

NEWS IN brief

Norway quits Nepal hydropower project

AFP, Kathmandu
Norwegian company Statkraft has said it is dropping plans to build a \$1.5 billion hydropower plant in Nepal, citing bureaucratic hurdles and political instability in the troubled Himalayan nation. The Norwegian firm entered an agreement in 2007 to build the Tamakoshi III plant and generate 650 megawatts for export to India and other neighbours before transferring ownership to Nepal after 25 years.

US spy chief's personal accounts hacked

AFP, Washington
US spy chief James Clapper's personal online accounts have been hacked, his office confirmed Tuesday, a few months after CIA director John Brennan suffered a similar attack. Clapper's Office of the Director of National Intelligence confirmed the hack but refused to provide details. "We are aware of the matter and we reported it to the appropriate authorities," spokesman Brian Hale said.

Paris attacks suspects' safe houses identified

AFP, Brussels
Belgian police have identified three safe houses used by key suspects including presumed ringleader Abdelhamid Abaaoud as they plotted the deadly Paris attacks, prosecutors said yesterday. The premises include a flat in Charleroi, a town south of the capital Brussels where a major airport is located, a house in the rural village of Auvelais near the French border, and a flat in Brussels.

UN appeals for nearly \$8b for Syria aid

AFP, United Nations
With the war in Syria headed for a sixth year, UN agencies on Tuesday appealed for \$7.73 billion in funding to help 22.5 million people affected by the conflict. The appeal for funds from UN member-states covers help for 13.5 million Syrians displaced inside the war-ravaged country and 4.7 million who have fled across the border to neighboring countries.

MH370 search finds new shipwreck

AFP, Sydney
The hunt for missing Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 has uncovered a shipwreck deep underwater, officials said yesterday, the second such discovery since the search began almost two years ago. An Australian-led team continues to scour the southern Indian Ocean seabed in hope of finding the final resting place of MH370, which vanished on March 8, 2014 en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing with 239 people on board.



Pakistani security officials examine the site of a bomb blast near a polio vaccination centre in Quetta, yesterday. At least 15 people were killed in the blast which apparently targeted police outside the vaccination centre.

OBAMA'S FINAL STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS IN QUOTES

IS FIGHT NOT WWII: "As we focus on destroying ISIL, over-the-top claims that this is World War III just play into their hands. Masses of fighters on the back of pickup trucks and twisted souls plotting in apartments or garages pose an enormous danger to civilians and must be stopped. But they do not threaten our national existence."

SWIPE AT TRUMP: "When politicians insult Muslims, when a mosque is vandalized, or a kid bullied, that doesn't make us safer. That's not telling it like it is. It's just wrong. It diminishes us in the eyes of the world. It makes it harder to achieve our goals. And it betrays who we are as a country."

GITMO MUST GO: "That is why I will keep working to shut down the prison at Guantanamo: it's expensive, it's unnecessary, and it only serves as a

recruitment brochure for our enemies."

LIFT THAT EMBARGO: "Fifty years of isolating Cuba had failed to promote democracy, it set us back in Latin America. That's why we restored diplomatic relations, opened the door to travel and commerce, positioned ourselves to improve the lives of the Cuban people. So if you want to consolidate our leadership and credibility in the hemisphere, recognize that the Cold War is over. Lift the embargo."

CLIMATE CHANGE IS REAL: "Sixty years ago, when the Russians beat us into space, we didn't deny Sputnik was up there. We didn't argue about the science, or shrink our research and development budget... Look, if anybody still wants to dispute the science around climate change, have at it. You'll be pretty lonely."



SOURCE: AFP

IS siege near Pak consulate kills 10 in Afghanistan

AFP, Jalalabad

Islamic State jihadists yesterday claimed responsibility for a deadly gun and bomb siege targeting the Pakistani consulate in Afghanistan's Jalalabad city, in the first attack by the group on the Pakistani government.

Afghan officials said all three attackers and seven security forces were killed in the brazen assault in eastern Nangarhar province, where the group has made alarming inroads in recent months.

The four-hour siege near the consulate comes amid renewed international efforts to revive peace talks with the Taliban, locked in a tussle for supremacy with Islamic State jihadists in Afghanistan.

In an Arabic statement released via Twitter, the IS group said two of its fighters blew themselves up at the scene by detonating explosive belts, while a third managed to escape unharmed.

"The attack lasted almost four hours during which the consulate building was destroyed and tens of its employees were killed together with a number of officers from the apostate Pakistani intelligence services," the statement said.

