

# NEWS IN brief

## New IS video 'desperate stuff': Cameron

British Prime Minister David Cameron yesterday described an Islamic State group video apparently showing the execution of five British "spies" as "desperate stuff" designed to deflect from their recent military losses. The group threatened Britain in the Internet video Sunday showing the killing of five people it said worked with the coalition fighting IS.

## Delhi police to arm 1,000 traffic cops

The Delhi Police has decided to arm 1,000 traffic cops in the capital with revolvers. Delhi Police chief BS Bassi made the announcement yesterday, but the purpose of the weapons were not mentioned. Traffic policemen in Delhi are so far not armed.

## Filippo Grandi takes helm of UNHCR

Italian diplomat Filippo Grandi began work yesterday as the new head of the UN refugee agency, facing the mammoth task of leading efforts to deal with record levels of displacement worldwide. "UNHCR is navigating extraordinarily difficult waters," Grandi said in a statement.

## Syrian opposition leader to visit Beijing

The leader of the main exile Syrian opposition group will visit China this week, Beijing said yesterday, despite the country repeatedly blocking UN Security Council resolutions on the conflict. China is a veto-wielding permanent member of the UN Security Council and has voted against resolutions on Syria four times alongside Russia.

## IS fighters attack Libyan oil port

Islamic State (IS) fighters have clashed with guards as they tried to enter Libya's oil port of Sidra. Two members of the Petrol Facilities Guard militia, which is defending Sidra, were reportedly killed. The militants are said to have been pushed back, but IS says it now controls Bin Jawad, 30km west of Sidra on the road from its stronghold in Sirte. In December, France said IS was aiming to control Libya's oil wells. IS, which has been operating in Libya for about a year, failed to take Sidra in an attack last October.

# Peace talks will be govt's priority: Suu Kyi

Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday said bringing peace to the country's strife-ravaged ethnic regions will be a priority for her government when it takes power. The veteran democracy champion's National League for Democracy (NLD) party swept landmark November polls that look set to curtail the military's decades-long chokehold on the country. But under Myanmar's complicated junta-era political charter, her party is not expected to take power until February -- and Suu Kyi herself is banned from becoming president. "We have to build peace. Building peace is the first ever duty of a new government," she told supporters at the party's Yangon headquarters yesterday, during a speech marking the country's Independence Day.



"We have to work to include everyone in a signed ceasefire agreement by holding a really effective peace conference," she added. The 70-year-old opposition leader had remained somewhat tight-lipped on what her government's main objectives and who her main players will be, as delicate transition negotiations continue between the incumbent military-backed government and the her victorious party. Myanmar is a patchwork of ethnic identities with over 130 officially-recognised minority groups, many with distinct languages and cultures. Across vast swathes of these often remote regions, ethnic rebel groups have fought wars against the military for greater autonomy, many of them lasting for decades. Ethnic minorities have long accused the central government and the military of human rights abuses and resource grabs.



# DEADLY QUAKE RATTLES NORTHEASTERN INDIA

Clockwise from left: Cracks line the front of a telecommunications building in Imphal yesterday, after an earthquake struck northeast India near the country's borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh. Security personnel walk past a collapsed building. Medics tend to people who were injured after the earthquake at a hospital. A man points to a crack in a mud house at Malaynagar village, on the outskirts of Agartala. At least 11 people were killed and scores injured when a strong 6.7 magnitude earthquake struck northeast India early yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS



# 900 passengers 'murdered' in last two years

Says leading air safety firm INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

For the second year running, the main cause of aviation deaths in 2015 was "unlawful interference" - in other words, murder - according to a leading air-safety firm.

The Dutch safety consultancy, To70, said: "The total number of fatalities as a result of unlawful interference has increased in the past two years to over 900." It cites the losses last year of two Malaysia Airlines jets the still-unsolved disappearance of MH370, and MH17 which was shot down over in Ukraine - and the two crashes this year involving Germanwings in the Alps and Metrojet in Sinai.

