

NEWSIN brief

Syria regime air strikes kill 15 near Damascus

AFP, Beirut

At least 15 people were killed and dozens wounded yesterday in government air strikes on an area outside the capital Damascus, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor said. There were no immediate details on the breakdown of those killed in the strikes, which are the latest to hit the town of Douma in the rebel stronghold of Eastern Ghouta.

1,500 Russian troops enter Ukraine: Kiev

AFP, Kiev

"One thousand five hundred Russian soldiers and 300 pieces of military equipment, including Grad missile systems, crossed the Ukraine-Russia border on February 7 and 8," Ukraine military spokesman Andriy Lysenko told journalists. Around 170 vehicles, including trucks, petrol tankers and cars, also crossed the border, he said.

Somali lawmakers approve new cabinet

AFP, Mogadishu

Somali lawmakers approved a new cabinet yesterday, hours after Shebab insurgents assassinated a colleague as he made his way to parliament. The killing in the capital Mogadishu is the latest in a string of assassinations of politicians in the war-torn east African country.

Vietnam forces anti-graft website offline

AFP, Hanoi

The website of an outspoken Vietnamese newspaper has had its licence revoked after publishing articles which "abuse freedom and democratic rights," authorities said yesterday, as part of a growing crackdown on press freedom in the communist country. The newspaper, Nguoi Cao Tuoi -- which means "Elderly" in Vietnamese -- must take down its website and fire its editor-in-chief, the Ministry of Information and Communications said in an online statement.



Syrian men carry an injured person as they arrive at a clinic in the rebel-held area of Douma, east of the capital Damascus, following reported air strikes by regime forces yesterday. Tens of thousands of residents trapped in the rebel bastion suffer from food and medical shortages, as well as deadly regime bombardment.

PHOTO:
AFP

Violence flares after Baghdad's curfew lifted

CNN ONLINE

The historic end of Baghdad's decade-old curfew was marred by more violence a day afterward -- highlighting the security challenges that still plague Iraq.

The curfew, which was in place nightly, was lifted at 12:01 am Sunday. The move represents the first time the curfew, aimed at stymying violence in Baghdad, has been completely lifted since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

But in the hours leading up to the curfew removal, 11 people were killed in a pair of suicide attacks in Baghdad, a police source told CNN. Six people were killed in a bombing at a restaurant, and five people were killed when an assailant detonated explosives at a busy market.

While Sunday marked a day of relative calm after the curfew was lifted, violence erupted once again early yesterday morning.

A suicide bomber targeted a popular restaurant in northwestern Baghdad early yesterday morning, killing at least 12 people and wounding 42, Baghdad police officials told CNN.

And in northeastern Baghdad, an improvised explosive device detonated on a busy street, killing one person and wounding another four.

Both the attacks yesterday took place during the overnight hours that previously would have been subject to curfew. And both took place in primarily Shiite neighborhoods.

No one has claimed responsibility for the attacks.

But more and more, civilians are falling victim to deadly violence in the country. The infiltration of ISIS in the past year contributed to a staggering civilian death toll in 2014: at least 17,049, according to Iraq Body Count.

That number is roughly double the number recorded in 2013 -- which was about double the number from of the previous year.

EU delays Russia sanctions

Merkel talks Ukraine with Obama

AFP, Kiev

Europe yesterday postponed sanctions against Moscow ahead of a Ukraine peace summit as US President Barack Obama and German Chancellor Angela Merkel weighed options to end 10 months of bloodshed.

Merkel was in Washington as cracks between Europe and the United States seemed to emerge over the White House's mulling of sending arms to Ukraine, an idea flatly rejected by the German leader.

Officials from Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France, meanwhile, were hammering out the details for a four-way summit tomorrow on a European-brokered peace plan billed as a last chance to defuse the escalating conflict.

Ahead of the possible summit in Minsk, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said the EU would hold off implementing new sanctions to improve the chances of halting fighting that has killed some 5,400 people.

"The latest peace initiative shows that things have begun to move," Fabius said in Brussels.

EU foreign ministers had been set to formally sign off on adding 19 more people to a sanctions list over Moscow's alleged backing of pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has warned that a "number of points" still needed to be hammered out before the Minsk meeting can take place and wrangling was set to be intense as foreign ministry officials from the four nations met in Berlin.

Based on a largely ignored peace deal agreed in September in Minsk, the new plan may extend rebel

control over territory they have seized in recent weeks, although Kiev is adamant the demarcation line agreed in September should not be shifted.

French President Francois Hollande has said the proposal includes the creation of a 50-70-kilometre demilitarised zone around the current frontline.

