

# NEWS IN brief

## Two arrested in US over links to IS

US authorities said two people with ties to the Islamic State group were due in court yesterday in California and Texas, including a refugee from Syria accused of returning there to fight alongside IS. The arrests come amid heightened security in the United States following last month's assault by a radicalised Muslim couple in California that left 14 people dead.

## IS claims Libya bombing

The Islamic State group has claimed a deadly suicide bombing at a checkpoint in Libya's oil heartland, as EU foreign affairs chief Federica Mogherini seeks to shore up support for a unity government. IS's Libya branch released a statement saying that Thursday's attack in Ras Lanouf was carried out by a foreign fighter using an explosives-packed car.

## Prince William, Kate to visit Bhutan

Britain's Prince William and his wife Kate are to visit the South Asian kingdom of Bhutan in the spring as part of an official trip that also takes in India, royal officials announced yesterday. It will be couple's first visit to the remote Himalayan kingdom, and it is unclear whether they will be accompanied by their children, two-year-old Prince George and Princess Charlotte, who was born in May last year.

## Coalition raids kill 11 civilians in Syria

Suspected US-led coalition air strikes have killed 11 civilians, mostly children, in a jihadist-held village in northern Syria, a monitor said yesterday. "Eight children and three women were killed in strikes by the international coalition on Hazima, a village north of Raqa city" on Thursday," said Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

## Gunmen abduct Swiss woman in Timbuktu

Gunmen have abducted a Swiss woman from her home in fabled Timbuktu in northern Mali, the second time she has been taken captive, officials said yesterday. Her capture is the first in the area since the kidnap and murder of two French journalists late November 2013 in Kidal. "Beatrice, a Swiss citizen, was kidnapped in her home in Timbuktu by gunmen," a Timbuktu government official said.



A protester holds a picture of Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, who was executed in Saudi Arabia, as others chant slogans during a rally after Friday prayers in Tehran, yesterday. The festering diplomatic crisis between the Middle East's leading Sunni and Shia Muslim powers has raised sectarian tensions across the region and complicated efforts to resolve conflicts in Syria and Yemen.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# TENSION IN KOREAN PENINSULA South launches anti-North broadcasts

South Korea yesterday resumed high-decibel propaganda broadcasts into North Korea as the United States ramped up pressure on China to bring Pyongyang to heel after its latest nuclear test.

While North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un celebrated his 32nd birthday, the international community scrambled to find common ground on how best to penalise his regime following its shock announcement two days ago that it had successfully tested its first hydrogen bomb.

The cross-border broadcasts blare out an eclectic mix of everything from K-pop and weather forecasts to snippets of news and critiques of the North Korean regime.

Among the songs on the playlist was "Bang, Bang, Bang" recent hit by A-list K-pop boy band, Big Bang. Their resumption revives psychological warfare tactics that date back to the 1950-53 Korean War. But they can be remarkably effective.

Britain's Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond yesterday urged South Korea to "be bigger" than the North as it renewed propaganda broadcasts through massive loudspeakers at the border in response to Pyongyang's nuclear test.

"North Korea acts in a totally irresponsible and provocative way, and I can entirely understand the pressure that the South Koreans feel to respond," Hammond told reporters on a visit to the USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier, docked at the Yokosuka Naval Base southwest of Tokyo.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State John Kerry urged China to take a tougher line with North Korea after its latest nuclear test, warning in a call to his Beijing counterpart Thursday that it cannot be "business as usual."

"North Korea had a particular approach that it wanted to make and we agreed and give them time to implement that," he said, describing his call to China's foreign minister Wang Yi.

# Obama accuses NRA of misleading US over guns

US President Barack Obama has strongly criticised the most powerful US gun lobby during a televised public forum. He said the National Rifle Association (NRA) had deliberately misrepresented proposed legislation on gun control. The NRA declined to take part in the discussion, which it called a public relations spectacle.



Meanwhile, US Republican presidential hopeful Donald Trump said he would eliminate gun-free zones in schools on his first day in office, if elected. Addressing the audience at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, Obama blamed the NRA and others for suggesting that "somebody's going to come grab your guns". He said that all he was seeking to do was strengthen background checks - not seize all firearms.

