

NEWS IN
brief

26 Afghan cops killed in anti-Taliban drive
AFP, Kandahar

At least 20 Afghan policemen were killed yesterday in a Taliban attack near Kabul, bringing to 26 the number of officers to die since the start of an army offensive aimed at weakening the insurgents. The assault saw Taliban gunmen and suicide attackers strike police headquarters in Puli Alam city, south of Kabul. The defence ministry said 76 insurgents were killed on Monday, the first day of the operation.

Cameroon kills 86 Boko Haram militants
AFP, Yaoundé

Cameroon's army says it has killed 86 Boko Haram militants and detained 1,000 people suspected of links to the Islamist group, as central African leaders held talks on how to combat its bloody insurgency. Five Cameroonian soldiers were also killed during the clashes in the Waza region near the border with Nigeria, defence ministry spokesman Didier Badjeck said Monday.

18 killed in Haiti
AP, Haiti

At least 18 people on a packed Carnival float in the Haitian capital were killed yesterday when they were electrocuted by a power line. The accident occurred as thousands of people filled the streets of downtown Port-au-Prince for the raucous annual celebration.

US immigration reforms stalled
AP, Houston

A federal judge temporarily blocked President Barack Obama's executive action on immigration on Monday. US district judge Andrew Hanen's decision puts on hold Obama's orders that could spare five million people from deportation. The first of Obama's orders -- to expand a program to protect young immigrants from deportation if they were brought to the US illegally as children -- was set to start taking effect today. The other major part of the order, which extends deportation protections to parents of US citizens and permanent residents, was to take effect after May 19.

Muslim students' killer charged with murder
INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

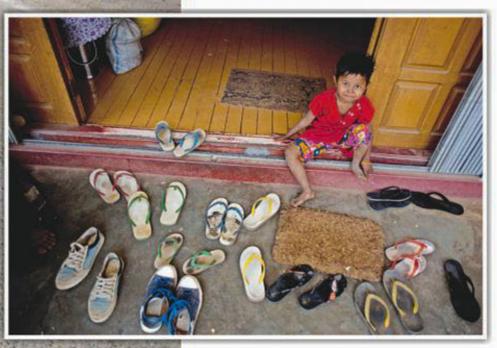
A grand jury in North Carolina has formally charged a man on three counts of murder over last week's shooting of three young Muslim students. Craig Hicks, 46, was detained last week following the shooting deaths of student DeahShaddyBarakat, 23, his 21-year-old wife, Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, and her 19-year-old sister Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha.



MYANMAR DECLARES EMERGENCY

Residents who fled from conflict areas near the Myanmar and Chinese border arrive at a temporary refugee camp at a monastery in Lashio, northern Myanmar, yesterday. Myanmar yesterday declared a state of emergency in the conflict-torn region, where ferocious fighting between the army and ethnic rebels has sent thousands fleeing airstrikes and fierce gun battles.

PHOTO: AFP



LANKA
War Crimes

UN agrees to delay report
BBC ONLINE

The UN has agreed to Sri Lanka's request to delay a long-awaited report into alleged atrocities committed during Sri Lanka's 26-year civil war. The UN rights chief said he recommended the deferral of the report until September "to allow for a stronger and more comprehensive report". He said Sri Lanka's new government was far more prepared to co-operate on the issue than the previous administration. Sri Lanka's army defeated Tamil Tiger separatist rebels in May 2009. Both sides have been accused of committing war crimes and the UN report had been originally due next month. Maithripala Sirisena defeated long-time ruler Mahinda Rajapaksa in presidential elections last month, and promised to co-operate with the UN. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said Sirisena had given clear commitments indicating it was prepared to co-operate "on a whole range of important human rights issues - which the previous government had absolutely refused to do". "I need to engage with them to ensure those commitments translate into reality" he said. He said he had recommended the report's deferral to reflect "the changing context in Sri Lanka, and the possibility that important new information may emerge which will strengthen the report". But he stressed that those responsible for committing abuses would not escape justice. "I am acutely aware that many victims... might see this as the first step towards shelving, or diluting, a report they have long feared they would never see," he said.

Truce hope fades

Fighting erupts in flashpoint town; sides refuse to withdraw big arms

AFP, Soledar

Street-to-street fighting broke out for the first time inside a flashpoint town in east Ukraine yesterday, officials and pro-Russian rebels said, dealing a harsh blow to a fragile ceasefire just three days old. The combat in Debaltsevo, a strategic railway hub located between the separatist-held cities of Donetsk and Lugansk, was described as "intense". The town is largely encircled by heavily armed rebels who previously had been exchanging artillery fire with up to 8,000 government troops holed up inside.

