

Top China diplomat backs Putin

China has voiced its support for Russia's handling of the Ukraine crisis, with prominent diplomat Qu Xing calling on the West to "abandon its zero-sum mentality". According to state news agency Xinhua, the Chinese ambassador to Belgium said the West should take "the real security concerns of Russia into consideration". Qu said the "nature and root cause" of the crisis was the "game" between Russia and western powers the United States and EU, and that a change of approach is required to resolve it. After nearly a year of relative silence on the subject, China's intervention is striking, not least because it comes just as harsher sanctions against Moscow are being discussed. Putin, who has spent years fostering Russia-China relations, will be pleased to have received public backing; the US will likely take seriously China's stance. Qu was also critical of Washington's ties to Kiev, expressing concerns that the region could "become a distraction in its foreign policy". He said: "The United States is unwilling to see its presence in any part of the world being weakened, but the fact is its resources are limited, and it will be to some extent hard work to sustain its influence in external affairs."



People gather yesterday at the spot, where Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, inset, was shot dead, near Saint-Basil's Cathedral, in the center of Moscow. Nemtsov, a fierce critic of President Vladimir Putin, was gunned down while walking in sight of the Kremlin late Friday, prompting an international chorus of condemnation.



PHOTO: AFP



US Congress averts security shutdown

Feuding US lawmakers narrowly avoided a Department of Homeland Security shutdown Friday at the 11th hour, but funded the agency only until March 6, forcing Congress to revisit the issue next week. House and Senate members scrambled to prevent the premier agency securing the United States against terror threats from running out of money at midnight, as DHS became a battleground for lawmakers clashing over President Barack Obama's controversial immigration reforms. The president signed the temporary measure into law shortly before midnight, despite his preference for full DHS funding through the end of the fiscal year on September 30.

Isolated clashes hamper shaky Ukraine truce

Ukraine yesterday said that isolated clashes were punctuating a shaky truce with pro-Russian rebels after international monitors warned that the conflict in the country stands at a "crossroads". Kiev military spokesman Andriy Lysenko said that fighting had halted along most of the frontline but rebels were attacking government positions around Donetsk airport, one of the most fiercely contested locations in the conflict. No soldiers were reported killed over the past 24 hours, after Kiev said Friday that three servicemen had died after several days without a fatality. The two warring sides both said that they were continuing the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the front -- a key next step in a stuttering European-brokered peace plan to end fighting that has cost at least 5,800 lives since April. But while monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have reported weapons movements on most sides they say it is too early to confirm a full pull-back. As the fragile peace deal seemed to gain traction, the OSCE's envoy to Ukraine told the UN Security Council on Friday that while there were encouraging signs, the country still risked all-out war.

"We seem to be at the crossroads, where we are facing the risk of a further escalation of the conflict or where common sense, responsibility, and humanity shall prevail and we may be able to walk on the road to peace," envoy Heidi Tagliavini told the 15-member council. The Security Council's meeting on the conflict came a year to the day after Russian and pro-Moscow forces began occupying strategic sites on the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea. Russia formally annexed the territory in March 2014, triggering an international furore. The uprising in Ukraine's east began the following month. The UN said Friday there was a crisis in rebel-held areas, where people were living in "extraordinarily difficult circumstances". The UN estimates 4.7 million people in or near the combat zones need help while another 300,000 people have fled to other parts of the country and a million abroad. Kiev accuses Russia of continuing to pile in weapons and men to bolster the rebels and Poroshenko warned that even if the peace held, Russia would continue to threaten Ukraine. "Even if there is a lengthy truce that leads to a political solution and long-term peace, the military threat from the east will unfortunately remain."

Egypt court lists Hamas as 'terrorist' group

Brotherhood chief handed fourth life sentence. An Egyptian court yesterday branded the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas a "terrorist" organisation, a judicial source said, after it was alleged to have links with jihadists behind deadly Sinai attacks. From Gaza City, Hamas reacted by condemning what it called "a great disgrace which soils the reputation of Egypt". Since Egypt's military ousted Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013, the authorities have accused Hamas of aiding jihadists who have waged a string of deadly attacks on security forces in the Sinai Peninsula. Egypt blames Hamas, which is close to Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood, of supporting the blacklisted Egyptian movement. An Egyptian court on January 31 banned the armed wing of Hamas, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, declaring it a "terrorist" group. In March last year, Egypt banned Hamas from carrying out any activities on its soil and froze the assets of the Islamist movement which controls the neighbouring Gaza Strip. The ruling comes just days after Egypt adopted a new anti-terrorism law allowing the authorities to close the premises of any declared "terrorist" organisation, and to freeze its assets as well as those of its members. Meanwhile, another Egyptian court yesterday sentenced to life imprisonment the head of the banned Muslim Brotherhood over the killing of protesters who stormed the group's Cairo headquarters in 2013. Three co-defendants of Mohamed Badie -- the Islamist movement's spiritual leader who already faces three other life terms from other cases -- were sentenced to death in the same trial. Fourteen others, including Badie's deputies Khairat al-Shater and Saad al-Katni, were handed life terms.