The firm's figures assume that the 224 victims aboard the Metrojet flight from Sharm el Sheikh to St Petersburg last October were killed by a terrorist bomb. While Egyptian investigators say they have found no indication of explosives, the Kremlin says it has proof that a bomb planted on board had downed the Airbus A321.

# Attack on Indian mission foiled

Afghan forces besiege insurgents in Mazar-i-Sharif

REUTERS, Mazar-i-sharif

Afghan special forces fought with insurgents barricaded in a house near the Indian consulate in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif yesterday after an overnight attack that coincided with an assault on an Indian air base near the border with Pakistan.

As the battle stretched into the afternoon, soldiers entered the building, a large structure formerly used as an office by US development agency USAID, where between four and six attackers had locked themselves inside a safe room.

The attack began late on Sunday after gunmen tried unsuccessfully to break into the consulate, taking advantage of the fact that many people were watching the final of a football championship between Afghanistan and India.

After a heavy exchange of fire that went on until well into the night, security forces suspended operations before resuming in the morning, firing rocket-propelled grenades and heavy machine guns at the building.

"The area is sealed off and we are proceeding cautiously and making all possible efforts to protect the lives of those in the area. The attackers will be killed," the provincial governor, Atta Mohammad Noor, said on his Facebook page.

Gunfire rang out as a helicopters circled overhead in a residential area of the Taliban in Afghanistan. But there was no more concrete indication of who may have been responsible. Last month, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Kabul and Islamabad on the same day, underlining the drive to improve stability and overcome the longstanding hostility in the region.

### DEVELOPMENTS

Four civilians, six Afghan security staff were wounded  
Gun battle clouds prospects for regional talks

However, Sunday's attack and a separate assault on an Indian air base in Pathankot, in the northwest Indian state of Punjab, underlined how difficult that process is likely to be.

As the attack in Mazar-i-Sharif began, Indian security forces were still engaged in mopping up the insurgents in Pathankot.

In 2014, India's consulate in the western Afghan city of Herat was hit by heavily armed insurgents including suicide bombers, one of a series of attacks on Indian diplomatic stations in Afghanistan over previous years.

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# AIR FORCE BASE ATTACK

India works to defuse grenades

Mulls options on foreign secretary-level talks with Pakistan

REUTERS, Pathankot

Indian security forces were working yesterday to carefully defuse grenades in the final stages of an operation to secure a vast air base near the border with Pakistan, two days after a militant attack killed seven military personnel and wounded 22.

The attack, a rare targeting of an Indian military installation outside the disputed region of Kashmir, threatens to undermine a tentative thaw in relations with Pakistan.

A senior federal government official said two militants who were hiding in the administrative block of the base had been killed on Sunday, but authorities had yet to recover the bodies.

"A total of six terrorists have been killed, but every inch of the air base has to be secured before we call off the operation," said the official in New Delhi, who requested anonymity.

Manish Mehta, an Indian army spokesman, said the military was working at a "very fast pace" to defuse live hand grenades and gather the remains of the militants.

"The air base is large and we have been working all night to ensure that the base is totally in our control," said Mehta.

A soldier from India's counter-terrorism force, the National Security Guard, was killed by an exploding grenade on Saturday as he lifted the body of one dead attacker, prompting caution in work to clear the area of possible booby-traps.

Military trucks were seen entering and leaving the walled compound and helicopters were flying over it yesterday morning. A government official said yesterday India is mulling its options on whether to go ahead with foreign secretary-level talks with Pakistan scheduled for later this month.

A final decision on the talks, scheduled for Jan 15, is expected to be taken after security forces have completed their operation at the Pathankot air base, the source said, requesting anonymity.

The attack came about a week after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid a surprise visit to his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif the first by an Indian premier in 11 years.

Officials said the attack bore the hallmarks of previous suspected assaults by Pakistan-based militant groups, underscoring the fragility of recent efforts to revive bilateral talks between the nuclear-armed neighbours.



An Afghan Quick Reaction Force (QRF) soldier fires a rocket-propelled grenade launcher during an operation near the Indian consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

# 'Mad witch'

Minister mistakenly sent offensive SMS

BBC ONLINE

Australia's Immigration Minister Peter Dutton has reportedly apologised for mistakenly sending an SMS to a journalist, calling her a "mad witch".

