



**Demonstrators from the Jat community shout slogans as they block the Delhi-Haryana national highway during a protest at Sampla village in Haryana, India, yesterday. Rural Indian protesters blockaded highways and paralysed a northern state despite a deal giving them more government jobs, but there was relief for New Delhi's 20 million residents as the army retook control of their main water source.** PHOTO: REUTERS

# China signals it will not back down

US urges wider challenge to Beijing's claims

REUTERS, Beijing

China's South China Sea military deployments are no different from US deployments on Hawaii, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said yesterday, striking a combative tone ahead of a visit by Foreign Minister Wang Yi to the United States this week.

The United States last week accused China of raising tensions in the South China Sea by its apparent deployment of surface-to-air missiles on a disputed island, a move China has neither confirmed nor denied.

Asked whether the South China Sea, and the missiles, would come up when Wang is in the United States to meet Secretary of State John Kerry, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said Washington should not use the issue of military facilities on the islands as a "pretext to make a fuss".

"The US is not involved in the South China Sea dispute, and this is not and should not become a problem between China and the United States," Hua told a daily news briefing.

US ships and aircraft carrying out frequent, close-in patrols and surveillance in

recent years is what has increased regional tensions, she said.

"It's this that is the biggest cause of the militarisation of the South China Sea. We hope that the United States does not confuse right and wrong on this issue or practice double standards."

Meanwhile, a senior US naval officer said yesterday Australia and other countries should follow the US lead and conduct "freedom-of-navigation" naval operations within 12 nautical miles of contested islands in the South China Sea.

"What we're trying to ensure is that all countries, no matter size or strength, can pursue their interests based on the law of the sea and not have that endangered by some of these actions," Vice Admiral Joseph Aucoin said, according to the ABC.

"It's up to those countries, but I think it's in our best interests to make sure that those sea lines remain open, I'll leave it at that," he said.

Tensions between China and its neighbours have risen further since Taiwanese and US officials said last week Beijing had placed surface-to-air missiles on Woody Island, part of the Paracels archipelago it controls.

## SOUTH CHINA SEA ROW

# Encounter in J&K ends

Indian forces kill all militants after 3-day standoff

TNN, Srinagar

The 48-hour gunbattle in Pampore has come to an end and the three militants who stormed the building have been killed, the Army said yesterday.

"A lot of arms and war-like ammunition have been recovered," Major General Arvind Dutta, GoC, Victor Force told reporters. "They were foreign terrorists and were heavily armed," the Army officer said.

"They were lot of civilians in the building when the terrorists entered it. Our main focus was to evacuate them to safety. We launched a joint operation and used bullet-proof vehicles to evacuate 120 civilians from the building," he said.

"The process of sanitizing the building is underway," he added. "There were a lot of rooms in the building and hence the operation took time."

The officer praised the brave soldiers who were martyred in the operation. The terrorists were holed up

inside the Entrepreneurship Development Institute (EDI) building in Pampore area on Srinagar-Jammu National Highway and had kept the security forces engaged for over two days.



**Smoke rises from a government building where Kashmiri militants took refuge during the gunbattle.** PHOTO: AFP

CRPF DG Prakash Mishra suspected LeT hand behind the Pampore attack. "From the modus-operandi, the attack seems to be orchestrated by LeT," he said.

Earlier yesterday, Army had said it was in no hurry to flush out the mili-

tants holed up in a government building as the main aim is to avoid further casualty to security forces.

As the operation against the ultras entered the third day, General Officer Commanding of the Srinagar-based Chinar Corps, Lt Gen Satish Dua, told reporters here, "There is no time limit. There is no hurry. Our main purpose is to make sure that we do not have anymore casualty. We will take as long as it takes to clear the building."

As the security forces mounted an assault on the building on Sunday, they met with stiff resistance from the ultras who are holding vantage points inside the building.

Two officers of the rank of captain and a Lance Naik from the elite Para force of the Army were killed while trying to flush out the militants.

