

NEWS IN brief

Pak Chopper Crash: Indonesia envoy dies

AFP, Jakarta
An Indonesian ambassador who was on a Pakistani military helicopter that crashed this month died yesterday after battling severe burn injuries. Indonesia's foreign minister said. Ambassador Burhan Muhammad, 58, was aboard the military helicopter, along with his wife and a delegation of ambassadors when it crashed on May 8 and set a school building ablaze in the Gilgit area of northern Pakistan. His wife, the Norwegian and Filipino ambassadors, and the wife of the Malaysian envoy were

US reporter to face spy charges in Iran

AFP, Tehran
The Washington Post's Tehran correspondent Jason Rezaian, in custody for 10 months, will appear in court next week accused of spying, his lawyer said yesterday. Rezaian, an Iranian-American, was formally charged last month with espionage, collaboration with hostile governments, gathering classified information and disseminating

Pak, Afghans sign intel-sharing deal

AFP, Islamabad
The spy agencies of Pakistan and Afghanistan have agreed to share intelligence and bolster cooperation in their fight against the Taliban, the latest sign of a thaw in once-frosty ties. Afghanistan's engagement with Pakistan in its fight against the Taliban is seen as a major policy shift from the previous Hamid Karzai government, which accused Islamabad of desta-

Saudi advertises for more executioners

AFP, Riyadh
Saudi Arabia advertised vacancies for eight executioners yesterday after beheading 84 people since the start of the year. The civil service ministry said that as well as beheadings, the successful candidates would be expected to carry out amputations. Amputation of one or both hands is a routine penalty for theft. Drug trafficking, rape, murder, apostasy and armed robbery

170 bikers charged over deadly Texas brawl

AFP, Washington
Some 170 rival motorcycle gang members have been charged with engaging in organized crime linked to capital murder after a mass brawl at a Texas restaurant left nine people dead, police said on Monday. Officials said as many as five gangs fought each other with knives, chains and guns in front of terri-



Afghan investigators inspect the site of a suicide bombing in a parking lot in central Kabul, yesterday. A Taliban car bomber ripped through the parking lot of the justice ministry in Kabul Tuesday, killing four people and wounding dozens of others in the latest in a string of attacks to shake the Afghan capital. PHOTO: AFP

MOB KILLING OF WOMAN Eleven Afghan police jailed over inaction

AFP, Kabul
Eleven Afghan policemen were yesterday sentenced to one year in prison for failing to protect a woman who was lynched by a mob after being falsely accused of blasphemy, following a landmark fast-track trial. Farkhunda, 27, was savagely beaten and her body was set ablaze in broad daylight on March 19, triggering protests around the country and drawing global attention to the treatment of Afghan women. The verdict comes after four Afghan men were sentenced to death and eight others were handed 16-year jail terms earlier this month after a three-day trial broadcast live on national television. "You are sentenced... for negligence of duty to one year in prison," Judge Safiullah Mojaddidi told the 11 defendants, including senior officers, while eight other policemen were found not guilty. "This verdict is not final and the defendants have the right to appeal," the Kabul primary court judge added. Farkhunda was attacked on the banks of the Kabul River after an amulet seller, whom she had reportedly castigated for peddling superstition, falsely accused her of burning a copy of the Quran.

Iraq eyes swift action in Ramadi

AFP, Baghdad
Iraq's army and allied paramilitary forces massed around Ramadi yesterday, looking for swift action to recapture the city from the Islamic State group before it builds up defences. With his security strategy in tatters and his authority facing its biggest challenge since he took office eight months ago, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi was looking for quick redemption. Reeling from the worst setback since ISIS grabbed swathes of territory in June last year, he called in the Shiite-dominated Popular Mobilisation units (Hashed al-Shaabi). "The Hashed have started to arrive in areas east of Ramadi," said army Brigadier General Ali al-Majidi, speaking to AFP from a base west of Baghdad. He said the operation would begin with efforts to contain continued attacks by ISIS east of Ramadi before an offensive is launched to reconquer lost ground. Abadi and Washington had hoped to rely on regular forces and locally recruited Sunni tribal fighters newly incorporated into the Hashed al-Shaabi to fight ISIS in Anbar. Such a solution was seen as more palatable to the predominantly Sunni population of the province, and a way for Washington to keep Iranian-backed militias at bay. The Shia paramilitary groups had been eager to join the Ramadi battle for some time and argued that Abadi's reluctance led to the provincial capital's fall. Following a belated green light, they started sending convoys of fighters to Anbar, where anti-ISIS forces are massing, mostly east and west of Ramadi. "The US government and Iraqi government seem to be on the same sheet of music that Ramadi has to be counterattacked before ISIS consolidates," Michael Knights of the Washington Institute said. US Secretary of State John Kerry said on Monday he was "absolutely confident" that the situation could be reversed within days. According to an official in the Anbar governor's office, at least 500 fighters and civilians were killed in the three-day blitz that led to the fall of Ramadi. ISIS released pictures of the spoils they retrieved from abandoned government bases, including tanks, armoured personnel carriers and other vehicles, as well as weapons and ammunition. The group also released pictures of the moment when its fighters freed prisoners held at a counterterrorism detention facility. The jihadists, whose capture of Ramadi on Sunday showed they may



