

# NEWSIN brief

## Quake strands 137 climbers on Malaysian peak

Malaysian authorities raced yesterday to try to reach 137 people, some of them injured, who were stranded atop the popular climbing peak of Mount Kinabalu after a strong earthquake triggered dangerous rockfalls. The 6.0-magnitude quake struck near the mountain around 7:15 am yesterday, jolting a wide area of the Malaysian state of Sabah on Borneo island. No deaths or major damage had been reported as of late yesterday afternoon.

## Iraq's Tareq Aziz dies

Tareq Aziz who served as the international voice of Iraq's ousted president Saddam Hussein's regime died yesterday in hospital after several years of poor health in jail, a provincial official said. "Tareq Aziz died in Hussein Teaching Hospital in the city of Nasiriyah where he was brought when his health condition worsened," Adel Abdulhusein al-Dakhili, deputy governor of Dhi Qar province where the ex-foreign minister was jailed, told AFP.

## Niger signs up protocol to end slavery

The west African country of Niger, where there are tens of thousands of modern-day slaves according to unofficial estimates, yesterday became the first country to sign a UN protocol to stamp out the practice. "This is a historic moment -- by being the first country to ratify the protocol, Niger has ensured that the protocol is well on the way to entering into force," Guy Ryder, the head of the International Labour Organization said at a ceremony in Geneva.



Indian activists carry placards during an environment awareness campaign in Siliguri yesterday, on the occasion of World Environment Day. Social activists, along with school children, took part in the rally to raise awareness of the environment, as well as the use of mosquito nets and fresh drinking water.

# Malala suspects 'secretly acquitted'

Eight of the 10 men supposedly convicted and jailed for attempting to murder Pakistani schoolgirl activist Malala Yousafzai were actually cleared, officials said yesterday. Malala was shot in the head in October 2012 by Pakistani Taliban militants who boarded her school bus in an attack that also wounded two of her friends and shocked the world. In April, legal and security officials announced that a court had sentenced 10 men to life imprisonment over the attack, following a trial in Malala's hometown of Mingora, in Pakistan's north-western Swat district. The suspects had been detained by the army during a major anti-militant offensive and the existence of the trial was kept secret until after its conclusion. No media were present for any hearings. Salim Khan Marwat, the Swat district police chief, said that contrary to the earlier announcement, the anti-terrorist court had cleared all but two of the suspects. "Two of them were sentenced to life imprisonment while eight others were acquitted," he told AFP. "I have no knowledge where the eight persons are now -- either in military custody or released." Azad Khan, the deputy inspector general of police for Malakand division, of which Swat forms a part, confirmed the details and said the trial had been held under military supervision.



## HUMAN TRAFFICKING Thai PM vows no escape for officials in probe

Thailand's junta leader yesterday said government officials involved in the illicit trade in migrants would not be spared and vowed to "eradicate" the industry, days before the release of an influential US report ranking nations on their anti-trafficking efforts.



The kingdom, a longstanding trafficking hub, has been at pains to show it is cracking down on the illicit trade in migrants since the US relegated Thailand to the lowest tier of countries accused of failing to combat the problem in its State Department report last year. Tens of thousands of Rohingya Muslims fleeing persecution in Myanmar have been trafficked or smuggled through Thailand's southern provinces and into Malaysia in recent years. They have been joined by increasing numbers of Bangladeshi economic

migrants, some of whom have in recent weeks recounted horror stories of kidnap and coercion into a transnational trade in humans. During a speech at Thailand's first ever national anti-trafficking day yesterday, Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha said his "government is determined to eradicate human trafficking". "There is no place for traffickers in this country regardless of whether they are influential figures or government officials," said Prayut, who leads Thailand's military government.

## Lawyers to seek Manas trial by military court

A team of lawyers representing key human-trafficking suspect Thai army officer Lt-General Manas Khongpaen is planning to make a legal request asking that he be prosecuted and tried in a military court, citing an early junta rule that they say enables such an option. The lawyers are also planning to submit a request for a temporary release of Manas, an Army special adviser who has been detained at Na Thawi prison in Songkhla province. Manas was handed over to the Na Thawi court in the southern province after his surrender on Wednesday to police, who are prosecuting him as a civilian on 13 offences related to trafficking of Rohingya and other migrants.

