

NEWS IN brief

Russian bids farewell to slain Putin critic

Thousands of mourners yesterday filed past the coffin of slain Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov...

Russia, Ukraine strike gas delivery deal

Russia and Ukraine reached a deal Monday to supply gas to Europe until the end of March...

Nigeria 'kills 70 Boko Haram fighters'

Nigerian troops backed by civilian vigilantes yesterday claimed to have killed more than 70 Boko Haram fighters...

Rare goblin shark found in Australia

A rare sea creature described as an "alien of the deep" has been found off Australia and delivered to a museum...



Iran deal threatens Israel's existence

Says Netanyahu; Obama scoffs at the notion

Israel and the United States clashed furiously over the Iran nuclear talks yesterday...

However, US President Barack Obama hit back immediately, scoffing that he had presented no idea of his own to contain the Iranian threat.

Netanyahu's party faces a close-fought Israeli parliamentary election in two weeks time...

But, in a determined speech to a packed joint session of US Congress, he pulled no punches in his denunciation of the accord...

"That deal will not prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons," he declared. "It would all but guarantee that Iran gets those weapons, lots of them."

"This deal has two major concessions. One, leaving Iran with a vast nuclear programme. Two, lifting the restrictions on that program in about a decade."

"That's why this deal is so bad. It doesn't block Iran's path to the bomb. It paves Iran's path to the bomb," he said.

While some 50 members of Obama's Democrats stayed away from Netanyahu's address, he was welcomed with a warm standing ovation and left to raucous applause.

Later, Obama said, "I am not focused in the politics of this. I am not focused on the theatre ... As far as I can tell, there was nothing new."

"On the core issue, which is how to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon which would make it far more dangerous, the prime minister [Netanyahu] did not offer any viable alternatives."

"We don't yet have a deal ... But if we are successful then, in fact, this will be the best deal possible with to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapon," he added.

GAZA War Crimes

Palestinians to formally go to ICC in April

AFP, Ramallah

The Palestinians will formally approach the International Criminal Court on April 1 to complain about alleged Israeli war crimes in Gaza and settlement activity...

"One of the first important steps will be filing a complaint against Israel at the ICC on April 1 over the (2014) Gaza war and settlement activity," said Mohammed Shtayyeh, a member of Fatah, the main faction of the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

On January 2, the Palestinians moved to join the Hague-based court in a process which is due to take effect on April 1, setting the scene for potential legal action against Israeli officials for alleged war crimes.

Israel reacted furiously, and quickly moved to cut off millions of dollars in monthly tax payments it collects on behalf of the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority, exacerbating an already severe financial crisis.

There was no immediate response from Israel, with foreign ministry spokesman Emmanuel Nachshon refusing to react to a declaration which he described as "speculative and hypothetical".

On January 16, the ICC announced "a preliminary examination" into Israel's actions over a period beginning in June which included last year's war in Gaza.

About 2,200 Palestinians and 73 Israelis were killed during the conflict in July and August, with UN figures indicating most of the victims were civilians.

TIKRIT OFFENSIVE AGAINST ISIS Iraq's move catches US 'by surprise'

Offensive took place keeping US in the dark

AGENCIES

The Iraqi military launched a major campaign to take back a key city from the self-proclaimed Islamic State over the weekend—a move that caught the US "by surprise," in the words of one American government official.

The US-led coalition forces that have conducted seven months of airstrikes on Iraq's behalf did not participate in the attack, defense officials told The Daily Beast, and the American military has no plans to chip in.

Instead, embedded Iranian advisors and Iranian-backed Shia militias are taking part in the offensive on the largely Sunni town, raising the prospect that the fight to beat back ISIS could become a sectarian war.

The news is the latest indication that not all is well with the American effort against the terror group. On Friday, US defense officials told The Daily Beast that a planned offensive against the ISIS stronghold of Mosul had been indefinitely postponed after Iraqi officials argued that the timing was theirs to decide.

