Paris calls for end to Cuba sanctions

AFP, Paris

French President Francois Hollande called Monday for an end to US sanctions on Cuba during a historic visit to Paris by President Raul Castro, seen as a key step in rebuilding ties with the West.

"President Obama... must, and he's said it himself, go all the way and bring an end to this vestige of the Cold War," Hollande said after meeting with the 84-year-old Cuban leader.

Castro is on his first official trip to the European Union since taking over from his elder brother Fidel in 2006. France has led the way in welcoming Cuba back into the diplomatic fold since the Caribbean island restored relations last year with the United States, after more than half a century of enmity.

The visit builds on Hollande's own state visit to Cuba last May, the first by a Western head of state in more than half a century. Castro is the second former pariah to be welcomed to Paris in a matter of days, after Hollande hosted Iranian President Hassan Rouhani last week.

He was formally welcomed on Monday under the Arc de Triomphe before being driven down a virtually deserted Champs-Elysees avenue decked out in Cuban flags.

Havana hopes the visit will allow Cuba to "widen and diversify its relations with France in all possible areas -- politics, economics, trade, finance, investment, culture and cooperation," said Rogelio Sierra, Cuba's deputy foreign minister.



French President Francois Hollande (L) welcomes Cuban President Raul Castro on his arrival at the Elysee Presidential Palace in Paris on Monday.

РНОТО: AFP

War on IS to intensify

US, allies report progress in Iraq, Syria

AFP, Rome

and intensify" the fight against Islamic State jihadists in Syria and Iraq but distanced themselves from calls for military action to curb the group's expansion in Libya. Meeting in Rome, ministers from

the 23 countries involved in the USled coalition battling the extremist group said progress was being made in pushing IS back in Syria and Iraq and cutting off its sources of finance and energy. And they pledged to step up their action. "We will intensify and accelerate

the campaign against ISIL/Daesh in Iraq and Syria, act in concert to curb its global ambitions, and take every in a statement.

The statement expressed concern over "the growing influence" of IS in Libya but stopped short of threatening air strikes. Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni and US Secretary of State John Kerry opened the talks by telling their

allies that IS was adapting to the pressure on its heartland and redirecting its efforts towards Libya and into attacks like Washington and its allies yesterday vowed to "accelerate" those in Paris, Ankara and San Bernadino, California.

> Kerry said IS fighters have lost 40 percent of their territory in Iraq and 20 percent in Syria.

Within the coalition, Italy has taken the lead in planning how to address the IS threat which is just a short boat ride from its southern shores, in and around the Libyan

> coastal city of Sirte. But Rome's focus is firmly on trying to rally the international community behind efforts to get a national unity government established and helping it stabilise a country that descended into chaos after the ouster of Muammar Gaddafi Direct military intervention against

measure to ensure the protection of our citizens," they said IS fighters is not on the immediate agenda, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius told reporters, rubbishing reports that Paris was pushing for strikes. "There is absolutely no question of military intervention in Libya," Fabius said.

Gentiloni also played down the need for "hasty military intervention."

Syrians," Oxfam said in a

report. "Aid funding and

resettlement places

offered so far were often

so low as to be little more

than token gestures," it

has said the donor confer-

ence Thursday will urge

participating countries to

double the amount of

money they are giving to

Host country Britain

EU unveils plan NEV to avoid 'Brexit'

Sceptics unmoved; Brussels gives greater power to London

REUTERS, London/Brussels

European Council President Donald Tusk yesterday presented proposals for keeping Britain in the European Union to a mixed response, underlining the challenges Prime Minister David Cameron faces to win over his people and other EU leaders. The proposals, which addressed all four areas where

Cameron has demanded reform, did little to ease doubts among his more Eurosceptic lawmakers and even some of the prime minister's closest allies wondered out loud if the package -- which must still be agreed by other EU states would be enough. The two sides have been locked in talks trying to find a way

for Cameron to win what he calls the "best deal possible" for Britain while keeping other EU states onboard before a referendum which could take place as early as in June.

Tusk's text said Britain could immediately suspend welfare payments to EU migrants for four years if Britons voted to stay in the bloc and could, alongside other countries,

also opt out of further political integration in the 28member bloc. But with Eurosceptics

have new powers to block

legislation. Britain could

describing the talks as "trivial" and some of Cameron's allies saying the proposals

would probably need more work, a summit of EU leaders on Feb 18-19 was gearing up to be a difficult meeting.

Cameron said in a Tweet: "Draft EU renegotiation document shows real progress in all four areas where UK needs change but there's more work to do." In the text, Tusk's proposal would have a legally binding

provision allowing a group of 55 percent or more member states to either stop EU legislation or demand changes to address concerns Britain has handed too much power to Brussels. It also included a clause saying Britain could suspend some payments to migrants from the bloc for four years, starting immediately after the referendum, after meet ing the conditions to trigger a so-called 'emergency brake'. As well as curbing migration and returning powers to

Britain, Cameron also wants his country excluded from the EU goal of "ever closer union" and says it should be protected against moves by the 19 countries that share the euro currency to impose rules by majority vote on London.

