

NEWS IN brief

Yemeni forces launch Scud at Saudi Arabia

REUTERS, Sanaa

Yemeni army units allied to the Houthi militia fired a ballistic missile toward southern Saudi Arabia yesterday, the group's TV channel said, as combat between the kingdom and the Iran-allied group has intensified. "The Yemeni army fired a Scud ballistic missile toward Jizan," Houthi-run Al Maseera TV reported on its twitter page.

Two Nato soldiers killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Men wearing Afghan military uniforms shot dead two Nato soldiers in the country's south yesterday, the coalition said, the first insider attack on foreign troops since the Taliban's bitter power transition. So-called "green-on-blue" attacks -- when Afghan soldiers or police turn their guns on international troops -- have been a major problem during Nato's long years fighting alongside Afghan forces.

Maoin rebels kill three troopers in India

AFP, New Delhi

Maoin rebels killed three paramilitary troopers and injured another six in an ambush in eastern India yesterday, a police officer said. After triggering a landmine, the rebels opened fire with assault rifles on a Border Security Force convoy in a forested area of Orissa state, district police chief Mitrabhanu Mahapatra said.

China work safety chief sacked

AFP, Beijing

The head of China's work safety watchdog has been sacked, state media said yesterday, two weeks after giant explosions in one of the country's largest ports killed 139 and injured hundreds. Yang Dongliang, director and Communist Party chief of the State Administration of Work Safety, was fired for "suspected severe violation of discipline and the law", according to a one-line report from the official Xinhua news agency.

Iran urges US to release 19 detainees

AFP, Tehran

Iran urged the United States yesterday to release 19 Iranians detained on sanctions-related offences, a day after ruling out a prisoner swap with a Washington Post reporter accused of espionage. "We call on the American government and their judicial authorities to put an end to the detention of these individuals," foreign ministry spokeswoman Marzieh Afkham said.



Syrian migrants cross under a fence into Hungary at the border with Serbia, near Roszke, yesterday. Inset, German President Gauck shakes hands with a girl during visit of an asylum seekers accommodation facility in Berlin. Hungary's government has started to construct a 175-km-long fence on its border with Serbia in order to halt a massive flow of migrants who enter the EU via Hungary and head to western Europe. PHOTO: REUTERS



MIGRANT TRAGEDY

50 found dead in boat off Libya

REUTERS, Rome

Some 50 migrants were found dead in the hold of a boat off the coast of Libya yesterday during a rescue operation which saved 430 other people, the Italian coast guard said.

Thousands of people, mainly from Africa and the Middle East, have put to sea this year in the hope of reaching Europe, often dangerously packed onto small boats that were never designed to cross the Mediterranean.

A spokeswoman for the Italian coast guard said the Swedish ship Poseidon, working with the European Union's border control agency Frontex, had gone yesterday to help a boat in difficulty and had found the bodies.

It was not immediately clear how the migrants died. More than 100,000 migrants have reached Italy so far this year, but at least 2,300 are believed to have died while trying to make the crossing.

Emergency services received 10 calls for help from various boats in difficulty yesterday, all in an area around 30 miles from the Libya coast, the spokeswoman said.

An Italian coast guard vessel saved 113 people from a partially-deflated rubber boat, but one passenger, who was already fighting for their life, died soon after.

CLAIMS OF US SPYING

Obama expresses regret to Japan's Abe

AFP, Tokyo

US President Barack Obama yesterday apologised to Tokyo after WikiLeaks claimed Washington had spied on Japanese politicians, a government spokesman said.

Obama held a telephone conversation with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday morning, spokesman Yoshihide Suga said, adding that the pair agreed to work together on global economic issues in the wake of a stock market meltdown sparked by fears over China.

"President Obama said he was very sorry... as the case caused a big debate in Japan," Suga told a regular news conference, without confirming the spying claims.

He added that Abe reiterated his "serious concern" over the case.

"Prime Minister Abe told (Obama) that, if the Japanese people concerned were subject

to these activities, it would risk jeopardising trusting relations between allies," Suga said.

In an earlier conversation with US Vice President Joe Biden, Abe voiced similar concerns if the spying claims were confirmed.

