

NEWS IN brief

Barrel bomb kills 20 in Syria's Aleppo

At least 20 people were killed yesterday in a regime barrel bomb attack on a mini-bus stand in a rebel-held part of Syria's Aleppo city, a monitor said. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based NGO, said the toll was expected to rise because of the number of serious injuries among the wounded.

Nigel Farage to stay on as Ukip leader

Nigel Farage will stay on as Ukip leader, despite announcing he would stand down after failing to be elected as an MP in last week's election. His resignation was "unanimously rejected" by Ukip's National Executive Committee after canvassing the views of Ukip members, who "overwhelmingly" wanted him to remain in place.

US drone strike kills 4 in Yemen

An al-Qaeda provincial commander was among four militants killed in an apparent US drone strike on the jihadist-held Yemeni city of Mukalla, an official said yesterday. The Monday strike outside the presidential palace in the south-eastern port city, capital of Hadramawt province, killed Maamoun Hatem, who heads al-Qaeda's forces in the central province of Ibb, the official said.

Afghan drug users nearly double

The number of drug users in Afghanistan soared to a record high of three million last year, almost doubling over a two-year period in the world's leading producer of opium, officials said yesterday. It showed a national drug use rate of 11 percent, one of the highest in the world, with drug use in rural areas three times higher than in urban areas.

Mentally ill jailed over Thai royal insult

A Thai court yesterday jailed a mentally ill 65-year-old woman for one year for allegedly defaming the monarchy by insulting a portrait of the nation's revered king. Thailand's monarchy is protected by one of the world's harshest lese majeste laws, and convictions have surged since a military coup last May.

Saudi beheads 80th person this year

Saudi Arabia yesterday carried out its 80th beheading of the year, edging closer to the 87 executions it carried out during all of 2014, according to AFP tallies. Amnesty International ranked Saudi Arabia among the world's top three executioners of 2014.

Student protesters go on trial in Myanmar

More than 70 Myanmar education activists yesterday went on trial in a case that has sparked international alarm and raised fears of a return to junta-era tactics in the slowly reforming nation. The mostly young campaigners were arrested two months ago during a violent police crackdown on student-led protests calling for education reform in what was one of the most concerted challenges to the government of reformist Prime Minister Thein Sein.



Nepalese patients are carried out of a hospital building as a 7.3 magnitude earthquake hits the country, in Kathmandu yesterday. Inset, A mother tries to comfort her child. The strong tremor followed by powerful aftershocks killed dozens of people and brought fresh terror to a traumatised Nepal. PHOTO: AFP

Putin hosts Kerry to discuss Ukraine, world issues

Report claims hundreds of Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine war

AFP, Sochi

President Vladimir Putin hosted US Secretary of State John Kerry for high stakes talks yesterday as Washington seeks the full implementation of a shaky Ukraine ceasefire and renewed efforts to end the Syrian war.

On the highest-level US visit to Russia since the conflict in Ukraine erupted in late 2013, Kerry first met with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov for four hours in the Black Sea resort of Sochi before being welcomed by Putin at his seaside summer residence.

The two men warmly shook hands, before sitting down with a small team of staff at a long table.

At "a critical moment" for Ukraine, Washington is looking to ensure the "next steps in concrete implementation" of the truce deal, as well as to "see whether they (Russia) see an opportu-

nity to do more together" in Syria, a senior State Department official said.

Kerry was also set to discuss Yemen and Libya and brief Putin on the negotiations on curtailing Iran's nuclear programme. He was accompanied by



chief US negotiator Wendy Sherman who will travel to Vienna today for a new round of Iran talks.

Ties between Moscow and Washington collapsed when Russia seized the southern Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea in early 2014 and but-

ressed separatists in eastern Ukraine.

But after a year of tensions, signs are emerging that both Russia and the West may be ready to seek detente.

Meanwhile, Russia's opposition yesterday released a report based on research by slain Putin critic Boris Nemtsov detailing allegations of widespread Russian army involvement in Ukraine that Moscow has denied.

