

NEWS IN brief

Putin takes 10% salary cut

AFP, Moscow
Russian President Vladimir Putin announced yesterday he was cutting his salary by 10 percent as well as the earnings of several top government officials, as the country's economy reels from the collapse of the ruble. The salaries of Putin, his Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, Prosecutor General Yury Chaika and the president of the powerful Investigative Committee Alexander Bastrykin, will all be cut by 10 percent from March 1 to December 31, according to a decree signed by the president.

Top Qaeda leader reported killed in Syria

AFP, Beirut
The military chief and several top commanders of the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Nusra Front have been reported killed in north-western Syria, where the jihadist militia has been making major gains in recent months. Syrian state media, a monitoring group and a local activist reported that Abu Hammam al-Shami had been killed but information on the circumstances of his death was contradictory.

Five hurt in Jerusalem car attack on pedestrians

AFP, Jerusalem
A driver ploughed his car into pedestrians in Jerusalem yesterday, injuring five people in an attack that further inflamed tensions a day after the Palestinians vowed to halt security coordination with Israel. "A young man rammed his car (into pedestrians), and then got out and tried to stab people," police spokeswoman Luba Samri said in a statement. Four Israeli border guards were among those injured in the attack outside a security forces' base on the line separating west from Arab east Jerusalem. The driver was shot and seriously wounded by a security guard at the scene, according to police.

Beijing yet to approve MH370 commemoration

AFP, Beijing
Chinese relatives of those on board Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 said yesterday they were still waiting for permission from authorities to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the plane's disappearance.

MERS kills 10 more in Saudi Arabia

AFP, Riyadh
The MERS virus has killed 10 more people in Saudi Arabia over the past week, pushing the death toll above 400, as health officials broaden their campaign to halt its spread. The latest deaths occurred between February 27 and March 5, adding to a surge of cases that killed 30 people in February alone. On Wednesday the health ministry said it started a new phase of a public education campaign to help prevent the spread of the virus.

Taliban deny Afghan Shiite kidnap

AFP, Kandahar
The Taliban said yesterday they were not responsible for the abduction of 30 Shiite Muslims in southern Afghanistan last week, as rescue efforts restarted after a halt for bad weather. Masked gunmen stopped two buses on the road to Kabul from the western city of Herat on February 24 and took 30 male passengers hostage, all of them members of the Hazara minority ethnic group. No one has claimed responsibility for the abduction, but kidnappings for ransom by bandits and militias are common in Afghanistan.



Maldives police try to move former president Mohamed Nasheed during a scuffle as he arrived at a courthouse in Male on 23 February, 2015.

Modi skips Maldives after unrest

Says diplomatic sources

AFP, New Delhi
India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi will skip the Maldives on a regional tour this month due to political unrest following the arrest of the former president and opposition leader, an Indian diplomat has said. The Indian foreign ministry announced yesterday that Modi would be visiting the Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka from March 10 to 14, with no stop scheduled in the Maldivian capital Male, which had been making plans to receive him. "The visit was being discussed, arrangements were being made, but the sudden decision to drop Maldives is due to the current political situation in Male," an Indian diplomatic source in Colombo, declining to be named, told AFP. "It would have been difficult to go ahead with the visit given



the fact that there are daily protests in Male." The arrest of former president Mohamed Nasheed on February 22 and his subsequent detention on terror charges have sparked regular anti-government protests and drawn international condemnation. While Syed Akbaruddin, India's foreign ministry spokesperson, said there was "no question" of cancelling a visit that had never been announced, the Maldivian foreign minister told reporters last month that they were preparing to welcome Modi in the second week of March. "I do not believe that the internal affairs of Maldives will affect the relationship between both the countries and that it will influence any planned official visits," Dunya Maumoon told a press conference after Nasheed's arrest. There was no immediate comment from Maldives authorities, but Nasheed's Maldivian Democratic Party welcomed the change to Modi's itinerary.

Ausies protests Indonesia's treatment of death row men

AFP, Sydney
Australia issued a formal protest to Indonesia yesterday after photos emerged of a smiling senior police officer posing with the two men due to face the firing squad, as it was confirmed that the executions would not happen this week. Prime Minister Tony Abbott expressed outrage over the photographs taken on board the plane used to transport Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran from Bali to the so-called "execution island" of Nusakambangan. "I thought they were unbecoming and showed a lack of respect and dignity and we have protested to the Indonesian ambassador here in Canberra," Abbott told reporters of the pictures that were widely published in Australia. The two men were the ringleaders of the so-called "Bali Nine" drug trafficking gang and were moved on Wednesday to the place where they are due to be killed, amid intense protest from Canberra. They are among a group of drug convicts, including foreigners from France, Brazil, the Philippines, Nigeria and Ghana, who are expected to be executed at the same time on the prison island of Nusakambangan.

HK freedom 'eroded' by China

Says UK MPs; HK democrats hail 'honourable' MPs; China warns Britain over report

AFP, London, Hong Kong
Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy from China is being "eroded", an influential committee of British MPs warned yesterday in a report welcomed by the city's democrat lawmakers. The House of Commons foreign affairs committee voiced concern about the former colony's "direction of travel", saying it could face a "crisis of governance" unless tensions over how it is ruled are resolved. Hong Kong's democrat lawmakers called British MPs "honourable" for highlighting concerns but said the city has to fight its own battles. Last year saw weeks of protests after China announced that candidates to be the city's next leader in a 2017 vote would be vetted by a pro-Beijing committee. British MPs were barred from entering Hong Kong by China in December to research their report as the demonstrations continued, with Chinese officials accusing them of acting as a colonial power. Speaking to AFP as the committee published its report on Britain's relations with Hong Kong, chairman Richard Ottaway said that while it could not force China to change its behaviour, it could offer guidance. "It's almost advice to China from a country that's had a democracy for hundreds of years -- that if you offer the people a bit of democracy, they're going to want the whole lot and that until they get a complete package of democracy, this is going to be a continuing problem for them," he said. Meanwhile, China said Britain had "no right to interfere" in Hong Kong yesterday following the report by British MPs. Ottaway said the "real concern is that a high degree of autonomy is being eroded" -- particularly over political reforms and press freedoms. However Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said that Hong Kong's return to China under a "one country, two systems" deal had been "a great success". "Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China. Its affairs are China's domestic affairs. The UK has no right to interfere," she said at a briefing yesterday.

