

NEWSIN brief

Zika case found in Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta
An Indonesian research institute said yesterday it had found one positive Zika case on Sumatra island, adding that the virus has been circulating in the country "for a while". The institute said a 27-year-old man living in Jambi province had been found to be infected.

Bomb kills two police in Egypt's Sinai

AFP, Cairo
A bomb blast killed two Egyptian police officers and wounded five others in an attack on their armoured vehicle in the Sinai Peninsula on Friday, the interior ministry said. The vehicle was targeted near a school in the North Sinai provincial capital of El-Arish. Islamic State is suspected behind the attack.

Veteran BBC presenter Terry Wogan dies

AFP, London
BBC presenter Terry Wogan, one of British television's most familiar faces and the long-running anchor of its Eurovision coverage, died of cancer yesterday aged 77, his family announced. Irish-born Wogan had a successful television career, most notably anchoring Britain's flagship chat show during the 1980s, and hosted a hugely popular radio show for 27 years, retiring in 2009.

Saudi police arrest 9 US 'terror' suspects

AFP, Riyadh
Saudi authorities have arrested nine American citizens among 33 "terror" suspects rounded up over the past days, the Saudi Gazette newspaper reported yesterday. The arrests also included 14 Saudis, three Yemenis, two Syrians, an Indonesian, a Filipino, an Emirati, a Kazakhstani national and a Palestinian.

Syria peace talks in peril

Opposition threatens to quit UN talks over humanitarian issues

REUTERS, Geneva
Syria's main opposition group met UN mediator Staffan de Mistura for the first time yesterday, but the peace process ran straight into trouble after Islamic State bombers killed more than 60 people near the country's holiest Shia shrine.

Representatives of the Saudi-backed Higher Negotiation Committee (HNC) - which includes political and militant opponents of President Bashar al-Assad - warned they may yet walk away from the Geneva talks unless the suffering of civilians in the five-year conflict is eased.

The head of the Syrian government delegation retorted that the blasts in Damascus, which the Interior Ministry blamed on a car bomb and two suicide bombers, merely confirmed the link between the opposition and terrorism - even though Islamic State has been excluded from the talks.

The United Nations is aiming for six months of negotiations, first seeking a ceasefire, later working toward a political settlement to the civil war that has also killed over 250,000, driven more than 10 million from their homes and drawn in global powers.

Only on Friday, the HNC said it would boycott the process, insisting it wanted an end to air strikes and sieges of Syrian towns before joining the negotiations. This forced de

Mistura - who invited the government and opposition umbrella group for "proximity talks", in which he would meet each side in separate rooms - to set the ball rolling with only the Damascus delegation.

Under intense pressure, notably from the United States, the HNC later relented and arrived in Geneva on Saturday. However, the group questioned how long the delegation would stay.



Syrian pro-government forces inspect the damage following suicide bombings on a Shia shrine on the outskirts of the capital Damascus, yesterday.

"In view of the (Syrian) regime and its allies' insistence in violating the rights of the Syrian people, the presence of the HNC delegation in Geneva would not have any justification and the HNC could pull its negotiating team out," the group's coordinator, Riad Hijab, said in an online statement.

Opposition delegate Bassma Kodmani denied that her side was ready yet to negotiate. "We only came to Geneva after receiving assurances and commitments and we have precise commitments on the fact there would be serious progress on the humanitarian situation," she told a news conference. "We can't start political negotiations until we have those gestures."

The Syrian government's delegation head in Geneva, Bashar al-Jaafari, said the government was considering moves such as the creation of humanitarian corridors, ceasefires and prisoner releases, but suggested they might come about as a result of the talks, not before

HISTORIC POLITICAL TRANSITION IN MYANMAR Suu Kyi allies to form govt after decades of struggle

REUTERS, Naypyitaw
After decades of struggle, hundreds of lawmakers from Aung San Suu Kyi's camp will form Myanmar's ruling party today, with enough seats in parliament to choose the first democratically elected government since the military took power in 1962.

The National League for Democracy (NLD) won some 80 percent of elected seats in November's historic vote, but the junta-drafted constitution means it will have to share power with the army that for years has suppressed, often brutally, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate and her allies.

