

NEWS IN brief

Japan lifts nuclear sanctions on Iran

Japan yesterday lifted sanctions on Iran, falling in line with major world powers after the United Nations atomic energy agency confirmed last weekend that Tehran had fully taken steps to curb its disputed nuclear programme. Iran emerged from years of economic isolation when the US and other countries lifted crippling sanctions against the Islamic republic.

Lagarde to run for second IMF term

Christine Lagarde yesterday announced that she will run for a second term at the head of the International Monetary Fund, after winning strong backing from across Europe. With Lagarde's term coming to an end in July, the IMF formally began accepting nominations on Thursday for who will guide the global crisis lender for the next five years.

IS claims killing Egypt cops in Cairo raid

An Egyptian affiliate of the jihadist Islamic State group yesterday claimed responsibility for a bomb blast during a police raid on a Cairo apartment that killed seven people, including five policemen. Thursday's explosion in the Al-Haram district, near the pyramids, came as police raided a flat suspected to be a militant hideout and tried to defuse an explosive device, the interior ministry said.

Two bomb-makers killed in West Bengal

An improvised bomb exploded in eastern India yesterday, killing two people who had been making explosives in a cow shed, a senior police official said. The explosion took place in Birbhum district of West Bengal, about 200 kilometres west of state capital Kolkata.



Pak court lifts rare birds' hunting ban

Pakistan's supreme court has lifted a ban on the hunting of a rare bird, the Houbara bustard. The bird is prized by hunters in the Middle East, who consider the bird's meat an aphrodisiac. The Houbara, which is about the size of a chicken, once flourished on the Arabian peninsula but now faces a high risk of extinction. The government had asked the court to review the ban, saying it harmed relations with Arab states. Hunting of the birds is banned in Pakistan but the government has routinely issued special permits for Middle Eastern dignitaries, allowing them to hunt under certain conditions.

UK unveils migrant language tests, misspells language

Britain's Home Office was left red-faced Friday after unveiling new English tests for migrants -- but misspelling the word "language" in its announcement. Prime Minister David Cameron on Monday launched a £20 million (\$28.5 million, 26 million euro) language fund to help women, particularly Muslims, who arrive in Britain after getting married but struggle to speak English. He also said women from non-EU countries who fail to pass an English language test after two and a half years in the country could face deportation, drawing criticism from Muslim groups and opposition parties. A Home Office press release giving details of the move Thursday spoke of a "new English language test" and had to be corrected. Asked if Cameron was disappointed by the mistake, his official spokeswoman told reporters: "All of us are open to mistakes at times." The error drew ridicule on Twitter -- broadcaster Anita Anand wrote it was "beyond parody", while user @DaveGoddard 1971 joked: "Makes you proud to be British".



A young unemployed Tunisian who tried to commit suicide is carried by a member of the Tunisian army after witnesses said they saved his life in the central Tunisian city of Kasserine, yesterday.

TUNISIA PROTEST OVER UNEMPLOYMENT

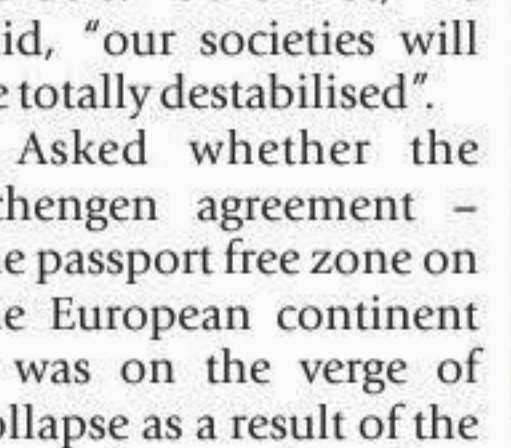
Curfew imposed as unrest spreads

Tunisia yesterday declared a nighttime curfew across the country after a wave of protests and clashes that constitute the most serious outbreak of social unrest since its 2011 revolution. Five years after the overthrow of longtime dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, street demonstrations against unemployment and poverty are again shaking the North African nation. Anger erupted over the death last Saturday of an unemployed young man who was electrocuted when he climbed an electricity pole while demonstrating in central Tunisia. The unrest has spread around the country including to Tunis where shops were burnt and looted in one suburb. The interior ministry said the 8pm to 5am curfew was necessary to prevent damage to property and to ensure public safety. Earlier Friday new clashes broke out in the central town of Sidi Bouzid between stone-throwing protesters and police who fired tear gas, according to an AFP journalist. Authorities called for calm after 16 people were arrested on vandalism charges in a suburb of Tunis, the latest incident in almost a week of unrest. National Guard units clashed with individuals in balconies until early yesterday, an official said. The unrest has echoes of the public anger unleashed by the death of a street vendor who set himself on fire in December 2010 in protest at unemployment and police harassment. That desperate act of defiance provided the spark for the uprising that overthrew Ben Ali and inspired revolutions across the Arab world.