Then there was the unexpected battle for Tikrit. Over the weekend, a reported 30,000 troops and militiamen—mostly Shias—stormed the Sunni dominated city of Tikrit, former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's hometown and the symbolic birthplace of his three decades of repressive practices against the majority Shiapopulation.

US officials were largely left in the dark of the planning and timing of the operation, defense officials said. The Pentagon said Monday it was not conducting airstrikes in support of the Tikrit offensive because the Iraqi government did not ask for such help.

The US had seen the prospect of strikes in Tikrit for a while but the timing and nature of the attack "caught us by surprise," one government official explained to The Daily Beast.

The Iraqi decision to cut out the US-led coalition turned the war against ISIS in Iraq into a dual track approach—one carried out by the US-led coalition another directed by the Iranians. Each has its own military strategy.

And there were several reports that Maj Gen Qassem Soleimani, the shadowy commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' overseas operation arm is also on the ground near Tikrit.

"As long as the Iranians perceive that what we're doing comports with their objectives—which is eliminating ISIL—we're on a parallel course there," Director of National Intelligence James Clapper told an audience at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York on Monday.

There are already fears that the Iraqi effort, backed by their Iranian supporters, will decimate parts of the city, defense officials said.

Such actions would have great symbolic effect and make it increasingly unlikely of mending sectarian tensions between the minority Sunnis and their Shia-dominated government.

"This is a real bellweather," said a second defense official. "If this becomes a sectarian battle, we will shift to simply counter terrorism, and away from training Iraqi forces. And the coalition will come apart."

On the ground, Iraqi forces closed in on Tikrit yesterday, their progress slowed by jihadist snipers and booby traps.

The recapture of Tikrit is of both strategic and symbolic importance. Military commanders have said Tikrit is a stepping stone for an even more ambitious operation aimed at retaking Mosul, the large northern city which has been the main Iraq hub of ISIS.



Iraqi forces fire weaponry from a position in the northern part of Diyala province on Monday.

Ex-CIA chief pleads guilty to misdemeanor

BBC ONLINE

David Petraeus, a former CIA director and four-star general, has reached a plea deal with the US Justice Department in which he will admit to mishandling classified materials.



A Justice Department statement said a plea agreement had been filed.

The deal means that Petraeus will plead guilty to one count of unauthorised removal and retention of classified material, but could avoid an embarrassing trial.

It ends a long investigation into whether he provided secret information to his mistress.

He resigned from his post at the CIA in 2012, after it emerged he was having an affair with his biographer Paula Broadwell.

The charge carries a maximum sentence of one year in prison, the New York Times reported.

Mr Petraeus has signed the deal, Justice Department spokesman Marc Raimondi confirmed to the BBC.



MYANMAR EDUCATION REFORM PROTEST

Riot police (R) confront students (L) during a protest march in central Myanmar town of Letpadan, yesterday. Some 200 Students yesterday defied an order to disperse. Students have rallied for months over a controversial education bill that they say is undemocratic and have collected support from ordinary people and monks in their march, which began in the central city of Mandalay in January.



India, Pakistan hold first talks in a year

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan and India held their first high-level talks for nearly a year yesterday, with a senior Indian diplomat hailing the meeting in Islamabad as "positive and constructive".

Indian Foreign Secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar is visiting Pakistan for the first senior-level dialogue between the nuclear-armed rivals since their prime ministers met in New Delhi last May.

Relations between the two countries, always fraught, soured further last August amid increased firing along their borders and a row over a Pakistani diplomat meeting Kashmiri separatists.

Jaishankar, India's top official for foreign affairs, met his counterpart Aizaz Ahmed Chaudhry and said afterwards talks were held "in a very positive and constructive atmosphere".

"We agreed to work together to find common ground and narrow our differences," he told reporters.

"I reiterated our known concerns on cross-border terrorism including on the Mumbai (attacks). We agreed that ensuring peace and tranquility on the border was vital."

