

NEWSIN brief

IS threatens attacks on Spain

Islamic State has threatened attacks on Spain in their latest propaganda video, declaring: "We will recover our land from the invaders." A map was previously shared showing the areas IS plans to have under control by 2020, including Spain and large parts of Asia and Africa. Spain was ruled by Muslims after it was invaded in 711 by largely Moorish armies from North Africa, later becoming part of the Umayyad caliphate. Muslim rule declined after the 10th century and ended in 1492.

Dinosaur fossils found in western India

A geologist yesterday said his team has discovered what it believes are dinosaur fossils in the western Indian state of Gujarat that could be millions of years old. The team dug up the fossils during excavations in Gujarat's marshy coastal district of Kutch, Gaurav Chauhan said. Gujarat, sometimes dubbed India's Jurassic Park, is home to one of the world's largest collections of dinosaur remains.

Thousands protest against TTP in Malaysia

Thousands of protesters yesterday gathered in Kuala Lumpur to denounce the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade alliance, demanding the government reject the accord in a parliamentary debate next week. The TPP aims to create the world's biggest free-trade area including Canada, Brunei, Chile, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam, the United States, Japan and Australia.

India plane grounded after bomb hoax

An Indian passenger plane was forced to make an emergency landing in the country's western city of Nagpur yesterday after a hoax bomb threat, GoAir airline said. The GoAir plane, carrying 150 passengers, was en route from the eastern city of Bhubaneswar to Mumbai when authorities received an anonymous call that a bomb had been planted aboard. However no bomb was found.

Japan only accepted 27 refugees last year

Japan accepted only 27 refugees last year and rejected almost all applications, officials said yesterday, as rights groups urged the government to allow more people in. The justice ministry said it received a record 7,586 refugee applications in 2015, meaning more than 99 percent of requests were rejected. Japan is home to 2,419 refugees, according to the UN.

Visiting Xi vows tighter ties with Tehran

Kerry visits Riyadh to reassure allies over Iran, optimistic on Syria talks' future

AGENCIES

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani yesterday hailed a "new chapter" in relations with China after talks with President Xi Jinping, who is touring the region to boost Beijing's economic influence.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State John Kerry, on a visit to Saudi Arabia, yesterday sought to reassure Gulf allies concerned about a perceived warming of ties between Washington and Iran.

He also announced that the Syria Support Group of 20 nations and organisations will meet "very shortly" to help push peace in the war-ravaged country.

The Asian giant and the Middle East's foremost Shia power aim to build economic ties worth up to \$600 billion within the next 10 years, Rouhani announced.

The two leaders oversaw the signing of 17 agreements in areas including politics, the economy, security and cooperation on peaceful nuclear energy.

"With the Chinese president's visit to Tehran and our agreements, a new chapter has begun in Tehran-Beijing relations," Rouhani said in a televised speech, flanked by Xi.

It is the first visit to Iran by a Chinese president in 14 years, according to state news agency IRNA, and comes just days after sanctions against Tehran were lifted under a historic nuclear deal with world powers.

Xi later met with Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali

Khamenei.

Beijing has long taken a backseat to other diplomatic players in the Middle East but analysts say the region is crucial to Xi's signature foreign policy initiative -- known as "One Belt One Road" -- touted as a revival of ancient Silk Road trade routes.

region," it added, while supporting Tehran's increased role in regional and international affairs.

Xi's tour, his first of the Middle East as Chinese president, has also taken him to Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

In Riyadh, Kerry held meeting with his Saudi counterpart Adel al-Jubeir and other foreign ministers from the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council.

"The United States remains concerned about some of the activities that Iran is engaged in other countries," Kerry told reporters, citing as an example Iran's "support for terrorist groups like Hezbollah" in Lebanon.

Saudi Arabia and its Gulf neighbours perceive a lack of US engagement in the region, particularly in the face of what they see as Iran's "interference" in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and elsewhere.

But, Jubeir, citing Iran as the world's chief sponsor of terrorism, told reporters that he did not see a "coming together" of the US and Iran.

Kerry later met with King Salman and the monarch's son, Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is also the defence minister.

Kerry also expressed confidence that Syrian peace talks will go ahead on Monday in Geneva despite a dispute over opposition representation. Yesterday he and his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov discussed by telephone the makeup of the opposition side.



Chinese President Xi Jinping meets Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Tehran (left) and US Secretary of State John Kerry meets with Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz (R) in Riyadh, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP



According to Iranian media, more than a third of Iran's foreign trade is carried out with China.

The two presidents issued a joint statement outlining a long-term "comprehensive strategic partnership".

The two countries agreed to enhance cooperation including in fossil and renewable energy, transportation, railways, ports, industry, commerce and services, said the statement, published by Mehr news agency.

