

NEWS IN BRIEF

Spain breaks up 'IS jihadist cell'

AFP, Madrid

Spanish police said they arrested seven people on Sunday with suspected links to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State groups and uncovered an operation to smuggle arms to jihadists under the guise of humanitarian aid. The arrests were carried out in the eastern cities of Valencia and Alicante and in Spain's North African enclave of Ceuta.

Pak PM soft on India: Hafiz Saeed

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has come under attack from Islamist parties and groups supporting militancy in Kashmir that accused him of being soft on India and advocating peace. The groups led by Jamaat-ud-Dawah (JuD) chief Hafiz Saeed said, "Prime Minister is bound to follow the path of Quaid-e-Azam... founding fathers. He should not betray the Kashmir cause."

Iraq deploys troops to retake Mosul

AFP, Kirkuk

The Iraqi army is deploying thousands of soldiers to a northern base in preparation for operations to retake the Islamic State group's hub of Mosul, officials said yesterday. IS seized Mosul in June 2014 and except for air strikes has held Iraq's second city largely unopposed for over 18 months as the country's security forces battled the jihadists in other areas.

IS claims car bomb blast in Saudi capital

REUTERS, Dubai

An explosion damaged a car in the Saudi capital Riyadh yesterday, the Saudi Press Agency reported, an incident the Islamic State militant group said was caused by a bomb one of its members had affixed to the vehicle. There were no injuries.

Europe creates Zika drug 'task force'

AFP, Paris

Europe's medicines watchdog said yesterday it had assembled an expert team to aid the development of drugs and vaccines against Zika virus, feared to cause brain damage in unborn babies. The task force includes specialists in vaccine design and infectious diseases, the London-based European Medicines Agency (EMA) announced in a statement, and warned of a "widening public health crisis".

Somali plane bomb 'was hidden in laptop'

AFP, Mogadishu

Somali intelligence officials investigating a bomb blast on a commercial jet released surveillance footage Sunday appearing to show a passenger being given a laptop in which the bomb was concealed. The blast on Tuesday ripped a hole in the Daallo Airlines plane fuselage shortly after it took off from Somalia's main airport.



An Afghan National Army officer escorts a slightly injured boy from the site of a suicide attack on the outskirts of Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan yesterday. A Taliban suicide bomber threw himself against a bus carrying Afghan soldiers and killed three of them.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Two attempts failed before 26/11 attacks

Says Headley while deposing before Mumbai court

TNN, Mumbai

Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) operative David Coleman Headley, one of the main conspirators in the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, said yesterday that Pakistani terrorists attempted twice to attack Mumbai before the 26/11 strikes, but didn't succeed.



Headley, an American national, was deposing as a witness before a Mumbai court via video conference from the US. He told the court that the LeT's two unsuccessful attempts were in September and October of 2008. The November 26, 2008 attacks killed 166 people.

Headley also said that he joined the LeT after being "influenced" by its head Hafiz Saeed and took his first "course" with the group in 2002 in Muzaffarabad.

Headley, who is currently serving a 35-year prison sentence in the US for his role in the terror attacks, also said he changed his name from Dawood Gilani to David Headley in 2006 so that he could enter India to set up a business.

Headley also said that in his Indian visa application he had furnished "wrong" information "to protect his cover".

"After I got a new passport I disclosed it to my colleagues in LeT of which one of them was Sajid Mir, the person with whom I was dealing with. The objective for coming to India was to set up an office/business so that I can live in India. Before the first visit, Sajid Mir gave me instructions to make a general video of Mumbai," Headley told the court here.

Refugees crowd border

AGENCIES

Turkish humanitarian groups set up camps in Syria and sent in truckloads of aid yesterday for tens of thousands of people stranded on the border after fleeing a Russia-backed regime offensive on the northern region of Aleppo.

Turkey, which has long pushed for a safe zone on the border, has vowed to help an estimated 35,000 people amassed on the frontier, many of them women and children.

"Around 30,000 Syrians have now massed," the border with northwestern Syria which remains closed, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu told a joint press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Ankara.

Turkey and Germany will ask Nato to help police the Turkish coast and stop traffickers from sending migrants on dangerous sea journeys, Merkel told the press conference.

"Turkey has reached the limit of its capacity to absorb the refugees," Deputy Prime Minister Numan

Kurtulmus told CNN Turk television.

