

# NEWSIN brief

## N Korea fires short-range missiles into sea

AFP, Seoul

North Korea test-fired five short-range missiles into the sea off its east coast yesterday, raising cross-border tensions ahead of Seoul's planned joint army drills with the US. The missile tests come as South Korea and the United States prepare to start major annual joint military exercises hated by Pyongyang. The large-scale Key Resolve and Foal Eagle exercises, which will begin in early March, look set to trigger a sharp rise in military tensions on the divided peninsula.

## Lebanon receives US artillery, ammunition

AFP, Beirut

The Lebanese army received a shipment of US weapons yesterday, an embassy official told AFP, to help in the fight against jihadists who have staged incursions from Syria. "Support for the (Lebanese military) remains a top priority for the United States. Recent attacks against Lebanon's army only strengthen America's resolve to stand in solidarity with the people of Lebanon to confront these threats," said the embassy.

## Kurds recapture portion of villages from IS

AFP, Beirut

Syrian Kurdish forces have recaptured more than a third of the villages around Kobane from the Islamic State group since routing the jihadists from the town a fortnight ago, a monitor said yesterday. "The (Kurdish) People's Protection Units (YPG) have recaptured 128 villages out of some 350 in the past two weeks," said Syrian Observatory for Human Rights director Rami Abdel Rahman.

## Nigeria vote postpone-ment comes under fire

AFP, Abuja

Criticism mounted yesterday over Nigeria's decision to postpone national elections by six weeks because of Boko Haram violence, with some insisting President Goodluck Jonathan's political woes were the true cause of the delay. The national security advisor, Sambo Dasuki, had written to Jega last week explaining that security could not be guaranteed on February 14 because all available military resources had been committed to an intensified operation against Islamist rebels in the northeast.

## Japan seizes Syria visiting journo passport

AFP, Tokyo

Japan has seized the passport of a journalist planning to travel to Syria following the brutal killing of two Japanese hostages by the Islamic State group there, local media said yesterday. It was the first time Tokyo had taken such a measure on the grounds it was needed to protect the passport-holder's life, the Asahi Shimbun and other news reports said.

## French police detain 6 in new 'anti-terror' raid

AFP, Paris

French police detained six people yesterday suspected of recruiting potential jihadists, just days after another operation saw five charged on similar grounds, Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve said. He said in a statement that anti-terrorism magistrates in Paris had ordered yesterday's raid following a probe opened in January last year into "conspiracy to commit a terrorist act and financing of terrorism."



People clean a street near a destroyed car after shelling in the Leninsky district of the eastern Ukrainian city of Donetsk yesterday. Fresh fighting in the former Soviet republic claimed eight civilian lives, separatist authorities said, with Kiev accusing the rebels of massing heavy weapons ahead of a new offensive.

PHOTO: AFP

# Leaders plan new Minsk peace talks

BBC ONLINE

The leaders of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France aim to meet in Belarus's capital Minsk on Wednesday to discuss a peace plan for eastern Ukraine.

It comes after leaders of the four countries discussed the ongoing conflict by telephone yesterday.

More than 5,300 people have been killed by fighting between Ukrainian forces and pro-Russia rebels since April 2014.

Western countries accuse Russia of arming the rebels and sending troops to Ukraine – claims Russia denies.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande have been leading efforts to establish a new peace plan.

Merkel, Hollande, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin held an "extensive" telephone conference yesterday, German government spokesman Steffen Seibert said in a statement.

The four parties discussed "a package of measures" to try to reach "a comprehensive settlement of the

conflict in eastern Ukraine," Seibert said, adding that the leaders aimed to meet on Wednesday.

However, Putin said the planned meeting would only take place "if by that time we manage to agree on a number of points".

Signatories of a previous ceasefire deal - Ukraine, Russia, rebel representatives and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – would also meet in Minsk on Wednesday, Seibert said.

## UKRAINE CRISIS

That deal, which was signed in Minsk last September, failed to end the fighting and the rebels have since seized more ground.

The pace of diplomatic activity to reach a deal to resolve the Ukraine crisis has been dramatically accelerating. With the German Chancellor Angela Merkel in the driving seat and French President Francois Holland as her co-pilot, the drive is on for a deal.

However, while few details have been provided, this is not a substan-

tially a new peace plan.

The level of frustration many western countries feel against Russia's policies has been palpable – Hammond for example branded Vladimir Putin as "some kind of 20th-Century tyrant".

The heady optimism surrounding last year's deal evaporated quickly. This year people are much, much more cautious.

Poroshenko said that he hoped the new Minsk talks would lead to a "swift and unconditional" ceasefire by both sides.

Hollande said on Saturday the new plan being developed would include a demilitarised zone of 50-70km around the current front line.

The latest push for a peace deal is thought to be spurred by news that the US is considering sending defensive weapons to Ukraine. The move is opposed by many European leaders.

