

NEWS IN
brief

Israel invites bids for 85 new settler homes

AFP, Jerusalem
The Israeli ministry of construction issued tenders for the building of 85 new housing units in the Givat Zeev settlement, settlement watchdog Peace Now said yesterday. The tenders for the settlement, which lies immediately south of the West Bank city of Ramallah, had been issued last year but received no bids from contractors so were issued again, Peace Now and the construction ministry

McCain appointed as Poroshenko's aid!

AFP, Kiev
Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has appointed John McCain, a hawkish US senator who has pressed Washington to send lethal weapons to war-torn Ukraine, as his advisor, his administration said. Ukraine's pro-Western authorities are putting together an advisory council to help the ex-Soviet country conduct reforms and build global support

Syria strikes on villages kill 17 children

AFP, Beirut
Regime air strikes on three adjacent rebel-held villages in northern Syria killed at least 39 civilians, 17 of them children, a monitoring group said yesterday. Eight siblings were among the dead from the Wednesday strikes in southern Aleppo province, the Syrian Observatory for

23 killed in new massacres in DR Congo

AFP, Goma
Twenty-three people have been killed in two new massacres blamed on Ugandan rebels in the restless east of the Democratic Republic of Congo, a regional official told AFP yesterday. The killings are the latest blamed on the rebels of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), who are accused of murdering more than 300 people in seven months of massacres in and around the major trading hub of Beni in DR Congo's North



FERRY OF DEATH



(From top anti-clockwise) Rohingya migrants swim to collect food supplies dropped by a Thai army helicopter after they jumped from a boat (R) drifting in Thai waters off the southern island of Koh Lipe in the Andaman sea; women cry as they look for help; men depict their miseries as the journo approached them; and people pass food supplies dropped by Thai army to others.

PHOTO: AFP

BURUNDI CRISIS
Fierce turf war after coup bid

AFP, Bujumbura
Rival factions of Burundi's army yesterday fought intense battles for control of the capital, a day after a top general launched a coup to oust the central African nation's President Pierre Nkurunziza. The clashes were centred around the state television and radio complex, with broadcasts to the nation halted, before resuming after an attack was repulsed. At least three soldiers were killed in the clashes, an AFP journalist who saw the bodies on the streets said. The president himself was in neighbouring Tanzania when the coup was launched and remains in a secret location in Dar es Salaam, Tanzanian officials said. "We control virtually the entire city. The soldiers who are being deployed are on our side," coup spokesman Venon Ndbaneze told AFP. Similar claims, however, were made by troops loyal to the president, and it remained unclear which side had the upper hand. Burundi's armed forces chief, a supporter of the president, had used national radio to declare that the coup, launched by former intelligence chief Godefroid Niyombare, had failed. Supporters of the president also carried out attacks against independent media broadcasters in the capital, with the influential African Public Radio station ablaze after being hit by a rocket. The attempted coup capped weeks of deadly civil unrest sparked by the president's controversial bid to stand for a third term.

Modi gets special treat from Xi

AGENCIES
Chinese President Xi Jinping hosted Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his ancestral home town at the start of a three-day visit to China yesterday as the two Asian giants work to boost economic ties despite decades of mistrust. Attempting to put their relationship on a more personal footing, Xi met his visitor in Xian, the capital of Shaanxi province, telling him it was "the first time I have treated a foreign leader in my hometown", China's official news agency Xinhua said. Modi, who was beginning a three-day visit, said it was "an honour to 125 crore Indians whom I am representing as Prime Minister", according to India's PTI agency. The choice of venue was seen as reciprocation after Modi hosted Xi in his home state of Gujarat last year. "China is a huge market. As far as

India is concerned, it's a totally under-exploited market," said TCA Rangachari, a former Indian ambassador to France and Germany who worked on China affairs for more than 15 years. But ties between the world's two most populous countries have long been strained over a Himalayan border dispute that saw the two nations fight a brief, bloody war in 1962. **3-DAY CHINA TOUR** "Boundary issues were discussed including peace and tranquillity on the border," Indian foreign secretary S. Jaishankar told reporters following the summit. He said the two also discussed India's attempt to join China as a permanent member of the United Nations' elite Security Council, which Beijing has avoided directly endorsing.