German foreign ministry spokesman Martin Schaefer said the Minsk talks' goal would be "a ceasefire to end the bloodshed and thus create space and time for political talks".

The issues on the table include questions about levels of regional autonomy and future elections in rebel-controlled areas, Schaefer said.

In the United States, the White House is facing increasing calls to supply the outmatched Ukrainian army with more weapons to shore up its faltering defences.

But Merkel and many European nations believe weapons could not overturn the military mismatch between Ukraine and the might of the Russian army, and would simply escalate the conflict.

The Kremlin has warned Europe and the US not to use the threat of arming Kiev to try to push Putin into an agreement over Ukraine.

Ukraine and its Western allies accuse Moscow of sending troops and weapons to spearhead the rebellion, but Moscow denies the allegations despite the rebels acquiring heavy weaponry.

While the EU had looked set to extend its individual sanctions, there is no agreement to toughen broader economic sanctions and Spain warned an export ban in place now had already cost Europe some \$21 billion euros (\$23.8 billion).

Putin will not accept ultimatums over Ukraine

Renews blame on west

AGENCIES

Russia said yesterday that President Vladimir Putin would not tolerate any ultimatums over Ukraine after a report said Germany had given him until tomorrow to agree a peace plan or face new sanctions.

"We've already said everything about the tone of the negotiations," Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Russian radio.

Putin warned on Sunday that he would go to the summit only if the leaders manage to agree on a "number of points" by tomorrow. He did not elaborate.

The Wall Street Journal reported on Sunday that Merkel had given Putin until Wednesday to agree to a Franco-German peace plan for Ukraine, failing which Moscow faced further sanctions.

Merkel -- who has publicly spoken out against supplying arms to Ukraine -- also told Putin privately that she would not stand in the way of Washington sending arms to Ukraine, according to the Wall Street Journal, which cited unidentified

Western officials.

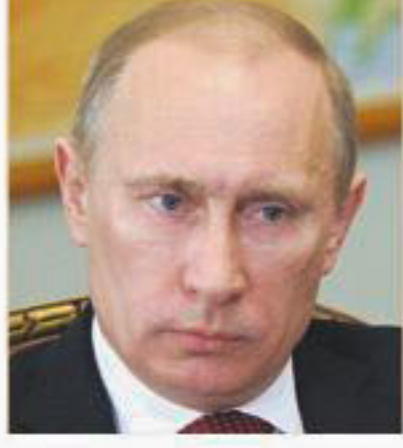
Western countries had broken pledges not to expand Nato and forced countries to choose between them and Russia, Putin told an Egyptian newspaper.

At the start of a visit to Egypt, President Putin renewed his attack on Western countries for their "hollow" promises not to expand Nato to include former Soviet countries, and therefore ignoring Russian interests.

There had been attempts, Putin told Egypt's al-Ahram newspaper, "to tear states which had been parts of the former USSR [Soviet Union] off Russia and to prompt them to make an artificial choice 'between Russia and Europe'."

"We repeatedly warned the US and its Western allies about harmful consequences of their interference in Ukrainian domestic affairs but they did not listen to our opinion," the Russian leader said.

He went on to accuse them of supporting a "coup d'etat in Kiev" - a reference to the ousting of former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich last year.



Yemeni security guards stand outside the parliament building in Sanaa yesterday, after the Shiite Huthi militia dissolved parliament and created a "presidential council" in a move it said was designed to fill a power vacuum following the resignation of the Western-backed president and prime minister in January. Yemeni political factions resumed UN-brokered talks with the Shiite militia that grabbed power last week, but one group walked out underlining the complexity of the crisis in a deeply tribal country awash with weapons.

PHOTO: AFP

Greece sticks to its guns on bailout

AFP, Athens

Greece was locked yesterday in intense talks with its EU partners after the country's prime minister stuck to his anti-austerity guns with the deadline for a deal needed to avoid the risk of default and a euro exit just days away.

In a rousing policy speech to parliament, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras on Sunday swore he would be "unshakable" in implementing his electoral promises and refused to apply for an extension to the much-loathed 240-billion-euro (\$270 billion) bailout.

The European Commission's representative for the EU-IMF-ECB troika and head of the Euro Working Group were in Athens for talks with the finance ministry in a bid to thrash out a last-minute deal ahead of the emergency meeting of eurozone finance ministers tomorrow.

Athens is expected to push for a new debt deal with its international creditors, so far something which its EU partners have resisted, and its determination to rip up the 2010 reforms-for-loans programme has sparked fears the country could default and exit the eurozone.



