

US to withdraw troops
from Ebola mission

AFP, Washington
The US military plans to pull out most troops from West Africa that were deployed to help stem the outbreak of the deadly Ebola virus, the Pentagon said Tuesday, ending a five-month mission. "Nearly all troops will return by April 30," a spokesman said.

NBC suspends star
anchor for six months

AFP, New York
NBC suspended star news anchor Brian Williams for six months without pay Tuesday for embellishing an Iraq war story, the US network said, amid swirling accusations that he exaggerated other news reports. Williams' on-air "misrepresentation" of how he came under fire in Iraq in 2003 was "wrong and completely inappropriate for someone in Brian's position," Deborah Turness, president of NBC news, said in a statement on its website.

Two killed in 100-car
pile-up in S Korea

AFP, Seoul
Two people were killed yesterday and more than 60 injured in a 100-vehicle pile-up on the highway to South Korea's largest international airport, police said. The multiple collisions occurred in heavy fog on the Seoul-bound lane of a bridge that forms part of the main expressway linking Incheon airport with the capital.

Boko Haram attack
Chad troops

AFP, N'djamena
Mililitants from the Boko Haram Islamist movement attacked Chadian troops stationed in a Nigerian border town before dawn yesterday before being repulsed, a Chadian military source said.

NY cop indicted over
black man shooting

AFP, New York
A grand jury has indicted a New York police officer over the death of an unarmed father of one in a Brooklyn stairwell, US media reported Tuesday. The fatal shooting of Akai Gurley was one of a series of deaths involving black men at the hands of police which sparked angry protests across US last year.

QUOTE
of the day



These fatwas have an impact ... I was told voting for me in Krishna Nagar dropped in places where fatwa was given.
— Kiran Bedi writes to Indian EC after poll defeat

THE HUMAN COST OF THE UKRAINE CRISIS



Dozens killed ahead
of make-or-break talks

AFP, Minsk
The leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany were to hold peace talks yesterday aimed at halting a 10-month war in Ukraine where dozens were killed in the latest fighting. In the run-up to the summit, the climax of a frantic diplomatic push to prevent the worst East-West crisis since the end of the Cold War from escalating, Russia expressed optimism. "Experts are working, there is noticeable progress," Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, although he signalled there would be no flexibility on the crucial negotiating demand from Ukraine that it be given back control of its border with Russia. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko warned he could "introduce martial law throughout Ukraine" if the talks in the Belarusian capital Minsk failed to stop the war with the pro-Russian separatists. "I will not hesitate with this decision, if the actions of the aggressor lead to further escalation," he told a cabinet meeting. Martial law would mark a grave escalation of the crisis, freeing up military resources for the fight in the east but also likely leading to the cutting off of foreign investments, including a vital loan from the International Monetary Fund. Putin, Poroshenko, Hollande, Merkel to attend Minsk summit
Russia reports 'progress' ahead of talks
Germany says talks offer 'glimmer of hope, nothing more'

made to pay if the talks fail. A French presidency source said Hollande and Merkel would "try everything" to achieve peace but that hours before the start of the summit at about 1530 GMT there were "quite a lot of problems still to be resolved". Merkel's spokesman said the summit offered "a glimmer of hope, nothing more". The bloodletting on both sides has been relentless in recent weeks as pro-Russian separatists have pushed a new offensive and Kiev forces have counter attacked. At least 50 people were reported killed in the last 24 hours, including 16 in a devastating rocket attack on Kramatorsk, the Ukrainian government's eastern military headquarters and administrative hub. If the talks fail, Obama has warned that Washington may decide to start providing lethal weapons to Ukraine, a step many European leaders oppose for fear of getting drawn into open conflict with Russia.

Stumbling
BLOCKS

Ceasefire: Both sides seem willing, but wrangling over who pulls back from the frontlines first.
Demarcation line: Rebels won't give up occupancy; Ukraine adamant of regaining 500 sq km of lost land.
Border control: Ukraine sees no solution unless it regains control of 400 km of border with Russia under rebels' grip; Russian flow of arms and troops into Ukraine has not stopped even with OSCE observers monitoring the frontier.
Removing foreign fighters: Ukraine demands removal of any foreign military and troops from its soil – a clear jab at Russia; Moscow has denied sending in any troops or weapons – meaning it cannot officially withdraw anyone. However Russia admitted "volunteer" fighters – even those within the ranks on leave – have joined the rebels.
Status of rebel regions: Moscow is pushing for separatist regions to be given a high degree of autonomy, with elections for regional governors; Kiev argues that the Kremlin just wants to cement the rebels in power and would use them to block the country's pro-Western trajectory.
Prisoner swaps: One area where both nations have made progress through swapping hundreds of prisoners last year. One obstacle: Kiev demands release of pilot Nadia Savchenko – allegedly spirited across the Russian border illegally.
Who signs?: Ukraine desperate to get Russian President's signature on any peace deal – an implicit admittance to Kremlin's role in the conflict; Moscow rejected all such approaches and told Kiev to talk directly to rebels.

