

NEWS IN brief

Nepal PM to visit India next week

AFP, Kathmandu
Nepal's prime minister will travel to India next week on a visit aimed at repairing fractured relations between the neighbours after the end of a crippling months-long border blockade. Kathmandu said yesterday. "Prime Minister Oli is now in a position to improve the souring relationship with India after the promulgation of the new constitution in Nepal," said a PM's advisor.

UK's daily Independent drops print edition

AFP, London
The Independent will publish its final print edition next month and become digital only, its owners said yesterday. "The newspaper industry is changing and that change is being driven by readers. They're showing us that the future is digital," said Evgeny Lebedev, the Russian-born British owner of The Independent.

Death threat: Suu Kyi gets extra security

AFP, Yangon
Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi has been given extra security following a death threat on Facebook alluding to her presidential ambitions, officials said yesterday. In a post last week, a man called Ye Lwin Myint threatened to shoot anyone who tries to change a controversial clause in the constitution which bars Suu Kyi from the top office. He did not specifically name the Nobel laureate.



Yemenis inspect the damage following an air-strike carried out by the Saudi-led coalition on a school and a bowling club, in the capital Sanaa, yesterday. Saudi Arabia has asked the United Nations to move aid workers away from rebel-held areas in Yemen as the Riyadh-led coalition presses on with air strikes against insurgents, according to a letter seen by AFP Thursday. The United Nations flatly rejected the request.

BORDER CONTROL TO STEM MIGRANT FLOW

EU issues Greece 3 months' ultimatum

French PM criticizes Merkel's liberal policy

AFP, Brussels
EU member states yesterday gave Greece a three-month ultimatum to remedy "deficiencies" in controlling the influx of migrants or effectively face suspension from the Schengen passport-free zone. The decision -- taken by ministers over Greek objections -- culminates weeks of pressure on Greece, the main gateway for the million refugees and migrants who entered Europe last year, stoking the continent's biggest such crisis since World War II. A report adopted 10 days earlier by the European Commission, the EU executive, found Greece was failing to properly register and fingerprint migrants during inspections at the Turkish land border and several islands in the Aegean Sea last November. The document, seen by AFP, gave Greece, which is already struggling to emerge from a massive debt crisis, one month to "establish an action plan to remedy the deficiencies." After a further two months, Greece must report back on how the scheme is being implemented. If Greece fails to remedy the problems by mid-May, Brussels could authorise other member states to exceptionally extend border controls within the EU's cherished Schengen area, including with Greece, for up to two years, instead of the normal six months. The Schengen area allows passport-free travel through 26 countries, most of them in the EU, and is put forward as one of the major European achievements on unity. Meanwhile, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's liberal refugee policy came under fire again as French Prime Minister Manuel Valls yesterday warned it is not sustainable in the long run. Valls's criticisms came after his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev lambasted Merkel's asylum policy as a "total failure."