More than a million Ukrainians have fled their homes since April 2014, when the rebels seized a big swathe of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions following Russia's annexation of Crimea.

# Better no deal than a bad one

## Says Iran's supreme leader

AFP, Tehran, Munich

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said yesterday that he would rather see no deal reached with major powers on his country's nuclear programme than one that undercuts national interests.

His comments came as US Secretary of State John Kerry met Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif and held a second round of talks in Munich yesterday, meeting for about 90 minutes as they tried to hammer out a political accord to rein in Iran's atomic ambitions ahead of a March 31 deadline.

"I agree with a deal that can take place but I do not agree with a bad deal," the Iranian leader said, according to the Khamenei.ir website.

"It's better to have no agreement than one that goes against our national interests," he told air force commanders.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif yesterday appeared to rule out any new extension to tough negotiations with world powers over his country's suspect nuclear programme.

"I do not think another extension is in the interest of anyone, as I do not believe this extension was either necessary or useful," Zarif told a global security conference, meeting in the southern German city of Munich.

"In my view extension is not useful, not conducive to an agreement, and all my energy and focus and that of my colleagues and I'm sure my negotiating partners .... are all focused on reaching an agreement as early as possible."

Few details of the tough negotiations have leaked, but world powers are trying to ensure that Iran's pathways to developing a nuclear weapon are cut, in return for a gradual easing of international sanctions which have crippled Iran's economy.

Zarif refused to publicly discuss the details of the negotiations for an accord, but said "we are engaged in a very serious discussion."



# Guatemala's 'fire volcano' erupts

Covers towns in ash, prompts flight warnings

AFP, Guatemala City

Guatemala's Fuego volcano has erupted with thick plumes of ash that have blanketed several towns, including a popular tourist destination, while also prompting flight warnings.

Fuego volcano in southwestern Guatemala spewed columns of ash 5,000 meters above sea level on Saturday, forcing nearby residents to wear protective masks.

Officials issued a warning to the country's civil aviation agency, as flights could be affected by the thick ash clouds.

The National Natural Disaster coordination agency also imposed an orange alert, the second most severe in the country, as Fuego rumbled to life.

"We have issued a warning and our agencies are on alert in case the volcano increases its activity," the department's spokesman David de Leon told AFP.

The popular tourist destination Antigua Guatemala was covered in ash, which had reached towns as far as 40 kilometers from the volcano.

The ash clouds were moving at a speed of 40 kilometers per hour, de Leon said.



Members of Turkey's Alawite community stage a protest in the Kadikoy district of Istanbul yesterday. Thousands of Alawites, members of a subset of the Twelver branch of Shia Islam, gathered in Istanbul to protest for greater rights and a more equal position in the education system.

PHOTO: AFP

# Plea for 'urgency' at UN climate talks

AFP, Geneva

UN climate negotiators gathered in Geneva were urged yesterday to show urgency and compromise in crafting a draft by next week for a global pact to be signed in December.

"I ask you to work with efficiency and a sense of compromise," Manuel Pulgar-Vidal, Peru's environment minister and president of the negotiations told the opening session of a six-day huddle.

Pointing to scientific warnings of a dangerous Earth-warming trend, he appealed to country representatives to "work with an even higher sense of urgency".

"This is not a competition among us. We are just one team for one planet."

Negotiations resumed for the first time since an annual ministerial-level meeting in Lima last December yielded a sprawling 37-page blueprint for the agreement that countries had in 2011 agreed to finalise by the end of this year.

To be inked in the French capital, the pact must enter into force by 2020 to further the

UN goal of limiting global warming to two degrees Celsius over pre-Industrial Revolution levels.

Scientists warn that on current greenhouse gas emission trends, Earth is on track for double that -- a recipe for catastrophic droughts, storms, floods and rising seas.

The World Meteorological Organisation said 2014 was the hottest year on record -- part of a "warming trend" set to continue.

But the 195 nations gathered under the UN banner remain at odds, broadly on rich-developing country lines, and the Lima document is stuffed with options that reflect conflicting interests and demands on many fundamental points.

The goal of Geneva is to trim the document down to a workable draft for an official "negotiating text" to guide the process through to December.

Procedure requires that an official draft text must be submitted by the end of May this year -- six months before the next Conference of Parties in Paris that will adopt the final version.

## TransAsia to cancel more flights

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan's TransAsia Airways yesterday announced more flight cancellations this week as pilots were recalled for retraining following its second plane crash in seven months.

The airline had said Saturday that 90 flights -- all domestic -- would be cancelled today, and another 32 tomorrow.

The Civil Aeronautics Administration on Friday ordered the retraining after it emerged that pilots may have inexplicably shut off one of the two turboprop engines before Flight GE235 went down last Wednesday.

Pilots who fail the tests will be grounded immediately and indefinitely pending further training.

