

# NEWS IN brief

## Ireland holds gay marriage referendum

Ireland went to the polls yesterday to vote on whether same-sex marriage should become legal, in a referendum that has exposed sharp divisions between communities in this traditionally Catholic nation. Allowing gay couples to wed would be a seismic change in a country where homosexuality was illegal until 1993, and where abortion remains against the law except where the mother's life is in danger. If the move is approved and the ensuing legislation is passed, Ireland would become the first country to make the change following a popular vote.

## 'War crimes' rampant in Ukraine: Amnesty

Amnesty International yesterday accused Ukrainian forces of torture and pro-Russian rebels of even more serious war crimes such as summary executions committed both before and after a February truce deal. "Former prisoners described being beaten until their bones broke, tortured with electric shocks, kicked, stabbed, hung from the ceiling, deprived of sleep for days, threatened with death, denied urgent medical care and subjected to mock executions," the global human rights organisation said in a new report.

## Tibetan sets himself alight in China

A Tibetan father-of-four set himself on fire in protest at China's rule over the Himalayan region, overseas media and rights groups said, adding it was unclear whether he survived. There have been 140 such acts in Tibet and elsewhere since 2009, most of them fatal, both the ICT and RFA said.



An Indian man walks across a dried-up pond on the outskirts of eastern Bhubaneswar, yesterday. Inset, Indian children play on a summer day along with a herd of buffaloes in Jammu. Temperatures have risen over 40 degrees Celsius in northern Indian states as summer reaches its heights before the monsoon arrives.

PHOTO: AFP

## Australia rejects criticism over migrant crisis

Australia hit back Friday at criticism of its response to thousands of migrants stranded at sea in Southeast Asia, saying it was generous towards refugees in the region. When asked Thursday whether Australia would offer to resettle the migrants from Bangladesh and Myanmar's oppressed Rohingya minority, Prime Minister Tony Abbott replied, "nope, nope, nope". The reaction led an Indonesian official to suggest the country was shirking its responsibilities under the United Nations Refugee Convention. But Immigration Minister Peter Dutton said Australia's hardline policy, which includes refusing to resettle asylum-seekers who arrive on boats and turning back vessels, had helped stop people risking their lives at sea. Australia was a significant donor to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in Indonesia, he said. Australia currently takes in about 13,750 refugees under its humanitarian programme each year. Dutton said that with millions of people displaced around the world, Australia could not help everyone. As the migrant crisis unfolded, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand were heavily criticised for refusing to take in boats overloaded with passengers fleeing poverty or persecution. Abbott also stood by his earlier statement, saying Friday it would be "utterly irresponsible" to do anything that could encourage people to take to the sea in boats.

## MIGRANT CRISIS IN EUROPE 5,000 kids missing, who cares?

There are almost 5,000 missing children in Italy right now, and no one is looking for them. Their photos aren't posted on the Internet, and there are no Amber Alerts notifying the general public to keep a look out for them. They are nameless statistics, identified only by the identification number bracelets given to them after they were rescued at sea. The missing are unaccompanied minors, many of whom survived untold horrors for most of their lives before arriving in Italy on smugglers' boats from Libya. According to Italy's Foreign Ministry, 4,840 have simply disappeared from the reception centers across the country since last summer. The lucky ones, if you can call them that, presumably met family members who were here waiting for them. Others have been sucked into Italy's dark underworld and are victims of sex trafficking, labor exploitation or other unimaginable fates.

"The hope we have is that children end up with family members who are already here," Equality Now trafficking consultant Esohe Aghatise told The Daily Beast. "But the reality is that many end up in the sex trade or exploited in other ways." Aghatise, a Nigerian-born lawyer who

20,000 Nigerian sex workers in Italy, which makes up the vast majority in the country. Some, she says, are as young as 12 years old. But Nigerians are not the only minors who are lost. Many other sub-Saharan and North Africans children end up exploited on what Italy's Prime Minister Matteo Renzi has called a "modern slave market." Many boys and young men are picked up outside the migrant reception centers in Italy and enticed to work in the agricultural sector for a meager wage that they are led to believe will help them earn enough money to move on, according to a recent report by Italy's labor ministry, that predicted an escalation of sex and labor trafficking in 2015. At the current rate, as many as 300,000 migrants could reach Italian shores by the end of the year, among them an increasing number of unaccompanied minors who could just disappear without a trace, almost as if they never existed at all.



## Laden warned jihadists not to form Islamic State

A stock of documents found in the Pakistan compound where Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011 show that the notorious al-Qaeda leader warned jihadists against forming ISIS, the very terrorist organisation that now controls large patches of Iraq and Syria. Instead, bin Laden advised jihadists to focus their attacks on America and American targets. He wrote one letter to militants in North Africa and told them to stop "insisting on the formation of an Islamic State" and rather to attack US embassies and American oil companies, CNN reported. Bin Laden also told al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula - the Yemeni affiliate of the group - to halt attacks on domestic targets and start launching attacks on American interests. These letters and heaps of other documents found at the Abbottabad, Pakistan compound were released this week by US intelligence officials. Some of the documents were non-classified, while others were recently declassified. It is not clear whether bin Laden's warnings against ISIS ever reached the militants or if they simply were ignored, but al-Qaeda has continued to carry out attacks on local targets. ISIS, in its current state, did not exist at the time of bin Laden's death but evolved out of al-Qaeda in Iraq and was clearly discussed prior to the 2011 raid in which he was killed.



