

NEWS IN brief

Mexico braces for monster hurricane

Monster Hurricane Patricia roared toward Mexico's Pacific coast yesterday, prompting authorities to evacuate villagers, close ports and urge tourists to cancel trips over fears of a catastrophe. With maximum sustained winds of 325 kilometers (200 miles) per hour, the US National Hurricane Center called Patricia the strongest eastern north Pacific hurricane on record. The storm was expected to make landfall later yesterday.

Another US campus shooting kills 1

A shooting linked to a dispute over a dice game has left one person dead and three others injured at Tennessee State University, police said yesterday. The incident took place late Thursday in the courtyard of the university's Floyd-Payne Campus Center in Nashville, Tennessee, when an argument over a dice game escalated into a physical fight, local police said. A pistol was recovered at the scene but no arrests have been made.

Pakistan appoints ex-general as NSA

Retired Lieutenant General Nasser Khan Janjua has been appointed as the new National Security Advisor (NSA) of Pakistan, signalling the powerful army's increasing grip on security affairs of the country and its dealings with India. The government on Thursday modified the appointment of Janjua as the NSA, devesting the position from the mild-mannered Sartaj Aziz who will now concentrate on foreign affairs.

Obama vetoes \$612 b defense bill

US President Barack Obama vetoed a \$612 billion defense spending bill Thursday, saying it prevented the closure of Guantanamo Bay prison and wasted money on unwanted programs. Making a rare public show of rejecting a law, Obama said the text agreed by the Republican-controlled Congress "falls woefully short" in key areas.

4 hurt in blast near Cairo pyramids

Four people including two Egyptian policemen were wounded when a bomb they were trying to defuse exploded in Cairo near the pyramids yesterday, while an officer died in an attack in Sinai, officials said. Two policemen and two hotel security guards were wounded in the blast outside the Meridien hotel near the Giza pyramids, a security official said.



A Syrian refugee rests after arriving on a beach onboard a raft during a rainstorm on the Greek island of Lesbos, on Thursday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Juncker backs Merkel's plan

Hostility towards migrants rises across Europe as numbers soar

European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker backed Angela Merkel's welcoming stance towards migrants yesterday ahead of a mini-summit of leaders this weekend aimed at tackling record arrivals. Juncker's comments came as Slovenia warned it could build Europe's latest border fence to stem the world's biggest migration crisis since World War II, unless it gets more help from the summit. Hostility towards migrants streaming into Europe is mounting, with Germany on Thursday foiling an extremist plot to torch migrant shelters and Swedish police saying a sword attack on a school with many immigrant pupils was motivated by racism. More than 670,000 migrants came to Europe this year. Merkel's open-door policy faces a backlash as Germany braces for up to a million asylum requests this year, but Juncker said that "I appreciate very much that the Chancellor does not

change course because of opinion polls". "It is not a question of short-term popularity but the very substance of what politics is about," Juncker, who is hosting today's mini-summit on migration, was quoted as telling the

REFUGEE CRISIS

Slovenia threatens to build border fence

Cops link Swedish school sword attack to migrants

Germany foils arson attacks on asylum camps

Funke-Mediengruppe press group about Merkel. In a sign of the growing stress on Germany, police in the southern town of Bamberg arrested 13 members of a far-right movement suspected of planning arson attacks on two homes for asylum seekers, prosecutors said Thursday.

Sweden is the EU's other top destination for asylum seekers, and police there said a sword-wielding man who killed two people at a school in the southwestern town of Trollhattan was a "racially motivated" hate crime.

A country of 9.8 million, Sweden expects to receive up to 190,000 asylum applications this year. Greece meanwhile saw a record 48,000 arrivals in the past week, most of them coming by sea from Turkey, according to the International Organisation for Migration.

Slovenia has become the main entry point into the European Union's passport-free Schengen zone from the increasingly crowded Balkan route after Hungary sealed its southern borders few weeks earlier.

More than 47,500 people have entered the small Alpine nation, which has a population of just two million, since October 17 when Budapest shut its frontier with Croatia, barely a month after also closing its Serbian border.

'Pakistan worst country in religious freedom'

PTI, Washington

Asserting that Pakistan is the worst country in terms of religious freedom, a Congressional-established commission on international religious freedom has asked the Obama Administration to designate Pakistan as 'country of particular concern' citing "egregious" violations.

