

NEWS IN
brief

US offers \$20m on ISIS leaders
BBC ONLINE

The US government is offering rewards totalling \$20m (£13m) for information on what it says are four leaders of the Islamic State (ISIS) militant group. It named the four as Abdul Rahman Mustafa al-Qaduli, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, Tarkhan Tayumurazovich Batirashvili and Tariq bin al-Tahar bin al-Falih al-Awni al-Harzi.

US ferry services to Cuba approved
REUTERS, Miami

The US Treasury Department on Tuesday approved licenses for passenger ferry service between the United States and Cuba, a Treasury Department official told Reuters. Ferry services between Cuba and the United States were cut off in the early 1960s, following the Cuban revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power.

India fireworks factory blast kills 11; 6 hurt
AFP, Kolkata

An explosion at an illegal fireworks factory in eastern India has killed 11 people and injured six others, a senior police officer said yesterday. Police arrested the factory owner over the explosion which happened late Wednesday at a village in West Bengal about 130 kilometres from the state capital Kolkata, Inspector General Anuj Sharma said.

Ebola deaths pass 11,000 mark: WHO
AFP, Geneva

The number of deaths from the Ebola epidemic now exceeds 11,000, figures from the World Health Organization showed on Wednesday. The worst ever outbreak of Ebola began in southern Guinea in December 2013 before spreading to Liberia and Sierra Leone.

7.1 quake strikes off PNG, Solomon Islands
AFP, Sydney

A 7.1 magnitude earthquake struck in the Pacific between Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands yesterday, but a tsunami threat passed and there were no reports of major damage, seismologists said. The quake hit at 0710 GMT at a depth of 23.2 kilometres, some 144 kilometres southwest of Panguna in PNG and 642 kilometres from the Solomons capital Honiara, the US Geological Survey said.

Afghan forces defend Kunduz from Taliban
BBC ONLINE

The Afghan government has launched a major offensive against Taliban forces near the north-eastern provincial capital of Kunduz. The Taliban have come close to the city in recent fighting, leaving it cut off and displacing tens of thousands. Security forces and Taliban have been involved in a standoff for about a week after the insurgents launched an offensive on Kunduz at the end of April.

Pirate William Kidd's 'treasure' discovered
INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Archaeologists in Madagascar believe they have discovered treasure belonging to the ruthless Scottish pirate William Kidd. Divers brought a 50kg silver bar to the shore and soldiers have been guarding the suspected treasure at Sainte Marie Island, the BBC reports. Kidd was born in 1645 and was chosen by the British authorities to hunt down pirates. He later betrayed and was eventually convicted of piracy and murder by parliament. He was hanged in 1701.



DEATH TOLL
7,800

NEPAL ENDS QUAKE MOURNING

Nepalese people participate in a candle-light memorial for the victims of the April 25 earthquake in Kathmandu, yesterday. Nepal wrapped up a 13-day period of mourning May 7 for victims of an earthquake as its broken capital began slowly picking up the pieces. As authorities released figures showing nearly 300,000 homes were destroyed by the quake in Kathmandu alone, mourners gathered around a damaged Hindu temple for the first of a series of ceremonies.

PHOTO: AFP

Everest may have shrunk: Report

PTI, Kathmandu

The devastating earthquake that has rocked Nepal not only killed thousands but may have also shrunk the height of the world's tallest peak — Mount Everest — by about 2.5 cm, according to analysis of satellite data.

The first good view of the aftermath of Nepal's deadly earthquake from a satellite showed that a broad swath of ground near Kathmandu lifted vertically, by about 1 metre, which could explain why damage in the city was so severe.

The data also indicated the tallest mountain in the world, Mount Everest, got a wee bit shorter, Live Science reported.

The new information comes from Europe's Sentinel-1A radar satellite. Scientists are racing to interpret the Sentinel data, which were made available last week just hours after the satellite passed over Nepal.

The devastating 7.8-magnitude earthquake that

struck Nepal on April 25 has claimed over 8,500 lives and injured another 16,390 people.

Researchers detected the vertical shift in the ground by comparing before-and-after radar images from the satellite using a technique that produces an image called an interferogram.



The resulting images have rainbow-coloured areas that represent the movement of the ground between the times each radar image was taken. Each colourful fringe on the European Space Agency's Nepal interferogram reflects about 2.8 centimetres of vertical movement.