The toll appeared to be exaggerated, with Islamabad saying officials at the consulate itself are safe and accounted for.

The brazen assault sent terrified young students in an adjacent school



An Afghan man assists schoolgirls in the vicinity of an attack from a building close to the Pakistan consulate in Jalalabad yesterday.

fleeing the area, which is also close to the Indian diplomatic mission.

"This is first attack claimed by IS against the state of Pakistan," Muhammad Amir Rana, a Pakistani security analyst, told AFP.

"This is a highly symbolic attack as the Pakistani consulate is a high-profile installation in Jalalabad."

There was no immediate comment on the IS group's claim from Islamabad.

In a statement earlier Wednesday,

Pakistan's foreign office "strongly condemned" the attack on its consulate.

Islamabad has officially denied that the Islamic State organisation is operating in Pakistan, but authorities have expressed fears the jihadists could find recruits among the country's myriad of Islamist militant groups.

In May last year, the IS group claimed responsibility for an attack that claimed the lives of at least 43 members of the Shia Ismaili minority in Pakistan's southern port city of Karachi.

Blast kills 15 outside Pak polio centre

Two militant groups claim responsibility for the suicide attack

REUTERS, Quetta

A suicide bomber killed at least 15 people, most of them police, outside a polio eradication centre in the Pakistani city of Quetta yesterday, the latest militant attack on the anti-polio campaign in the country.

Two militant groups - the Pakistani Taliban and Jundullah, which has links with the Taliban and has pledged allegiance to Islamic State - separately claimed responsibility for the attack.

The bomb blew up a police van that had just arrived at the centre to provide an escort for workers in a drive to immunize all children under five years old in the poor southwestern province of Baluchistan.

"It was a suicide blast, we have gathered evidence from the scene," Ahsan Mehboob, the provincial police chief told Reuters. "The police team had arrived to escort teams for the polio campaign."

Ahmed Marwat, who identified himself as a commander and spokesman for Jundullah, said his group was responsible. "We claim the bomb blast on the polio office. In the coming days, we will make more attacks on polio vaccination offices and polio workers," he said by telephone.

The Pakistani Taliban also claimed responsibility in a statement released by their spokesman, Mohammad Khorasani.

Teams in Pakistan working to immunize children against the virus are often targeted by Taliban and other militant groups, who say the campaign is a cover for Western spies, or accuse workers of distributing drugs designed to sterilise children.

The latest attack killed at least 12 policemen, one paramilitary officer and two civilians, officials said. Twenty-five people were wounded.

Pakistan and neighbouring Afghanistan are the only two countries in the world where polio remains endemic, the World Health Organisation says.

'Talk to me if he wins'

Obama on Trump

AGENCIES

President Obama, on the eve of his final State of the Union address, rejected the message Donald Trump has capitalized on in his presidential campaign.

"The message that Donald Trump's putting out has had adherence a lot of times during the course of our history. You know, talk to me if he wins. Then we'll have a conversation about how responsible I feel about it," he told TODAY's Matt Lauer in an exclusive interview.

"But I'm pretty confident that the overwhelming majority of Americans are looking for the kind of politics that does feed our hopes and not our fears, that does work together and doesn't try to divide, that isn't looking for simplistic solutions and scapegoating but looks for us buckling down and figuring out, 'How do we make things work for the next generation.'"

But Vice President Biden differed. "Yes, I think it's possible," Biden told Savannah when asked whether he could imagine Trump taking the Oval Office.

Mosque blast kills 12 in Cameroon

AFP, Yaounde

A suicide bomber killed 12 worshippers at a mosque in northern Cameroon yesterday, security officials said, in an area regularly targeted by Nigeria's Boko Haram Islamists.

The blast struck the mosque in the village of Kouyape, in Kolofata district north near the Nigerian border, at around 5:30am during morning prayers, a security source said.

Since July last year Cameroon's far north has been hit by a series of attacks blamed on Boko Haram, which has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group.

"Eleven worshippers were killed at the scene. A twelfth died of their wounds in hospital," the security source said, adding that the attacker was praying alongside other worshippers when he blew himself up.

The bombing came after two people were killed overnight in the same area in another attack blamed on Boko Haram, the security source said.

Cameroon has beefed up its military presence along the Nigerian border as part of a regional coalition. Since late November the Cameroon army has carried out operations in several border areas aimed at weakening Nigerian jihadists who have been very active in the region.

Sources say these operations have significantly weakened Boko Haram's capability, forcing the insurgents to turn away from direct confrontations with the military in favour of suicide attacks.