While Captain Pawan Kumar was killed in a pre-dawn exchange of fire, Captain Tushar Mahajan and Lance Naik Om Prakash sustained fatal injuries in the afternoon on Sunday.

# Brexit may leave UK vulnerable: Europol

AFP, The Hague

Britain's citizens could be left more vulnerable to attacks by terror groups and organised crime gangs if they decide to leave the European Union, the continent's policing agency warned yesterday.

"I see a very clear picture of the United Kingdom's dependency on the EU to help protect its security interest," Europol's director Rob Wainwright said in The Hague.

Should Britain leave in a so-called "Brexit" it will "no longer have the benefits that it currently has," Wainwright told reporters in The Hague, speaking on the sidelines of a conference on combatting migrant smugglers into Europe.

This included "direct access to our database, the ability to involve itself into our intelligence projects and many other areas," he said. Europol's warning follows remarks by British Prime Minister David Cameron over the weekend that a Brexit would offer "risk in a time of uncertainty."

Britain would be "safer, stronger and better off" in the 28-member bloc, Cameron said Saturday after announcing June 23 as the date for a referendum on the issue.

The issue has deeply divided Britain's ruling Conservative Party with five cabinet members as well as London's outspoken mayor Boris Johnson supporting the "Leave" campaign, and the country's continued security is a key issue.

Following Cameron's remarks, Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith told the BBC that staying in the EU would make the country more vulnerable to Paris-style attacks.

# NEWS IN brief

## US rejected N Korea peace treaty bid

AFP, Washington

The United States said Sunday it received a North Korean proposal to discuss a peace treaty for the Korean peninsula but rejected it when Pyongyang refused to consider reducing its nuclear arsenal. State Department spokesman John Kirby disclosed the exchange when asked about a Wall Street Journal report that President Barack Obama's administration had secretly agreed to peace talks to formally end the Korean War of 1950 to 1953.

## Fiji cyclone toll hits 20 as tourists flee

AFP, Suva

Tourists began fleeing cyclone-ravaged Fiji yesterday and aid efforts intensified as the death toll climbed to 20, with officials warning it could rise further as reports trickle in from devastated remote communities. Aerial photographs revealed entire villages were flattened when severe tropical cyclone Winston struck overnight Saturday, lashing the Pacific island nation with gusts of 202 miles per hour.

## Iran, Russia held talks over missile upgrade

REUTERS, Dubai

Iran negotiated with Russia at the weekend over buying an upgraded version of the S-300 surface-to-air missile defence system, which it requires to meet its military needs, a foreign ministry spokesman in Tehran said. Russia now hopes to reap economic and trade benefits from the nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions on Iran last month. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Tehran on Sunday.

## Saudi tries 32 from Iran-linked 'spy' ring

REUTERS, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia has put 32 people on trial, including 30 members of its own Shia Muslim minority, accused of spying for Iran, several local newspapers and television reported yesterday. The 32, including an Iranian, were detained in 2013 sparking expressions of concern among Saudi Shias.

## Libya warns of IS attacks on oil facilities

REUTERS, Tripoli

Libya's oil facilities are likely to suffer further attacks unless a United Nations-backed unity government is approved, the head of the National Oil Corporation said yesterday. Mustafa Sanalla also said suspected IS militants had staged their latest attack against Libya's oil infrastructure last Thursday or Friday.

# Hungary sees fresh migrant influx

1,500 tried to enter illegally from Serbia this month

AFP, Budapest

Hungary yesterday reported a sharp rise in the numbers of migrants breaching its southern borders in February, the first significant surge since the frontiers were sealed last year.

Around 1,500 migrants tried to enter the EU member state illegally from Serbia this month, with 500 alone caught between Friday and Sunday, police said in a statement.

Many were economic migrants from Morocco, Iran and Pakistan, police said. Unlike Syrians, they are unlikely to be granted asylum in Europe and face deportation.

About 300,000 migrants and refugees passed through Hungary last year, before right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orban sealed off the southern borders with razor wire and fences in September and October.