Last month, WikiLeaks said it had intercepts revealing years-long espionage by the US National Security Agency on Japanese officials and major companies.

Tokyo's response has been widely seen as muted compared to the anger expressed in France and Germany following similar allegations.

"(Abe and Obama) will firmly work together on the economy issue," Suga said, without elaborating.

He added that Obama repeated Washington's support for Abe's speech on the eve of the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII in which he expressed regret but also said future generations need not apologise for Japan's war record.



US military may have skewed ISIS analysis

AFP, Washington

The Pentagon is investigating whether military officials have improperly rewritten intelligence assessments to give a more optimistic view of the US-led campaign against the Islamic State group in Iraq, the New York Times reported yesterday.

The inspector general probe began after at least one civilian analyst at the Defence Intelligence Agency said he had evidence that US Central Command officials were reworking intelligence report conclusions prepared for President Barack Obama and other policymakers.

Unnamed government officials detailed the claim to the Times, though it was unclear when the reports were changed and who was responsible.

Under a directive by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, which oversees the 17 US intelligence agencies, analytical assessments "must not be distorted" by a particular audience, agenda or policy view.

US officials told the Times that complaints had been made to the intelligence community's inspector general, and that the Pentagon's inspector general then took up the matter.

If the assessments were indeed skewed, it could help explain why public descriptions of progress against the militants has varied.

Since the US-led bombing campaign of the Islamic State began in Iraq a year ago, and subsequently in



Syria, Iraqi security forces have retaken some territory previously seized by the group but not major cities like Mosul and Ramadi.

But US intelligence agencies have recently found that the group has been little weakened by the assault just as it expanded into North Africa and Central Asia, the Times said.

Last month, Obama administration special envoy retired general John Allen said "ISIS is losing," using an acronym by which the group is known.

Defence Secretary Ashton Carter agreed last week that the war was "difficult" and will take "some time," though he insisted he was "confident that we will succeed in defeating ISIL and that we have the right strategy."

Syria's conflict began with anti-government demonstrations in March 2011.

But after a bloody crackdown by the ruling regime it spiralled into a multi-front civil war that has left more than 240,000 people dead.



An official holds a confiscated elephant tusk before destroying the ivory at the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation, in Bangkok, Thailand, yesterday. About two tonnes of ivory were crushed and incinerated during the ceremony as part of a campaign against poachers, traffickers and traders involved in the illicit trade in ivory. PHOTO: REUTERS

Kurds launch new assault on ISIS

REUTERS, Erbil

Kurdish forces attacked Islamic State insurgents in a cluster of villages in Iraq's northern province of Kirkuk yesterday, bent on securing territory they have gained in the course of rolling back the jihadists since last summer.

The assault began overnight south of Daquq, a town about 175 km north of the Iraqi capital Baghdad. The front line between the regional Kurdish peshmerga forces and Islamic State in northern Iraq has hardly budged for months.

The Kurds already control most of the territory they claim as their own, and have little incentive to push further into predominantly Sunni Muslim Arab towns and villages.

By mid-morning, Islamic State militants had been routed from the village of Albu Najm, according to a source within the peshmerga forces. Fighting continued in another village nearby, he said.

A Kurdish officer with the rank of captain was killed by an improvised explosive device, a source in the Kirkuk morgue said.

The peshmerga have emerged as an important partner for the United States in its aerial campaign against Islamic State.

They have pushed back the ultra-radical Sunni insurgents in northern Iraq, effectively expanding the area of their autonomous region in the process. Large parts of Kirkuk province remain in Islamic State hands.



China's Xi stresses unity for Tibet

Vows fight against separatism

REUTERS, Beijing

China will wage an unceasing fight against separatism in its restive mountainous region of Tibet, President Xi Jinping said, as the government repeated it would never accept exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama's genuine autonomy proposals.

This year marks several sensitive anniversaries for the remote region that China has ruled with an iron fist since 1950, when Communist troops marched in and took control in what Beijing calls a "peaceful liberation".

It is 50 years since China established what it calls the Tibet Autonomous Region and also the 80th birthday of Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, who has lived in exile in India since fleeing Tibet in 1959 following an abortive uprising.

