

NEWSIN brief

'Ankara blasts ordered by IS'

AFP, Ankara
A massive twin bombing in the Turkish capital Ankara this month that killed 102 people was ordered by the jihadist Islamic State (IS) group, prosecutors said yesterday. They said there was "strong evidence" that it was also behind other attacks in the country, including one on the border with Syria in July, and was planning more.

Abbott tells Europe to close borders

BBC ONLINE
Former Australian PM Tony Abbott has said Europe should follow Australia and close its borders to migrants fleeing Middle Eastern conflicts. In his first major speech since being ousted by his party, Abbott said: "No country or continent can open its borders to all comers without fundamentally weakening itself." Abbott also said many of the people currently displaced throughout Europe were economic migrants.

UN calls for end to US's Cuba embargo

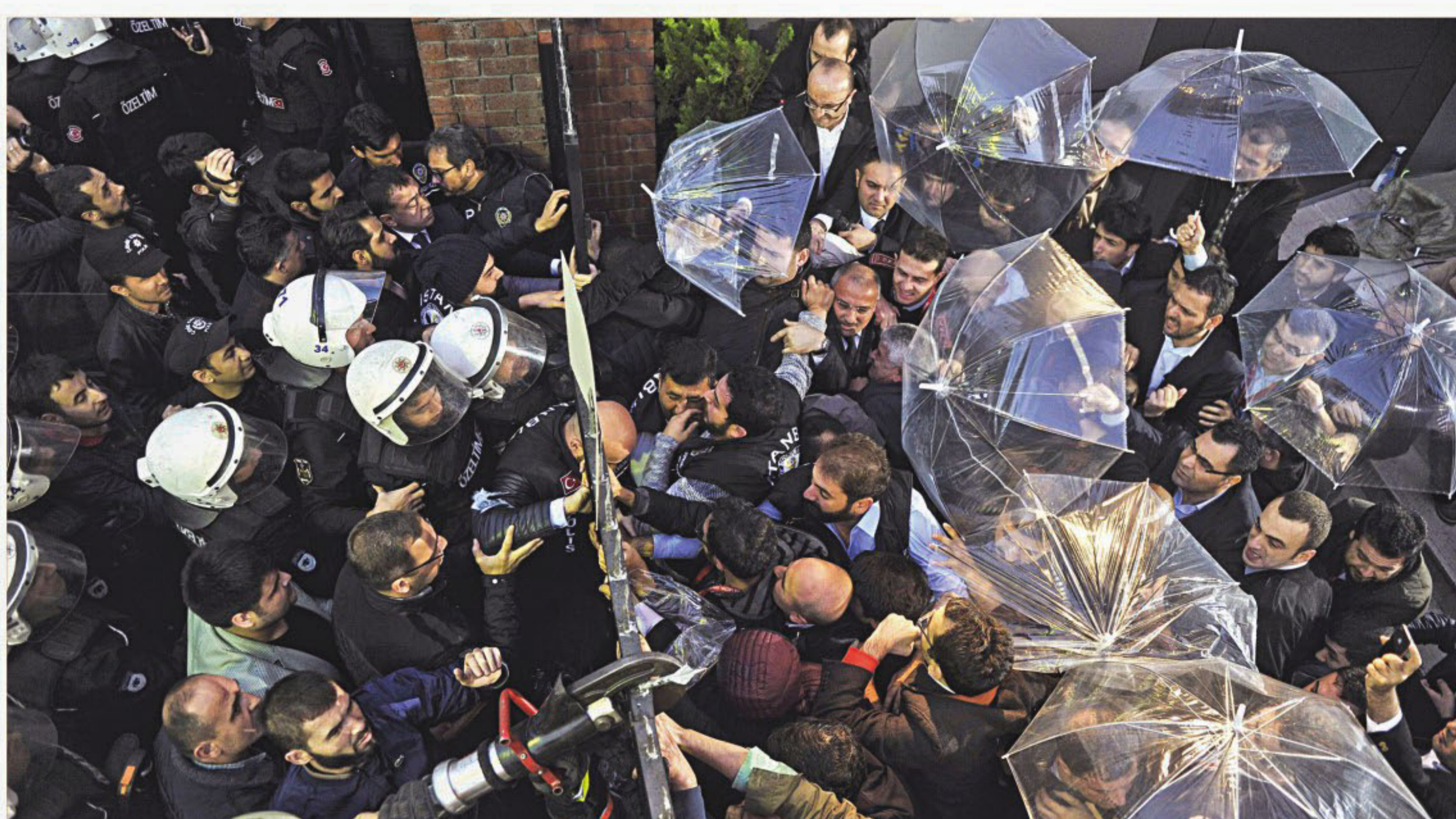
AFP, United Nations
The UN General Assembly called Tuesday for an end to the US embargo on Cuba in a resolution adopted by a near-unanimous vote, three months after the United States restored diplomatic ties with Havana. The United States and Israel voted against the non-binding resolution, but all 191 other countries of the 193-member assembly backed the measure.

