

NEWSIN brief

IS planning more attacks on Europe

AFP, Amsterdam
The Islamic State group has honed the ability to launch global attacks and is set to focus more on Europe following the Paris massacre, the chief of the EU police agency Europol said yesterday. Rob Wainwright was unveiling the findings of a new Europol report on changes in how the jihadist group operates.

Netaji's grand nephew joins BJP

PTI, Howrah
Chandra Kumar Bose, grand nephew of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, yesterday joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the presence of party president Amit Shah. Bose was present at a public meeting here, which was addressed by the BJP president. Bose had attended the ceremony where 100 files on Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose were declassified by the NDA government on January 23.

Maldives slams jailed Nasheed for UK visit

AFP, Colombo
The Maldives' foreign minister yesterday lambasted jailed former president Mohamed Nasheed, accusing him of using prison leave for publicity after he met Prime Minister David Cameron while in Britain for medical treatment. Duna Maumoon accused Nasheed of exploiting the visit for political gain, saying it was "not medical leave, but media leave".

I will retire on due date: Pak army chief

REUTERS, Islamabad
Pakistan's influential army chief yesterday said he would step down at the end of his three-year term in November, the military's public relations wing said, breaking a precedent of military leaders seeking to extend their terms. General Raheel Sharif is considered by many to be Pakistan's most powerful man. Since he took office in 2013, the army has launched assaults against Islamist insurgent strongholds.

Zika virus to spread across Americas: WHO

BBC ONLINE
The Zika virus is likely to spread across nearly all of the Americas, the World Health Organization warned yesterday. The infection, which causes symptoms including mild fever, conjunctivitis and headache, has already been found in 21 countries in the Caribbean, North and South America. It has been linked to thousands of babies being born with underdeveloped brains and some countries have advised women not to get pregnant.



This photograph released by the official Twitter page of the Office of the Indian Prime Minister shows Prime Minister Narendra Modi (3rd L), visiting French President Francois Hollande (2nd L) and French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius (L) riding the metro in New Delhi yesterday.

Focus on anti-terror

Says Hollande as France, India agree to step up security cooperation

AFP, New Delhi
French President Francois Hollande vowed yesterday not to weaken his resolve against terrorism as he held talks with India's leader on security cooperation and a long-delayed defence deal.
Hollande said he and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had agreed to step up cooperation on counter-terrorism after deadly attacks on Paris in November that recalled the 2008 assault on Mumbai.
But they failed to reach a final agreement on India's long-delayed purchase of 36 Rafale fighter jets from the French company Dassault.
The French president said a new video which threatens countries of the US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State group would only strengthen France's resolve which was tested by November's deadly attacks in Paris.
"These odious provocations only serve to further increase the resolve that we have, that I have, to protect French people through the decisions that I have taken... but also to hit, and hit again, this organisation that threatens us and kills our children," he said.
Modi also spoke of the two leaders' joint resolve to increase security cooperation, recalling a deadly raid earlier this month on an Indian military base near the Pakistan border.
"President Hollande and I have agreed to scale up the range of our counter terrorism cooperation in a manner that helps us to tangibly mitigate and reduce the threat of extremism and terrorism to our societies," he said.

We will bury IS

Says Ghani; Afghan army being 'rebuilt' for Taliban battle: US

AGENCIES
Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has vowed to "bury" the Islamic State group's affiliate in Afghanistan, a report said, after Washington granted the US military legal authority to strike the jihadists in the country.

"This could be a point of no return for Daesh -- we will bury Daesh," Ghani told BBC in an interview released yesterday, using the Arabic acronym for IS.
"Afghans are now motivated by revenge. They (IS) have confronted the wrong people," Ghani said on the sidelines of World Economic Forum in the Swiss resort of Davos.

The US State Department earlier this month formally designated the group's affiliate in Afghanistan and Pakistan -- which calls itself "Khorasan Province" -- as a terrorist organisation. The White House this month also gave the US military legal authority to target the group's fighters in Afghanistan.

A US military official said yesterday Afghan army units battling the Taliban in southern Helmand province are facing major restructuring and leadership changes, with several key commanders being replaced.

US Army Brig. Gen. Wilson Shoffner, the head of public affairs for the US-Nato mission, told The Associated Press that the Afghan army corps in Helmand is now being "rebuilt" and that senior officers are being replaced.