Migration crisis can destroy Europe

Warns French PM; Gates urges US to take in more refugees

Europe cannot take in all the refugees fleeing war-torn Syria and Iraq and the migration crisis is putting the European Union in grave danger, the French Prime Minister Manuel Valls has said. Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Valls added that Europe needed to take urgent action to control its external borders. "Otherwise," he said, "our societies will be totally destabilised". Asked whether the Schengen agreement -- the passport free zone on the European continent -- was on the verge of collapse as a result of the on-going migration crisis, he said: "No, it's Europe that can die, not the Schengen area. If Europe is not capable of protecting its own borders. "The European project, not Europe as much. Not our values, but the concept of Europe that our founding fathers had, yes it is in very grave danger. That's why you need border guards and controls outside the European Union. Sometimes we had the feeling that borders did not exist. No, borders do exist so you have to protect them."



Bill Gates



Manuel Valls

Meanwhile, billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates has told the BBC that the United States "should set a better example" by taking in more refugees. Speaking to the BBC at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Gates said his home country "had the capacity" to follow the examples of Germany and Sweden, who were "to be congratulated". But he acknowledged that relaxing immigration laws "was not easy". He added that governments were dealing with "tight budgets". However, he emphasised that the issue was largely a political one, and that "the total number of refugees is not a world record".

Europe is torn between upholding its values and pursuing its interests in the multiple crises over refugees, challenges to the rule of law, relations with Russia and Turkey, and Britain's membership that are shaking the European Union. Political and economic interests are mostly prevailing over the EU's declared values and governance standards, but it is not clear that the outcomes are any more effective. To critics including human rights campaigners, Europe is too willing to betray its principles. To supporters, it is "growing up" and acting less naively. "Politics is the art of the possible, but this is very different from the conception of Europe promoted for the last half century," said Michael Leigh, senior adviser at the German Marshall Fund think-tank on transatlantic relations and a former senior European Commission official. After more than a million migrants flooded into Europe last year, EU governments are divided on whether the bloc should give priority to its commitment to give asylum to refugees, or whether the main aim should be to toughen border controls and pay other countries to keep potential asylum-seekers at bay. The sullen reluctance of most of the EU -- not just central European states but core partners like France -- to take in quotas of refugees to which they agreed months ago is driven by fear of a domestic political backlash. Brussels faced another of those values-versus-interests dilemmas last week when the executive European Commission had to decide whether to launch disciplinary

When interests trump values

action over Polish laws shackling the constitutional court and the state media. The Commission did take a first step on Poland but stressed it wanted to resolve the issue in dialogue. Major EU members Germany and Britain have mostly kept quiet about Poland on pragmatic grounds. London needs Polish goodwill as it renegotiates sensitive aspects of its own EU membership. Eager to curb the access of EU migrants -- mostly Poles -- to in-work welfare benefits to deter further mass immigration to Britain, it is the last country likely to criticise Warsaw over civil rights. Similar mixed feelings guided the EU's schizophrenic response to Russia's 2014 seizure and annexation of Crimea and moves to destabilise eastern Ukraine. While the bloc did agree to impose sectoral sanctions that have pushed the Russian economy into recession and restricted its access to capital, there are charges of double standards when it comes to energy. With Turkey, the EU is drawing a veil over its criticism of deteriorating civil liberties, media freedom and judicial independence in a candidate country for the sake of its vital interest in stemming the refugee flow to Europe. Across north Africa, the EU is downplaying the human rights and good governance elements of its policy towards neighbours such as Egypt, Morocco and Algeria -- a stumbling block to dealing with authoritarian rulers -- due to Europe's need for security cooperation against Islamist militants. "We are not abandoning our values but we are perhaps being more pragmatic," said an EU official involved in managing those relationships, speaking on condition of anonymity.

