

# Kerry seeks to narrow divisions with Russia

BBC ONLINE

US Secretary of State John Kerry yesterday held talks in the Russian capital Moscow on ways to bridge gaps over ways to end the Syrian conflict.

He told President Vladimir Putin that the two countries had "the ability to make a significant difference".

Kerry, who also met his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, said he hoped to find "common ground".

The US and Russia disagree on what role Syrian President Bashar al-Assad should play in any transition.

The US wants him to stand down, but Russia says only the Syrian people should decide his fate.

"Together, we are looking for ways out of the most urgent crises," Putin said ahead of the meeting.

Beyond the cordial words, there was no sign that any progress had been made in narrowing the gaps that continue to divide Russia and the US, says the BBC's Barbara Plett-Usher, who is travelling with Kerry.

Russia launched an air campaign to bolster Assad's government in September. It says it has targeted only "terrorists", above all jihadist militants from Islamic State (IS), but activists say its strikes have mainly hit Western-backed rebel groups.

A US-led coalition has been target-

ing IS positions in Syria since September 2014 and does not coordinate its raids with the authorities in Damascus.

There has been some confusion (to

Russian general staff said Russia is supporting the FSA with arms, ammunition and material help (copying Putin almost word for word). But a few hours later a Kremlin aide denied that

work effectively on specific issues," Kerry said before the start of his talks with Lavrov.

"The world benefits when powerful nations can find common ground," he added.

Kerry has been comparing notes with the Russians on a meeting in Riyadh last week that united elements of the Syrian political and armed opposition.

Russia took issue with the outcome - a statement of principles to guide peace talks that says President Assad and his aides can play no part in any transitional period.

Russia also sees some of those who participated as terrorists, and it wants all parties to agree on a terrorist blacklist before proceeding further, BBC correspondent says.

Kerry is hoping to discuss moves to convene talks between a unified Syrian opposition delegation and the government next month at a meeting of the International Syrian Support Group - which includes the Arab League, the EU, the UN and 17 countries - in New York on Friday.

There are some doubts whether the meeting will go ahead, but the US state department denied claims from Russia that "preconditions" would have to be met for it to take place.



Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) speaks with US Secretary of State John Kerry at the Kremlin in Moscow yesterday.

put it mildly) about whether Russia is or isn't supplying weapons and ammunition to the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

Last week, President Putin said it was - then, a few hours later, his spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied it.

On Monday, the chief of the

Moscow was supplying anything.

This is what Peskov said: "I have nothing to add to what's already been said. I have nothing to add and I don't want to explore this subject."

"Even when there have been differences between us, we have been able to

# Yemen truce starts

## Warring sides meet in UN-backed peace talks in Switzerland

AFP, Aden

A ceasefire took effect yesterday in conflict-ravaged Yemen as warring sides began UN-brokered peace talks in Switzerland, according to the United Nations and the Saudi-led coalition battling Iran-backed rebels.

Limited violations of the truce were reported shortly after it began at midday, with several mortar rounds hitting government forces in the southwestern province of Ta'ez, according to a Yemeni security official.

The Saudi-led coalition, which launched an air war against the Huthi Shiite rebels and their allies in March, said the ceasefire had started as scheduled following a request by Yemeni President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi.

The rebel forces, who control the capital, have yet to say if they will abide by the truce. The UN envoy to Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, hailed the halt in fighting as "a critical first step towards building a lasting peace in the country."

He said that the talks in Switzerland "seek to establish a permanent ceasefire and pave the way for a return to a peaceful and orderly political transition."

UN spokesman Ahmad Fawzi confirmed that the talks had begun at an undisclosed location.

"The UN-sponsored consultations aimed at finding a durable settlement to the Yemen crisis started today in Switzerland," he told reporters.

"These consultations seek to establish a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, secure improvements to the humanitarian situation and a return to a peaceful and orderly political transition," he added.

Fawzi said 12 negotiators and six advisers made up each of the two delegations taking part in the talks.

Ahead of the truce, clashes shook the flashpoint city of Ta'ez and coalition warplanes bombed rebel positions.

Even after the ceasefire took effect, a Yemeni security official reported five mortars targeted pro-Hadi forces in Shurajja, south of Ta'ez. Resident reported hearing shelling in the city.

More than 5,800 people have been killed in Yemen -- about half of them civilians -- and more than 27,000 wounded since March, according to the UN.

# 'You are next'

## Obama to IS leaders

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama voiced fresh determination to destroy the Islamic State on Monday, vowing to kill the group's leaders and win back territory in the Middle East.

Sounding a notably more strident tone, Obama said that the United States and its allies were taking the fight to Islamic State extremists in Iraq and Syria, but admitted that progress needed to come faster.

"We are hitting ISIL harder than ever," said Obama.

