

# NEWS IN brief

## Comoros breaks off relations with Iran

AFP, Moroni

Indian Ocean archipelago and Saudi Arabia ally the Comoros said Friday it had cut diplomatic relations with Iran over what it termed Tehran's "aggression" towards Riyadh. A foreign ministry statement said the Comoros viewed Tehran as "interfering" in "the internal affairs of certain countries" and "not respecting diplomatic conventions".

## 600 jihadists stopped from entering Syria

AFP, London

Some 600 Britons have been stopped from going to Syria to try to join Islamic State and other jihadist groups, Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond said in comments reported yesterday. Meanwhile some 800 have made it through since 2012, with half of them still thought to be inside the war-torn country, he said.

## Migrant men banned from German pool

BBC ONLINE

A German town has banned male asylum seekers from a public swimming pool after women complained of harassment. A government official in Bornheim said men from a nearby asylum shelter would be barred until they "got the message" that such behaviour was not acceptable. It follows outrage over hundreds of sexual assaults in nearby Cologne and other German cities on New Year's Eve.

## Maldives' Nasheed allowed to travel to UK

AFP, Malé

The Maldives' opposition leader Mohamed Nasheed, who is serving a 13-year jail term following a controversial trial, has been allowed to travel to Britain for surgery, the Maldives government said yesterday. Nasheed has complained of a spinal cord problem requiring specialist surgery that is not available in the small Indian Ocean archipelago.



## Italy rescues 250 migrants off Libya

AFP, Rome

An Italian ship yesterday morning reached the Sicilian port of Catania bringing 246 migrants to safety as well as the body of another after two rescue operations off the coast of chaos-wracked Libya, the coastguard said. The Dattilo ship had rescued 131 and 115 migrants trying to reach Europe on two inflatable boats.



French special forces take position in the surroundings of the Splendid hotel following an attack by al-Qaeda linked gunmen in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso yesterday. Inset, Soldiers carry the body of a man in the surroundings of the hotel. Security forces freed 126 hostages, ending a siege that began around 8:30 pm on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP



# IS plans to attack more cities

## Say Indonesian police; 12 jihadists including 'financier' of Thursday's attacks arrested

AGENCIES

Indonesian police yesterday named the five men they suspect launched this week's gun and bomb attack in Jakarta, which was claimed by Islamic State, and said they had arrested 12 people linked to the plot who planned to strike other cities.

As investigators pieced together clues from the radical group's first attack on Indonesia, neighbouring Malaysia said it had arrested a man in Kuala Lumpur who had confessed to planning a suicide attack in the country.

"We ... have carried out acts of force. We have done searches, we have made arrests and we have obtained evidence connected with the terrorist bombing at Sarinah," Jakarta police spokesman Mohammad Iqbal told a news conference.

"We will not say how many people or what sort of evidence we have as it will upset our strategy. Be patient, when the case is closed and things are clear we will disclose them." Seven people, including the militants, were killed in

Thursday's attack near the Sarinah department store in the Indonesian capital's commercial district. About 30 people were hurt.

Police held up pictures of the dead and wounded at the news conference, including a man who kicked off the siege by blowing himself up in a Starbucks cafe.

Another attacker, who opened fire with a gun outside the cafe, was named as Afif. A National Counter-Terrorism Agency spokesman said Afif had served seven years in prison, where he refused to cooperate with a de-radicalisation programme.

The brazenness of the Jakarta assault, which had echoes of marauding gun and bomb attacks such as the Paris siege in November, suggested a new brand of militancy in a country where extremists typically launch low-level strikes on police.

Police spokesman Anton Charliyan said the Jakarta five and the 12 others who were arrested had plans to attack cities elsewhere in Indonesia, including Bandung, which lies some 120 km (75 miles) southeast of the capital.



# Peace treaty would end nuke tests

## Says North Korea, urges US to scrap drills with South

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea yesterday demanded the conclusion of a peace treaty with the United States and a halt to US military exercises with South Korea to end its nuclear tests.