"The just-released IRF (International Religious Freedom) Report leaves no doubt that the egregious nature of the violations in Pakistan warrant a CPC designation," Robert George, Chairman of the US Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), said.

In its recent report on IRE, the State Department has said that there is widespread violation of human rights of religious minorities in the country, in particular the Hindus and Christians.

In July 2014, the State Department designated nine countries as CPCs: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

State Department's 2014 IRF report said Pakistan "government's general failure to investigate, arrest, or prosecute those responsible for religious freedom abuses promoted an environment of impunity that fostered intolerance and acts of violence, according to domestic and international human rights organisations."

USCIRF's 2015 annual report, released in April, recommended that these countries be re-designated as CPCs, and also called for eight additional designations: Central African Republic, Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, Tajikistan, and Vietnam.

Mosque blasts kill 55 in NE Nigeria

AFP, Maiduguri

Two bomb blasts ripped through mosques in northeast Nigeria yesterday, killing at least 55 people and injuring more than 100, as Boko Haram fighters seized a town in neighbouring Cameroon.

The attacks in Maiduguri, Yola and Kerawa again underlined the persistent national and regional threat from the Islamist militants, despite military claims of gains.

Fears will be heightened particularly in Maiduguri, which has been hit six times this month, killing a total of 76 people, according to an AFP tally.

Questions will also again be raised about how the militants are able to carry out such attacks on a regular basis, after similar attacks in the city last month claimed 117 lives.

The first attack in Maiduguri happened shortly after 5:00 am (0400 GMT) in the Jidari area of the Borno state capital, where Boko Haram was founded in 2002.

Boko Haram, which wants to create a hardline Islamic state in northeast Nigeria, has previously targeted mosques and religious leaders who do not share their extremist ideology.



Israeli police scuffle with a Palestinian man at the Damascus Gate at the entrance of the Old City in east Jerusalem before the Friday prayer, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

UN raises alarm over sex abuse of migrants

AFP, Geneva

Women and children among the migrants and refugees moving through Europe face a high risk of violence and sexual abuse, the UN warned yesterday, calling on European countries to do more to protect them.

The UN refugee agency said more than a third of the more than 600,000 migrants and refugees who have arrived in Europe this year are women and children, warning they are "particularly subject to abuse."

"We are raising the alarm bell," spokeswoman Melissa Fleming said, pointing to numerous testimonies about sexual violence at overcrowded reception sites, for instance on the Greek island of Lesbos where reception centres are buckling under the arrivals of thousands of people daily.

Such reception centres often "lack adequate lighting and separated spaces for single women and families with children," she pointed out.

Many migrants and refugees are also forced to camp out in the open, in parks and along roadsides, or in train stations, where women and children are also especially vulnerable to abuse, she said.

Perhaps most worryingly, she warned, some children appeared to be engaging in "survivor sex" to pay smugglers to continue their journey, either because they have run out of money, or because they have been robbed en route.

"Unaccompanied children can be particularly vulnerable, as they lack the protection and care of adult who is responsible for them," Fleming told reporters.

In a number of countries, children were also being detained alongside adults, which she warned was "fertile ground for further child abuse."

Fleming said UNHCR was in the process of launching an assessment to determine how widespread the abuse of the women and children moving through Europe was.

Israel eases Al-Aqsa access to Palestinians

90 wounded in Gaza, West Bank clashes

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday lifted age limits for prayers at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound in an apparent bid to ease tensions as nearly 90 people were injured in clashes in Gaza and the West Bank.

While thousands of Muslims prayed without incident at the ultra-sensitive site, young Palestinians clashed with Israeli police in the occupied West Bank and Gaza strip, leaving scores injured by Israeli gunfire, according to emergency services.

The international community has scrambled to defuse a wave of violence that many fear heralds a third Palestinian intifada, or uprising, and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said it was time for Israeli and Palestinian leaders to meet face to face.

Ban's appeal came as tensions showed little sign of easing, with Palestinian movements holding a "day of rage" yesterday against Israel.

