

NEWSIN brief

2 'Iran spies' gets death in Kuwait

AFP, Kuwait City
Kuwait yesterday sentenced two defendants to death, including an Iranian being tried in absentia, after they were convicted of "spying for Iran" and plotting attacks in the Gulf country. Kuwaiti authorities said in August they had dismantled an Iran-linked cell and seized large quantities of arms, explosives and ammunition. The verdicts come amid deep tensions between Tehran and Gulf Arab states over the execution of a Shia cleric in Saudi Arabia.

Rupert Murdoch to marry again

AP, London
Media mogul Rupert Murdoch has announced his engagement to Jerry Hall, the American actress and former supermodel who had a long-time relationship with Mick Jagger. Murdoch (84) and Hall (59) placed a classified ad Monday in the Births, Marriages and Deaths section of the Times newspaper. Murdoch has six children from his three previous marriages.



Air strike destroys 'millions' in IS cash

AFP, Washington
A US-led coalition air strike has destroyed a cash storage facility used by Islamic State jihadists in the Iraqi city of Mosul, a US defense official said Monday. Two 2,000-pound bombs struck the facility, destroying "millions" of dollars worth of cash, the official told AFP. "We estimate in the millions of dollars... from all their illicit stuff: oil, looting, extortion," the official said. The strike came early Monday.

Doctors' strike causes havoc at UK hospitals

AFP, London
Tens of thousands of junior doctors in England went on strike yesterday, causing major disruption to hospitals across the country in the first walkout of its kind for 40 years. They are providing only emergency cover during a 24-hour walkout which started at 0800 GMT, meaning that several thousand routine operations have had to be cancelled, along with appointments and tests.

Taliban free Canadian tourist nabbed in 2010

PTI, Toronto
A Canadian man, held by the Taliban in Afghanistan since 2010, has been released, Canada's government has announced. Colin Rutherford was a tourist in Afghanistan when he was seized by the Taliban in November 2010. The Taliban accused the then 26-year-old of being a spy. It was not immediately clear how his release came about, but Dion thanked the government of Qatar for its assistance.



Emergency responders work beside victims at the site of a blast in Istanbul's Sultanahmet district, the city's main tourist hub, yesterday. Ten people were killed and 15 wounded in the suspected terrorist attack. Story on page 16.

PHOTO: AFP

IS attacks kill 30 in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad
Jihadist gunmen and bombers killed at least 12 people in a busy market area of Baghdad while a double blast at a cafe north of the Iraqi capital claimed another 20 lives. An attack claimed by the Islamic State group and involving suicide explosions, gunfights and hostage-taking wreaked chaos in the eastern neighbourhood of Baghdad al-Jadida. "A car came... gunmen came out of it and spread out. They started shooting, killing people, there were lots of dead people," said a witness, Salman Hussein. The head of Baghdad Operations Command, Lieutenant General Abdelmir al-Shammari, insisted to reporters on the scene that the situation was quickly brought under control. He denied reports by several officials in the Baghdad police and in the interior ministry that the attackers held several people hostage in the nearby Zahrat Baghdad mall. But a senior police officer gave a different account, saying the attackers sprayed gunfire and blew up a car bomb on the street before entering the mall and taking hostages. Almost simultaneously, bombings killed at least 20 people at a cafe in the town of Muqadiyah northeast of Baghdad, security officers said. A bomb exploded at the cafe and a suicide bomber detonated an explosives-rigged vehicle after people gathered at the scene, a police captain and an army colonel said. IS also claimed the Muqadiyah attack. At least three people were killed and eight wounded in another car bomb blast in Nahrawan, south of Baghdad. Yesterday's combined attacks made for one of the worst days of violence in months in areas that are not active front lines.

