

NEWS IN brief

Africa leaders to hold Boko Haram summit

Leaders of central and west African states will hold a summit on April 8 to try to draw up a joint strategy against the threat posed by Boko Haram militants, a statement from organizers said yesterday. The meeting in Malabo, capital of Equatorial Guinea, is being jointly organized by the economic community of west African states and the economic community of Central African states.

Sri Lankan president arrives in Pakistan

Sri Lanka's new president Maithripala Sirisena arrived in Pakistan yesterday for a three-day state visit, after making his first overseas trip as leader to Islamabad's rival India. Pakistan's foreign office said Sirisena would meet his counterpart President Mamnoon Hussain and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif today.

Alps plane crash body search ends

French investigators have ended their search for bodies in the Alps where a Germanwings passenger jet crashed last month, killing all 150 people on board, a local official said on Saturday. Prosecutors believe German co-pilot Andreas Lubitz deliberately flew the Airbus A320 jet into the mountainside during a flight from Barcelona to Dusseldorf.

6 Ukrainian soldiers killed in rebel east

Six Ukrainian troops were killed in two separate incidents in the troubled separatist-held east yesterday as isolated clashes continue to violate a fragile ceasefire to end the year-long war, officials said. After a lull of several days, the latest fatalities bring to nine the number of soldiers reported dead in 48 hours.

Coalition strikes ISIS in Syria, Iraq

US and allied forces conducted 15 air strikes in Syria and Iraq against Islamic State militants during the past 24 hours. Three of the strikes targeted militants in Syria, while 12 strikes were aimed at targets in Iraq.

Blast kills cop on Key Cairo bridge

A bomb exploded near a checkpoint on a bridge in an affluent Cairo neighbourhood yesterday, killing a policeman, Egyptian police said. Two people including a woman were wounded in the blast, a health ministry official said. The bombing was claimed by jihadist group Ajnad.



Palstinians protest outside the Dome of the Rock mosque after Jewish worshippers entered the al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem under Israeli security forces protection yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Kenya unites in sorrow

Kenya's people prayed for unity yesterday at the start of three days of national mourning for the 148 people murdered in a university massacre by Somali Islamists. Flags flew at half mast after President Uhuru Kenyatta warned that people's "justified anger" should not lead to "the victimisation of anyone. (as) this would only play into the hands of the terrorists". The al-Qaeda-linked Shebab militants lined up non-Muslim students during the massacre Thursday described by Kenyatta as a "barbaric medieval slaughter". The president vowed Saturday to retaliate in the "severest way" for the killings in the northeastern town of Garissa, close to the border with Somalia. The massacre, Kenya's deadliest attack since the 1998 bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi, claimed the lives of 142 students, three police officers and three soldiers. "The terrible events in Garissa are still fresh in our minds and heart, but today is a day for new hope," Kenyan Anglican Archbishop Eliud Wabukala told a packed cathedral in Nairobi, as armed soldiers patrolled outside. "These terrorists want to cause scare and divisions in our society, but we shall tell them, you will never prevail." Top Muslim leader Hassan Ole Naado also offered his condolences. "Kenya is at war, and we must all stand together," Naado said, deputy head of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims, saying the organisation was helping to raise money for the funerals of those killed and medical costs of the scores wounded. On Saturday, the Shebab warned of a "long, gruesome war" unless Kenya withdrew its troops from Somalia, and threatened "another bloodbath".

Nuke deal: Iran talks tough

Says it could resume nuke activities if West fails to honour deal

Iran's foreign minister said that Tehran would be able to return to its nuclear activities if the West withdraws from a pact that is to be finalised in June. Foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, interviewed on a talk show on state-run TV, yesterday said, Iran has the power to take "corresponding action" and "will be able to return" its nuclear programme to the same level if the other side fails to honour the agreement. "All parties to the agreement can stop their actions in case of violation of the agreement by the other party," Zarif said.