"But in the end, these people have nowhere else to go. Either they will die beneath the bombings... or we will open our borders," he said.

Aid agencies have warned of a desperate situation among the crowds queuing in the cold and rain at Bab al-

near Bab al-Salama.

Meanwhile, the Syrian army advanced toward the Turkish border yesterday in a major offensive backed by Russia and Iran that rebels say now threatens the future of their nearly five-year-old insurrection against President Bashar al-Assad, reports Reuters.

"Our whole existence is now threatened, not just losing more ground, said Abdul Rahim al-Najdawi from Liwa al-Tawheed, an insurgent group. "They are advancing and we are pulling back because in the face of such heavy aerial bombing we must minimize our losses."

Speaking during a visit to Ankara yesterday, Merkel criticised Russia for bombings in Syria that have forced tens of thousands of civilians to flee, suggesting they were in violation of a UN Security Council resolution that Moscow signed in December.

"We must take another look at Resolution 2254 from December 18, the resolution of the UN Security Council that was supported by Russia," Merkel said.

SYRIA WAR

Turkey limits entries of refugees, sets up camps

Around 30,000 refugees have massed: Turkish PM

Russian firepower helps Syrian forces edge toward border

Salama frontier post, which faces Turkey's Oncupinar crossing, and begun setting up camps on the Syrian side.

The Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation, which is providing food for 20,000 refugees, said it had set up a new camp with a capacity of 10,000, in addition to eight it already operates

N Korean rocket puts object into space

S Korea fires warning shots at North vessel

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea launched a long-range rocket carrying what it called a satellite, drawing renewed international condemnation just weeks after it carried out a nuclear bomb test.

Critics of the rocket program say it is being used to test technology for a long-range missile. The US Strategic Command said it had detected a missile entering space, and South Korea's military said the rocket had put an object into orbit.

South Korea and the United States said they would explore whether to deploy an advanced missile defense system in South Korea "at the earliest possible date."

"If it can communicate with the Kwangmyongsong-4, North Korea will learn about operating a satellite in space," said David Wright, co-director and senior scientist at the Global Security Program of the Union of Concerned Scientists.

The UN Security Council condemned the launch in an emergency meeting on late Sunday, and vowed to take "significant measures" in response to Pyongyang's violations of UN resolutions.

Meanwhile, the South Korean navy fired warning shots at a North Korean patrol boat that intruded over their disputed maritime border yesterday. The defence ministry in Seoul said the North Korean vessel crossed the Yellow Sea border just before 7:00am. "It quickly retreated after the South Korean navy fired warning shots," a ministry official said.

UN against amnesty for Lanka rebels

Ex-regime slams human rights chief's visit

AFP, Colombo

The UN rights chief has said Tamil rebels still detained years after the end of Sri Lanka's bloody civil war should not be granted universal amnesty, a top regional official said Sunday.

More than 200 suspected Tamil separatists remain in prison, many without charge, following the country's bitter 37-year-war that ended nearly seven years ago. Tamil political and civil society groups have long demanded their unconditional release, though the government has rejected demands for universal amnesty.

Speaking on a trip to the island nation, UN rights chief Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said jailed Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) members should clear their names in court, according to the chief minister of Sri Lanka's former war zone, C V Wigneswaran.

"He (Zeid) said it is not the common practice of the international community to give common pardon to such suspects," Wigneswaran told reporters in Jaffna.

Meanwhile, ex-president Mahinda Rajapakse's brother denounced yesterday the UN human rights chief's visit to Sri Lanka as a "big joke", as the former regime stepped up opposition to a UN-backed war crimes probe.

Former president Rajapakse and his brother, ex-defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, have signed a petition against the probe into allegations of thousands of civilian deaths during the final months of Sri Lanka's separatist war.

MYANMAR PRESIDENTIAL VOTE Nominees to be named March 17

AFP, Naypyidaw

Myanmar will not discover who its new president will be until at least mid-March, an official said yesterday, as speculation swirls over who will serve as proxy for democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The cut off point for presidential candidate proposals will be March 17, Win Khaing Than, the speaker of Myanmar's combined houses of parliament told lawmakers yesterday.

That means voters will have waited more than four months to discover who the new president will be after they delivered a thumping victory for Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party in landmark November polls.