'Leave now or starve to death'

UN tells residents as 'insufficient' aid reaches besieged Syrian towns

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
Hundreds of people in the besieged village of Madaya have been told they need to leave or they will starve to death. The UN humanitarian chief, Stephen O'Brien, said about 400 people in the hospital, near Damascus in Syria, must be evacuated immediately to receive life-saving medical attention "or they are in grave peril of losing their lives". After briefing the UN Security Council, he said people in the area needed treatment for medical complications, severe malnourishment and starvation. Nearly 42,000 people in Madaya are at risk from hunger, according to Yacoub El Hillo, the UN's resident and humanitarian co-ordinator in Syria. Syria has denied that anyone is starving there. But aid conveys that entered the settlement on Monday confirmed reports that people are starving and have had to eat stray cats and dogs and grass after receiving no aid since October. The images of people starving and emaciated children have raised global concern after the area has been cut off for months by fighting. 23 people have died of starvation in Madaya since December 1, according to Doctors Without Borders. Peter Wilson, Britain's deputy UN

ambassador, said it was "good news that those convoys are getting through, although it's little and it's late". "It's important to remember that Madaya represents only 10 per cent of those who are under siege and 1 per cent of those who need aid in Syria," he added.

ian aid, with civilians prevented from leaving and aid workers blocked from bringing in food, medicine, fuel and other essentials. On the ground, Syrian regime forces yesterday advanced into the main bastion of rebels in the northwestern province of Latakia, the coastal heart-



Syrians wait for the arrival of an aid convoy on Monday in the besieged town of Madaya.

PHOTO: AFP

Simultaneously, trucks began entering Foua and Kfarya, which are both under siege by rebel groups hundreds of miles to the north. It will take several days to distribute the aid in the areas that need it most, and supplies are probably enough to last for a month, aid agencies say. The UN says 4.5 million Syrians are living in besieged or hard-to-reach areas and desperately need humanitar-

land of President Bashar al-Assad's clan, a monitor said. Supported by pro-regime militias, fighters with Lebanese Shia movement Hezbollah and intense Russian air strikes, the army entered the town of Salma, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. Over the past 48 hours, more than 120 air strikes by Russian warplanes targeted Salma and its outskirts, it added. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said in a speech broadcast live on state television on Monday: "We are hopeful that the sanctions against Iran would be lifted in the next few days." US Secretary of State John Kerry said last week that "we are days away from implementation, if all goes well."



Members of the Iraqi government forces battle with Islamic State (IS) group fighters east of Ramadi yesterday after they took control of the agricultural area surrounding the eastern part of the capital of Iraq's Anbar province. Iraqi forces continue to clear the city and evacuate civilians two weeks after declaring victory against the Islamic State group, security officials said.

PHOTO: AFP

UN peacekeepers 'paid 13-year-olds for sex'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
The United Nations has been grappling with so many sexual abuse allegations involving its peacekeepers that Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon recently called them "a cancer in our system." Now, officials have learned about what appears to be a fresh scandal. Investigators discovered this month that at least four UN peacekeepers in the Central African Republic allegedly paid young girls as little as 50 cents in exchange for sex. The case is the latest to plague the UN mission in the Central African Republic, whose employees have been accused of 22 other incidents of alleged sexual abuse or sexual exploitation in the past 14 months. The most recent accusations come in the wake of Ban's efforts to implement a "zero tolerance" policy for such offenses. The most recent allegations involve at least four peacekeepers who are accused of paying girls as young as 13 for sex at a camp for the internally displaced next to the international airport in Bangui, the capital. The site, known as M'Poko camp, is home to 20,000 people, mostly Christians. It is a vast agglomeration of white tents surrounding old, decaying airplanes, just yards from the airport runway. The United Nations has not publicly released the nationalities of the accused troops, or provided details of the alleged abuse. But in interviews, UN officials said the peacekeepers were from Gabon, Morocco, Burundi and France.



