

# NEWS IN brief

## 5 killed, 25 feared dead in Russian mall fire

AFP, Moscow  
Russian rescue workers yesterday combed through the incinerated rubble of a shopping mall for the bodies of 25 people still missing a day after a fire ripped through the centre, leaving five dead, local officials said. The emergency situations ministry said it had abandoned hope of finding any survivors after the three-storey building was destroyed in the blaze in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan 800 km (500 miles) east of Moscow.

## 'Putin to blame for Nemtsov's death'

AP, Moscow  
The daughter of Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov says that Russian President Vladimir Putin is "politically" responsible for her father's death. In an interview in Italy with the BBC, Zhanna Nemtsova said that her father was "a critic of Putin, he fought with Putin, with nobody else," and said she blamed the president for his death.

## Honduras prison riot kills 3; 15 injured

AFP, Tegucigalpa  
Three inmates were killed, including at least one who was fatally shot, during a Honduran prison riot that also left seven prisoners and eight guards hurt, authorities have said. The San Pedro Sula prison, located some 240 kilometres (150 miles) north of the capital city Tegucigalpa, was built for 1,300 inmates, but houses 2,900.

## Pak forces kill 13 Baluchistan rebels

AFP, Quetta  
Around 1,000 Pakistani paramilitary troops backed by helicopters are battling separatists in the country's restive southwest, with the rebel death toll rising to 13 yesterday on the second day of fighting. The clash with separatists began in the area of a gasfield in Pirkoh, some 245 kilometres southeast of Quetta which is wracked by a tribal insurgency, Taliban attacks and sectarian violence.

## Ukraine ceasefire on 'thin ice': OSCE

AFP, Kiev  
The ceasefire in eastern Ukraine between Kiev's forces and pro-Russian rebels is largely being observed but is still on "thin ice," an OSCE monitor said yesterday, one month after both sides agreed to the truce. Ukraine's security spokesman Andriy Lysenko said no soldiers had been injured or killed over the past day -- the first time in five days.



Pakistani paramilitary officials escort blindfolded and handcuffed Aamir Khan, the leader of Muttahida Qaumi Movement political party, to a court in Karachi, yesterday. A court remanded 28 members of the main political party in Pakistan's largest city Karachi in custody yesterday, a day after they were arrested during a raid on the party's headquarters accusing it of harbouring criminals.

# Sri Lanka pledges war crimes probe

BBC ONLINE  
Sri Lanka hopes to set up a domestic inquiry within a month into atrocities from the civil war, President Maithripala Sirisena has told the BBC. He said UN investigators would not take part in the inquiry, but their views would be taken into account. Sirisena's predecessor Mahinda Rajapaksa consistently refused any co-operation with the UN. The army and Tamil Tiger rebels were both accused of atrocities in the 26-year war, which ended in 2009. Between 80,000 and 100,000 people are estimated to have died in the conflict. In the final months, many thousands of Tamil civilians are thought to have been killed in government shelling. Sirisena told BBC Sinhala's Saroj Pathirana that an investigative committee would work "efficiently, in a balanced legal and impartial manner". When asked if UN investigators would be involved, the president said: "We are ready to get advice and their opinions for the inquiry, but I don't think we need any outsiders because we have all the sources for this." The UN agreed last month to delay its long-awaited report into alleged war crimes, saying the new government was more willing to co-operate than the previous administration. Sirisena came to power in January, inflicting a surprise defeat on former ally Rajapaksa. Both men were in government during the bloody finale of the war, but fell out when Sirisena defected. Parliamentary elections take place later this year, and Rajapaksa could return as prime minister. Analysts say Sirisena's refusal to allow UN investigators to be involved may be designed to appeal to Sinhalese voters, who are largely opposed to any international inquiry.

