

NEWSIN brief

Greece confirms loan extension request

BBC ONLINE
Greece was to ask the eurozone for a six-month extension of its European loan agreement yesterday, a Greek government official has confirmed. The loan would not be an extension of the current bailout agreement, which includes strict austerity measures. Greece is likely to run out of money if a deal is not reached before the end of February.

Next round of US-Cuba talks on Feb 27

AFP, Washington
The United States and Cuba will hold a second round of talks on normalizing relations on February 27 in Washington, the State Department said Tuesday, as they work to end half a century of enmity. The first round of talks were held at the end of January in Havana, with the two countries discussing reopening embassies and renewing ties that have been severed for decades.

Another 'hate crime' against Muslims in US

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
A man allegedly asked two people if they were Muslims before allegedly stabbing them at a suburban Detroit bus stop, according to a report from the Detroit Free Press. The alleged attack happened at 10:30 pm on Saturday in Southfield, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit, and police arrested Terrence Lavaron Thomas shortly after. Police say Thomas was incoherent when they arrested him.

Syria ready for Aleppo ceasefire: UN

AFP, Beirut
The UN's Syria envoy said Damascus is willing to facilitate a humanitarian ceasefire by halting fire on Aleppo, where regime troops are engaged in a new offensive to encircle embattled rebels. The comments by Staffan De Mistura on Tuesday, came as regime forces severed the main rebel supply line into Aleppo in fighting that killed more than 150 people.

Kurds repulse ISIS attack in Iraq

AFP, Arbil
Kurdish peshmerga forces have repulsed a major attack by the Islamic State jihadist group southwest of Iraqi Kurdistan's capital Arbil, officials said yesterday. "The attack which was launched at 8:00 pm (1700 GMT on Tuesday) was foiled. It lasted four hours and we killed 34 ISIS members," Sirwan Barzani, the local peshmerga commander, told AFP.

US to allow export of armed drones

AFP, Washington
The United States said Tuesday that it will allow for the first time the widespread export of armed drones to some allied countries as part of its global counterterrorism fight. Armed drones are a cornerstone of Washington's battle against extremists around the globe. The statement, however, did not say which countries would be customers.

Pak Terror Boat: Did India fake it?

AFP, New Delhi
India yesterday was forced to deny it deliberately blew up a Pakistani fishing boat after video was released showing a coast guard official apparently boasting about ordering the vessel's destruction. The official's apparent claim has reignited controversy about the December 31 incident, which killed four Pakistani men and led to a flare-up in tensions between the two neighbours. India has always maintained that the crew from near Karachi blew up their own boat while trying to escape from the navy -- a claim Pakistan rejects.



An injured Myanmar Red Cross volunteer lies on ground after vehicles of a rescue convoy were attacked by Kokang rebels near the self-administered Kokang capital Laukkai, northern Shan State, Myanmar, yesterday. Inset, A woman cries at a temporary refugee camp at a monastery in Lashio. PHOTO: AFP

Tens of thousands flee Myanmar war zone

AFP, Lashio
Nearly 90,000 civilians in northeastern Myanmar are believed to have fled clashes between troops and ethnic rebels, an official said Wednesday, as sporadic violence hampered efforts to evacuate those still trapped. Rebels fear the national army is planning a major assault following the imposition of a state of emergency in the Kokang region of Shan state on Tuesday. Whole towns and villages lie empty in the rugged, remote area as tens of thousands of residents have fled their homes -- some on foot. At least 30,000 people, mainly the ethnic Chinese Kokang, have crossed the border into China's Yunnan province, sparking alarm in Beijing. Clashes continued yesterday as more civilians arrived in the Shan town of Lashio, fearing they could be caught up in the sudden upsurge of violence. In one of at least two separate attacks on civilians Tuesday, around 100 people came under fire as they travelled in Myanmar Red Cross trucks in a desperate dash from their homes. "It was a miracle we weren't hit," Maung Ying told AFP in Lashio after the attack on aid vehicles, which were marked with Red Cross flags but had no

military protection. "They were shooting from the mountains on both sides of the road. I thought I was going to die, bullets were passing just over our heads," he said, adding the ordeal lasted for an hour. The convoy had passed through Laukkai, the epicentre of fierce fighting since rebels launched attacks last week. Tun Tun Oo, head of the Lashio Red Cross, which is separate from the better known International Committee of the Red Cross, said it was now too dangerous to go into Laukkai. Both the army and rebels have blamed each other for the attack. The violence, which flared on February 9, has killed dozens of soldiers and rebels. There is no official civilian death toll. China says it has stepped up border controls and called on all parties to prevent a further escalation of fighting. It is the first major unrest in the region since 2009, when a huge assault by the army drove out rebel fighters, sending tens of thousands into China.