## Data on 4m govt staff hacked: US Fingers pointed at China

The US government on Thursday admitted hackers accessed the personal data of at least four million current and former federal employees, in a vast cyber-attack suspected to have originated in China. "As a result of the incident" uncovered in April, the US Office of Personnel Management said it "will send notifications to approximately four million individuals." The government's personnel department handles hundreds of thousands of sensitive security clearances and background investigations on prospective employees each year. It was not immediately clear whether the hack affected President Barack Obama, other senior government officials or the intelligence community. The Washington Post and other US media cited government officials as saying that Chinese hackers were behind the breach. But the Chinese embassy in Washington countered that such attacks would not be allowed under Chinese law. "Jumping to conclusions and making hypothetical accusations is not responsible and counterproductive," embassy spokesman Zhu Haiquan said. "Chinese laws prohibit cyber crimes of all forms. The FBI and the Department of Homeland Security are said to be leading the investigation. The FBI in a statement said it "will continue to investigate and hold accountable those who pose a threat in cyberspace."

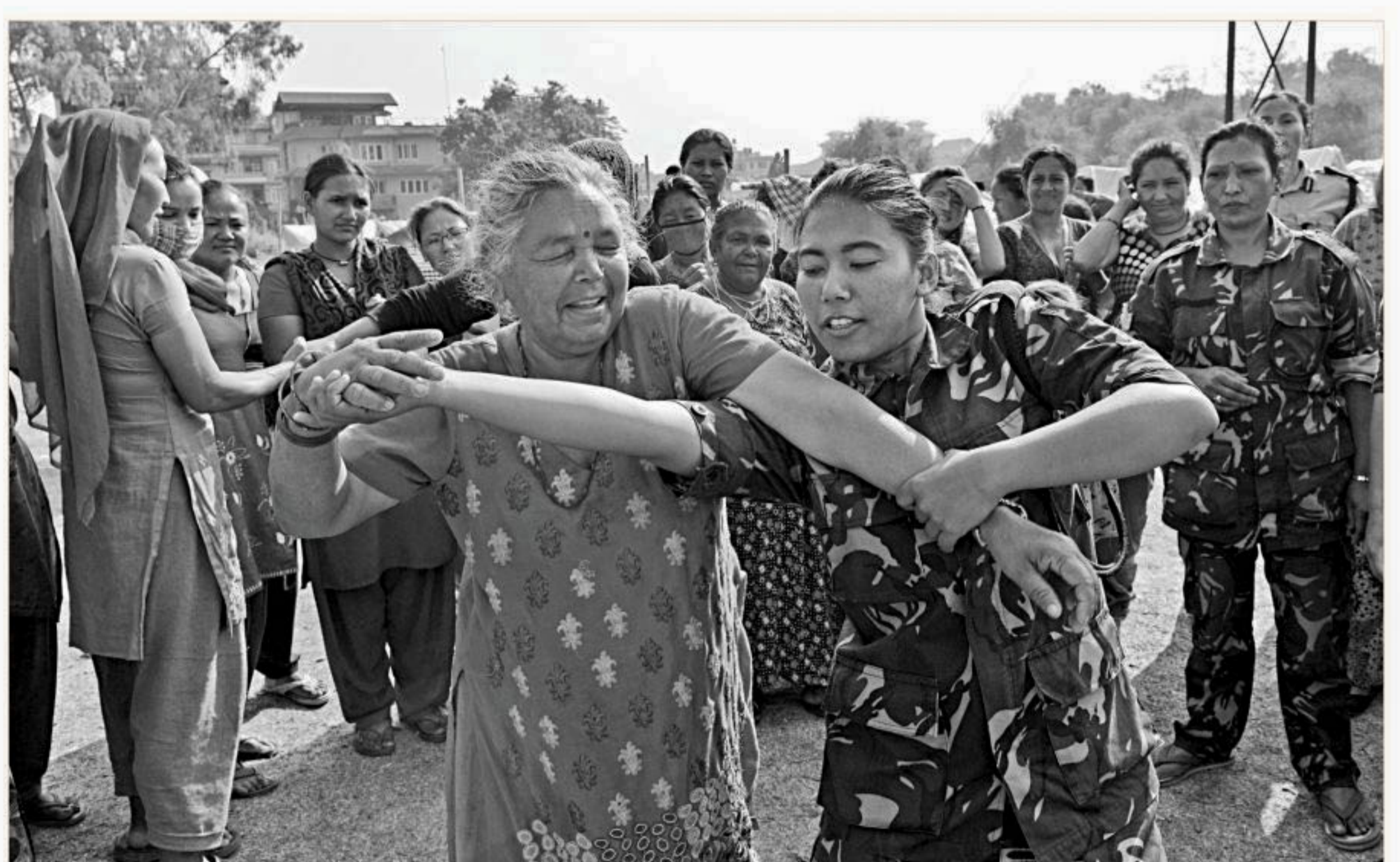


## The world is rejecting mass surveillance Says Snowden

Legislation ending the US government's bulk collection of telephone data is "a historic victory for the rights of every citizen," former intelligence analyst Edward Snowden said in a commentary Thursday. In the opinion piece, published in several newspapers internationally including The New York Times, Snowden reflected on what he said was a profound shift in the public's awareness of mass surveillance since his infamous leaks disclosing the extent to which the US government and some partners monitor electronic communications. "Ending the mass surveillance of private phone calls under the Patriot Act is a historic victory for the rights of every citizen, but it is only the latest product of a change in global awareness," he said, referring to this week's ending of the bulk data collection program under the USA Patriot Act. "Since 2013, institutions across Europe have ruled similar laws and operations illegal and imposed new restrictions on future activities. The United Nations declared mass surveillance an unambiguous violation of human rights," he added. The 31-year-old Snowden remains wanted by the United States for espionage following his bombshell leaks that got him branded a traitor in some political quarters and a hero in others.

