

## NEWS IN brief

### ISIS urges more attacks on Saudi Shias

AFP, Dubai

An Islamic State-affiliated group in Saudi Arabia has urged more attacks against Shias, after ISIS claimed two bomb attacks on mosques in the kingdom. An ISIS suicide bomber on Friday blew himself up at the entrance of a mosque in Eastern Province, killing three people, exactly seven days after the jihadist group attacked another mosque in the oil-rich region killing

### Canada may now strip militants of citizenship

AFP, Ottawa

A revised Canadian immigration law came into force Friday enabling the government to revoke the citizenship of persons convicted of terrorism, treason, spying or taking up arms against Canadian soldiers. According to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, more than 100 Canadians have joined the ISIS group's ranks. The new immigration law, however, affects only Canadians with dual

### MJ's Neverland on sale for \$100 million

AFP, Los Angeles

Neverland, the sprawling California ranch that was once the location of "King of Pop" Michael Jackson's mind-boggling amusement park, is up for sale for \$100 million, realtors said Friday. But an expert said the price tag is "optimistic," given the unproven charges of child molestation which tainted Jackson's final years before his death in 2009. The late star built up his Neverland Ranch on 2,700 acres outside Santa Barbara to include zoo animals, numerous amusement rides and lavish gardens. It has 22 buildings, according



Syrians stand amidst the destruction in the eastern Shaar neighbourhood of the northern Syrian city of Aleppo, yesterday. Once Syria's commercial hub, Aleppo has largely become a city in ruins, split between regime forces in the west and opposition fighters in the east.

PHOTO: AFP

## Syria barrel bombs kill 71 civilians

AFP, Aleppo

Barrel bombs dropped from regime helicopters killed at least 71 civilians in Syria's Aleppo province yesterday, after forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad retreated from the neighbouring northwestern region of Idlib.

Insurgents now control the vast majority of Idlib after Al-Nusra Front -- al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate -- and its allies overran the last remaining regime-held city and surrounding villages.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said "at least 71 civilians were killed, and dozens were wounded, when regime helicopters dropped barrel bombs on the city of Al-Bab and in Al-Shaar in east Aleppo city".

Rami Abdel Rahman, the director of the Britain-based monitoring group, said 12 people were killed in rebel-held Al-Shaar, including eight members of a single family.

## US, China spat intensifies

Washington demands halts of sea reclamations at Shangri-La summit

AFP, Singapore

The United States yesterday called for an immediate end to China's intensifying reclamation works in the South China Sea and vowed to continue sending military aircraft and ships to the tense region.

US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter told a high-level security conference in Singapore that Beijing was behaving "out of step" with international norms.

China insists it has sovereignty over nearly all of the South China Sea, a major global shipping route believed to be home to oil and gas reserves.

"First, we want a peaceful resolution of all disputes. To that end, there should be an immediate and lasting halt to land reclamation by all claimants," Carter said at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue on security with a high-level Chinese military delegation in the audience.

"We also oppose any further militarisation of disputed features," he said.

He acknowledged that other claimants have developed outposts of differing scope and degree, including Vietnam with 48, the Philippines with eight, Malaysia with five and Taiwan with one.

"Yet, one country has gone much farther and much faster than any other."

"China has reclaimed over 2,000 acres, more than all other claimants

### SOUTH CHINA SEA ROW

combined and more than in the entire history of the region. And China did so in only the last 18 months," Carter said.

Chinese delegation head Admiral Sun Jianguo, deputy chief of the general staff department at the People's Liberation Army, is scheduled to address the forum today.

Sun and Carter spoke cordially on the sidelines before a luncheon at the forum, an AFP photographer said.

But in the highest level rebuke to Carter's comments so far, Chinese Vice

Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin said China's sovereignty over the South China Sea was firmly established, and that it had showed great restraint despite provocation and "muscle flexing" from other countries.

Meanwhile in an interview released over the weekend by the Wall Street Journal, China's ambassador to the United States, Cui Tiankai, said US actions and rhetoric could make the region "less stable".

The Chinese military this month ordered a US Navy P-8 Poseidon surveillance aircraft to leave an area above the heavily-disputed Spratly Islands. But the American plane ignored the demand.