The report-- based on media articles and information from families of Russian soldiers allegedly killed in Ukraine -- claims that hundreds of Russian soldiers have been killed fighting in Ukraine.

The 64-page report said the Russian army made two major incursions into Ukrainian territory in the summer of 2014 and in the winter of 2015. Both turned the tables in the fighting and came ahead of negotiations on the conflict.

Ensure space for legitimate dissent

India asks Maldives

THE HINDU ONLINE

Amid growing clamour for India's intervention in the ongoing political turmoil in the Maldives, New Delhi has asked the island nation to ensure that space for legitimate political dissent is safeguarded and safety and security of foreign workers is secured.

India's statement, made at the Universal Periodic Review of Maldives at the 22nd Session of the Working Group on UPR of the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva last week, follows reports of human rights violations and impingement on press freedom in the island nation.

"We have seen reports by UN agencies that press freedom is being abridged. The Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers has also reported their increased politicisation. Maintaining public trust requires strong adherence to due process. The space for legitimate political dissent must be safeguarded," India has said.

However, India is yet to respond to the demand from pro-democracy and human rights activists to put pressure on the current leadership in Male to consider the release of the former President, Mohammed Nasheed, and other political detainees.

Saudi strike on arms depot kills 69 in Yemen

AFP, Sanaa

At least 69 people were killed and 250 others were wounded by explosions after Saudi-led warplanes hit an arms depot on the outskirts of Sanaa, a medical official said yesterday.

"These are the cases registered so far," the official said, adding that most of those killed and wounded were civilians.

Residents said that explosions at a military base at Mount Noqum, in the eastern outskirts of Yemen's capital, lasted until midday yesterday after coalition jets struck the depot late Monday.

An April 21 coalition raid on a missile base in the rebel-held capital triggered explosions that killed 38 people and wounded 532.

A five-day pause in the coalition bombing campaign was due to start at 11:00pm (2000 GMT) to allow deliveries of desperately needed relief supplies.



INDO-BANGLA LBA

Rs 3008cr package softened Didi

TNN, Kolkata

Just how Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi won over West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has been the biggest political mystery over the past week. It turns out that a compensation package of Rs 3,009 crore in the India-Bangladesh enclave exchange pact helped Modi take Didi on board during his recent Kolkata visit.

Mamata was initially reluctant, but changed her stance once she extracted a significant compensation for the thousands who will be displaced from 111 enclaves along the Bengal border.

Foreign minister Sushma Swaraj gave an assurance on the package in parliament last week, paving the way for the passage of the Constitutional Amendment Bill on Indo-Bangla Land Boundary Agreement on Monday, which would have fallen through in the Indian Rajya Sabha without Trinamool's support.

The Centre has fixed the upper ceiling of the compensation at Rs 3,009 crore with the minimum being Rs 775 crore. The money will come under two heads - fixed and variable. The variable part has been estimated at Rs 2,234 crore, depending on the actual transfer of population. The reason, as an MEA official explained, is that the people of these enclaves have the right to decide if they are willing to come over to India.

'Please help us or we will die'

Rohingya migrants pleads for rescue on stricken vessel

AFP, Bangkok

Hundreds of starving migrants have pleaded for urgent rescue after they were abandoned by smugglers on a boat in waters believed to be near both Thailand and Malaysia, an activist said yesterday.

Their desperate appeal came as a distraught Rohingya man in the Malaysian capital told AFP he had spoken to his wife who is also onboard a broken migrant boat with three of their children.

The Arakan Project, which monitors migrant journeys across the Bay of Bengal, said it had spoken by telephone to Rohingya migrants on board an abandoned vessel yesterday afternoon.

The boat, which is believed to be carrying around 350 people including dozens of women and children, was thought to be cast adrift by a Thai smuggling gang who fled the vessel after disabling the ship's engine on Sunday.

"They told us they have had no food and water for the last three days. They have called for urgent rescue," said Chris Lewa, the founder of the Arakan Project.

