

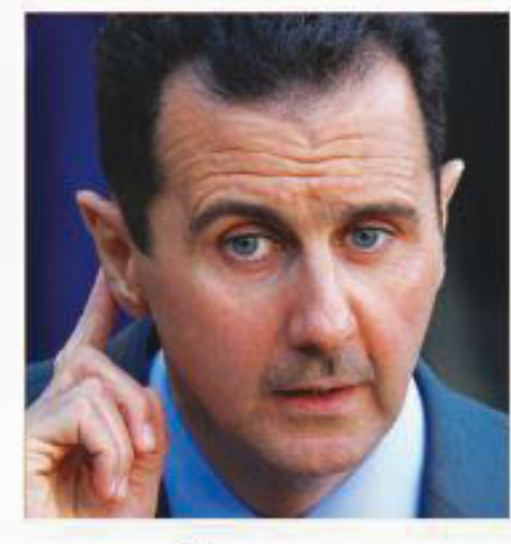
Iceland drops bid to become part of EU

Iceland has withdrawn its bid to become part of the European Union, two years after its application was paused when a centre-right coalition party came into power. "Iceland's interests are better served outside of the European Union," the country's foreign minister, Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson wrote on his website, the Guardian reports. Iceland first placed its bid to become part of the EU in 2009 when the country was ruled by a left-leaning government and its economic stability had been crippled by the financial crisis. Since taking power in 2013, Iceland's coalition government has been fervently against joining the EU, and last January it attempted to withdraw its membership bid but was forced to halt its plans when people took to the streets in protest at the decision being made without a referendum.



A group of Iraqi fighters flash victory sign during fighting to re-take control of the city of Basheer, some 20 kilometres south of the northern city of Kirkuk, from Islamic State (ISIS) group jihadists, yesterday. Inset, Iraqi Shia fighters launch rockets towards ISIS group in the city of Tikrit.

PHOTO: AFP



Assad must go, says US UN chief blast west on Syria inaction

The United States on Thursday renewed its call for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down, marking the fourth anniversary of the civil war by paying tribute to "the brave Syrians" fighting tyranny. "For four years the Assad regime has answered Syrians' calls for freedom and reform with unrelenting brutality, authoritarianism and destruction," State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters. "As we have long said, Assad must go and be replaced through a negotiated, political transition that is representative of the Syrian people." Without the departure of Assad, it would not be possible "to fully stabilize" the country, Psaki said. Last year was the deadliest yet in the conflict, with at least 76,000 people killed out of more than 210,000 since it began on March 15, 2011 with peaceful demonstrations, inspired by the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia.

Sweden takes U-turn After years of stalemate, it seeks London date with Assange

Swedish prosecutors want to question Julian Assange in London over allegations of sexual assault, potentially ending an impasse that left the WikiLeaks founder holed up for almost three years in Ecuador's embassy. Swedish prosecutors said on Friday they had asked for Assange's approval to question him in London, a U-turn after years of insisting he must go to Stockholm for questioning about alleged assaults against two women in 2010. Assange denies the allegations, which are not related to WikiLeaks' publication of U.S. military and diplomatic documents, also in 2010. He refused to go, arguing Sweden could send him on to the United States where he might face trial. One of Assange's lawyers said he welcomed the request but expressed concern the process could take time because approval was needed from British and Ecuadorian authorities. "He has been nagging for this for four years. He wants nothing more than to have an opportunity ... to give his version of what

happened and to clear his name," Assange's lawyer Per Samuelson told Reuters. Ecuador's embassy in London could not immediately be reached for comment. Assange, an Australian citizen, has been unable to leave Ecuador's embassy since claiming asylum there in 2012. Even if Sweden drops the charges, he faces arrest by British police for jumping bail granted while the UK courts considered a European arrest warrant issued by Sweden. Samuelson said Assange and his lawyers had to discuss the request from Swedish prosecutors, who also want to sample his DNA, before responding. A Swedish appeals court late last year upheld a detention order on Assange, but said prosecutors had not made enough effort to question him. The main reason for prosecutors' change of heart is that several crimes Assange is suspected of are subject to a statute of limitations expiring in August. Prosecutor Marianne Ny said she still believed questioning him at the embassy would lower the quality of the interview and he would need to be in Sweden should the case come to a trial.



