

NEWS IN brief

2 Israelis stabbed, attacker killed

Two Israelis were stabbed in Hebron in the occupied West Bank yesterday, with one of them seriously wounded, and the Palestinian attacker was shot dead, the Israeli police and army said. Since October 1, almost daily attacks and clashes between Palestinians and Israeli soldiers have killed 113 on the Palestinian side, 17 Israelis, an American and an Eritrean.

Third Paris Bataclan gunman identified

French police have identified the third gunman from the deadly attack on the Bataclan concert hall in Paris, Prime Minister Manuel Valls said yesterday. French national Foued Mohamed-Agag, 23, had travelled to war-torn Syria at the end of 2013, police sources said. The two other attackers who killed 90 concert-goers at the Bataclan -- Omar Ismail Mostefai, 29, and former Paris bus driver Samy Amimour, 28 -- had also been in Syria.

China smog red alerts spread to more cities

Pollution red alerts spread to more Chinese cities, state media reported yesterday as Beijing entered its third day of heavy smog, with officials warning poor conditions could last until Saturday in some places. Dingzhou and Xinji, two cities in Hebei province, which surrounds Beijing, followed the capital's lead to issue their first ever red alerts along with 27 cities in the region.

SC suspends Rousseff impeachment move

Brazil's beleaguered President Dilma Rousseff won a respite in her battle to avoid impeachment when the Supreme Court ordered the commission considering her case suspended for a week. The suspension, made in response to an appeal from the Communist Party of Brazil, which is allied to the leftist Workers' Party of Rousseff, is in effect until next Wednesday when the court will meet to make a ruling.

Malaysia accepts first Syrian migrants

Malaysia has received the first batch of Syrian migrants out of a total of 3,000 it plans to allow into the country. The eight people have relatives working in Malaysia who appealed to authorities for help, reports said. Malaysia and the Philippines said earlier this year they would accept Syrian migrants.



A picture is projected on the cupola of St. Peter's Basilica during the show "Fiat Lux : Illuminating Our Common Home," at the Vatican on Tuesday. Images by some of the world's greatest environmental photographers, including Sebastião Salgado, Joel Sartore, Yann Arthus-Bertrand and Louie Schwartzberg, are projected there in solidarity with COP21 talks in Paris.

India, Pakistan to resume peace talks

India and Pakistan agreed to resume high-level peace talks yesterday, according to a joint statement that signalled a thaw in tense relations between the nuclear-armed neighbours, which have fought three full-scale wars. The breakthrough came at the close of a regional conference in Islamabad attended by India's Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj, which also saw meetings between Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in a bid to revive the Taliban peace process. "Both the countries have agreed to resume the stalled talks," said Swaraj, who met with Sharif and his foreign affairs adviser Sartaj Aziz, adding: "We will start the dialogue process from scratch." The dialogue will cover peace and security as well as territorial disputes, including over Kashmir, a Himalayan region that has seen India and Pakistan fight two wars since gaining their independence from Britain in 1947. Delhi suspended all talks after Islamist gunmen attacked the Indian city of Mumbai in November 2008, killing 166 people. The attacks were later found to have been planned from Pakistan. The countries agreed to resume the peace process in 2011 but tensions have spiked over the past two years, with cross-border shelling over the disputed border in Kashmir claiming dozens of lives since 2014. A brief meeting between Sharif and his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi on the sidelines of the UN climate change summit in Paris on November 30, followed by talks between the two countries' national security advisers in Bangkok, appeared to have broken the ice. Pakistan's foreign ministry later said the United States had also thrown its support behind the process. Earlier, Swaraj told reporters that Modi would visit Pakistan to attend the Saarc Summit likely to be held in September 2016, in what will be the first prime ministerial visit to Pakistan from India in 12 years.

Rebels leave Homs under truce

Syrian rebels began evacuating the last opposition-held district in Homs yesterday, paving the way for President Bashar al-Assad's regime to take full control of the country's third-largest city. Hundreds of Syrian rebels and civilians were leaving the Waer district under a rare local ceasefire agreed with the regime at the start of December. Some 2,000 rebels and their families will abandon Waer in Homs -- once dubbed the "capital" of Syria's revolution -- to travel to other opposition-held areas, after enduring a three-year siege that saw the district heavily shelled. The evacuation comes as a broad range of Syrian opposition groups, including armed factions, hold unprecedented talks in the Saudi capital on forming a united front for talks with Assad. Some 100 delegates aim to form a unified bloc for talks with Assad, though analysts say deep divisions will

be difficult to overcome. The talks follow a major diplomatic push to resolve Syria's nearly five-year civil war, and intensified foreign military action including Russia's first strikes from a submarine Tuesday.