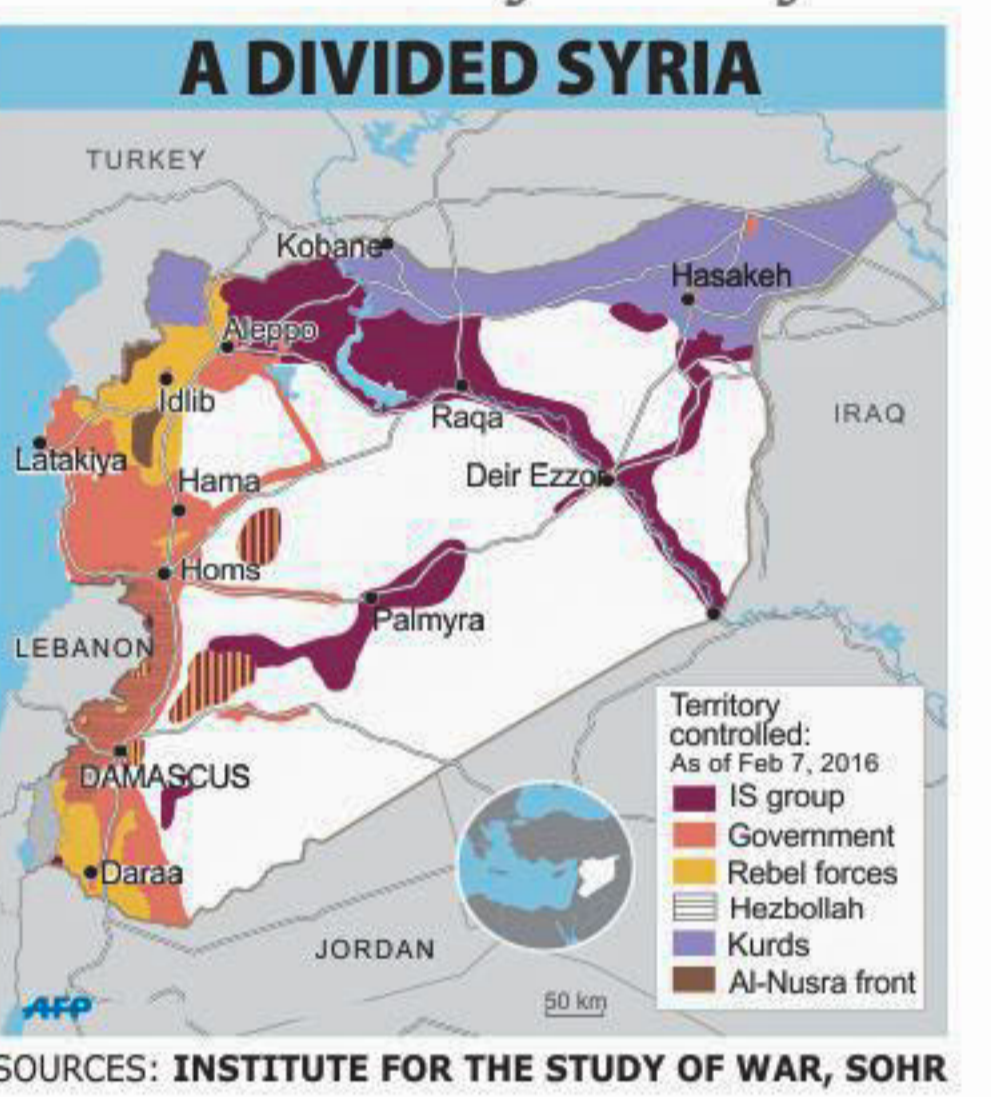
Russia PM warns of world war

Says prospect of Saudi, UAE incursion raises fears of a conflict without end

AGENCIES
The deployment of foreign ground troops in Syria could draw nations into a world war, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has warned. Speaking to the German newspaper Handelsblatt, the Prime Minister said "a ground operation draws everyone taking part in it into a war". When asked about Saudi Arabia's proposal to send in ground troops, he said "the Americans and our Arab partners must consider whether or not they want a permanent war". On Thursday, Saudi Arabia confirmed it is planning to deploy ground troops in Syria to fight IS. Medvedev also criticised the refusal of Western powers to collaborate with Russia in Syria. He said the conflict must be resolved through talks, not by opening another front in the war. Over 250,000 people have died in the Syrian conflict, which has

DEVELOPMENTS

CIA director says IS can make chem weapons
US says wins Saudi, UAE air campaign commitment against IS

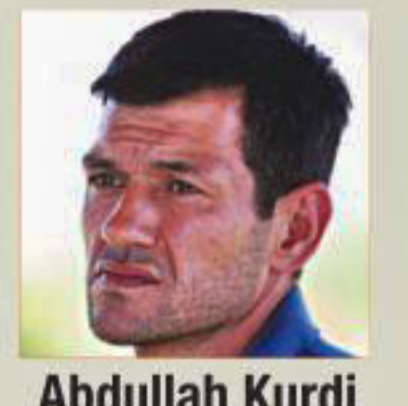


dozen defence ministers at Nato headquarters, Carter yesterday said key ally the United Arab Emirates agreed to send special forces soldiers to Syria to assist in the development of local Sunni Arab fighters focused on recapturing Raqqa, IS's de facto capital. CIA director John Brennan has said that Islamic State fighters have used chemical weapons and have the capability to make small quantities of chlorine and mustard gas, CBS News reported Thursday. Brennan also warned of the possibility that the Islamic State group could seek to export the weapons to the West for financial gain. The release of the interview excerpts comes two days after similar comments from spy chief James Clapper before a congressional committee. "ISIL has also used toxic chemicals in Iraq and Syria, including the blister agent sulfur mustard," Clapper, the director of national intelligence, told lawmakers.