Nepal changes Everest climbing route

BBC ONLINE
The route used by mountaineers to scale Mount Everest is to be changed amid fears of an increased avalanche risk. Nepal will change the path next month after a deadly collapse in 2014 killed 16 Sherpa guides - the worst single loss of life in expedition history. The current route up the mountain has been in use since the 1990s. Mountaineers will now take a more central route after Base Camp, avoiding the left side of the Khumbu Icefall, where last year's accident occurred. The fatal avalanche last year triggered a boycott by Sherpa climbers who demanded better wages and conditions. Their protest at Base Camp led to the cancellation of all expeditions to Everest. The central route up the mountain immediately after Base Camp is not



actually new. It was the path used by mountaineers more than two decades ago. But in the 1990s, the route was changed to run up what is known as the "west shoulder" because it was shorter and easier to climb, even for inexperienced mountaineers. Some 250 people in total have died trying to climb Mount Everest since it was first scaled in 1953.

Afghan civilian casualties on rise

BBC ONLINE
The number of civilian deaths and injuries in Afghanistan rose by 22% in 2014, the United Nations says. A total of 3,699 Afghans killed and 6,849 injured made 2014 the deadliest year since the UN began keeping records in 2009. For the first time more people were killed in battles between the Taliban and government forces than by roadside bombs, the figures show. Fighting between government forces and the Taliban accounted for just over a third of civilian casualties, while roadside bombs were responsible for 28% of civilian deaths and injuries, UN Special Representative Nicholas Haysom said, presenting the latest figures in Kabul. Suicide attacks accounted for 15% and assassinations by the Taliban for 11% of civilian casualties, according to the UN figures.

Libya a ticking time bomb

Warns Italy as ISIS plans to use migrant boats to cause terror in Europe
AGENCIES
Italy on Wednesday issued its strongest warning yet about the danger of the Islamic State group establishing a stronghold in Libya from where it could attack Europe and destabilise neighbouring states. Addressing parliament, Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni also outlined Italy's readiness to play a leading role in de-arming and rebuilding its former colony in the event of a UN-brokered cease-fire in a conflict that has plagued Libya since the 2011 Western-backed overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi. Gentiloni said there was a serious danger of ISIS fighters forging an alliance with local militias or criminal gangs currently engaged in a multi-sided battle for control of Libya. The country has no functioning government and is headed for bankruptcy because of a collapse in its oil production as a result of the fighting. Italy sees the chaos as driving the accelerating flux of African migrants trying to reach its shores from Libya. Gentiloni stressed that Italy was not considering military action along the lines of the airstrikes Egypt has carried out this week in retaliation for IS's beheading of 21 Egyptian Christians in Libya. Propaganda released by ISIS has detailed plans to use Libya as a base to cause "pandemonium" in Europe by hijacking immigrant boats crossing the Mediterranean. An online essay written by a prominent Isis supporter claiming to be in Libya called the country the "strategic gateway for the Islamic State" and announced the "blessed expansion" of its so-called caliphate into North Africa. The essay claimed that the huge weapons stockpiles left by vying powers in Libya's civil war as well as years of military backing by Britain, the US and others could be exploited, along with its huge tracks of desert and mountain ranges that would be difficult for foreign intelligence to survey. Charlie Winter, the Quilliam researcher who wrote the report, emphasised that the essay must be treated as "unofficial propaganda" and could not be taken as fact, although it provided an insight into ISIS' thinking. A spike in the number of migrants fleeing the chaos in Libya has already been seen in recent months, with Italy recording at least 2,490 people landing on its shores since Sunday. Italy's security services fear that the jihadists could take over the trafficking, the Times reported, as a source of revenue as well as to spread terror. ISIS plans to use immigrant boats from Libya to cause terror in Europe and close shipping routes.