20,000 fighters
head to Syria

US report says ISIS jihadists drawing recruits from more than 90 countries

AFP, Washington
Foreign fighters are flocking to Syria at an "unprecedented" rate, with more than 20,000 volunteers from around the world joining the Islamic State or other extremist groups, US intelligence officials said Tuesday. The foreign fighters have traveled to Syria from more than 90 countries, including at least 3,400 from Western states and more than 150 Americans, according to the latest estimate from the National Counter-Terrorism Center (NCTC). A majority of the foreign volunteers who arrived recently have joined forces with the Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq, it said. The estimate of the total number of foreign fighters flocking to Syria was up from a previous estimate in January of roughly 19,000, according to NCTC.



No precise numbers are available "but the trend lines are clear and concerning," Nicholas Rasmussen, NCTC director, said in prepared remarks for a congressional hearing. "The rate of foreign fighter travel to Syria is unprecedented. It exceeds the rate of travelers who went to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, or Somalia at any point in the last 20 years," he said. The volunteers come from a range of backgrounds and "do not fit any one stereotype," Rasmussen said. Meanwhile, a former senior CIA official warned that Afghanistan is in danger of turning into a sanctuary once again for Islamist extremists as the West withdraws troops and shifts its attention elsewhere. The country could even become a refuge for Islamic State jihadists now waging war in Syria and Iraq, said Robert Grenier, the former Central Intelligence Agency station chief in Islamabad.

Rohingya vote rights
irk many in Burma

AFP, Yangon
Dozens of protesters marched in Yangon Wednesday against a law giving voting rights to Myanmar's temporary citizens, including hundreds of thousands of Muslim Rohingya, as parliament's speaker referred the fiery issue to a constitutional tribunal. Controversy over people holding limited citizenship rights in Myanmar's complex national identification system spilled onto the streets after a bill granting them the right to vote in referendums was enacted on Tuesday. The issue has ignited indignation among some Buddhists in restive Rakhine state, where around half a million Rohingya Muslims are estimated to hold "white cards", a temporary identification document. "If those given the right to vote don't pay respect to Myanmar's flag, then we will have a failure of sovereignty," said Nyi Nyi Maung, a Rakhine Buddhist who had joined monks and other protesters in Yangon Wednesday. Parliamentary speaker Shwe Mann, who is also the head of the ruling party, said he had asked the constitutional tribunal to look into the matter, adding that the law could still be amended. Violence between Buddhists and Muslims tore through Rakhine in 2012, leaving over 200 people dead and sparking outbreaks of religious violence across the country, overshadowing its democratic transition.



South Sudanese Child soldiers sit with their rifles at a ceremony of the child soldiers disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration in Pibor oversaw by UNICEF and partners, on Tuesday. Some 300 child soldiers in Pibor, Jonglei State, surrendered their weapons and uniforms in the ceremony. They were to spend their first night in an interim care center where they will be provided with food, water and clothing. They will also have access to health and psychosocial services.

PHOTO: AFP

Diplomats quit crisis-hit Yemen

AFP, Sanaa
Western governments evacuated their diplomats from Yemen yesterday as conflict deepened in the impoverished Saudi neighbour which has long been on the front line of the war against al-Qaeda. Exactly four years after the start of Arab Spring-inspired protests that forced veteran strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh from power, his Western-backed successor is under effective house arrest, after being ousted by Shia militia last week. The United Nations has demanded his reinstatement but its efforts to broker a deal between the militiamen and their opponents have made no headway and the Security Council was to meet later yesterday to decide on what to do next. The Huthi militia, which entered the capital unopposed last September, seized more territory in the Sunni-majority country this week, sparking fears of a backlash from its feared al-Qaeda branch. Washington said the "deteriorating security situation" in the capital Sanaa had triggered its decision to close its embassy indefinitely. "On February 11... US Embassy Sanaa American staff were relocated out of the country," a State Department travel warning said. "The Department urges US citizens to defer travel to Yemen and those US citizens currently living in Yemen to depart." Britain too evacuated its diplomats. France also called on its 100 or so citizens in Yemen to leave the country and said it would close its embassy starting from February 13 over mounting security fears. The Arab Spring protests of 2011 had raised hopes of democratic reform after more than three decades of ironfisted rule by Saleh.