This was "clearly an attempt to provoke and escalate the situation," Cui said.

Liu described "close-in manoeuvres" as "a crude act of muscle flexing that threatens to heighten militarisation of the South China Sea," without directly referring to the United States.

## MASSIVE INDIAN HEATWAVE

# Death toll crosses 2,000

Sudden showers bring relief to Telangana, Andhra Pradesh

AGENCIES

India's brutal weeks-long heatwave has killed more than 2,000 people, authorities said yesterday, as day temperatures decreased at many places across the most affected Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states due to pre-monsoon showers on Friday, providing relief to people from the sweltering heat.

Hundreds of mainly poor people die at the height of summer every year in India, but this year's toll is the second highest in India's history and fifth most in recorded history globally, according to EM-DAT, an international disaster database.

The southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana -- which have so far borne the brunt of the heatwave -- accounted for 1,979 deaths. A further 17 people were killed in Orissa, eastern India, while nine people were reported dead elsewhere in the country, taking the death toll to 2,005.

A total of 2,541 people died in 1998 due to extreme temperatures, the highest figure in India's history, according to EM-DAT.

In Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh, the temperature came down to 37 degrees Celsius from 43 in the evening. The city recorded 1 mm rainfall until 5.30pm, and weather officials said intermittent showers are in store over the weekend and next week.

Officials in Andhra Pradesh and



Telangana, meanwhile, launched public education campaigns to inform the most vulnerable on how to withstand the heat.

Yesterday, maximum temperatures across India hovered around 45 degrees Celsius, with forecasters in New Delhi warning that searing temperatures would continue next week across several states.

## No military site inspections

Says Iran; Kerry, Zarif launches crunch talks ahead of looming deadline

AFP, Geneva

Tehran rejected a key Western demand for site inspections yesterday as US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Iranian counterpart launched crunch talks to secure a nuclear deal ahead of a looming deadline.

The Geneva talks between Kerry and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in the run-up to the June 30 deadline come amid heightened diplomatic moves to try and end a 12-year standoff and put a nuclear bomb beyond Iran's reach.

Kerry and Zarif huddled for negotiations in a leading hotel, greeting each other warmly and chatting as they walked together along the corridor to the meeting room.

Asked by a journalist whether they expected to meet the deadline, Zarif smiled and said: "We will try." Kerry did not respond.

But even as talks got underway, senior Iranian nuclear negotiator Abbas Araghchi told state television it would be

"out of the question" for UN inspectors to question Iranian scientists and inspect military site inspections as part of a final nuclear deal with world powers.

After an interim accord struck in Geneva in November 2013, Washington and Tehran are trying to nail the final



details of a ground-breaking agreement that would see Iran curtail its nuclear ambitions in return for a lifting of crippling international sanctions.

Sealing a long-elusive deal with the Islamic republic could give US President Barack Obama his biggest foreign policy achievement yet.

After three decades of enmity, it would also pave the way to bringing

Iran back into the international fold and create fresh impetus to resolve a host of conflicts in the Middle East.

On April 2, Iran and the "P5+1" -- as the US and its partners are known -- agreed after eight days of tough talks in the Swiss city of Lausanne to the main outlines of a nuclear deal, with Tehran agreeing to rein in and mothball large sections of its nuclear programme.

Since the April 2 accord, technical experts have been meeting behind the scenes to overcome the remaining issues. But many of the decisions now need to be made at a political level.

Several sticking points remain, such as the possible military dimensions of the Iranian programme. Iran also is demanding an accelerated lifting of US, EU and UN sanctions, while the P5+1 wants a "snapback" mechanism to be put in place, enabling the measures to be quickly reimposed if Tehran breaks the deal.

Both US and Iran under immense pressure from hardliners not to make major concessions.

## Pak gunmen storm buses; 21 killed

AFP, Quetta

Unidentified gunmen stormed two passenger coaches in southwest Pakistan and killed at least 21 people, officials said yesterday.

The buses were en route to the port city of Karachi when they were stormed in Mastung district in the troubled province of Baluchistan late Friday, according to Mastung deputy district commissioner Akbar Harifal.