There is much still to decide, including how long the socalled "emergency brake", or suspension, on welfare payments to migrants will be in force and how to enforce protection for London's financial industry.

'Dam is about to burst'

Warns Jordan about refugees; study accuses rich nations of not doing enough; nine more drown off Turkey; Finnish PM halts plan to keep refugees in his home

AGENCIES

King Abdullah of Jordan said his country is at "boiling point" because of an influx of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees. Ahead of a donor conference on Syria, the king told the BBC that there was enormous pressure on ordan's social services,

infrastructure and economy. "Sooner or later, I think, the dam is going to burst," he warned. He said the international community would have to

offer more help if it wanted Jordan to keep taking refugees. The UN is seeking \$7.7bn to fund aid operations for 22.5 million people in Syria and neighbouring countries next year.

However, only 43% of its 2015 appeal for \$2.9bn was funded. British charity Oxfam on Monday said it was time for concrete action on stumping up aid and not just words and pledges to help the millions of refugees from Syria's conflict.

"Rich countries meeting in London this week must commit to real changes that will improve the lives of millions of



A refugee camp in Jordan. File photo.

tackle the humanitarian crisis.

The Turkish coastguard yesterday recovered the bodies of nine migrants including two babies after their boat sank just a short distance from land while trying to reach Europe.

The coastguard said it discovered the boat half capsized only 25 metres from the coastline after it set off from the western town of Seferihisar in an apparent bid to reach Greece, reports AFP.

Meanwhile, Finland's centrist Prime Minister Juha Sipila has backtracked from his plans to house asylum seekers at his country house for security reasons, a government official said yesterday.

Avoid support to militant groups in Kashmir

Pak parliamentary panel to govt; 'ISI agent' arrested in Pathankot

Pakistani parliamentary panel has asked the government to avoid "encouraging" support to militant groups in Kashmir and take action against outfits involved in attacks there to dispel international concerns.

The National Assembly standing committee on foreign affairs on Monday issued a four-page policy paper linked to Kashmir, the Express Tribune reported. "Pakistan should not encourage calls for active support to armed, banned, militant groups in Kashmir," the paper said.

India has been demanding that Pakistan act

against militant groups operating from its soil. The committee, headed by ruling Pakistan Muslim League- Nawaz (PML-N) lawmaker Awais Ahmad Leghari, proposed the government to take action against "violent armed outfits" to dispel international concerns that Pakistan was not doing enough against groups involved in attacks in Kashmir, reports PTI.

The panel suggested that Pakistan's policy towards India should be based on four key principles - reciprocity, reduction, resumption and result. "Pakistan should continue seeking comprehensive engagement with India on all outstanding issues," it said.

Meanwhile, an alleged undercover Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agent, who had taken up job as a labourer at the Army cantonment in Pathankot, was arrested by the Punjab Police based on information provided by Intelligence agencies, reports The Hindu.

The Indian Air Force base in Pathankot was stormed by militants, reportedly belonging to Pakistan-based terrorist outfit Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), on January 1 and 2. It resulted in the death of seven security personnel. The accused arrested yester day was identified as Irshad Ahmad, an Indian who had taken up a job on the directions of ISI, an Intelligence officer claimed.

IS suicide bomber kills 18 troops near Ramadi AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Fighters from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (IS) group have killed 18 Iraqi soldiers in a suicide car attack north of Ramadi, continuing their counterattack after being driven from the city by Iraqi troops last month. Military sources told Al Jazeera that Tuesday morning's attack took place in the town of Al-Bu Dhiaab, just a few miles north of Anbar province's capital.

Israel lifts restrictions on access to Ramallah

AFP, Ramallah

Israel late Monday lifted daylong restrictions on access into and out of the Palestinian political capital Ramallah on the occupied West Bank, imposed after a checkpoint shooting that wounded soldiers, in a stepped-up response to such attacks. Violence since October has killed 25 Israelis. At the same time, 161 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces.

Anupam Kher 'denied Pak visa' for Karachi fest

TNN, New Delhi

Pakistan yesterday denied a visa to actor and BJP sympathiser Anupam Kher, who has been invited by the organisers of a literary festival in Karachi as one of their guests. Kher claims only he has been singled out of the 18 delegates who applied for the visa. Reacting to reports, the Pakistan High Commission, however, has claimed Kher never submitted any application for the visa.

Snow strands 'nearly 100,000' in China

BBC ONLINE

Heavy snow has disrupted public transport in southern China, stranding tens of thousands of people outside a rail station, police said. The crowd outside Guangzhou station swelled to nearly 100,000 at its peak on Monday night. Central China has experienced some of its coldest weather in years. The rare snow has coincided with the run-up to Chinese New Year - where hundreds of millions of migrant workers travel

home to see their families. Indian rape survivor raped again in hospital

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A rape survivor has allegedly been sexually assaulted again in an Indian hospital where she had been taken for treatment. The unnamed 15-year-old said she was raped for a second time by a security guard at the Mahatma Gandhi Medical College and Hospital in Jamshedpur City just a few days after she was admitted after being raped by a teen-

ager in her neighbourhood.