Kyle, was depicted in the film American Sniper. Separately, in an article in the New York Times, he called gun violence a national crisis, and urged owners and firearm manufacturers to play their part in ending it.

Obama added that he would not campaign for Democrats who did not back gun reforms, saying he wanted leaders brave enough to stand up to what he called the gun lobby's lies. NRA spokesman Andrew Arulanandam said the group had seen "no reason to participate in a public relations spectacle orchestrated by the White House".

Donald Trump made his promise to end gun-free zones when he addressed a rally in Vermont. "You know what a gun-free zone is for a sicko?" he asked the crowd. "That's bait." Earlier this week, Obama unveiled a package of executive actions aimed at keeping guns from people who should not have access to them.

# 4 Palestinian knife attackers shot dead

Four Palestinians were shot dead by Israeli forces Thursday after trying to stab them in two incidents in the southern West Bank, the army said.

"Three attackers, armed with knives, attempted to stab soldiers guarding the Gush Etzion junction," a statement said, adding that troops responded by firing at the assailants. A military spokeswoman said all three were killed.

A short while later, a Palestinian armed with a knife tried to stab soldiers northeast of Hebron, a statement said. "The force thwarted the attack and shot the assailant, resulting in his death."

Since October 1, 22 Israelis and 143 Palestinian have been killed in violence.

# INDIAN AIR BASE TERROR ATTACK Pak PM 'orders probe into leads given by India'

Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has ordered a probe into the leads provided by India about the Pathankot airbase attack which killed 7 Indian soldiers, a media report said on Friday.

He chaired a high-level meeting on Thursday and discussed the attack on the Indian airbase, The Nation reported.

The prime minister and his aides agreed to launch investigations into the evidence provided by India, it said.

A senior official said the leads provided by India were handed over to Intelligence Bureau chief Aftab Sultan for further action.

Addressing the meeting, Prime Minister Sharif said Pakistan was ready to boost cooperation with neighbouring India as part of counterterrorism efforts.

Sharif directed National Security Adviser Nasser Khan Janjua to remain in contact with his Indian counterpart Ajit Doval in a bid to keep renewed dialogue on track after the attack on Pathankot air base. Indian intelligence agencies on Thursday identified Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) chief Maulana Masood Azhar as the prime mastermind of the air base terror attack. The attack was reportedly planned at a markaz (a seminary) in Bahawalpur, Pakistan, intelligence sources said. India has also shared with Pakistan the identity of four JeM handlers suspected to have guided the Pathankot attackers.



# Mao statue demolished in China

A gargantuan gold-painted statue of Communist China's founding father Mao Zedong has suddenly been demolished, apparently for lacking government approval, state media said yesterday, days after images of it went viral.

Images of the statue of a seated Mao towering some 37 metres (121 feet) over empty fields in the central province of Henan made worldwide headlines this week. But the 3 million yuan (\$460,000) structure has been destroyed, the People's Net news portal cited local officials as saying, adding the reason was "unclear".

The website is linked to the People's Daily, the official mouthpiece of the Communist Party. It cited reports from unspecified media as saying the likeness of the man who ruled China with an iron grip for nearly three decades until his death in 1976 "was not registered or approved" by the local government.

Despite being blamed for millions of deaths, Mao is still widely revered in China and credited with uniting the country.

# MASS SEX ASSAULT IN GERMANY Many mob attackers were migrants: govt

Germany yesterday said most suspects in the mob violence that marred Cologne's New Year's Eve celebrations were asylum seekers, fuelling calls to quickly deport criminal migrants.

Unsettled by a record refugee influx, Germany has reacted with shock to news that women had to run a frightful gauntlet of groping, insults and robberies in an aggressive and drunken crush of around 1,000 men.

A week after the chaotic scenes outside Cologne railway station, federal police said they had identified 31 suspects whose alleged offences were "mostly theft and causing bodily harm". Eighteen of them are asylum seekers, the interior ministry said. Among the suspects are nine Algerians, eight Moroccans, five Iranians, four Syrians, two Germans and one citizen each from Iraq, Serbia and the US.

Victims and eyewitnesses had since the beginning blamed men of "Arab or North African" appearance, inflaming a heated public debate about Germany's ability to integrate the nearly 1.1 million asylum seekers it took in last year.



