

More Saudi measures urged to combat MERS

AFP, Riyadh

An international health mission said yesterday more measures are needed to combat the spread of MERS in Saudi Arabia, the country worst hit by the coronavirus. The mission headed to the desert kingdom after a surge of cases in the past weeks, including 50 reported this month alone as well as infections acquired in health facilities. A total of 899 people have been infected in the kingdom, of whom 382 have died, since the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) was identified globally in 2012.

France deploys aircraft carrier for ISIS fight

AFP, Aboard The Charles De Gaulle

A French aircraft carrier launched operations in the Gulf yesterday as Paris stepped up its participation in the US-led military campaign against the Islamic State group. Seven weeks after extremist attacks killed 17 people in Paris, Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian vowed France would face the jihadist threat head-on.

Egypt jails activist-blogger for five years

BBC ONLINE

An Egyptian court has jailed prominent blogger and pro-democracy activist Alaa Abdel Fattah for five years at his retrial for violating a protest law. He was previously given a 15-year jail term in the case over his alleged role in a protest in 2013. Alaa Abdel Fattah gained fame during the 2011 uprising as a campaigner against military trials for civilians.

N Korea bans foreigners from marathon

BBC ONLINE

North Korean authorities have banned foreigners from participating in the annual Pyongyang marathon because of concerns over the spread of the Ebola virus, travel agencies say. In October, the country began enforcing strict travel restrictions on incoming tourists including a 21-day quarantine. The marathon, one of the year's most popular events for tourists, takes place on 12 April.

Jerusalem mayor overpowers attacker

BBC ONLINE

The mayor of Jerusalem had wrestled to the ground a Palestinian suspected of stabbing an ultra-Orthodox Jewish man in a scene caught by a security camera. Nir Barkat says he ordered his car to stop when he spotted the attack near City Hall in the city centre on Sunday. Footage shows the mayor striding towards the suspect before bringing him down as one of his guards points.

Turkish forces evacuate Syria tomb

CNN Online

About 40 Turkish soldiers watching over the Tomb of Suleyman Shah in northern Syria have been evacuated amid the continuing security crisis, Turkish officials said. "The ongoing conflict and state of chaos in Syria posed serious risks to safety and security of the tomb, the Turkish Foreign Ministry said in a statement. One soldier was killed in an accident, a Turkish government official said. No other details were released.

Egypt postpones trial of Brotherhood head

AFP, Cairo

An Egyptian military court has postponed to March 9 the trial of the Muslim Brotherhood leader and 198 other Islamists over deadly clashes after president Mohamed Morsi's ouster, an army official said yesterday. Mohamed Badie, 71, facing his first military trial, and the other defendants are accused of participating in clashes that killed 31 people in the canal city of Suez between August 14 and 16, 2013.



Russia's Other Russia party supporters take part in a rally in support to the Novorossia (self-proclaimed People's Republic of Donetsk and self-proclaimed People's Republic of Lugansk) in St. Petersburg yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Pro-Russia rebels violate truce

AFP, Kiev

Pro-Russian forces massing near Ukraine's port city of Mariupol are continuing to attack government troop positions, Kiev said yesterday, fuelling concerns for the fate of an internationally brokered ceasefire.

Tensions were also high following a bomb blast Sunday in the normally peaceful eastern city of Kharkiv. In their latest toll, authorities said that three people had died in the "terrorist" attack.

The West has warned of additional sanctions on Russia if the shaky truce should deteriorate further, especially after rebels last week took the strategic town of Debaltsevo in defiance of the ceasefire meant to start February 15.

A withdrawal of heavy weapons from the frontline -- a key step of the truce -- has still not gone ahead despite both sides on Sunday agreeing to start the process.

"As Ukrainian positions are still being fired upon there can be no talk yet of a withdrawal of arms," military spokesman Vladyslav Selenzynov wrote in a statement on Facebook yesterday.

The rebels, meanwhile, have sent mixed messages, alternately saying that they have pulled back some weapons or that they will start today.

A Ukrainian military commander, Colonel Valentyn Fedichev, said yesterday that, while generally across the conflict zone "the intensity of the number of attacks has decreased", troop positions were still fired on 27 times since Sunday. Two Ukrainian soldiers were killed and 10 wounded, he said.

Insurgent fighters "have not halted attempts to assault our positions in the town of Shyrokyne and the Mariupol area," Fedichev said.

UKRAINE CRISIS

Egypt backs 'unified Arab force'

Shuts embassy in Yemen over 'bad' security

AGENCIES

As threats in the Middle East grow, there's a pressing need in the region, Egypt's President said Sunday.

