

NEWS IN brief

Afghan-Taliban peace talks by March

Direct peace talks between Afghanistan and Taliban chiefs are expected to take place by the start of next Monday, Afghan leaders and officials from the United States, China and Pakistan said. Pakistan has agreed to host the talks, said a joint statement by Afghanistan and its three partners after meeting in Kabul.

Fiji cyclone death toll hits 29

Humanitarian aid began pouring into Fiji yesterday, as the death toll from super-cyclone Winston rose to 29 and officials warned the devastated Pacific nation's recovery could take months. Severe tropical cyclone Winston, the most powerful storm ever recorded in the southern hemisphere, lashed Fiji with wind gusts of 325 kilometres per hour, leaving a trail of destruction.

Sea level rising at fastest pace in 2,800 years

The world's oceans are rising at a faster rate than any time in the past 2,800 years, and might even have fallen without the influence of human-driven climate change, researchers say. Sea levels rose globally by about 5.5 inches from 1900 to 2000, said the study led by Rutgers University said. In the absence of global warming, the change in sea level would have been about 2.8 inches, it added.

Nasheed asks for prison leave extension

Former Maldives president Mohamed Nasheed has requested two more months' leave from prison after travelling to London for urgent medical treatment, government said yesterday. Nasheed, whose conviction and jailing last year on terror-related charges has been widely criticised, was allowed to fly to Britain for 30 days to receive spinal surgery.

Bill Gates backs FBI over Apple row

Microsoft founder Bill Gates is backing the FBI in its standoff with Apple over unlocking an iPhone in the probe of last year's deadly San Bernardino attacks, the Financial Times reported yesterday. Times ranked Gates with Silicon Valley companies who support Apple in its refusal to hack the phone of one of the attackers, Gates said technology companies should be forced to co-operate with law enforcement in terrorism investigations, the paper said. The FT report comes a day after a poll indicated that a majority of Americans also back the FBI in its battle with Apple.



Macedonian policemen stand in front of a gate over rail tracks as migrants wait behind at the Greek-Macedonian border, after additional passage restrictions imposed by Macedonian authorities left hundreds of them stranded near the village of Idomeni, Greece, yesterday. The picture was taken from the Macedonian side of the border.

PHOTO: REUTERS

CLOSURE OF BORDERS TO MIGRANTS

New crisis brewing as arrivals soar

EU, UN warn of 'chaos, confusion'

A diplomatic spat between Greece and Austria yesterday highlighted the deepening rifts among European states about how to tackle the migrant crisis as new figures showed no let-up in the influx of people fleeing war and poverty.

With migrant and refugee arrivals in Europe surpassing 110,000 in the first two months of the year alone, the United Nations warned that border restrictions being imposed by some states could cause chaos. 413 people lost their lives trying to cross the the journey to Europe.

And the European Union also voiced concerns about the risk of a "humanitarian crisis" particularly in Greece, which lies on the frontline of Europe's greatest migration challenge since World War II.

Thousands of people have been left stranded in Greece after Macedonia abruptly closed its border to Afghans, creating a fresh bottleneck on the Balkans route to northern Europe.

