

# NEWS IN brief

## Iraq's Tikrit offensive stalled by ISIS bombs

AFP, Samarra

Iraq's huge offensive to retake Tikrit from the Islamic State group was stalled yesterday by a slew of bombs and the several hundred jihadists holding out in the city. While Iraqi troops and militia were able to surround the jihadists in Tikrit with relative ease, ousting them from the city's streets has proved far harder. The operation to recapture Tikrit, the capital of Salaheddin province, began on March 2.

## US, Cuba wrap up 3rd round of talks

AFP, Havana

Cuba and the United States yesterday said they had wrapped up a third round of talks on normalizing relations, but gave few details beyond praising the "constructive" environment. Unlike the previous two rounds of talks since the old Cold War enemies announced a historic rapprochement on December 17, no press conference was held.

## Prince Harry to quit British army

AFP, London

Prince Harry, 30, yesterday announced he is to leave the British army after 10 years' service that has seen him fight on the front line twice in Afghanistan.



His decision will come as a surprise to many royal-watchers as the prince was living out his boyhood dream and seemed quite content with the army life.

## UK judges sacked for watching porn

BBC ONLINE

Three UK judges have been sacked for viewing pornographic material via their official IT accounts, the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office has said. The pornography was not illegal in content, a spokesman added. However the Lord Chancellor and the Lord Chief Justice concluded it was an "inexcusable misuse" of their official accounts and "wholly unacceptable conduct for a judicial office holder". A fourth judge resigned before the official inquiry had concluded.

## Arafat wasn't poisoned, says French experts

AFP, Nanterre

French experts reexamining evidence have confirmed their earlier conclusion that the 2004 death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was not the result of poisoning, a prosecutor told AFP Monday. The prosecutor for the western Paris suburb of Nanterre said the experts found there was no foul play in Arafat's death, which sparked immediate and enduring conspiracy rumours.

## AAP goes national

IANS, Ghaziabad

A month after it won a spectacular victory in Delhi, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) yesterday announced that it has decided to go national.

"We have decided to expand nationally," party leader Sanjay Singh told the media after a meeting of AAP leaders at the residence of Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal here.

The AAP's Political Affairs Committee (PAC), its highest decision making body, also decided from where it should contest next elections, Sanjay Singh said.



## CYCLONE DEVASTATES VANUATU

A young boy kicking a ball as his father searches through the ruins of their family home in Vanuatu's capital Port Vila on Monday after Cyclone Pam ripped through the island nation. The Pacific nation's president yesterday pleaded for help to rebuild the archipelago's "completely destroyed" infrastructure as aid groups warned of a looming food crisis.

PHOTO: AFP

## 90% of 'issues' solved Says Iran; White House rules out quick deal

AFP, Lausanne

Uncertainty reigned at crunch US-Iran nuclear talks yesterday as US officials warned that key differences remained but Tehran said that almost all technical issues were resolved ahead of a March 31 deadline for the outlines of a deal.

"We have agreed on 90% of the technical issues," Iran's nuclear chief Ali Akbar Salehi was quoted by state television as saying from the marathon negotiations inside a plush hotel in the Swiss lakeside city of Lausanne.

"In most of the issues we have come to mutual agreements -- we have differences only in one major issue which we will try to solve in this evening's meeting" between Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and US Secretary of State John Kerry, Salehi said.

The deal being sought by Kerry, Zarif and other negotiators including Salehi and US Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz will, they hope, convince the world that Iran will not develop nuclear weapons under the guise of its civilian programme.

The accord, due to be finalised by July,

would involve Iran, which denies wanting the bomb, agreeing to scale down its nuclear activities to within strict limits in return for relief from sanctions suffocating its economy.

If they manage it and the accord holds, both sides hope it will end a 12-year stand-off and potentially help normalise Iran's international relations at a particularly volatile time in the Middle East.

However, the White House sought to temper optimism about a seemingly imminent nuclear deal with Iran, warning that some difficult issues are yet to be resolved.

"In the mind of the president the odds have not moved," said White House spokesman Josh Earnest, warning that "at best" it is a 50/50 proposition.

Critics in the United States and in Iran's arch foe Israel, widely assumed to have nuclear weapons itself, fear that the mooted restrictions on Iran's nuclear programme won't go far enough.

In Washington 47 Republican senators last week wrote an open letter to Iran's leaders telling them that Congress could alter any deal and that a future president could tear it up.



## Pakistan executes 12 death-row prisoners

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday hanged 12 convicted murderers in prisons across the country, the highest number in a single day since the government lifted a six-year moratorium on capital punishment, officials said.

Ten of the convicts were hanged in the populous Punjab province, while two others were executed in the southern metropolis of Karachi, according to prison officials who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The latest hangings bring to 39 the number sent to the gallows since Pakistan resumed executions in December after Taliban militants gunned down more than 150 people, most of them children, at a school in the restive northwest.

The partial lifting of the moratorium, which began in 2008, initially only applied to those convicted of terrorism offences, but was last week extended to all capital offences.