AIR BASE ATTACK

No reason to distrust Pak

Says Indian HM; US 'stalls' sale of F-16s to Pakistan
AGENCIES
India has no reason to distrust Pakistan's assurance that it will take effective action on inputs given about the perpetrators of the Pathankot terror attack, Indian Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh said yesterday. "Pakistan government has said it will take effective action. I think we should wait," Singh told reporters on the sidelines of a function here. "There is no reason to distrust (avishvaas) them (Pakistan) so early," he said. After the attack, India had said it has provided to Pakistan actionable intelligence to act upon the perpetrators of the terrorist act. Reports from Pakistan on Monday said law enforcement agencies have picked up "some suspects" connected to Pathankot airbase attack. Meanwhile, the US Congress has "stalled" a planned sale of eight new F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan, Pakistani newspaper Dawn reported yesterday quoting congressional and diplomatic sources. Concerned over the end use of the F-16 fighter jets by Pakistan, US lawmakers have used clarification and information notices to delay the sale of the combat aircraft.

MIGRANT LINKS TO MASS SEXUAL ASSAULTS

Germany arrests hundreds after far right rampage

AFP, Berlin
German police yesterday said they have arrested 211 far-right extremists who went on a rampage on the sidelines of a xenophobic rally in Leipzig, setting cars on fire and smashing windows. They blame Germany's record influx of refugees for sexual violence against women at New Year's Eve festivities. Officials say the perpetrators of assaults in Cologne were almost exclusively from a migrant background. The extremists are known to police as football hooligans, and had wrought chaos Monday at an area of the eastern city known to be left-leaning, just as thousands of far-right supporters of the anti-migrant PEGIDA movement were gathering at a peaceful demonstration, authorities said. News website Spiegel Online also pub-

lished a picture of a kebab shop with a smashed window. Germany has been outraged by a rash of crime targeting women at New Year's festivities in Cologne in the west that has been blamed on migrants. As thousands rallied to blame refugees for the violence, a group of hooligans broke away and smashed windows, burned cars and rubbish bins and shot off pyrotechnics that set a floor of a building on fire. In return, left-wing radicals vandalised a bus that had been chartered by the hooligans, police said. In all, 57 offences were committed that night, police said. Police said groups linked to Cologne's extremist hooligan scene had used social media to organise gatherings in the inner city Sunday evening, and launched a spate of attacks against Pakistani, Syrian and African men.



PEACE TALKS WITH MYANMAR REBELS

Suu Kyi vows to lead efforts

AFP, Naypyidaw
Aung San Suu Kyi promised yesterday to use her party's popular mandate to drive Myanmar's peace process as she outlined a vision of a federal future to ethnic rebels who have battled for decades. She was speaking at a fresh round of talks between the government, army and ethnic minority armed groups, at which crucial economic and social issues that spurred the violence will be discussed. Those include the ownership of natural resources, seen as a major factor in conflicts that have displaced tens of thousands of people and cost countless lives. Suu Kyi, whose party won the November general election, said she was optimistic the "fighting will be finished soon" if the nation's political standards are improved and all groups work together.

"We cannot build lasting peace without national reconciliation," she said. "Now we are ready to lead the peace process, because we have the power invested in the mandate given to us by the people and ethnic minorities." It was the first time the democracy

However, deep challenges remain. Some major armed groups have shunned the talks altogether and clashes are continuing in parts of the country between rebels and soldiers. Observers say major stumbling blocks lie ahead, including fostering unity and negotiating the thorny issue of ownership of resources. But the most critical challenge is seen as Suu Kyi's uneasy relationship with the nation's still hugely powerful military, which holds the key to securing a lasting peace. In October Thein Sein's efforts yielded a ceasefire with some rebel groups, although the agreement fell short of a binding nationwide truce. But several major ethnic armies, including in war-torn northern Kachin and Shan states, have refused to sign a national truce until all groups are brought into the deal -- notably smaller organisations locked in conflict with the military.



champion had taken a leading role in years-long official peace efforts. The painstaking negotiations have until now been steered by reformist President Thein Sein, who was also present at the talks in the national capital Naypyidaw.