

# NEWS IN brief

## Saudi execution toll climbs to 135

AFP, Riyadh  
Saudi Arabia yesterday executed one of its citizens convicted of murder, bringing to 135 the number of people put to death this year, according to an AFP tally. The number is up sharply from the 87 Saudis and foreigners executed during the whole of 2014. Most Saudi executions are carried out by beheading with a sword, punishment which the interior ministry says is a deterrent.

## Lankan Tamil prisoners go on hunger strike

AFP, Colombo  
More than 200 Tamil prisoners staged hunger strikes and other protests in jails across Sri Lanka this week against being incarcerated for years without trial, officials said yesterday. The prisoners were arrested during Sri Lanka's 37-year civil war for suspected involvement with Tamil rebels fighting for a separate homeland for the ethnic minority.



## 'No medical safe passage for Assange'

AFP, Quito  
Britain has refused Ecuador's request to give Julian Assange safe passage for a medical checkup after he had a sharp pain in his right shoulder, Quito's top diplomat said yesterday. The WikiLeaks founder has been holed up in the Ecuadoran embassy in London since 2012, seeking to avoid extradition to Sweden where he faces a rape case. Assange said the sex was consensual.

## Pakistan hangs six more

AFP, Islamabad  
Pakistan yesterday hanged six people convicted of murder in Punjab province, the third day in a row it has carried out a batch of executions and bringing the total toll since December to more than 240. The hangings come as Pakistan's controversial lifting of a moratorium on executions last year is under growing scrutiny.

## China billionaires overtake US

AFP, Shanghai  
The number of billionaires in China has overtaken that of the United States for the first time, an annual survey said yesterday, calling it a "turning point" for the super-wealthy. Communist-ruled China now has 596 billionaires, up a "staggering" 242 over the last year, Shanghai-based luxury magazine publisher Hurun Report said, surpassing the 537 Americans.



Shia fighters launch a mortar round toward Islamic State militants in Baiji, north of Baghdad, on Wednesday. Inset, Smoke rises from the refinery. Iraqi forces and Shia militia fighters recaptured most of the country's largest oil refinery from Islamic State militants yesterday, security officials said. PHOTO: REUTERS

# Iraq offensive eyes Baiji, Ramadi

AFP, Baghdad  
Iraqi forces battled the Islamic State jihadist group on separate fronts yesterday, ramping up operations to retake Baiji and Ramadi, two of the conflict's worst flashpoints. The Baiji area has seen almost uninterrupted fighting since IS swept across Iraq last year, but top officers yesterday said that the Baiji refinery, the country's largest, was almost secure. There were contradictory statements from the armed forces and the allied paramilitary Popular Mobilisation (Hashed al-Shaabi) on whether or not the refinery had been fully retaken. Senior commanders said it had been "completely cleared" but the Joint Operations Command said late Wednesday that the sprawling complex had not yet been exten-

sively swept by Iraqi forces. The refinery itself, which once produced 300,000 barrels per day of refined products meeting half of Iraq's needs, is said to have been damaged beyond repair and no longer of huge strategic interest. The larger Baiji area, however, is at a crossroads between several key frontlines and officers said anti-IS forces were pushing north past the refinery to further cut IS supply lines. Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the foreign wing of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards, was reported in Iraqi media to have been the mastermind of the latest Baiji offensive. Key positions in the Baiji area, around 200 kilometres (120 miles) north of Baghdad, have changed hands several times since IS launched a massive offensive in Iraq in June 2014.

Top army officers said control of Baiji is essential to ensuring the success of operations against IS in most of its remaining strongholds. Among them one is Ramadi, where Iraqi security forces backed by Sunni tribal fighters and US-led coalition air strikes have said they are poised to launch a much-delayed assault. The government had resisted for more than a year in the capital of the western Anbar province until IS forces blitzed them out with dozens of massive suicide truck bombs in mid-May. After what was Baghdad's most stinging setback this year in the war against IS, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and Hashed

leaders vowed to retake Ramadi within days. But the jihadists' sophisticated network of defences using explosives and searing summer temperatures thwarted plans for an immediate fightback. The US-led coalition said on Tuesday that additional training on urban warfare had since been provided to Iraqi troops, who were now ready to launch an offensive. Iraqi forces this week took up positions just north of the city centre, in a neighbourhood called Albu Farraj, security officials said. The Anbar Operations Command chief, Major General Ismail Mahalawi, told AFP that coalition strikes struck two suicide car bombs Thursday before they could hit their targets in the Albu Farraj area.