Jihadists blow up Iraqi army HQ in Ramadi

More than 40 Iraqi soldiers were killed when ISIS blew up the Iraqi army headquarters near Ramadi in Iraq's western Anbar province, an Anbar provincial leader told CNN, as the battle continues for control of key cities in Iraq. Ramadi has been the focus of a fierce ISIS assault since Wednesday, launched at the same time as Iraqi forces made gains against the Sunni extremist group in an offensive in Tikrit, about 100 miles to the north. ISIS fighters in Ramadi dug a tunnel underneath the army headquarters and detonated hundreds of homemade bombs, Sabah Al-Karhout, the head of the Anbar Provincial Council, said Thursday. The headquarters are located in the Albu Diab area, just 4 kilometers north of Ramadi. Al-Karhout also denied reports that the US-led coalition had bombed the headquarters. A statement released early yesterday by the US-led coalition against ISIS said the Iraqi security forces had suc-

WAR ON ISIS
Iraq says government forces now control 50pc in Tikrit
Baghdadi accepts Boko Haram's pledge of allegiance

pushed deep into Tikrit, a police colonel claimed around 50 percent of the city was now back in government hands. Massively outnumbered, the jihadists are defending themselves with a network of booby traps, roadside bombs and snipers, with suicide attackers occasionally ramming cars into enemy targets. Tikrit was the hometown of dictator Saddam Hussein, remnants of whose Baath party collaborated with the jihadists when they took over almost a third of the country last June. With crucial military backing from neighbouring Iran and a 60-nation US-led coalition, Baghdad has rolled back some of the losses. Commanders see the recapture of overwhelmingly Sunni Arab Tikrit as a stepping stone for the reconquest of second city Mosul further north, which once had a population of two million. On Thursday, the group released a recording said to be a speech by spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani accepting a pledge of allegiance by Nigeria's Boko Haram jihadist group.



Hillary given devilish look on TIME cover

It was either a curious oversight or an ominous editorial directive, but the cover of TIME's latest issue out Thursday depicts likely 2016 presidential prospect Hillary Clinton apparently sporting devil's horns. It is not the first time such an image has graced the storied magazine; the position of the "M" in TIME has led to dozens of personalities, including Pope Francis, preacher Billy Graham and Microsoft founder Bill Gates looking as if they too had the satanic features. A TIME reporter tweeted a link to 33 similar covers over the last several years, including one depicting Clinton's husband, former president Bill Clinton. But given her miserable week, following revelations Hillary exclusively used a private email account while secretary of state, and that her family foundation received foreign donations, the cover image triggered a flurry of online debate. The latest scandals to haunt the prospective Democratic frontrunner have led analysts and political observers to wonder aloud whether she and her team operate by their own playbook, flouting guidelines that apply to all government personnel.



Demonstrators protest in front of the police station late Thursday in Ferguson, Missouri. The troubled US community of Ferguson, Missouri -- scene of months of protests and racial tension -- was on a knife edge again after two police officers were shot. President Barack Obama and Attorney General Eric Holder were quick to denounce the "ambush," which threatened to derail efforts to calm nerves in the mainly African-American suburb of 21,000.

PHOTO: AFP

Powers hold talks on ending Iran sanctions

Major world powers have begun talks about a United Nations Security Council resolution to lift UN sanctions on Iran if a nuclear agreement is struck with Tehran, a step that could make it harder for the US Congress to undo a deal, Western officials said. The talks between Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States — the five permanent members of the Security Council — plus Germany and Iran, are taking place ahead of difficult negotiations that resume next week over constricting Iran's nuclear ability. Some eight UN resolutions - four of them imposing sanctions - ban Iran from uranium enrichment and other sensitive atomic work and bar it from buying and selling atomic technology and anything linked to ballistic missiles. There is also a UN arms embargo. Iran sees their removal as crucial as UN measures are a legal basis for more stringent US and European Union measures to be enforced. The US and EU often cite violations of the U.N. ban on enrichment and other sensitive nuclear work as justification for imposing additional penalties on Iran.

