

**NEWS IN brief**

**Secretive US space plane back in orbit**

AFP, Washington  
The US Air Force launched its robotic space plane X-37B into orbit for a fourth flight on Wednesday aboard an Atlas 5 rocket, in a mission aimed at testing a new engine to steer satellites, officials said. The mini-shuttle has been shrouded in secrecy and military officers have refused to discuss its purpose. But defense experts have speculated it might be meant for spying from space, fixing broken satellites or even as a

**Four Sri Lankan ministers resign**

THE HINDU ONLINE  
Four Ministers belonging to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) yesterday resigned from the government. The Ministers — Mahinda Yapa Abewardene, Cabinet Minister in charge of Parliamentary Affairs; Dilan Perera, State Minister for Housing and Samrudhi and SLFP spokesperson; CB Ratanayake, State Minister for Public Administration and Democratic Rule and Pavitradevi Wanniarachchi, Minister of Environment — announced their decision at a press conference here citing dissatisfaction of some

**Israel to get US bombs, Saudis to get choppers**

AFP, Washington  
The United States said Wednesday it plans to sell thousands of bombs and missiles to Israel as well as 10 Seahawk helicopters to Saudi Arabia, in deals worth about \$1.9 billion each, officials said Wednesday. The planned weapons deal with Israel would provide 3,000 Hellfire missiles, 250 medium-range air-to-air missiles, 4,100 glide bombs and 50 BLU-113 "super penetrator" bombs designed

**Amnesty gives top award to Weiwei**

AFP, Berlin  
Human rights group Amnesty International yesterday honoured Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei and US folk singer Joan Baez as joint winners of its Ambassador of Conscience Award. The London-based group said its highest prize, to be presented at a Berlin ceremony from 1800 GMT, recognises "those who have shown exceptional leadership in the fight for human rights, through their life and

**6.9 quake strikes off Solomon Islands**

AFP, Sydney  
A 6.9-magnitude earthquake struck off the Solomon Islands in the Pacific yesterday, the US Geological Survey said, but no tsunami warning was issued and no major damage was expected.



Nepalese police and army personnel clear rubble at the Narayan Hindu temple in Kathmandu yesterday, after multiple earthquakes struck the Himalayan nation. Nearly 8,500 people have now been confirmed dead in the disasters, which destroyed more than half a million homes and left huge numbers of people without shelter with just weeks to go until the monsoon rains.

**Regime raid in Syria's Aleppo kills 40 rebels**

AFP, Beirut  
At least 40 rebels were killed yesterday as a regime air strike on their base in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo triggered a huge explosion, a monitoring group said. The Islamist rebels had shells stored at the base, which magnified the blast, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights head, Rami Abdel Rahman, told AFP. "The shells exploded when the strike happened, and witnesses there described an explosion like an earthquake," Abdel Rahman said. Al-Shaar falls within opposition-controlled east Aleppo city, which is regularly bombed by regime warplanes and helicopters. Abdel Rahman said the fighters targeted were part of the Northern Front, a coalition of Islamist factions formed in December. The regime's use of barrel bombs — old containers full of explosives — has been criticised by human rights groups for its indiscriminate nature.

**ISIS now controls 'half of Syria'**

*Militants seize Palmyra as UN fears enormous loss to humanity'*

AGENCIES  
Islamic State controls more than half of Syria's territory after it captured the ancient city of Palmyra, a group monitoring the war said on Thursday. By taking Palmyra, ISIS controls "more than 95,000 square kilometres in Syria, which is 50 percent of the country's territory", the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. The areas it holds are mostly sparsely inhabited. Syria's