"As we squeeze its heart, we'll make it harder for ISIL to pump its terror and propaganda to the rest of the world," Obama insisted at the Pentagon, after meeting top military and national security advisors.

Listing eight Islamic State figures killed in coalition operations, Obama issued a stern warning: "ISIL leaders cannot hide and our next message to them is simple: You are next."

# Modi a 'coward', a 'psychopath'

## Kejriwal blasts Indian PM following CBI 'raid on party HQ'

AGENCIES

A furious Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal yesterday alleged that his office had been raided by the CBI and directed an extraordinarily sharp attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, calling him a "coward and psychopath".

Modi's right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) demanded an apology from 47-year-old Kejriwal for his "unwarranted and shameful" description of the premier, while the CBI termed his claims "false propaganda".

The firebrand chief minister, who founded and leads the anti-corruption Aam Aadmi party, is a bitter opponent of Modi and they have clashed repeatedly in recent months.

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) confirmed officers had raided the Delhi city government headquarters and 13 other locations in connection with a corruption case involving Kejriwal's principal secretary Rajendra Kumar.

Civil servant Kumar, in a previous role, "abused his official position" by awarding government contracts to a favoured private firm over seven years, along with six others, CBI spokeswoman Devpreet Singh told reporters.



Another official told AFP on condition of anonymity that cash and property deeds had been recovered from Kumar's home.

News of the raid was broken by Kejriwal himself, who posted on Twitter that "CBI raids my office" and then accused Modi of being "a coward and a psychopath" who could not "handle me politically".

Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee tweeted: "Sealing of a Chief Minister's office is unprecedented. I am shocked." Kejriwal, retweeting her comment, said it was "undeclared emergency."

Although his initial comments sparked an uproar, Kejriwal was unrepentant when he later addressed reporters.

"I have a message for Mr. Modi: 'You can't scare me. You have no idea what I'm made of. I won't be afraid even until my last breath,'" he said.

The raid triggered chaos in parliament where Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said repeatedly that it "has nothing to do with Mr Arvind Kejriwal" and ridiculed the suggestion it was politically motivated.

Kejriwal and Modi stood against each other in last year's general election in the Varanasi constituency. Although Kejriwal lost, he then oversaw a dramatic landslide victory over the BJP in polls in February for the Delhi state assembly.

The two men have since clashed repeatedly, with Kejriwal accusing the federal government of blocking a series of initiatives, including a new push to clean up the capital's polluted skies.



A view of a coastal village hit by Typhoon Melor, in Legazpi city, Albay province in the Philippines yesterday. Wide areas of the central Philippines were plunged into darkness yesterday as powerful typhoon Melor barreled into the coconut-growing region, causing flooding, storm surges and forcing almost 800,000 people to evacuate their homes, officials said.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# Begin climate change action today, urges UN chief

AFP, United Nations

Calling the Paris climate deal "a health insurance policy for the planet," UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Monday urged governments to waste no time in delivering on their commitments to fight global warming.

"Now, actions should begin from today," Ban said after returning from Paris where the historic deal was reached Saturday, capping two weeks of tough negotiations.

A formal signing ceremony will take place at the United Nations on Earth Day: April 22. Ban will then convene an action summit on May 5-6 to keep the pressure on the 195 governments that have pledged under the landmark deal to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

"The Paris agreement is a victory for people, for the common good, and for

multilateralism," Ban said.

The accord sends a clear signal that the global economy is shifting to low-emission growth and contains strong accountability and transparency measures, he said.

The UN chief described the deal as "ambitious", setting a target of containing global temperature rise to well below 2 degrees Celsius from pre-industrial levels through a series of national measures.

The agreement will come into effect by 2020, once at least 55 countries responsible for 55 percent of global greenhouse gases ratify the accord.

Under the deal, there will be five-year reviews to take stock of implementation, and a first such assessment is scheduled for 2018.

The UN chief recalled that reaching the deal had been a top priority of his tenure when he took over as secretary-general at the United Nations in 2007.



# IAEA ends Iran 'weapons' probe

BBC ONLINE

The global nuclear watchdog, the IAEA, has closed a 12-year-long investigation into the possible military dimensions (PMD) of Iran's nuclear activities.

The move is seen as a key step towards lifting UN, EU and US sanctions. The IAEA concluded Iran conducted nuclear weapons-related research until 2003 and to a lesser extent until 2009, but found no evidence of this since.

The lifting of sanctions, agreed in a July deal with world powers, hinged on the IAEA's findings on the PMD issue.

Iran has strongly denied pursuing a clandestine nuclear weapons programme. Iranian Foreign Minister welcomed yesterday's announcement by the Vienna-based IAEA.

"The resolution by the board of governors of the agency... shows the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme," the semi-official Tasnim news agency quoted him as saying.

The IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) has sought to closely monitor Iran's nuclear programme and its inspections are set to increase under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreed with world powers.

