

NEWS IN
brief

Pope starts LatAm tour in Ecuador

AFP, Guayaquil

Pope Francis, in South America on a three-nation tour, was to perform mass in Ecuador yesterday, with more than a million faithful -- many of whom camped out overnight -- expected to attend. Francis will address an expected crowd of 1.5 million as he officiates an open-air mass from a park late-morning on the second day of his trip, which will also see him go to Bolivia and Paraguay.

Philippines confirms second MERS case

AFP, Manila

A foreigner who flew to the Philippines from the Middle East has become the second confirmed case of MERS in the country, the health department said yesterday, as a deadly outbreak in South Korea spreads alarm across Asia. The 36-year-old male patient, whose nationality was not disclosed, has been put in isolation at a government facility to contain the virus, Health Secretary Janette Garin said.

Saudi Arabia opens new airport in Medina

PTI, Dubai

Weeks before the annual Hajj pilgrimage, Saudi Arabia has opened a new international airport built at a cost of US \$ 1.2 billion and a passenger capacity of eight million a year in Medina, the second holiest city of Islam. Saudi King Salman officially opened the majestic Prince Mohammed bin Abdul Aziz International airport which is the country's first airport constructed and operated entirely by the private sector.

'Cattle thieves' kill 37 in Nigeria

AFP, Kano

Gunmen suspected of being cattle thieves killed at least 37 people in a village in northern Nigeria's Zamfara state, a local government official said yesterday. The official said some 50 gunmen had taken part in the attack on Cigama, shooting indiscriminately. He said several houses were burnt down and herds of cattle stolen during the attack.

Egypt killed 241 Sinai militants from July 1-5

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's military killed 241 militants in the Sinai from July 1-5, the army said yesterday, including jihadists from the Islamic State group who launched spectacular attacks last week. The military has poured troops and armour into the peninsula after, on July 1, jihadists from ISIS launched blistering attacks there killing dozens.



Greece's maverick finance minister Yanis Varoufakis, who announced his surprise resignation leaves the Ministry of Finance with his wife Danai on the back of a motorbike downtown Athens, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Iran talks enters final act

Kerry urges Iran to grab opportunity as France says all cards on the table'

AFP, Vienna

The last act of high-stakes Iran nuclear talks began yesterday with foreign ministers seeking to resolve a few remaining issues blocking a historic accord on the eve of a final deadline.

With ministers back in Vienna on a 10th day of talks, both sides warned however that success in their quest to nail down an agreement ending a 13-year-old standoff was far from guaranteed.

On Sunday, US Secretary of State John Kerry, in Vienna since July 27 facing off against his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif, said "it is now time" to seal the deal.

"While I completely agree... that we have never been closer, at this point this negotiation could go either way," he said, with talks "not yet where we need to be on several of the most difficult issues".

The point was rammed home by France's Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, Germany's Frank-Walter

Steinmeier and EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini as they returned to Vienna late Sunday.

"The main question is to know whether the Iranians will accept making clear commitments on what until now has not been clarified," Fabius said, adding that "all the cards" were "now on the table".

Yesterday, an Iranian official said that Tehran has "made a number of concessions and "shown a good amount of flexibility" and that "only a few items.. need to be tackled by the ministers".

The official, asking not to be identified, said however that "there are tough issues ... which were not resolved at expert level or the deputy minister level, those are not easy issues."

Also present were Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and China's Wang Yi, who yesterday said that a "comprehensive agreement is within reach."

"What is important is that today and tomorrow all parties, especially the United States and Iran, should

make their final decisions as quickly as possible," Wang said.

The deal, capping almost two years of rollercoaster talks following the 2013 election of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, would build on a framework accord reached in April in Switzerland.

A final deal could also put Iran and the United States on the road to normalised relations -- much to the alarm of Iran's regional rivals -- after 35 years of enmity and mistrust.

Signs have emerged that some of the outstanding issues have been resolved by teams of experts, who are now waiting for the ministers to sign off on their months of behind-the-scenes work.

But the same tough issues that remain have bedevilled the talks since the start.

These include investigating allegations that in the past Iran sought nuclear weapons, finding a mechanism to lift the sanctions, and ensuring Iran can continue to have a modest, peaceful nuclear programme.

EUROPE'S IMPOSSIBLE DILEMMA
Let Greece stay or let it go?

AFP, Brussels

Europe faces a near impossible choice between giving debt-laden Greece a chance or pushing it out of the euro and risking global turmoil, analysts said Sunday, after Greek voters overwhelmingly rejected international creditors' terms.

Berlin, Paris and Brussels all warned in the run-up to Sunday's referendum that a 'No' vote to the EU-IMF reform demands was a 'No' vote for the single currency and a return to the drachma.

