

NEWS IN brief

Afghan avalanches death toll hits 196

CNN ONLINE

For almost a week, avalanches caused by heavy snowstorms have killed 196 people in the mountainous province of Panjshir, Afghanistan, officials said yesterday. Ten new avalanches were reported early yesterday morning, without any casualties. Over the weekend, a total of 40 avalanches hit the area, said Bab Jan Hakimi, head of disaster response at the Afghan Red Crescent Society.

Pak parents refusing polio vaccine arrested

AFP, Peshawar

Police in northwest Pakistan have arrested more than 450 parents for refusing to vaccinate their children against polio, officials said yesterday. Riaz Khan Mehsud, deputy commissioner of Peshawar told AFP that 471 parents were detained and sent to jail for refusing the vaccine.

Namibia president gets Mo Ibrahim prize

BBC ONLINE

The outgoing Namibian President Hifikepunye Pohamba has won the world's most valuable individual award, the Mo Ibrahim prize for African leadership. The \$5m award is given each year to an elected leader who governed well, raised living standards and then left office. But the previous award was the fourth in five years to have gone unclaimed.

N Korea fires missiles as US-S Korea drills begin

BBC ONLINE

North Korea fired two short-range missiles into the sea as annual US-South Korea military exercises got under way, officials in Seoul say. The two missiles, with a range of 490km, were fired from the western city of Nampo into the sea east of the Korean peninsula, the South Korean military said.

Saudi diplomat held by Qaeda in Yemen freed

AFP, Riyadh

A Saudi diplomat, kidnapped in Yemen almost three years ago and handed to Al-Qaeda, has been freed and returned to the kingdom, the interior ministry said yesterday. Abdullah al-Khalidi, deputy consul in the southern port city of Aden, who was kidnapped on March 28, 2012, was freed following "intense efforts" by the Saudi intelligence services, a ministry statement carried by the official SPA news agency said without elaborating.

Uruguay's cannabis-friendly president hands over power

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Uruguay's liberal president - who proposed a state-run cannabis marketplace - handed his power over to a new leader yesterday. Jose Mujica, who is known for giving away most of his salary and living humbly on a farm with his family and three-legged dog, presented his presidential sash to Tabare Vazquez on Sunday.

Greece outlines first anti-poverty measures

AFP, Athens

Greece's leftist government yesterday outlined a first batch of measures to combat poverty to be approved by parliament in coming days. According to a government document seen by AFP, the measures include free electricity, rent support and food stamps.



US Secretary of State John Kerry (R) gestures as he meets Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov yesterday in Geneva. PHOTO: AFP

UKRAINE CRISIS

Kerry and Lavrov hold Geneva discussions

Death toll soars past 6,000

AFP, Geneva

The US and Russian foreign ministers expressed cautious optimism after holding talks in Geneva yesterday to end fighting in Ukraine, where the UN says more than 6,000 people have died in less than a year.

The meeting between John Kerry and Sergei Lavrov in Geneva was just one of several attempts at mediation on the conflict yesterday, as high-stakes talks to resolve a bitter gas dispute between Kiev and Moscow were also due in Brussels.

Speaking separately after their 80-minute meeting, Kerry and Lavrov both cautiously said a February 15 ceasefire was on the right track, despite repeated breaches of the peace deal that have left hundreds dead.

The Russian foreign minister welcomed "tangible progress" in the implementation of the agreement reached in Minsk last month, saying "the ceasefire is being consolidated, heavy weapons are withdrawn."

Kerry, meanwhile, said he was "very hopeful" that his talks with Lavrov would help bring about the change needed to end fighting.

"Our hope is that within the next hours, and certainly not more than days, this (ceasefire) will be fully implemented," he said.

Underlining this momentum, the Russian, Ukrainian, French and German leaders agreed to hold four-way tele-

phone talks on the crisis Monday evening, the Interfax news agency quoted a Kremlin advisor as saying.

But Kerry cautioned that there so far had been "a kind of cherry-picking, a piecemeal selectivity to the application of the Minsk agreements."