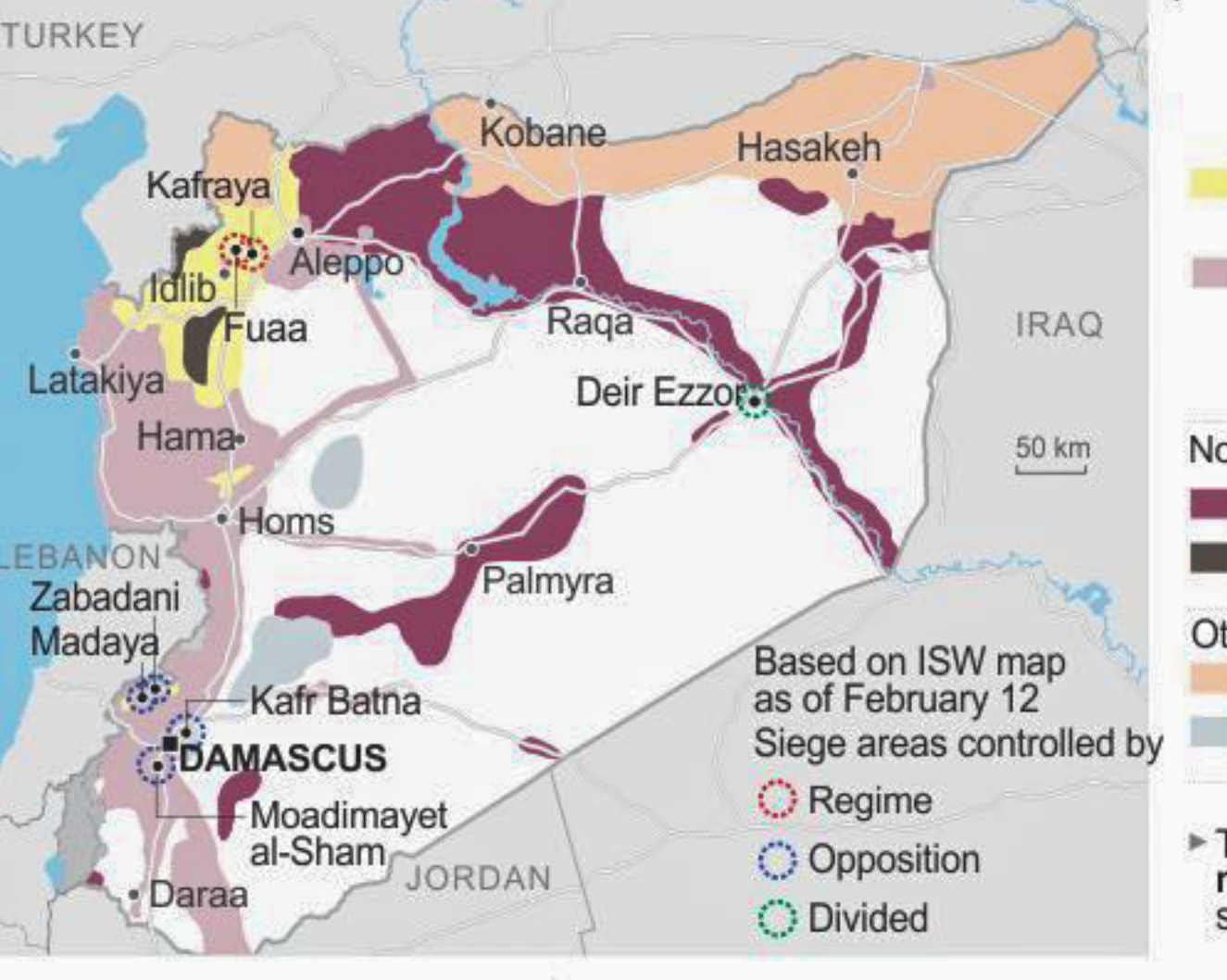
Athens also hit out at Vienna for failing to invite Greek representatives to a meeting on the crisis with ministers from western Balkan states on Wednesday.

"I am very worried about the news that we are getting about increasing closures of European borders along the Balkans route because that will create further chaos and confusion," UN refugee agency UNHCR chief Filippo Grandi, said on a visit to the Greek island of Lesbos, which handles most of the arrivals from Turkey.

The arrival last year of more than one million refugees and migrants on Europe's shores, many fleeing war, poverty and persecution, has caused a chain reaction of border clamp-downs, in a blow to the EU's border-free Schengen zone.

