

NEWS IN brief

Storm in eastern India kills 42

AFP, New Delhi
A powerful storm swept through India's eastern Bihar state overnight leaving at least 42 people dead and destroying crops and properties, officials and a report said yesterday. The storm lashed several districts across the impoverished state, uprooting trees, toppling power lines and destroying

Malaysia moves UK top court over massacre

AFP, London
Relatives of 24 rubber-plantation workers killed in Malaysia in 1948 by British troops pressed their decades-old demand for a public inquiry in Britain's highest court yesterday. The December 12, 1948 incident, dubbed the "Batang Kali massacre", occurred during the so-called Malayan Emergency, when Commonwealth forces fought a communist-inspired revolt in the

17 Indian pilgrims killed in Nepal bus crash

AFP, Kathmandu
Seventeen Indian pilgrims were killed when a bus swerved off a highway in central Nepal yesterday and plunged 300 metres down a mountain, police said. The bus was heading to the Indian town of Gorakhpur returning from a pilgrimage to the famed Hindu temple of Pashupatinath in Kathmandu, when the

France foils imminent terror attack

AFP, Paris
France yesterday said it had foiled a jihadist plot to attack a church after an Algerian who accidentally shot himself was found with a stash of weapons and documents mentioning Islamist militant groups. The suspect, who was admitted to a Paris hospital after his arrest, was known to intelligence services over comments on social networks expressing his desire to go and fight in Syria alongside jihadists, said Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve.

Austria recognises Armenian genocide

AFP, Vienna
Austrian lawmakers yesterday condemned as "genocide" for the first time the massacre of Armenians by Ottoman Turks during World War I, ahead of the massacre's 100th anniversary. They called on Turkey - which does not accept the highly sensitive term - to take responsibility for its role in the mass murders. Armenians say up to 1.5 million of their ancestors were killed by Ottoman



Pro-democracy demonstrators stage a protest outside the government building in Hong Kong yesterday. Hong Kong's government announced a roadmap for leadership elections which offered no concessions to the city's democracy camp -- prompting opposition lawmakers to walk out of the plan's unveiling.

Taliban announce 'spring offensive'

AFP, Kabul
The Afghan Taliban said their annual "spring offensive" will begin tomorrow, vowing nationwide attacks in what is expected to be the bloodiest fighting season in a decade as Nato forces pull back from the frontlines.
This year's offensive marks the first fighting season in which Afghan forces will battle the insurgents without the full support of US-led foreign combat troops.
The militants have already stepped up attacks on government and foreign targets in recent weeks, taking a heavy toll on civilians and Afghan security forces.
"The Islamic Emirate is going to launch the spring operations under the inspirational name of 'Azim' (Determination) at 5 am on 24th April 2015," the Taliban said in a statement yesterday, using their official name.
"The main targets of these operations... will be the foreign occupiers, especially their permanent military bases... officials of the stooge regime, their military constellations, especially their intelligence, interior ministry and defence ministry officials."
Nato's combat mission formally ended in December but a small follow-up foreign force has stayed on to train and support local security personnel.
US President Barack Obama last month backpedalled on plans to shrink the US force in Afghanistan this year by nearly half, agreeing to keep the current level of 9,800 US troops until the end of 2015.

Saudi air strikes continue

Rebels demand end to all attacks as talks condition

AFP, Taz
Yemeni rebels demanded a Saudi-led coalition completely end its attacks as a condition for UN-sponsored talks, as the alliance launched new air strikes yesterday a day after declaring its month-long campaign over.
The fresh raids broke a brief lull after the coalition's announcement on Tuesday night that the first phase of its "successful" bombing campaign had finished and that it was now focusing on political efforts.
The Saudi-led coalition had warned it stood ready to counter any advance by the rebels and their allies, however.
And it duly responded with more firepower when the Huthi rebels took advantage of the cessation in Yemen's third city Taz to overrun the headquarters of the 35th Armoured Brigade loyal to President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi.

"We demand, after a complete end to the aggression against Yemen and the lifting of the blockade, to resume political dialogue... under the sponsorship of the United Nations," said spokesman Mohammed Abdulsalam.
In an apparent goodwill gesture, the rebels freed three top commanders -- including the defence minister and a brother of Hadi -- whom it had captured in the past month, mediators said.
Riyadh said the strikes, which it launched on March 26 as the rebels closed in on Hadi's last refuge in Aden, had succeeded in eliminating the threat posed to Saudi Arabia and its neighbours by the rebels' air and missile capabilities.
But rebels remain in control of Sanaa and swathes of the country while Hadi is in exile in Riyadh, where he fled when the raids began.