China "acknowledges Iran's constructive role in the fight against terrorism and maintaining peace and stability in the

UNREST OVER UNEMPLOYMENT AND POVERTY

Tunisia extends curfew

PM holds emergency cabinet meeting, urges patience

AFP, Tunis

Tunisian Prime Minister Habib Essid yesterday pleaded for people to be "patient" after a wave of protests against poverty and unemployment in the worst social unrest since the 2011 revolution.

He spoke after chairing an emergency cabinet meeting as authorities said a nighttime nationwide curfew would be indefinite.

The measure was imposed Friday after the spread of unrest from the central town of Kasserine, where an unemployed man died of electrocution during a protest, to the rest of the country.

Anger at the January 16 death of Ridha Yahyaoui after he climbed a power pole also hit the capital where shops were burnt and looted in one suburb.

It was the worst social unrest since the revolution five years ago that ousted longtime dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Tunisia "is in danger despite the positive things which we have accomplished, particularly the transition toward democracy", said Essid, urging people to "understand that there are difficulties".

"Solutions exist but some patience and optimism are needed," said Essid.

The premier, who met the defence and interior ministers before the cabinet meeting, did not announce any firm measures to tackle unemployment and corruption which have plagued the country.

On Friday he said he had "no magic wand" to solve unemployment which is more than 15 percent nationwide and 32 percent among university graduates.

Calm returned to Kasserine on Saturday morning after a day of clashes, but in the nearby town of Sidi Bouzid -- the cradle of the revolution -- teenagers set tyres alight, AFP journalists said.

There have been 261 arrests over the unrest and 84 for curfew violations on Friday, the interior ministry said.

The unrest echoed the public anger that erupted after the death of young fruit seller Mohammed Bouazizi in December 2011 in protest at unemployment and police harassment. Bouazizi set himself on fire in Sidi Bouzid, sparking the uprising that toppled Ben Ali -- whose rule was tainted by graft accusations -- and inspired the Arab Spring revolts.

While Tunisia is considered a rare Arab Spring success story, the authorities have failed to resolve the problems of social exclusion and regional inequalities.



Habib Essid

Nepal to amend charter to appease ethnic group

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's parliament yesterday voted to amend the country's new constitution in a bid to resolve a months-long dispute with ethnic minority protesters demanding more political representation.

"I announce that the Nepal constitution first amendment bill has been passed with a two-thirds majority in favour," said speaker Onsari Gharti Magar as lawmakers thumped their desks in agreement.

More than 50 people have been killed in clashes between police and people protesting against the constitution introduced in September, which demonstrators said left them politically marginalised.

Demonstrators from the Madhesi ethnic minority, mainly from Nepal's southern plains, have led a months-long blockade of a key border crossing, causing a crippling shortage of fuel and other vital supplies across the landlocked country.

In an effort to end the deadlock, parties last month tabled a bill to amend the constitution and increase the Madhesi presence in government bodies through proportional representation.

But Madhesis say the bill is incomplete and does not address their main demand to revise the federal state borders laid out in the charter that will limit their representation in parliament.

Madhesi lawmakers walked out of parliament in protest before the bill was passed late yesterday with 461 votes in favour of the amendments.

The constitution, the first drawn up by elected representatives, was meant to cement peace and bolster Nepal's transformation to a democratic republic after decades of political instability and a 10-year Maoist insurgency. But several rounds of talks between the government and the protesting parties had failed to reach an agreement.



Left, Tourists take selfies after a snowfall in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, China, yesterday. Much of China shivered yesterday as a teeth-chattering cold snap broke decades-old records and snow fell in some parts for the first time in years, cancelling flights and forcing many indoors. The two pictures on the right show heavy snowfall in Washington DC and New York, USA. A deadly blizzard slammed the eastern US yesterday, as officials urged millions in the storm's path to seek shelter -- warning the worst is yet to come.



WAR ON 'ISLAMIC STATE'

US accuses Arab allies of doing 'nothing at all'

AFP, Washington

Several members of the US-led coalition attacking the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria are doing "nothing at all" to help destroy the jihadists, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter said Friday.

His comments mark a departure from the Pentagon's typical depiction of the 65-member coalition, which carries the slogan "One mission, many nations," and is frequently touted to highlight global resolve in the predominantly US effort to defeat the IS group.

"Many of them are not doing enough, or are doing nothing at all," Carter said in an interview with CNBC on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

In a separate interview with Bloomberg TV, Carter called the anti-IS alliance a "so-called" coalition, highlighting frustrations the Pentagon has with some partners -- particularly Sunni Arab nations -- not doing enough.

Carter has spent the past week in Europe, primarily in Paris, where he sought to persuade allies to step up their efforts against the IS group.