Ilya Kiva, a deputy regional police chief inside the town who was reached by telephone, said the rebels had entered Debaltsevo and were using small arms, mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. "Battles are going on right now with rebels storming our positions," a Ukrainian military spokesman in Kiev, Alexander Motuzyanik, confirmed to AFP.

Another spokesman, Andriy Lysenko, denied rebel claims that dozens of government troops had surrendered. "Our military positions held" and soldiers were reposting, he said. Rebels quoted by Russian-language news agencies said their forces had entered Debaltsevo from the east and the north and killed "many" Ukrainian

soldiers in a "mopping up" operation. They said they had taken control of the railway station. The hostilities and rebel checkpoints outside the town prevented journalists from entering to verify the situation.

The fighting, though, severely undermines an already shaky European-brokered ceasefire that came into effect across eastern Ukraine on Sunday. A second step of that truce was meant to see the warring sides move their heavy weapons back from the frontline from Tuesday. But Kiev and the rebels accused each other of repeated violations that prevented that happening.

Lysenko accused the rebels of breaking the truce 164 times and said that "despite the ceasefire announcement, the enemy had been preparing for active combat operations".

He affirmed that Kiev was still prepared to withdraw its weapons "as soon as the ceasefire is applied along the frontline".

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Poroshenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin held a late Monday phone call in which they agreed "concrete measures" to allow OSCE monitors to fulfil their role of observing the ceasefire, according to Merkel's office.

UKRAINE CRISIS

Greek eurozone hope hangs in a thread

Talks with euro creditors on the verge of collapse

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Greece's crunch talks with its European creditors broke down after just four hours today, pushing the country closer towards a potential exit from the single currency.

Greece refused to countenance an extension of the existing €172bn bailout programme, while the rest of the eurozone's finance ministers said this was a non-negotiable first step to talks.

"There is no alternative to a request to an extension of the programme" said Pierre Moscovici, the European Commission's economics and financial affairs commissioner. That was echoed by Jeroen Dijsselbloem, the chairman of the Eurogroup.

Dijsselbloem said there could be a new Eurogroup meeting tomorrow if Greece requested an extension over the next few days. However, the Greek side suggested that Dijsselbloem had gone back on an earlier understanding by trying to

push Greece into extending the existing agreement.

The Athens government has repeatedly said it will not agree to continue with the existing programme, which it blames for pushing Greece into a deep economic depression. It is instead demanding a bridge loan from creditors until the summer while an entirely new programme can be fashioned. It wants this to include a cancellation of a large tranche of the country's debt and an easing of the requirement for Greece to run primary budget surpluses for the foreseeable future.

The Finance Minister, Yanis Varoufakis, said there would be no capitulation to the pressure from the Eurogroup.

The country's bailout is due to lapse on 28 February. Without a new agreement in place by then, Greece could find its banking system shut off from access to the European Central Bank's liquidity lifeline.



The bodies of Pakistani victims of a bomb attack lie beside burnt-out vehicles near the police headquarters in Lahore, yesterday. The bomb exploded in the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore, killing at least 5 people, police said. The blast happened close to the city police headquarters in the centre of the city, Pakistan's second-largest and the power base of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

PHOTO: AFP

ISIS 'burns to death 45 in Iraq'

No confirmation yet
BBC ONLINE

Jihadist militants from Islamic State have burned to death 45 people in the western Iraqi town of al-Baghdati, the local police chief says.

Exactly who these people were and why they were killed is not clear, but Col Qasim al-Obeidi said he believed some were members of the security forces.

The fighting and poor communications in the area make it difficult to confirm such reports.

IS fighters captured much of the town, near Ain al-Asad air base, last week.

Col Obeidi said a compound that houses the families of security personnel and local officials was now under attack.

BEHEADING OF 21 EGYPTIANS



ISIS did what West couldn't

Arabs unite to bomb the West's enemies
INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Just when Washington and Nato feared they were going to be bombing ISIS on their own, the self-styled "Islamic State" has single-handedly created a new Arab military alliance to bomb the West's enemies.

By its seaside slaughter of 21 Egyptian Christians, ISIS has brought ex-Field Marshal President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi into the war against it. And by burning Jordan's captured pilot alive, it provoked 56 more air strikes from Jordan, a return to action by the UAE and a flight of Bahraini jets to Amman to help in the struggle. In what is almost a sideshow, Libya's air force -- supporting one of its country's two rival governments -- continues to bomb ISIS fighters, but now in co-operation with Egypt.