### WAR ON ISLAMIC STATE

# US role in Syria 'unconstructive'

## Putin blasts US for declining to host a high-level delegation from Moscow

AFP, Astana  
Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday blasted Washington for being "unconstructive" on Syria after the Kremlin said the United States had declined to host a high-level delegation from Moscow. "I believe this is an unconstructive position," Putin said on a visit to Kazakhstan, where he also called for countries with large Muslim populations to join an alliance against terrorism. "I don't quite understand how our American partners can criticise Russia's actions in Syria in the fight against international terrorism if they refuse to hold direct dialogue even in such an important area as political settlement." "What apparently lies at the heart of the weakness of the American position is a lack of any kind of agenda," Putin said in televised remarks. "It looks like they have nothing to talk about." "Nevertheless, we are keeping our doors open and very much hope for dialogue with all the participants of this complicated process, including with our American partners." Earlier this week Putin said he was willing to send a high-ranking delegation to the United States led by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday said Washington had declined to host a Russian delegation and also refused to send its own mission to Moscow. Washington said it was not interested in having any talks while Moscow keeps bombing Western-backed moderate rebels in Syria under cover of its fight against IS jihadists.



Putin at the weekend said the goal of Moscow's air campaign was to "stabilise the legitimate authorities", while Washington has repeatedly said Syria's embattled leader Bashar al-Assad should go. On the ground, Syria regime forces backed by Russian air strikes pushed an offensive in central Syria yesterday. Russian warplanes launched at least 15 air strikes to support government troops as they began a new operation just north of the city of Homs, a monitoring group said. Syrian state television, citing a military source, said the army had begun a military operation in the north and north-west of Homs province "with the goal of restoring security and stability to the villages and towns in the area". It said its forces had taken control of one village north of the city. Syrian troops have in recent days also been pushing a military operation in northern Hama province and the Sahl al-Ghab region between Hama, Latakia and Idlib provinces. More than 245,000 people have been killed in Syria since March 2011, and more than four million Syrians have fled their country.

# Catalan leader in court on independence bid

AFP, Barcelona  
Catalonia leader Artur Mas went before a judge yesterday charged with breaking the law by staging a vote on independence from Spain, as hundreds of supporters demonstrated outside the court. Mas's supporters have branded the case against him politically motivated and accuse Spanish authorities of going after him to disrupt his drive for the rich northeastern region to secede. The Catalan independence movement has raised political tensions in Spain as it recovers from several years of recession and prepares for a general election on December 20. The Spanish government says holding an independence vote is against the constitution since all Spanish people have the right to decide on matters of sovereignty. The 59-year-old Mas waved from the steps of the courthouse to a crowd of hundreds of supporters as he arrived for a preliminary hearing in a judicial process that could see him barred from public office. "We are all Mas," yelled the crowd. Prosecutors accuse him of civil disobedience and misuse of public funds in organising the vote on November 9, 2014, in defiance of an injunction by Spain's Constitutional Court. Mas himself called the ballot "a great act of democratic rebellion". The Spanish government went to court to block his plan for a full referendum so Mas instead held the November vote as a non-binding symbolic ballot. About 2.3 million of Catalonia's 7.5 million inhabitants took part and nearly 1.9 million voted in favour of independence.



# Nuclear deal wins final Iran approval

AFP, Tehran  
Iran's nuclear accord with world powers won final approval Wednesday in the Islamic republic with a top panel of jurists and cleric giving the green light, state news agency IRNA reported. The Guardians Council, which ensures legislation does not violate Iran's constitution and Islamic rules, approved a Tuesday parliamentary vote that endorsed the deal curbing Iran's atomic programme in exchange for an end to sanctions. The vote came after fierce debate over the terms of the July 14 accord, which has faced a rough ride from hardliners in both Tehran and the US Congress. The deal, which will lift nuclear-related sanctions in return for Tehran, which has always denied seeking an atomic bomb, curbing its nuclear activities.