Political reporter Samantha Maiden said the offensive text, which also contained strong language, was intended for disgraced ex-minister Jamie Briggs.

She said Dutton apologised for the message about her article referring to Briggs' recent resignation. The BBC has approached Dutton's office for comment. He reportedly told News Corp in a statement he is expecting a "tough time" in Maiden's next article. "Sam and I have exchanged some robust language over the years so we had a laugh



after this and I apologised to her straightaway, which she took in good faith," Dutton was quoted as saying. Former Cities Minister Jamie Briggs resigned last week following a complaint from a female public servant over his alleged conduct during a night out in Hong Kong. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has broken his silence over incidents embroiling two of his ministers in an inappropriate text message and photo leak.

"As I advised the minister yesterday his language was clearly inappropriate as he recognised by apologising immediately to Ms Maiden," he said in a statement to the media.

# A look at fraught Saudi-Iran ties

AP, Dubai

Diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia have been tense since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, though there have been occasional thaws between the two rivals. Here's a look at how relations between the two Mideast powers have shifted over the last decades:

**PRE-REVOLUTION RELATIONS:** Under the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran had rocky relations with Saudi Arabia, though they improved toward the end of his reign.

**POST-REVOLUTION:** After the overthrow of the shah and takeover of the US Embassy in Tehran, Saudi Arabia quickly became America's top ally in the region. In the ensuing 1980s war between Iran and Iraq, Saudi Arabia backed Iraq despite its concerns about dictator Saddam Hussein.

**1987 HAJJ RIOTS:** The annual pilgrimage to Islamic holy sites in Saudi Arabia, required of all able-bodied Muslims once in their life, saw bloodshed when Iranians held a political demonstration. Iranian pilgrims later battled Saudi riot police, violence that killed at least 402 people.

**SEVERING TIES:** In 1988, Saudi Arabia severed ties with Iran, citing the 1987 hajj rioting and Iran's attacks on shipping in the Persian Gulf. Iranians responded by boycotting the hajj in 1988 and 1989. The two countries restored diplomatic ties in 1991.

**NUCLEAR DISPUTE:** Worries about Iran resumed in Saudi Arabia amid international sanctions against Tehran over its contested nuclear program and the increasingly harsh rhetoric of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Iran and Saudi Arabia each backed opposite sides in Syria's civil war, as well as in the civil war in Yemen.

**2015 HAJJ DISASTER:** On Sept 24, 2015 a stampede and crush strikes the annual hajj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia. While the kingdom says 769 pilgrims are killed, an Associated Press count shows over 2,400 people were killed. Iran says at least 464 of its pilgrims were killed.

**SHEIKH'S EXECUTION:** On Jan 2, Saudi Arabia executed Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and 46 others - the largest execution carried out by the kingdom in three and a half decades. The execution of al-Nimr, a central figure in Arab Spring-inspired protests by Saudi Arabia's Shia minority, sparked protests across the Mideast. Saudi Arabia responded by announcing it was severing diplomatic ties with Iran over the attacks.

# Lanka Tamils welcome promise of land

Demand end to army occupation

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's main opposition yesterday welcomed President Maithripala Sirisena's promise of land for 100,000 people who were forced from their homes during the long civil war, most of them Tamils.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) said Sirisena's pledge to give displaced civilians new plots within six months was a "positive development", but demanded that the military vacate the private land it occupied.

"This is the first time he is giving a timeframe," TNA spokesman M A Sumanthiran told AFP a day after Sirisena made the offer.

"We welcome this as a very positive development but our stand is that the military must vacate all private lands they are occupying," Sirisena, who was elected last January, has won praise for starting to hand back land after the end in May 2009 of one of South Asia's longest and bloodiest ethnic wars.

But he is also under international pressure to do more to ensure reconciliation. The president told AFP in an interview Sunday he would give land to civilians displaced by war by the middle of this year. He admitted it was an "ambitious target" but said it was necessary to end what he called an "unacceptable situation".

The land will be in addition to the property being handed back by the military in line with an earlier election pledge by Sirisena.