

# NEWSIN brief

## Blair quits as Middle East envoy

AFP, London

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Wednesday resigned as envoy of the Middle East Quartet diplomatic group after eight years in the job, his office said. Sources close to Blair said he would step down officially next month after holding post since 2007.

## Airstrikes hit rebels in Yemen capital, 36 killed

AFP, Sanaa

Saudi-led coalition warplanes bombed a rebel troop headquarters in the Yemeni capital yesterday, killing 36 soldiers, witnesses and a health official said. The coalition launched air strikes on March 26 against Iran-backed Shia Huthi rebels and allied forces loyal to former leader Ali Abdullah Saleh in a bid to restore UN-backed President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi to power.

## Greenpeace wins court battle in India

AFP, New Delhi

A court in New Delhi yesterday ordered authorities to unfreeze Greenpeace India's local bank accounts in a partial victory for the environmental campaigner in its ongoing battle against the government. Greenpeace has accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government of waging a "malicious campaign" against the group after its foreign funding licence was withdrawn last month.

## WWII bomb forces 20,000 to flee home

AFP, Berlin

German authorities evacuated around 20,000 people from their homes in the western city of Cologne yesterday after a World War II bomb was unearthed during construction work. The unexploded US-made device, which lay five metres underground and was discovered Friday, was set to be defused later in the day, and river traffic on the nearby Rhine was to be halted during the operation, city officials said.



(From top clockwise) An Afghan child migrant is helped off a dingy as it lands on a beach on the Greek island of Kos; overcrowded with Afghan immigrants the dinghy lands at the beach; and rescuers help migrant women. The EU yesterday asked its member states to admit over the next two years 40,000 asylum seekers from Syria and Eritrea who have already landed in Italy and Greece.

PHOTO: AFP; REUTERS

## ISIS kills 20 men in ruins of Palmyra

AFP, Beirut

The Islamic State jihadist group shot dead at least 20 men in the ruins of Syria's ancient city Palmyra yesterday, accusing them of fighting for the government, a monitor said.

"ISIS executed 20 men by firing on them in front of a crowd gathered in Palmyra's Roman theatre, after accusing them of fighting for the Syrian regime," Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, told AFP.

"ISIS gathered a lot of people there on purpose, to show their force on the ground," Abdel Rahman said.

The executions, if confirmed, could signal the start of "the group's barbarism and savagery against the ancient monuments of Palmyra," Syrian antiquities director Mamoun Abdulkarim told AFP.

IS seized Palmyra, including its UNESCO world heritage site, on May 21, after a bloody assault that lasted nine days. The Britain-based Observatory said ISIS had since executed at least 217 people, including 67 civilians, in and around the city.

# World has 795m hungry people

## UN targets zero hunger in a generation as numbers fall

AFP, Rome

The number of hungry people around the world has dropped below 800 million for the first time since the UN started counting, the Food and Agriculture Organisation said in an annual report yesterday.

The Rome-based agency said there are 795 million people around the world suffering from hunger, 216 million fewer than in 1990-92, and that the world was on track to potentially eradicate the problem within the lifetime of today's young people.

"The near-achievement of the MDG hunger targets shows us that we can indeed eliminate the scourge of hunger in our lifetime," said FAO director general Jose Graziano da Silva. "We must be the zero hunger generation."

In the developing world, the prevalence of undernourishment has declined to 12.9 percent of the population from 23.3 percent a

quarter of a century ago, the report found.

A total of 72 out of 129 countries monitored by the FAO have achieved the Millennium Development Goal



target of halving the prevalence of undernourishment by this year and developing regions as a whole only missed the objective by a narrow margin.

The improvement in food security was all the more striking given the world's population has grown by 1.9

billion since 1990, meaning many more mouths to feed, the FAO noted.

But while the situation had significantly improved over the past two decades, progress in recent years had been hampered by natural disasters, extreme weather events, political instability and civil conflicts, the report said.