main cities, including the capital Damascus, are located on its western flank along the border with Lebanon and the coastline and have been the priority for the Syrian military. The jihadists seized Palmyra yesterday, as UNESCO warned that the destruction of the ancient city would be "an enormous loss to humanity". The capture of Palmyra, a 2,000-year-old metropolis, comes days after the group also expanded its control in Iraq. Palmyra "is the birthplace of human civilisation. It belongs to the whole of humanity and I think everyone today should be worried about what is happening," UNESCO chief Irina Bokova said yesterday. ISIS fighters had spread out through Palmyra, including at the archaeological site in the city's southwest, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Syrian state media said loyalist troops withdrew after "a large number of ISIS terrorists entered the city". In an online statement, IS proclaimed its capture of the entire city, which is strategically located at the crossroads of key highways leading west to Damascus and Homs, and east to Iraq. ISIS also seized Palmyra's prison, notorious for the killings of hundreds of regime prisoners in the 1980s and seen as a symbol of oppression during the reign of President Bashar al-Assad's late father Hafez al-Assad. The jihadists, notorious for demolishing archaeological treasures since declaring a "caliphate" last year straddling Iraq and Syria, fought their way into Palmyra on foot after breaking through in the city's north. Known in Syria as "the pearl of the desert", Palmyra is home to colonnaded alleys, elaborately decorated tombs, and ancient Greco-Roman ruins that attracted more than 150,000 tourists yearly.

**BURUNDI CRISIS**  
**Deadly protests as army urges unity**

AFP, Bujumbura  
Protesters in Burundi battled police yesterday in violent anti-government demonstrations against a third term bid for power by the president, as security forces tried to stem unrest a week after a failed coup. At least two protesters were shot dead and eight were wounded in clashes with police in the capital Bujumbura, the Red Cross said, the latest victims of the unrest triggered by President Pierre Nkurunziza's bid for a third term, in which more than 20 people have died. Heavy gunfire was heard all day in suburbs of the capital. The crisis, which began in late April after the ruling party nominated Nkurunziza to stand again in the June presidential election, deepened last week when a top general staged a failed coup attempt. Newly-appointed Defence Minister Emmanuel Ntahonvukiye called for unity in the wake of the abortive coup, which was crushed by loyalist forces after street fighting between rival factions. "The survival of Burundi as a nation depends on the cohesion of the army," a military statement read, warning that, should the army splinter, it would result in a situation seen in war-torn Somalia. Nkurunziza, in an address to the nation late Wednesday, said most of the central African country was secure, and that the upcoming parliamentary and presidential votes would be peaceful. Shooting was heard overnight in the flashpoint Musaga district of the capital, where police have vowed to end protests.

**Ukraine ups ante against Russia**

*Scraps five key security cooperation deals; Moscow concerned*

AFP, Kiev  
Kiev lawmakers yesterday annulled five crucial security agreements with Moscow that had allowed Russia to transport troops to a separatist region of Moldova and purchase weapons that are only produced in Ukraine. The deals were suspended when Kiev accused the Kremlin of fomenting a pro-Russian revolt in Ukraine's industrial east 13 months ago that has killed 6,250 and left the ex-Soviet state's economy in ruins. But the decision means that legislative support from Ukraine's dominant nationalist and pro-European parties would be required before such cooperation could resume once the separatist conflict is resolved. It also underscores how little a truce deal reached in February has done to rebuild trust between Moscow and Kiev. The five laws include a strategic agreement allowing Moscow to send peacekeeping forces across Ukraine to

Moldova's Russian-speaking Transdnister region. A top Ukrainian state security official told AFP that the transports' abrupt interruption had caught Moscow off guard when they first went into effect about a year ago. The same source said Moscow has since found new avenues by which to supply troops in the self-declared state. But several senior Russian officials signalled their alarm at the sudden complication. "There is no other way for us reach (Transdnister) other than through Ukraine," an unnamed diplomat in Russia's foreign ministry told Interfax. "We have to think and look for alternatives. We cannot abandon Transdnister and Moldova," the Russian parliament's defence committee head Vladimir Komoyedov added. A second politically-charged agreement cancelled by Kiev required the neighbours to protect each others' state secrets. It was initially adopted with the arrival of one-time spy

Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin in 2000. Another law covered basic Russian military transports across Ukraine and a fourth concerned mutual arms purchases. Ukraine inherited several huge Soviet-era arms manufacturing sites that formed the backbone of Russia's armed forces. The final law covered intelligence sharing between the two sides. Some analysts said Thursday's legislation meant that crucial links that tied Moscow and Kiev over the past two decades have been ruptured for many years to come. Pro-Russian legislators that supported these laws at the expense of closer links with NATO and the European Union were trounced in the November election and at present appear a longshot at making a comeback in the 2019 parliamentary vote. Pro-Western President Petro Poroshenko has pledged to adopt all the reforms needed for Ukraine to join the European Union by 2020.