"The need for a unified Arab force is growing and becoming more pressing every day," President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said in a televised address, noting that Jordan and the United Arab Emirates have offered to send troops as Egypt steps up its efforts to battle ISIS in neighboring Libya.

"The challenges in the region, and facing our countries, are huge challenges, and ... we can overcome those challenges once we are together," Sisi said.

Sisi's comment comes after a series of Egyptian airstrikes targeting ISIS in Libya in retaliation for the slaughter of 21 Egyptian Christians by the jihadist

group.

On Sunday, he said the Egyptian army isn't an aggressor angling to invade foreign territory.

"Your armed forces only protect the people of Egypt, and we coordinate with our Arab brothers," al-Sisi said.

Meanwhile, Egypt shut its embassy in Sanaa and recalled all its staff yesterday due to deteriorating security, state media said, joining a diplomatic exodus since Shiite militia seized the Yemeni capital.

Long on the front line of the US war against Al-Qaeda, Yemen has descended into chaos since the Shiite Huthi militia swept into Sanaa from their mountainous northern stronghold last year.

"The Egyptian diplomatic mission in Sanaa headed by Ambassador Youssef al-Sharqawi returned to Cairo

yesterday due to the bad security situation in Yemen," the official MENA news agency reported.

"The Egyptian embassy in Sanaa was closed after the departure of the mission," it added.

The Huthis overran Sanaa in September and installed a "presidential council" last month in a move widely condemned as a "coup".

Since then, Saudi Arabia, the United States, France, Germany, Italy, Britain, the Netherlands, the United Arab Emirates, Spain, Japan and Turkey have all shuttered their embassies in Sanaa.

A day after escaping house arrest in the Huthi-controlled capital, President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi on Sunday labelled the militia takeover as a "coup" and declared all their measures "null and illegitimate".

LAND ORDINANCE

Hazare slams 'anti-farmer' bill

PTI, New Delhi

Accusing the Modi government of antipathy towards farmers, Social activist Anna Hazare yesterday launched a two-day agitation against the controversial land acquisition ordinance here, coinciding with the commencement of the Budget session of Parliament.

77-year-old Hazare and Narmada Bachao movement activist Medha Patkar were joined by hundreds of supporters at Jantar Mantar and the activist said he will take the movement against the ordinance to each and every district of the country.

Hazare said he will not allow AAP or Congress to share stage with him at the protest venue and the two parties can join it as part of common people.

"How can you take away land without farmer's consent.

India is an agricultural country. The government must think about the farmers. The land ordinance is undemocratic," Hazare said.

"The government cannot be indifferent to the farmers' interest. This is government of people of India and not of England or America. It is the people who have made the government," he added.

Terming it as a very serious issue, Hazare said he will take the agitation across the

country and will come back to the Ramliha grounds soon if the government does not heed farmers' demand.

"People in the villages are still not aware of this (amendments). Now, we will make people of every state and district aware of the provisions (of the ordinance). It is important to reach out to every district," he said.

Hazare has been highly critical of the Modi government for making certain changes in the Land Acquisition Act through an ordinance.

On December 29 last year, the government had recommended promulgation of an ordinance making significant changes in the Land Acquisition Act including removal of consent clause for acquiring land for five areas of industrial corridors, PPP projects, rural infrastructure, affordable housing and defence.

When asked whether AAP and Congress can join the agitation, Hazare said, "They will be not be allowed to share the stage because if I allow, then it will become a party event. They are free to join the crowd. No one can stop them."

Asked whether he will miss his one-time proteges Arvind Kejriwal and Kiran Bedi in the protest, he said, "Why will we miss them? We don't have any personal motive or interest. If there is a personal motive or interest, then they will be missed. These are people's issues."



Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan (L) greets Congolese President Denis Sassou-Nguesso upon his arrival at Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport in Abuja, yesterday. President Jonathan was holding talks yesterday with Congolese President Sassou-Nguesso and his Equatorial Guinea counterpart on the ongoing fight against Boko Haram islamists and the collaboration between ECOWAS and the Economic Community of Central African States. The re-election campaign in Nigeria, initially scheduled for February 14, has been delayed for six weeks to give Nigeria's military time to secure the country.

PHOTO: AFP

ISIS JOINING GIRLS

Police scramble to find teens

CNN ONLINE

Six days ago, the trio of British girls ran away from home and flew from London to Istanbul. It's unclear where 15-year-olds Amira Abase, Shamima Begum and 16-year-old Kadiza Sultana are.

But authorities worry their next stop will be Syria. "This is an ongoing, live counterterrorism operation, and we're concerned about these three girls," London Metropolitan Police Cmdr. Richard Walton said.

