

NEWS IN brief

Kohli fan denied bail in Pakistan

AFP, Lahore

A Indian cricket fan in Pakistan faces the prospect of up to a decade in prison after a court denied to bail him yesterday. Umar Daraz, 22, was jailed on January 26 for celebrating with India's tricolour after batting star Virat Kohli's 90 not out led his team to victory over Australia in a Twenty20 match in Adelaide. The act was termed "against the ideology of Pakistan" by police.

Ugandan challenger arrested after vote

AFP, Kampala

Ugandan police stormed opposition party headquarters and arrested top presidential challenger Kizza Besigye for the third time in a week yesterday, as early results showed veteran leader Yoweri Museveni enjoyed a solid lead in the country's chaotic elections. United States condemned Besigye arrest.

Indian Maoist rebels killed in gunfight

AFP, New Delhi

Indian security forces killed four Maoist rebels, including a woman, in an overnight gun battle in India's eastern Jharkhand state, a senior police officer said yesterday. Police said the nine-hour gunfight erupted on Thursday after they ambushed a group of 40 rebels.

Palestinian stabs 2 cops, shot dead

AFP, Jerusalem

A man stabbed and wounded two policemen outside Jerusalem's Damascus Gate yesterday before they shot him dead, the latest in a four-month wave of Palestinian attacks on Israelis. Since October 1, 173 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces.



Kosovo police officers wearing gas masks inspect the parliament, after tear gas was launched by opposition lawmakers, disrupting the first parliamentary session of the year in Pristina, yesterday. Angry over a government deal with Serbia and demanding snap elections, the united opposition has effectively blocked parliamentary proceedings since October with their tear gas protests. PHOTO: AFP

US slaps sanctions on North Korea

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama on Thursday signed off on new sanctions against North Korea to punish the reclusive Asian nation for its provocative recent nuclear test and rocket launch.

The White House said Obama had signed measures passed by Congress, tightening sanctions on anyone importing goods or technology related to weapons of mass destruction into North Korea, or anyone who knowingly engaged in human rights abuses.

"The administration is deeply concerned about North Korea's actions and their recent provocations," said White House spokesman Josh Earnest before Obama signed the legislation.

Earnest said the White House hoped the sanctions will "serve to increase pressure on North Korea."

The measure also heaps additional financial pressure on the already-sanctioned regime of leader Kim Jong-Un, by aiming at cutting down on money laundering and narcotics trafficking, two major illicit activities believed to be funneling millions of dollars into Kim's inner circle.

Pyeongyang shocked the world last month and earned a global rebuke when it announced it had successfully tested a hydrogen bomb. On Sunday, it defiantly launched a satellite-bearing rocket, a move the West sees as a cover for a ballistic missile test in violation of UN Security Council resolutions.

Under the bill, penalties for the sanctionable activities would include the seizure of assets, visa bans and denial of government contracts.



Truce plan not working

AFP, Beirut

Fighting raged on in Syria yesterday, as a hoped-for ceasefire failed to materialise and Turkey intensified its shelling of Kurdish-led forces.

Further dampening hopes for an end to the conflict, the UN peace envoy admitted a February 25 date for a resumption of stalled peace talks was no longer "realistically" possible.

Key regime backer Russia meanwhile warned that recent comments by President Bashar al-Assad about retaking all of Syria were out of step with Moscow's diplomatic efforts.

On the ground, Turkey intensified its nearly week-long shelling of positions in Aleppo province, where it has sought to halt the advance of a Kurdish-led alliance against rebel forces.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor said Ankara's overnight bombardment was the heaviest since it began targeting the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on Saturday.

Turkey also expanded its fire, the Britain-based monitoring group said, hitting the Kurdish town of Afrin for the first time, where two civilians were

killed and 28 wounded.

Ankara has been angered by the SDF's operation in Aleppo province, where it has seized key territory from rebel forces supported by Turkey.

Ankara considers the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) that dominate the SDF to be an affiliate of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party

SYRIA WAR

Russia warns Assad on vow to retake all of Syria

Turkey intensifies shelling on Kurdish-led forces

group.