Meanwhile, Arab League military chiefs yesterday decided to form a panel to examine all aspects of building a region-wide military force aimed at combatting jihadists, including the Islamic State (ISIS) group.
The bloc agreed in March to set up the force, with members given four months to decide on its composition, precise rules of engagement and budget.
It was not immediately clear when the committee will actually be formed, but the statement said it would meet in the next few weeks.
US President Barack Obama called on Tehran to help find a political solution.
"What we need to do is bring all the parties together and find a political arrangement. It is not solved by having another proxy war in Yemen," he said.
Meanwhile, a statement from Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif's office said he would make a one-day trip to Riyadh today, and welcomed the Saudi announcement of the end of the air attacks in Yemen.
Sharif will be joined by the country's powerful army chief Raheel Sharif, defence minister Khawaja Asif and other senior officials. Pakistan has remained neutral in the conflict despite heavy pressure from the Gulf countries.

YEMEN CRISIS

- Rebels seize brigade HQ in third city Taz
- Arab top brass to set up panel on regional force
- Pak PM heads to Saudi to discuss conflict

JAPAN'S WARTIME ATROCITIES

Abe offers 'remorse' but no WWII apology

BBC ONLINE
Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has expressed "deep remorse" over his country's actions during World War Two, stopping short of the fresh apology demanded by Japan's neighbours.
Abe was speaking at a summit in Indonesia, where he also met Chinese leader Xi Jinping.
His speech included a warning against mighty nations using "unchecked force" - an apparent reference to China.
Abe has been accused of playing down Japan's wartime atrocities.
China and South Korea say he has pursued a "revisionist" approach to history, placing a further strain on ties already weakened by territorial disputes and regional rivalry.
A Chinese foreign ministry spokesman, quoted by the Associated Press news agency on Tuesday, said Japan should "squarely face and reflect on the history of aggression" and "gain trust" from its neighbours.
At the speech at the Asia-Africa summit in the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, Abe said Japan felt "deep remorse over the past war" and promised to avoid aggression and settle international disputes peacefully.
The statement is unlikely to please China or South Korea, which have demanded a full apology from Japan over its military's conduct when it occupied their territory during the war.
Abe's speech also warned against the "unchecked use of force by the mightier to twist the weaker around" - terms he has often used to describe China.
"The rule of law should protect the dignity of sovereign nations, be they large or small," he said, speaking after Xi.
Xi and Abe met on the sidelines of the summit later on Wednesday, raising hopes of warming ties between the two nations.

Tricky drafting of Iran nuke deal begins

AFP, Vienna
Iran and major powers yesterday began the difficult process of finalising by June 30 a historic deal putting an Iranian nuclear bomb out of reach, three weeks after agreeing the main outlines.
Following a negotiating marathon in Switzerland, Iran agreed on April 2 to what US President Barack Obama called a "historic understanding... which, if fully implemented, will prevent (Iran) from obtaining a nuclear weapon."
This will include Iran dramatically scaling back its nuclear activities and submitting those that remain to what Obama described the "most robust and intrusive inspections and transparency regime ever negotiated".
In return, the United States and five other major powers committed to lift certain sanctions that have caused the Islamic republic of 75 million people major economic pain.

XENOPHOBIC ATTACK

Zuma vows action as army deployed

AFP, Johannesburg
President Jacob Zuma yesterday pledged to tackle xenophobia in South Africa as troops were sent in to support police in a crackdown against attacks on immigrants that have left at least seven people dead.
Overnight Tuesday, 11 men were arrested in a joint police and army raid on a hostel in downtown Johannesburg, hours after the military was deployed.
After meeting business, civil and religious leaders, Zuma said his government would take decisive steps to address "underlying" problems behind the attacks and ensure foreigners were not targeted.
"South Africans are not xenophobic," he said.
"We have taken a decision that we don't want to see it again and therefore we are going to be working together with that determination."
Many South Africans believe poverty and a severe jobs shortage is one driving factor behind mobs in Johannesburg and in the port city of Durban targeting migrants from Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique and other African countries.

