

# Big powers agree on UN draft resolution on Syria

AGENCIES  
The five permanent UN Security Council members agreed on a draft resolution endorsing the Syrian peace process, diplomats said yesterday.

Churkin suggested there were significant disagreements on the draft resolution among the Security Council five veto powers - the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China.

Foreign ministers from 17 countries - including Russia's Sergei Lavrov, US Secretary of State John Kerry and other European and Middle Eastern ministers, as well as top diplomats from regional rivals Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran, were in New York for the Syria meetings.

only backers Russia and Iran -- not the West -- were ready to resolve his country's nearly five-year conflict.

**SYRIA CRISIS**  
**OTHER DEVELOPMENTS**

- German secret service in talks with Syrian spies: report
- US, allies conduct 22 strikes against IS militants
- Suspected Russia raids kill 32 civilians



**A child, injured by shelling, sits inside a field hospital in the Douma neighborhood of Damascus, Syria.**

Russian and Iranian concerns about how to refer to a bloc of opposition groups that would join UN-led peace talks with the Syrian government set to begin in January.

Also present were UN chief Ban Ki-moon, his Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura and EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini. The Organization of the Islamic Conference and the Arab League were also represented.

Western officials say a recent meeting in Saudi Arabia of opposition figures made significant headway in coming up with an opposition bloc, though Russia and Iran questioned the legitimacy of the Saudi-hosted discussions.

On the eve of the UN talks, Assad warned in an interview with Dutch television that misguided efforts to bring about regime change would make the conflict "drag on" and that

# Obama reassures US on terror threat

Report says hate crimes against Muslims tripled after attacks

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President Barack Obama sought Thursday to reassure Americans they face no "credible" terror threat, as US authorities began a review of the visa system that let one of the San Bernardino shooters into the country.

"At this moment, our intelligence and counterterrorism professionals do not have any specific and credible information about an attack on the homeland," the president said after meeting top US security officials at the National Counterterrorism Center in Virginia.

"That said, we have to be vigilant," he said. The December 2 murder of 14 people in San Bernardino was carried out by US-born Syed Farook and his Pakistani wife Tashfeen Malik, reports AFP.

Obama repeated his pledge to hunt down IS in its stronghold in Syria. The US president has also ordered a review of the K-1 visa system -- also known as the "fiancee visa" -- which Malik used to enter the United States.

Possible changes include increased monitoring of social media posts and a more detailed background check and interview process. An analysis by a California State University research group has found that hate crimes against Muslim Americans and mosques across the United States have tripled in the wake of the terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, California, with dozens occurring within just a month.

The spike includes assaults on hijab-wearing students; arsons and vandalism at mosques; and shootings and death threats at Islamic-owned businesses, reports New York Times.

"The terrorist attacks, coupled with the ubiquity of these anti-Muslim stereotypes seeping into the mainstream, have emboldened people to act upon this fear and anger," said Brian Levin, a criminologist at the university.

# NEWSIN brief

## Carter makes surprise visit to Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul  
US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter yesterday arrived in Afghanistan on an unannounced visit, officials said, with media reporting his trip was aimed at assessing the deteriorating security situation in the country.

His visit comes amid a surge in Taliban attacks across Afghanistan and mounting concerns that loyalists of the Islamic State group are making steady inroads in the country.

## Turkey kills 54 Kurdish militants

AFP, Diyarbakir  
Turkish security forces have killed 54 Kurdish militants during a major operation to root out Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) rebels from two urban centres, official media said yesterday.

The operation began on Tuesday, with 25 militants killed in first two days. But the latest figure more than doubled the number of casualties, implying a heavy toll during Thursday's fighting inside the towns.

## Pakistan airstrikes kill 23 militants

AFP, Peshawar  
Pakistani fighter jets killed 23 militants yesterday in airstrikes carried out in the country's remote tribal belt near the Afghan border, the military said in a statement.

## Ukraine halts payment on \$3b debt to Russia

AFP, Kiev  
Ukraine yesterday announced it would not make payment on its \$3 billion debt to Russia due this weekend, deepening a row with Moscow which said it would take Kiev to court. Moscow and Kiev have been locked in a bitter showdown over a Russian \$3 billion loan granted to the pro-Moscow regime of ex-president Viktor Yanukovich in December 2013, not long before he was ousted and fled to Russia.

## Israel, Turkey agree to restore ties

BBC ONLINE  
Israel and Turkey have reached a preliminary agreement on normalising relations, an Israeli official said. Ties broke down after the Israeli navy raided a flotilla trying to break Israel's blockade of Gaza in 2010. Ten Turkish activists were killed. The deal will see Israel compensate families of those killed while Turkey will drop all claims against Israel, the unnamed official said.