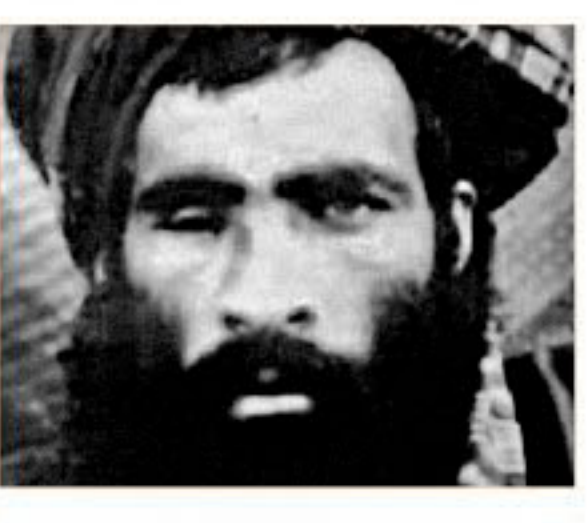
Zarif, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, said the framework nuclear deal announced by Iran and six world powers on Thursday in Switzerland was not binding until a final agreement is worked out by a June 30 deadline. His remarks appear aimed at reassuring hardliners who strongly oppose the framework agreement as a good deal for the West and disaster for Iran. Zarif said Iran is "committed" to implementing its part of any final agreement providing Western countries fulfill their promises. Despite the criticism by hardliners, the deal has been overwhelmingly backed by Iran's establishment, including President Hassan Rohani who pledged in a

speech to the nation on Friday that Iran will abide by its commitments under the nuclear deal. Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday urged the United States to seek a better deal to curb Iran's nuclear program and said he would press American lawmakers not to give Tehran "a free path to the bomb." Netanyahu, in the first of several appearances on US Sunday news programs, said he has spoken with both Democrats and Republicans in Congress - nearly two thirds of House of Representatives members and a similar number in the US Senate - about the Iran nuclear issue. "This is not a partisan issue. This is not solely an Israeli issue," Netanyahu said on CNN's "State of the Union" program. "This is a world issue because everyone is going to be threatened by the pre-eminent terrorist state of our time, keeping the infrastructure to produce not one nuclear bomb but many, many nuclear bombs down the line." US President Barack Obama called the agreement reached in Lausanne, Switzerland, a "historic understanding" and told Netanyahu in a telephone call soon afterward that the deal represented progress toward a lasting solution that cuts off Iran's path to a nuclear weapon.

Houthis ready for talks if Yemen air strikes stop

Yemen's Houthis are ready to sit down for peace talks as long as a Saudi-led air campaign is halted and the negotiations are overseen by "non-aggressive" parties, a senior Houthi member said.

Saleh al-Sammad, who was an adviser to President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, also told Reuters in emailed answers that Yemenis reject the return of Hadi, who escaped to Saudi Arabia after Shi'ite Houthi fighters edged closer to his southern base of Aden last month. Warplanes and ships from a Saudi-led coalition have been bombing the Iran-allied Houthi forces for 11 days, saying they are trying drive back the Houthis and restore Hadi. UN brokered peace talks in the preceding weeks between Hadi and the Houthis had failed. "We still stand by our position on dialogue and we demand its continuation despite everything that has happened, on the basis of respect and acknowledging the other," Sammad said. "We have no conditions except a halt to the aggression and sitting on the dialogue table within a specific time period ... and any international or regional parties that have no aggressive positions towards the Yemeni people can oversee the dialogue," Sammad said, without specifying who they might be. Sammad added that he wanted the dialogue sessions aired to the Yemeni people "so that they can know who is the obstructor". Saudi Arabia's King Salman was quoted as saying on Monday that the kingdom was also ready for a political meeting of Yemeni parties, under the auspices of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Five out of the six GCC member states are part of the military coalition bombing which is bombing the Houthis.



Mullah Omar loves RPG 7, has 'humour'

Reveals his biography

The Afghan Taliban have published a surprise biography of the reclusive Mullah Mohammed Omar, to mark his 19th year as their supreme leader. The 5,000-word biography on their main website clarifies disputed facts about his birth and upbringing. It lists his favourite weapon - the RPG 7 - and says he leads a simple life and has a "special" sense of humour. It says Mullah Omar, whose whereabouts are unknown, "remains in touch" with day-to-day Afghan and world events. The US state department has a \$10m bounty on Mullah Omar, who has not been seen since the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. It was Mullah Omar's backing for al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden that sparked the campaign. It is unclear why the Taliban have chosen the 19th anniversary of his supreme leadership to publish the biography but some analysts say it may be an attempt to counter the growing influence of Islamic State in Afghanistan. Commentators and Taliban watchers have been unable to agree on many facts about Mullah Omar, including his birth and heritage. The biography says he was born in 1960 in the village of Chah-i-Himmat, in the Khakrez district of Kandahar province, in the south of the country.