Two other executions planned for yesterday were stayed by courts.

In Punjab, three murder convicts were executed from the central town of Jhang, two from Rawalpindi near the capital, two from Mianwali, one from Multan, one from Faisalabad, and one from Gujranwala.

Human rights group Amnesty International estimates that Pakistan has more than 8,000 prisoners on death row, most of whom have exhausted the appeals process.

Supporters of the death penalty in Pakistan argue that it is the only effective way to deal with the scourge of militancy.

## SPATE OF COMMUNAL INCIDENTS Uproar erupts in Indian Houses

THE HINDU ONLINE

Indian lower house of the parliament yesterday witnessed noisy scenes yesterday when the Congress and the AIADMK raised the issue of desecration of a church in Hisar, the rape of a nun in West Bengal and a communally objectionable statement made by senior BJP leader Subramanian Swamy in Assam.

Raising the issue, Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi said, "I want to draw the attention of my colleagues to the growing fear among people and rising incidents of religious intolerance. A church was desecrated in Hisar in Haryana, and the state government said legal papers were not available. Can that be a reason (for destroying a church)?"

Gogoi also pointed out that a national executive member from the BJP had visited Assam and made objectionable statements. "Does God only reside in temples, not in mosques and churches," he asked.

He was referring to a statement made by senior BJP leader Subramanian Swamy in Assam: he reportedly said mosques and churches are mere "buildings" to offer prayers, and therefore there was "no problem in demolishing them."

The AIADMK's PB Venugopal, echoing Gogoi on the issue, said, "India is a secular country and all politicians must avoid glorifying any one religion."

Immediately, after that, as chaos continued in the Lok Sabha, the Congress' Adhir Ranjan Choudhury and the CPI(M)'s Mohammad Salim raised the issue of the rape of a nun in West Bengal's Ranaghat district. Salim stressed that communal incidents was not confined to one state or one



religion, hitting out at the BJP, the ruling party, accusing it of "creating a communal situation in the country."

Immediately, the BJP's SS Ahluwalia who represents West Bengal's Darjeeling constituency, jumped to his feet at this point and addressed the house in Bengali, attacked the Trinamool Congress government in the state. This saw the Trinamool's Saugata Roy joining issue with Ahluwalia, stressing that Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had visited the traumatised nun in Ranaghat and promised stern action against the culprits.

Union Parliamentary Affairs Minister M Venkaiah Naidu, then rose to his feet to support the Trinamool Congress, but went on to dissociate his government from the communal episodes in Haryana and West Bengal, and his party from Swamy's statement in Assam.

There was also uproar in the Rajya Sabha over comments by Swamy in Assam where he reportedly said mosques are not religious places.

## Repeated remembering 'wipes similar memories'

BBC ONLINE

Recalling a particular memory can cause us to forget another, similar memory - and neuroscientists have now watched this process happen using brain scans.

Inside the brains of human subjects, they pinpointed the unique imprints of two visual memories that were triggered by the same word.

Then they watched as repeatedly recalling one of the images caused the second, interfering memory to vanish.

The study is published in the journal Nature Neuroscience. The results suggest that our brains actively delete memories that might distract us from the task at hand.

"People are used to thinking of forgetting as something passive," said lead author Dr Maria Wimber from the University of Birmingham.

"Our research reveals that people are more engaged than they realise in shaping what they remember of their lives."

Dr Wimber performed the study with colleagues from the MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit in Cambridge.

The idea that frequently recalling something can cause us to forget closely related memories is not new; Dr Wimber explained that it had "been around since the 1990s". But never before had scientists managed to confirm that this was the result of an active suppression of the interfering memory, rather than just a passive deterioration.

## No Palestinian state, if elected Pledges Netanyahu as Israelis vote in tight race

AFP, Jerusalem

Israelis were voting yesterday in a close-fought election pitting the centre left against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who ruled out a Palestinian state in a last-ditch appeal to the far-right.

Heading to the polls on a cold, sunny day, voters cast their ballots in an election seen as a referendum on the Netanyahu years, with turnout unusually high among defiant Arab Israelis.

The last polls published on Friday indicated a narrow win for the centre-left Zionist Union, with the outcome likely to determine the prospects for new Middle East peace talks and Israel's troubled relations with its US ally.

In a last-ditch appeal to the far-right ahead of the vote, Netanyahu ruled out the establishment of a Palestinian state if reelected, effectively reneging on his 2009 endorsement of a two-state solution.

Breaking with years of diplomatic obfuscation on the question, he told the Israeli NRG website today: "I think that anyone who goes about establishing a Palestinian state today and vacat-



ing territory is giving attack territory to extremist Islam to be used against the state of Israel. That is the real reality that has been created here in recent years. Whoever ignores this is putting his head in the sand."

Asked by his interviewer whether that meant, "If you are prime minister then there won't be a Palestinian state?" Mr Netanyahu replied simply: "Indeed."

Some 5.8 million people are eligible to vote in the election, with 25 parties in the race for the Knesset's 120 seats.