Both are members of the BRICS grouping of major emerging economies, but are jockeying for influence in Asia. Beijing has vowed to pour investment into India's arch-rival Pakistan, as it rolls out plans to boost infrastructure across Asia which seem to mostly bypass India. Chinese contracts to build or manage Indian Ocean ports have raised concerns it is seeking to establish a "string of pearls" in the region. The Indian leader will later head to the capital Beijing and China's financial hub Shanghai, seeking to deliver on election promises to attract foreign investment for India's crumbling rail and other infrastructure.

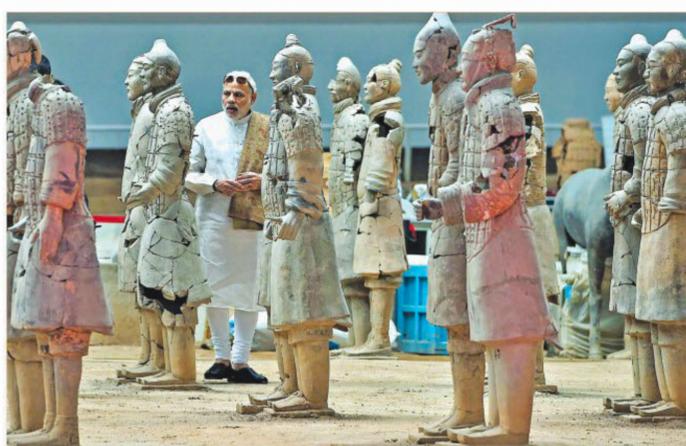
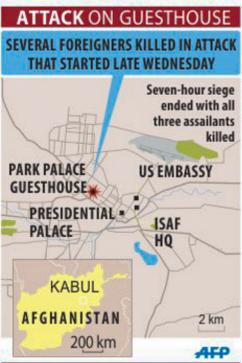
US House votes to end phone data collection

REUTERS, Washington
The US House of Representatives approved a bill on Wednesday that would end spy agencies' bulk collection of Americans' telephone data, setting up a potential showdown with the US Senate over the program, which expires on June 1. The House voted 338-88 for the USA Freedom Act, which would end the bulk collection and instead give intelligence agencies access to telephone data and other records only when a court finds there is reasonable suspicion about a link to international terrorism. The strong support in the House by both Democrats and Republicans could increase pressure on Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to allow a vote on the bill. McConnell and several other senior Republican senators have said they would rather renew the existing bulk data collec-

tion program, authorized under the USA Patriot Act, passed in the wake of the Sept 11, 2001, attacks. But continuing the program, which has concerned many privacy advocates since it was exposed in 2013 by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, would face strong resistance in the House. At least two senators - Republican Rand Paul, a 2016 presidential candidate, and Democrat Ron Wyden - have pledged to filibuster any attempt to extend the plan. Mostly framed so far as dealing with bulk collection of domestic telephone "metadata," the bipartisan USA Freedom Act addresses activities much broader than phone calls, said government officials and private experts. They said the FBI has used the Patriot Act and court rulings to gather records of hotel stays and international wire transfers by companies such as Western Union.