US piles pressure on Syrian opposition

Russia blamed for 'obstacles' in path of peace talks

AGENCIES
Syria's warring parties were scheduled to begin the latest round of talks aimed at ending the country's conflict yesterday in Geneva.

But they have been delayed at least in part by a dispute over who will represent the opposition.

Salim al-Muslat, a spokesman for HNC, accused Russia and the Syrian government of throwing obstacles in the path of talks that were originally due to begin in Geneva yesterday.

The HNC has repeatedly said talks cannot begin until air strikes are halted, government sieges of rebel held territory are lifted and detainees freed, steps outlined in a Dec 18 UN Security Council resolution, reports Reuters.

"We want to realise pure humanitarian matters. They are not preconditions. It is an international resolution at least part of which must be implemented, so we see there is seriousness and good will in this matter," al-Muslat said on Saudi-owned Arabic news channel Arabiya al-Hadath.

The member of the so-called High Negotiations Committee (HNC) said Kerry applied "pressure" during a weekend meeting in Saudi Arabia, warning the opposition risked "losing friends" if they failed to attend the talks.

Fuad Aliko said the Committee would meet today to make a final decision on whether to attend the Geneva talks. The Saturday meeting with Kerry was "neither comfortable, nor positive", said Aliko, a member of the Committee's designated delegation for the talks.

Kerry told the Committee's chief Riad Hijab that they risked "losing friends", Aliko said. "This talk means a halt to political and military support to the opposition," he added.

Libya rejects UN-backed unity govt

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
Libya's internationally recognised parliament yesterday voted to reject a unity government proposed under a United Nations backed plan to resolve the country's political crisis and armed conflict.

Of 104 members attending the session in the eastern city of Tobruk, 89 voted against backing the government proposed by Libya's Presidential Council last week.

Since 2014, Libya has had two competing parliaments and governments, one based in Tripoli and the other in the east. Both are backed by loose alliances of armed groups and former rebels who helped oust Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

The unity government proposals and agreement were the result of months of negotiations, and were backed by some members of both rival factions.

Lawmaker Mohamed al-Abani told Reuters that the proposed administration also did not represent the interests of the Libyan people but had been formed "according to the demands of militia leaders".

The UN and Western diplomats had urged Libyans to back the agreements as a step towards ending the turmoil that has gripped the country since the toppling of Gaddafi. The chaos engulfing the country has enabled the so-called Islamic State to expand its influence rapidly. In recent weeks the extremist group has launched attacks from its stronghold in the city of Sirte on facilities in the "oil crescent" along the country's northern coast.



Children slide in the snow in Central Park in New York on Sunday. The eastern United States emerged wearily from a massive blizzard that dumped huge amounts of snow and killed at least 25 people, but Washington was still reeling, with government offices and schools to remain closed yesterday. The storm -- dubbed "Snowzilla" -- walloped a dozen states from Friday into early Sunday, affecting an estimated 85 million residents.

East Asia cold snap 'kills 85 in Taiwan'

60,000 tourists stranded in S Korea
BBC ONLINE

A cold snap sweeping across East Asia has killed at least 85 people in Taiwan and stranded 60,000 tourists in South Korea. Taiwanese media reported deaths from hypothermia and cardiac disease following a sudden drop in temperature over the weekend. Meanwhile heavy snow forced the closure of the airport on the Korean holiday island of Jeju, cancelling flights. The cold spell has also hit Hong Kong, southern China and Japan.

Many of those who died in Taiwan were elderly people living in northern regions such as Taipei and Taoyuan. Those areas accounted for 66 of the deaths. Another 16 were confirmed dead in the southern city of Kaohsiung.

The temperature in Taipei city fell to a 44-year low of 4C (39F) on Sunday, and many homes in Taiwan lack central heating. Many victims reportedly had heart trouble and shortness of breath.

"In our experience, it's not the actual temperature but the sudden drop that's too sudden for people's circulatory systems," said a city official quoted by AP news agency.

In South Korea, more than 500 domestic and international flights have been cancelled in Jeju as the island, known for balmy weather and beaches, saw -6C weather. The airport was due to reopen last night.

Thousands of tourists were left stranded over the weekend. Yonhap news agency reported that local officials were scrambling to find transport and accommodation.



