

NEWS IN brief

Afghan Taliban launch spring offensive

REUTERS, Kabul
Taliban insurgents shot rockets onto a US base outside Kabul and targeted Afghan government buildings in a provincial capital yesterday, as they officially launched their spring offensive in a year that has already seen fierce fighting. There were no casualties in either rocket attack, officials said. This year's fighting season is expected to be intense after Nato forces ended their 13-year combat mission in December.

EU clears 19 GMO products

AFP, Brussels
The EU has cleared 19 controversial genetically modified products including human food, animal feed and cut flowers, the European Commission said Friday. "All the GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms) approved today have been proved to be safe before their placing on the EU market," it said in a statement.

UN talks with Syria rival sides on May 4

AFP, Geneva
The United Nations yesterday said it would host separate talks with rival sides in Syria from May 4 in a bid to kickstart stalled negotiations to end the four-year conflict. UN spokesman Ahmad Fawzi said the talks would last between four and six weeks and would be at "mostly ambassadorial level and expert level".

14 migrants killed in Macedonia train horror

AFP, Skopje
At least 14 immigrants from Somalia and Afghanistan were killed in central Macedonia when they were hit by an international passenger train, officials said yesterday. The train driver reported seeing several dozen people sitting on or near the track at about 10:30 pm (2030 GMT) on Thursday but was unable to stop in time, a local prosecutor said in a statement.

3 cops arrested over Indian model rape

AFP, Mumbai
Police in Mumbai have arrested three officers who allegedly raped a model in a police station and then demanded several thousand dollars as blackmail to keep quiet, a deputy commissioner said yesterday. Deputy commissioner Dhananjay Kulkarni said the woman has alleged she was then driven to a police outpost and raped by the officers before they extorted up to 500,000 rupees from her.

India restricts US charity's funding

AFP, New Delhi
India has cracked down on the Ford Foundation, saying the US charity can no longer give money to local organisations without government permission, the latest move against a foreign NGO, an official said yesterday. A government intelligence report last year reportedly claimed that local activists were working with foreign powers to undermine India's economic growth.

Israeli tanks strike Gaza after rocket fired

AFP, Gaza City
Israeli tanks hit a position of the Islamist movement Hamas in the Gaza Strip after a rocket was launched on southern Israel from the Palestinian enclave, Israel's army said yesterday. A military statement said its overnight strike had targeted "terrorist infrastructure" in the north of the Strip. A spokesman for Gaza's emergency services said nobody was wounded.



From top, clockwise, People lay flowers at the Tsitsernakaberd Memorial in Yerevan, Armenia, yesterday, as part of the Armenian genocide centenary commemoration; members of the Armenian community hold the Armenian flags and placards during a demonstration in front of the Turkish consulate in Jerusalem; and people wearing gags gather in central Moscow to protest the killings a century ago. Story on page 16.

ARMENIA GENOCIDE WHO SAID WHAT

Yesterday marked a century since the start of the massacres waged by Ottoman forces, which Armenia says killed 1.5 million people between 1915 and 1917.

"The Armenian people of the Ottoman Empire were deported, massacred, and marched to their deaths. Their culture and heritage in their ancient homeland were erased" --US President Barack Obama condemns the cleansing of 1.5 million people but refuses to call it genocide.

"Recognition of the genocide is a triumph of human conscience and justice over intolerance and hatred" --Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan

"There is no and cannot be any justification for mass murder of people" --Russian President Vladimir Putin

"Important words have already been said in Turkey, but others are still expected so that shared grief can become shared destiny" --French President Hollande urging Turkey to recognize genocide

"History is history, victims are victims and this day has to be honoured in their memory" --Bulgarian Prime Minister

Survivor blasts US 'shame'

AFP, Los Angeles
A 101-year-old survivor of the massacre of 1.5 million Armenians a century ago has blasted the US refusal to label the killings as genocide, calling the decision a "shame" for America.

Yevnige Salibian, who lives in a care home in California, said she thought President Barack Obama's decision not to use the word was due to Washington's political and diplomatic interests in Turkey.

"Why? For political reasons! They have bases in Turkey, army bases. For their political gain, they don't want to recognize it. And it's shame, shame for America," she said.

During his 2008 campaign for the White House, then senator Obama had pledged to "recognize the Armenian genocide."

But the White House this week avoided referring to the mass World War I killings of Armenians as genocide, as a diplomatic row raged ahead of the tragedy's 100th anniversary on Friday.