PHOTO: AFP

NIGERIA VOTE

No further delay

Says national security advisor

AFP, Abuja

Nigeria's elections will not be postponed past March 28, National Security Advisor Sambo Dasuki told AFP in an interview yesterday, saying that Boko Haram fighters who forced the delay would be defeated within the coming six weeks.

"Those dates will not be shifted again," Dasuki said when asked if the polls, which had been initially scheduled for February 14, could be pushed back further.

The NSA for several weeks has been urging the Independent National Electoral Commission to reschedule the vote, offering a range of explanations.

Then last week, he wrote INEC chief Attahiru Jega urging a delay on the grounds that the military could not provide nationwide election security because all available resources were being deployed to the northeast to fight Boko Haram.

Troops have only been called in when police and civil defence units have needed reinforcements.

INEC's decision to postpone the polls at Dasuki's urging was criticised by civil society and many Western governments including the United States, Britain and Canada.

Thai junta bans ex-PM from travelling overseas

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's toppled former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra has been banned from travelling overseas because graft charges carrying up to a decade in jail will be formally laid against her later this month, officials said yesterday.

Yingluck, who was ousted by a court ruling shortly before the army grabbed power in May, has already been banned from politics for five years following her impeachment over a costly rice subsidy scheme.

In addition, she faces jail if found guilty of corruption charges linked to the policy, which paid farmers in her party's rural heartland well over the market rates for their crop.

Local media said Yingluck had wanted to travel to Hong Kong, China and Britain this week.

But the Thai junta denied her permission on the advice of the state prosecutor, the Office of the Attorney General.

"The office (OAG) said the case was still

under the justice process and asked for the trip to be postponed," deputy prime minister General Prawit Wongsuwan told reporters.

"The ban was linked to the legal process."

An OAG spokesman said it would formally indict Yingluck by February 21, leaving the Supreme Court to decide if the case would proceed.

As Thailand's highest court, there is no right of appeal against a Supreme Court decision.

Yingluck's lawyer said there was no legal justification for blocking her from leaving the country.

"The case is yet to go to court," Norawit Larlaeng told AFP, adding a ban before any proceedings treated his client like she "was guilty without having a court ruling".

The generals seized power ostensibly to restore order after months of often deadly protests against Yingluck's government.

The junta says it will hold fresh elections in early 2016 once reforms to tackle corruption and curb the power of political parties are codified in a new constitution.



Syria rejects foreign troops to fight ISIS

AFP, Damascus

Syria will not allow foreign ground troops on its territory to fight the Islamic State group, Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem said on yesterday.

Speaking at a news conference in Damascus, Muallem also said Jordan had not responded to a Syrian request to coordinate efforts against IS after the group killed a captured Jordanian pilot.

"So far, there is no coordination between Syria and Jordan in the fight against terrorism," Muallem said at the joint news conference with Belarus Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei.

Damascus regularly accuses Jordan of supporting "terrorism" in Syria because of its backing for the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad. Last week, it called on Amman to cooperate in its efforts against "terrorism" in the wake of a video showing the murder of a Jordanian pilot captured by IS in Syria.

Jordan is a member of the US-led coalition carrying out air strikes against IS in Syria and Iraq, and its pilot Maaz al-Kassasbeh was captured in December when his plane went down over Syria.

More than 210,000 people have been killed in Syria's conflict since it began in March 2011, and around the half the population has been displaced.

The war has created massive humanitarian needs, but Muallem criticised the international community, saying it was failing to do its part.



Nitish Kumar stakes claim to form Bihar govt

JD(U) expels defiant Jitan Ram Manjhi

NDTV ONLINE

Nitish Kumar yesterday led about 130 legislators from his Janata Dal (United) and allies to the Bihar Governor's house in a show of strength, staking claim to be the state's new chief minister.

"We are ready to prove majority on the floor of the assembly as soon as he [Bihar Governor] wants," said Nitish Kumar, who was accompanied by RJD's Lalu Yadav and other allies.

Kumar's party has also booked 140 seats on a flight to Delhi today, where it has sought an appointment with President Pranab Mukherjee to demonstrate support for Kumar if he is not invited by the Bihar governor to be CM.

The JD(U) expelled Jitan Ram Manjhi yesterday morning, who has refused to resign as Bihar chief minister, for anti-party activities. Manjhi had met Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday.

Manjhi claims he has the support of enough legislators to remain in the top post. "After meeting PM Modi its like Jitan Ram Manjhi got a licence for horse trading," Nitish Kumar alleged.

QUOTE of the day



"No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

Nelson Mandela wrote this in his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, published in 1995 which profiles his early life, coming of age, education and 27 years in prison.