Asian African Summit

Strengthening South-South Cooperation to Promote World Peace and Prosperity

Jakarta, Indonesia, 22-23 April 2015

Asian African leaders gather for a family photo at the Asian African Summit. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is seen in the first row, fourth from right.

Indian farmer hangs himself in Delhi protesting land reform

AFP, New Delhi
A farmer hanged himself in front of hundreds of protesters gathered in the centre of the Indian capital yesterday to rally against the government's contentious reform of land purchasing laws.
Television footage of the protest close to the nation's parliament showed the farmer sitting in the branches of a tree before taking a scarf and hanging himself, as protesters, police and media crews looked on.
The farmer, reportedly a father of three from the desert state of Rajasthan, was rushed to hospital but declared dead on arrival.
Prime Minister Narendra Modi said the nation was "deeply shattered and disappointed" over the farmer's death.
"At no point must the hardworking farmer think he is alone. We are all together in creating a better tomorrow for the farmers of India," Modi said on Twitter.
The Delhi police announced an investigation into the sequence of events leading to the farmer's death.
Anger was mounting over whether police and rally organisers did enough to save the man, as a political row erupted over who was to blame for the suicide.
The tree was several metres from the stage where Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and members of his party were due to speak against the national government's land bill.
Local media said a suicide note had been recovered from the farmer's body, which said he had recently suffered crop losses because of unseasonal rains in Rajasthan.
Kejriwal and his Aam Aadmi Party quickly came under fire from political opponents for continuing the rally even after the farmer was taken down from the tree.



India takes Al Jazeera off air over map row

AFP, New Delhi
India's government took Al Jazeera news channel off the air yesterday for five days after officials insisted it had repeatedly shown wrong maps of disputed Kashmir.
Al Jazeera in India showed a blue screen yesterday with a sign saying "as instructed by the ministry of information and broadcasting, this channel will not be available".
An official said the order was made earlier this month over the maps that showed parts of the Himalayan Kashmir region in arch rival Pakistan and China, an extremely sensitive issue in India.
"The ban has been imposed for five days and it was done on instructions of an inter-ministerial committee, who took cognisance of an incorrect map of India in which the channel showed parts of Kashmir in Pakistan and China," the official told AFP on condition of anonymity.
According to local media reports, Al Jazeera breached India's broadcasting code over the maps shown in 2014 and 2013 which on some occasions also did not include the Lakshadweep and Andaman islands.
Kashmir is divided between India and Pakistan but both claim the whole of the region and have gone to war twice over its control since partition in 1947.
The government in 2011 ordered The Economist magazine to cover up a map of disputed borders in Kashmir. The news weekly placed white stickers over a diagram of the borders on 28,000 copies on sale in India.

Sri Lanka ex-leader's brother arrested

AFP, Colombo
Sri Lankan authorities arrested the youngest brother of former president Mahinda Rajapakse for "misappropriating" public funds, his lawyer said yesterday, hours after the ex-leader accused his successor of a witch-hunt.
Former economic development minister Basil Rajapakse was taken into custody after being questioned for more than seven hours, his lawyer UR de Silva told AFP, adding that the charge was for a non-bailable offence.
Two senior officials who worked under Basil Rajapakse were also arrested on charges that the three of them were responsible for a \$530,000 fraud involving the construction of public housing. Basil had fled to the US soon after his brother lost the January 8 election.

Liberland: World's latest nation?

Man sets up his own nation; 160,000 register to become citizens

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
Czech man Vit Jedlicka has claimed a 7km2 stretch of land on the west bank of the Danube river as the Free Republic of Liberland, after disputes between Serbia and Croatia rendered it technically no man's land.
It's no half-assed attempt at nation formation either - Liberland already has a constitution, flag, coat of arms, official website, Facebook page and a motto: "To live and let live".
Liberland "prides itself on personal and economic freedom of its people, with its constitution seeking to "significantly limits the power of politicians [to] interfere too much in the freedoms of the Liberland nation."
We have just received endorsement for our activities from Austrian ambassador. We are on good way to establish special political relations with this country.
Jedlicka (still an unelected president) called for 5,000 people to become part of the new sovereign state, located on terra nullius at 45° 46' N, 18° 52' E, but 160,000 people ended up applying, according to Geek.com, leading him and seven volunteers to sift through registrations.
Liberland is looking for people who "have respect for other people and respect the opinions of others, regardless of their race, ethnicity, orientation, or religion," and "do not have communist, nazi or other extremist past".