

NEWSIN brief

PLANNED 'CESSATION OF HOSTILITIES' IN SYRIA

WORLD WILL BE WATCHING Obama warns Russia; fighting rages ahead of midnight deadline

Two pilots die in Nepal plane crash

AFP, Kathmandu Two pilots were killed when a small passenger plane crash landed in Nepal yesterday but all nine passengers survived, an airport official said.

It is not clear what caused the accident, which came two days after a Twin Otter turboprop plane crashed into a mountain-side in Nepal killing all 23 people on board.

11 killed in mass PNG jail break

REUTERS, Sydney Police in Papua New Guinea shot and killed 11 prisoners and wounded 17 after a mass prison breakout in the Pacific nation's second largest city, PNG media outlet EMTV reported yesterday. More than 30 prisoners attacked two guards at the Buimo prison in Lae, nearly 320 km (200 miles) north of the Papua New Guinea capital, Port Moresby, before escaping, EMTV said.

Afghan ex-governor freed in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar A former Afghan governor kidnapped nearly two weeks ago in Pakistan's capital was freed yesterday after a shoot-out with police, he told AFP, saying he could not identify the men who abducted him. Fazlullah Wahidi, the ex-governor of Afghanistan's western Heart province, was abducted on Feb 12 from a busy market in Islamabad.

Japan census shows 1m population loss

AGENCIES New census figures in Japan show the population has shrunk by nearly one million in the past five years, in the first decline registered since 1920. As of October last year the country has 127.1 million people, 0.7% fewer than in the last census. Japan is grappling with the problem of a rapidly ageing population for years.

India SC to hear Ram temple plea

THE HINDU ONLINE A plea by BJP leader Subramanian Swamy to "re-build" Ram temple at the Ramjanmabhoomi site where kar sevaks destroyed Babri Masjid in 1992 will be heard by the Supreme Court along with appeals challenging a 2010 Allahabad High Court decision fixing the exact birthplace of Lord Ram at the disputed Ayodhya site.

William and Kate to visit Taj Mahal

AFP, London Britain's Prince William and wife Kate will visit the Taj Mahal, where his mother princess Diana posed for one of her most famous photographs, when they go to India in April, royal officials said yesterday. William and Kate will arrive in India on April 10 before travelling to Bhutan on April 14 and returning to India on April 16, when they will visit the Taj Mahal.

AGENCIES US President Barack Obama has warned Damascus and key ally Moscow that the "world will be watching" their commitment to a looming ceasefire as intense Russian air strikes battered rebel bastions across Syria yesterday just hours before the midnight deadline.

Both President Bashar al-Assad's regime and the main opposition body have agreed to the deal -- which allows fighting to continue against the Islamic State group and other jihadists.

The agreement brokered by Russia and the United States marks the biggest diplomatic push yet to help end Syria's violence, but has been plagued by doubts after the failure of previous peace efforts.

Members of the 17-nation group backing the process were to meet in Geneva yesterday to work out further details of the so-called "cessation of hostilities", which is then expected to be endorsed by the UN Security Council, diplomats said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitor, said Russia and the regime had launched a wave of attacks on non-jihadist rebel areas ahead of the deadline.

"It's more intense than usual," Observatory head Rami Abdel



Members of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and residents search through the rubble for bodies following an airstrike in the rebel-held city of Douma in Eastern Ghouta, yesterday.

Rahman said. The Observatory said there had been Russian strikes overnight on rebel bastions including the Eastern Ghouta region outside Damascus, the north of Homs province and the west of Aleppo province. There were at least 26 air strikes on Eastern Ghouta including 10 on its main city of Douma which was facing heavy regime shelling, he said. Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin insisted Moscow

would continue targeting "terrorist groups". "The decisive fight against them will, without doubt, be continued," Putin said in televised remarks. "We understand fully and take into account that this will be a complicated, and maybe even contradictory process of reconciliation, but there is no other way," Putin said. The intensified attacks prompted Turkey, a key supporter of opposition forces, to

express worries over the viability of the ceasefire. "We are seriously concerned over the future of the ceasefire because of the continuing Russian air raids and ground attacks by forces of Assad," presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin told reporters in Ankara. The complexity of Syria's battlefields -- where moderate and Islamist rebel forces often fight alongside jihadist groups like the al-Qaeda affiliated Al-Nusra Front -- has raised serious

doubts about the feasibility of a ceasefire. Diplomats are reported to be working to define areas that will fall under the partial truce and to set up monitoring mechanisms.