This May 13, 2013 photo shows the type of riverine command boat apprehended by Iran on January 12, 2016. Inset, US sailors are seen in an undisclosed location in Iran in this handout picture released on Farsnews website yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

'A waterfall of mercy'

AP, Vatican City

Oscar-winning actor and director Roberto Benigni gave Pope Francis two thumbs up Tuesday, delivering one of his rapid-fire monologues and praising the pope as a fountain of mercy who is "dragging the whole church toward Christianity."

At perhaps the most unusual Vatican book launch ever, Benigni was joined by the Vatican secretary of state, the Vatican spokesman and the Vatican publisher, as well as a Chinese prison inmate, to premier "The Name of God is Mercy." Francis' book-length conversation with Italian journalist Andrea Tornielli is being released in 86 countries as part of the pope's Holy Year of Mercy.



Benigni, whose 1999 "Life is Beautiful" won three Oscars, joked that he wanted to be a priest as a child but realized he had to become a comic instead after friends laughed when he said he wanted to be pope.

Gesturing wildly, Benigni praised Francis for living the message of mercy, going to visit the "least of the least" in Lampedusa, ground zero in Europe's migration crisis, and launching his jubilee year of mercy with the "poorest of the poorest of the poor" in Central African Republic.

"He's a fountain, a waterfall of mercy," Benigni said.

Israeli raid kills 1, wounds 3 in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

An Israeli air raid yesterday in the northern Gaza Strip targeting alleged militants killed one Palestinian and wounded three others, the Israeli army and a Palestinian official said.

Israeli aircraft "targeted a terror cell plotting to detonate an explosive device against (military) forces stationed along the border of the northern Gaza Strip," the Israeli army said.

Meanwhile, Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallstrom on Tuesday called for "thorough" investigations into the killing of Palestinians by the Israeli army in recent months.

A wave of violence since October killed 149 Palestinians and 22 Israelis.

Tension eases as Iran releases 10 US sailors

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday released 10 US Navy sailors detained in the Gulf, heading off a potential crisis within days of the expected implementation of its nuclear deal with world powers.

A dramatic series of events started with the sailors -- nine men and a woman -- being taken into custody after their two patrol boats drifted into Iranian territory late on Tuesday.

US and Iranian officials scrambled to defuse the situation, which unfolded as the nuclear accord edged toward its final steps, with a top Iranian official saying the deal should be implemented by Sunday.

The detention of the sailors raised alarm in Washington but after informal talks with Tehran, Iran's Revolutionary Guards said they had been set free.

"Following their apology, they have been released to international waters in the Gulf," said a statement read out on state television, noting that the sailors had not entered Iranian waters intentionally and had no

"hostile intent".

Video footage showed the Navy personnel with their hands on their heads as they were apprehended. But other footage showed them eating a meal and drinking water, some smiling, while sitting on Persian rugs.

A Pentagon statement confirmed they had been freed.

US officials had said one or both of the boats experienced mechanical problems and they had been taken to Farsi Island, which lies roughly midway between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Gulf and houses a base of the Guards, which has its own naval units.

Washington and Tehran have no diplomatic relations but US Secretary of State John Kerry called Iranian counterpart Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to discuss the incident.

Both men cited the sailors' speedy release as a textbook example of diplomacy, with Kerry thanking "Iranian authorities for their cooperation".

Turkey arrests suspect over Istanbul attack

AFP, Istanbul

Turkey yesterday said it had arrested one person in connection with a deadly suicide bombing that ripped through the historic heart of Istanbul, killing 10 tourists, most of them Germans.

Ankara has said that Tuesday's attack was carried out by a 28-year-old Syrian who belonged to the Islamic State (IS) group and had recently entered Turkey from Syria.

One person was arrested on Tuesday evening in connection with the bloodshed, Interior Minister Efkan Ala said yesterday, without explaining the suspect's role in the strike.

In the wake of the attack, Turkish security forces rounded up 68 suspected IS members across the country, state media said, but it was not clear if any of them were directly connected to the Istanbul bombing.

Turkey has been hit by a string of deadly attacks blamed on jihadists over the last year, including a double suicide bombing in October in Ankara that killed more than 100 people.

But Tuesday's bombing was the first time in recent memory tourists had been targeted in the heart of Istanbul.

The bomber, identified as Nabil Fadli, detonated his charge on Sultanahmet Square which is home to Turkey's most visited historic sites including the Ottoman-era Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia church.