In geographical terms, the gains on the global nutrition front were clouded by what the FAO called "darker shadows" in some regions. In Africa, 24 countries currently face food crises, twice as many as in 1990.

With nearly one in four people affected by undernourishment, sub-Saharan Africa was the region worst-affected by hunger, the report showed.

East Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and southeast and central Asia all posted strong reductions in hunger by contrast.

# Modi govt undermining democracy: Manmohan

AFP, New Delhi

India's former prime minister yesterday accused his successor Narendra Modi of suppressing dissent and undermining democratic institutions, in an unusually outspoken attack a year after losing office.

Manmohan Singh said Modi's government had "rewritten" history to suit its Hindu nationalist mindset since storming to power in general elections last May.

"Institutions of democracy are under threat. The entire edifice of the welfare state is now being dismantled," said the 82-year-old Congress leader in a speech to young party members in New Delhi.

"The past is continually being rewritten to promote a highly biased and communal view of history. Dissent is being suppressed," said Singh, who was prime minister from 2004 until last year.

Members of Modi's right-wing government have faced criticism over a series of sensational claims for Hinduism -- includ-

ing suggestions that ancient Hindu sages were the pioneers of aviation and algebra.

Singh, a pioneer of India's landmark economic reforms in the 1990s, also said millions of "distressed farmers" were unhappy with the Modi government, which wants to pass a controversial bill making it easier to acquire land.

"Throughout the country, there is acute distress in rural areas," he said.

The mild-mannered Singh, who enjoyed a reputation for personal probity, also denied any wrongdoing during his decade-long premiership.

"I can say in all humility that I have not used my public office to enrich myself, enrich my family or to enrich my friends," he said.

India's former telecoms regulator had on Tuesday accused Singh of allowing a multi-billion-dollar corruption scandal involving allocation of mobile spectrum in 2009.

The former premier also faces allegations of involvement in corruption involving coal mining licences, which he has denied.

# No Iran nuke deal without military site checks: France

AFP, Paris

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius yesterday said that France would oppose a nuclear deal with Iran if it did not allow inspections of military sites.

An agreement "will not be accepted by France if it is not clear that verifications can be made at all Iranian facilities, including military sites," Fabius told parliament.

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei last week ruled out inspections at military sites.

But Yukiya Amano, the head of the UN's atomic watchdog, told AFP on Tuesday that Iran has agreed to implementing the Additional Protocol of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that allows for snap inspections of its nuclear facilities, and if required, military sites.

"When we find inconsistency or when we have doubts, we can request access to the

undeclared location for example, and this could include military sites," said the Japanese diplomat.

But Iran appears to be interpreting the protocol differently. As well as Khamenei's comments, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has said the protocol allows "some access" but not inspections of military sites, in order to protect national "military or economic secrets".

Meanwhile, a senior Iranian negotiator yesterday said talks between Iran and world powers aimed at finalising a deal over Tehran's nuclear programme could go beyond a June 30 deadline.

With the issue of access to military sites emerging as a potential deal-breaker, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei praised the work of his nuclear negotiators after they came under heavy criticism from the conservative camp in parliament.



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II (2L) accompanied by Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh (3R) enter the Royal Gallery during the State Opening of Parliament at the Palace of Westminster in central London, yesterday. Prime Minister David Cameron's government confirmed it will hold a referendum on whether Britain should leave the EU yesterday in a policy speech read by Queen Elizabeth II. In the speech, the queen promised "wide-ranging powers" for Scotland as well as Wales. She also unveiled a tough plan to reduce immigration, including giving police the power to seize wages earned by illegal immigrants.

PHOTO: AFP



## Thai ex-PM under probe for lese majeste

AFP, Bangkok

Thai police are investigating whether fugitive former premier Thaksin Shinawatra committed royal defamation in a recent interview, authorities said yesterday as they announced his passports had been revoked.

Thailand's junta also confirmed that elections will not be held until September 2016, dealing a further blow to hopes that the kingdom's generals will swiftly hand power back to a civilian government.

