

# NEWSIN brief

## 7 killed in gun battle in Indian Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar  
A fierce gun battle killed two soldiers and five suspected militants yesterday in Indian-administered Kashmir near the de facto border with Pakistan, army officials said. The seven died during a heavy exchange of fire in the border village of Marsari, 130 kilometres (80 miles) northwest of the main city of Srinagar, defence spokesman N N Joshi said.

## Palestinian teen 'attacker' shot dead

AFP, Hebron  
Israeli forces shot dead a Palestinian teenager as she tried to stab a soldier in the flashpoint West Bank city of Hebron yesterday, Israeli and Palestinian authorities said. The incident took place as Washington's UN ambassador, Samantha Power, arrived for talks with Israeli and Palestinian leaders. Since October, 167 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces.

## Myanmar army chief's term extended

REUTERS, Yangon  
Myanmar's powerful army chief Min Aung Hlaing and his deputy are slated to extend their terms for another five years, a local newspaper said yesterday. The move means Min Aung Hlaing has consolidated his power base among the military leadership and would allow the army to avoid a top-level reshuffle at this sensitive period.

## Taiwan building tragedy toll hits 114

AFP, Taipei  
Rescuers have found the bodies of more than 100 people killed after an apartment block in Taiwan collapsed during an earthquake one week ago, authorities said yesterday. Officials said the rescue operation has ended. The death toll now stand at 116, with 114 of the victims from Wei-kuan, according to Tainan government.

# Russia doubts Syria ceasefire

### Advancing regime eyes IS capital; US says Assad 'deluded' in claiming military solution

AGENCIES  
Russia yesterday said a ceasefire deal for Syria agreed by major powers was more likely to fail than succeed, as Syrian government forces backed by further Russian air strikes gained more ground against rebels near Aleppo.

International divisions over Syria surfaced anew at a Munich conference where Russia rejected French charges that it was bombing civilians, just a day after world powers agreed on the "cessation of hostilities" due to begin in a week's time.

The conflict, reshaped by Russia's intervention last September, has gone into an even higher gear since the United Nations sought to revive peace talks. These were suspended earlier this month in Geneva before they got off the ground.

The Syrian army looked poised yesterday to advance into the Islamic State-held province of Raqqa for the first time since 2014, apparently to pre-empt any move by Saudi Arabia to send ground forces into Syria to fight the jihadist insurgents.

The cessation of hostilities deal falls short of a formal ceasefire, since it was not signed by the warring parties - the government and rebels



A woman of the Kurdish community takes part in the annual rally of Kurds from all over Europe to denounce the detention of Turkey's Kurd rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan, yesterday, in Strasbourg, France. Turkish artillery yesterday shelled areas of Aleppo province in northern Syria held by Kurdish forces.

seeking to topple President Bashar al-Assad in a five-year-old war that has killed 250,000 people.

If its forces retake Aleppo and seal the Turkish border, Damascus would deal a crushing blow to the insurgents who were on the march until Russia intervened, shoring up Assad's rule and paving the way to the current reversal of rebel fortunes.

Russia has said it will keep bombing Islamic State and the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front, which in many areas of western Syria fights government forces in close

proximity to insurgents deemed moderates by Western states.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, asked at a security conference in Munich on Saturday to assess the chances of the cessation of hostilities deal succeeding, replied: "49 percent." Asked the same question, his German counterpart Frank-Walter Steinmeier put the odds at 51 percent.

The complex, multi-sided civil war in Syria, raging since 2011, has drawn in most regional and global powers, caused the world's worst

humanitarian emergency. Assad, backed on the ground by Iranian combatants and Lebanon's Hezbollah in addition to big power ally Russia, is showing no appetite for a negotiated ceasefire. He declared this week that the government's goal was to recapture all of Syria, though he said this could take time.

The US government said Assad was "deluded" if he thought there was a military solution to the conflict. Syrian state television announced the army and allied militia had yesterday captured the village of al-Tamura overlooking rebel terrain northwest of Aleppo.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported advances in the same area, adding that Russian jets had hit three rebel-held towns near the Turkish border.

Government offensives around Aleppo have sent tens of thousands of people fleeing towards the Turkish border.

