighting ambitious plans to increase renewable energy. The Paris conference should culminate in a deal among 195 countries on how to curb fossil-fuel gases.

Pak airstrikes kill 25 militants

Pakistan's military said it killed 25 militants in air strikes on tribal regions near the Afghan border Wednesday as part of a major offensive against the Taliban and other insurgents. The strikes took place in the Sanzila area of South Waziristan and Tirah in Khyber, the military said in a statement. "In precise aerial strikes, 25 terrorists were killed and seven hideouts were destroyed," the statement added. The conflict zone is off-limits to journalists, so there is no way to independently verify the number and identity of those killed. Pakistan began a long-awaited push to clear insurgent bases from North Waziristan last June after a bloody Taliban attack on Karachi airport finally sank faltering peace talks.

India removes top official

Trinamool MP resigns from party, a day after getting bail

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has forced one of its most senior officials to resign after reports said he had interfered in a police probe into a Ponzi scheme -- the Saradha scam. The government said late Wednesday it had accepted the resignation of home secretary Anil Goswami with "immediate effect" without giving reasons for the sudden departure. Goswami's removal comes after the foreign secretary was sacked last week, with the government reportedly unhappy with her performance, and replaced by a former envoy to the United States. Modi has also cracked down on the performance of officials, demanding longer hours and more efficiency, and surprising some by paying unannounced visits to their offices. Indian newspapers said yesterday that Home Minister Rajnath Singh sacked Goswami after being notified that he had tried to halt the arrest of a former minister under the previous Congress government. The CBI has already arrested several top regional politicians and lawmakers for alleged links to the property-to-media Saradha Group which collapsed last year, leaving tens of thousands of mostly poor investors penniless. Meanwhile, Srinjay Bose, Rajya Sabha MP of the ruling Trinamool Congress in West Bengal resigned from the party yesterday after being released on bail on Wednesday in the Saradha scam case. He has also given up his Rajya Sabha seat. Soon after he announced his decision to leave the party, TMC has said that the party will "soon announce" the name of its new member in the Upper House. Bose, a shipping and media baron, was arrested by the Central Bureau of Investigation in November in connection with the Saradha scam. In his resignation letter, Bose has admitted that politics is not his "cup of tea" and thus he has decided to resign from the primary membership of the party and his seat in Parliament.

Sri Lanka leader renews troop deployment orders

Sri Lanka's new President Maithripala Sirisena has renewed orders allowing for troops to be deployed across the island, dampening hopes yesterday of a lower-profile military presence under his rule. Sirisena's election last month had been expected to lead to a lessening of the numbers of troops in towns and cities -- particularly in former war zones -- which had been a prominent feature of his hardline nationalist predecessor Mahinda Rajapakse's tenure. During the build-up to his election victory, Sirisena promised to confine the military to their barracks and call them out only in the event of an emergency or a threat to national security. But, according to a presidential decree seen by AFP, Sirisena has now renewed a monthly authorisation for the deployment of troops across the island. The presence of large numbers of troops is particular contentious in the mainly Tamil northern and eastern provinces that bore the brunt of a 37-year separatist conflict, which was brutally crushed by the army in May 2009. Tamil lawmaker Suresh Premachandran said the president should explain why he felt it necessary to call out troops nearly six years after the end of the war.



A rescued Indian child labourer looks on on board a Patna-bound express train at a railway station in Secunderabad, yesterday. Some 400 children hailing from India's Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal states were rescued during a 10-day-raid conducted by the city police and labour department officials in different parts of the old city of Hyderabad.

Mummified 200-year-old monk in 'deep meditation'

A Buddhist academic has said a 200-year-old mummified monk discovered in Mongolia may not be dead but in a "very deep meditation". The preserved body was discovered in the lotus position, covered in animal hide, last week in the Songinokhairkhan district, close to the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar. Forensic examinations are being carried out on the remains, which investigators believe belong to a man who may have been a Lama, or a teacher of Tibetan Buddhism. Now, an expert has claimed the monk may have been in a rare spiritual state known as "tukdam". Ganhuigyn Purevbata, founder and professor of the Mongolian Institute of Buddhist Art at Ulaanbaatar Buddhist University, told The Siberian Times: "Lama is sitting in the lotus position vajra, the left hand is opened, and the right hand symbolizes of the preaching Sutra. "This is a sign that the Lama is not dead, but is in a very deep meditation according to the ancient tradition of Buddhist lamas." The mummified remains have reportedly been taken for examination at the Ulaanbaatar National Centre of Forensic Expertise, according to The Telegraph. It has been suggested the mummified monk was a teacher of the Buryat Buddhist Lama Dashi-Dorzho Itigilov, who was born in 1852, and was reported to have died in 1927 while meditating. When his body was examined by Buddhist monks in 1955 and again in 1973, Itigilov apparently remained in the lotus position and his body did not appear to show signs of decay. It is understood the body was reburied in a coffin packed with salt and left until 2002 when it was once again exhumed, 75 years after Itigilov's death.