The results will be refined in the coming weeks, with as scientists further analysis the images and additional data from satellites become available.

According to the early analysis, a region 120 km long by 50 km) wide lifted upward by as much as 3 feet during the earthquake, said Tim Wright, a geophysicist at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom.

NSA data collection 'illegal': US court

BBC ONLINE

A US appeals court yesterday ruled that bulk collection of phone records by the National Security Agency is illegal.

Overturning a 2013 ruling, the judges did not, however, halt the programme but urged Congress to take action.

The NSA's spying was leaked by Edward Snowden, a former NSA contractor who has since fled to Russia.

The NSA has collected data about numbers called and times, but not the content of conversations. It also allegedly spied on European firms.

Among individuals targeted was German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

The latest verdict, by The 2nd US

Circuit Court of Appeals in New York, came after New York District Judge William Pauley had dismissed a legal challenge by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) which argued that the way the NSA tracked million of calls contravened the US constitution.

The 97-page ruling says that "a provision of the USA Patriot Act permitting the Federal Bureau of Investigation to collect business records deemed relevant to a counterterrorism investigation cannot be legitimately interpreted to permit the systematic bulk collection of domestic calling records".

However, the appeals court stopped short of ruling on the constitutionality of the programme, which is set to expire on 1 June.



China has 'right' to seek regional influence: Modi

AFP, New Delhi

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has played down fears over China's growing regional clout ahead of his landmark trip to Beijing, saying the rise of Asian powerhouse has a "right" to seek greater influence.

While ties between the nuclear-armed nations have long been strained over a bitter border dispute, China's recent push to forge closer ties with countries in India's backyard has caused some alarm in New Delhi.

But in an interview with Time published yesterday, Modi said nations have a "natural tendency" to want to increase their influence, which was their right so long as they respected human rights and international rules.

"You referred to the increase in Chinese influence in the region and in the world," he told the magazine in a rare interview.

"I think it is a very natural tendency for the nations to increase their influence in the international space, as they pursue their international relations with different countries.

"I firmly believe that with due regard to international rules and regulations, and with full respect for human values, ... each country has the right to increase its presence, its impact and influence internationally for the benefit of the global community."

Modi, who is due to fly to Beijing next Thursday on his first trip since being elected a year ago, has signalled he will pursue a more muscular foreign policy than India's previous left-leaning government.

POSSIBLE POST-POLL OPTIONS IN UK

With all the main opinion polls predicting no party winning a majority in Britain's general election, the stage is set for complex negotiations that could result in four core scenarios. Informal talks are expected to start as early as today once results are in.

The four results of the election that are seen as the most likely by pollsters are the following:

1. Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition:

A late boost for the Conservatives and a better-than-expected result for the under-pressure Liberal Democrats could bring the current government line-up back under Prime Minister David Cameron. If the numbers do not add up to the required 326-seat majority, the Conservatives could also reach out to the Democratic Unionist Party from Northern Ireland.

2. Conservative minority:

A more flexible option for Cameron could see the Conservatives going it alone if they end up winning the most seats but then cannot easily put together a multi-party coalition. Like the Labour version of this scenario, a minority government could spell instability even if it is backed up by a formal agreement as it



(From Left) Ed Miliband, David Cameron and Nick Clegg leave polling booths after voting yesterday. They were accompanied by their wives. PHOTO: AFP

would leave the Conservatives prey to shifting political sands.

3. Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition:

Not a front-runner but things could change quickly in the night between Thursday and Friday, particularly if Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg loses his seat. While Clegg is seen as pro-Conservative, several senior members of the party and many of the rank and file are closer to the centre-left of Labour leader Ed Miliband who would then be the new prime

minister. Smaller left-wing parties like the Social Democratic and Labour Party in Northern Ireland and the Green Party could be brought into this arrangement.

4. Labour minority:

Miliband has ruled out any post-election "deal" with the Scottish National Party even though they would be a natural centre-left ally, citing his opposition to their claim for independence. Miliband has left open the option of the SNP voting to support a Labour

Take selfies and go to jail

AFP, London

Election officials in Britain have warned voters not to share pictures taken of themselves in polling booths as they cast ballots on Thursday, warning that a "selfie" could land them in jail.

The Electoral Commission has said that while it is not illegal to take a selfie, sharing an image that showed — accidentally or not — how someone had voted would infringe rules on voting secrecy and could lead to a six-month prison sentence.

