

NEWSIN
brief

Syria regime strikes
kill 82

Dozens of Syrian regime strikes on an opposition-held area near Damascus have killed at least 82 people, a monitor said yesterday, in the deadliest such onslaught since November. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based monitor, said the new toll in the Thursday air strikes on the Eastern Ghouta region included at least 18 children.

UK intel sharing
with US 'unlawful'

UK surveillance agency GCHQ has been officially censured for not revealing enough about how it shares information with its American counterparts. The Investigatory Powers Tribunal said GCHQ failed until December 2014 to make clear enough details of how it shared data from mass internet surveillance. It was the IPT's first ruling against an intelligence agency in its 15-year history.

East Timor PM
offers resignation

East Timor resistance hero Xanana Gusmao has submitted his resignation as prime minister, the government said yesterday. The president must now decide whether to accept the resignation of the 68-year-old, who has served as either president or prime minister since East Timor became independent in 2002 following a long struggle against Indonesian occupation.

Boko Haram attack
Niger for the first time

Islamist group Boko Haram for the first time launched an attack in Niger yesterday, striking at the town of Bosso just across the border from Nigeria, witnesses said. The offensive was repelled by the forces, sources added. Niger's parliament is due to vote on Monday on a proposal to send troops to Nigeria to fight Boko Haram, as impetus to beat the jihadists mounts across the region.

Egypt military kills 27
militants in the Sinai

Egyptian military air strikes killed 27 Islamic militants in Northern Sinai early yesterday. Apache helicopters targeted militants from Sinai Province, a group that pledged allegiance to Islamic State, the ultra-hardline militants who have seized swathes of Iraq and Syria, the sources said.

China mall fire kills 17

A nine-year-old boy has been detained after a shopping mall inferno that killed 17 people in China, police said yesterday. The fire broke out Thursday on the top floor of a four-storey building in the city of Huizhou. Huizhou police said that "the fire was caused by a boy playing with fire at the mall," adding that the suspect had been fiddling with a "lighter".

QUOTE
of the day



Wouldn't this provide Russia with an excuse to openly enter the conflict?"

Germany's Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen says on US move to send weapons to Ukraine to help fight pro-Moscow rebels.



Jordanian Queen Rania holds a placard during a demonstration in the capital Amman to express her solidarity with the pilot murdered by the Islamic State (ISIS) group. Thousands marched in Jordan's capital yesterday demanding retribution for the killing by ISIS as Amman intensified its fight against the jihadists.

TAIWAN PLANE CRASH

Probe focuses
on engine
failure

One engine failed on the TransAsia plane that crashed in Taiwan this week with the loss of at least 35 lives, and the pilots may have inexplicably shut down the other, investigators and experts said yesterday. Initial findings from the plane's black boxes were released as reports emerged that the chief pilot was still clutching the joystick when his body was found in the cockpit, after he apparently battled to avoid populated areas. On Wednesday the French-made twin-engine ATR 72-600 plane plummeted into a river after clipping an elevated road, as shown in dramatic dashcam footage. In the first account of the last moments of Flight GE235, Taiwan's Aviation Safety Council said the right engine had "flamed out" about two minutes after takeoff from an airport in northern Taipei. Warning signals blared in the cockpit and the left engine was then shut down manually by the crew, for unknown reasons, the council's director Thomas Wang told a news conference. Analysts said it was probable the crew made an error which might have caused the tragedy.

Ukraine on the brink

Merkel plays down peace hopes as she, Hollande meet Putin

AFP, Moscow

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande met Russian leader Vladimir Putin yesterday in a frantic bid to avoid a further escalation of violence in east Ukraine.

Ahead of the Moscow talks, Merkel played down hopes of a rapid end to surging fighting as she and Hollande try to convince Putin to sign up to a peace plan to stop the conflict.

"We know that it is completely open as to whether we'll succeed in achieving a ceasefire through these talks," Merkel told reporters in Berlin before taking the surprise initiative to Putin.