The attacks on Mumbai in 2008, blamed on Pakistan-based militants, have been a perennial thorn in relations in recent years.

India has been infuriated at Pakistan's failure to either extradite or prosecute effectively the alleged masterminds of the carnage, which left 166 people dead.

Jaishankar's trip is part of a tour that also includes Bhutan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. But Pakistan-India issues, which tend to dominate regional politics, were clearly prominent on the agenda.

Indian State bans beef Introduces jail time for possession

AFP, Mumbai

India's western state of Maharashtra has introduced a ban on beef so strict that even possession could land you in jail for five years, media reports and the chief minister said yesterday.

The country's Hindu majority considers cows sacred, and several states already ban their slaughter. But the latest measures in Maharashtra -- home to India's commercial centre Mumbai -- go even further, making the sale or possession of beef an offence punishable by a five-year jail term or a 10,000 rupee (\$160) fine.

The Indian Express newspaper said the measures became law after President Pranab Mukherjee gave his assent to a legal amendment -- which was passed by the state parliament two decades ago, but was never sent to a president for approval.

The measures include a ban on the slaughter of bulls and bullocks, hitherto legal with a vet's certificate, although it will still be legal to slaughter buffalo.

The ban didn't go unnoticed and led to an acrimonious debate on the social media with #BeefBan top-trending on India's twitter.

"In Maharashtra, all chicken, goats and sheep are currently thinking -- Why should gais (cows) have all the fun? #BeefBan," Ramesh Srivatsava said on Twitter.

The decision led to many angry exchanges on social media with people on different sides of the divide citing personal freedom, religious beliefs, history, environment and even animal rights to make their point.

Many took snarky jibes at the local state government for its decision. "And in other news, safer to be born a cow than a girl in India," Sonika Mehta said on Twitter.

Threats do not work in a democracy: Modi

THE HINDU ONLINE

Speaking in the Rajya Sabha on the motion of thanks to the President's address, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi took on the opposition saying that in a democracy threats do not work.

Taking a dig at the Congress, he said: "When the Congress was unwilling to credit others for India's freedom, how can they credit others for India's development." He went on to list NDA-I programmes that the UPA "repackaged" to counter the Congress charge that the Centre was repackaging previous government's schemes.

However, he added: "We do not feel that just because we are in the treasury benches we know it all. Everyone has to work together."

She would have lived if she allowed the rape

Delhi bus rapist blames dead victim for attack

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

One of the men convicted of gang raping a woman on a bus in Delhi has blamed his victim for the fatal attack, saying "girls are far more responsible for rape" than men.

The 23-year-old physiotherapy student died of horrific injuries two weeks after being assaulted by six men as she travelled home from the cinema with a male friend.

Among them was Mukesh Singh, who claims he was driving the bus during the incident on 16 December 2012 and did not take part.

In an interview with the BBC from prison, where he is awaiting execution, he referred to the woman's murder as "an accident" caused by her being out at night.

"A decent girl won't roam around at nine o'clock at night," he said. "A girl is far more responsible for rape than a boy. Boys and girls are not equal. ... About 20 per cent of girls are good."



QUOTE of the day



"When the Congress was unwilling to credit others for India's freedom, how can they credit others for India's development."

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi

Bill Gates still world's richest man: Forbes



AFP, New York

Billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates kept his spot as the world's richest man, a rank he has held for 16 of the past 21 years, Forbes magazine said Monday.

The Microsoft co-founder's fortune increased \$3.2 billion since last year to \$79.2 billion, the business magazine said, despite a \$1.5 billion gift of Microsoft shares to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in November.

Mexican telecom tycoon Carlos Slim held onto second place thanks to his \$77.1 billion, ahead of American investor Warren Buffett, with \$72.7 billion, who gained a whopping \$14.5 billion from last year.

In fourth was Amancio Ortega, founder of the Inditex fashion group.

Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg jumped five spots to land in number 16, the first time he made it within the exclusive circle of the world's 20 richest people.