But US Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Pyongyang needed to demonstrate by its action that it was serious about denuclearization for any dialogues to start.

"We now have unfortunately a decade during which North Korea has totally reversed its obligations to international community, when it comes to missile and nuclear programs," Blinken told a news conference in Tokyo.

"So it's very hard to take any of their overtures very seriously, particularly in the wake of their fourth nuclear test," he said, after meeting his counterpart from Japan and South Korea.

"Still valid are all proposals for preserving peace and stability on the peninsula and in Northeast Asia including the ones for ceasing our nuclear test and the conclusion of a peace treaty in return for US halt to joint military exercises," North Korea's official KCNA news agency cited a spokesman for the country's foreign ministry as saying early on yesterday.

But asked if the United States would consider a halt to joint exercises, US State Department spokesman John Kirby said it had alliance commitments to South Korea.

# Fierce clashes begin in Syria's Aleppo

AFP, Beirut

Fierce fighting raged yesterday between regime forces backed by Russian air strikes and Islamic State group fighters in northern Aleppo province, a monitor said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least 16 IS fighters had been killed in a failed attack on a regime position near the town of Al-Bab in the northeast of the province.

State television also reported that regime forces had repelled an assault. Heavy fighting was ongoing yesterday, the monitor said, with Russian war planes carrying out strikes in the region between the regime-held Kweyris air base and Al-Bab.

The regime has advanced towards the town, an IS bastion, in recent days, and is now within 10 kilometres (six miles) of it, according to the Observatory. That is the closest regime forces have come to the town since 2012.

The Britain-based monitor also said at least 35 Syrian soldiers and pro-regime militiamen were killed yesterday in a multi-front attack by the Islamic State group on the eastern city of Deir Ezzor.

The advance puts IS in control of around 60 percent of Deir Ezzor, with the regime holding the rest. Syrian state news agency SANA said regime troops had repelled an IS attack on the area around Al-Baghaliyeh and inflicted "heavy losses" on the group.



Eric Chu (C), presidential candidate from the ruling Kuomintang, bows with party workers as they concede defeat in presidential polls outside the party headquarters in Taipei yesterday. Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan's main opposition party will become the island's first female president after the ruling Kuomintang conceded defeat as voters turned their backs on closer China ties.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# UN to confirm Iran deal nuke compliance

## Tehran frees four American prisoners

AFP, Vienna

US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Iranian counterpart met for a final time in Vienna yesterday ahead of an expected announcement by the UN watchdog that their momentous 2015 nuclear accord can enter into force.

In an apparent sign of goodwill, Iran said that four Iranian dual-national prisoners had been freed, with local media reporting that they included Washington Post correspondent Jason Rezaian and Saeed Abedini, a pastor from Idaho.

In Vienna meanwhile, in the same plush hotel where they agreed last July's landmark nuclear deal, Kerry and his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif met to iron out the final details.

This was ahead of an expected UN nuclear watchdog announcement that Iran has complied with its side of the accord, allowing the lifting of sanctions, including on Iran's life-blood oil exports.

Zarif said earlier as he arrived in the Austrian capital that this was a "good day for the world".

"It's a good day for the people of Iran... and also a good day for the region," he said, saying it removed "the shadow of a baseless confrontation" in the Middle East.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report is expected to confirm that Iran has dramatically scaled down its nuclear programme as agreed in the hard-won July 14 deal agreed in Vienna.

This, combined with ultra-close IAEA inspections, extend to at least a year -- from a few months previously -- how long Iran would need to make one nuclear bomb's worth of fissile material.

Iran has always denied wanting nuclear weapons, saying its activities are exclusively for peaceful purposes such as power generation.

The IAEA's green light means that a raft of US, EU and UN sanctions on the Islamic republic can be lifted, allowing oil exports to resume and opening up the 80-million-strong country to business.

# Millions in IS cash blown up by airstrike

CNN ONLINE

A recent airstrike by the US hit IS where it really hurts -- right in the wallet. A Jan 11 bombing in Mosul destroyed million of dollars in IS cash, officials told CNN.