"There's a good possibility, a strong possibility, that we can stop them going into Syria. And our main objective here is to make contact with these three young girls, for them to make contact with us, preferably."

The notion that three girls from London could succumb to the lure of ISIS highlights the terror group's aptitude for recruiting young foreigners.

British Prime Minister David Cameron said the case illustrates the need to fight ISIS on multiple levels.

"It does make a broader point which is the fight against Islamist terror is not just one that we can wage by the police and border control," Cameron said Saturday.

British police say they are concerned about the number of young women and girls who are either hoping to or who already have joined ISIS. While they wouldn't divulge numbers, they say it's a growing trend.

British police say once they're in Syria with ISIS, it's unlikely they will ever be allowed to leave.



Rahul Gandhi takes a sabbatical

PTI, New Delhi

Congress vice president Rahul Gandhi has gone on a sabbatical "for a few weeks" to reflect upon recent events and the future of the party that was completely wiped out in the Delhi Assembly elections capping a string of losses.

Rahul has been "granted leave of absence for a few weeks after which he will return and resume his active participation in the affairs of the Congress party", party sources said.

They said he has "requested Congress president Sonia Gandhi for some time to reflect on recent events and future course of the party".

He believes that the direction that the party adopts at the upcoming AICC session will be of crucial importance for its future and he wishes to prepare for it, the sources said.

Congress has been performing badly at the hustings, which started with the Lok Sabha elections last year and continued in the Assembly elections in various states including Delhi recently.

The debacle in Delhi, where Congress failed to get even one seat in the 70-member House, was more stunning as the party had ruled the state for 15 years till December 2013.

The AICC session is expected in early April and media reports have suggested that Rahul could be made the party chief on that occasion.

IRAN NUKE TALKS

Kerry, Zarif work to close gaps

AFP, Geneva

Washington and Tehran's top diplomats sat down again yesterday for talks on Iran's nuclear programme as they struggled to narrow gaps ahead of a key deadline.

US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif were meeting at a luxury Geneva hotel for a third session in talks that began Sunday.

The talks are the latest in a string of meetings between the two men in a bid to forge a long-elusive nuclear deal.

World powers are trying to strike an accord with Iran that would prevent Tehran from developing a nuclear bomb in return for an easing of punishing international economic sanctions.

Iran denies its nuclear programme has any military objectives.

Tortuous negotiations over the controversy have poisoned relations between Iran and the West for years. However, there is now a heightened sense of urgency as the clock ticks down towards a March 31 deadline to agree on a political framework for the deal.

A senior State Department official said "a full schedule of meetings" was planned Monday with the participation of all the main negotiators and experts, touching on "virtually every topic".

"These meetings are steps in a long and tough process," the official said.

EBOLA CRISIS

Liberia reopens borders, lifts curfew

CNN ONLINE

Liberia reopened its land border crossings shut down during the Ebola outbreak, a positive sign in a nation that was the epicenter of the deadly virus.

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf also lifted a nationwide curfew imposed in August to help combat the virus. Her orders, which went into effect Sunday, come the same week schools reopened after a five-month hiatus.

The virus has killed about 9,365 people mostly in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia, according to the World Health Organization.

About 3,900 of the deaths have been in Liberia, which was so badly affected, it declared a shortage of body bags last year.

Turkish men in skirts support women's rights

CNN ONLINE

It's not unusual for men to join the fight for women's rights. But it is if they choose to wear miniskirts while they do it.

The brutal murder of a Turkish woman, Ozgecan Aslan, 20, who allegedly fought off a sexual assault before her body was burned and dumped in a riverbed, has sparked protests on the street and social media.

The Twitter hashtag #OzgecanAslan prompted thousands of tweets, with many women posting photos of themselves clad in black. And in recent days, #ozgecaninminietekgi, translated as "wear a miniskirt for Ozgecan," has begun circulating, often accompanied with a photo of a man wearing a short skirt.

Prominent lawyer and activist Hulya Gulbahar said the skirt protest is "very effective" and the first time women's rights have been so widely endorsed in Turkey.

"The women's movement is trying to tell society, 'My dress is not an excuse for your rape or sexual harassment.' But society

didn't want to hear these voices.

"People try to find excuses for rapes and killings. But they didn't find any in this case,



because Aslan was very innocent, purely innocent. The protest shows that a short skirt is not an excuse for rape."

In December last year, UN Women signed an agreement along with Turkish conglomerate Koc Holding's CEO, Turgay Durak, to strengthen women's economic and social empowerment in the country. And in 2011, Turkey was among 14 countries to ratify a European Treaty.