The UN's Syria envoy has said he hopes the agreement will lead to a resumption of peace talks which collapsed earlier this month in Geneva. A Russian Foreign Ministry official said on condition of anonymity that talks may restart in Geneva on March 7.

Syria's top opposition grouping -- the Riyadh-based High Negotiations Committee (HNC) -- yesterday said that 97 opposition factions had signed on "to respect a temporary truce" but reiterated that it was only agreeing to an initial period of two weeks.

Iran, another key Assad ally, has said it is confident the regime will abide by the agreement.

Huddling with his national security advisors in Washington on Thursday, Obama put the onus firmly on the regime and Russia.

He said he was not "under any illusions" about possible pitfalls, but that the ceasefire could help bring about an end to the war.

"A lot of that is going to depend on whether the Syrian regime, Russia, and their allies live up to their commitments," Obama said. "The coming days will be critical, and the world will be watching."

Ceasefire, truce or cessation of hostilities?

Cessation of hostilities, ceasefire or truce: these terms, all used in attempts to resolve the conflict in Syria, are similar and often used indiscriminately. However, they have different legal and symbolic meanings. A truce is a limited and temporary halt of activities or hostilities during a war. A cessation of hostilities is a more formal designation, which, however, falls short of a formal ceasefire signed by the warring parties. A cessation of hostilities is a first essential step to resolving a conflict, notably to permit the delivery of humanitarian aid. A simple cessation of hostilities could also permit a military response to the side that breaks it. AFP, PARIS

DEVELOPMENTS

Nearly 100 rebel factions have agreed to plan

Russia vows not let up in fight against terror groups

UN peace talks may restart March 7 in Geneva

UNSC expected to endorse plan

Iran votes in key polls

Set to elect new House, council of clerics in post-sanctions era

AFP, Tehran Iranians voted yesterday in a major test for President Hassan Rouhani, a moderate who hopes to curb conservative dominance and provide an opening for domestic reforms after a nuclear deal with world powers.

The Islamic republic's ultimate authority, supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was among the first to cast a ballot and he urged 55 million eligible voters to do so "quickly, as it's both a duty and a right".

As well as picking 290 members of parliament, the electorate will also vote in a second election to select the Assembly of Experts, a powerful committee of 88 clerics that monitors Khamenei's work.

The polls are especially important as they come just one month after sanctions were lifted under the nuclear accord and the vote's outcome will be

seen as a de-facto referendum on Rouhani's administration.

Lawmakers are elected for four years but the assembly has eight-year terms. Should Khamenei, who is 76, die

during that time its members would pick his successor.

Observers will be closely watching turnout figures, with higher voter participation expected to benefit moderates and reformers.

Results from outside Tehran were expected within 24 hours but the vote tally in the capital, which has a population of 12 million and is electing 30 lawmakers, will take three days.

Khamenei smiled warmly as he spoke to electoral officials and presented his identity documents before receiving his ballot paper which he posted in a sealed box at 8:09 am.

"We have enemies. Elections should be such that they make the enemy disappointed. We must vote with insight and open eyes," he said. Iranians could choose to endorse the international outreach started by Rouhani or deliver a stinging rebuke instead.

If voters support the pro-Rouhani list the president could swing the balance of power in parliament and have a chance of passing reforms through legislation on which he has so far been blocked.

CHARGES OF 'REVEALING STATE SECRETS' Turkish journo freed

AFP, Istanbul

Two Turkish journalists held in jail for the last three months on hugely controversial charges of revealing state secrets were released early yesterday after Turkey's Constitutional Court ruled their rights had been violated.