India to ban surrogacy service to foreigners

AFP, New Delhi
India's government yesterday said it will ban foreigners from using surrogate mothers in the country, a move likely to hit the booming commercial surrogacy industry. Health industry estimates put the size of India's surrogacy business at nine billion rupees (\$138 million) and growing at 20 percent a year.

Nigeria rescues 338 Boko Haram captives

AFP, Lagos
Nigerian troops have rescued 338 people, mainly women and children, held by Boko Haram Islamists around the group's Sambisa forest stronghold in the restive northeast, the army said yesterday. "The (army) unit ... rescued 338 persons that were held captive by the terrorists," the army said of an operation on Tuesday, adding that 192 of the survivors were children and 138 women.



Turkish protesters shout slogans outside the headquarters of Bugun newspaper and Kanal Turk television station in Istanbul yesterday during a demonstration against the Turkish government's crackdown on media outlets. The action triggered widespread concern about media freedom in Turkey, with critics accusing the government of trying to silence opponents of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) before the November 1 legislative vote. PHOTO: AFP

Diplomatic push gains pace

Iran accepts US talks invitation; Washington signals shift in anti-IS campaign

AFP, Moscow
Iran yesterday confirmed that it will take part for the first time in international talks aimed at resolving the Syria conflict as a diplomatic push to end the war gains momentum. Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif will join his counterparts from key players in the Syria crisis -- including Russia, the United States and Saudi Arabia -- in Vienna tomorrow for negotiations it is hoped could help staunch almost five years of bloodshed. The inclusion of Iran -- a key backer of President Bashar al-Assad -- marks a crucial shift after Tehran was excluded from earlier talks, mainly because of opposition from Washington and Riyadh. The talks will follow a meeting between the top diplomats of Russia, the United States, Saudi Arabia and Turkey on Thursday evening, the second time the quartet will have met in less than a week. Britain, Egypt, France, Germany, Lebanon and the European Union all confirmed they would take part, with Britain's Foreign Office saying the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Jordan and Italy would also attend. There was no mention of either the Syrian government or the opposition attending. After years of international failure to stem the violence in Syria, the talks in Vienna will be the first time all major international players in the

conflict will be in the same room. Ahead of the talks, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius yesterday said that France and its Arab allies had agreed on the need for a "precise timetable" for Assad's departure. But Assad yesterday renewed his accusation

SYRIA CRISIS: DEVELOPMENTS

- Washington weighs special forces in Syria, helicopter in Iraq for close combat
- CIA chief says military solution 'impossible' in Middle East
- Assad accuses West of backing 'terrorists'
- Russian warplanes hit record 118 Syria targets in 24 hours

that Western states including France were supporting "terrorist" groups in his country. The United States is considering sending a small number of special operations forces to Syria and attack helicopters to Iraq as it weighs options to build momentum in the battle against Islamic State, US officials said on Tuesday. Two US officials, who spoke to Reuters on

condition of anonymity to discuss ongoing deliberations, said any deployments would be narrowly tailored, seeking to advance specific, limited military objectives in both Iraq and Syria. The dynamic in the Syrian conflict shifted after Russia launched an air campaign in support of Assad's forces on September 30 -- allowing Syrian troops to go back on the offensive and overshadowing a US-led coalition bombing Islamic State jihadists. Meanwhile, US CIA chief John Brennan on Tuesday said a military solution is "impossible" in parts of the Middle East. "When I look at Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen," Brennan said, "it's hard for me to envision a central government in those countries that's going to be able to exert control or authority over the territory that was carved out post World War II." "A military solution is just impossible in any of these countries," he added. Russian warplanes have struck 118 "terrorist" targets in Syria over the past 24 hours -- the highest total yet -- the defence ministry said Wednesday, attributing the rise to new surveillance data. More than 250,000 people have been killed since Syria's brutal conflict broke out in March 2011, sparked by a bloody crackdown on protests against Assad's rule.