Merkel and Hollande flew first to Kiev on Thursday, hoping for a quick halt to the bloodshed and to revive a widely flouted truce accord agreed in Minsk last September.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said the biggest push yet to resolve the 10-month conflict raised "hope for a ceasefire".

Putin and the unsmiling European

duo held the closed-door talks around a small round table in an ornate hall in the Kremlin with the media only allowed in briefly and no comments made.

The tense visit is the first to Moscow for Merkel since the start of the Ukraine crisis while Hollande made a brief stopover there in December.

As fears have soared of an escalation in the conflict and concern over possible divisions between the United States and Europe on whether to supply arms to Kiev, US Vice President Joe Biden said Ukraine was battling for survival in the face of escalating Russian military involvement.

"We, the US and Europe as a whole, have to stand with Ukraine at this moment," Biden said in Brussels. "Russia cannot be allowed to redraw the map of Europe."

European Union officials said Thursday that the bloc will blacklist more Russian individuals over Ukraine, and it is hoped that the possibility that broader sanctions could be toughened up will encourage Russia to

agree to a peace deal.

The high-level European shuttle diplomacy to end the worst East-West crisis since the end of the Cold War came as US Secretary of State John Kerry also visited Kiev on Thursday and Washington mulled whether to supply arms to the Ukraine army.

As pressure grows for a peaceful resolution to the conflict that has killed over 5,300 people, rebel and Ukrainian forces on the ground agreed a ceasefire for several hours around the battleground town of Debaltsevo to allow civilians to leave, both sides said.

Hundreds of civilians have been killed over recent weeks in east Ukraine as fighting spiralled after insurgents ignored an earlier truce deal and pushed into government-held territory.

No confirmed details have emerged of what exactly the new European peace proposal contains and there is much disquiet in Kiev after the collapse of the previous peace deal.

CHINA PORT PROJECT
Sri Lanka govt
backtracks
after protests

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka reversed approval for a controversial \$1.4 billion Chinese port-related project after the main Marxist party raised objections yesterday, a day after giving it the all clear.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said the government would thoroughly review the project involving the reclamation of 233 hectares of land next to a Chinese-owned mega port in Colombo.

The project would have been Sri Lanka's single largest foreign investment.

Launched under the previous government during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Colombo in September, the project gives Beijing a firmer foothold in the Indian Ocean region, a development that neighbouring India is uncomfortable with.

Beijing has been accused of seeking to develop facilities around the Indian Ocean in a "string of pearls" strategy to counter the rise of its Asian rival India and secure its own economic interests. Sri Lanka is a midway point on one of the world's busiest shipping lanes that Beijing wants to secure as a maritime silk road for the 21st century.

DELHI ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS 2015

AAP rejects shahi
imam's support

New survey gives BJP absolute majority ahead of today's polls

AGENCIES

The shahi imam of Jama Masjid, Syed Ahmed Bukhari, has appealed to Muslims in Delhi to vote for the Aam Aadmi Party.

Delhi will go to polls today and the results will be declared on February 10.

After the Friday prayers, Bukhari while addressing the gathering said that it is important for Muslims to vote en bloc in favour of one party, which is secular. "BJP ever since it has come in power at the centre is dividing the country on religious lines. AAP is a secular party and Muslims for their betterment should vote for it."

In last Delhi assembly elections, Bukhari was against AAP and had then appealed people to vote for Congress.

However, the AAP has rejected Bukhari's offer of support. AAP leader Sanjay Singh said his party doesn't support the ideology of Bukhari, and the party doesn't need his support.

"Imam Bukhari has supported different parties at different times, he has invited Pakistani PM Nawaz Sharif and not the Indian PM for his son's dastarbandi (anointment as the next shahi imam)," he added. He accused the shahi imam of playing communal politics.

The BJP is projected to get absolute majority in Delhi and win between 41-45 seats and AAP is likely to secure the second place, according to a survey by Research and Development Initiative (RDI). The survey states that AAP is likely to win between 21-25 seats in the 70-member Delhi Assembly.