The Department of Defence released dramatic declassified video of the cash depot being blown to smithereens -- along with "millions" in cold, hard currency left fluttering on the breeze.

The black and white aerial footage shows the moment a pair of 2,000-pound bombs strike the finance distribution centre.

A massive flash fills the screen and, seconds later, the air is flush with paper money. Clouds of cash cover the landscape and settle atop of the roofs of surrounding buildings.

"It was a good strike. And we estimate that it served to deprive ISIL of millions of dollars," said Gen. Lloyd Austin, head of the US Central Command, using another name for IS. "ISIL needs those funds to pay their fighters, to recruit new fighters and to conduct their various malign activities."

Acting on a tip, and careful to avoid civilian casualties, the US sent in aircraft and drones days head of the strike, to monitor an IS cash collection and distribution point, officials told CNN.

The US-led coalition has been targeting gas production centres and other high-profile targets during recent air strikes in the hopes of disrupting the terrorist group's ability to operate in the region.

# 'Netaji died of plane crash injuries'

PTI, London

The latest set of witness statements released by a United Kingdom-based website set up to unravel the mystery surrounding Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's death seem to confirm that the freedom fighter died as a result of a plane crash in Taiwan.

Five witnesses, which include Netaji's close associate, two Japanese doctors, an interpreter and a Taiwanese nurse, have been quoted as corroborating that the founder of the Indian National Army died on August 18, 1945 following a plane crash on the outskirts of an airfield in Taipei.



"There are no two opinions between the five witnesses about the fact that Bose's end came on the night of 18 August 1945," www.bosefiles.info said in a statement.

Col Habibur Rehman Khan, Bose's aide-de-camp who was with him on the fateful day and survived the crash, submitted a statement written and signed on 24 August 1945 -- six days after the

crash confirming Bose's last words to him. In September 1945, two intelligence teams from India, assisted by H K Roy and KP De, went to Bangkok, Saigon and Taipei to investigate. They concluded Bose had died as a result of the air tragedy.

# Obama vows to protect minorities

PTI, Washington

United States President Barack Obama yesterday vowed to protect religious minorities both at home and abroad, even as a top American official said that Muslims in India and Hindus in Bangladesh and Pakistan were facing threat.

"Our commitment to religious freedom has fostered unprecedented religious diversity and freedom of religious practice. But these ideals are not self-executing. Rather, they require a sustained commitment by each generation to uphold and preserve them," Obama said as he proclaimed January 16, 2016 as Religious Freedom Day.

This work is crucial, particularly given the recent spike in reports of threats and violence against houses of worship, children and adults simply because of their religious affiliation, said the US President.

Obama made no reference to any country in his speech but has said that his administration works to promote religious freedom around the globe.



# Ethnic groups place faith in Suu Kyi govt

AFP, Naypyidaw

Rebel negotiators applauded talks with Myanmar authorities yesterday at the end of five days of discussions, but said the real business of crafting peace rests with Aung San Suu Kyi's government-in-waiting.

The delicate negotiations to end long-running wars between Myanmar's patchwork of ethnic minorities and the state have been steered by the current quasi-civilian government, which replaced a military junta in 2011.

But the difficult task of implementing the peace process will be handed over to the new government, led by Suu Kyi's National League of Democracy (NLD) party, which will take office later this year after sweeping historic elections last

November.

"This peace talk was like a foundation for upcoming peace conferences," said Col. Khun Okkar, the head of Pa-O National Liberation Organisation (PNLO), an ethnic rebel group in Myanmar's Shan State.

"The next government will lead the real peace talk," he said.

Representatives from armed ethnic factions, the government and army, agreed this week to conclude the peace process within the next five years, said Aung Min, a government minister who facilitated the meetings.

Ahead of November's elections, analysts predicted that Suu Kyi, 70, would struggle to win support among minority voters because of her ethnic Bamar heritage.