Toll tops 380 amid survivors' misery

AFP, Shangla
Entire communities of earthquake survivors in Afghanistan and Pakistan were spending a third night without shelter in plummeting temperatures yesterday, with fears growing for children sleeping in the open as rescuers struggled to reach remote mountainous regions. Rugged terrain, severed communication lines and an unstable security situation have impeded relief efforts since Monday's 7.5 magnitude quake ripped through the region, triggering landslides and flattening buildings. More than 380 people have been killed. Desperate victims appealed for blankets, warm clothes and food after the quake levelled thousands of homes, forcing many to camp out in the open. "Winter is coming and soon there will be snow everywhere, the children won't survive the cold," Shahroon, a resident of Usiak village in Chitral district in the worst-hit province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, told AFP yesterday.

Shahroon, who goes by one name, said children in his family as young as four were sleeping outside. "If we stay here the kids will die... we have lost everything already and can't afford to see these children die in front of us, they are the only valuables we have now."

AFGHAN-PAKISTAN QUAKE



If the government can help them rebuild before the snow comes they will stay, he said -- but "otherwise we will go to Rawalpindi or Peshawar or any other city and spend our lives begging on the roads". Pakistan's confirmed death toll

stood at 267 with more than 1,800 people injured and 11,000 homes damaged, and authorities warn that the number could spike with many isolated regions still cut off. The UN children's agency UNICEF warned that children in the earthquake-hit areas "are facing further deadly threats as extreme conditions and insecurity cut off communities from aid". Western charities said the Taliban presence in Afghanistan was hindering relief efforts. The militants yesterday claimed to have overrun the remote district of Darqad in the quake-hit northern province of Takhar, underscoring the fragile security situation facing relief workers. The insurgents on Tuesday had urged aid organisations not to delay in delivering relief, and vowed their fighters would provide "complete help" in affected areas. Afghan officials said 115 people were confirmed dead and hundreds more injured, with casualties reported from around half a dozen of the

Online freedom diminishing worldwide

AFP, Washington
Global online freedom declined for a fifth consecutive year as more governments stepped up electronic surveillance and clamped down on dissidents using blogs or social media, a survey showed yesterday. The annual report by non-government watchdog Freedom House said the setbacks were especially noticeable in the Middle East, reversing gains seen in the Arab Spring. Freedom House found declines in online freedom of expression in 32 of the 65 countries assessed since June 2014, with "notable declines" in Libya, France and Ukraine. The researchers found 61 percent of the world's population lives in countries where criticism of the government, military or ruling family has been subject to censorship. And 58 percent live in countries where bloggers or others were jailed for sharing content online on political, social and religious issues, according to the "Freedom on the Net 2015" report. In a new trend, many governments seeking to censor content from opponents have shifted their efforts to targeting online platforms, pressuring services like Google, Facebook and Twitter to remove content, the report said. Freedom House said governments in 14 of the 65 countries passed laws over the past year to step up electronic surveillance.



MJ world's top earning dead celebrity: Forbes

MAIL ONLINE
Michael Jackson has been revealed as the top earning dead celebrity, earning an astonishing £75million this year, according to financial magazine Forbes. In his more than three decade solo career, the King of Pop made an impressive £719million. But it seems he has proved even more lucrative since his death, making a further £653million since 2009. In second place is Elvis Presley, who has made £36million, Peanuts cartoonist Charles Schulz comes in third with £26million, while fourth place, with £14million, goes to Bob Marley. Elizabeth Taylor rounds off the top five with £13million. Jackson has earned upwards of £65million every year since his death in 2009, meaning he was out-earned not only every other dead celebrity, but also every living solo musician. When the singer died, he was £392million in debt due to chronic overspending and large interest payments on loans. These financial burdens were taken on by his family who have traded on his reputation and back-catalogue to claw themselves out of debt. The singer, who has reportedly sold more than one billion records worldwide, was found dead, aged 50, at his Los Angeles home on June 25, 2009, after suffering a heart attack causing by an overdose of the powerful anaesthetic propofol.

UN warns of 'catastrophe'

Abbas says talks useless, demands UN protection

AFP, Jerusalem
The United Nations yesterday warned that a deadly surge in violence between Israelis and Palestinians was headed toward "catastrophe" as new knife attacks took place in the volatile West Bank. An Israeli woman was stabbed and moderately wounded in one such attack, while a Palestinian allegedly tried to stab an Israeli soldier and was shot dead in another, the police and army said. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said the latest flare-up in violence in the six-decade-old conflict was "dangerous in the extreme". World leaders desperately want to revive moribund Israeli-Palestinian peace talks that last collapsed in April 2014, to avoid a deeper slide into violence that many fear could lead to a third Palestinian intifada. But Abbas yesterday said that "it is no longer useful to waste time in negotiations" and warned that a continuation of the current violence could "kill the last shred of hope for the two-state-solution-based peace."

