

NEWS IN brief

Egypt overturns death penalty for 149 Islamists

AFP, Cairo An Egyptian appeals court yesterday overturned death sentences for 149 pro-Islamists accused of killing policemen in a mob attack on their station, a judicial source said. The court ordered a retrial for the defendants over the attack, which killed 13 policemen near Cairo on August 14, 2013, the day police shot dead hundreds of Islamist demonstrators in the capital.

IS's Afghan radio station destroyed

AFP, Jalalabad Air strikes have destroyed a radio station run by Islamic State jihadists in eastern Afghanistan, officials said yesterday, two months after the group took to the airwaves in a sign of their growing reach. The Pashto-language "Voice of the Caliphate" beamed IS propaganda in irregular nightly broadcasts from an undisclosed location in Nangarhar province bordering Pakistan.

10 Indian soldiers missing in avalanche

AFP, Srinagar Rescuers yesterday searched for 10 soldiers feared buried in an avalanche in India's remote Himalayas near the de facto border with Pakistan, an army spokesman said. One junior officer and nine soldiers were hit while on duty at a post on Siachen Glacier at an altitude of 5,800 metres, army said.

Lanka's ex-army chief joins govt

AFP, Colombo Sri Lanka's former army chief Sarath Fonseka yesterday joined the coalition government which has vowed to probe allegations of atrocities committed during the bloody finale of the island's separatist war. Fonseka led troops to victory over Tamil Tiger rebels in 2009, ending the 37-year war.



Israeli police officers and emergency personnel inspect the bodies of two of the reported Palestinian assailants killed following an attack at Damascus Gate, a main entrance to Jerusalem's Old City, yesterday. Three Palestinians armed with a gun, knives and explosives attacked Israeli police outside Jerusalem's Old City, leaving at least two officers seriously wounded and the attackers shot dead. PHOTO: AFP

Brexit deals 'fair' for all members Says EU; UK PM to defend package

AFP, Strasbourg The proposed deal to keep Britain in the European Union and avoid a "Brexit" after a referendum is "fair" for Britain and its 27 partners, European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker said Wednesday. Juncker spoke a day after EU Council President Donald Tusk unveiled a series of proposals to help persuade Britons to stay in the European Union. The commission, the executive of the 28-nation bloc, firmly supported the proposals, Juncker told members of the European Parliament. "The settlement that has been proposed is fair for the United Kingdom and fair for the other 27 member states," Juncker told the parliament in Strasbourg, France. "It is also fair for the European parliament," he added. The proposals include a four-year "emergency brake" on welfare payments for EU migrant workers, protection for countries that do not use the euro currency and a "red card" system giving national parliaments more power. "We have addressed the prime minister's concerns while respecting the (EU) treaties," Juncker said. "I've always said I wanted the UK to remain a member of the European Union on the basis of the fair deal," he told the MEPs. Cameron on Tuesday said Tusk's plans showed "real progress" and made it likely that he would campaign to stay in the European Union in a referendum expected in June. But he will likely face tough questions from British lawmakers in a debate late yesterday. Many have greeted the plans with scorn, with UK Independence Party head Nigel Farage dismissing them as "pathetic," while Conservative lawmaker Steve Baker said the prime minister was just "polishing poo".

UN suspends peace talks

AFP, Geneva The UN special envoy for Syria announced yesterday a "temporary pause" until February 25 of troubled talks in Switzerland aimed at ending the country's brutal civil war. "I have concluded frankly that after the first week of preparatory talks there is more work to be done, not only by us but the stakeholders," Staffan de Mistura told reporters in Geneva. "I have indicated from the first day I won't talk for the sake of talking. I therefore have taken the decision to bring a temporary pause. It is not the end or the failure of the talks," he said. "Both sides indicated they are interested in having the political process started. I have already fixed a date for the next talks of 25th February." His comments came after several days of fruitless talks aimed at starting indirect negotiations between the Syrian government and opposition. The hoped-for six months of indirect "proximity talks" are part of an ambitious roadmap agreed by outside powers embroiled in the conflict in November in Vienna. The opposition umbrella group High Negotiations Committee (HNC) only reluctantly arrived in Geneva on Saturday, a day after representatives from President Bashar al-Assad. The HNC was insisting on immediate steps including humanitarian aid getting through to besieged cities, a halt to the bombardment of civilians and the release of prisoners. It was also outraged that while in Geneva a major offensive by the Syrian army and allied militias was happening on the ground near Aleppo, backed by intense Russian air strikes. The government delegation meanwhile complained that the HNC was disorganised, had not named its negotiators and that the body contained individuals it considered "terrorists". De Mistura said he was asking for the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) of outside countries to convene "as soon as possible." Meanwhile, Syrian troops backed by Russian warplanes yesterday cut the last supply route linking rebels in Aleppo city to the Turkish border, a military source said, in a major blow to the opposition. The army broke a three-year rebel siege of two government-held Shiite villages, Nubol and Zahraa, and took control of parts of the supply route, the Syrian military source told AFP.