## Niger coup plot foiled: president

BBC ONLINE  
Niger's President Mahamadou Issoufou has said his government has foiled a plot to overthrow him. He said the plotters planned to use "aerial firepower" to unseat him, in comments made on state TV. He was elected in 2011, bringing to an end years of military rule. Niger has seen several coups since becoming independent in 1960.

# Oil spills in Nigeria Dutch court takes up case against Shell

AFP, The Hague  
A Dutch appeals court ruled yesterday that four Nigerian farmers may take their case against oil giant Shell to a judge in the Netherlands, in a landmark ruling involving multinational corporate governance.

"The Dutch courts and this court consider it has jurisdiction in the case against Shell and its subsidiary in Nigeria," Judge Hans van der Klooster said at the appeals court in The Hague.

The four farmers and fishermen, backed by the Dutch branch of environmental group Friends of the Earth, first filed the case in 2008 against the Anglo-Dutch company in a court case thousands of kilometres (miles) from their homes.

They want Shell to clean up devastating oil spills in four heavily-polluted villages in the west African country's oil-rich Niger Delta, prevent further spills and pay compensation. The three-judge panel also denied Shell the power to take its decision before the Netherlands' top court. Shell did not specifically say whether it would seek a review of yesterday's judgement, but it said that the case over their responsibility for the spills "will be the topic of continuing litigation."

The farmers also wanted Shell to disclose a number of documents they believe could show the company's negligence in maintaining its oil pipelines and guarding against sabotage.



**Boats of fishermen are seen on the dried Poopo lakebed in the Oruro Department, south of La Paz, Bolivia, on Thursday. Lake Poopo in Bolivia, the Andean nation's formerly second largest after the famed Titicaca, has dried up entirely. With the water now gone, animals have died off in the millions, according to studies. And the local families, having lost much of their sustenance, have been forced to migrate.**



# IMPEACHMENT CASE Court gives Brazil leader lifeline

AFP, Brasilia  
Brazil's Supreme Court ruled Thursday that Congress must restart impeachment proceedings against Dilma Rousseff from scratch and overhauled the procedure, in a badly needed win for the embattled president.

In an 8-3 decision, the judges annulled an opposition-dominated impeachment commission established by secret ballot in the lower house last week and ordered the procedure be restarted in an open vote.

It also gave the final word on whether to open an impeachment trial to the Senate, where Rousseff has greater support. Rousseff is accused of fudging the government's accounts during her re-election campaign last year. The 68-year-old leftist maintains the budgeting maneuvers were accepted practice.

Under the court's ruling, a new commission to decide whether or not to impeach the president must now be created in an open vote by the lower house.

If the commission recommends impeachment, the decision will then pass to the full lower house -- and then, the judges ruled, to the Senate.

"It would be illogical for the Senate to act as a rubber stamp and execute whatever the lower house determines," said Supreme Court Justice Roberto Barroso.

# DELHI GANG RAPE Court allows release of teenage rapist

BBC ONLINE  
A legal challenge to stop the release of the teenage convict of the 2012 Delhi gang rape has been unsuccessful. The petitioner, politician Subramanian Swamy, requested the Delhi high court to stop his release, due today.

The teenager, who cannot be named as he was a minor at the time of the crime, was sentenced to three years in a reform facility in August 2013 - the maximum term possible for a juvenile. The rape and the subsequent death of the woman had caused global outrage.

Some activists and the parents of the victim also wanted the teenager to stay in jail, saying "he can be a threat to the society". But yesterday, the court said the convict could not be kept in the correctional home because he had served the maximum term possible under the law.

"We agree it is a serious issue. But after 20 December, the juvenile cannot be kept at a special home per law," the NDTV website quoted the judge as saying. The mother of the victim said she was "disappointed" with the ruling and that she would consider challenging the order in the Supreme Court.

With public outrage growing over his release and threats to his life, he will be handed over to a charity for his protection and rehabilitation. Some reports had claimed that the juvenile had been the most brutal during the crime and there were calls to try him as an adult, with many saying his punishment should be commensurate with his crime.

# Afghans win approval to join WTO

REUTERS, Kabul  
Afghanistan has won formal approval to join the World Trade Organisation in a move the US-backed government hopes will help lift its war-shattered economy and create jobs in one of the world's poorest countries.

Afghanistan has until June 30 to ratify the agreement, the final step before becoming a full member of the organization that underpins the global system of international trade.

"Trade-led growth will create new economic opportunities and jobs, especially for women; it will reduce poverty, and increase prosperity," said Afghanistan's Deputy Chief Executive Mohammad Khan Rahmani, in a speech at a WTO meeting in Nairobi where the agreement was passed.

# Leaders vow to step up fight against terrorism

AFP, Brussels  
EU leaders yesterday vowed to step up the fight against terrorism in the wake of the Paris attacks, wrapping up a dramatic 2015 plagued by a series of crises.