While fighting has broadly halted along much of Ukraine's frontline, several incidents took place over the weekend, with press photographer Sergiy Nikolayev killed by a mortar shell and eight soldiers injured by rebel fire.

Ukraine's army said yesterday that one soldier had been killed, but added the ceasefire was still broadly holding.

Both sides have also begun to pull back some heavy weaponry from the frontline, but monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe have said it is too early to confirm a full pullback.

The United Nations, meanwhile, cast a cloud on hopes raised by the talks with a report that painted a bleak picture of developments in the country.

"More than 6,000 lives have now been lost in less than a year due to the fighting in eastern Ukraine," UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said in a statement.

The report detailed how the conflict was affecting civilians, pointing to arbitrary detention, torture and enforced disappearances committed mainly by armed groups but also in some cases by Ukrainian law enforcement agencies.

MYANMAR EDU REFORMS

Police seal students inside monastery

AFP, Yangon

Riot police sealed hundreds of Myanmar student protesters inside a monastery yesterday in a tense standoff, activists said, blocking their planned march to Yangon to call for education reforms.

Scores of security personnel circled the monastery in Letpadan town, some 130 kilometres north of Myanmar's main city Yangon, trapping around 300 students inside since early morning.

Authorities appear increasingly uneasy over the months-long rallies by different student organisations, which have persisted in some areas despite parliamentary efforts to rethink a controversial education bill.

Arun Singh to replace Jaishankar as US envoy

TNN, New Delhi

Arun Singh, India's envoy to Paris, will take over the ambassadorial assignment in Washington DC, replacing S Jaishankar, who was appointed foreign secretary on January 28. Although the appointment, earlier reported by TOI, has not yet been formally announced, it's likely to sail through.

An IFS officer of the 1979 batch, Singh has already spent five years in Washington as deputy chief of mission (which is an ambassadorial position in MEA). Prior to that he was India's ambassador to Israel. When in the head office, Singh had managed the tough Iran-Pakistan-Afghanistan desk between August 2001 and April 2005, which was the challenging times in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Like Jaishankar, Singh has built contacts in Washington, which will come in handy as PM Narendra Modi is deeply invested in

that bilateral relationship. But before taking up the assignment in Washington—likely in May, Singh will manage Modi's visit to Paris, scheduled for April.

With Jaishankar taking over as foreign secretary, a number of key changes have been made in ambassadorial posts in different capitals. Mohan Kumar, currently ambassador in Bahrain, is likely to take over as ambassador to Paris, a place where he served as deputy not long ago.

Navdeep Suri, ambassador in Egypt will be India's next high commissioner to Australia, a significant move. Suri, also a high-achiever, is expected to steer one of India's more important relationships.

Sanjay Bhattacharya, currently joint secretary in charge of southeast Asia, will move to Egypt as ambassador. This is an important position because Egypt is a pivotal power in the Arab world.



Attempts being made to remove Kejriwal

Says AAP as party rift widens

TNN, New Delhi

AAP yesterday said that attempts were being made to remove Arvind Kejriwal as national convener and announced that there will be a probe into the leakage of letters that have exposed rift within the party.

In the midst of the ongoing crisis in the party, AAP spokesperson Sanjay Singh yesterday said that the party's national executive will meet on March 4 to discuss the recent turn of events.

"Constant leaks of letters written by party members has made the party look like a joke," Sanjay Singh said.

The national executive meeting on March 4 may take a decision on the future of Yogendra Yadav and Prashant Bhushan, who have been accused of plotting against Kejriwal.

This as the rift in the party seemed to widen further yesterday with senior leaders taking to social media to air their differing views on the ongoing crisis in the party.

In a series of tweets, Yogendra Yadav hit out at those who were floating conspiracy

theories targeting him and senior leader Prashant Bhushan.

"For the last two days we have been reading reports about allegations and conspiracy theories against me and Prashant Bhushan. All these reports are imaginary and baseless. But, I feel sad at the motive behind these attempts," Yogendra Yadav tweeted.

This was followed by a series of tweets from Ashutosh, who claimed that there was a decisive churning in the party.