The Observatory said government troops had also edged to within a few kilometres (miles) of the provincial boundary of Raqqa after making a rapid advance eastwards along a desert highway from Idhriya in the last few days. The Syrian government has had no serious foothold in Raqqa province since Islamic State captured

# DEPLOYMENT OF SAUDI TROOPS IN TURKEY A bloodier Syria conflict looming?

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK  
The reports that Saudi Arabia is sending troops and aircraft to Turkey for a possible ground mission in Syria adds a highly combustible element to a fine balance between fragile hopes of a ceasefire and the slide into a conflict even bloodier than the one taking place now.

Confirmation of the Saudi deployment came from the Turkish foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, and shows a calibrated policy by two states, who consider themselves to be heavyweights and who are both currently badly losing out in Syria.

Cavusoglu said that Turkey and Saudi Arabia have "always emphasised the need for an extensive result-oriented strategy in the fight against the Daesh (IS) terrorist group.... Turkey and Saudi Arabia may launch an operation from the land."

But this is less to do with IS and much more with the fact that Sunni rebels, backed by Saudis and the Turks, are



rapidly losing ground to the forces of Bashar al-Assad, supported by a ferocious Russian air onslaught, Iranian 'volunteers' and fighters from the Lebanese Hezbollah. There is added exasperation, from the Turkish point of view, that some of this territory is being taken over by Kurdish forces.

The Incerlik gambit comes against a backdrop of a convoluted and confusing scenario, not just on the ground in Syria but in the maneuvers going on over the conflict elsewhere.

The Saudi defence minister and heir apparent to the throne, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, presented his country's military plans in Syria to a summit of the US-led anti-Isis coalition at the Nato headquarters in Brussels last Thursday. He did not, according to diplomatic sources, mention sending troops and aircraft to Turkey to the US defence secretary Ash Carter and his fellow Western ministers.

As those talks finished there was an announcement, at another international meeting on Syria, in Munich, by US Secretary of State, John Kerry, and the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, that there will be a ceasefire in a week. Within, 24 hours however, President Assad declared that he was preparing to reconquer all of Syria.

Neither Riyadh nor Ankara appear to believe peace will break out anytime soon and are frantically trying to redress the balance on the ground with the projected sending in of troops.

This will bring inherent risks. The Sunni Gulf states have long been fighting proxy wars with their bitter Shia enemies, Iran, with the vicious conflict in Yemen the latest in the series. A force led by the Saudis, with likely contributions from the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, will, in Syria, find themselves in the same battlespace for the first time as the Iranians and Shia militias.

The Turks will come up against the YPG, the Syrian Kurdish group allied to the Turkish Kurds of the PKK, and enemies of Ankara. The YPG, however, are the best fighters the Americans have found against IS and have provided air cover for their operations.

The sending of Saudi aircraft and troops to Turkey does not mean an invasion is imminent. But one cannot rule out



Pope Francis (L) and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill hug each other after signing agreements in Havana, on Friday. Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill called in a historic meeting Friday for restored Christian unity and urgent action to help Christians threatened by violence in the Middle East. The Pope went to Mexico yesterday for a five-day visit.

# Modi govt failing to boost economic investment

### Says Manmohan, criticises govt's inconsistent Pakistan policy

REUTERS, New Delhi  
In a rare interview India's former prime minister Manmohan Singh criticised his successor Narendra Modi's government for failing to take advantage of lower commodity prices to propel economic growth and an inconsistent policy towards neighbour Pakistan.

Speaking to the India Today, Singh said the Modi government should use India's improving fiscal balances to raise investment in the economy and raise credit availability to businesses.

"In the hands of a purposeful government, this could be an opportunity to step up investment in the economy in a big way," said Singh, who left office after a 2014 election loss.

Singh, who is regarded as the architect of India's economic reforms, said the government has not been able to capitalise

on falling oil and commodity prices that have lowered India's import bill. Sharp falls in import prices have reduced India's trade deficit raising hopes that it will boost economic activity.

India's turbocharged growth figures have been criticised by many analysts



for giving too flattering a view of Asia's third-largest economy.

Indian economy posted growth of 7.3 percent in the quarter through December, but consumer inflation inched up unexpectedly last month and capital goods production, a proxy for investments, fell nearly 20 percent

in December.