So President Obama and the Pentagon can, it seems, take satisfaction in seeing their "moderate" friends in the Middle East flying alongside them in their latest version of the "war on terror". So far, so good. No "boots on the ground", as the now-hackneyed expression goes. No Western lives in danger -- save for the pitiful handful of hostages still held in Raqqa. Of course, any Iraqi who opposes the "Islamic State", any Iraqi Shia, and any Christian -- Libyan or otherwise -- who falls foul of ISIS's sectarian hatred, will suffer accordingly. But that will be Arab killing Arab. Americans are safe. So are the Israelis.

Egypt didn't launch its war with Isis in yesterday's air raids -- the two sides had been killing each other for more than a year.

Days before ISIS released its gory video depicting the Egyptians' beheadings, Libya's former Prime Minister warned that the group would soon reach the Mediterranean and even Europe if order was not restored in the country. And the murders realised long-held fears of militants reaching the Mediterranean coast.

ISIS's ideology has spread much further, with pledges of allegiance from terrorist groups in Egypt, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Yemen.

For Arabs, there is a clear message in all these alliances. Washington has an American-trained general in charge of the Libyan air force, an American-trained former field marshal and president in charge of Egypt, an American-educated and British-trained king in Jordan and two wealthy emirates with huge US investments -- one of them headquarters to the US fleet in the Gulf -- in the battle. Only that well-known dictator who has been fighting ISIS for longer than any of them -- Bashar al-Assad of Syria -- is left out. For now.

India's 'Charlie's Angels'

AFP, New Delhi

As dawn breaks over the Indian capital, a group of police women are already hard at work practising their punches, on a mission to rid the city's streets of sexual predators.

Dressed in white karate kimonos, the constables kneel and kick their imaginary attackers with aggression, honing their skills in preparation for their debut assignment to protect women and the vulnerable.

Following a string of high-profile attacks that has seen New Delhi branded the rape capital of India, police chiefs decided to form an all-women squad specially trained in martial arts.

"We won't tolerate any bad behaviour," leader Bharti Wadhwa told AFP after an intense two-hour session with her 40-strong team, dubbed Charlie's Angels by their trainers.

"It can start from a simple cat call which then leads to stalking and then rape. We will nip such antics in the bud," said Wadhwa.

After months of such sessions, the women are almost ready. Wearing plain clothes instead of uniforms to blend in, they are set to be deployed at areas where women are thought vulnerable.



SWINE FLU IN INDIA

Death toll nears 600

PTI, New Delhi

The death toll from swine flu in 2015 alone has soared to 585 with 100 more casualties reported across the country in since February 12, prompting the Centre to order additional stocks of medicines and diagnostic kits.

While the total number of swine flu deaths had stood at 485 till February 12, the latest official data released on Monday said 100 more people succumbed to the H1N1 virus in the three days till February 15, taking the toll to 585. Altogether, 8,423 people have contracted swine flu this year in the country.

Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra are the worst-affected states with their respective tolls standing at 165, 144, 76 and 58, official figures said.

Won't allow any group to incite hatred: Modi

BBC ONLINE

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday vowed to protect all religious groups after a string of attacks on churches in Delhi.

Addressing a Christian audience in the capital, he called on all religious groups to show restraint and respect.

Since December, five churches have been attacked, but this is the first time Modi has commented on the issue.

Critics say his Hindu nationalist BJP government is not doing enough to stop Hindu zealots targeting minorities.

"I condemn violence against any religion. We will act strongly against such violence," Modi said at a conference organised by Christian groups in Delhi on Tuesday.

"My government will not allow any group belonging to majority or minority to incite hatred against other communities." Modi also said that "everyone has the undeniable right to retain or adopt the religion of his or her choice without coer-

cion or undue influence".

Christian groups accuse hardline Hindu groups, emboldened by Mr Modi's landslide in last year's general election, of carrying out the recent attacks, but police say there is little evidence for this.

They say they have provided security to more than 200 churches in the capital.

Hindu temple vandalised in US

A Hindu temple was vandalised with hate message and swastika spray-painted on its wall in the US state of Washington, the latest incident that has shocked the Hindu community there.

The incident happened when unidentified miscreants sprayed swastika and painted "Get Out" on one of the walls of the temple in the Seattle Metropolitan area. It is one of the largest Hindu temples in the entire North West.

Of late there has been increasing incidents of vandalism of Hindu temples in the US including one in Loudoun County, Virginia and Monroe, Georgia last year.