# Khamenei condemns Republican letter on Iran, bemoans US 'tricks'

REUTERS, Dubai  
Iran's Supreme Leader hit out yesterday at a letter by US Republican senators threatening to undo any nuclear deal between Washington and Tehran, saying he was worried because the United States was known for "backstabbing", Mehr news agency reported. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the ultimate authority on all Iranian matters of state, added at a meeting with President Hassan Rouhani and senior clerics that whenever negotiators made progress, the Americans became "harsher, tougher and coarser". The letter signed by 47 Republican senators warned Iran that any nuclear deal made with US President Barack Obama, a Democrat, could last only as long as he remained in office - an unusual intervention into US foreign policy-making. The White House has described the letter as "reckless" and "irresponsible,"

saying it interfered with efforts by six major powers to negotiate with Iran on a deal to prevent it from building a nuclear bomb. Mehr quoted Khamenei as saying: "Of course I am worried, because the other side is known for opacity, deceit



and backstabbing. The clerical Supreme Leader said the letter was "a sign of the decay of political ethics in the American system", and he described as risible long-standing U.S. accusations of Iranian involvement in terrorism. US Secretary of State John Kerry,

Washington's chief nuclear negotiator, voiced "utter disbelief" at the senators' action, saying the notion that they could alter any executive accord between government leaders was "flat wrong". The nuclear negotiations, which resume in Lausanne, Switzerland, next week, are at a critical juncture as the sides try to meet an end of March target for an outline accord, with June 30 the deadline for a detailed, final agreement. Iran and the powers have twice extended their deadline to conclude the negotiations, which aim to place curbs on Iran's nuclear energy capacity to help ensure it cannot develop nuclear bombs. In return, Iran would secure a removal of sanctions that have severely damaged Iran's oil-based economy. The Islamic Republic dismisses Western suspicions that it aims to develop nuclear weapons, saying its atomic energy program is only for peaceful purposes.

# Swine flu in India turns even more dangerous: MIT study

PTI, Washington  
The swine flu virus in India which has already killed more than 1,500 people since December may have acquired mutations that make it more severe and infectious than



previously circulating H1N1 strains, a new MIT study has warned. The study by Massachusetts Institute of Technology contradicts previous reports from Indian health officials that the strain has not changed from the version of H1N1 that emerged in 2009. MIT researchers found that the recent Indian strains carry new muta-

tions in the hemagglutinin protein that are known to make the virus more virulent. Hemagglutinin binds to glycan receptors found on the surface of respiratory cells and the strength of that binding determines how effectively the virus can infect those cells. In the past two years, genetic sequence information of the flu-virus protein hemagglutinin from only two influenza strains from India has been deposited into publicly available influenza databases which makes it difficult to determine exactly which strain is causing the new outbreak and how it differs from previous strains. "However, those two strains yielded enough information to warrant concern," said Ram Sasisekharan, the Alfred H Caspary, professor of Biological Engineering at MIT and the paper's senior author. Sasisekharan and Kannan Tharakaraman, a research scientist in MIT's Department of Biological Engineering, compared the genetic sequences of those two strains (of 2014) to the strain of H1N1 that emerged in 2009 and killed more than 18,000 people worldwide between 2009 and 2012.



British Foreign Minister Philip Hammond (L) shakes hands with Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj prior to a meeting in New Delhi, yesterday. British Foreign Minister Philip Hammond is on an official visit to India.

PHOTO: AFP

# Ebola toll tops 10,000: WHO

AFP, Geneva  
More than 10,000 people have now died from the Ebola virus, almost all of them in west Africa, the World Health Organization said yesterday. The three hardest-hit countries of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia have recorded 24,350 cases and 10,004 deaths since the epidemic began more than a year ago, the UN body said. There have also been six deaths in Mali, one in the United States and eight in Nigeria, all of which have since been declared Ebola-free. Ebola, one of the deadliest pathogens known to man, is spread through direct contact with the bodily fluids of an infected person showing symptoms such as fever or vomiting. Sierra Leone has registered the highest number of cases in the worst-ever outbreak of the tropical fever, reporting 11,677 cases as of March 10, according to the WHO. The country has seen a total of 3,655 deaths from Ebola. Also as of March 10, Guinea had reported 3,330 cases and 2,187 deaths. Liberia, long the worst-hit country, recorded 9,343 cases as of March 5, with 4,162 deaths.



# Delhi cops to question Pak journalist

TNN, New Delhi  
Delhi Police will question Pakistani journalist Mehr Tarar in connection with the mysterious death of former Union minister Shashi Tharoor's wife Sunanda Pushkar. An official communique will be issued soon in this regard, Delhi Police chief BS Bassi said yesterday. 52-year-old Sunanda was found dead in her suite at a five star hotel in south Delhi on the night of January 17, 2014, a day after she was involved in a spat with Pakistani journalist Mehr Tarar on micro-blogging website Twitter over the latter's alleged affair with Tharoor. "If required, Shashi Tharoor will be questioned again," Delhi police chief BS Bassi said. The Delhi police chief also said that "we have asked the FBI to expedite the process of sending viscera report". The SIT probing the case has so far questioned at least 15 people, including Tharoor, his staff members, close friends of the couple and the staff of Leela Palace hotel where Pushkar was found dead. Pushkar's son Shiv Menon was quizzed by the SIT on February 5. Police sources said Menon was asked about the state of relations between Tharoor and Pushkar. Former Samajwadi Party leader Amar Singh was also questioned by SIT on January 28 in the case.