When army chief and now Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-cha swept to power in a coup last May he initially said he hoped to hold elections within 15 months.

Thaksin, the billionaire telecoms tycoon-turned-prime minister, who was toppled by a coup in 2006, sits at the heart of Thailand's bitter political divide and lives in self-imposed exile to avoid jail on a corruption charge.

Last week Thaksin made rare comments to overseas media as the Thai military marked a year in power, although it was not immediately clear which interview he faces censure for.

Under Section 112, anyone convicted of insulting the king, queen, heir or regent faces up to 15 years in prison on each count.

# Everest glaciers may retreat 70% by 2100

TNN, New Delhi

Over 70 per cent of glacier volume in the Everest region could be lost by 2100 if current trends of greenhouse gases emission continue, a new paper published today in The Cryosphere, an open access journal of the European Geosciences Union (EGU) warns. This could have very damaging impact on agriculture and water availability in the Gangetic Plains, home to millions of Indians.

The glacier model used by the study shows that glacier volume could be reduced between 70% and 99% by 2100. This range is being given because the final outcome will depend on how much greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise, and on how this will affect temperature, snowfall and rainfall in the area. Glaciers in High Mountain Asia, a region that includes the Himalayas, contain the largest volume of ice outside the polar regions.

Changes in glacier volume can impact the availability of water, with consequences for agriculture and hydropower generation. While increased glacier melt initially increases water flows, ongoing retreat leads to reduced meltwater from the glaciers during the warmer months, with greatest impact for the local populations before the monsoon when rainfall is scarce.

## FOUR CONTROVERSIAL BILLS ON 'RACE AND RELIGION'

# UN sounds alarm at Myanmar move

STAR REPORT

A group of United Nations human rights experts yesterday expressed alarm at the enactment of the Population Control Healthcare Bill in Myanmar, the first of four in a package of bills that seek to 'protect race and religion'.

The experts said the bills are highly discriminatory against ethnic and religious minorities as well as against women.

"These bills risk deepening discrimination against minorities and setting back women's rights in Myanmar," said the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee. "At a time when thousands of Rohingyas are already fleeing the country by boat, this sends precisely the wrong signal to these communities."

On Saturday, State media reported that the president of Myanmar had

signed the Population Control Healthcare Bill. While the stated objectives of the Bill are to improve living standards, alleviate poverty, ensure quality healthcare and develop maternal and child health, its provisions are extremely vague and lack any protection against discrimination, the independent experts noted. Under the newly adopted law, certain areas can be designated for special health care measures, including birth spacing.

"Any coercive requirement for birth spacing with the aim to 'organise' family planning would constitute a disproportionate interference in the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and could amount to a violation of women's human rights," said the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health, Dainius Pūras, noting that the Bill allows township groups to 'organise' married couples to practice 36-month birth spacing between

pregnancies.

"Evidence shows that attempts to impose strategies aimed at 'controlling population growth' often disproportionately target marginalized and minority groups and can have discriminatory, coercive and punitive effects that go against basic rights and freedoms, particularly those of women," the experts added.

The rights experts also expressed serious concern about the other three bills currently being considered by parliament: the Religious Conversion Bill, the Myanmar Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Bill and the Monogamy Bill.

The Religious Conversion Bill establishes a state-regulated system for religious conversion. "The right to conversion has the status of unconditional protection under international human rights law," the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, said.

The Myanmar Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Bill seeks to protect Buddhist women marrying non-Buddhist men. In practice, the bill discourages interfaith marriages between Buddhist women and men of other faiths by imposing disproportionate penalties on non-Buddhist men.

The Monogamy Bill criminalises polygamy and prohibits extramarital affairs.

The independent experts called on the Government of Myanmar to discard all four laws, which will violate Myanmar's obligations under international human rights standards.

The Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Rita Izsák, cautioned that "these bills particularly discriminate against ethnic and religious minorities and have the potential to fuel existing tensions in the country."