TRIAL ON AYLAN KURDI'S DEATH

Smugglers, father on dock

AFP, Istanbul
The father of Aylan Kurdi, the Syrian toddler whose drowning shocked the world last year, went on trial on Thursday along with two alleged people smugglers accused of causing the death of migrants. Aylan's mother and brother also died in the same accident. The trial of the two Syrian nationals opened at the criminal court in the western Turkish resort of Bodrum, the Dogan news agency reported. If convicted, they face up to 35 years in jail. But also on trial in absentia was Aylan Kurdi's father, Abdullah Kurdi, who survived the sinking of the boat. Both of the defendants in court strongly incriminated Abdullah as a well-known organiser of people smuggling, accusing him of being responsible for the deaths and driving the boat at the time of the disaster. But Dogan said the court had decided to drop the legal proceedings against



Farmers clash with police amid tear gas in front of the Agriculture ministry in Athens, during a demonstration against pension reform, yesterday. More than 2,000 farmers clashed with police in Athens yesterday protesting the austerity measure demanded by the EU and the International Monetary Fund.

Make N Korea 'pay price'

China urges UN action; South, US discuss missile defence

AGENCIES
China will back a UN Security Council resolution to make North Korea "pay the necessary price" for recent rocket launches, its foreign minister told Reuters yesterday, adding the goal was to get Pyongyang back to the negotiating table. Earlier, South Korea said it will begin talks with Washington as early as next week on deploying the advanced US missile defence system following North Korea's rocket launch. Wang Yi also said he was concerned by a possible US deployment of its sophisticated THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) missile defence system to South Korea, saying it could also be used to target China. North Korea has been under UN sanctions since its first nuclear test in 2006. It has conducted three more atomic tests since then. Washington and Beijing have appeared

divided over how to respond to North Korea, with Washington urging tougher sanctions and Beijing stressing the need for dialogue. However, Wang told Reuters at an interview in Munich that it was time for a "strong" resolution covering a wide range of areas. "(We) support the United Nations Security Council to take further steps and in adopting a new resolution so that North Korea will pay the necessary price and show there are consequences for its behaviour," the minister said. South Korea on Wednesday suspended operations at the Kaesong industrial zone as punishment for the rocket launch. The North called the move "a declaration of war" on Thursday and expelled the South's workers. A few minutes before yesterday midnight, the South shut off the supply of electricity into Kaesong that powered the factory zone, the ministry said early yesterday. It also cut the water supply.

TENSION IN KOREAN PENINSULA

NATIONAL HERALD CASE

Gandhis need to face trial: Indian SC

TNN, New Delhi
The Supreme Court yesterday refused to quash trial court proceedings against Congress president Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul in the National Herald case, but it exempted them from personally appearing in the hearing scheduled for February 20 in a Patiala House court. At the same time, the apex court expressed its unhappiness at the Delhi high court's conduct when it rejected an appeal by the Gandhis to quash the case. The Supreme Court bench headed by Justice J S Khehar expunged remarks made against the Gandhis by the Delhi high court, saying it was wrong of the high court to comment against Congress leaders when the trial court proceedings was yet to begin. "Let there be fair trial in the case. We expunged the remarks made by HC and trial court proceeds in the case without getting influenced by HC observations," the bench said. The Delhi HC judgment had said that the "probity of the legendary national political party" was "at stake" in the case, as the office-bearers of the party held National Herald's funds in trust. The bench dismissed the appeals filed by the Congress leaders, observing that prima facie the case "evidenced criminality". Earlier, a bench comprising Chief Justice T S Thakur and Justice R Banumathi assured senior advocate Kapil Sibal, who's representing the Gandhi family, saying they will look into the case to see if it should be urgently heard.