Baluchistan Home Minister Sarfaraz Bugti said 15 to 20 attackers armed with guns and other automatic rifles were involved in the attack.

He yesterday told reporters that a massive search operation involving 500 ground troops and supported by four helicopters was underway.

## Mysterious illness kills 120,000 rare antelopes

AFP, Astana

The sudden deaths of tens of thousands of endangered antelopes in ex-Soviet Kazakhstan over the past two weeks have left scientists scrambling for answers and conservationists worried about the animal's future.

Over 120,000 rare saiga antelopes -- more than a third of the total global population -- have been wiped out in a devastating blow that the United Nations Environment Programme has called "catastrophic".

Scientists have struggled to put their finger on the exact nature of the disease that has felled entire herds, but say findings point towards an infectious disease caused by various bacteria.

The rate of the deaths has staggered those who have studied the species -- whose ancestors have inhabited the region since the ice age.



## 7.8 quake shakes Japan

AFP, Tokyo

A 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck off the Japanese coast yesterday, geologists said, shaking buildings in Tokyo and setting off car alarms, an AFP correspondent reported.

There were no immediate reports of injuries or damage.

Despite the huge power of the quake, there was no risk of a tsunami, The Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre reported.

Residential buildings swayed for around a minute as the quake built in intensity at around 8.30pm.

The epicentre was 676 kilometres below the Earth's surface. It was centred on a remote spot in the Pacific Ocean around 870 kilometres south of Tokyo, the US Geological Survey said.



A Palestinian boy shows a red card to an Israeli soldier during a rally to show their support for the Palestinian bid to vote the Israel Football Association out of Fifa in West Bank, on Friday. Israel welcomed the avoidance of an "absurd situation" after the Palestinian Football Association withdrew the motion.

PHOTO: AFP

## MIGRANT CRISIS IN EUROPE

# 4,200 more rescued, 17 found dead

AFP, Rome

The Italian coastguard said it had coordinated the rescue of about 4,200 migrants sailing across the Mediterranean Sea on Friday, but also found 17 corpses on several of the rickety boats.

Distress calls were made from 22 different boats, many off Libya but also off the southern Italian coast.

The total number of people rescued in 24 hours is one of the highest in recent years but the coastguard could not confirm if it was a record. So far, the busiest days this year have been the rescue of 3,791 migrants on April 12 and 3,690 on May 2.

The 17 bodies were found on three inflatable dinghies, from which more than 300 other migrants were rescued alive.

Another maritime rescue mission on Thursday saw more than 700 migrants rescued off Sicily coast.

Overall, more than 40,400 boat migrants -- many of them fleeing conflict and poverty in countries such as Syria and Eritrea -- have arrived in Italy since the start of the year, similar to the same period last year.

## Russia blacklists 89 EU officials

AFP, Stockholm

European politicians who discovered they were on a previously confidential Russian travel blacklist yesterday said they were proud of being included, as EU governments led by Germany criticised the entry bans.

The 89-strong list, formerly undisclosed but revealed to European diplomats on Thursday, includes past and serving parliamentarians and ministers who have been outspoken critics of President Vladimir Putin and the war in Ukraine.

"Being on this list does not change my commitment to the people of Ukraine," said Swedish MEP Anna

Maria Corazza Bildt in a tweet.

"I have more to be proud of than to be afraid of... Putin's list is a confirmation that I am doing right as a parliamentarian," the centre-right politician, married to Sweden's former foreign minister Carl Bildt, added.

She was among eight Swedes confirmed on the list, which was drawn up in response to the EU's own sanctions and travel bans on Russia citizens over Moscow's annexation of Crimea in Ukraine last year.

Former Czech foreign minister Karel Schwarzenberg, a staunch critic of Russia's policy towards Ukraine, also confirmed he was on the list and welcomed it.

"When I saw the other names (on the list), I found out I was in a very decent club. I consider this a reward," he was quoted as saying by news agency CTK.

According to German daily Bild seven German nationals have been targeted. Polish media reports suggest that as many as 18 Poles have been targeted.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte was the first to reveal that a list of blacklisted figures had been shared with European diplomats.

Western governments have known about the existence of a list for some time and several prominent politicians and officials have been stopped from entering Russia in recent months.