But even if Netanyahu's rightwing Likud party does end up losing, he could return to power by virtue of Israel's complex proportional representation system.

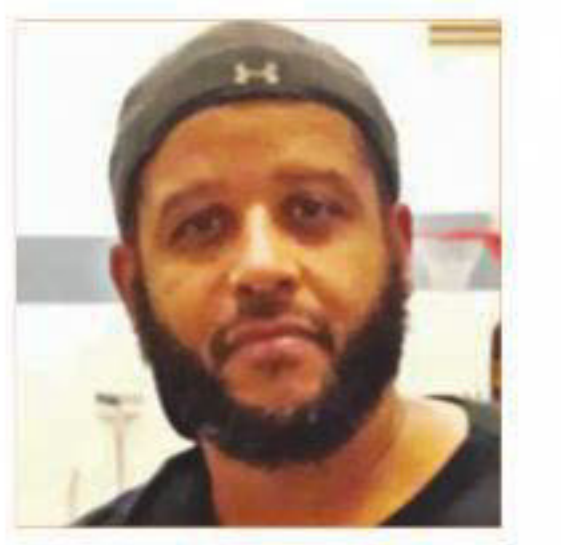
With smaller rightwing and religious parties likely to win more seats than the left, experts say Netanyahu has a better chance of piecing together a majority of at least 61 seats needed to win backing for a coalition.

Polling stations opened at 7:00am, with campaigners putting up party banners and bunting outside, as in Jerusalem the first voters shuffled in to place their slips in a blue ballot box.

Voters had until 10:00pm (2000 GMT) to cast their ballots and nine hours into the voting, turnout stood at 45.4 percent, down slightly from at the same time during the 2013 election.

Exit polls were to be published minutes after polling stations closed.

It is Israel's third election since 2009 and the biggest challenge yet for Netanyahu, who is seeking a third consecutive term but has seen polls giving Isaac Herzog's Zionist Union a three-to-four seat lead.



## Ex US Air Force man tried to Join ISIS

ABC NEWS ONLINE

A former US Air Force veteran has been arrested by the FBI for allegedly trying to join ISIS, authorities announced on Monday.

Tairoud Nathan Webster Pugh, 47, who is from New Jersey but had been living overseas for years, was secretly arrested two months ago after being deported back to the United States.

On Jan 10, he flew from Egypt to Turkey hoping to slip into Syria and "fight violent jihad" with ISIS, but Turkish authorities refused to let him enter their country, federal prosecutors say in court documents filed in Brooklyn, NY, authorities said. Egyptian authorities then deported Pugh to the United States, where he was arrested by the FBI.

A month before his alleged attempt to join ISIS, Pugh was fired from his job as an airplane mechanic in Kuwait, according to court documents. He learned how to install and maintain aircraft engines, navigation systems and weapons systems while serving in the Air Force from 1986 to 1990, the documents say.

A federal grand jury in Brooklyn, NY indicted Pugh Monday on two charges -- attempting to provide material support to terror organization, and obstruction and attempted obstruction of an official proceeding.

Over the past 18 months, about 30 US people have been charged with joining terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq or trying to do so.

Pugh converted to Islam in 1998 and "became increasingly radical in his beliefs," the feds said.

## US rules out Assad's role in Syria peace talks

### UN investigators to share names of war crimes suspects

AFP, Damascus

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad will never be part of peace negotiations to halt the brutal civil war, US officials vowed Monday, adding they were taking every step to bring an end to his rule.

Top US diplomat John Kerry appeared to suggest in a weekend interview that Washington would have to talk with Assad eventually if peace was to be forged, but State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki moved to clarify that assertion.

"As we have long said, there always has been a need for representatives of the Assad regime to be a part of that process," said Psaki.

"It would not be, and would never be -- and it wasn't what Secretary Kerry was intending to imply -- that that would be Assad himself."

Kerry's comments had caused alarm both abroad and among the US-backed opposition as the war entered its fifth year having claimed some 215,000 lives.

Meanwhile, UN investigators yesterday offered to share information from secret lists of alleged Syria war criminals with prosecutors, to help bring perpetrators to justice.

Frustrated with the situation on the ground, the head of the commission Paulo Pinheiro said the investigators would share information from the lists with prosecutors in any country preparing cases.

On the ground, Six people, including three young children, were killed in an alleged regime gas attack in northwestern Syria late Monday.

A Britain-based monitoring group said doctors in the village of Sarmin, southeast of the city of Idlib, concluded that the manner of death indicated a gas, possibly chlorine, had been emitted from the barrel bombs.

Activists have accused the Syrian regime of using chlorine -- a toxic agent that can be considered a chemical weapon -- on civilian areas in the past.



Indian Congress president Sonia Gandhi (C) walks towards the Presidential Palace in protest against land reforms proposed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi, yesterday. On Monday, Indian police fired water cannon and baton-charged demonstrators at a protest near parliament against Modi's land reforms, which opponents say will harm millions of farmers.

PHOTO: AFP