Heavy air strikes by Russian planes supported the army in its advance, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitoring group. The Observatory said the regime's gains were the most significant development in Aleppo province since 2012. "The pro-regime forces have encircled the rebel quarters in Aleppo from the south, east and north," said Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman. The current offensive is one of several which the government has launched since Russian strikes began on September 30. Russian planes have carried out heavy air strikes throughout the area north of Aleppo city in past days. Despite calls from the US and its allies for Moscow to stop the bombing during the peace process, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said his country had no intention of ending its campaign. "Russian strikes will not cease until we really defeat terrorist organisations like Jabhat al-Nusra. And I don't see why these air strikes should be stopped," he said at a news conference in Oman's capital Muscat. The almost five-year-old civil war has killed more than 260,000 people, forced millions from their homes and sucked in a host of regional and global powers.

SYRIA WAR

Stop refugees to get aid

Germany's interior minister has promised Afghanistan it will continue to provide security support to the country, but only if the arrival of Afghan refugees to the country is stopped. During a visit to Kabul on Monday, Thomas de Maiziere said: "We're staying here as long as it's necessary. But we also expect that the Afghan population stays here," N-tv reports. "We want the influx of refugees to be stopped." The minister quashed any expectations Afghans may hold upon coming to Germany, stressing chances of asylum seekers finding success were slight. "There is no welcome money in Germany. There is no guarantee of a job or an apartment," Maiziere told state broadcaster ZDF, warning Afghans not to succumb to propaganda spread by people smugglers. Mr Maiziere called on Afghans to "stay here to build up [the] country", insisting parts of the region are still stable, Reuters reports. Meanwhile, the UN said yesterday said children are now make up over a third of the migrants who undertake the perilous sea crossing from Turkey to Greece. "Children currently account for 36 percent of those risking the treacherous sea crossing between Greece and Turkey," the UNICEF spokeswoman Sarah Crowe said. "Children and women on the move now make up nearly 60 percent" of those entering from Macedonia, she added. The figures mark a significant shift since June, when 73 percent of migrants were adult males and only one in 10 were under the age of 18. UN said women and children were even more vulnerable to the dangers of trying to travel to Europe. Nearly 4,000 people died trying to reach Europe by sea last year.

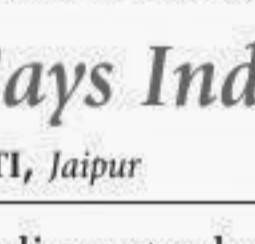
Germany tells Afghanistan; Unicef says one in three reaching Europe are children

AGENCIES Mr Maiziere called on Afghans to "stay here to build up [the] country", insisting parts of the region are still stable, Reuters reports. Meanwhile, the UN said yesterday said children are now make up over a third of the migrants who undertake the perilous sea crossing from Turkey to Greece. "Children currently account for 36 percent of those risking the treacherous sea crossing between Greece and Turkey," the UNICEF spokeswoman Sarah Crowe said. "Children and women on the move now make up nearly 60 percent" of those entering from Macedonia, she added. The figures mark a significant shift since June, when 73 percent of migrants were adult males and only one in 10 were under the age of 18. UN said women and children were even more vulnerable to the dangers of trying to travel to Europe. Nearly 4,000 people died trying to reach Europe by sea last year.



Name and shame nations support terror

Says Indian foreign secretary India yesterday said that countries which support terrorism must be named and shamed, asserting the need for united efforts to combat terror. Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar while stating this at a security conference in a veiled reference to Pakistan also said that some countries believe that they can buy peace at home by supporting groups for terror outside, which he said, was "delusional". He did not name any country. He said India will continue to be in touch with Pakistan with regard to the probe in the terror attack on an IAF base in Pathankot last month. "Nations which support terrorism must be named and shamed," Jaishankar said at the Counter Terrorism Conference 2016 here. He called for fostering greater international cooperation to fight terrorism while pointing out that even so-called victims of terror do not cooperate on fighting terror on international stage. Jaishankar said that governments must show solidarity through a united message condemning terror attacks. On terrorism in eastern parts of the country, he said the India had discussions with Myanmar on fighting terrorism and there is a greater responsiveness to the concerns of India.



Sarath Fonseka

US executes 72-year-old prisoner

AFP, Washington The US state of Georgia executed its oldest death row inmate yesterday, just days before his 73rd birthday, in a move critics denounced as emblematic of capital punishment's excesses. The African American man had spent more than 36 years behind bars for the 1979 murder of a white convenience store clerk. The United States executed 28 people last year, the lowest number since 1991.