Ankara fears the SDF advance in Aleppo province is intended to connect Kurdish-held areas in northern and northeastern Syria, creating an autonomous Kurdish region extending along most of its southern border.

Russia's intervention in Syria has allowed Syrian government forces to recapture key territory, including in Aleppo province, where regime fighters have virtually surrounded the rebel-held east of Aleppo city.

In an interview with AFP last week, a confident Assad defiantly pledged to retake all of Syria, but Moscow's UN envoy yesterday said that those comments were "not in accord with the diplomatic efforts that Russia is making."

Moscow backs a plan announced by 17 world powers last week for humanitarian access throughout Syria and a ceasefire that was to have begun by Friday.

But while aid deliveries have gone ahead to several besieged areas and the United Nations has said it hopes to deliver aid to all 18 within a week, there was no sign of a ceasefire being implemented yesterday.

Austria snubs EU with migrant cap launch

AFP, Spielfeld

Austria yesterday introduced a daily cap on asylum seekers which could trigger a domino effect of border clampdowns on the Balkan migrant trail from Greece up to northern Europe.

The move sparked an angry reaction from the European Union saying the "unilateral actions" are "incompatible" with EU law.

Instead by EU leaders, spearheaded by Germany, hope to firm up a deal with Ankara at a special summit in March.

Under the pact, Turkey would close its borders and then fly refugees to Europe for resettlement in exchange for three billion euros.

However, central European countries have already rejected the EU resettlement plan and are instead pushing to seal off Greece, the entry point for many migrants, from the passport-free Schengen zone.

In response, Athens has threatened to veto an accord keeping Britain in the bloc at marathon talks on Friday unless EU members stop the border clampdown, a Greek government source told AFP yesterday.

Big rifts have opened up in the 28-nation bloc as the continent grapples with its biggest migration crisis since World War II, which saw more than a million people land on Europe's shores in 2015 and shows no sign of abating.

More than 80,000 people -- many of them children -- have braved the perilous journey across the Aegean Sea since January, with most fleeing war and violence in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.

In Austria a maximum of 80 migrants per day are now being allowed to claim asylum. Vienna is also limiting the daily number of people transiting through to seek asylum in a neighbouring state to 3,200.

Following Austria's tighter measures, Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia have also tightened their borders.

The asylum-seeker cap is in line with Austria's announcement last month that it would only take in 37,500 asylum seekers this year -- sharply down from the 90,000 it accepted in 2015, making it one of the bloc's highest recipients on a per-basis capita.

REFUGEE CRISIS

Move sparks fears of Balkan domino effect

Greece wants EU to shut all borders till Turkey meet in March

Nepal PM starts India visit

Seeks to strengthen strained ties with New Delhi

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Nepal's prime minister has begun a six-day state visit to India that comes after months of bitter relations between the two neighbours.

Experts say the visit that started from yesterday -- the first foreign trip by Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli as prime minister -- indicates that relations between the two nations are getting back on track.

Relations deteriorated after India asked Nepal to amend the constitution adopted last September to address the grievances of historically marginalised groups such as Madhesi.

"This is a kind of goodwill visit, the distrust that was generated should be removed. That should be the objective of the prime minister's visit," Lokraj Baral, a former ambassador to India, told Al Jazeera.

"The prime minister has also said that he was for the restoration of the trust. That's most important ... I would say the greatest benefit would be the restoration of trust and mutual confidence."

The visit comes a week after a nearly five-month blockade on the India-Nepal border was lifted.