The Cumhuriyet newspaper's editor-in-chief Can Dunder and Ankara bureau chief Erdem Gul emerged from the Silivri jail on the outskirts of Istanbul before dawn to be greeted by jubilant supporters and family, television pictures showed.

They had been detained since November over a report alleging that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government tried to ship arms to Islamists in Syria.

But the pair, who were kept in jail for 93 days, are still set to stand trial on the charges on March 25, with prosecutors demanding multiple life terms.

"I think that this is a very historic ruling," Cumhuriyet quoted Dunder as saying as he left the prison alongside Gul. He noted the irony of being released on February 26, Erdogan's 62nd birthday.

"I think it is a nice gift for him. We will continue. We will have nice birthday gifts for him," said Dunder.

Dunder said he harboured no anger but would continue to defend rights "with a louder voice", saying 30 colleagues still remained behind bars.

"We will continue to fight for press freedom until the concentration camp (Silivri jail) that you see behind us becomes a museum," he added.

The Constitutional Court ruled that their "rights to personal liberty and security" and "freedom of expression and freedom of press" had been violated. The decision was approved by 12 members of the court, with three dissenting.



Can Dunder

WAR CRIMES PROBE

Lanka could accept int'l actors: FM

REUTERS, Washington

Sri Lanka's foreign minister said on Thursday he is willing to consider international participation in investigating possible war crimes during the 26-year Tamil insurgency.

"I think it is only fair that the victims of the war would want some form of guarantee that the new courts will deliver justice and accountability in a fair manner, and for that we are willing to consider the participation of international actors," Mangala Samaraweera, the minister, said at a Washington think tank.

Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena has previously said that foreign participation was not needed for an impartial inquiry.

The foreign minister's comments come after the United Nations said earlier this month that it would not force Sri Lanka to accept a role for international judges, but any process must be impartial and independent.

The United Nations says the Sri Lankan military and Tamil Tiger rebels were both likely to have committed war crimes during the war, which ended with a military victory in 2009. A UN resolution calls for all alleged war crimes to be investigated and tried in special courts by international judges.



Stranded refugees walk through a motorway towards the Greek-Macedonian border near the Greek village of Idomeni as at least 20,000 refugees and migrants have been stranded in Greece after border shutdowns through the Balkans route to central and northern Europe, yesterday.



F-16 sale to Pakistan badly timed

Says top US senator John McCain

PTI, Washington

Top Republican senator John McCain on Thursday acknowledged the "timing" of the announcement on the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan was "really bad" and that the Obama administration needs to explain the reason behind its decision which "complicates" India-US relations.

At a time, when the US is pushing hard to improve its defence relationship with India as part of its effort to maintain its dominance in the Asia Pacific region, such a move tends to "complicate" India-US ties, McCain, Chairman of the powerful Senate Armed Services Committee, told reporters at the Defence Writers Group.

"I think that the future of Asia, if we want to have the kind of influence that we always had and a deterrence to the Chinese behaviour is a very close relationship between the United States and India. Which by the way the F-16 issue complicates that," McCain said.

"I think the timing was really bad on this issue," McCain said on his position on the sale of F-16s to Pakistan. He said that he would have "rather seen and kicked off" this over to the next administration.

ROAD TO WHITE HOUSE: GOP DEBATE Rubio, Cruz gang up to halt Trump

AFP, Houston

White House hopefuls Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio unleashed a barrage of attacks against Donald Trump during Thursday's raucous Republican debate as they sought to halt the billionaire frontrunner's seemingly relentless march to the party's nomination.

The three candidates exchanged some of the most heated and acerbic remarks of the entire 2016 primary cycle. They often talked over one another as they battled for supremacy in the final on-stage showdown before the "Super Tuesday" series of state wide votes on March 1.

Cruz and Rubio mounted a furious assault against Trump, blasting the frontrunner for hiring foreigners and challenging his commitment to conservative principles, but Trump largely stood his ground and swatted away the attacks.

Rubio appeared loose and aggressive against Trump. While he has hesitated to attack Trump directly on the campaign trail, Rubio seemed eager to engage and criticise his rival during the debate in Houston.

