

NEWS IN brief

Belgium arrests 10 'IS recruiter'

AFP, Brussels
Belgian police yesterday arrested ten people in the Brussels area who were allegedly part of a network recruiting people to fight with the Islamic State group in Syria, prosecutors said. The ten were arrested during raids in several areas of the Belgian capital, including the Molenbeek quarter where several of the key suspects in the November Paris attacks lived.

Bangkok blast suspects plead not guilty

BBC ONLINE
Two Chinese Uighurs Tuesday denied involvement in a deadly shrine bombing in the Thai capital, and a lawyer said one had been beaten up and threatened with deportation to force an earlier confession. Twenty people were killed when the bomb hit the Erawan shrine in the centre of the Thai capital on 17 August. No group has ever admitted being behind the bombing, which also injured scores of people.

US to allow up to 110 flights to Cuba

AFP, Washington
The United States and Cuba was to sign a bilateral agreement yesterday authorizing up to 110 scheduled daily commercial flights to Havana and nine other destinations on the communist island. The deal restores regular flights between the two countries for the first time in more than half a century.

Sarkozy quizzed over campaign finances

AFP, Paris
Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy was to be questioned by investigating magistrates yesterday about a long-running scandal over his 2012 campaign finances. It was not clear if Sarkozy, who is manoeuvring for another run at the presidency in 2017, would be charged after the session with the magistrates in Paris.



SYRIA CRISIS
Regime allows aid convoys to 7 besieged areas: UN
Angela Merkel backs no-fly zones to protect civilians

The Turkish army tanks fire towards the Syria border, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Turkey urges ground operation

Russia denies deadly strikes on hospitals, schools as tension escalates

AFP, Istanbul
Turkey yesterday called for a ground operation with its international allies to end the war in Syria, as the United Nations announced aid convoys are being sent to besieged towns. "So far I understand that the government of Syria has approved access to seven besieged areas," said Vanessa Huguenin, spokeswoman for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) earlier said the Syrian government yesterday approved access to seven besieged areas, including Mouadamiya al-Sham near Damascus and Deir al-Zor. Around 486,700 people in Syria currently live in areas besieged by either government or rebel forces, UN figures show. Scores of people

are reported to have died of malnutrition or because of a lack of medical treatment. On the international front, tensions escalated over Russia's air war backing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, with Ankara branding the bombing "barbaric". Turkey sees Assad's ouster as essential to ending a five-year conflict that has killed more than 260,000 people, and is highly critical of Iran and Russia for supporting the Damascus regime. "We want a ground operation with our international allies," a senior Turkish official told reporters in Istanbul, adding such an operation would require the involvement of the United States and Gulf states. "There is not going to be a unilateral military operation from Turkey to Syria," the official emphasised, but added: "Without a ground operation it is impossible to stop the fighting in Syria."

Analysts fear that any ground incursion by Turkey and its Nato allies could lead to a dangerous confrontation with Russia. The UN said Monday that nearly 50 civilians, including children, had died in the bombings of at least five medical facilities and two schools in northern Syria. Russia denied it had bombed any hospital, calling such reports "unsubstantiated accusations". Meanwhile, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel said she now supported a no-fly zone to protect civilians after the air strikes. In a new departure, Merkel told Germany's Stuttgarter Zeitung newspaper that she now favoured a no-fly zone being imposed in Syria. She said: "In the present situation it would be helpful if there were an area over which none of the warring parties would fly air attacks - a sort of no-fly zone."

Boutros Boutros-Ghali dies at 93

AFP, United Nations
Former UN secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who led the world body from the hopeful times that emerged at the end of the Cold War to the massacres in Rwanda and Bosnia, has died at the age of 93, the United Nations announced yesterday. The Egyptian diplomat became the first secretary-general from the African continent in 1992, but his tenure ended abruptly after five years when the United States vetoed his second term. Boutros-Ghali, who served as the United Nations' sixth secretary-general, died in Cairo, a UN spokesman said. UN Security Council members observed a moment of silence in memory of Boutros-Ghali during a meeting in New York. A former Egyptian foreign minister, the veteran diplomat headed the world body during one of its most difficult times with crises in Somalia, Rwanda, the Middle East and the former Yugoslavia. After a series of clashes with the US administration, Washington turned against Boutros-Ghali and decided to back Ghanaian Kofi Annan for the top post. After leaving the United Nations, Boutros-Ghali served as secretary-general of the Francophonie group of French-speaking nations. Boutros-Ghali was born on November 14, 1922 into a Coptic Christian family in Cairo. He was educated at Cairo University and in Paris, where he established a lifelong connection with France.