Ukraine truce 'not dead'

Insists France after heavy fighting forces govt troops to withdraw from flashpoint town
AFP, Artemusk
France yesterday insisted the truce it helped broker last week in the Belarus capital Minsk "was not dead" after Ukrainian troops pulled out of the flashpoint eastern town of Debaltseve after it was stormed by pro-Russian rebels. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said 80 percent of the thousands of soldiers in the town -- a strategic railway hub sandwiched between the two main rebel-held cities of Donetsk and Lugansk -- had withdrawn. AFP journalists near the town but prevented from entering saw dozens of army tanks and vehicles carrying haggard soldiers leaving Debaltseve. The rebels' assault on Debaltseve dealt a heavy blow to the European-brokered truce agreed by all sides last week in a bid to quell a 10-

month conflict that has killed more than 5,600 people. A French government spokesman noted "progress" along much of the rest of the conflict zone and said all would be done to hold the ceasefire together. French President Francois Hollande, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Poroshenko were to speak by telephone yesterday. Western countries blame the relentless violence in Ukraine on Russia. They say Moscow is cynically playing with the truce -- which won unanimous backing from the UN Security Council on Tuesday -- to keep Ukraine destabilised. "The actions by the Russia-backed separatists in Debaltseve are a clear violation of the ceasefire," EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini said in a statement.



Obama vows to fight ruling

IMMIGRATION REFORM
AFP, Washington
US President Barack Obama claimed history and the law were on his side Tuesday, as he vowed to fight a court order freezing controversial immigration reforms. Obama had used an executive order to bypass a hostile Congress and drive through measures to protect about four million undocumented foreigners from deportation. But a judge in Texas issued an emergency injunction before the measures were to come into effect starting yesterday. Obama was defiant: "I think that the law is on our side and history is on our side, we are going to appeal it." "This is not the first time a lower court judge has blocked something or attempted to block something that ultimately was shown to be lawful." Twenty-six states -- all but two Republican-governed -- had pressed the Texas judge to intervene, claiming Obama had acted unlawfully. Immigration is a hot political issue heading towards the 2016 presidential election, around 11 million undocumented migrants in the country. Obama's executive order would have allowed only some of them to come forward: those who have not committed serious crimes and have children who are American citizens or residents.

Modi to shed India's top defence importer status

AFP, Bangalore
Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday vowed to end India's status as the world's number one defence importer, saying he wanted 70 percent of hardware to be manufactured domestically by the turn of the decade. Speaking at the start of a major aviation industry conference, Modi told hundreds of foreign and local businessmen that his government would favour domestic firms when awarding defence contracts as part of a larger push to boost India's manufacturing sector. "We have the reputation as the largest importer of defence equipment in the world," the prime minister said at the biennial Aero India show in the southern city of Bangalore. "That may be music to the ears of some of you here. But this is one area where we would not like to be number one," he added. "We are reforming our defence procurement policies and there will be a clear preference for the equipment manufactured in India." India, which has long been the world's largest buyer of defence equipment, is in the midst of a multi-billion-dollar upgrade of its ageing military hardware and recently lifted a cap on foreign investment in defence.

While his right-wing government has pledged to push forward with planned military purchases, which stalled under the previous centre-left Congress administration, Modi is determined that does not come at the expense of the domestic defence industry. Modi also said he wanted global firms to invest in India, for example by transferring some technology to local firms, as part of negotiating their lucrative deals to sell hardware. The five-day show, which is held at an air base on the city's northern outskirts, attracts the bosses of hundreds of aviation and defence firms.



Indian bride swaps groom mid-ceremony

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
An Indian bride has reportedly swapped her groom for a wedding guest mid-ceremony after her fiancé had an epileptic seizure. Jugal Kishore, 25, reportedly fell to the ground during the traditional exchange of "varamala" flower garlands in the northern town of Rampur. His illness was a shock to his wife-to-be, 23-year-old Indira, who was apparently furious that she and her family had not been told of Kishore's epilepsy. Instead of calling the wedding off, she quickly chose wedding guest Harpal Singh, her sister's brother-in-law, to replace him. Casually dressed in jeans and a leather jacket, he accepted, the Times of India reported. After the swap, the wedding ceremony continued as planned until Kishore returned from hospital. Shocked at returning to his own wedding to find his fiancée celebrating her marriage to someone else, he and his relatives reportedly pleaded with Indira to reverse her decision. When diplomacy failed, the family allegedly resorted to violence and entered into a brawl involving plates and cutlery. Kishore's family later filed a complaint at the local Milak police station but withdrew it after older relatives intervened.