He is meeting with representatives from another 26 allied nations next month to make the same appeal.

Carter reiterated calls for one such partner, Turkey, to bolster its fight against the jihadists. "Turkey is a long-time friend of ours," he said during a Davos question-and-answer session. But "the reality is" that it has a border that "has been porous to foreign fighters."

Some Arab and Gulf countries including Saudi Arabia are nominally part of the coalition, but are now more focused on fighting Iran-backed forces in Yemen.

Palestinian girl attacker, 13, shot dead

AFP, Jerusalem

A 13-year-old Palestinian girl was shot dead by an Israeli security guard she tried to stab at a settlement in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Israeli police said yesterday.

It was the latest fatality in an almost four-month-long surge of violence that has raised concern of wider escalation, a decade after the last Palestinian uprising subsided, and it followed two stabbings this week inside settlements carried out by Palestinian teenagers, according to Israeli authorities.

Police spokeswoman Luba Samri said initial investigations showed the teenager "had fought with her family and left her home with a knife and intending to die".

Holding a knife, she ran toward the security guard at the entrance to Anatot settlement and he opened fire at her, Samri said. Her father arrived at the scene shortly after the incident and was arrested, she added.

Since the start of October, Israeli forces have killed at least 149 Palestinians, 95 of them assailants according to authorities. Most of the others have died in violent protests. Almost daily stabbings, shootings and car-ramping attacks by Palestinians have killed 25 Israelis and a US citizen.

The bloodshed has been fuelled by various factors including frustration over the 2014 collapse of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and the growth of Jewish settlements on land Palestinians seek for an independent state.

Palestinian leaders have said that with no breakthrough on the horizon, desperate youngsters see no future ahead. Israel says young Palestinians are being incited to violence by their leaders and Islamist groups that call for Israel's destruction.

British PM urges Maldives to open up its politics

AFP, London

British Prime Minister David Cameron urged the Maldives to open up its politics and release all remaining political prisoners after meeting former president Mohamed Nasheed yesterday.

Nasheed, who has been in prison in the Maldives but was granted special leave for urgent surgery, visited Cameron's Downing Street office in London, accompanied by his wife Laila Ali Abdulla and his British lawyer Amal Clooney.

He was sentenced to 13 years in jail on terrorism charges relating to the arrest of an alleged corrupt judge in 2012, when he was still in power. The United Nations has said his trial was seriously flawed.

his release was "a positive step, more needed to be done... if real change is to be delivered," a Downing Street spokesman said.

The former British protectorate in the Indian Ocean is one of the 53 Commonwealth members.

"Looking ahead to the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group visit to the Maldives next month, the prime minister and Nasheed agreed this was an opportunity for all Commonwealth members to send a consistently strong message on the need for the Maldivian government to engage in open political dialogue and free all remaining political prisoners swiftly.

"Finally, the prime minister told Nasheed that the UK would continue to raise concerns about the erosion of democracy and wider situation in the Maldives."



Pakistan arrests university attack suspects

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani security agencies have arrested five men accused of helping organise Wednesday's attack on a university in the country's troubled northwest that killed 21 people, the military announced yesterday.

The assault on Bacha Khan university campus in Charsadda by four armed assailants was later claimed by a faction of the Pakistani Taliban. According to a Pak army officer, a key suspect who is still at large arranged transportation for the four gunmen. The suspects also secured accommodation for the assailants. They also helped purchase their weapons in the country's tribal belt.

Mosquito-borne Zika virus panic grips Latin American countries

Triggers pregnancy delay calls; US announces travel warning

AFP, Sao Paulo

Alarm over thousands of birth defects blamed on the mosquito-borne Zika virus spread Friday, as the United States expanded a travel warning for pregnant women.

With the sting of a mosquito bite and a fever, many pregnant women may not know that they caught the Zika virus -- until it strikes their unborn child.

Now authorities in some Latin American countries are warning women to avoid getting pregnant for fear of the virus.

Babies across the region, and at least one in the United States, have been born with abnormally smaller heads -- a condition doctors call microcephaly, which can cause brain damage.

The scare has struck hardest in Brazil, which hosts the summer Olympic Games in

August.

It is one of 22 territories that the United States has warned pregnant women not to visit because of the Zika risk.

The World Health Organization (WHO) this week noted a surge in cases of microcephaly in Brazil, the country most affected by the current epidemic.

WHO spokesman Christian Lindmeier said Friday there were 3,893 suspected microcephaly cases in Brazil, which included 49 deaths. Before last year there were about 160 cases of microcephaly in Brazil on average.

He said there were "about 20 countries in the Americas which are reporting Zika cases, and about 10 in Africa, Asia and the Pacific," but the biggest outbreaks were in Brazil, Colombia and elsewhere in Latin America.