SYRIA CEASEFIRE PLAN

United States and Russia have announced a "cessation of hostilities" from February 27



Rebel forces: have issued a conditional acceptance
Regime: issued a decree for April parliamentary elections after announcement
Not committed to the deal
IS group
Al-Nusra front
Other regions
Kurds
Contested area
Based on ISW map as of February 12
Siege areas controlled by
Regime
Opposition
Divided
The Syrian war has killed more than 260,000 people since 2011

The opposition High Negotiations Committee said its "commitment to the truce is conditional" on the lifting of sieges, release of prisoners, a halt to bombardment of civilians and the delivery of humanitarian aid

Sources: Institute for the Study of War, SOHR AFP

Doubts as US, Russia announce Syria truce

Warring parties skeptical, cautiously agree to deal

Syria's regime yesterday agreed to a ceasefire deal announced by the United States and Russia, but there were widespread doubts it could take effect by the weekend as hoped.

The agreement, announced Monday, does not apply to jihadists like the Islamic State group and Al-Nusra Front, putting up major hurdles to how it can be implemented on Syria's complex battlefield.

A Syrian foreign ministry statement said the government would continue to fight both those groups as well as other "terrorists", while agreeing to stop other military operations "in accordance with the Russian-American announcement."

The deal calls for a "cessation of hostilities" between forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and opposition groups that would take effect overnight Friday-Saturday in Damascus.

The High Negotiations Committee (HNC) -- the leading Syrian opposition group -- gave its conditional acceptance to the deal late Monday.

Turkey and Israel yesterday said they were not optimistic over the implementation of the ceasefire.

But after several previous failed attempts, few had serious expectations for a lasting

ceasefire.

Analysts said the deal may be simply unworkable, rebels on the ground doubted the regime's goodwill and many civilians expected their hopes to once again be dashed.

"It's a waste of time and it's difficult to implement on the ground," said Abu Ibrahim, a commander in the 10th Brigade opposition force in the northwestern Latakia province. He expected "numerous rebel groups" to reject the agreement, which he said was formed "without consulting any factions on the ground."

Despite being on opposing sides of the conflict, Moscow and Washington have been leading the latest diplomatic push to try to resolve a conflict that has left more than 260,000 dead and forced millions from their homes.

A new report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group put the number of dead at more than 370,000.

Shortly after the truce was announced, Assad issued a decree for parliamentary elections to be held on April 13, as the four-year term of the current legislature comes to a close.

The last such elections were held in May 2012 and although multiple parties were allowed to stand, most of the 250 lawmakers who were elected were from the ruling Baath party.

Delhi water crisis may last 15 days

AFP, New Delhi

A water crisis in India's capital will take up to two weeks to fix, authorities warned yesterday as taps ran dry, days after protesters sabotaged a canal to demand better treatment for their caste.

Jat caste groups called off their protests on Monday after the government in the northern state of Haryana accepted their demands following days of riots, arson and looting that saw thousands of troops deployed.

New Delhi's water board was battling to restore full supplies to the city of 17 million people which relies heavily on the canal running through Haryana.

Although schools and many businesses reopened yesterday as supplies were partially restored, many were still suffering after the water board said it had been forced to limit supplies.

Obama presents roadmap to close Guantanamo jail

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama yesterday presented a long-awaited roadmap to close the controversial US military prison at Guantanamo Bay, saying it was time to shutter a facility that betrayed US interests and values.

With less than a year left in office, Obama unveiled a plan that says the United States should continue to transfer low-risk detainees to other countries and which describes how 13 possible replacement facilities could save the US taxpayer millions of dollars each year.

"For many years, it's been clear that the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay does not advance our national security. It undermines it," Obama said in a White House address.

"This is about closing a chapter in our history. It reflects the lessons that we've learned since 9/11 -- lessons that need to guide our nation going forward."

A total of 91 suspected jihadists remain at Guantanamo, a prison that once housed about 700 inmates at its peak and has become synonymous around the world with torture, indefinite detention and

orange jumpsuits.

Obama has pushed for Guantanamo's closure since taking office in 2009, but his efforts have been thwarted by Republican lawmakers, many of whom see it as a useful tool in combating terror. Obama says the opposite is true, and that the facility feeds into anti-US, jihadist propaganda.