Modi temple
to open in
Gujarat

AFP, Ahmedabad
A temple dedicated to India's Narendra Modi is set to open in his home state of Gujarat thanks to some ultra-loyal supporters of the Hindu nationalist prime minister. The Hindu temple, to be officially opened on Sunday in Kotharia village, includes an idol of the barrel-chested, dapper-dressed premier at which followers can make daily offerings and prayers. About 350 Modi devotees have been collecting small donations in recent years for construction of the dome-roofed temple, some 210 kilometres from Gujarat's main city of Ahmedabad. "Earlier we used to offer prayers to Bharat Mata (Mother India). But in the last few years we have been offering prayers to Modi-ji," said Ramesh Undhad, using a Hindi honorific for respect. "We had kept a framed photograph of Modi-ji beside the statue of Mother India," Undhad, a former local councillor and head of the project, told AFP. A long time chief minister of Gujarat, Modi stormed to power nationally last May, riding a "Modi-wave" of popularity that saw thousands pack rallies to hear the powerful and charismatic orator.

Modi 'brought
down to earth'

Says NY Times after Delhi poll defeat
IANS, Washington
While US officials refrained from comment on Aam Aadmi Party's massive victory in Delhi elections, the New York Times saw "a defeat for Prime Minister Modi" in the results. "Fresh from the diplomatic high of a successful summit meeting with President Obama, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been brought down to earth by domestic politics," the influential US daily said in an editorial. "Ordinarily, elections in New Delhi would not draw international attention," the Times said. But since sweeping to power last year with the biggest national election victory in three decades, Modi and his BJP have generated "an aura of invincibility" winning a succession of other state elections, it said. "The election won't affect Modi's hold on the prime minister's office and the federal government," the Times said. "But it will increase the enormous pressure to deliver on his economic and governance promises even while making that harder." Many other major US newspapers like the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal chose to carry an Associated Press story about "Upstart party wins big in India's capital, in blow for Modi." "While the results from last weekend's elections will not have any bearing on the structure of the federal government, they sent a clear message to Modi that he was not invincible," it said. "They were also an indication of voters' frustration with endemic corruption," AP said. Analysts, it noted viewed "the scale of the defeat of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party was a wake-up call for the government." Kejriwal rejects security cover
Delhi chief minister-designate Arvind Kejriwal yesterday refused to take security cover, said a party source. "Through newspapers, we came to know that he (Kejriwal) will be given Z-plus security. But, he is a man of the masses and doesn't need any security," a party source said after Kejriwal met Union home minister Rajnath Singh.



Australia foils
terror attack

Belgium jails Islamists
AFP, Sydney
Two men were charged in Australia yesterday after police thwarted an "imminent" terror attack, seizing an Islamic State flag, a machete and an Arabic-language video detailing the alleged plot during a raid in Sydney. New South Wales Deputy Police Commissioner Catherine Burn said the planned attack was "consistent with the messaging coming out of ISIS", while New South Wales state Premier Mike Baird described it as "beyond disturbing". Asked whether the plot involved a beheading, Burn said police were as yet unsure, but that it had been due to happen Tuesday in Sydney, and would likely have involved a knife. Meanwhile, a Belgian court yesterday jailed the leader of an Islamist group that sent jihadist fighters to Syria to a 12-year jail term and imprisoned several other members in one of the largest cases of its kind in Europe. Fouad Belkacem, 32, the chief of the Sharia4Belgium group, was convicted by a court in the northern port city of Antwerp of radicalising, recruiting and dispatching young men to fight holy war.

'Pak knew Laden's hiding place'

Ex-ISI chief says Islamabad hoped to use him as bargain chip

AFP, Islamabad
Pakistan's main intelligence agency probably knew where Osama Bin Laden was hiding and hoped to use him as a bargaining chip before he was killed by US forces in 2011, a former spymaster has said. Lieutenant General Asad Durrani, who led the country's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency from 1990 to 1992, made the comments while speaking on Al Jazeera's "Head to Head" interview show on Tuesday. The al-Qaeda chief was tracked down after a 10-year manhunt to Abbottabad, a garrison town north of Islamabad where Pakistan's military academy is headquartered. Asked whether it was possible for Bin Laden to have lived in the town without the powerful ISI's knowledge, Durrani said: "My assessment... was it is quite possible that they (the ISI) did not know, but it was more probable that they did. Durrani, who emphasised that he had no specific knowledge of the issue, suggested Pakistan may have been harbouring Bin Laden in the hope of getting a bigger say in the future of neighbouring Afghanistan, where US-led forces officially ended a 13-year combat mission at the end of 2014. "The quid pro quo to my mind... (was) you get your Osama Bin Laden, provided that, now let's agree, let's agree on how to bring the Afghan problem to an end," Durrani told Al-Jazeera, according to a transcript released by the broadcaster. A leaked Pakistani government report in 2013 said Bin Laden arrived in Pakistan in the spring or summer of 2002 and settled in Abbottabad in August 2005.