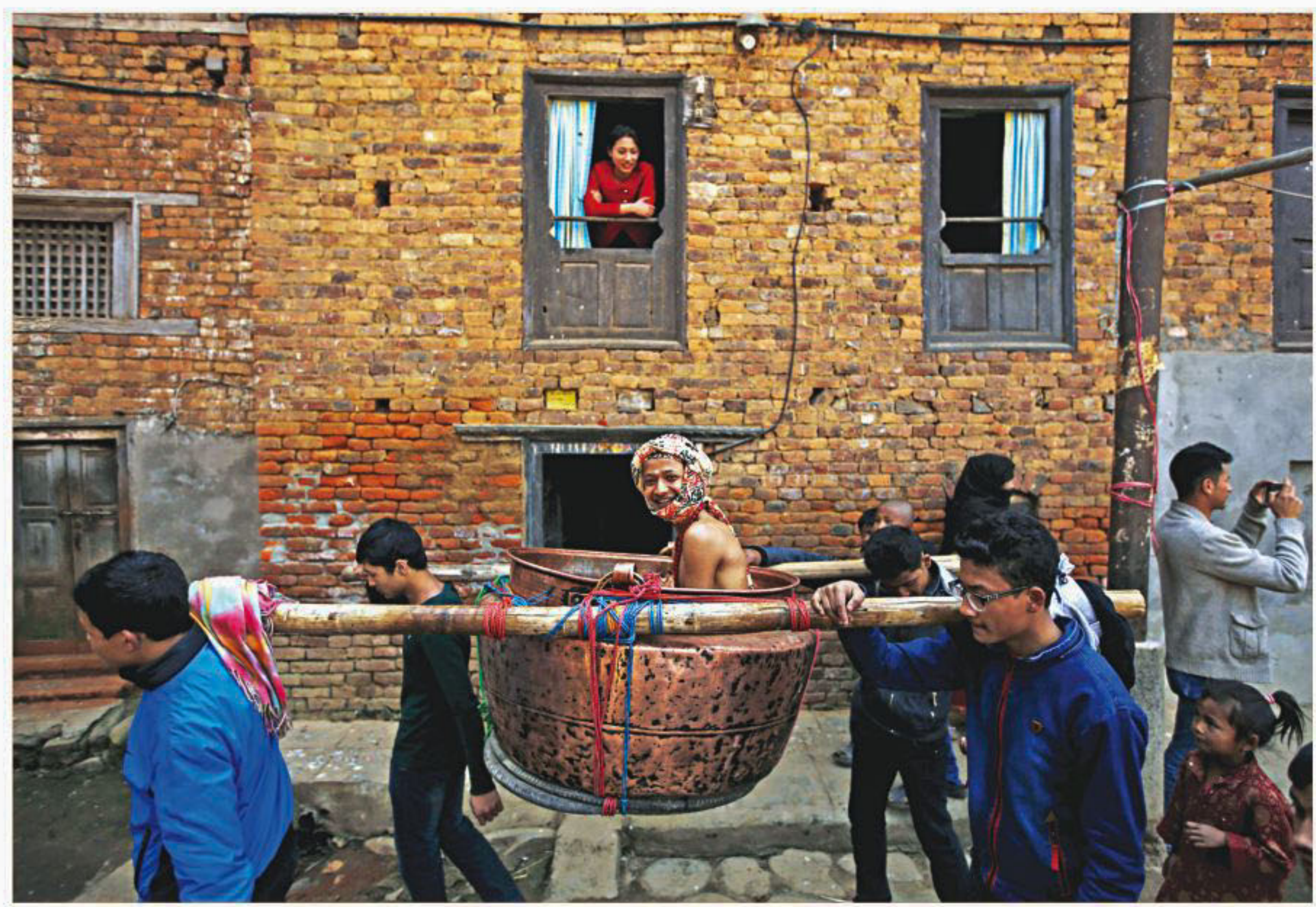
The trade stoppage resulted in a severe shortage of fuel and essential supplies.

The landlocked Himalayan nation almost entirely depends on India for fuel and other essential items such as medicines.

Nepal accused India of interfering in its internal matters and imposing an unofficial blockade -- a charge India has denied.

Anti-India and anti-Madhesi sentiment runs high in Nepal as India backed the demands of Madhesi people, who say the new charter does not address their political and economic marginalisation.

The current coalition government, led by Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (UML), passed amendments that they said would address the demands of the Madhesi, who share close cultural and familial bonds with people across the border in India.



A devotee is carried around town in a vessel as part of rituals during the Swasthani Bratakatha festival at Thecho in Lalitpur, Nepal, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

CASTE-BASED PROTEST Cop fire kills one in India

AFP, New Delhi

Police opened fire on protesters in northern India yesterday, killing one, as rival caste groups clashed during a mass rally over access to jobs and education.