Tajik opposition leader killed in Istanbul

Reports Turkish media

AFP, Istanbul
An opposition leader from the Central Asian nation of Tajikistan was shot dead by an unknown gunman on a street in Istanbul late Thursday, Turkish media reported yesterday. Umarali Kuvvatov, head of the "Group 24" opposition group, was killed with a gunshot wound to the head in Istanbul's conservative Fatih district, said the Dogan news agency. The assailant fled the scene, it said. Kuvvatov, an oil businessman, was one of the most outspoken critics of the hardline regime of President Emomali Rakhmon and was wanted by Dushanbe on fraud charges which his supporters claimed was politically motivated. His movement Group 24, which is based outside Tajikistan, was banned in October last year by the country's Supreme Court after the government labelled it as an "extremist organisation." Tajik authorities blocked the movement's website, as well as hundreds of others, after Group 24 used social media to call for a mass anti-government protest in Dushanbe in October. Kuvvatov, 47, fled Tajikistan in 2012 for Dubai and had been living in Turkey with his wife and children since early 2013. Tajikistan in January had formally asked Turkey to extradite him. Tajikistan, an impoverished Muslim nation of some eight million people, has been led since 1992 by former Soviet apparatchik Rakhmon, who has ruled with an iron fist after seeing his republic shattered by civil war when the Soviet Union broke up.

Taiwan Subway Killer Court hands down capital punishment

AFP, Taipei
A former college student was sentenced to death in Taiwan yesterday for killing four people and wounding more than 20 others in a subway stabbing spree that shocked the island. Cheng Chieh, 22, will face a firing squad after he was convicted on four counts of murder and 22 counts of attempted murder for the carnage in May last year, the first fatal attack on Taipei's subway system since it launched in 1996. "The judges sentenced Cheng to death as his means were brutal and his crimes were severe while he had shown no remorse," Lien Yu-chun, a spokeswoman for the New Taipei district court, told AFP. A court statement said that Cheng's crimes "angered gods and men" and that the sentence would safeguard society.

Myanmar defends rally crackdown

Police arrest more protestors

AFP, Yangon
Myanmar authorities have defended a crackdown on a Yangon rally that saw police and men in civilian clothes beat unarmed protesters, as security forces made fresh arrests yesterday. In a defiant statement as authorities launched a third day of action against several demonstrations, the state-run Mirror newspaper said police acted legitimately to disperse a rally on Thursday in the heart of Yangon. Several people were wounded in the incident and eight briefly detained. "The authorities repeatedly asked the people to disperse. But because the protesters fought back against the authorities, there was a crackdown and some protesters were detained," the



Myanmar student protesters and nationalists shout slogans and wave flags during a demonstration yesterday.

report said. Activists have insisted it was a peaceful protest. Their rally in Yangon, held in solidarity with a rolling student demonstration calling for education reform, comes as several groups of workers also staged strikes over pay. In the latest arrests early yesterday, authorities in the central town of Letpadan detained five student protesters, according to activists. "Some students sneaked out through police barriers and joined with the people who came to support our strike," student leader Min Thway told AFP, adding that the situation had since calmed. Around 50 students also gathered in Yangon in the afternoon for a peaceful demonstration that passed without incident. Observers fear democratic reforms in Myanmar, which is gradually emerging from decades of authoritarian rule, are stalling in the run-up to a breakthrough general election slated for the end of this year. The latest crackdown has deepened concerns that authorities have not lost the repressive reflex forged during the junta era. Myanmar's authorities have a long history of using groups of hired civilians to violently disperse protesters -- most recently in 2007 when thugs attacked protesting monks and civilians during a period of large demonstrations that came to be known as the "Saffron Revolution".



Filipino Muslims pray during an inter-faith rally at a Manila park yesterday. Participants urged parliament to pass a proposed law giving minority Muslims limited autonomy in several southern provinces to end a decades-old rebellion that has claimed 120,000 lives.

Wife of Frenchman on Indonesia death row still hopeful

AFP, Cilacap
The wife of a Frenchman on death row in Indonesia says she refuses to believe she has seen him for the last time, as fears grow he will soon be executed with a group of foreigners. Serge Atlaoui has been detained on Indonesia's notorious Nusakambangan prison island in Central Java since he was sentenced to death in 2007 on drugs charges. The Frenchman, 51, had his appeal for clemency rejected in January by Indonesian President Joko Widodo, a vocal supporter of capital punishment for drug offenders. Atlaoui was joined this week on the island by two Australian drug traffickers Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran, whose transfer from Bali signals their execution date, and that of several other foreigners, is drawing near. Atlaoui's wife Sabine visited him in prison this week and refused to believe it will be her last, as she pins all her hope on a legal challenge for a stay of execution. "Yes, of course we are worried," she told AFP in Cilacap, the port town where family must wait before visiting Nusakambangan. "But we've got this judicial review that has been lodged, and we do hope that through this process, the truth can be revealed." Atlaoui, a father of four, was arrested near Jakarta in 2005 in a secret laboratory producing ecstasy. Imprisoned in Indonesia for ten years, he has always denied the charges saying he was installing industrial machinery in what he thought was an acrylics factory.