Some analysts say the cold reality of a possible "Grexit" may make some leaders agree with Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras that the shock result does not necessarily have to mean a break with Europe.

"EU member states will give Greece another chance, but there is very little time and this will really be the last chance," Nicolas Veron of the Bruegel think-tank in Brussels told AFP.

He said a Greek exit from the 19-country currency union could come about "very rapidly" if action was not taken quickly.

The creditors face a difficult choice between trying to avoid the risk of contagion from a Greek euro exit -- plus the political and symbolic implications of the loss of a historic European nation from the club -- or sticking to their austerity guns.

Eurozone leaders are to hold a special summit today in Brussels which could well be the last chance to reach some kind of deal before the European Central Bank cuts off emergency liquidity assistance (ELA) to Greece's struggling banks.

Slovakia's Finance Minister Peter Kazimir poured cold water on the chances of success, saying that the "nightmare of the 'euro-architects' that a country could leave the club seems like a realistic scenario after Greece voted 'No' today."

"I think it's going to lead to Grexit," Pieter Cleppe of the Open Europe think-tank told AFP.

He said that without an extension of ECB funding "there is no other way than to provide a parallel currency."

Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis insisted on Sunday night that a parallel currency was not on the table and that Athens could strike a deal, but that will take hard work, analysts said.

Pouring more money into the black hole of Greece's finances will not be popular with voters in other eurozone countries, particularly in the more headline Baltics, Finland and the Netherlands, said Anne Laure Delatte, an economist at the French Institute for Scientific Research.

"What could work in the Greeks' favour is the radical uncertainty, and the pressure from the Americans, who fear a new financial crisis," she said.

"But what could count against them is the idea that the eurozone could do better without them, and the pressure from voters."

Failure to do a deal would be a boost for populist leaders like France's Marine Le Pen and Britain's Nigel Farage who made gains in European Parliament elections last year, said Pascal Delwit, political science professor at Free University of Belgium.

"I find it hard to imagine that we are heading towards Grexit," he said. "European leaders don't want to open a Pandora's Box."



Greece names new finance minister

AFP, Athens

Greece yesterday named economist Euclid Tsakalotos, its top negotiator in the stalled EU-IMF talks, as the country's new finance minister, the president's office said.

"Euclid Tsakalotos will take his oath of office at 1700 GMT today," it said.

Rotterdam-born and Oxford-educated Tsakalotos, 55, taught economics at Kent University in Britain between 1990 and 1993 before relocating to Athens.

The leftist economist and lawmaker of the ruling Syriza party replaces flamboyant fellow economist Yanis Varoufakis, who stepped down earlier Monday.

Tsakalotos had already become Greece's point man in the EU-IMF talks in April after Varoufakis was deemed too abrasive in his contacts with fellow eurozone finance ministers.

Meanwhile, International Monetary Fund chief Christine Lagarde yesterday said that the global crisis lender would assist Greece if asked, a day after Greek voters rejected a prior bailout plan.

"The IMF has taken note of yesterday's referendum held in Greece. We are monitoring the situation closely and stand ready to assist Greece if requested to do so," Lagarde said in a brief statement.

In Sunday's referendum, more than 61 percent of Greeks rejected creditor demands for further austerity in return for more bailout funds, a victory for the radical leftist Syriza's government.

New suspected Boko Haram carnage kills 44 in Nigeria

AFP, Jos

At least 44 people were killed in twin bomb blasts in the central Nigerian city of Jos, the emergency services said yesterday, after a wave of mass casualty attacks blamed on Boko Haram militants.

Sunday's bombings took the death toll from raids, explosions and suicide attacks to 267 this month alone and to 524 since Muhammadu Buhari became president on May 29, according to an AFP count.

The former army general has repeatedly vowed to crush the Islamists and is eyeing the deployment of a strengthened regional force at the end of this month to deliver a hammer blow.

But with the death toll rising, attacks increasing and the military seemingly unable to prevent attacks on civilians, he will be under pressure to act fast.

Sunday's blasts happened within minutes of each other at a shopping complex and near a mosque in the religiously divided capital of Plateau state, which the rebels have targeted before.

"At the moment we have 44 dead bodies and 47 others injured from the scenes of the two attacks," Mohammed Abdulsalam,

from the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) told AFP.

Umar Abubakar, who was at the Yantaya mosque for the "Tafsir" or Koran commentary session, said a number of attackers opened fire from outside at about 9:20 pm (2020 GMT).

"They fire an RPG (rocket propelled grenade) at the mosque but it hit a metal bar on the facade and exploded," he said. "Many people were killed and injured from the shooting and the explosion."

"It was a miracle I escaped because I can't explain how it happened."

Daybreak showed the mosque pockmarked with bullet holes and stained with blood, while footwear, books and other personal items were strewn on the ground.