Meanwhile, Greece said yesterday it was taking action to persuade Macedonia to take in Afghan migrants as thousands remained stranded at the border and the main port in Athens.

"We have begun diplomatic moves... we believe the problem will be resolved," junior interior minister for migration Yiannis Mouzalas told parliamentary television.



**Afghan migrants arrive in an overcrowded raft at a beach in the Greek island of Lesbos yesterday.** PHOTO: REUTERS

# Afghan forces retreat from Helmand

13 killed in Taliban bombing north of Kabul

AFP, Kandahar

Afghan troops have retreated from two districts in the southern province of Helmand, officials said yesterday, a move which highlights the challenge from Taliban fighters in the opium-producing region.

"The Afghan army retreated from two army bases in Musa Qala and one base from Nawzad district" on Saturday, provincial governor Khan Rahimi told AFP, leaving no troops anywhere in those districts.

He said the soldiers had moved to other parts of Helmand such as the heavily-contested districts of Lashkar Gah and Sangin, adding: "We have no concerns regarding this step but we have plans to ensure security in other vulnerable areas."

But the decision was criticised by Abdul Majeed Akhundzada, deputy chief of the

provincial council.

"Retreating from Musa Qala looks to me like ignoring the deaths of Afghan security forces and the civilians," Akhundzada said.

Meanwhile, at least 13 people, including nine civilians, were killed yesterday in a suicide bombing carried out by Taliban insurgents against the Afghan police in an area 60 kilometres northwest of Kabul, authorities said.

"There are 13 casualties, nine civilians and four policemen, as well as 19 injured, 17 of whom are civilians," Parwan police chief province

Mohammed Zaman Mamozai said.

Helmand has seen some of the fiercest battles of the Taliban's battle against local and foreign forces that began in 2001. The militants have intensified their campaign in the province since the Nato combat mission in the war-torn country officially ended in 2014.

# Britain gets first new daily for 30 years

AFP, London

One of Britain's largest newspaper publishers announced yesterday it was launching a new national daily, the first of its kind for 30 years, that will hit the newsstands just as another goes out of print.

Trinity Mirror, which publishes the left-leaning Daily Mirror and Sunday Mirror tabloids, said The New Day will go on sale on February 29 and offer an "upbeat, optimistic approach and will be politically neutral".

The announcement comes just days after the owner of The Independent newspaper, Evgeny Lebedev, announced that it would publish its last print edition next month after 30 years. It will continue online.

The New Day will have a social media presence but no website, said Trinity Mirror's chief executive, Simon Fox.

He acknowledged the number of people buying newspapers declined but insisted that print was far from dead. "Over a million people stopped buying a newspaper in the past 2 years but we believe a large number of them can be tempted back with the right product," he said.

# 'Muslim nations should play primary role' in fighting terrorism

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Muslim countries have a responsibility to play a primary role in combating terrorism, a prominent Saudi Arabian prince has said.

Prince Turki al-Faisal, an influential and outspoken member of the Saudi royal family, made his comments as the oil-rich kingdom hosts an 18-day military exercise with 20 members of a recently announced Islamic counterterrorism alliance.

Speaking to reporters in Abu Dhabi, Prince Turki said: "I consider this a leading and commendable step that should have happened sooner and thank God it has taken place."

"It's no secret, unfortunately, that in our world today the majority of terrorism-related acts, its victims are

Muslim," he said. "Therefore, it is our responsibility as Muslim countries to play the primary role in fighting this disease that has impacted us all."

The Prince, who headed Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence Directorate for more than two decades until September 2001, added he has not seen any indication from Saudi leaders that if Saudi troops were deployed to Syria, they would also fight President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

"The world community has the capability, economic, political, military and otherwise, to put a stop to the killing," he said. "I think it is high time that people said enough is enough, but simply saying it is not going to do it. There has to be concrete action on the ground to put a stop to the killing."



Prince Turki al-Faisal