# India to develop two islands in Indian Ocean

TNN, New Delhi  
In a major boost for India in the Indian Ocean, India has bagged "infrastructure development rights" for two islands in the region - Agalega from Mauritius and Assumption from Seychelles - during PM Narendra Modi's ocean outreach comprising visits to Mauritius, Seychelles and Sri Lanka. New Delhi marked its Indian Ocean presence with Modi offering to set up joint working groups with the two blue economies in the region to harness potential for economic cooperation. The understanding to allow India to develop these islands is of huge strategic significance for India which is widely seen as having lost out to China in having a purposeful engagement with the littoral states despite its own central location. The Modi government has sought to address the issue by acknowledging the primacy of Indian Ocean for India's security and for maintaining peace and stability in the region. Official sources said that the development rights for the two islands had been discussed for months before these were successfully concluded during Modi's visit in a sign that "Indian Ocean was going to be India's Ocean". India signed an MoU with Mauritius for setting up and upgrading infrastructure for improving sea and air connectivity at the outer island of Mauritius "which will go a long way in ameliorating the condition of the inhabitants of this remote Island".

# Pakistan tried to strike a deal with Osama?

TNN, Washington  
President Obama on Wednesday nominated career diplomat David Hale as the US ambassador to Pakistan amid continuous misgivings about the country's commitment to fight terrorism, fueled by new disclosures that Islamabad tried to strike a deal with al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden even as Washington was trying to hunt him down. Revelations in the Long War Journal, based on files recovered by US forces from Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, which were presented as evidence in a terrorism trial in New York, show the Pakistani intelligence establishment reaching out in 2010 to al Qaeda through its jihadist proxies to cut a deal in which terrorists will spare Pakistan of attacks in exchange for immunity in Waziristan and other areas they are present in. One of Pakistani intelligence's emissaries was Fazlur Rehman Khalil, the longtime leader of Harakat ul Mujahedin, who was

used to send al Qaeda a letter. "We received a messenger from them bringing us a letter from the Intelligence leaders including Shuja' Shah, and others," a bin Laden aide writes to the "Sheikh" as he calls bin Laden. "They said they wanted to talk to us, to al Qaeda. We gave them the same message, nothing more."

Shuja Shah is believed to refer to Ahmed Shuja Pasha, a former ISI chief who was received in Washington around the same time in the belief that he and the Pakistani intelligence establishment were fighting al Qaeda. The Long War Journal disclosures in fact indicate that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's brother Shahbaz Sharif, went to the extent of seeking protection for Punjab (his home province) from terrorism without worrying too much about other provinces. Pakistan's current foreign policy advisor Sartaj Aziz too has recently suggested Islamabad had no reason to fight with terrorist groups that were anti-American but did no harm to Pakistan.



# COURT SUMMON IN COALGATE SCAM Sonia leads solidarity march for Manmohan

TNN, New Delhi  
Congress leaders yesterday took out rallies and stopped trains at several places across Uttar Pradesh to protest against the court summons issued against former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in a coal scam case. Congress workers, lead by Rita Bahuguna Joshi, yesterday stopped the Howrah-Amritsar Express at Lucknow's Charbagh railway station for over an hour. Earlier, the entire top Congress leadership including Sonia Gandhi took to the streets to express solidarity with former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who has been summoned as accused in a coal scam case, with the party President calling it "outrageous". Sonia Gandhi collected leaders at the party headquarters early in the morning and immediately led a march to Singh's residence about half a km away in the heart of the capital in which several of Singh's cabinet colleagues P Chidambaram, Anand Sharma, Ambika Soni, Veerappa Moily and K Rehman Khan were present. The Congress leaders also attacked the government accusing it of maintaining a "studied silence" after the CBI had told the court that there was no criminality involved in the allocation of Talabira coal blocks II to Hindalco company of Aditya Birla group in Odisha in 2005.

