

NEWS IN brief

Obama invites Modi, Sharif to Washington

US President Barack Obama has invited Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif to attend the Nuclear Security Summit from March 31 to April 1 next year in Washington. According to The Express Tribune, there has been no official announcement regarding the invitation as yet.

Belgium arrests two over 'New Year plot'

Belgian police have arrested two people suspected of planning attacks in Brussels on New Year's Eve. Raids took place on Sunday and Monday in Brussels and the provinces of Flemish Brabant and Liege. Police seized military clothing and computer equipment in the raids, but no weapons or explosives.

Spy links: Indian ex-air force officer arrested

Delhi police yesterday said they have arrested a former Indian Air Force officer on charges of passing secrets to Pakistan's spy service. Police said the man, who is accused of giving details of air force exercises to Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), had fallen victim to a "honey trap". Police said the ISI used a woman to lure him into passing on top-secret information through mobile phone and the Internet.

Four terrorists hanged to death in Pakistan

Pakistan yesterday hanged four men sentenced to death by military courts for assisting in suicide bombings and attacks on soldiers, officials said. Rights groups have accused Pakistan of executing an estimated 300 people in less than a year.

Thai junta chief no laughing matter!

Every New Year Thailand's top political journalists traditionally come up with satirical nicknames for the government and senior ministers. But this year they will forego the pleasure, having decided the junta is no laughing matter. In a statement, the Government House press corps said they were opting to stay mum because "the cabinet of [Prime Minister] General Prayut Chan-O-Cha came into power by special way".

Only 190 EU migrants relocated so far

The European Union's struggle to deal with migration can be bluntly told in two numbers: More than one million people have made their way to Europe this year, according to the International Organization for Migration, and 190 have been formally relocated. The disparity is a potent reminder of how migration has strained the European Union's political will, its unity and its resources.



QUOTE
"If Hillary thinks she can unleash her husband, with his terrible record of women abuse, while playing the women's card on me, she's wrong!"

DONALD TRUMP
GOP FRONTRUNNER
OF US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION



A destroyed house is seen on Monday in the aftermath of a tornado in Garland, Texas. The southern US state of Texas reeled from rare December tornadoes, as days of storms battering a vast region stretching from the southwestern US to Canada claimed at least 43 lives.

PHOTO: AFP

WAR ON ISLAMIC STATE Iraq eyes Mosul after Ramadi

REUTERS, Baghdad
The Iraqi army will need Kurdish fighters' help to retake Mosul, the largest city under the control of Islamic State, Iraqi Finance Minister Hoshiyar Zebari said, with the planned offensive expected to be very challenging. Mosul, 400 km north of Baghdad, has been designated by the government as the next target for Iraq's armed forces after they retook the western city of Ramadi. "Mosul needs good planning, preparations, commitment from all the key players," Zebari, a Kurd, said in an interview on Monday in Baghdad. "Peshmerga is a major force; you cannot do Mosul without Peshmerga," he told Reuters, referring to the armed forces of Iraqi Kurdistan, an autonomous northern region close to Mosul. The mostly Sunni city had a population of two million before it fell to the militants in June 2014 in the first stage of their sweeping advance through northern and western Iraq. The battle of Mosul would be "very, very challenging", Zebari said. "It will not be an easy operation, for some time they have been strengthening themselves, but it's doable." Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said on Monday that Islamic State would be defeated in 2016 with the army planning to move on Mosul. "We are coming to liberate Mosul and it will be the fatal and final blow to Daesh," he said in speech praising the army's "victory" in Ramadi. Retaking Mosul would effectively mark the end of the caliphate proclaimed by Islamic State in adjacent Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria, according to Zebari.

Israel ex-PM Olmert to serve jail term

BBC ONLINE

Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has been ordered to serve 18 months in jail for bribery. Olmert had been sentenced to six years by a lower court in 2014, but this was reduced by the Supreme Court. The 70-year-old was convicted over a real estate deal that took place while he served as mayor of Jerusalem, prior to becoming prime minister in 2006. Olmert, who stepped down in 2009, will become the first former Israeli head of government to go to prison. He is due to begin his sentence on 15 February. The Supreme Court acquitted Olmert of receiving a 500,000-shekel (\$130,000; £86,000) bribe from the developers of Holyland, a controversial block of flats in Jerusalem, after he appealed against the March 2014 conviction. A separate conviction of illicitly taking a 60,000-shekel payment for another project was upheld. "A heavy weight was lifted from my chest today, when the Supreme Court exonerated me of the main charge, of Holyland," Olmert said following the ruling. "No bribe was ever offered to me and I never accepted one." Several other government officials and businesspeople were convicted alongside Olmert in 2014. The judge at the time said he was guilty of "moral turpitude". In a separate case, Olmert was sentenced earlier this year to eight months in prison for fraud and breach of trust for accepting illegal payments from an American businessman. The Supreme Court is yet to rule on Olmert's appeal in that case.