Angry youths lobbed stones at Israeli police who responded with tear gas and gunfire at numerous checkpoints in the occupied West Bank, where 20 Palestinians received gunshot wounds. 65 people, including three journalists, were hit by Israeli fire in the blockaded Gaza Strip.

In the latest attack yesterday, a Palestinian stabbed and lightly wounded a soldier in the occupied West Bank and was shot and wounded by Israeli forces.

Since October 1, at least 50 Palestinians and one Israeli Arab have been killed in clashes with Israeli police. Eight Israelis also died.

Who are Syria's moderate rebels?

Asks Putin as Russia hold talks with US, Saudi Arabia, Turkey

AGENCIES

Russian President Vladimir Putin has dismissed criticism over his country's air campaign in Syria, accusing Western governments of double standards in their support for the Syrian opposition.

Speaking on Thursday at a political conference in Sochi, Putin said the West is using some of the rebel groups as pawns to fit their wider agenda in the Middle East.

"It's always difficult to play a double game: declaring a fight against terrorists while simultaneously trying to use some of them to arrange the pieces on the Middle East chess board in one's own interests," Putin said at a meeting of political scientists in Sochi known as the Valdai Club.

"It is impossible to prevail over terrorism if some of the terrorists are being used as a battering ram to overthrow undesirable regimes," Putin said.

"Let's not play with words and divide the terrorists into moderate and

not moderate," said the president.

"I would like to understand what is the difference. Perhaps, some experts believe that moderate bandits behead people in moderate numbers or in some tender way."

His comments came as top diplomats from Russia, the US, Saudi Arabia and Turkey held talks in a frosty atmo-



sphere yesterday on how to end the Syrian conflict, with the sides sharply at odds on the future of Bashar al-Assad.

The Vienna meeting took place three weeks after Moscow thrust itself into the heart of the crisis by launching a bombing campaign in support of the

Syrian president, that has drawn sharp condemnation from the west.

And Russia and Jordan said they had agreed to "coordinate" their military operations in Syria.

The crunch talks at a Vienna hotel brought together Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry with their Saudi counterpart Adel al-Jubeiri and Turkey's Feridun Sinerlioglu.

But the atmosphere appeared chilly, and there was scant hope for progress on resolving almost five years of war with the sides at loggerheads over the future of Assad.

Putin also said his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad had told him he was ready to talk to armed opposition groups if they are genuinely committed to dialogue and to combating Islamic State.

Meanwhile, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group yesterday said Russian air strikes in Syria have killed at least 446 people, more than a third of them civilians.

US-Iraqi forces foil ISIS massacre plot

AFP, Washington

Kurdish and US forces stormed an Islamic State prison in northern Iraq on Thursday, freeing some 70 captives who were facing imminent execution, the Pentagon said.

A US serviceman died of wounds sustained in the pre-dawn operation near Hawijah, the first to be killed in action since the US-led campaign against IS began in Iraq in June 2014.

Five IS militants were captured and several others killed in the raid. It marked an apparent break with the normal modus operandi of US forces, which are in Iraq to support government forces but do not directly engage in combat in line with Obama's "no boots on the ground" policy.

RISING INTOLERANCE IN INDIA Akademi condemns writer's killings

AFP, New Delhi

India's top literary body yesterday condemned multiple killings of writers, as protesters surrounded its New Delhi headquarters in a growing row over intolerance that has prompted dozens of authors to hand back awards.

Sahitya Akademi had been criticised by India's literati for its silence over the murders of writers including secular scholar M M Kalburgi, who was shot dead in August, allegedly by Hindu radicals.

More than 50 authors and artists have returned prestigious awards over what they say is institutional inaction following a series of violent incidents including the lynching over a Muslim over rumours he ate beef.

"The Akademi strongly condemns the killing of writer Kalburgi and appeals to the state and central government to take steps to prevent such incidents in the future," academy member Krishnaswamy Nachimuthu told reporters.

Hundreds of protesters gathered outside the academy's New Delhi office yesterday wearing black arm bands and holding pictures of Kalburgi.

Government investigators have said Hindu extremists were also responsible for the killings of writer Govind Pansare and rationalist Narendra Dabholkar.

British author Salman Rushdie has lent his support to protesting writers, saying the literary body's silence was giving rise to "thuggish violence".