## Merkel dampens hopes for Greek loan deal

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has dampened hopes for an end to marathon talks with Greece on a new loan deal as cash-strapped Athens said an agreement was possible by end month. Speaking after a two-hour meeting late on Thursday with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and French President Francois Hollande in Riga, Merkel urged Athens to continue talks with its international creditors. "It was a very friendly and constructive exchange," Merkel said. "But it is clear, the work with the three institutions has to go on. There is still a lot to do," she added, referring to the European Union, European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund who have bailed out Greece twice to the tune of 240 billion euros (\$267 billion). The three leaders met on the sidelines of the EU-Eastern Partnership summit in the Latvian capital. Tsipras' radical leftist government is locked in talks to obtain fresh funding with international creditors who are demanding more tough austerity measures in return.

## 'Hello dictator'

European Commission head Jean-Claude Juncker lived up to his reputation for straight talking yesterday when he hailed Hungarian Premier Viktor Orban as "dictator" on his arrival at an EU summit in Riga. The right-wing Orban has angered and infuriated his European Union peers for years, carrying out sweeping constitutional and institutional changes that critics say have curbed press freedom and judicial authority. "Hello, dictator," Juncker was overheard to say to Orban in front of the press at the EU-Eastern Partnership summit in Latvia. Orban replied: "Hello Grand Duke," a reference to Juncker's native Luxembourg, known as the Grand Duchy. Orban's spokesman Bertalan Havasi told AFP that the two men enjoyed the banter.

## Saudi Arabia seeking to head UN rights body!

Saudi Arabia is reportedly planning to make a bid to head the United Nations' Human Rights Council, in a move that has been described as the "final nail in the coffin for the credibility" of the HRC. Reports of the bid come just days after Saudi Arabia posted a job advertisement for eight new executioners. This year it has already put 85 people to death in what has been branded by Amnesty International a "macabre spike" from the 87 people it killed in total last year. The country will move to assume lead control over the HRC after 2016 when the presidency is awarded to a new nation. UN Watch, a non-profit human rights group that monitors the international body, disclosed Saudi Arabia's intentions in a recent report and urged the United States to fight against it. The move in 2013 to elect Saudi Arabia to the UN's 47-seat Human Rights Council drew condemnation from campaign groups over alleged systematic violations of the rights of its citizens. Germany currently heads the HRC, but its term will conclude in 2016. Elections will be held in early December 2015 for the 2016 term, according to a UN official. Rates of human trafficking are high in Saudi Arabia, and the kingdom is currently designated by the United States as a "country of particular concern" regarding religious persecution.

## HERO COP CHIEF FOILS ROBBERY WITH A CHAIR

Fiji's recently appointed police chief has displayed his crime-busting credentials in dramatic fashion, fighting off a gang of robbers at a Suva restaurant with just a folding chair. Police boss Ben Groenewald said instinct kicked in during the incident on Thursday night, which left him with wounds requiring 13 stitches after one of the attackers hurled a wine bottle at his head. Groenewald, a South African who took the Fiji job last year, said he was at a private function at the rear of the restaurant when he heard a commotion near the front. Initially thinking "it was a drunken person", the 65-year-old went to investigate and offer his help. But what he found is a robber gang of five members. After his intervention, they fled, but not before one threw a wine bottle at Groenewald's head. Groenewald is a career cop who served for more than 40 years in South Africa, where murder and other violent crimes are common, before accepting the role in the usually tranquil Pacific island nation.



## PICK-POCKETING SHUTS DOWN EIFFEL TOWER

Paris's iconic Eiffel Tower was shut to tourists yesterday as staff walked off the job to protest a surge in gangs of pickpockets roaming around the monument. The closure of one of the busiest tourist attractions in the French capital ahead of a long weekend recalls a similar strike at the Louvre museum in 2013 as staff protested often violent pickpockets stalking the halls of the palace. Workers at the 126-year-old iron lattice towersaid in a statement they had chosen to down tools due to an "increase in pickpockets around the Eiffel Tower and several threats and assaults." Paris, which received 22 million visitors in 2014 according to city figures, is one of the world's top tourist destinations and a mecca for tricksters and pickpockets.



## DOGS DOMESTICATED OVER 27,000 YEARS AGO: STUDY

Man's best friend may have been his companion for far longer than believed, scientists reported, publishing an analysis that dates domesticated dogs to over 27,000 years ago. Humans possibly domesticated dogs 27,000 to 40,000 years ago, according to Swedish researchers whose work was published Thursday in the journal Current Biology. The scientists based their analysis on an ancient Siberian jaw fragment. Previous estimates said modern dogs diverged from their wolf ancestors 16,000 years ago after the last ice age. The "Taimyr" wolf bone in the study, dated to 35,000 years ago, shows that the animal was the most recent ancestor of wolves and modern dogs.



## \$12,400 FOR A PAIR OF JAPANESE MELONS!

A single pair of premium melons fetched an eye-watering 1.5 million yen (\$12,400) at an auction in Japan on Friday. The winning bid was placed by a local fruit wholesaler for the first Yubari melons to go under the hammer this year at the Sapporo Central Wholesale Market in northern Hokkaido, officials said. The figure -- enough to buy a brand new car in Japan -- is some way short of the record for the luxury fruit, which fetched 2.5 million yen last year. High prices are the norm for the opening auction of the season and reflect buyers' desire for prestige. Yubari melons are considered a status symbol in Japan -- like a fine wine -- with many being bought as a gift for friends and colleagues.