Suu Kyi is currently barred from top political office by a junta-era constitution.

The announcement prolongs anxiety over who will take over the presidency from outgoing general-turned-reformer Thein Sein at the end of March.

"(The military) will never change their position," information minister Ye Htut told AFP.

Three presidential candidates will be nominated, one by each of the lower and upper chambers and one from the army, which retains 25 percent of parliament's seats. The new president will then be chosen by a vote of the combined houses, which are dominated by an overall NLD majority.



Rescuers carry a survivor out from the site where a 17-storey apartment building collapsed after an earthquake hit Tainan, southern Taiwan. Four more survivors were pulled alive from the rubble yesterday. The official death toll from the quake rose to 38, with more than 100 people missing.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Obama urges Arab world to set up inclusive govts

AFP, Dubai

US President Barack Obama urged Arab countries yesterday to establish inclusive governments to ensure security in a region rocked by turmoil.

"When governments truly invest in their citizens, their education, skills, and health, and universal human rights are upheld, countries are more peaceful, more prosperous and more successful," he told the opening day of the World Government Summit in Dubai.

"As we have seen in the tumult across the Middle East and North Africa, when governments do not lift up their citizens, it's a recipe for instability and strife," he said in a video address to the conference.

Obama recalled discussing with leaders of the six Arab monarchies of the Gulf at Camp David last year how "true and lasting security requires an inclusive government that serves all citizens". Several Middle East and North African

countries have been rocked by a wave of uprisings demanding reforms that started in Tunisia and led to the 2011 Arab Spring.

Some of the uprisings, such as those in Syria, Libya and Yemen, have morphed into civil wars prompting the rise of extremists such as the Islamic State jihadist group as well as an exodus of millions of refugees to Europe.

The president of the World Bank Group, Jim Yong Kim, echoed Obama at the Dubai summit, urging leaders to "build inclusive governments".

"Good governance is the foundation of all development," Kim told participants. "Many parts of the world are becoming more fragile, making quality leadership and good governance ever more important." He called for governments to be "transparent in their actions and fully engage with citizens". More than 3,000 participants from 125 countries are attending the three-day summit on governance.



Nepal protesters call off blockade, strike

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's ethnic minority groups lifted a four-month-old blockade along a major trading point with India yesterday, saying it didn't want ordinary people to suffer anymore, but vowed to carry on with its campaign against the new constitution.

The Madhesi Front of four small parties based in the Tarai lowlands launched the strike in September to force Nepal's major political parties to amend the new charter and give them a greater role in the power structure.

But the strike has led to a severe fuel shortage, and last week traders, fed up with the prolonged closure of the border crossing, burned the tents of the Madhesi activists and removed the barriers they had placed on the open border with India.

"We have called off the protests at the border, transport strike and closure of government offices," said Sarbendra Nath Shukla of the Tarai Madhes Loktantrik Party, part of the Madhesi Front.

Nepal made changes to the constitution to ensure greater participation of the Madhesis in parliament but the community leaders said the amendments failed to address their central fear of redrawing the provincial borders in a way that would divide them.

Shukla said the Madhesi Front would try to rally the public against the new charter with signature campaigns and public meetings.

British media 'most right-wing' in Europe

Finds new research by YouGov

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

too right-wing, or balanced. The five policy areas analysed were immigration, housing, health, economics and crime.

The British press is regarded as the most "right-wing" and "biased" in Europe, according to new research by YouGov.

The company polled people from seven major European nations to find out how they perceived the press in their own countries. They found that 26 percent of Britons viewed their newspapers, TV and radio as "too right-wing", more than in any of the other nations surveyed.

By contrast, only 17 percent of British respondents felt their media was "too left-wing". The other countries in the survey were France, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland.

Respondents to the survey were asked whether they felt their country's media coverage of five key issues was too left-wing,

Between a quarter and a third of Britons felt that British coverage of each of these topics struck a reasonable political balance. However, in each area people were more likely to describe coverage as "too right-wing" than "too left-wing".

Only Finnish people saw their own press as similarly skewed to the right, with 23 percent of Finns perceiving a right-wing bias in their media. All five of the other countries in the survey were more likely to assess their own media as tending towards excessively left-wing coverage. Only 19 percent of French people, for example, perceived their press as biased towards the right.