The migrants, she added, were unsure of their exact location and believed they were in waters close to Thailand's southern border with Malaysia.

The migrants were reached on a mobile phone with a Thai number and said there were 50 women and 84 children on board the vessel.

Speaking from his tiny flat in Kuala Lumpur, the husband of another Rohingya migrant currently at sea said he had managed to briefly speak to his wife by phone onboard a stricken vessel.

"She said there is no food or water. If the children or babies cry, they wet their lips with some sea water," Mohammed Hashim, who is in his early 40s, told AFP, frequently breaking down in tears.

"She told me: 'Please help or we will die,'" he added. It is not clear if the boat is the same one contacted by the Arakan Project.

The UN has led warnings that thousands of migrants are believed to be stranded at sea without food and water and could die unless Southeast Asian governments act urgently to rescue them.



French President Francois Hollande (L) listening to Cuban historical leader Fidel Castro during a meeting in Havana on Monday. Hollande's Cuba trip, the first ever by a French leader, has highlighted the simultaneously cooperative and competitive relationship between the United States and the European Union as both look to increase business with Havana. Hollande called for an end to the US embargo on Cuba. PHOTO: AFP

US, Saudi Arabia play down rift over Iran

AFP, Washington

The White House and Saudi Arabia scrambled to quell talk of a diplomatic rift Monday, after King Salman pulled out of a summit with President Barack Obama at the eleventh hour.

Senior US and Saudi officials appeared in public to insist the Gulf royal's decision was not a snub nor part of a deeper crisis in never-easy ties that date back decades.

Obama had invited six Gulf leaders to the presidential retreat, amid suspicions that Washington is no longer committed to their security and is not doing enough to stop Iran's destabilizing actions across the region.

Only two leaders, from Qatar and Kuwait, are now slated to attend.

With just days before today's meeting at the White House and tomorrow's gathering at Camp David, Riyadh said it would instead send Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and the king's influential son Mohammed bin Salman.

"I think this idea that this is a snub because the king did not attend is really off base. This is an extremely high-level delega-

tion. It has absolutely the right people to represent the kingdom," said Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir.

The White House, meanwhile, announced that Obama and Salman had spoken by telephone, as the US too tried to downplay differences.

Beneath the surface, however, there is deep unease at what US allies perceive as Washington's disengagement from the region under Obama's administration.

There is also worry that a nuclear deal with Iran could unfreeze tens of billions of dollars that Tehran could use to buy weapons or augment support for proxy groups.

Some Gulf states had pressed for the summit to lead to a written guarantee that the US would come to their defense, something American officials refused.

Gulf nations had also asked for access to high-tech weapons like the F-35 stealth fighter jet. But instead, the summit is likely to result in more modest commitments to joint maritime security, a promise to study regional ballistic missile defense and a review to speed up weapons transfers.

MIGRANT CRISIS IN EUROPE Binding refugee quotas divide EU

AFP, Brussels

EU plans for binding refugee quotas across the 28-nation bloc could be sunk because Britain, Ireland and Denmark do not have to accept them, European sources said yesterday.

The European Commission, the EU executive, is due today to present a new migration policy which will include quotas after the worst migrant shipwreck left 750 people dead in the Mediterranean last month.

As the death toll mounts off its southern shores, the European Union is trying to put in place a strategy to deal with both the growing number of arriving refugees and to halt the inflow at source in conflict-torn North Africa and the Middle East.

The final plan is supposed to be put before EU leaders at their June 25-26 summit but immigration is such a sensitive political issue for many member states that agreement could prove elusive, especially when it comes to sharing the burden.

Commission spokeswoman Natasha Bertaud said on Tuesday that Britain and Ireland have "opt-in rights" on certain policy areas under EU treaties, meaning in this case that they had the right to decide whether or not to participate in a quota system. Denmark also followed the suit.

The issue is so divisive that after further talks Tuesday, officials still had not fashioned an agreement before the 28 EU Commissioners were due to meet Wednesday to formally sign off on the new migration policy, the sources said.