UN talks falter as war rages

Opposition cancels meeting with UN envoy REUTERS, Beirut/Geneva

A Syrian military offensive threatened critical rebel supply lines into the northern city of Aleppo yesterday and Damascus echoed its opponents in contradicting a UN envoy's assertion peace talks had begun.

UN envoy Staffan De Mistura announced the formal start on Monday of the first attempt in two years to negotiate an end to a war that has killed 250,000 people, caused a refugee crisis in the region and Europe and empowered Islamic State militants.

But both opposition and government representatives have since said the talks have not in fact

begun and fighting on the ground raged SYRIA on without constraint. A rebel commander told Reuters he PEACETALKS

was deploying reinforcements including

US-made anti-tank missiles to the Aleppo frontline for what he described as a "decisive battle".

The main Syrian opposition council said after meeting De Mistura on Monday it had not and would not negotiate unless the government stopped bombarding civilian areas, lifted blockades and released detainees. It said yesterday that it will not attend a planned afternoon meeting with the UN special envoy, adding further doubts about the prospects for peace talks in Switzerland.

The head of the Syrian government delegation also denied talks had started after discussions with De Mistura yesterday.

The refugee crisis and spread of the jihadist Islamic State through large areas of Syria, and from there to Iraq, has injected a new urgency to resolve the five-year-old Syria war.

But the chances of success, always very slim, appear to be receding ever more as the government, supported by Russian air strikes, advances against rebels, some of them U.S.-backed, in several parts of western Syria where the country's main cities are located. All previous diplomatic efforts have failed to stop the war.



Bill Clinton applauds his wife Hillary Clinton during latter's caucus night rally in Des Moines, Iowa, on Monday.



Ted Cruz speaks after winning at his lowa caucus night rally in Des Moines, Iowa, on Monday.

'No one remembers who came in second,' Trump said in 2013

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

After months of bold statements about being the Republican frontrunner for the most powerful job in the world, Donald Trump has been beaten into second place in the Iowa caucus. Trump lost the caucus by four per

cent to Texas senator, Ted Cruz, who claimed 28 per cent of the vote.

And now 'The Donald' is being mocked online for a 2013 tweet: "No one remembers who came in second."

People have taken pleasure in mocking

ing to the latest polls on the Republican race, is still 23 per cent ahead of nearest rival Ted Cruz. Trump's supporters have been quick to remind his detractors that many people have

won their party's nomination and even the

Presidency despite losing the Iowa caucus.

This list of past Iowa runners-up include former Presidents Bill Clinton, George HW Bush and Ronald Reagan.

ADELE OBJECTS AS TRUMP PLAYS SONG Pop superstar Adele on Monday lodged objec-

> tions as Republican presidential frontrunner Donald Trump played her music on the campaign trail.

Trump, an apparent fan of Adele who was spotted at her concert in November in New York, has regularly played her hit "Rolling in the Deep" at his rallies. Adele, whose blockbuster success

the controversial businessman who, accord- **Donald Trump** has been attributed to her ability to attract audiences across wide demographic lines, did not mention Trump by name. Trump earlier in his campaign played Neil

leaning views.

Young and REM songs triggering furious protests from the artists known for their left-

Clinton wins Iowa by coin toss INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A coin toss was used to decide whether Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders won at six precincts in the Iowa caucus. Clinton won all six coin tosses in Newton, Ames,

West Branch and Davenport, as well as two precints in Des Moines, the Des Moines Register reported. Under Iowa's Democratic caucus guide, ties

between two or more candidates can be determined by a coin toss.

Speaking after the caucuses, Bernie Sanders said he and Ms Clinton were "in a virtual tie".

Republican White House hopeful Mike Huckabee Monday suspended his campaign after winning barely two percent in the Iowa caucuses that launched the 2016 presidential

race. In the Democratic race, Martin O'Malley was set to suspend his campaign after garnering less than one percent in Iowa, sources in his camp said.

School picnic turns tragic 14 Indian students

drown in sea while swimming INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Fourteen students have drowned in western India during a school picnic by the

Three men and 10 women were swept away while swimming off the beach town of Murud, senior police official Raja Pawar said, while a fourth male student's body was recovered later in the evening, the Times of India reports.

The victims, all aged between 19 and 23, had been part of a group of about 115 students and 11 teachers from the Abeda Inamdar college in Pune who had travelled to Murud for a picnic.

Locals also managed to rescue six students from the sea earlier in the day, according to the newspaper. Murud is about 95 miles

south of Mumbai and its beach has a dangerous undertow. Local residents told

police they had warned the

students not to swim too far out to sea, but claim the students ignored the advice.