Philippines urges China to show respect

The Philippines accused China yesterday of ramming Filipino fishing boats off a disputed shoal in the South China Sea, and demanded its powerful neighbour respect its sovereignty over the potential flashpoint territory. The foreign ministry said it has sent two notes of protest over the January 29 incident off Scarborough Shoal as well as the removal of critically endangered giant clams by Chinese fishermen in the area a week earlier. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesman disputed Manila's version of the first incident yesterday, stressing its coast guard was performing its "normal" duties on Chinese territory. "The Philippines continues to urge China to respect the Philippines' sovereign rights and jurisdiction over Bajo de Masinloc," Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario told AFP yesterday, referring to the shoal by its local name. The ministry alleged three Filipino-flagged vessels were "intentionally rammed" by a vessel with Chinese coast-guard markings, causing damage and endangering the crews' lives. "The Huangyan island is an inherent part of Chinese territory," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei said yesterday, calling the shoal by its Chinese name. A coast guard dinghy was sent to relay orders, "and some of the boats bumped slightly into each other", said Hong. "The Chinese side urged the Philippine side to enhance supervision and education of its own fishermen to prevent similar incidents from happening again."

EX-MINISTER'S INTERFERENCE CHARGES

Rahul defends himself

India's main opposition Congress party leader Rahul Gandhi has defended himself against allegations by a former minister who quit the party last week. Jayanthi Natarajan had accused Rahul of "interfering" in her work when she was environment minister. Rahul said he had only asked Ms Natarajan to "protect the environment". Natarajan's ministry was often blamed for holding up growth by refusing environmental permissions for major industrial projects. She was environment minister in the Congress-led federal government from 2011 to 2013. It is not clear why Natarajan chose to make the allegations almost two years after she quit her post. Natarajan said last week that she was "asked by Rahul Gandhi's office to make sure environment was protected and to ensure large projects don't cause tremendous havoc". The projects include plans by mining group Vedanta to extract bauxite in the state of Orissa. Rahul said he had indeed asked Natarajan to protect the environment and the poor. "I want to tell you that I have fought for the poor and the tribespeople and I had told Jayanthi Natarajan that we should look into the welfare of the environment, poor and the tribespeople," the Press Trust of India news agency quoted Rahul assaying during an election meeting in Delhi on Wednesday.

Kejriwal bids to halt Modi bandwagon

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi faces the first real test of his popularity tomorrow when voters in Delhi elect a new state government, with a self-styled anarchist bidding to stall the premier's bandwagon. The results, to be announced on Tuesday, could also prove to be a new low for the long-ruling Congress party which suffered a landslide defeat to Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party in May's general election. Since May, Modi has been the master of all he surveyed as his Hindu nationalist party romped to victory in a string of state elections. But Delhi, which the BJP surprisingly failed to win in December 2013, could prove elusive once more and deliver the first real reverse for the premier who has been enjoying an extended honeymoon with voters. Standing in his way is a familiar foe: Arvind Kejriwal who quit after a chaotic 49-day reign as Delhi chief minister but whom opinion polls say could return to power. Modi put his two top lieutenants -- BJP president Amit Shah and Finance Minister Arun Jaitley -- in charge of the campaign while a former top policewoman Kiran Bedi was handpicked as the choice for chief minister. Bedi's selection has opened a can of worms, with many BJP activists furious at having to campaign for the 65-year-old who has a history of disparaging the BJP. A former reality TV show host, Bedi is a seasoned media performer. But Kejriwal has proved his pulling power among working class and minority voters, with even impromptu appearances drawing thousands. Kejriwal famously declared himself an anarchist during his brief tenure and staged several protests outside government offices. This time round he has tried to cut a more sombre figure, insisting he can be relied on to form a stable government to guarantee cheap utility bills and deliver on pledges such as free wifi. But his main selling point remains as the underdog pitting the establishment -- not unlike Modi's own pitch last year.



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