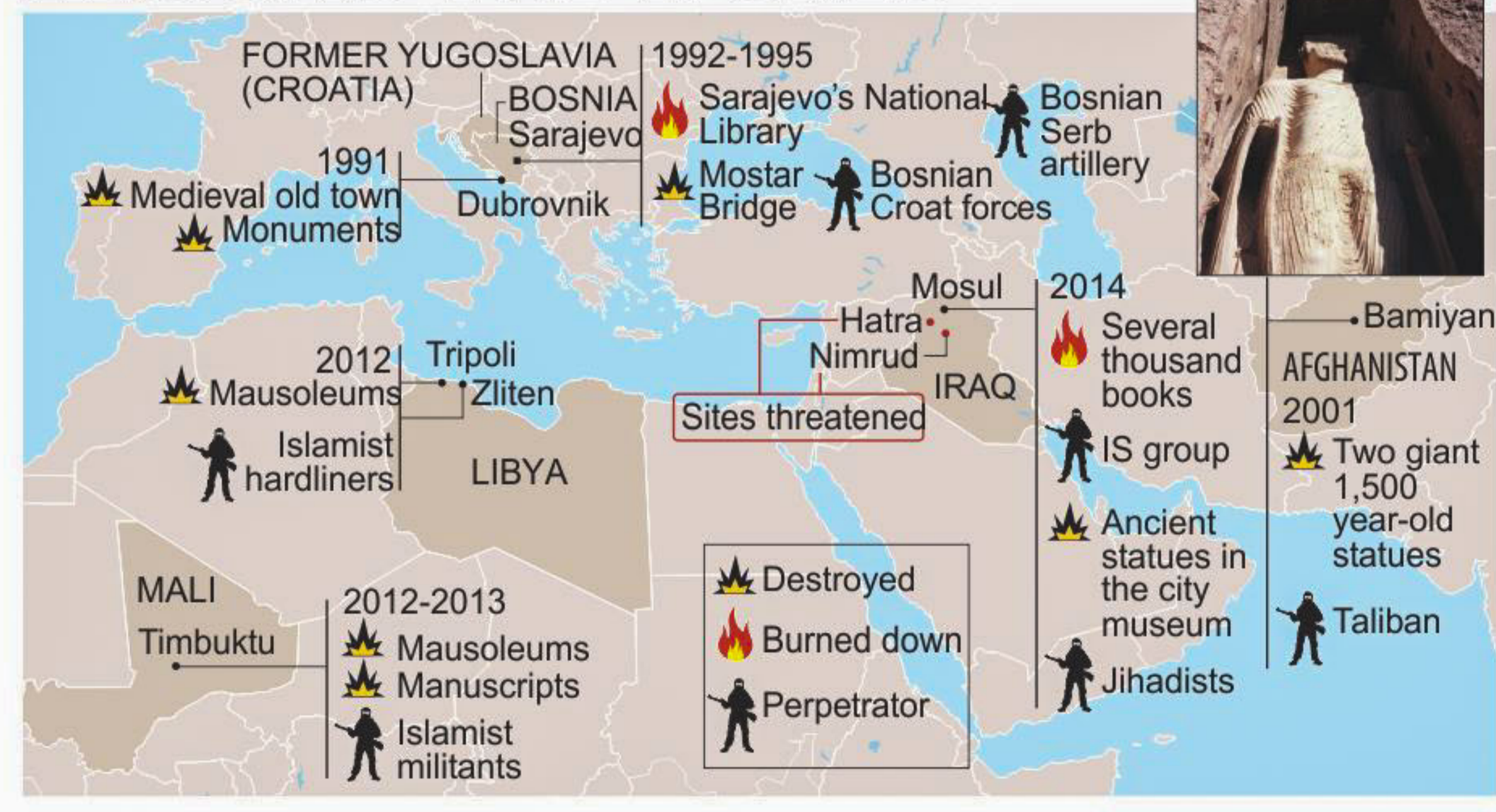


When Conan Doyle became Sherlock Holmes

A never-seen-before archive of evidence compiled by Sherlock Holmes author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle when he turned sleuth to solve a real-life mystery has emerged for sale for £40,000. Conan Doyle followed in the footsteps of his most famous creation Dr Holmes when in 1906 he began investigating the peculiar case of George Edalji.

Edalji, a solicitor from Birmingham, is handed seven years' hard labour in 1903 after being found guilty of a series of mutilation attacks on horses around the rural village of Great Wyrley, Staffs, where his father was the vicar. Conan Doyle became convinced that Edalji was innocent after meeting in him in a hotel lobby in 1906 on his release from prison. Noticing how bad Edalji's eyesight was, he concluded it would have been impossible for someone with such poor vision to carry out the crimes at night. In a style akin to his most famous character, Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle set about logically compiling reams of evidence in a bid to disprove Edalji's guilt and see him pardoned. In May 1907 as direct result of Conan Doyle's work an inquiry into the case was opened and concluded with Edalji being officially pardoned.