Cern restarts 'Big Bang' collider

AGENCIES

Scientists at Europe's particle physics research centre Cern yesterday restarted their "Big Bang" Large Hadron Collider (LHC), embarking on a new bid to resolve some mysteries of the universe and look for "dark matter". The machine had been shut for two years for a refit. Hopes for the second run lie in breaking out of what is known as the "Standard Model" of how the universe works at the level of elementary particles, and into "New Physics". That includes searching for the dark matter that makes up about 96 per cent of the stuff of the universe. Scientists are preparing for particle-smashing collisions expected to start in June, though any new discoveries made are unlikely to emerge until mid-2016. The overhaul included new magnets, much higher energy beams and voltages and a complete check of all wiring around the underground 27km (17-mile) LHC tunnel and its four major detectors and multiple magnets. During the last run, from 2010 to 2013, physicists tracked down the legendary Higgs boson particle after years of searching in the recorded debris from particle collisions at Cern and in other smaller colliders. In two months, Cern will start smashing particles into each other in the LHC with nearly twice the energy compared with that first run from 2010-2013, and as before at close to the speed of light.



Armenian Christian Catholic Iraqis sing during a mass for Easter Sunday celebrations at Umm al-Nour Church yesterday, the capital of the Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq. PHOTO: AFP

'It wasn't Yoko I lost John to'

Beatle's former wife breaks silence before dying

For almost 50 years she kept an astonishing secret, refusing to attack the woman who ruined her life. When Cynthia Lennon died aged 75 from cancer last week, the world believed her marriage to Beatles star John had been destroyed by Yoko Ono. Yet the truth about John and his relationships with women is infinitely more complex, and vastly more revealing of his real character, than the enduring myth. In a rare and never before published interview, Cynthia revealed that her former husband believed the true love of his life was not Yoko Ono, but Alma Cogan, a fading female singing star eight years older than himself.



Cynthia Lennon revealed her former husband believed Alma Cogan was the reincarnation of his mother.

How Saddam's military officers control ISIS

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When Abu Hamza, a former Syrian rebel, agreed to join Isis, he did so assuming he would become a part of the group's promised Islamist utopia, which has lured foreign jihadists from around the globe. Instead, he found himself being supervised by an Iraqi emir and receiving orders from shadowy Iraqis who moved in and out of the battlefield in Syria. When Abu Hamza disagreed with fellow commanders at an "Islamic State" meeting last year, he said, he was placed under arrest on the orders of a masked Iraqi man who had sat silently through the proceedings, listening and taking notes. Abu Hamza, who became the group's ruler in a small community in Syria, never discovered the Iraqis' real identities, which were cloaked by code names or simply not revealed. All of the men, however, were former Iraqi officers who had served under Saddam Hussein,

including the masked man, who had once worked for an Iraqi intelligence agency and now belonged to the Islamic State's own shadowy security service, he said. US Marines chain the head of a statue of Saddam Hussein before pulling it down in Baghdad's al-Fardous square 09 April 2003, while an Iraqi waves the US flag. His account, and those of others who have lived with or fought against the Islamic State over the past two years, underscore the pervasive role played by members of Iraq's former Baathist army in an organisation more typically associated with flamboyant foreign jihadists and the gruesome videos in which they star. Even with the influx of thousands of foreign fighters, almost all of the leaders of the Islamic State are former Iraqi officers, including the members of its shadowy military and security committees, and the majority of its emirs and princes, according to Iraqis, Syrians and analysts who study the group.

They have brought to the organisation the military expertise and some of the agendas of the former Baathists, as well as the smuggling networks developed to avoid sanctions in the 1990s and which now facilitate the Islamic State's illicit oil trading. In Syria, local "emirs" are typically shadowed by a deputy who is Iraqi and makes the real decisions, said Abu Hamza, who fled to Turkey last summer after growing disillusioned with the group. He uses a pseudonym because he fears for his safety. "All the decision makers are Iraqi, and most of them are former Iraqi officers. The Iraqi officers are in command, and they make the tactics and the battle plans," he said. "But the Iraqis themselves don't fight. They put the foreign fighters on the front lines." The public profile of the foreign jihadists frequently obscures the Islamic State's roots in the bloody recent history of Iraq, its brutal excesses as much a symptom as a cause of the country's woes. The raw cruelty of Hussein's Baathist regime, the disbandment of the Iraqi army after the US-led invasion in 2003, the subsequent insurgency and the marginalization of Sunni Iraqis by the Shia-dominated government all are intertwined with the Islamic State's ascent, said Hassan Hassan, a Dubai-based analyst and co-author of the book Isis: Inside the Army of Terror.