## Chinese cruise ship lifted from river 103 bodies found

The Eastern Star is upright once again, looking almost normal with its bottom resting on the water and its deck and cabins clear above it. The ship's positioning yesterday was a step forward in the days-long nightmare playing out on a section of the Yangtze River that flows through Hubei province. It means answers should be easier to come by as to why the Eastern Star capsized Monday night and what can be done to prevent similar tragedies in the future. It also means closure could be coming soon to hundreds of families. By 6:20 pm (6:20 am ET) yesterday, the body count stood at 103, according to Chinese state media. That's a tick up from previous days, but still a fraction of the 456 passengers who were on board, many of them in their 60s and 70s. Fourteen of them survived. But rescuers have had no luck since Tuesday, when a 21-year-old sailor and 65-year-old woman were plucked from the water. The chances of more miracles have dwindled with each passing day. And the salvage process has begun. That process involved huge floating cranes that set up alongside the overturned river cruise ship, rolled the ship upright and raised it to the surface.



Nepalese police officers conduct a self defence training session for women and children at a shelter for earthquake victims in Kathmandu yesterday. A cycle of unemployment and poverty, and the impact of a 10-year Maoist insurgency have made Nepalese women and children easy targets for traffickers, and campaigners say that the April 2015 earthquake increased the threat.



## Suu Kyi to make first China trip next week

Myanmar's opposition leader and democracy champion Aung San Suu Kyi will visit China for the first time next week, Beijing and her party said yesterday, at a time of cooling relations between the once closely-bonded nations. Beijing was a key backer of Myanmar's military junta while it was under Western sanctions, but conflict in a border area as well as fears over resource-grabbing by China have chilled ties.