HERITAGE SITES DESTROYED AROUND THE WORLD



SYRIA WAR Dozens killed as Qaeda takes rebel base

Al-Qaeda's Syria affiliate yesterday drove US-backed rebels out of a strategic northern military base in fierce fighting that left dozens dead, a monitor said. At least 29 fighters from the Western-armed Hazm movement were killed along with six Al-Nusra Front jihadists, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. It said fierce fighting had broken out on Friday night for Base 46, west of the city of Aleppo. "Al-Nusra captured Base 46," said Rami Abdel Rahman, director of the Britain-based Observatory. Base 46 is a sprawling military compound that rebel fighters seized in November 2012 from troops loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In a statement, residents in the nearby rebel-held village of Atareb criticised the attack on the base and appealed to Al-Nusra to instead fight the "infidel regime and its allies". The offensive came a month after Al-Nusra -- al-Qaeda's official affiliate in Syria -- expelled Hazm from Regiment 111, another base they had taken from Assad's forces. Hazm is mainly present in northern Syria. Last year, it was the first to receive US-made anti-tank missiles from its Western backers. It is one of a number rebel groups that the United States classifies as "moderate". They are loosely branded as the Free Syrian Army. Syria's conflict began in March 2011 as a popular revolt seeking democratic change, but later evolved into civil war after Assad's regime launched a brutal crackdown on dissent.

ISLAMIST RADICALIZATION THREAT In Algeria, women 'imams' battle evil

Hundreds of female religious guides have been at the forefront of Algeria's battle against Islamic radicalisation since the civil war that devastated the North African country in the 1990s. Their aim is to steer women away from false preachers promoting radical forms of Islam. The surge of the Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq, and even in Libya next door, as well as the growing influence of al-Qaeda-linked militants and Salafists, has them working around the clock. Known as "mourshidates," their goal is to spread the good word of Islam and a message of tolerance, helping those who have strayed from it. "Killing is a capital sin, so how is it that people can kill innocent ones in the name of Islam," asks Fatma Zohra, who is in her mid-40s, her hair and neck concealed under a matching purple veil and a hijab. Like the other 300 mourshidates appointed by the religious affairs ministry, Zohra holds a degree in Islam and has learned the Quran by heart. For the past 17 years she has been "listening to women, advising them and referring them to specialists" when their problems are not directly linked to religion. The mourshidates use skills borrowed from psy-



chology and sociology, working in mosques, prisons, youth centres, hospitals and schools. Unlike imams, who are men, they are not allowed to lead prayers. When the first mourshida was licensed in 1993 to teach and guide women, only housewives showed up, but the audience has grown over the years to include university students and professionals. Samia, another mourshida who decline to give her surname, says she has been working for the past 15 years in a region of Algeria where youths, both boys and girls, have been increasingly radicalised. "Pseudo-imams, who know nothing about the teachings of the Koran," are trying to indoctrinate people through television programmes and the Internet, she said. Like Samia, many mourshidates say they are proud to have contributed to help youths from falling into the grips of radical Islamists. "It is the biggest reward of our work," one of them said.

Mugabe turns 91 with million-dollar birthday bash

Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe yesterday celebrated his 91st birthday with a lavish bash attended by thousands of ruling party faithful. Crowds of supporters clad in ZANU-PF party regalia emblazoned with the president's image sang and danced as he arrived for the party being held at a luxury hotel in the famed Victoria Falls resort. Assisted by his wife Grace the frail Zimbabwean leader, who was surrounded by family members, threw 91 balloons into the air. Elephants were slaughtered for the feast, which was held on the hotel's golf course. Seven huge cakes were on display in one of the tents. One giant 91-kilo creation depicted the Victoria Falls. Critics lampooned the scale of the festivities, calling them "obscene" in a country where millions live in poverty. Mugabe, who has ruled Zimbabwe since independence from Britain in 1980, is the world's oldest leader.

US may reopen embassy in Cuba soon

The United States and Cuba said they made progress Friday in talks on restoring diplomatic ties and Washington could reopen its Havana embassy before a key April summit if differences are overcome. After a second round of historic meetings, negotiators from both countries appeared optimistic about the road ahead, but cautioned there were still outstanding issues to resolve in order to restore diplomatic ties frozen for half a century. Friday's talks were only the second between the Cold War foes since President Barack Obama and Cuba's President Raul Castro surprised the world in December with their decision to restore ties. Obama is due to attend the Summit of the Americas in Panama on April 10-11, which Cuba will also be at for the first time.

'Prepare for war' N Korean leader tells army

North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un has urged his army to prepare for war with the United States and its allies, state media said yesterday, as Pyongyang ramps up the rhetoric ahead of US-South Korea military drills. Kim's comments came after South Korea and the United States Friday conducted a joint naval drill involving 10 South Korean warships and a US Aegis destroyer, ahead of the launch of large-scale military exercises that have enraged the North. "The prevailing situation where a great war for national reunification is at hand requires all the KPA (Korean People's Army) units to become (elite) Guard Units fully prepared for war politically and ideologically, in military technique and materially", he was quoted by the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) as saying. North Korea regularly ratchets up hostile rhetoric at times of joint US-South Korea military exercises that spark a sharp surge in tensions on the divided peninsula.