EU to seek UN clearance Agrees to triple funding for migrant rescue mission

AFP, Brussels
Britain and France agreed Thursday to seek UN approval for an EU military operation against people smugglers, in a bid to curb the soaring number of migrants dying as they seek a better life in Europe.

At crisis talks in Brussels, EU leaders also decided to triple funds for the bloc's maritime search and rescue operation, as horrific details continued to emerge of last weekend's shipwreck that saw hundreds drown in the Mediterranean's worst migrant disaster.

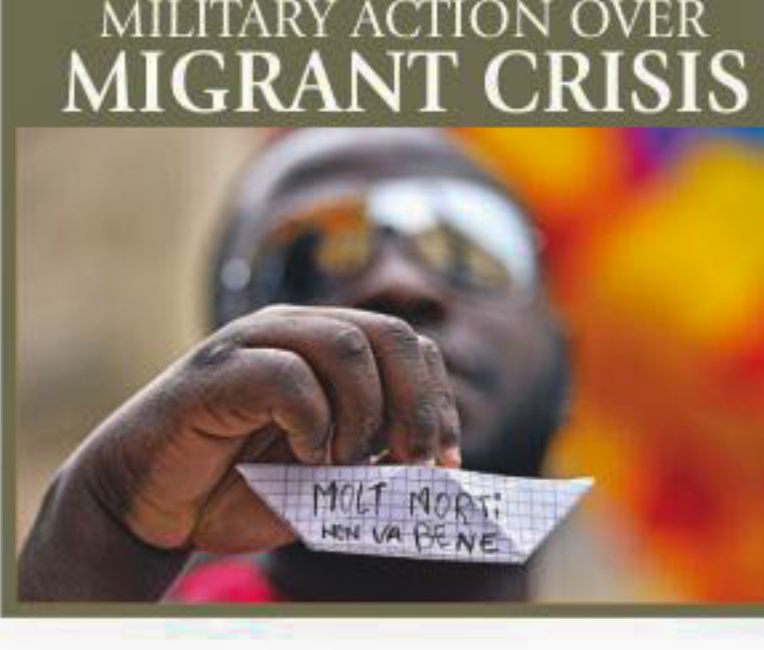
Triton's funding will increase from the current three million euros (\$3.2 million) a month to nine million euros.

European Council President Donald Tusk said EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini had been tasked to "propose action in order to capture and destroy the smugglers' vessels before they can be used."

Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi added that leaders from France and Britain -- both permanent members of

the UN Security Council -- had "committed to get a resolution from the United Nations for an intervention in Libya."

But leaders failed to agree on concrete action over the sensitive issue of what to do with migrants -- many of whom depart from chaos-ridden Libya



-- once they land on European shores.

Draft proposals leaked before the summit had suggested that member states provide resettlement to 5,000 migrants, but no number was given in the concluding statement.

Ahead of the high-profile gathering,

poignant events had taken place in Malta and Brussels to try and highlight the tragic human dimension of migrant shipwrecks.

Already, more than 1,750 migrants have died crossing the Mediterranean this year -- 30 times more than the same period in 2014.

Malta honoured the more than 750 victims of last weekend's shipwreck with an inter-faith funeral service -- the wooden coffins of 24 of the dead carried away by soldiers for private burials.

French President Francois Hollande, meanwhile, said any decision to destroy the traffickers' ships would have to be in line with international law.

"It can only be done through a resolution of the Security Council," he said.

But experts have questioned the feasibility of a military response to the crisis.

"It's not an easy task to go shoot down boats in Libyan ports," a European source who wished to remain anonymous said.

He pointed out that the radical Islamic State group was in control of parts of chaos-ridden Libya.

Laden allies planned to bomb Vatican Says Italy as it dismantles terror cell

AFP, Rome

Italian police yesterday said they had dismantled an Islamist network they have linked to Osama bin Laden, one of Pakistan's deadliest attacks and, more loosely, a possible plot to bomb the Vatican.

A total of 18 people were ordered arrested following a six-year investigation that began with a probe into an illegal immigration racket allegedly run from the island of Sardinia. Only nine of the suspects had been detained by Friday afternoon.

Mario Carta, an officer in the DIGOS anti-terrorism unit that carried out the investigation, acknowledged there was no firm evidence of a conspiracy to kill the pope, only "strong suspicions" based on wiretapped conversations in which the suspects had spoken "in ironic terms" about the leader of the world's Catholics.

Wiretap recordings suggest two members of the network were part of bin Laden's security detail before his slaying by US special forces in Pakistan in May 2011, according to a police statement. Others remained in contact with the late al-Qaeda leader's relatives after his death.