Portugal elects Rebelo de Sousa as president

AFP, Lisbon

Law professor and TV pundit Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, 67, was the clear winner Sunday in Portugal's presidential election, taking 52 percent of the vote.

The overwhelming favourite, Rebelo de Sousa was far ahead of his closest rival, independent leftist Antonio Sampaio da Novoa, who won 22.89 percent, according to a nearly complete count. Fifty percent was required to avoid a runoff.

Although largely ceremonial, Portugal's presidency has make-or-break power over the nation's fragile ruling alliance and the right to dissolve parliament in the event of a crisis.

"I want to restore national unity," while "our country is emerging from a deep economic and social crisis," said Rebelo de Sousa, pledging to "be a free and independent president".

Rebelo de Sousa, a former head of the centre-right Social Democratic Party, had been the big favourite in the 10-candidate race. Known to TV audiences as "professor Marcelo", he came into the contest with a popularity built over decades in the public eye.

He has the backing of right wing parties but claims total independence, insisting he will not be partisan but seek to rule "above the fray".

Prior to the election, he vowed to do "everything I can" to ensure the current government's stability.

Among the first to congratulate him, former conservative prime minister Pedro Passos Coelho said "this victory in the first round gives him indisputable political authority".

'Thatcher's govt tried to stop Mandela being honoured'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Margaret Thatcher's government reportedly tried to stop Nelson Mandela receiving an honorary degree at the University of Lancaster from a member of the royal family.

According to documents shown to the Times, Richard Luce, a former foreign office minister and now a crossbench peer, lobbied the university to "quietly drop" proposals in 1982 for Princess Alexandra to honour Mandela. The manoeuvring was kept secret at the National Archives until now.

Baroness Thatcher had previously dismissed the African National Congress (ANC) as "a typical terrorist organisation" and refused to back sanctions against the South African government that pursued the notorious policy of apartheid. Despite pressure from the Conservative government the university went ahead with its plans and awarded Mandela -- who, at the time, was 22 years into his jail term on Robben Island -- with the honorary doctorate in law in 1984.

According to the Times, a confidential note between diplomats said Luce "agrees with the recommendation that we should advise Princess Alexandra that on balance she should try to avoid conferring the honorary degree. Moreover he thinks that ideally the proposal that such a degree should be conferred on Mandela should be quietly dropped since in any event it could cause embarrassment to Princess Alexandra."

Power transition looms in Myanmar

Suu Kyi meets army chief

AFP, Yangon

Aung San Suu Kyi and Myanmar's powerful army chief held fresh talks yesterday on the country's dramatic political transition, days before a military-dominated legislature hands over to the most democratic parliament in generations.

The discussions are the latest effort to smooth the transfer of power following a landslide victory for Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy in November elections, which is set to transform the once-cloistered nation after decades under military rule. The meeting saw "friendly and open discussions about the formation of a new government, the transition, post-election peace and stability, the parliament and peace process", according to a statement posted on the NLD's official Facebook page late yesterday.

Observers see a rapprochement between Suu Kyi, 70, and the military chief as crucial to ensuring the political handover stays on track. The two-hour closed-door meeting was their second since the elections.

Victorious National League for Democracy MPs will take their seats in parliament in the capital Naypyidaw on February 1.

'Rise in space junk could lead to war'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The rise of space junk orbiting the Earth could 'provoke armed conflict' as damage to military satellites could be misconstrued as an attack, a new report warned.

Researchers at the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow said the debris had a "special political danger" because it is difficult to determine whether an operational satellite had been hit by the fragments or was intentionally attacked by another country.

Space agencies in the US and Russia track thousands of pieces of space junk larger than 10cm but estimate there could be trillions of smaller pieces.

Even the smallest piece of debris is capable of causing damage to spacecraft as they can collide at a combined speed of more than 30,000mph, the Guardian reports. Writing in a study for the journal Acta Astronautica, astrophysicist Vitaly Adushkin said such an incident "may provoke political or even armed conflict between space-faring nations".

"The owner of the impacted and destroyed satellite can hardly quickly determine the real cause of the accident", he explained. Professor Adushkin warns unless something is done to clean up this area of the Earth's orbit it could lead to more space junk forming as pieces of debris crash into each other and produce smaller fragments.



The warning comes after a Russian satellite, Blits, was damaged in 2013 after colliding with debris.