Leaders of the bloc's 28 member states assembled in Brussels for their last summit of a year which opened with the threat of a Greek exit from the euro and ended with a refugee crisis of historic proportions as well as Britain facing its own possible "Brexit" from the EU. The jihadist violence began in January with the shocking assault by French nationals against satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo in Paris, followed by another assault in Copenhagen only a few weeks later, and then the November attacks in the French capital in which 130 people were killed.

In a draft of the summit conclusions seen by AFP, leaders vowed to press on with a series of proposals made in February that have since remained stuck in the EU's legislative pipeline. These measures, which include a controversial plan to track airline passenger names in close coordination with the United States, "need to be urgently implemented", the statement said.

On Thursday British Prime Minister David Cameron laid out his plans at a summit dinner on how he intended to keep Britain in the EU in return for a difficult reform deal with his European partners. He appealed to them to work with him on his demands including a freeze on benefits for EU migrants, before he holds a referendum on a possible "Brexit" by the end of 2017.

EU president Donald Tusk said on Thursday leaders agreed to push through by June 2016 a plan for a new border and coast-guard force that could intervene in member countries -- even without their consent -- in order to shore up the EU external frontier. He said they also agreed to protect the Schengen area, the cherished European passport-free zone which symbolises the ideal of free movement.

**EU SUMMIT**

**UK PM hails 'good progress' on reform deal**

**June 30 deadline set for new border force**

# Coal demand slowly burning out: IAEA

Global coal consumption has declined for the first time in this century thanks largely to China's economic restructuring, but usage will continue to grow in India and Southeast Asia, the IAEA said yesterday.

The Paris-based International Energy Agency said in a report issued in Singapore that growth in world coal demand halted in 2014 for the first time since the 1990s.

China accounts for half of global coal usage. "Given the economic rebalancing in China and ongoing structural decline in OECD countries, even with the continuation of growth in India and Asean countries, a downward trend in global coal consumption in 2015 is likely," it said.

Global coal demand fell 0.9 percent from 7,991 million tonnes in 2013 to 7,920 million tonnes in 2014, the IAEA said. But India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) are "remaining centres of significant coal growth," the report said.

Those markets saw demand increase by 112 million tonnes in 2014 -- which compares with a falloff in coal demand in the highly-developed Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) area of 47 million tonnes. The IAEA report was completed before the post-2020 Paris agreement to fight global warming was forged on December 13. The IAEA study only looks at coal demand until 2020.

# UN report unveils appalling condition of widows

Says millions worldwide robbed, enslaved, raped and accused of witchcraft

The number of widows has grown by 9 percent since 2010, partly because of conflicts and disease. The biggest jump has been in the Middle East and North Africa where the estimated number of widows rose 24 percent between 2010 and 2015, partly due to the Syrian war and other conflicts.

Millions of widows around the world are left destitute after being robbed of their inheritance, while others are enslaved by their in-laws, accused of witchcraft or forced to undergo abusive sexual rituals, research shows.

The crushing poverty and persecution faced by widows worldwide is outlined in a major report on widowhood which was to be presented to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon yesterday. "Widows have been suffering in silence for centuries, and yet nobody - no government, not even the UN - has ever attended to this problem," said Lord Raj Loomba, a campaigner on widowhood, who will discuss the issue with Ban in New York.

There are more than 258 million widows worldwide with one in seven living on less than \$1 a day, according to the World Widows Report produced by the Loomba Foundation which works to empower widows. Newly-widowed women in many developing countries are often plunged into destitution after being disinherited, stripped of property and evicted by their in-laws, sometimes losing their children. Those who remain reliant on their in-laws are often treated like slaves, abused physically, psychologically and sexually, Loomba said. Loomba said the new UN global development goals, known as the SDGs, agreed this year would never be met without addressing the problems endured by widows. The SDGs also include ending all discrimination and violence against women and girls, and commitments regarding women's access to property and inheritance.

# Global disaster costs fall in 2015: Swiss Re

The economic cost of disasters across the world dropped in 2015 to around \$85 billion (78 billion euros) from \$113 million last year, reinsurance company Swiss Re said yesterday.

Insurance companies covered \$32 billion of the total, it said in its Sigma study. The 2015 figure is much below the annual average over the past decade of \$192 billion, Swiss Re said.

The cost of natural disasters alone accounted for \$74 billion of this year's total, it said. The industrial disaster in Tianjin in northeastern China, where massive explosions at a hazardous goods storage firm on August 12 killed 161 people, is estimated to have been the year's costliest catastrophe, with insurers covering more than \$2 billion of the damage, but calculations are ongoing.

Among natural catastrophes, the February winter storms in the United States produced the biggest bill for insurers, costing them around \$2.7 billion. The Nepal earthquake, which killed 9,000 people and destroyed 500,000 homes had an economic cost of more than \$6 billion, but insurers had to pay out just \$160 million, Swiss Re said.

AFP, ZURICH