WAR ON ISIS

Negligence of duty trial starts against Yingluck

Thai junta delays polls, bars her from leaving country
AFP, Bangkok
Thailand's ousted prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra insisted on her innocence Tuesday at the start of a trial that could see her jailed for a decade, part of what observers say is a vendetta against her family. It is the latest legal move against Yingluck -- sister of fugitive billionaire ex-premier Thaksin Shinawatra -- whose administration was toppled in a military coup nearly a year ago. Meanwhile, Thailand's junta delayed a general election by at least six months yesterday, hours after Yingluck was banned from traveling overseas, raising questions about a promised return to democracy. Deputy Prime Minister Wissanu Krea-ngam, installed after the military seized power in last May's coup, told reporters that the polls would take place in August 2016 at the earliest to allow for a referendum on the new constitution. Around 50 supporters gathered outside the courthouse on the northern outskirts of Bangkok including more than a dozen members of Yingluck's Pheu Thai Party, a rare public act of defiance of the junta. A guilty conviction for Yingluck could deliver a hammer blow to the political dominance of her family, but it also risks stirring up their grassroots "Red Shirt" supporters who have remained largely inactive since the military took over. "I am confident that I am innocent," Yingluck told reporters outside the courthouse. The ousted premier is accused of criminal negligence over a populist rice subsidy scheme, which paid farmers in the rural Shinawatra heartland twice the market rate for their crop. She is not accused of personal corruption but of failing to prevent alleged graft within the programme, which cost Thailand billions of dollars and galvanised protests against her elected government prior to last May's coup. The charge carries up to 10 years in jail.



Thailand's former premier Yingluck Shinawatra receives roses from her supporters outside the Supreme Court in Bangkok, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Landslide wipes out town At least 62 killed, 40 injured in Colombia

AFP, Salgar
A massive landslide tore through a ravine in northwest Colombia Monday before dawn, killing at least 62 people and injuring 40, authorities said. Most residents were sleeping when the landslide hit the municipality of Salgar around 3:00 am, burying a large area in mud and debris. The rush of mud and water "tore down everything in its path," Salgar Mayor Olga Osorio told RCN Radio. The small town of Santa Margarita was practically "wiped off the map," she said. The country's disaster management agency reported an increased death toll early Tuesday morning and said a handful of government organizations were involved in rescue and aid efforts that included debris removal and erecting temporary shelters. The rescue operation, which was being carried out by some 377 first responders, was suspended overnight Monday and resumed again early in the morning. Aerial images showed a broad river of mud that had inundated a large area, dragging houses and trees along with it. Residents shoveled out piles of mud in the afternoon, trying to salvage what belongings they could, as dump trucks arrived to begin hauling away the mess. President Juan Manuel Santos flew over the affected area and met with local officials. Several children were orphaned and are being cared for by the Colombian Institute for Family Wellbeing, he said. He announced that each family affected - 30 in all -- would receive \$7,000, and promised infrastructure improvements to try to prevent such disasters in the future. Santa Margarita, the hardest-hit town, is one of four that make up Salgar, a municipality of 17,000 people in the department of Antioquia. It was cut off from the rest of the municipality because of damage to an access road and a bridge, local media said. The area was left without electricity, drinking water or gas, and 31 homes were damaged, officials said. Colombia's tropical climate and mountainous landscapes make it prone to landslides. Landslides due to heavy rains have killed hundreds of people yearly in Colombia and destroyed thousands of homes.

Pakistan raids 'fake degree factory'

AFP, Islamabad
Pakistani investigators yesterday carried out raids on a firm accused of running a global fake degree empire, officials said, confiscating computers and holding employees for questioning. The firm Axact was accused by the New York Times of running a network of hundreds of websites for phony universities complete with paid actors for promotional videos, as part of an elaborate scheme that generated tens of millions of dollars annually. The NYT article cited clients from the US, Britain and UAE who had paid huge sums for their degrees -- with some believing the universities were real and they would soon

Obama gets his own Twitter account

AFP, Washington
"Hello, Twitter! It's Barack. Really! Six years in, they're finally giving me my own account." With that inaugural Tweet sent from a smart phone in the Oval Office before jumping on Marine One Monday, the President of the United States Barack Obama -- or @POTUS -- cast off security and bureaucratic chains in place since he was elected. The account -- which already had nearly 150,000 followers in the first half hour and a million followers shortly after -- instantly became one of the world's top hacking targets, but will also allow Obama to tweet directly for the first time. Until now Obama has tweeted through his executive staff @WhiteHouse or the remnants of his campaign staff @BarackObama. Obama describes himself as "Dad, husband, and 44th President of the United States." Obama's arrival on Twitter was greeted former president Bill Clinton, husband of 2016 presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton. "Welcome to @Twitter, @POTUS! One question: Does that username stay with the office? #askingforafriend," he tweeted. Obama responded: "Good question, @billclinton. The handle comes with the house. Know anyone interested in @FLOTUS?" -- referring to the first lady of the United States account. If Hillary were elected, Bill Clinton would become the first American "First Gentleman."



'Serious shortcomings!' Kim Jong Un criticises turtle farm for failing to breed lobsters

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un has reportedly criticised a turtle farm for "serious shortcomings" after it failed to breed lobsters. The dictator toured the Taedonggang Terrapin Farm outside Pyongyang on Monday, according to a release from the state's official media outlet. Kim, who allegedly executed his defence minister last week, appeared upset that farm officials had failed to successfully breed from the freshwater lobsters provided to the factory two years ago. The official report labelled workers failings as a "manifestation of incompetence, outmoded way of thinking and irresponsible work style."