BRIBERY CASE



Guinea free of Ebola: WHO

BBC ONLINE

Guinea, the west African country where the worst ever Ebola outbreak began two years ago, is free of the disease, the World Health Organization (WHO) said yesterday. "Today the World Health Organization declares the end of Ebola virus transmission in the Republic of Guinea," the UN agency said in a statement. WHO said that Guinea will now enter "a 90-day period of heightened surveillance to ensure that any new cases are identified quickly before they can spread to other people." Guinea leapt to global prominence as the home of "patient zero" -- an infant, Emile Ouamouno, who in December 2013 became the outbreak's first victim. WHO made the declaration once 42 days passed since the last confirmed Ebola patient in Guinea tested negative for the second time. The two other west African countries, Liberia and Sierra Leone, have also been declared Ebola free.

IS releases 'fatwa' on female sex slaves

Tells militants how and when they can rape captured women, girls

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

IS has released a fatwa detailing how and when its fighters can rape female sex slaves -- "one of the inevitable consequences of jihad". The document, drawn up by the terrorist group's "Committee of Research and Fatwas", was revealed by Reuters news agency after being discovered among a huge trove of documents seized by US special forces in Syria. It is one of many self-proclaimed rulings IS has made to enforce its interpretation of Islamic law, with others governing the treatment of "infidels" and revenue streams from stolen oil and antiquities. The fatwa on female slaves, which could not be independently verified, was apparently released in response to a question on unspecified "violations" by IS fighters owning female slaves. It lists 15 rulings, which go into explicit detail prohibiting intercourse if a slave is menstruating or is pregnant, and banning forced abortions. Many of the injunctions deal with rape within families, or the "sharing" of a slave's

children. "If the owner of a female captive, who has a daughter suitable for intercourse, has sexual relations with the latter, he is not permitted to have intercourse with her mother and she is permanently off limits to him," one says. "Should he have intercourse with her mother then he is not permitted to have intercourse with her daughter and she is to be off limits to him." "Owners" are banned from raping two sisters at the same time, or passing slaves between father and son, or other relatives. Militants are not allowed to sell slaves to anyone they know will mistreat them, the document says, adding: "The owner of a female captive should show compassion towards her, be kind to her, not humiliate her and not assign her work she is unable to perform." IS has released previous documents attempting to justify its enslavement and rape of women since the kidnap of thousands of Yazidi women and girls in Iraq last year, managing the subject of slavery through its department of "war spoils".



2015: THE YEAR OF THE REFUGEE



CRISIS IN EUROPE

They have crossed treacherous seas in unseaworthy boats, trampled through dark forests carrying their worldly possessions on their backs. They have boarded crowded trains, walked miles along lonely motorways, slept rough, given birth to children in undignified squalor. Many have arrived at Europe's door bloodied but unbowed; many have died trying to get in. Trafficked by human smugglers, they have endured privations that have shamed an entire continent. Some have been stuffed into the backs of lorries and asphyxiated. Others have drowned in the Mediterranean, fallen from trains or frozen to death clinging to the undersides of lorries. Fleeing bloodshed and chaos at home, they have made extraordinary journeys that have tested the human spirit almost to destruction. 2015 was the year of a migration crisis unprecedented in modern times, the greatest movement of refugees in Europe since the Second World War. More than one million refugees and migrants arrived in the European Union in 2015, while almost 3,700 died or went missing in perilous journeys which reaped huge profit for smugglers, according to the International Organisation for Migration. Out of a total of 1,005,504 arrivals to Greece, Bulgaria, Italy, Spain, Malta and Cyprus by 21 December 2015, the vast majority -- 816,752 -- arrived by sea in Greece, IOM said. Almost all those arriving came across the Mediterranean or the Aegean Seas, and half were Syrians fleeing the civil war. Another 20% were Afghans, and 7% were

CRISIS IN SOUTH ASIA

2015 was the year that Southeast Asia faced its own refugee crisis, while the world focused on Europe. The images seem all too familiar: men, women, and children crammed onto the decks of a boat, pleading to be rescued. For days, they have had no food or water. Many of them are fleeing persecution and violence, while some are merely seeking better opportunities. But these people aren't Syrian, nor are they crossing the Mediterranean -- they're Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants adrift in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Earlier this year, thousands of people, mostly of the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar, embarked on boats in hopes of reaching Malaysia. It was a well-worn route, one that smugglers had used to transport Rohingyas and fortune-seekers. But after Thai authorities announced a crackdown on human trafficking in May, smugglers abandoned their ships en masse while still underway. An estimated 5,000 to 8,000 people were left stranded at sea. And no country would take them in. The crisis forced leaders in Southeast Asia to take a hard look at longstanding issues within the region, including human trafficking, irregular migration, and the continued persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar. Initially, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia repeatedly rejected the boats. Thailand and Malaysia publicly stated that the refugees were not welcome. Countries eventually decided to take in refugees in late May, but only after intense pressure from international organizations and the media. Even though the worst of the crisis has passed, the future remains bleak for the refugees who were allowed to land. Indonesia and Malaysia have both made clear that refugees will only be allowed to stay until May 2016, after which they must be resettled to a third country. For now, boat journeys from Myanmar and Bangladesh have slowed -- UNHCR reports that only 1,000 refugees and migrants have departed by sea since September. However, human rights groups, as well as UNHCR, have emphasized that the root causes of the crisis still remain and must be addressed. Despite Myanmar holding a historic election this year, persecution and routine exclusion of the Rohingya in Myanmar continues.