## 'SAUDI INVOLVEMENT' US Congress demands release of 9/11 papers

Politicians in the US Congress, including the Republican Senator Rand Paul, have urged President Obama to allow the release of 28 pages of classified documents which they believe link Saudi officials with the September 11 terror attacks in 2001. The documents were part of the 2002 joint House and Senate report "Inquiry into Intelligence Activities Before and After the [9/11] Terror Attacks", 28 pages of which have never been released. 15 of the 19 hijackers who took over four planes, crashing two into the World Trade Centre, on into the Pentagon and one into a field when passengers fought back, came from Saudi Arabia, as did Osama bin Laden. However there have long been suspicions that the Saudi regime itself was involved - which the Saudis deny. Rand Paul, leading the bipartisan effort to introduce a Senate bill, said in a statement: "I stand with my colleagues today to call for the release of the final 28 pages of the 9/11 congressional inquiry. I firmly believe the family members of the victims of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks have the right to know the details surrounding the tragedies that occurred on that sad day." Paul did not rule out reading the report on the floor of Congress unless the report is released. "We're going to try the normal legislative procedure first ... and see how that goes," said Rand.

## Yemen rebels, government agree peace talks

Huthi Shiite rebels and Yemen's exiled government agreed yesterday to attend UN-brokered peace talks in Geneva aimed at ending a more than two-month war that has cost over 2,000 lives. The Geneva meeting, provisionally set for June 14, would be the first significant effort to stop the fighting which has led to what the United Nations has called a "catastrophic" humanitarian situation. A Saudi-led coalition has been bombing the Iran-backed rebels and their allies for 10 weeks, raising tensions between Riyadh and its regional rival Iran, while rights groups have expressed concerns about the extent of civilian casualties. "We accepted the invitation of the United Nations to go to the negotiating table in Geneva without preconditions," said Daifallah al-Shami, a senior member of the rebels' political wing. Speaking to AFP, he added that the rebels "will not accept conditions" from other parties. Ezzedine al-Isbahi, information minister of the Yemeni government exiled in the Saudi capital, said it would also send a delegation to Switzerland. UN envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed told the Security Council on Wednesday that the government would attend but that he was still in consultation with the rebels. "The government agreed to participate in the Geneva talks," Isbahi told AFP. He said the meeting would involve "consultations on implementing Resolution 2216" which the Security Council passed in April. The resolution imposed an arms embargo on the Huthi rebels and demanded they relinquish seized territory.

## Lanka PM faces no-confidence motion

Sri Lanka's opposition said yesterday it has filed a motion of no confidence in the country's new prime minister, a move likely to hasten the dissolution of parliament in the politically divided country. Ranil Wickremesinghe took over this year at the helm of a new minority government that has depended on the opposition's support to push through political reforms. But he has also launched a series of investigations into alleged corruption by the country's former rulers -- now in opposition -- and would be all but certain to lose a no-confidence vote in parliament. The no-confidence motion already has the support of 112 of the 225 members in the house.

## ISIS advances on key Syrian city

The extremist Islamic State group fought fierce battles yesterday with Syria's armed forces in a bid to seize control of Hasakeh, a key provincial capital in the country's northeast. "Fierce clashes continued yesterday between regime forces and ISIS south of Hasakeh city. The regime is violently and intensely bombarding jihadist positions from the air," the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. The Britain-based monitor said the regime was using barrel bombs -- large containers packed with explosives -- against jihadists edging towards the city, which is divided between Kurdish and government control. Since their offensive began on May 30, ISIS fighters have advanced to the southern outskirts of Hasakeh using deadly suicide attacks and heavy mortar fire. Citing a military source, Syria's state news agency SANA said the army had used "aerial weapons... to destroy equipment belonging to the ISIS terrorists". The seven-day assault has killed at least 71 government loyalists and 59 extremists, including 11 who drove car bombs -- IS's signature weapon -- towards regime positions, the Observatory said. The jihadists, which have expanded their control in central and eastern Syria and in neighbouring Iraq, seized a number of key posts, including a prison and power plant. Hasakeh has since been without power, local activist Arin Shekmos told AFP.