The first sitting of the NLD-dominated parliament is another step in Myanmar's drawn-out transition which started with the election and will go on until the NLD government officially starts its term in April.

"We are likely to announce the president in the second week of February," said Win Htein, a senior member of the party. Other NLD officials said the presidential nomination process may begin towards the end of the month.

This week, the party will focus on appointing parliamentary speakers, who

were announced last week. It will also prepare for the start of state and regional assemblies on Feb.8, some in places dominated by large ethnic minorities such as Shan State in the east or Rakhine in the west.

Each of the parliament's two chambers will appoint its presidential candidate and the military officials who hold a quarter of seats will put forward their nominee. Combined chambers will then vote on the candidates. The winner will become president. The other two will serve as vice presidents.

Expectations are towering for Suu Kyi. Myanmar's 51.5 million people expect the NLD to quickly fix everything from bringing peace to fractured ethnic states to stopping the abuse of the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine by the Buddhist majority.

Suu Kyi, who is barred from being the president, has said she will be "above the president", and in complete control of the government, but the NLD has not explained how she will do this.

"To accomplish the challenges, they need to choose the right people and put them in right positions," said Shwe Mann. "This is also my main concern, because it will decide the performance of her government."



Israeli security forces gather around the body of a Palestinian man who was shot dead following a reported shooting attack on Israelis at a checkpoint near the Beit El settlement, close to West Bank city of Ramallah, yesterday.

PALESTINIAN STATEHOOD Israeli PM slates French ultimatum

AFP, Jerusalem
Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday criticised France's threat to recognise a Palestinian state if plans to renew peace efforts fail, arguing that it gives Palestinians no incentive to compromise.

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said Friday his country was working to quickly revive plans for an international conference to work toward a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Should efforts to breathe life into the moribund peace process fail, France would move to unilaterally recognise Palestine as a state, Fabius said.

"This will be an incentive for the Palestinians to come and not compromise," Netanyahu said at the start of a cabinet meeting yesterday. "The substance of negotiations is compromise and the French initiative, as it has been reported, in effect gives the Palestinians in advance reasons not to do so."

The rightwing premier also said "I believe that we will see a sobering up on this issue. In any case, we will work to bring this about and our position is very clear: We are prepared to enter into direct negotiations without preconditions and without dictated conditions."

Meanwhile, a Palestinian opened fire at a checkpoint near a Jewish settlement in the West Bank yesterday, wounding three Israelis before being shot dead, officials said, the latest in four months of violence.

The Israeli army said a shooting attack had occurred near the Beit El settlement, close to Ramallah. Israeli medics said two of the three wounded had serious injuries.

TENSION IN SOUTH CHINA SEA China: US incursion 'sabotaged' peace

AP, Beijing
China strongly condemned the United States after a US warship deliberately sailed near one of the Beijing-controlled islands in the hotly contested South China Sea to exercise freedom of navigation and challenge China's vast sea claims.

The missile destroyer USS Curtis Wilbur sailed within 12 nautical miles of Triton Island in the Parcel chain "to challenge excessive maritime claims of parties that claim the Parcel Islands," without notifying the three claimants beforehand, Defense Department spokesman Mark Wright said Saturday in Washington.

The latest operation drew Beijing's ire. Defense Ministry spokesman Yang Yujun issued a statement saying the "unprofessional and irresponsible" US action "severely violated Chinese law, sabotaged the peace, security and good order of the waters, and undermined the region's peace and stability."

In an opinion published yesterday by the official Xinhua news agency, China described the maneuver as a "deliberate provocation" that raised doubts about the United States' sincerity just days after Secretary of State John Kerry visited Beijing for meetings about the South China Sea and North Korea that were called productive by both sides.

China, Taiwan and Vietnam have overlapping claims in the Paracels and require prior notice from ships transiting what they consider their territorial waters. The latest operation was particularly aimed at China, which has raised tensions with the US and its Southeast Asian neighbors by embarking on massive construction of man-made islands and airstrips in contested waters.