Glimmer of hope for S Sudan peace

President names rival as deputy

AFP, Juba
South Sudan's President Salva Kiir has named his arch-rival Riek Machar as vice-president, raising hopes for the implementation of a repeatedly broken peace deal to end more than two years of civil war. Tens of thousands of people have been killed and over two million forced from their homes since war between the rivals broke out in December 2013, pushing the world's youngest nation to the brink of famine. "I, Salva Kiir Mayardit, President of the Republic of South Sudan, do hereby issue this Republican Decree for the appointment of Dr. Riek Machar Teny as the first vice President of the Republic of South Sudan," said the decree issued late on Thursday. While the appointment was agreed as part of an August 2015 peace deal, its announcement now adds pressure on Machar to return to South Sudan from exile. Machar, who was vice-president from 2005 until he was sacked in 2013 welcomed the decree. It was not immediately clear when Machar would travel to Juba to take up his post. Analysts warned that while Kiir's decree may help end the war between the two, levels of intense violence and conflict will likely continue at a local level.



4 UN troops killed in Mali attacks

AFP, Bamako
Four United Nations peacekeepers died and several others were wounded when suspected Islamists attacked their base in Mali's restive north, as three Malian soldiers perished in an ambush in the same region, security sources said. The latest attacks highlighted the vulnerability of the sprawling arid north, where UN peacekeepers and Malian soldiers are struggling in their fight against jihadists who had seized vast swathes of territory in 2012. A camp of the UN mission in Mali, or MINUSMA, was attacked with rockets early yesterday in the strategic town of Kidal in the northeast, a UN source said. Two Guinean soldiers died on the spot. Two other soldiers, among seven seriously wounded, died later of their injuries, the Guinean source said.

RACE TO WHITE HOUSE Clinton, Sanders eye minority votes

REUTERS, Milwaukee
Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders clashed sharply in a debate on Thursday over their support for President Barack Obama, with Sanders accusing Clinton of "a low blow" after she compared him to Republicans. As the Democratic race moves to states with large minority populations, both candidates openly courted black and Hispanic voters during a debate that was far more restrained and cordial than last week's contentious debate in New Hampshire. In the sharpest exchange of the night, Clinton attacked Sanders for being too critical of Obama. "The kind of criticism that we've heard from Senator Sanders about our president, I expect from Republicans, I do not expect from someone running for the Democratic nomination to succeed President Obama," said Clinton. "Madam Secretary, that is a low blow," said Sanders. Sanders said he had been an Obama ally in the Senate even if he did not always agree with him. "Do senators have the right to disagree with the president?" Sanders said. Clinton, who has eagerly embraced Obama's legacy, said Sanders had called Obama weak and a disappointment, and "that goes further than saying we have our disagreements." With an eye on the minority vote, both candidates decried the high incarceration rate of African-Americans and called for broad reforms of the criminal justice system. The race now moves to what should be more favourable ground for Clinton in Nevada and South Carolina, states with more black and Hispanic voters, who, polls show, have been more supportive of Clinton so far.

'Goodbye' to Philae

AFP, Paris
Scientists gave up yesterday trying to contact robot lab Philae, stubbornly silent on the surface of a comet streaking through space -- closing a captivating chapter in an historic quest. "Time to say goodbye to Philae," announced the German Aerospace Center DLR, and said it "will no longer be sending any commands." Philae's comet host is moving further and further away from the Sun and its battery-boosting rays, and by this point "there is indeed little hope to still get a signal," project manager Stephan Ullamec told AFP. The probe was "probably" covered with comet dust, and shaded on the craggy surface of its alien home -- comet 67P/Churyomov-Gerasimenko. Comet-orbiting mothership Rosetta will continue listening for Philae for a month or two, until it can no longer spare the energy required. Philae touched down on November 12, 2014, after a 10-year, 6.5-billion-kilometre odyssey through space, piggybacking on Rosetta. Placing a probe on 67P marked a breakthrough moment in the European Space Agency's mission to prod a comet for clues to the origins of life on Earth.