Some of the men arrested or being sought are suspected of involvement in the October 2009 bombing of the Meena Bazaar in Peshawar, which left more than 100 dead and over 200 people injured.

US drone war under fire after failed strike

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama's admission Thursday that a US drone strike accidentally took the lives of two hostages has raised fresh questions about the limits and the risks of the country's "targeted killing" campaign.

Since taking office in 2009, Obama has relied heavily on drone raids to hunt down al-Qaeda leaders and other Islamist extremists from Pakistan's tribal areas to Somalia and Yemen.

But the botched strike revealed that the US had no idea an American aid worker, Warren Weinstein, and an Italian humanitarian, Giovanni Lo Porto, were in the same compound as al-Qaeda militants when the drone raid was launched in January.

The White House also admitted that US intelligence was flawed for another drone strike at about the same time, which killed two US citizens who were al-Qaeda operatives but who Washington did not know were present.

"I think this is going to push the debate about the effectiveness of drones," said Seth Jones, a former adviser to US special forces and a fellow at the RAND Corporation.

Human rights groups and some lawmakers have long questioned the legality and the morality of the drone air war, citing estimates of thousands of civilian casualties caused by the strikes. Military experts have cast doubt on the ultimate effect of the raids on extremist groups.

Intelligence experts say hundreds of drone strikes have not defeated or seriously reduced the size of al-Qaeda. But the Obama administration has promoted the tactic as a superior strategy to the large ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan pursued during Bush's presidency.



Iraq claims major gain over ISIS

Says 'over 250' jihadists killed in just a few days

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A senior commander in the Iraqi army claims his forces have killed hundreds of Islamic State jihadists and retaken swathes of territory in Anbar province, where the extremist group launched a counteroffensive in recent weeks.

Lieutenant General Abdul Amir al Shamamri told Sky News his forces had killed "more than 250 terrorists in the past few days".

He said this had been achieved with assistance from the Iraqi air force, military helicopters and coalition air strikes. "The coalition strikes provided cover for our troops to push forward."

ISIS captured large parts of the capital Ramadi last week and still controls most of the province. Militants have launched suicide attacks targeting government buildings and checkpoints and are responding fiercely to Iraqi attacks with heavy artillery.

A military official said thousands of police officers and residents who fled Ramadi are now returning back to their homes as more reinforcements arrive, according to Washington Post.



An armed militiaman loyal to Yemen's fugitive President Abderabbo Mansour Hadi keeps position during reported clashes with Huthi rebels in the port city of Aden's Dar Saad suburb, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Missing plane is in the Bay of Bengal! Aviation expert claims he has found wreckage

ANI, London

An aviation technology expert has reportedly claimed that he has spotted the remains of missing Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 but needs 1.3 million pounds to find it.

Andre Milne, who has been investigating the case independently since the flight disappeared in March last year, has said that he located the wreckage in the ocean between Malaysia and India, reported The Mirror.

He insisted that the debris in the Bay of Bengal must be probed. While remarking that the disappearance of the flight had touched every single person in different ways, Milne urged people to come forward and donate 6.70 pounds each



Ex-CIA chief fined, gets probation

INFO LEAK CASE

AFP, Washington

Former CIA chief David Petraeus was given two years' probation and fined \$100,000 on Thursday for providing classified secrets to his mistress, capping a dramatic fall from grace for the man feted for changing the course of the Iraq war.

Petraeus, a decorated four-star general and the most revered commander of his generation, pleaded guilty in a North Carolina court, avoiding a trial that would have cast an embarrassing light on details of his affair and his flouting of secrecy laws.

The Justice Department had previously said that Petraeus, 62, had acknowledged giving eight "black books" -- logs he kept as the US commander in Afghanistan -- to his lover and biographer, Paula Broadwell.

The five-by-eight-inch notebooks were meant to serve as source material for Broadwell's book about the general, "All In: The Education of General David Petraeus."

They included Petraeus's daily schedule, classified notes, the identities of covert officers, details about US intelligence capabilities, code words and accounts of his meetings with President Barack Obama, according to court documents.

SA suspends parliament

AFP, Cape Town

South Africa's parliament will be suspended from next week to enable lawmakers to return to their constituencies to spread the anti-xenophobia message, in the wake of deadly xenophobic attacks.

The violence against foreigners has killed at least seven people and driven thousands from their homes.

More than 20 years after the end of apartheid, however, high unemployment and a lack of chances for young blacks have made impoverished and crowded townships a powder-keg of frustration.