US Secretary of State John Kerry told Congress on Wednesday that an Iran nuclear deal would not be legally binding, meaning future US presidents could decide not to implement it. That point was emphasized in an open letter by 47 Republican senators sent on Monday to Iran's leaders asserting any deal could be discarded once President Barack Obama leaves office in January 2017. But a Security Council resolution on a nuclear deal with Iran could be legally binding, say Western diplomatic officials. That could complicate and possibly undercut future attempts by Republicans in Washington to unravel an agreement. Iran and the six powers are aiming to complete the framework of a nuclear deal by the end of March, and achieve a full agreement by June 30, to curb Iran's most sensitive nuclear activities for at least 10 years in exchange for a gradual end to all sanctions on the Islamic Republic. The sanctions question is a sticking point in the talks that resume next week in Lausanne, Switzerland, between Iran and the six powers.

EU unlikely to agree to prolong Russia sanctions next week

European Union leaders are unlikely to reach agreement at their summit next week to prolong economic sanctions on Russia that expire in July, a senior EU official said yesterday. New sanctions on Russia are also off the table for now because EU governments want to give a chance to a fragile ceasefire in eastern Ukraine. But some of the EU's 28 member states had pushed for an early decision on extending sanctions on Russia's financial, energy and defense sectors adopted in July last year over Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine. While leaders will discuss sanctions at next week's summit, the senior EU official said a majority would probably

want to hold over discussion of renewing the economic sanctions on Russia until July. "I don't think there is unanimity at all for the rollover of sanctions, the sanctions that are due in July," the official, briefing reporters on condition of anonymity, said. Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico said on Friday that new or extended EU sanctions against Russia would not help the ceasefire in eastern Ukraine. "The ceasefire needs to be supported and we will hardly support it by saying that we will bring some new and further and further sanctions," Fico said in Prague. The EU is divided on sanctions and Fico has in the past called them "meaningless and counterproductive". Slovak Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajcak said the prevailing view in the

EU was that sanctions should remain in place in their current form for the time being. "We have not gotten that far that we could talk about cancelling sanctions," Lajcak told reporters in Slovakia. EU governments did agree on Friday to prolong sanctions on a list of Ukrainian and Russian individuals and companies accused of undermining Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence. The asset freezes and travel bans on 150 people and 37 organizations were extended for a further six months, until Sept. 15. Details will be published in the EU's Official Journal on Saturday. The decision was a formality after EU foreign ministers agreed in January to extend the sanctions.

Tim Cook offered liver to save Steve Jobs, says book

Apple's chief executive Tim Cook offered part of his liver for a transplant to Steve Jobs before the company co-founder died, but the offer was rejected, a new book states. The book said Jobs reacted angrily to the offer to help extend his life when he was suffering from pancreatic cancer. "He cut me off at the legs, almost before the words were out of my mouth," said Cook, according to the book, "Becoming Steve Jobs," due to be released later this month by Brent Schlender and Rick Tetzeli. Cook quoted Jobs as saying, "I'll never let you do that. I'll never do that." Jobs refused the offer even though Cook had the same rare blood type as Jobs and as

a result would have been compatible, the book said. Because the liver can regenerate, a partial transplant from a living donor can often be successful. Cook told the authors he was surprised by Jobs's reaction to the liver offer, according to excerpts of the book released by the magazine Fast Company. "Somebody that's selfish doesn't reply like that," he said. "I said, 'Steve, I'm perfectly healthy, I've been checked out. Here's the medical report. I can do this and I'm not putting myself at risk.'" "Steve only yelled at me four or five times during the 13 years I knew him, and this was one of them." The Apple co-founder later did receive a liver transplant in 2009. He died in October 2011 at age 56 after a long battle with cancer.