SYRIA CRISIS
Divided opposition begins unity talks in Saudi Arabia
Gulf monarchs seek united front at annual summit in Riyadh
Kerry to visit Moscow for talks on Syria

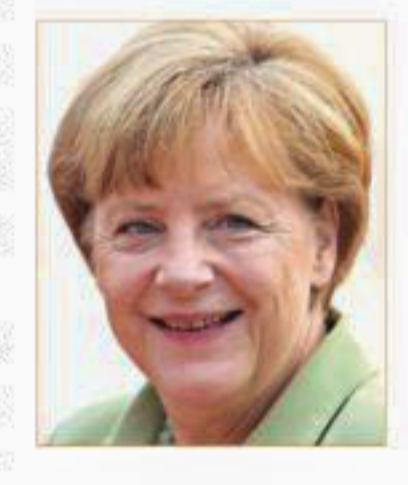
US Secretary of State John Kerry yesterday said he would head to Moscow next week to meet Russian leaders and try to build momentum for a push to end Syria's civil war. Under the deal, Waer's rebel forces,

who range from secular fighters to jihadists including fighters with al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Nusra Front, are to completely leave the district by the end of January. Once the evacuation is complete, police, but not troops, will reenter the district, where some 75,000 people currently live, down from 300,000 before the conflict began. The United Nations has been pushing for such localised ceasefires as broader efforts have failed to end Syria's war, despite the deaths of more than 250,000 people and millions being forced from their homes. Meanwhile, Gulf monarchs began arriving in Saudi Arabia for an annual summit yesterday, facing challenges including plunging oil revenues, the war in Yemen, pressure for peace in Syria and signs of regional divisions. The kings and emirs, who will meet at a royal palace, are expected to voice support for a bid to unify Syria's opposition ahead of potential talks with President Bashar al-Assad's

Merkel Time's 'Person of the Year'

The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel has been named the 2015 TIME magazine person of the year. The prestigious title was announced both on TIME's website and NBC's Today Show in New York yesterday. The title is awarded to an individual who has influenced the year's news for either positive or negative reasons and is decided by the editors of the influential magazine. Last year the title went to Ebola fighters and the year before that, Pope Francis. Nancy Gibbs, the editor of TIME told Today the Chancellor was awarded the title for "asking more of her country than most politicians would dare, for standing firm against tyranny as well as expedience and for providing steadfast moral leadership in a world where it is in short supply". She also praised Merkel for her leadership during the refugee crisis. "At a moment when much of the world is

once more engaged in a furious debate about the balance between safety and freedom, the Chancellor is asking a great deal of the German people, and by their example, the rest of us as well. "... By viewing refugees as victims to be rescued rather than invaders to be repelled, the woman raised behind the Iron Curtain gambled on freedom." Merkel was revealed as one of the eight shortlisted candidates on Monday. The other candidates were ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, Black Lives Matter activists, Caitlyn Jenner, Uber CEO Travis Kalanick, Vladimir Putin, Hassan Rouhani and Donald Trump. Democrat presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders was voted the 2015 person of the year in a separate poll voted by readers on Monday. Other previous winners include Mahatma Ghandi (1930), Queen Elizabeth II (1952), Adolf Hitler (1938) and virtually all US presidents since Franklin D. Roosevelt in



US's Thai envoy faces lese majeste probe

The US Ambassador to Thailand is facing a police investigation for royal defamation after criticising jail terms under the draconian law, as ultra-nationalist sentiment surges since royalist generals seized power. The Foreign Correspondent's Club of Thailand (FCCT) said it had been asked to cooperate in the probe against US Ambassador Glyn T Davies. Police are probing whether a speech he delivered to international media last month at the club "violated article 112 of the criminal code, the lese majeste law". "The FCCT is cooperating with the police," the club added in a statement. A senior Thai police source confirmed to AFP that they had received a complaint and were investigating the ambassador's comments. In a wide-ranging talk to the FCCT, Davies heaped praise on the revered but ailing 88-year-old Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej. But he also expressed concern at the "unprecedented prison sentences handed down by Thai military courts against civilians" for alleged lese majeste. "We believe no one should be jailed for peacefully expressing their views and we strongly support the ability of individuals and independent organisations to research and to report on important issues without fear of retaliation."



Members of the Afghan military stand near bodies of Taliban militants wearing Afghan army uniforms who were killed during clashes against security forces at Kandahar Airport yesterday, a sprawling complex which also houses a joint Nato-Afghan base. Story on page 16.