"It's clash of ideas between ultra left who demand referendum in Kashmir and pragmatic politics of welfarism. Churning in AAP is not a clash of personalities but of ideas. This will make way for future politics of AAP. This is my personal view," Ashutosh said.

Amid all these, AAP co-convenor Durgesh Pathak alleged that Prashant Bhushan and Yogendra Yadav wanted the party to lose in Delhi polls so that Arvind Kejriwal could be removed from the post of convenor.



In this picture taken on Sunday Internally Displaced Persons look on after collecting food-stuffs during a distribution event run by the American University of Nigeria through the Adamawa Peace Initiative at the Upper Room Cathedral to the Holy Spirit in Yola, Nigeria. Hundreds of thousands of IDPs have come to Yola to flee Boko Haram, mainly staying with relatives and other local residents, which makes them ineligible for aid through the major international Non Governmental Organisations.

PHOTO: AFP

TAIWAN NUKE WASTE PLAN

Opposition demands halt to plan

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan's main opposition party weighed in on the fight over a controversial plan to process the island's nuclear waste overseas yesterday, calling for an immediate halt to the proposal.

Environmental activists say that the plan by state-run Taiwan Power Co (Taipower) to ship the waste abroad runs the risk of a nuclear accident and an international backlash from campaign groups.

Now the major opposition Democratic Progressive Party has also pledged to shoot down the plan, accusing Taipower of a lack of transparency.

It comes as the government faces increasing pressure over its nuclear energy policy.

Taipower launched the bidding process for firms to transport and reprocess 1,200 spent fuel rods from two of the island's nuclear plants just before the Lunar New Year holidays -- a tactic opponents said was to evade media and public attention.

It also launched it before the budget was fully approved, the DPP said.

"The whole bidding process was not transparent," DPP legislator Tien Chiu-chin told AFP, warning that it could become a "money pit" and result in international disputes both environmentally and financially.

Tien added that the DPP would "do everything" to block the budget for the Tw\$11.25 billion project, which still needs to be passed in parliament.

HK lawmakers arrested over democracy protests

AFP, Hong Kong

Three Hong Kong pro-democracy lawmakers were arrested and then released yesterday over their involvement in mass protests for free elections, the latest targets of a police probe campaigners say is tantamount to intimidation.

Police have vowed to investigate the "principal instigators" of the street blockades that ended in December when rally camps were cleared.

Albert Ho and Helena Wong, both of the Democratic Party, and lawmaker Charles Mok, voluntarily turned themselves in at Wan Chai police headquarters yesterday morning on the request of the police.

Ho and Wong held up small paper yellow umbrellas -- the symbol of the democracy movement -- as they went into the police station while supporters carrying umbrellas and placards shouted "We want universal suffrage".

Both Wong and Ho said the possibility of future charges remained.

Oldest primary school student is 92

CNN ONLINE

She grew up in Kenya under colonial rule, when women didn't get an education.

Now in her 90s, Priscilla Sitienei is changing that, attending elementary school -- and inspiring a generation.

She started five years ago as a kindergartner at a boarding school near Eldoret. She's in fourth grade today.

"I had grandchildren and great-grandchildren who shunned school," she says by phone from Ndalat. "That made me mad. I decided I have to show them that education is important."

During colonial times, some Kenyan hospitals did not keep birth records. Sitienei's exact age is unclear, but she says she was born around 1923, when a famine plagued her hometown. Growing up, relatives told her she barely survived that famine as a toddler, which gave her a rough estimate of her

birth year. Priscilla Sitienei has her own special dorm room at the boarding school in Eldoret. Outside her door is a sign that says "education has no age limit."

If confirmed by the Guinness World Records, she would be the oldest pupil in elementary school.

The last such honor by the Guinness World Records went to another Kenyan, Kimani Maruge, who in 2004 was named the oldest person to begin primary school. Five years later, he died at age 90.

Though Sitienei worked as a traditional midwife for decades, she says there's still a lot to learn.

"My favorite subject is math," the nonagenarian says. "Now that I'm in school, I know the right dosage to give the women who I help deliver their babies."

Sitienei got married at a young age and focused on raising her 10 children.