A woman carrying her child walks along a dirt road with other migrants and refugees after crossing the Macedonian border into Serbia near the village of Miratovac, on Thursday. Migrants and refugees are facing deteriorating weather conditions as they make their way to the EU via the Balkans.

PHOTO: AFP

# Military pledges loyalty to Maduro

Venezuela's military pledged loyalty to President Nicolas Maduro on Thursday, ramping up a high-stakes standoff between his socialist government and a center-right opposition that has vowed to use its new legislative powers to oust him.

The opposition laid claim to a big majority in the National Assembly, which could empower it to force out Maduro. He has rejected the assembly as illegal and formed a new hard-line leftist cabinet to fight it, in a deepening political crisis.

Venezuela's defense minister and armed forces chief, General Vladimir Padrino, weighed in, saying the military was unwavering in its backing for Maduro -- who has vowed to resist "with an iron hand."

"The president is the highest authority of the state and we reiterate our absolute loyalty and unconditional support for him," said Padrino, after the under-pressure government sued to stop the emboldened opposition using its newfound powers to kick out Maduro.

## DEEPENING VENEZUELA CRISIS



explosive devices, but no one was hurt and no damage reported. He said police were investigating. Padrino lashed out at the opposition after Ramos Allup had portraits of late president and socialist icon Hugo Chavez removed from the assembly building on Wednesday. "This is an outrage to military

honor," he warned. The government side also responded by pledging to fill the streets of Caracas with pictures of Chavez and of Simon Bolivar, Venezuela's 19th-century independence hero.

The opposition MUD coalition won a majority in the assembly for the first time in nearly 17 years at elections on December 6.

The MUD has vowed to find a way within six months to get rid of Maduro by constitutional means. But Maduro's side vowed to block it by suing, withholding funding and refusing to publish its legislation.

Analysts warn the political deadlock will compound the hardship of Venezuelans who are suffering shortages of basic goods and soaring inflation.

Plunging oil prices have sharply curbed the country's revenues.

One of the first measures the opposition wants to pass is an amnesty for 75 political prisoners, a plan backed by the United States. Maduro has vowed to veto that move.

# PARIS ATTACKS Belgian police 'find hideout' of suspect

BBC ONLINE

Belgian prosecutors believe they may have found a Brussels apartment where one of the Paris jihadists hid after the 13 November attacks.

Police found traces of explosives and a fingerprint of fugitive Salah Abdeslam in an apartment in the Schaerbeek district.

The Belgian federal prosecutor's office yesterday said that traces of the explosive TATP (acetone peroxide) and three hand-made belts that might be used to transport explosives were found in the raid on 10 December in Rue Berge.

Police are still searching for Abdeslam, 26. The Paris attacks are believed to have been at least partly planned in Brussels.

# Trump resurrects Monica Lewinsky to attack Clinton

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump dredged up a photo of Monica Lewinsky in a 15-second video montage Thursday, as the Republican presidential frontrunner stepped up his personal attack on his Democratic rival Hillary Clinton.

The clip, posted on Trump's Instagram account, showed a succession of pictures, among them one of former US president Bill Clinton standing beside Lewinsky, the White House intern with whom he had an extramarital affair in the late 1990s.

The next shot shows a New York tabloid featuring Bill Clinton's face and the headline "Liar, Liar," after the then-president admitted he had carried out an "inappropriate" relationship.

Hillary Clinton's voice plays over the clip, during which the former first lady, senator and secretary of state is heard proclaiming: "Women's rights are human rights and human

rights are women's rights, once and for all. "Let's keep fighting for opportunity and dignity."

The clip concludes with a screen of text ironically declaring Clinton a "true defender of women's rights."

On Sunday, Hillary Clinton was heckled by a Republican state representative in New Hampshire about her husband's alleged sex scandals.

"You are very rude," she snapped back.

Trump, a billionaire real-estate mogul, has sought to exploit Bill Clinton and his infidelities, calling the former president "fair game" while blasting his "terrible record" with women.

He renewed his personal attacks on the Clintons on Monday, criticizing Hillary Clinton for calling him sexist. "How can she do that when she's got one of the great women abusers of all time sitting in her house, waiting for her to come home for dinner?" Trump asked CNN.