JNU SEDITION ROW Teacher arrested, protest continues

AP, New Delhi
Students, journalists and teachers protested in the Indian capital yesterday after a student union leader's arrest and subsequent violence by Hindu nationalists. The uproar has once again sparked allegations that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party are displaying intolerance and cracking down on political dissent in the name of patriotism. Police cordons blocked right-wing Hindus from entering the campus of Jawaharlal Nehru University, where thousands of students have been protesting for days. Police also arrested Delhi University lecturer S A R Geelani before dawn. He and JNU student leader Kanhaiya Kumar are accused of sedition for participating in events where slogans against India allegedly were shouted along with criticism against the 2013 secret hanging of a Kashmiri separatist convicted of attacking parliament. Few JNU students attended classes in New Delhi on Monday. Later, mobs of lawyers and BJP supporters attacked students outside the courthouse where Kumar was appearing. The BJP supporters called the reporters and students anti-nationals, and demanded they leave India and go to archrival Pakistan. Police said they were investigating allegations from both sides.



US President Barack Obama makes opening remarks at the 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) summit at Sunnylands in Rancho Mirage, California on Monday. Obama will press leaders from Southeast Asia to boost trade and back a common stance on the South China Sea this summit that the White House hopes will solidify US influence in the region.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Austria 'shuts' border for refugees

Merkel rejects east Europe plan to shut Balkans migrant route

AGENCIES
The Austrian government yesterday announced it would step up border controls at checkpoints along its southern frontier with Italy, Slovenia and Hungary in a bid to slow the migrant influx. "There will be different structural measures from containers to further barriers" similar to the short mesh fence recently set up at Austria's main border crossing with Slovenia at Spielfeld, Interior Minister Johanna Mikl-Leitner said. The announcement deals a new blow to German Chancellor Angela Merkel who wants to promote a deal with Turkey at an upcoming EU summit to tackle to the continent's worst migration crisis since World War II. But Austria, which initially supported Merkel's call for a European solution, has adopted an increasingly hardline stance after receiving 90,000

asylum claims last year -- one of the bloc's highest rates per capita. "We are preparing Plan B not because we want it, but because the implementation of a European solution is too slow," Austrian Chancellor Werner Merkel told the Oesterreich newspaper Tuesday. Vienna has also joined the so-called "Visegrad Four" group -- Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic -- in their push to close the Balkans refugee route by shutting off



Greece, which they accuse of failing to protect the EU's external borders. Merkel yesterday strongly criticised the proposal: "Do we really want to give up already and close the Greek-Macedonian-Bulgarian border, with all the consequences this would have for Greece and the European Union as a whole and therefore the Schengen area?" "I will fight with all my strength on Thursday and Friday for the EU-Turkey agenda as the right way to tackle this," Merkel said. Meanwhile, Reports revealed that only three of the 58 suspects arrested in connection with the mass sex attack on women in Cologne on New Year's Eve were refugees from Iraq or Syria. Refugees have been widely targeted following more than 1,000 reports of theft, sex assault and rape of women at Cologne's central train station - leading to a hardening of attitudes towards Chancellor Angela Merkel's open door policy.

Ukraine PM asked to resign

AFP, Kiev
Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko yesterday asked Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk to resign in the face of the government's perceived failure to fight endemic corruption and overcome a deep economic crisis. Poroshenko's dramatic intervention came as opinion polls showed growing public disenchantment with the pro-Western team that took over the leadership of the former Soviet nation after its 2014 pro-Western revolt. Parliament was already considering holding a vote of no confidence in the government after first listening to Yatsenyuk account for his 2015 performance and his plans for this year.