The army was called in after several were injured in the violence in northern Haryana state, as demonstrators clashing over preferential treatment for certain castes defied police orders and went on a rampage.

State police chief Yash Pal Singal said a protester had shot at a member of the security personnel first during the demonstrations in Rohtak district triggering the violent retaliation by police.

"The BSF (Border Security Force) then fired in self-defence and unfortunately one protester lost his life. Some other people have received injuries," Singal said in comments broadcast on TV channels.

Haryana's dominant Jat community, a comparatively affluent caste group, has been calling for quotas in government jobs similar to those allocated to lower-caste groups who have faced generations of societal discrimination.

The Jats say they are struggling to compete with less privileged castes for government jobs and university places -- but other caste groups have opposed their demands for special treatment.

The government called in about 2,000 troops to quash the protests, Press Trust of India reported, as TV footage showed demonstrators trying to set fire to vehicles and a house belonging to a state minister.

The protesters have blocked major highways and disrupted rail traffic since Wednesday, prompting police to clamp prohibitory orders on many districts.

Saudi Arabia to run out of water soon

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Saudi Arabia has started taxing water for residents to try and address the soaring cost of debt as oil revenues decline.

The water tariff comes amid warnings that Saudi Arabia's groundwater will run out in the next 13 years.

Mohammed Al-Ghamdi, a faculty member at King Faisal University, warned that groundwater was running out after the World Bank issued a report on global natural water scarcity.

Groundwater in Gulf countries is running out because they have some of the highest levels of water consumption per capita in the world, Saudi newspaper Al-Watan Arabic daily reported. Daily water per person is reported to be 265 litres in Saudi Arabia, double the EU average.

Groundwater accounts for 98 per cent of water sources in Saudi Arabia, because the kingdom is devoid of rivers and lakes.

No 'Brexit' deal yet: UK PM

EU talks go overtime as tension mounts

AFP, Brussels

British Prime Minister David Cameron yesterday battled to win over sceptical European leaders on a second day of summit talks, as tensions mounted over his demands for a reform deal to keep his country from leaving the EU.

Greece tried to extract concessions over the migrant crisis in exchange for backing an accord to avoid a "Brexit", adding to the resistance Cameron faced as he held a series of face-to-face talks with continental counterparts.

An "English breakfast" to start yesterday's meeting of all 28 leaders was delayed by more than five hours to become first an "English lunch" then an "English dinner" as EU president Donald Tusk struggled to broker a deal.

"We've made some progress but there is still no deal," Cameron said after getting just three hours of sleep following talks that went deep into the night.

"As I have said, I would only do a deal if we get what Britain needs, so we are going to get back in there."

European leaders have dug their heels in over Cameron's reform demands, which include reducing welfare payments to EU migrants and opting out of a commitment to ever-closer union.

Cameron has said that without a satisfactory agreement, he will not campaign for Britain to stay in the 28-nation European Union in a referendum that he is expected to hold as early as June.

The British premier faces opposition from eastern European countries like Poland over his plans to limit access to benefits for migrants.

He also faces trouble from France and Belgium over his bid to make clear that Britain is not committed to ever-closer union and ensure that the City of London financial district is not bound by rules governing the euro single currency area.



Lawyers march against 'anti-India' protesters

SC sends JNU sedition case to lower court

AFP, New Delhi

Hundreds of lawyers marched through the streets of the Indian capital yesterday pledging to attack anyone found to be "anti-national", after some were accused of assaulting a student arrested for sedition.

Student leader Kanhaiya Kumar's arrest over a rally at which anti-India slogans were shouted has triggered a week of mass protests, in an escalating row over freedom of speech in the world's largest democracy.

In a brazen show of strength, lawyers wearing black courtroom robes marched past the iconic India Gate monument in New Delhi waving the Indian tricolour and shouting nationalist slogans in counter-protest.

They defended outbreaks of violence at court hearings earlier in the week that saw right-wing lawyers