Crews clean up oil and look for distressed wildlife at Refugio State Beach on Wednesday. Inset, a dead octopus is washed ashore believed to be caused by the oil spill. The governor of California declared an emergency yesterday after a pipeline rupture dumped thousands of gallons of oil into the ocean.

**US senator stages 10-hour talkathon seeking end to mass surveillance**

AFP, Washington  
White House hopeful Rand Paul theatrically brought the Senate to a standstill Wednesday, delivering a 10-hour, 30-minute speech seeking to end intelligence agency bulk telephone data collection from millions of Americans. The Republican senator from Kentucky said he launched his filibuster, a talkathon that stops other action in the Senate, to prevent powerful lawmakers from ramming through a two-month extension of the law that would reauthorize the controversial collection of phone data. "There comes a time in the history of nations when fear and complacency allow power to accumulate and liberty and privacy to suffer. That time is now, and I will not let the Patriot Act -- the most unpatriotic of acts -- go unchallenged," Paul said at the start of his speech. Paul has made reining in government surveillance a key part of his presidential platform. The speech was the chamber's longest



**Record gap between rich and poor: OECD**

AFP, Paris  
The gap between the rich and poor in most of the world's advanced economies is at record levels, according to an OECD study that also found glaring differences between men and women. In most of the 34 countries in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development the income gap is at its highest level in three decades, with the richest 10 percent of the population earning 9.6 times the income of the poorest 10 percent. In the 1980s this ratio stood at 7 to 1, the OECD said in a report. The wealth gap is even larger, with the top 1 percent owning 18 percent and the 40 percent only 3 percent of household wealth in 2012. "We have reached a tipping point. Inequality in OECD countries is at its highest since records began," said OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría. The study found that the rise in inequality between 1985 and 2005 in 19 OECD countries knocked an estimated 4.7 percentage points off cumulative growth between 1990 and 2010. The report also found that as inequality rose, there were significant falls in educational attainment and skills among families in lower income groups, thus implying large amounts of wasted potential and lower social mobility. As wages for women are 15 percent less than for men,

**China provoking conflict in the South China Sea: US**

REUTERS, Jakarta  
China's land reclamation around reefs in the disputed South China Sea is undermining freedom and stability, and risks provoking tension that could even lead to conflict, US Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken told a conference in Jakarta. China claims 90 percent of the South China Sea, which is believed to be rich in oil and gas, its claims overlapping with those of Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Taiwan. Recent satellite images suggest China has made rapid progress in filling in land in contested territory in the Spratly islands and in building an airstrip suitable for military use and that it may be planning another. "As China seeks to make sovereign land out of sandcastles and redraw maritime boundaries, it is eroding regional trust and undermining investor confidence," Blinken said on Wednesday. "Its behavior threatens to set a new precedent whereby larger countries are free to intimidate smaller ones, and that provokes tensions, instability and can even lead to conflict." The United States and China clashed over the dispute on Saturday, when visiting U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry urged China to take action to reduce tension. China said its determination to protect its interests was "as hard as a rock". Asked about Blinken's remarks, China's Foreign Ministry demanded on Thursday that the United States abide by the principle of not taking sides on the South China Sea, and said his comments damaged trust in the region. "The US assumptions are groundless," ministry spokesman Hong Lei told a regular briefing. Blinken said the previous day that competing claims had to be handled "diplomatically". "We don't take sides but we strongly oppose actions that aim to advance a claim by force or coercion," he said. "We will continue to encourage all claimants to resolve their differences in accordance with international norms." The territorial dispute is seen by many as one of Asia's most dangerous hot spots, posing risks that it could result in conflict as