EUROPE IN MULTIPLE CRISES



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WAR ON ISLAMIC STATE

22,000 jihadists killed since mid-2014: France

Around 22,000 jihadists have been killed by the US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State group since mid-2014, France's defence minister said on Thursday. "The figure given by the coalition... is about 22,000 dead since the start of operations in Iraq and Syria," Jean-Yves Le Drian told the France24 news channel, adding that the figure was "approximate". He also sounded upbeat about a series of military successes against IS in recent months. "We haven't seen a large offensive by Daesh for some time," Le Drian said, using an alternative name for the group. "Daesh is in a very fragile position but we must remain very careful," he added. The coalition air strikes against IS began in the summer of 2014 and intensified following last November's jihadist attacks in Paris, with strikes notably targeting IS oil production facilities, a key source of income for the group. In a major setback for the group, IS lost the Iraqi city of Ramadi to US-backed local forces last month.



A Somali soldier walks past wrecked cars in front of the Lido seafood restaurant yesterday following an overnight attack on the beachfront restaurant in Mogadishu. Inset, a man cries next to dead bodies. Shebab militants raided the restaurant on Thursday and killed at least 20 people, police said. (Story on page 16)

'Taliban' vow to target more Pak schools

The Taliban faction behind a massacre at a university in northwest Pakistan this week issued a video message yesterday vowing to target schools throughout the country, calling them "nurseries" for people who challenge Allah's law. The video, which spread rapidly on Facebook but was not released on official media accounts for the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistani (TTP), shows Khalifa Umar Mansoor, whose faction claimed responsibility for the attack on Bacha Khan university Wednesday. Heavily armed gunmen stormed the campus in Charsadda in northwest Pakistan, killing 21 people in an attack that had chilling echoes of a 2014 assault on a school in nearby Peshawar, also claimed by Mansoor's faction. The rampage threatened to shatter the sense of security growing in the troubled region a year after the Peshawar attack, which left more than 150 people dead -- mostly children. In the video issued Friday, Mansoor said his faction had attacked the university "because this is the place where lawyers are made, this is the place that produces military officers, this is the place that produces members of the parliament, all of whom challenge Allah's sovereignty". The TTP, an umbrella group, has officially disavowed the Bacha Khan attack, branding it "un-Islamic" and vowing to hunt down those behind it.

Turkey alarmed by 'Russian build-up' on Syria border

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday expressed alarm over reports of a build-up of Russian troops in northern Syria near the Turkish border, saying such movements will not be tolerated. Britain-based monitor the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights had said that Russia had sent a number of engineers to the Syrian border town of Qamishli to strengthen the runway and increase the capacity of an airport there. Russia's reported move into Qamishli comes as Ankara and Moscow are experiencing their biggest crisis in years over the shooting down of a Russian war plane by Turkey on November 24. "We have said this from the beginning: we won't tolerate such formations (in northern Syria) along the area stretching from the Iraqi border up to the Mediterranean," Erdogan told reporters after Friday prayers in Istanbul. "We maintain our sensitivities on this issue," said Erdogan, citing reports that Russia had deployed some 200 soldiers and adding he would raise the issue today in talks with visiting US Vice President Joe Biden. Observers have said that Russia, which has for years been at loggerheads with Turkey over the Syrian conflict, may want to refit the airport as a Russian base, as happened in Hmeimim in Latakia province. The Turkish army has already reinforced security by digging trenches in the border zone, the Hurriyet daily said. Top Russian military officials, including figures from the GRU military intelligence service, had already visited Qamishli, it added.



Tayyip Erdogan

Myanmar releases 52 political prisoners

Myanmar began releasing the first of about 100 prisoners yesterday, many of them political detainees, days before a parliament dominated by democracy champion Aung San Suu Kyi's party sits for the first time after an election win in November. The freeing of some political prisoners by the outgoing administration of President Thein Sein comes after US Assistant Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged Myanmar to free all political prisoners during a visit on Monday. The amnesty gives a last-minute boost to the legacy of Thein Sein, whose semi-civilian government in 2011 replaced a junta that had run Myanmar for 49 years, ushering in a series of political and economic reforms. "There were 52 political prisoners among those released today," said Bo Kyi, joint secretary of political prisoner watchdog Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. According to Bo Kyi, this leaves 77 political prisoners behind bars and 408 awaiting trial. Zaw Htay, a director at the president's office, said on his Facebook page that 102 prisoners would be freed. It was unclear how many had already been freed and whether all of them were political prisoners. Zaw Htay also said that 77 death sentences would be reduced to life imprisonments.

REUTERS, Yangon