The BBC's Bethany Bell in Vienna says sanctions against Iran could be lifted as early as the middle of January.

# Elected leaders die younger, says study

AFP, Paris

Politicians may achieve a lifelong dream of becoming a prime minister or president, but in doing so may face the Grim Reaper somewhat sooner than the expected. So suggests an offbeat study in the Christmas edition of the British medical journal, The BMJ.

Researchers led by Anupam Jena, an associate professor in health care policy at Harvard Medical School, looked at the age of death among 279 nationally-elected leaders in 17 Western countries, from 1722 to 2015.

This was compared with 261 runner-ups in the election who never served in that office. After adjusting for life expectancy at the time of the last election, elected heads of government lived 2.7 years less than non-elected rivals.

# Thai faces jail for insulting king's dog

AFP, Bangkok

A Thai faces prison after being charged with lese majeste for insulting the king's dog, his lawyer said yesterday, in an escalation of the already draconian royal defamation law.

Thanakorn Siripaiboon, 27, has been charged by police with lese majeste for a "satirical" Facebook post about the king and his dog, lawyer Pawinee Chumsri told AFP.

"There was a post including three photos on his Facebook page on December 6 with a message that satirised the king's dog," she said.

Thanakorn also faces lese majeste, sedition and computer crimes charges for clicking "like" on a doctored photo of the king

and sharing it, plus an infographic on a growing corruption scandal engulfing the junta.

Thailand has one of the world's harshest royal defamation laws.

Anyone convicted of insulting the revered but ailing 88-year-old King Bhumibol Adulyadej, or the queen, heir or regent can face up to 15 years in jail on each count. Thanakorn, an auto-parts worker, could face up to 37 years in prison.

Prosecutions have soared since the army, which styles itself as the champion of the monarchy, grabbed power in a coup last year.

Even the US ambassador faces a police investigation for royal defamation over a speech last month in which he expressed concern at the lengthy sentences.



# EU to launch controversial new border force plan

AFP, Strasbourg

The EU was set to unveil controversial proposals for a new border and coastguard agency yesterday in response to Europe's migration crisis, with powers to intervene even when the host country does not consent.

The new 1,000-strong force is aimed at slowing the record flow of nearly one million refugees and migrants to Europe this year, mainly from the war in Syria, in what is the worst crisis of its kind since World War II.

But some member states in the 28-nation European Union are hostile to a plan that could see them cede sovereignty over their own land and sea borders to bureaucrats in Brussels.

The European Commission, the powerful executive arm of the EU, will propose that the new agency has the "right to inter-

vene" to protect the security of the EU's passport-free Schengen area.

"In urgent situations, the agency must be able to step in to ensure that action is taken on the ground even where there is no request for assistance from the member state concerned or where that member state considers that there is no need for additional intervention," said a draft of its proposal obtained by AFP.

The EU could send in teams of guards in case of a surge at a particular border, or where a member state has a "deficiency" in the management of its borders and had failed to respond to warnings from Brussels, it said.

European Parliament President Martin Schulz hailed the plan, which was scheduled to be unveiled before MEPs in Strasbourg later yesterday, saying the EU had to be able to step in when member states could not meet their responsibilities.

# REFUGEE CRISIS

# NEWS IN brief

## Palestinians' support' knife attacks: poll

AFP, Jerusalem

Two-thirds of Palestinians support the ongoing wave of stabbings against Israelis, with the same percentage backing a larger armed uprising, a poll released on Monday found. Sixty-seven percent back the use of knives, the survey by the respected Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) found. Since October 1, almost daily attacks by Palestinians and clashes with Israeli soldiers have killed 117 Palestinian and 17 Israelis.

## Suspect arrested over Paris attacks

BBC ONLINE

French police yesterday arrested a man in the Paris region as part of the investigation into the 13 November attacks in the city, sources said. The 29-year-old man arrested yesterday was planning to travel to Syria, according to one French media report. Some 2,700 raids have been conducted since the attacks, with 360 people placed under house arrest across France, the AFP news agency reports.

## Half of Britons want to leave the EU: poll

AFP, London

Half of British voters favour leaving the European Union, a new poll showed Monday, days before Prime Minister David Cameron travels to Brussels for talks aimed at keeping Britain within the bloc. The ICM poll for the Vote Leave campaign found that 50 percent of voters would choose so-called "Brexit" if undecided voters were excluded from the tally, Britain's Daily Telegraph newspaper reported.

## Pakistan executes eight more

AFP, Multan

Pakistan hanged eight more convicted murderers yesterday, a day ahead of the one-year anniversary of an extremist attack that prompted authorities to lift a six-year moratorium on the death penalty. Pakistan reinstated executions last year as part of a crackdown on extremism after Taliban attackers gunned down more than 150 people, most of them children, at an army-run school in the restive northwest on December 16, 2014.