At a two-day conference this week of the senior leadership about Tibet, only the sixth ever held, Xi repeated the government's standard opposition to Tibetan independence, saying he would fight an "unswerving anti-separatism battle", state media said in comments reported late on Tuesday.

"We should fight against separatist activities by the Dalai group," Xi was quoted as saying.

The Dalai Lama denies seeking independence, saying he only wants genuine autonomy for Tibet, something he calls the Middle Way and which Beijing believes is merely a smokescreen for independence, arguing Tibet already has real autonomy.

SYRIAN WAR Assad confident of Russian support

AFP, Beirut

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad expressed "strong confidence" Tuesday that Russia will continue supporting his embattled regime, speaking in an interview with Hezbollah's Al-Manar television network.

Assad also described as "legitimate" the presence in Syria of fighters from Hezbollah backing his forces.

The powerful Lebanese Shiite movement, along with Russia and Iran, have been Assad's major allies since Syria's revolt broke out in 2011.

"We have strong confidence in the Russians, as they have proven throughout this crisis, for four years, that they are sincere and transparent in their relationship with us," Assad said.

His rare television interview

came as Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed the Syrian crisis with Jordan's King Abdullah II on the sidelines of the Meks-2015 aerospace show in Moscow.

Assad described Russia as "principled", while "the United States abandons its allies, abandons its friends."

He added: "This was never the case with Russia's policy, neither during the Soviet Union, nor during the time of Russia... Russia has never said that it supported President Such and Such and then decided to abandon him."

Assad had been asked by Al-Manar's correspondent about US President Barack Obama's comments earlier this month that Russia and Iran "recognise that the trend lines are not good for Assad."

He rebutted the statement, saying Iran, too, remained a steadfast ally.



US backs Sri Lanka war crimes probe

AFP, Colombo

The United States said yesterday it backed the new Sri Lankan government's plans for a local inquiry into alleged wartime atrocities, reversing its demand for an international probe.

Assistant Secretary of State Nisha Biswal said the US wants to sponsor a resolution at next month's UN human rights session backing Colombo's plans, signalling a major shift by Washington on the South Asian nation.

"We support efforts to create a credible domestic process for accountability and reconciliation," Biswal told reporters in Colombo after talks with the new government.

"The failure of past efforts is very much on our minds, but that is why you have to emphasise on building trust."

The US has led efforts at the UN Human Rights Council for three resolutions against Sri Lanka, with the last one calling for an international probe into the alleged abuses.

Biswal said there was new optimism for reconciliation over Sri Lanka's wartime past, after President Maithripala Sirisena ousted Mahinda Rajapakse at elections in January.

Dust lady of 9/11 dies of cancer

AFP, Washington

A survivor of the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York who was featured in one of the most haunting photographs of the outrage has died of stomach cancer. She was 42.

The family of Marcy Borders first announced her death Monday on Facebook. Borders, who was 28 at the time of the attacks, was just one month into a job for Bank of America in one of the Twin Towers.

As one of the towers collapsed, she took refuge in a nearby office building, where AFP photographer Stan Honda took a haunting photo of her completely covered in a thick layer of ash, which earned her the moniker "The Dust Lady."

The air appeared heavy and a distraught Borders was shrouded in a cloud of dust and backlit by an eerie yellow luminescence. "I can't believe my sister is gone," her brother Michael Borders wrote on Facebook, asking for people's prayers.

Her cousin Elnardo Borders wrote: "My emotions are all over the place right now."

He later wrote: "She @ peace now!!!"

After the attacks, Borders spiraled into a decade-long deep depression and alcohol and drug abuse, though she eventually recovered. She lost her job at Bank of America, where she ignored repeated offers of a transfer.

She spent much of her time sequestered in her two-room flat, in one of the poorer parts of Bayonne, a bedroom community in New Jersey over the bridge from Manhattan.

Something inside of her had died on that fateful day.

"I still live in fear. I can't think about being there, in those targets, the bridges, the tunnels, the (subway) stations," she told AFP in a whisper in a March 2012 interview.

"The father of my daughter took her; I can't take care of myself, so I can't take care of her."

Her fridge was empty, and her television had long turned silent. "I used to watch TV a lot, the TV was never off," she said.

"But now I fear that what happens in Jerusalem will happen here. All that violence... so I leave it off."