Eleven migrants drown off Greek island

At least 11 migrants, including five children, drowned and about 10 were missing after their boat sank overnight off the Greek island of Farmakonisi, Greek maritime police said yesterday. Twenty-six people were saved and a search was under way in the southeastern Aegean Sea for other survivors from the capsized wooden boat. The dead also included two women and four men. Witnesses said the boat had sunk despite a calm sea and feeble winds. On Tuesday, at least six children died when a boat carrying Afghan migrants sank in Turkish waters while on its way to Greece.

Maduro asks cabinet to resign after defeat

President Nicolas Maduro has shifted into damage control mode, asking his cabinet to resign in oil-rich but troubled Venezuela after the opposition won a majority in the legislature in a landmark challenge to his grip on power. "I have asked the council of ministers to present their resignation in order to carry out a process of restructuring, renovation and deep reform in the government," Maduro said on TV late Tuesday. Analysts warn a tough political struggle lies ahead after Maduro's rivals broke his side's 16-year control of the National Assembly in elections Sunday. Supporters of the opposition coalition MUD set off fireworks and danced in the street as the latest results of the vote came out late Monday. The national election commission confirmed that MUD won 112 of the 167 seats in the National Assembly. The other 55 went to the socialist party that ruled until now. The opposition in the legislature will now be able to call a referendum, launch constitutional reforms, replace senior judges and even take measures to try to depose Maduro. The new lawmakers take up their seats on January 5. Sunday's election was a dramatic blow for Maduro and the socialist "revolution" launched in 1999 by his late predecessor Hugo Chavez.



'I will never leave this race'

Defiant Trump vows to run for US presidency despite criticism

Donald Trump yesterday said he will never leave the 2016 race despite increasing calls for him to step aside. The leading Republican presidential candidate has said Muslims should be banned from entering the US, in the wake of the deadly California attacks. There has been a global outcry since Trump made his remarks. The White House said Trump was "disqualified" after he said the US should stop allowing Muslims from entering the country. Muslim leaders, the UN and foreign leaders have criticised the call as dangerous and divisive. Just before making that statement, he told the Washington Post he would not step aside no matter what happens. Trump also threatened to leave the Republican party before if he was not "treated fairly". Other contenders in the 2016 race condemned his comments about Muslims. Republican Party officials fear an independent Trump campaign would split the Republican vote, and give Democrats a winning advantage. Earlier, Pentagon warned that

MUSLIM BAN CONTROVERSY
Call endangers US security: Pentagon
Petition to ban Trump from Britain tops 230,000
Abbott says West should 'proclaim superiority over Islam'

our values - it plays right into the hands of terrorists". In Britain, more than 230,000 people had signed a petition to ban Trump from Britain following his call to bar Muslims from entering the US.

Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric undermines US national security by boosting the Islamic State (IS) group. The Pentagon's view echoed a tweet from Hillary Clinton that said Trump's proposed ban is "not only counter to Having topped 100,000 signatures, the petition now has to be considered for debate by parliament and will require a written government response. The petition was part of a social media storm after Trump said that radicalisation meant there parts of London where the police feared for their lives. Meanwhile, deposed Australian prime minister Tony Abbott yesterday declared "cultures are not all equal" and the West should proclaim its superiority over Islam, sparking accusations he is trying to "Trumpify" the nation's politics. The staunch Catholic also called on Australians to stop apologising for their values. Abbott, who was ousted by Malcolm Turnbull in a Liberal Party coup in September but remains on the backbench, urged the West to "be ready to proclaim the clear superiority of our culture to one that justifies killing people in the name of God". "We can't remain in denial about the massive problem within Islam," he wrote in an opinion piece for the mass-market Sydney Daily Telegraph. Labor opposition Leader Bill Shorten called the remarks "entirely counterproductive".

CALIFORNIA TERROR ATTACK

'Couple radicalised before online dating'

The couple behind the San Bernardino attack that killed 14 people were radicalised before they started dating, the director of the FBI has said. James Comey said Tashfeen Malik and husband Syed Farook spoke of jihad and martyrdom during conversations on an online dating service in late 2013. Malik moved to the US in July 2014 on a visa designed for fiances, and married Farook - US native - a month later. The FBI believes the duo were inspired by foreign terrorist organisations, but said the investigation is ongoing. Separately, a US government source familiar with the investigation yesterday said Farook may have contemplated an attack on a US target as early as 2011 or 2012. Last week's massacre was the deadliest terrorist attack in the US since 9/11. The couple were both killed in a shoot-out with police hours after the attack. Speaking during a Senate hearing in Washington, Comey characterised the couple as "homegrown violent extremists," and said that precise nature of the foreign influence is still under investigation. Earlier this week, another FBI official said that there was no evidence uncovered so far to suggest the attack was plotted overseas. The BBC's Jane O'Brien in Washington says the revelation is significant, as it contradicts earlier suggestions that Malik may have radicalised her husband.