The second attack targeted the packed Shagalinku restaurant in a shopping complex on the Bauchi Road, which is popular with travellers from the northeast.

The carnage in Jos followed a suicide attack on a church in the northeastern city of Potiskum on Sunday, which left five people dead, including the pastor, a woman and her two children.

Last week, Islamist militants fighters raided a number of villages around the Lake Chad area, killing more than 150 worshippers as they prayed in mosques.



The Dalai Lama reacts as his birthday caked is wheeled out on stage following a performance for him by children at the Honda Center in Anaheim, California, on Sunday, where the religious leader celebrated his 80th birthday with a speech on awakening compassion. A three-day celebration marking the Dalai Lama's 80th birthday kicked off, as thousands of supporters -- and some protesters -- gathered in Anaheim, California to hear the spiritual leader speak.

Children 'emotionally shattered' one year after Gaza war

REUTERS, London

The majority of children living in areas of Gaza hardest-hit during last year's conflict are showing signs of severe emotional distress and trauma, including frequent bed wetting and nightmares, a global children's charity said yesterday.

A ceasefire last August ended 50 days of fighting between Gaza militants and Israel, in which health officials said more than 2,100 Palestinians, mostly civilians, were killed. Israel put the number of its dead at 67 soldiers and six civilians.

Israeli air strikes and shelling hammered the densely populated Gaza Strip, dominated by the Islamist Hamas movement, causing widespread destruction of homes, schools and other buildings. Hamas and other militant groups launched thousands of rockets and mortar bombs from the Palestinian enclave into Israel.

Some 551 children were killed in Gaza and 3,436 were injured during the conflict, while an estimated 1,500

lost their parents, according to a report by Save the Children.

More than 70 percent of children in the worst-affected areas of Gaza suffer from regular nightmares and bed wetting and live in fear of further fighting, while half do not want to attend school because they are afraid to leave home, the charity said.



Homelessness and repeated exposure to violence, coupled with soaring unemployment for parents and limited mental health support, have prevented children from recovering from the mental trauma of war, according to Save the Children.

Around 100,000 people in Gaza are still homeless a year on from the conflict, while major reconstruction of health facilities, water networks and schools has yet to begin, the charity said.

Israel imposed a blockade on the Gaza Strip after the Islamist movement Hamas won power there in elections in 2006, and the flow of reconstruction materials into the territory has been greatly restricted since the end of the 2014 conflict.

So slow has the influx of goods been that the United Nations last month said it could take 30 years to repair the damage.

The continued blockade and threat of renewed conflict has made it difficult for children in Gaza to live normal lives, according to Save the Children.

Of the 1.8 million people living in Gaza - a population growing by 50,000 a year - nearly two-thirds are dependent on aid in some form or another. It is the United Nation's longest-running relief operation, set up in 1949.

Philae's comet may host alien 'life'

AFP, Paris

Astronomers proposed a novel explanation Monday for the strange appearance of the comet 67P/Churyumov-Gerasimenko carrying Europe's robot probe Philae through outer space: alien microscopic life.

Many of the frozen dust ball's features, which include a black crust over lakes of ice, flat-bottomed craters and mega-boulders scattered on the surface, were "consistent" with the presence of microbes, they said.

In fact, the comet racing towards the Sun at a speed of 32.9 kilometres (20.4 miles) per second, "could be more hospitable to micro-life than our Arctic and Antarctic regions."

They pointed to Rosetta's detection of complex organic material, which gave the comet its surprisingly super-dark and low-reflecting surface, as "evidence for life."

After 'selfie', India braces 'velfie'

AFP, Mumbai

Move over selfie, India is embracing the "velfie" with Bollywood stars, sporting heroes and even politicians taking and posting videos of themselves online using a range of new mobile apps.

From lip-synching famous movie scenes and quizzing political leaders

to interviewing job candidates, Indian tech firms are betting on the latest craze to grip social media -- the video selfie.

"2014 was about selfies... 2015 is for #velfies!" screams the blurb for Velfie, a smartphone app similar to Dubsmash where users mime songs or quotes to pre-recorded audio before posting the clips on social networks.

German-developed Dubsmash has rapidly become a global phenomenon since its launch in

November and has been downloaded more than 50 million times across 192 countries, according to its website.

The global craze is sweeping the Indian film industry, with numerous stars entertaining legions of loyal fans with dubbed videos which are uploaded to popular sharing platforms Facebook

and Instagram.

Actors Salman Khan and Ranveer Singh, and actresses Sonakshi Sinha and Richa Chadda are just some of the Bollywood

stars to have embraced it, lip-synching everything from Hindi film dialogue to lyrics from Western songs.

The app -- which is free and limits videos to ten seconds in length -- has been downloaded 200,000 times and is already operating in around 140 countries, according to Sundaram.