Instructions given to polling officials contained a section entitled: "Selfies in polling stations".

The manual suggested officials could choose to put up signs spelling out the directive and even prohibit the use of mobile phones in polling stations.

The relevant clause in the Representation of the People Act states that breaking secrecy rules in



Time has come for woman to lead UN: Ban

PTI, United Nations

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, whose term as the world body's chief will end next year, has said it is "high time" for a woman to lead the organisation.

The Secretary General has said at several public venues that "he thinks it's high time for a woman" Ban's Deputy spokesman Farhan Haq told reporters here on Wednesday when asked if the UN Chief has weighed in on the debate over a woman leading the 70-year old organisation.

Haq said while it was not in Ban's hands to determine who his successor will be, "He's not going to offer any opinions about who should be selected, but certainly, the time for a female Secretary General has come."

He added that Ban meets several women in very prominent positions in national and international politics and in the UN but it is not up to him to see whether he can help them become the next Secretary-General.

Ban took office in January 2007 and was unanimously re-elected for a second term by the General Assembly in June 2011. He would continue to serve as the UN Chief till December 2016.

Momentum is building up to make the selection process of the UN Chief more transparent amid growing frustration over the dominance of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council in the appointing the Secretary General.

Angering Palestine, Netanyahu forms hardline govt in Israel

Approves 900 more East Jerusalem settler homes

AFP, Jerusalem

After reaching a late-night deal on a new coalition, Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday signed an agreement giving a senior role to the far-right Jewish Home that firmly opposes a Palestinian state.

Following six weeks of intensive negotiations, the Israeli premier finally managed to forge a government late on Wednesday, just an hour before a legal deadline. Had he failed, he would have forfeited his position as premier.

The composition of Netanyahu's rightwing, religious coalition marks a new shift to the right by giving increased prominence to Naftali Bennett's nationalist-religious Jewish Home party, which strongly backs settlement activity.

The move looks likely to complicate Israel's damaged relationship with the Palestinians and further strain ties with the international community. US President Barack Obama, who has had a testy relationship with the Israeli premier, said in a businesslike statement that he "looks forward to working" with Netanyahu's new government.

But with a majority of only 61 of the Knesset's 120 seats, the coalition looked set to face an uphill battle for survival,

with commentators unanimous that Netanyahu would seek to broaden it out in the coming months.

Analysts said there was not likely to be any immediate change in Israel's policy towards the Palestinians, while acknowledging that Bennett's strong position would likely strengthen the settlement enterprise.

As the new government took shape, Israel gave the green light for construction of another 900 new homes in Ramat Shlomo, a settlement neighbourhood in east Jerusalem, the Peace Now settlement watchdog said.

The Palestinians immediately denounced Netanyahu's new administration, with chief negotiator Saeb Erakat saying it was clear it would not be working for peace and would seek to expand settlements.

Under the terms of the agreement, Bennett and his party will take several key portfolios including justice and education, as well as control of the World Zionist Organisation's settlement division, which transfers money to settlements. The party will have two seats in the security cabinet and the position of deputy defence minister, with responsibility for the Civil Administration that runs all civilian affairs in most of the occupied West Bank.



Saudi Arabia proposes 5-day Yemen ceasefire

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia yesterday proposed a five-day humanitarian ceasefire in Yemen to allow aid deliveries, and the United States called on Iran-backed Huthi rebels to accept the offer.

Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, whose country is leading a coalition conducting air strikes on the Yemen rebels, announced the proposal after talks with visiting US Secretary of State John Kerry.

Jubeir said he had informed his American counterpart of "the kingdom's idea of a five-day ceasefire in Yemen to coordinate with international organisations to deliver aid to Yemen if the Huthis and their allies commit to this and do not carry out acts of aggression".

The date for its start "will soon be set," he added. Iran is accused of supporting the Shia Huthi rebels, who are also backed by army units loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Weeks of coalition air strikes have prompted growing concerns over increasing civilian deaths and a mounting humanitarian crisis.

Earlier, Saudi Arabia said all options were open including ground operations to stop mortar attacks on its border towns by Yemen's Houthi militia.

"It is possible to repeat the same number of sorties, a land operation is possible, all options are open to prevent these practices of the militias," military spokesman Brigadier General Ahmed Asseri told TV channel al-Arabiya late on Wednesday.