Israeli security personnel check Palestinian pedestrians and vehicles at a newly installed road block in east Jerusalem, yesterday. Inset, A Palestinian boy inspects the damage in his room, which his family said was searched by Israeli soldiers during an Israeli army raid in the village of Tell, near the West Bank city of Nablus, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS



# 'Homeland is a joke'

Graffiti artists make fun of the award-winning TV show  
INDEPENDENT.CO.UK  
Homeland hired some graffiti artists to daub Arabic phrases on walls in season 5, but it seems no-one thought to check what they meant. The artists were hired to add authenticity to a refugee camp but did anything but, spraying "Homeland is racist", "Homeland is a joke, and it didn't make us laugh" and "#blacklivesmatter" on its walls. Heba Amin, Caram Kapp and Stone revealed the prank in a statement, explaining why they "hacked an award-winning show". "The series has garnered the reputation of being the most bigoted show on television for its inaccurate, undifferentiated and highly biased depiction of Arabs, Pakistanis, and Afghans, as well as its gross misrepresentations of the cities of Beirut, Islamabad- and the so-called Muslim world in general," they wrote. "For four seasons, and entering its fifth, "Homeland" has maintained the dichotomy of the photogenic, mainly white, mostly American protector versus the evil and backwards Muslim threat." "Given the series' reputation," they continued, "we were not easily convinced, until we considered what a moment of intervention could relay about our own and many others' political discontent with the series. It was our moment to make our point by subverting the message using the show itself." Other messages they snuck in included "the situation is not to be trusted", "this show does not represent the views of the artists," and the rather excellent "Homeland is watermelon".



# Kenya passes 'draconian' press law

AFP, Nairobi  
Kenyan media reacted with dismay yesterday after lawmakers approved a bill that could see journalists slapped with huge fines or jailed if found guilty of "defaming" parliament. The clause, which outlaws any publication of words deemed "defamatory to parliament", provides for fines of up to 500,000 shillings (\$4,850, 4,245 euros) or a two-year jail term. Haron Mwangi, chief executive of the Media Council of Kenya regulatory body, said the bill was "offensive to freedom of expression and the media". "This will have the chilling effect of inhibiting the media's role as a watchdog for society," he said.

# ESCALATING ISRAEL-PALESTINE VIOLENCE Violence rages despite new security measures

AFP, Jerusalem  
Security forces deployed to Israeli cities and Jews armed themselves with everything from guns to broomsticks yesterday after more stabbings shook Jerusalem, the latest in a wave of Palestinian knife attacks. Some 300 Israeli soldiers were reinforcing police, stretched thin by an upsurge in violence that began at the start of the month and which has raised fears of a full-scale uprising, or third Palestinian intifada. It was not clear whether troops were on the ground yet. The last time soldiers deployed in large numbers in Israeli cities was in an operation during the second Palestinian intifada in 2002, according to a security source. Beyond the attacks, violent protests have erupted in annexed east Jerusalem, the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Seven Israelis have been killed and dozens wounded, while at least 30 Palestinians have died, including alleged attackers since the violence erupted on October 1. Hundreds of

Palestinians have been wounded in clashes with Israeli security forces. Israel's best-selling newspaper was filled yesterday with photos of Jews arming themselves with tear gas spray, broomsticks and rolling pins, while gun sellers said demand had skyrocketed. On Wednesday, police began setting up checkpoints in parts of east Jerusalem. The move to install checkpoints followed a decision by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's security cabinet authorising police to seal off or impose a curfew on parts of Jerusalem. Despite the new security measures, there were two more stabbing attacks in Jerusalem on Wednesday. US Secretary of State John Kerry plans to travel to the region "soon" to call for calm, his spokesman said. Asked about media reports that Kerry hopes to host talks between Netanyahu and Abbas in Jordan, US State Department spokesman John Kirby said he had "nothing to report on the press reports you have seen with respect to that".

# Clinton debate boost may keep Biden waiting

AFP, Washington  
Hillary Clinton bested her challengers in the campaign's first Democratic presidential debate, but her biggest accomplishment may have been to neutralize a potential rival who was not even on stage: Joe Biden. Analysts and observers said Clinton delivered a commanding performance Tuesday in the party's two-hour Las Vegas showdown, reasserting her control of the presidential race after months of slipping poll numbers. For months Biden has been weighing whether to jump in. The 72-year-old has been an American political fixture for decades: 36 years in the Senate, seven years as President Barack Obama's wingman and twice a candidate for the White House, in 1988 and 2008.