The US president also has faced opposition from within his own administration,

with the Pentagon accused of slow-pedaling transfers and oversteering closure costs.

"This plan deserves a fair hearing, even in an election year," Obama said Tuesday.

Human rights groups worry this would only extend detentions without trial and create a "Guantanamo North."

The Guantanamo Bay military prison was opened in January 2002 on a US naval base on a coastal spit of land in southeastern Cuba, leased from Havana under a treaty dating back to 1903.

It was set up after the 9/11 attacks under the administration of then-president George W. Bush to deal with prisoners who were termed "enemy combatants" and denied many US legal rights.



Indian residents of the eastern New Delhi neighborhood of Sanjay Camp use hoses to fill water jugs from a water distribution truck, which arrives daily in the neighborhood to supply the low income colony with water, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

WORLD'S ARMS IMPORT REPORT

India tops the list again

THE HINDU ONLINE

India remains the world's largest weapons importer over a five-year period according to latest report of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) on global arms purchases released on Monday. The report also says that China

for 35 percent, a general trend for India to watch out for is that Pakistan is followed by Bangladesh and Myanmar, accounting for 20 and 16 percent respectively, all three being neighbours of India.

India merely extended its top run from 2006-2010 period. The top five exporters in the period were US, Russia, China, France and Germany.

The report noted that a major reason for the high level of Indian imports is because India's arms industry has so far largely failed to produce competitive indigenous designed weapons.

While Russia maintains a strong lead as the top supplier, purchases from US are sharply increasing. While the government has embarked on an ambitious Make in India drive to increase domestic manufacturing it is yet to bring in any meaningful technology build up in the country.



MILITARY BUILDUP IN S CHINA SEA 'Beijing installing radar facilities'

AFP, Beijing

Beijing is installing radar facilities on its artificial islands in the disputed South China Sea, an American think tank has said, in a move analysts warned would "exponentially improve" the country's monitoring capacities.

Satellite imagery of Cuarteron reef in the Spratlys released by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) showed what appeared to be a high-frequency radar installation, as well as a lighthouse, underground bunker, helipad and other communications equipment.

"Placement of a high frequency radar on Cuarteron Reef would significantly bolster China's ability to monitor surface and air traffic coming north from the Malacca Straits and other strategically important channels," said CSIS's Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

Images of other small reefs nearby which China has transformed into artificial islands -- Gaven, Hughes, and Johnson South -- revealed other features identified by CSIS as probable radar towers, gun emplacements, bunkers, helipads, and quays.

Thai military govt will not last long: Thaksin

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

After nearly two years of relative quiet, Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand's controversial former prime minister, has gone on a media offensive with a series of interviews lashing out at the country's military government and its proposed constitution.

Thaksin, who has been living in self-imposed exile for almost 10 years since a coup forced him from office, spoke to Al Jazeera and several other news organisations yesterday.

"I see [the country going] backward more than forward. So, this is why we start to worry. And when it comes to the draft constitution, [this] is the worst constitution ever," Thaksin told Al Jazeera, comparing it with something that could have been written in North Korea.

"I think the situation will not allow them to enjoy the power that much because of the way they run the country. Any regime that is careless about their own people will not last long," he said.

General Prayuth Chan-ocha came to power in May 2014 in a coup in which Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, was removed from office.

"The military keep urging publicly that they want to do reconciliation ... They want to move the country forward, but this is one-and-a-half years [later], and there is no sign of reconciliation," Thaksin told Al Jazeera.

"Vice versa ... They are really siding with one side and then pressuring the other side."

After Thaksin had given the series of interviews this week - including to the Wall Street Journal, the Financial Times and Reuters - Thailand's military government responded by saying it was not willing to engage with the former prime minister over the drafting of the constitution.

In an interview with the Bangkok Post, government spokesman Major General Sansern Kaewkamnerd said: "This charter is written to combat corrupt people so they should not be allowed to jointly draft or hold talks on it."