Taliban storms Kabul guesthouse; 14 dead

AFP, Kabul
Fourteen people, most of them foreigners, were killed in a Taliban attack on a Kabul guesthouse that trapped dozens attending a concert and triggered an hours-long standoff with Afghan forces, officials said yesterday. Four Indians, two Pakistanis, an American, an Italian and a British-Afghan dual national were among those killed in the overnight siege on the Park Palace, which was about to host a performance by a well-known Afghan singer. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the seven-hour assault, which triggered explosions and bursts of gunfire. It came as Afghan forces face their first fighting season against the insurgents without the full support of US-led foreign combat troops. "An attack against civilians gathered for a cultural event in the Park Palace hotel in Kabul killed 14 civilians and injured several others," the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said in a statement. An Indian foreign ministry official said that "unfortunately four Indians have died in the attack as per the information we have so far". Prime Minister Narendra Modi had spoken with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to offer his condolences, saying "we are one when it comes to fighting terror". US embassy spokeswoman Monica Cummings said: "Our thoughts are with the families of the victims at this time." The Taliban, which has stepped up assaults on government and foreign targets, said that the attack was carried out by a single gunman and "planned carefully to target the party in which important people and Americans were attending". The attack was also claimed by the Taliban-allied Haqqani network that is believed to be based out of the porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. "One of our suicide squads carried out the raid. We prepared for it for two months and will continue to carry out these attacks," a senior Haqqani commander in charge of suicide operations told AFP by telephone.



(Left) India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi looks on as he visits The Terracotta Warriors Museum in Xi'an, yesterday. Modi and China's President Xi Jinping shake hands before they hold a meeting in Xian.

PHOTO: AFP



'Your brother created ISIS'
Student challenges Jeb Bush on militant's rise

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
Jeb Bush was left grasping for a response when a student challenged him during a meeting by declaring: "Your brother created Isis". Bush, the former governor of Florida and sibling of George W. Bush, was wrapping up a town-hall style discussion when Ivy Ziedrich, a 19-year-old student at the University of Nevada, commanded his attention by asking him to take a student question. Her question revolved around a claim he made earlier in the meeting that America's retreat from the Middle East under the Obama administration was in part responsible for the rapid rise of the Isis terror group. Ziedrich lay the blame at George W. Bush's feet following on from his decision to disband the Iraqi Army, according to the New York Times. "It was when 30,000 individuals who were part of the Iraqi military were forced out - they had no employment, they had no income, and they were left with access to all of the same arms and weapons," Ziedrich told him. "Your brother created ISIS." Bush interjected to ask her if this was a question, to which she replied: "My question is why are you saying that ISIS was created by us not having a presence in the Middle East when it's pointless wars, when we sent young men to die for the idea of American exceptionalism? ... 'It's this idea - like, why are you spouting nationalistic rhetoric to get us involved in more wars?'" Bush "respectfully disagreed" with her statement, arguing that security had been arranged and al-Qaeda had been worn-down when the US left Iraq.



Baltics to ask Nato for thousands of troops

AFP, Vilnius
The Baltic states will formally ask Nato to deploy several thousand troops as a deterrent, Lithuania said yesterday, amid tensions with Russia over the conflict in eastern Ukraine. "We are seeking a brigade-size unit so that every Baltic nation would have a battalion," military spokesman Captain Mindaugas Neimontas told AFP. He said Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian generals would soon send a joint request to US General Philip Breedlove, Nato's top commander. Neimontas said the Baltic states were to seek "permanent rotational Nato forces" as a "deterrence measure given the security situation in the region". He refused to elaborate on specific numbers but a standard brigade could have around 3,000 troops. Latvia's defence ministry also confirmed the move in a statement saying "the joint letter will be sent next week". Baltic and Nordic countries have reported an uptick in Russian military activity in the region over the last year. Russian war planes flying with their transponders switched off have endangered civil aviation.

Obama seeks to reassure Gulf allies on Iran

REUTERS, Washington
President Barack Obama will seek to convince Gulf allies including Saudi Arabia yesterday that the United States is committed to their security despite deep concern among Arab leaders about US efforts to broker a nuclear deal with Iran. During a rare, high-profile summit at the Camp David presidential retreat in Maryland, Obama will meet with representatives from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Oman, all members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, to discuss security cooperation. Tension over US policy toward Tehran, Syria and the Arab Spring uprisings will loom over the meetings, which have already been overshadowed by some countries' decisions to send lower-level leaders. Saudi King Salman pulled out, sending Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman instead. The White House has said such decisions were not snubs and has portrayed the summit as a set of working meetings rather than symbolic photo sessions. Arab leaders are concerned that lifting Western sanctions as part of a nuclear deal with Iran would empower Tehran to act in destabilizing ways in the region.