# Manjhi wants House dissolved

THE HINDU ONLINE

Bihar Chief Minister Jitan Ram Manjhi has recommended the dissolution of the Assembly to pre-empt his mentor-turned-rival and Janata Dal (United) leader Nitish Kumar's attempts to replace him.

Kumar, who was elected leader of the JD(U) legislature party, is set to stake claim to form a new government and urged the Governor to reject Manjhi's recommendation, arguing that he had lost the majority. Twenty ministers from the Nitish camp had resigned.

Manjhi is moving with the support of the Bharatiya Janata Party, say sources in both camps, in a major blow to the attempts to forge a united front against the saffron party ahead of the Assembly elections scheduled for November.

The JD(U) and Lalu Prasad's Rashtriya Janata Dal had buried the hatchet after their defeat at the hands of the BJP in May 2014, but Manjhi's rebellion can derail their plans.

Kumar had given way to Manjhi, accepting moral responsibility for the party's Lok Sabha defeat, but Manjhi soon began to assert himself and placed himself as a Mahadalit leader, causing friction between him and Kumar.



# Follow through to consolidate SAARC relations

## Emphasizes Indian President

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Indian President Pranab Mukherjee yesterday emphasized that the invite to leaders of SAARC countries to attend the swearing in of Prime Minister Narendra Modi -- led government in May last year "must be followed through to its logical conclusion with concrete steps to consolidate our relations."

Addressing the Ambassadors and High Commissioners who head India's Missions abroad, the President said "India demonstrated dynamism and bold leadership by inviting leaders of SAARC countries to attend the swearing in of the new government in May last year."

"That initiative must be followed through to its logical conclusion through incisive diplomacy even as we remain firm in protecting our security and putting in place impregnable security mechanisms", Mukherjee said, according to an official statement.

The President said the one adage which never goes stale in international politics is "You can choose your friend but not your neighbour". "A strong message was conveyed to our neighbours that the region must decide whether to live in perpetual tension or understanding. Our initiatives in the neighbourhood must be followed up with concrete steps to consolidate and make permanent the advances we make in our relations."

# AIRASIA JET CRASH

## Divers pull out more bodies

### Malfunction forces AirAsia X to abort and turn back: CEO

AGENCIES

Indonesian crews pulled out more bodies following last year's crash of an AirAsia jet, raising the total to 100 so far, authorities said yesterday.

Of the 100 bodies recovered, 72 have been identified, police said. Efforts are underway to identify the remaining victims.

AirAsia Flight 8501 plunged into the sea on December 28 as it flew from the Indonesian city of Surabaya toward Singapore. It had 162 people on board.

Divers resumed their attempt to lift up the fuselage of the Airbus jet yesterday after earlier attempts failed.

Meanwhile, a system malfunction forced the pilots of an AirAsia X flight from Kuala Lumpur to Jeddah to abort the flight and return to Malaysia yesterday, the AirAsia Group's CEO said.

The incident sparked fresh questions on social media about the Malaysian airline group's safety record as it struggles with the aftermath of the loss of Flight 8501.

"One auto-thrust not functioning properly. Actually okay to fly but we just returning it to base," Tony Fernandes told AFP in a text message, calling it a "minor issue".

## QUOTE of the day



You cannot continue to victimize someone else just because you yourself were a victim once — there has to be a limit

Dr Edward W Said referred to the Israel-Palestine conflict in his renowned controversial work Orientalism, pointing at the Israeli state "bullying" the Palestinians based on a claim that they are owed land of their own after a tragedy such as the Holocaust.

# ERDOGAN EAVESDROPPING CASE

## Turkey launches new raids

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish police yesterday launched a new wave of raids seeking to arrest suspects accused of wiretapping the communications of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and other top officials.

Istanbul prosecutors issued warrants for 21 police officers, the official Anatolia news agency said.

It was unclear how many had been arrested so far although NTV television showed pictures of several suspects being roughly led away by plain clothes police.

The raids were focused on Istanbul but also took place in the western city of Afyon and Zonguldak on the Black Sea, Anatolia added.

The authorities accuse the police of carrying out the eavesdropping at the behest of Erdogan's arch foe, the US-based preacher Fethullah Gulen, in a bid to implicate the Turkish strongman in corruption allegations. Turkish police have over the last months

carried out numerous raids on former top police officials accused in the case. Anatolia said it was the ninth such wave of swoops since they started on July 22.

Gulen, who rarely makes comments in public, had written in an article published Tuesday in the New York Times that Turkey's leaders are taking the country on a path towards "totalitarianism."

The Turkish authorities last week also seized control of a bank linked to Gulen in a move the opposition denounced as a scandal that would undermine investor confidence in Turkey.

Suspects previously arrested have been accused of setting up bugs to eavesdrop on Erdogan and other top officials while he was prime minister up to August 2014.

Leaked tapes emerged in February 2014 where Erdogan allegedly told his son Bilal to dispose of some 30 million euros in cash. Erdogan has dismissed the recordings as a "vile montage".