The vote share projection has given BJP 41 per cent and AAP 36 per cent. Where as, Congress is likely to bag between 0-4 seats with a vote share of 12 per cent, according to the survey in the last week of January.



Palestinian protesters scuffle with Israeli security forces during clashes following a demonstration in the West Bank village of Nabi Saleh yesterday, to protest against the expansion of Jewish settlements on Palestinian land.

'Religious intolerance in India
would have shocked Gandhi'

AGENCIES

Muslim and Christian leaders yesterday warned of growing fear among India's religious minorities after US President Barack Obama said Mahatma Gandhi would have been shocked by communal violence in the mainly Hindu country.

Only days after warning in New Delhi about the need to promote religious tolerance, Obama invoked the memory of India's independence icon to drive home a similar appeal during a speech in Washington on Thursday.

While praising its "magnificent diversity", Obama then described India as a place where "religious faiths of all types have, on occasion, been targeted

by other peoples of faith, simply due to their heritage and their beliefs".

Such "acts of intolerance ... would have shocked Gandhiji", Obama added in comments that made front-page headlines in Indian newspapers yesterday.

He, however, did not name any particular religion and said the violence is not unique to one group or one religion.

The White House yesterday strongly refuted allegations that Obama's remarks on religious tolerance was aimed at the ruling BJP, saying the speech in its entirety was about the "core democratic values and principles" of both the US and India.

Meanwhile, a China government spokesman yesterday said China is opposed to foreign countries receiving the Dalai Lama, a day after Obama

held a symbolic first public encounter with the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader.

At a high-profile Washington prayer breakfast Thursday, Obama and the Dalai Lama saluted each other across a plush ballroom and the US president heaped praise on the Nobel Peace Prize winner, who is revered by Beijing.

"I want to offer a special welcome to a good friend," said Obama -- also a Nobel laureate -- describing the Dalai Lama as "a powerful example of what it means to practise compassion".

It was the first time the two men have been seen together in public. Three previous encounters have been held behind closed doors, and outside the Oval Office, to avoid risking relations with China.

FOREIGN POLICY ON INT'L CRISES

United States to show
'strategic patience'

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama believes the United States must resist the temptation to "over-reach" in its foreign policy and have "strategic patience" when it comes to tough international problems.

In a strategy document released Friday, Obama made the case for a more deliberative, cautious and restrained US foreign policy.

"The challenges we face require strategic patience and persistence," he said -- comments likely to be painted as vacillation or obfuscation by his political rivals.

Obama is facing calls for the United States to use its vast military and economic power to decisively intervene in Syria and Ukraine.

But the National Security Strategy document makes clear Obama's White House will not rush to engage if the outcome or impact is unclear.

"The United States will always defend our interests and uphold our commitments to allies and partners," the document states. "But, we have to make hard choices among many competing priorities, and we must always resist the over-reach that comes when we make decisions based upon fear."

Moreover, we must recognize that a smart national security strategy does not rely solely on military power."

The strategy echoes Obama's foreign policy mantra -- informally summed up as "don't do stupid stuff" -- adopted in the wake of damaging simultaneous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The document lays out a series of priorities for US foreign policy, from preventing nuclear proliferation to climate change.

It also reaffirmed a US desire to see China rise in a "stable, peaceful, and prosperous" way, but added "we will manage competition from a position of strength while insisting that China uphold international rules and norms."

Abbott faces
party revolt

AFP, Moscow

Party critics of Australian Prime Minister Tony



Abbott launched a dramatic bid yesterday to unseat the unpopular conservative leader after less than 18 months in office, but he vowed to fight on.

The move comes after Abbott's much-maligned decision to award Britain's Prince Philip a knighthood sparked two weeks of turmoil in his Liberal Party. The secret ballot is set to take place on next Tuesday.

The ruling Liberal-National coalition stormed to power in September 2013 elections, but in polls this week it trailed the opposition Labor Party 46 to 54 percent. Abbott's personal rating tumbled to just 34 percent.