'No plan B'

Says Juncker as Cameron holds crunch Brexit talks

AFP, Brussels
European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker insisted Tuesday that Britain leaving the EU is not an option, saying the bloc has no Plan B, as Prime Minister David Cameron sought support in Brussels for his contentious reform proposals. Cameron came to Brussels for talks with Juncker, European Parliament head Martin Schulz and top MEPs. Juncker said: "There is no Plan B. We are not going to have a referendum on Brexit." The European Parliament will have an important say on any agreement, but Cameron must first strike a deal at a summit of all 28 EU leaders in Brussels on Thursday and Friday. If Cameron gets what he wants there, he will take the deal into a proposed referendum, most likely in June. If Britons vote to remain in the EU, then the deal returns to Brussels to be put in legal form. Parliament will be closely involved in that process alongside the Commission, the EU's executive arm, and the bloc's 28 leaders. Prince William yesterday said that Britain's tradition of international cooperation was "essential" to its security, in a speech interpreted by British media as supporting its membership of the European Union. The prince, grandson of Queen Elizabeth II, spoke at the Foreign Office as Prime Minister David Cameron met with European chiefs in Brussels ahead of a crucial summit this week, where he hopes to secure reforms to the union before an in/out referendum on Britain's membership. The royal family does not overtly intervene in political issues, but has been known to issue carefully worded statements to be analysed by the press.



RACE TO WHITE HOUSE

GW Bush bats for Jeb in S Carolina

REUTERS, Charleston
Former President George W Bush came to the aid of his brother Jeb Bush's Republican presidential campaign in South Carolina on Monday with a rousing endorsement of his character and a call for voters to reject the angry bluster of Donald Trump. The appearance of the elder Bush on the campaign trail may help Jeb Bush with South Carolina Republicans who hold the former president in high regard. Without mentioning Trump by name, the 69-year-old George W Bush left no doubt he was talking about the New York billionaire. "Strength is not empty rhetoric. It is not bluster. It is not theatrics. Real strength comes from integrity and character. And in my experience, the strongest person isn't usually the loudest person in the room," George W Bush said. Whether the elder Bush's presence will help his 63-year-old brother in the South Carolina Republican primary on Saturday remains to be seen. Jeb is running fourth in polls in South Carolina, behind Trump, Texas Senator Ted Cruz and Florida Senator Marco Rubio. Bush finished in sixth place in the Iowa caucuses and in fourth place in the New Hampshire primary - the first contests in the state-by-state battles to pick a party nominee for the Nov 8 presidential election.



Pak province allows Hindu marriage

BBC ONLINE
A province in Pakistan has become the first in the largely Muslim country to give Hindus the right to register their marriage officially. The bill was passed on Monday by lawmakers in Sindh -- home to many of Pakistan's three million Hindus. Activists say that without such a law, Hindu women are targets for forced conversions, abduction and rape, and there is a lack of rights for widows. The country's national assembly is also considering a similar law. Under the bill, Hindus above the age of 18 in Sindh can register their marriages. It can be applied retroactively to existing unions. However, the legislation also contains a controversial clause that allows the marriage to be annulled if any spouse converts. For decades, Pakistan's Hindus have faced discrimination and religious persecution. In rural Sindh, young Hindu girls have been a regular target for abductions, forced religious conversions and underage marriages. The perpetrators of these crimes are often protected by local influential figures linked to Islamic seminaries.

'2-yr-old witch' rescued in Nigeria

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
Loven is the founder of African Children's Aid Education and Development Foundation, which she created to help children which have been labelled as witches and therefore neglected and even killed by members of their community. "Thousands of children are being accused of being witches and we've both seen torture of children, dead children and frightened children," she wrote in Danish on Facebook, making an appeal for donations to help pay the young boy's medical fees. Hope was given medication to remove the worms from his belly and daily blood transfusions to give him more red blood cells, Loven wrote. Harrowing pictures show how a starving two-year-old Nigerian boy was rescued after being discovered naked and wandering the streets because his family thought he was a witch. The boy, who has been named Hope, was found emaciated and riddled with worms after being forced to live off scraps of food thrown to him by passersby for eight months. He was rescued by Anja Ringgren Loven, a Danish woman living in Africa who bent down and began feeding the boy and giving him water. She then wrapped the boy in a blanket and took him to the nearest hospital.