He called on the United Nations "to set up a special regime for international protection for the Palestinian people." Since the violence started on October 1, 61 Palestinians have been killed so far. **343 UK ACADEMICS BOYCOTT ISRAELI UNIVERSITIES** Meanwhile, on Tuesday, hundreds of British academics said they would boycott contact with Israeli universities over the state's "intolerable human rights violations" towards Palestinians. The announcement, entitled "A commitment by UK scholars to the rights of Palestinians", was printed as a full-page advertisement in The Guardian newspaper. "We are deeply disturbed by Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian land, the intolerable human rights violations that it inflicts on all sections of the Palestinian people, and its apparent determination to resist any feasible settlement," the advert said. They said they would not accept invitations to visit Israeli academic institutions, participate in conferences funded, organised or sponsored by them, "or otherwise cooperate with them".



'Not frightened to fight a war'

Beijing warns after US 'naval incursion' in South China Sea

AGENCIES
China is not afraid of fighting a war against the United States in the South China Sea, a state-run newspaper has claimed. Twenty-four hours after Washington challenged Beijing's territorial claims in the region by deploying a warship to waters around the disputed Spratly archipelago, the notoriously nationalistic Global Times accused the Pentagon of provoking China. "In [the] face of the US harassment, Beijing should deal with Washington tactfully and prepare for the worst," the newspaper argued in an editorial yesterday. "This can convince the White House that China, despite its unwillingness, is not frightened to fight a war with the US in the region, and is determined to safeguard its national interests and dignity." The People's Liberation Army Daily, China's leading military newspaper, used a front-page editorial to accuse the US of sowing chaos in countries



such as Afghanistan and Iraq. Tuesday's manoeuvre, which saw the guided-missile destroyer USS Lassen sail close to artificial Chinese islands, came after Barack Obama and Chinese president Xi Jinping failed to find common ground over the issue during recent talks at the White House. US defence secretary Carter warned that further "freedom of navigation" operations in the region were planned.

China reacted to Tuesday's long-anticipated mission by hurling a barrage of accusations at Washington. "The United States has been very irresponsible," defence ministry spokesman Yang Yujun said, according to Xinhua, China's official news agency. Lu Kang, a foreign ministry spokesman, said China would "resolutely respond" to any deliberate provocations but declined to be drawn on any potential military response. "I advise the US not to make a fool out of themselves in trying to be smart," Lu said. But despite the angry rhetoric coming out of Beijing, experts say China's response has been relatively muted. China's military buildup in the South China Sea -- including the construction of a 3km runway capable of supporting fighter jets and transport planes -- has become a major source of tension between Beijing and Washington. China claims most of the South China Sea, one of the world's busiest sea lanes, although Vietnam, Malaysia,

Border-free EU faces tough test

Austria to 'shut border'; Germany toughens stance on economic migrants

AFP, Vienna
Austria yesterday said it would build a fence along its border with fellow EU state Slovenia to "control" the migrant influx, in what would be the first barrier between two members of the passport-free Schengen zone. Both countries have become key transit points for tens of thousands of refugees and migrants seeking to reach northern Europe ahead of the winter, and before more potential EU border closures. Vienna's announcement prompted sharp criticism from Berlin amid an escalating spat over Austria's handling of the humanitarian drama. "We do not believe that the current migrant crisis that Europe is facing can be resolved with the building of fences or walls," said German government spokesman Steffen Seibert, adding that the problem could only be dealt with if countries stood united. The small Alpine nation of Slovenia, which has been swamped by migrants recently, also reiterated its readiness to erect a fence along its Croatian frontier if new EU plans aimed at improving the situation failed to produce quick results. Austria's move is bound to intensify concerns about the EU's cherished Schengen system, a crucial part of European integration efforts, which allows for the free movement of people and goods. Big rifts have opened up between EU members over how



A woman holds a baby as migrants queue to cross the border into Austria from Slovenia, yesterday.

to handle Europe's worst refugee crisis since World War II. More than 700,000 migrants and refugees have already landed on the continent's southern shores so far this year, the majority from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. The endless procession has overwhelmed nations along the migrant trail leading from Greece through the Balkans, already prompting Hungary -- also an EU and Schengen member -- to seal its southern borders with razor wire. Germany, the EU's economic powerhouse, is expecting up to one million asylum-seekers this year, with Afghans making up the second-largest group after Syrians. Germany yesterday warned that the rising number of Afghans was "unacceptable", urging them to stay at home and rebuild their homeland. Thousands of people from the Balkans, who had had their German asylum requests rejected, would also be returned to their countries in the coming weeks, he said.