ZIKA KEY FACTS



ORDINARY INFECTION

- In most infected people only causes short-lived flu-like symptoms
- Usually lasts less than week
- 70 - 80 percent of cases go unnoticed

NEUROLOGICAL COMPLICATIONS

- Unproven but highly likely links
- Unexplained rise of microcephaly, brain damage in newborns in Zika-affected areas
- Possible rare link to Guillain-Barre syndrome (GBS) in adults

HOW IT IS TRANSMITTED

The mosquito species Aedes aegypti is the main carrier of the virus



One case of human sexual transmission has been confirmed in Dallas, US

SOURCE: WHO/SEEG/CDC/ECDC.EUROPA.EU/BRAZILHEALTH

'Plane crash inspired Laden to plot 9/11'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK Osama bin Laden planned the September 11 attacks after being "inspired" by a chance discussion about a plane crash in the US, al-Qaeda propaganda has claimed. In its weekly "al-Masra" newspaper, Ansar al-Sharia released an article claiming to tell the "untold story" behind the 2001 plot that killed almost 3,000 people at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and Pennsylvania. Just under two years before, EgyptAir Flight 990 had crashed into the Atlantic Ocean during its journey from Los Angeles to Cairo, killing all 217 people on board - almost half of them Americans. Egyptian investigators insisted mechanical failure was the cause but the US National Transportation Safety Board found that co-pilot Gabeel Al-Batouti had deliberately downed the plane, continually repeating "Tawkalat ala Allah" - I put my trust in God - as it plummeted. Despite speculation over terrorism, his family and friends said he had no strong beliefs and sources said it may have been suicide or revenge against EgyptAir following disciplinary action. Bin Laden, then the head of al-Qaeda, was apparently less interested in the motive than in how the disaster could be developed into a deadly new strategy. On hearing about the EgyptAir crash, al-Masra claimed he asked: "Why didn't he crash it into a building?" The article, published by the Jihadology website and seen by The Independent, claims that moment was the origin of the 9/11 plot. But it says it was Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, identified as the "principal architect" of the terror attacks by the 9/11 Commission Report, who had the idea to use planes from the US.



Woman throws flower pot at Modi's convoy

TNN, New Delhi In a security breach, a woman was detained yesterday for allegedly hurling a flower pot at Indian PM Narendra Modi's convoy in Delhi. The incident happened when Modi's convoy was passing through Vijay Chowk in central Delhi. Sources told TOI that the woman wanted to meet Modi at his office, but was stopped by the security personnel. The woman got into an argument with the security men guarding the PM's convoy. The woman allegedly pushed a flower pot kept at one of the guard rails, which fell on the road ahead of the convoy.

Vulnerable Asia fears Zika outbreak

AFP, Mumbai Densely packed slums, rampant mosquitoes and a history of rapidly spreading infections make Asia particularly vulnerable to the devastating Zika virus, posing a massive challenge for the region, health experts warn. Thailand confirmed Tuesday that a man contracted the mosquito-borne infection, blamed for a surge in the number of brain-damaged babies in South America, while Indonesia has also reported a domestic case. The cases in Asia come as top US health authorities confirmed this week a patient in Texas contracted the Zika virus through sexual transmission, fuelling fears the disease may spread rapidly. Officials in India worry it could be next, noting that the Zika and dengue fever-carrying Aedes aegypti mosquito thrives in the high-density communities of its teeming cities, where sanitation is often poor. "In India particularly there is a great threat of the Zika virus spreading quickly given the presence of the Aedes mosquito and favourable environment," said Om Shrivastav, an infectious diseases specialist. "It would definitely be a big challenge for Asian countries to control the spread of the virus... considering high population in the region," added Shrivastav, who is based in Mumbai, home to Dharavi, Asia's biggest slum. Every summer monsoon, heavy rains lash Mumbai for four months, flooding parts of the city, including the slums' maze of alleyways, which become fertile breeding grounds for mosquitoes. Soumya Swaminathan, director general of the Indian Council for Medical Research, warned against panicking but said a surge of dengue cases worldwide recently, was a cause for concern. WHO expert Anthony Costello has stressed there is no reason to believe the crisis would remain limited to Latin America, where 25 countries so far have reported Zika cases.



'Don't be anxious'

Suu Kyi urges patience over presidency decision AFP, Naypyidaw Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday tried to calm nerves over Myanmar's tense political transition, with her choice of proxy presidential candidate shrouded in mystery days after her party took up its parliamentary majority. She was speaking at her first press conference since the new parliament. "Don't be anxious. You will know when the time comes," Suu Kyi told reporters, adding that the party must "think carefully" about its choice of a candidate and suggesting the decision would not come until next month. The NLD's massive majority -- with almost 80 percent of parliament's seats -- gives it a clear run at the presidential selection. Suu Kyi, the centrepiece of Myanmar's long democracy struggle, is excluded from the presidency by a charter clause that bars anyone with close relatives who are foreign. She has sought to sidestep that problem by vowing to rule "above" a proxy leader. Elected members of both houses of parliament and the military will nominate three candidates to replace outgoing President Thein Sein, who retains his post until the end of March. The new president will then be chosen by a vote of the combined houses.