Vietnamese Foreign Ministry spokesman Le Hai Binh said that Vietnam respects "innocent passage" of ships through territorial waters in line with international law. State media quoted Binh as reiterating Vietnam's sovereignty over the Paracels and Spratlys and calling on nations to actively and practically contribute to peace and stability in the South China Sea.



Turkey warns Russia after new airspace breach

AL JAZEERA ONLINE
Relations between the two countries are at their lowest point in decades, prompted by the November 24 downing of the Russian jet by Turkish forces.

Moscow imposed a series of economic sanctions against Ankara after the incident, sparking the biggest crisis between the two countries since the Cold War.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Friday's incident was a sign that Russia wanted issues between the two countries to deteriorate.

Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg called on Russia to "act responsibly" and "take all necessary measures" to ensure the bloc's airspace was not violated again.

"A Russian combat aircraft violated Turkish airspace yesterday, despite repeated warnings by the Turkish authorities. Previous incidents have shown how dangerous such behaviour is," Stoltenberg said in a statement on Saturday.

He added that Turkish radar installations were not capable of identifying a particular aircraft or its type or nationality, and that no verbal warning had been issued.

WHITE HOUSE RACE NYT endorses Clinton, Kasich

BBC ONLINE

The New York Times has endorsed Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican John Kasich in their bids to become their parties' presidential candidates.

The liberal newspaper's opinion editors said Mrs Clinton was "one of the most broadly and deeply qualified candidates" in modern history.

It called Kasich, an outsider in the Republican race who is trailing in the polls, the "only plausible choice".

The move comes days before Iowa voters become the first to pick a candidate.

The endorsement of Clinton from one of the top-selling titles in the US is no surprise; the NYT backed the former secretary of state in her losing bid for the presidency against Barack Obama in 2008.

Ethiopians facing worst drought in decades: UN

AFP, Addis Ababa

Ethiopia is struggling with its worst drought for 30 years, with millions in dire need of life-saving aid, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warned yesterday.

At least 10.2 million people need food aid in Ethiopia, a figure the UN has warned could double within months, casting a fifth of the population into hunger.

Floods and failed rains caused by the El Nino weather phenomenon have sparked a dramatic rise in the number of people going hungry in large parts of Africa, with Ethiopia of special concern.

"People of the country are facing the worst drought in 30 years... the scale of emergency is too much for any single government," Ban told reporters in the

Boko Haram burns kids alive in Nigeria

AP, Abuja

A survivor hidden in a tree says he watched Boko Haram extremists firebomb huts and heard the screams of children among people burnt to death in the latest attack by Nigeria's homegrown Islamic extremists.

Scores of charred corpses and bodies with bullet wounds littered the streets from Saturday night's attack on Dalori village just 5 kilometres (3 miles) from Maiduguri, the birthplace of Boko Haram and the biggest city in the northeast, according to survivors and soldiers.

The shooting and burning continued for four hours, survivor Alamin Bakura said, weeping on a telephone call to The Associated Press. He said several of his family members were killed or wounded.

The violence continued as three female suicide bombers blew up among people who managed to flee to neighboring Gamouri village, killing many people, according to a soldier at the scene who insisted on anonymity because he is not authorized to speak to journalists.

It was not known how many scores of people were killed because bodies still were being collected, including from the surrounding bushes where the insurgents hunted down fleeing villagers, according to Abba Shehu, a security guard helping collect corpses.



Obama to visit US mosque for first time

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama plans to visit a mosque near Baltimore on Wednesday to make a plea for tolerance and religious freedom, the White House said yesterday.

It will be Obama's first visit as president to an American mosque -- though he visited a Jakarta mosque during a 2010 visit -- and comes at a time when American Muslims have reported a surge of anti-Muslim sentiment, linked partly to comments from Republican presidential frontrunner Donald Trump.

"The president will travel to Maryland to visit the Islamic Society of Baltimore mosque to celebrate the contributions Muslim Americans make to our nation and reaffirm the importance of religious freedom," a White House official said.

Following the deadly attacks late last year in Paris and in San Bernardino, California, both linked to radical Muslims, Trump called for a temporary ban on all Muslims entering the country.

Amid anecdotal reports of increased attacks on Muslims and mosques, US faith leaders called for Obama to visit a mosque and make a high-profile appeal for tolerance.