Singh said Modi should focus on improving relations with neighbouring countries, adding that the government has not succeeded at making headway with arch-rival Pakistan who India accuses of supporting insurgents across their shared border.

"Certainly relations with major powers have improved... But I would say that the real test of foreign policy is in the handling of your neighbours. And here I would say that the Modi government's handling of Pakistan is inconsistent," 83-year old Singh told the magazine. "It has been one step forward, two steps back."

Singh, an Oxbridge-educated economist as finance minister in 1991 was credited for reforms that opened up the Indian economy, but his legacy is marred by his final term as PM marked by corruption scandals, ballooning inflation and skidding

# US approves F-16 sale to Pakistan

AFP, Washington  
The United States said Friday it had approved selling up to eight Lockheed Martin F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan, along with training, radar and other equipment, worth a total of \$699 million.

The Defense Security Cooperation Agency, which coordinates such foreign arms sales, said it had informed Congress of the plans on Thursday.

The F-16 aircraft would allow "enhance Pakistan's ability to conduct counter-insurgency, counterterrorism operations."

Pakistan's arch-rival India said it was "disappointed" by the possible sale. A report said India was planning to summon the US ambassador "to convey displeasure."

# Female-led mosque opens in Denmark

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Scandinavia's very first female-led mosque has opened in Denmark in a bid to challenge Islam's "patriarchal structures".

All activities at the Mariam mosque in Copenhagen - except Friday prayers - will be open to men but all the imams will be female.

Founder Sherin Khankan told Agence France Presse she wanted to set up the mosque to challenge the "normalised patriarchal structures".

She said: "We have normalised patriarchal structures in our religious institutions. Not just in Islam, but also within Judaism and Christianity and other religions. And we would like to challenge that."

Khankan, who is a well known commentator in Denmark, said the reaction from the local Muslim community has been mostly positive with only "moderate" opposition in some quarters.

She said there was a tradition within Islam of women being imams and most of the criticism was based on ignorance. A similar project has been proposed in Bradford for British Muslim women.

Last year, the Muslim Women's Council (MWC) announced plans for a mosque in the city to be run by women which were put forward for public consultation in August.



# Major attacks in Europe 'a certainty'

Says French PM  
AFP, Munich  
More major attacks in Europe are a "certainty", French Prime Minister Manuel Valls told an audience at the Munich Security Conference yesterday.

"We have entered -- we all feel it -- in a new era characterised by the lasting presence of 'hyper-terrorism'," said Valls, whose country was hit by two Islamist attacks last year.

"We must be fully conscious of the threat, and react with a very great force and great lucidity. There will be attacks. Large-scale attacks. It's a certainty. This hyper-terrorism is here to stay," he said.

Valls was speaking at the three-day security conference in the southern German city, speaking alongside Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev.

"The force of the ideological fascination is formidable, and if we have changed era it is because this hyper-terrorism is in the heart of our societies."

Meanwhile, the mass influx of refugees and other migrants into Europe spells a "near existential threat" to the continent, US Secretary of State John Kerry said yesterday.

"The United States understands the near existential nature of this threat to the politics and fabric of life in Europe," he said at the Munich Security Conference.

# A hunter releases his tamed golden eagle during the traditional hunting contest outside the village of Nura, east from Almaty, Kazakhstan, yesterday. Inset, A tamed hawk attacks a rabbit.

PHOTO: REUTERS



# Roses are red, elbows are blue

AFP, Tokyo  
Elbowing each other in the stampede to buy Valentine's Day chocolate for the men in their lives, Japanese women brought stores to a standstill yesterday.

In Japan, the menfolk do sweet nothing on February 14 while the women do battle in heaving aisles, loading up on confectionery treats for the object of their desire.

If they are lucky, the guys will reciprocate on White Day in March, when traditionally they give a white gift, from sweets to lingerie.

"My feet hurt, my arms hurt, and my head hurts!" wined Kana Shimizu, clutching two dainty bags of Belgian chocolate that cost more than 10,000 yen (\$90) at a plush store in Tokyo's Ginza district.

"This one is for my boyfriend, the other one is for me. I don't want him having all the fun."