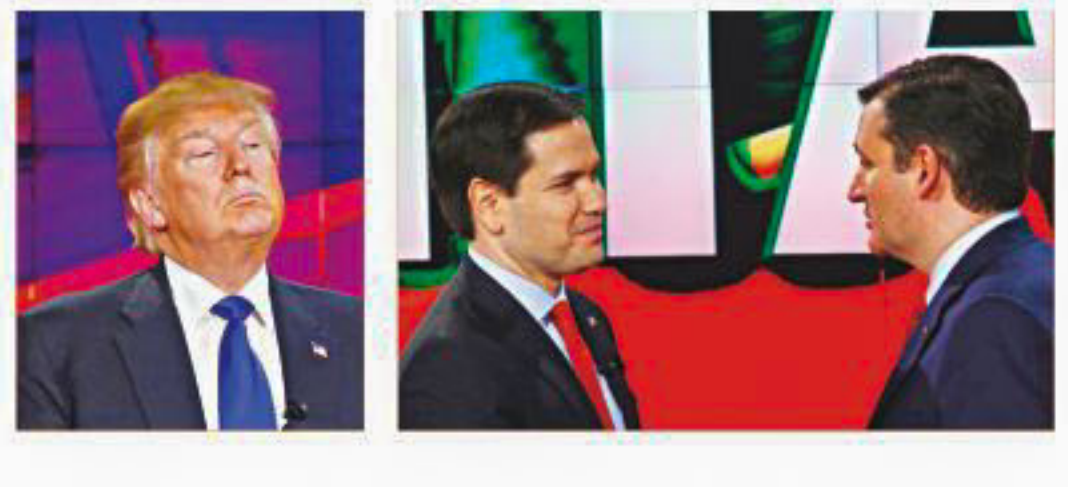
He immediately berated Trump over his immigration positions including having once supported a pathway to citizenship for the undocumented. And he took him to task for having "hired a significant number of people from other countries to take jobs that Americans could have filled" in Trump development projects.

Trump pushed back fiercely. "I've hired tens of thousands of people," he said in his rejoinder to Rubio. "You haven't hired one person, you liar."

Cruz joined in the Trump bashing, noting how The Donald in the past has donated to Democrats including former secretary of state Hillary Clinton, former president Jimmy Carter and Senators Chuck Schumer and Harry Reid.

"We can't win this election with a candidate who agrees with Hillary Clinton and can't take it to her and beat her on the debate stage and at the polls," Cruz warned.

Cruz also raised concerns over whether Trump would replace late justice Antonin Scalia on the Supreme Court with another proven conservative.



'Disaster' if Turkey talks fail

Warns EU commissioner; Greece seeks to stem migrant flow

AGENCIES

EU migration commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos yesterday warned that failure to make progress with Turkey at a March summit on stemming the migrant tide would spell "disaster" for the bloc.

"If there is no convergence and agreement on March 7, we will be led to disaster," Avramopoulos told a conference in Delphi, central Greece. "March 7 is the day that will decide everything," he said.

The meeting promises to be crucial, both for the implementation of the deal that Brussels and Ankara signed in November to cut migrant flows, and in trying to forge unity within the European Union on coping with the biggest such crisis in its history.

Meanwhile, Greece moved to slow the flow of migrants from its islands to the mainland yesterday as hundreds of refugees left reception centers with nowhere to go as countries in the Balkans progressively shut

down their borders.

At Idomeni, a small community on the border with Macedonia, Reuters witnesses saw hundreds of families walking toward the frontier to join an estimated 3,000 more at a makeshift camp where many pitched tents in a field close to razor wire fence.

Greece's migration row with Austria intensified yesterday, with Athens refusing a visit from Austria's interior minister whom it accused of "falsifying the truth" over its border control efforts.

The snub came a day after Greece recalled its ambassador to Vienna for consultations in retaliation for Austria's decision to leave Athens out of a Balkans migration meeting this week, reports AFP.

Meanwhile, Hungary's justice minister accused the EU yesterday of overstepping its mandate by seeking to impose migrant resettlement quotas on member states and said Budapest could hold its planned referendum on the issue in 150 days at the earliest.

PHOTO: REUTERS