

NEWS IN brief

Army picks hardliner as Myanmar VP

AFP, Naypyidaw
A trusted aide of Myanmar's Suu Kyi was a step closer to becoming the country's first civilian leader in generations after sailing through a parliamentary vote yesterday, while the military put forward a hardliner as its vice president nominee. Htin Kyaw's confirmation comes as the military put forward their own candidate Myint Swe, a retired army general.

Palestinian TV station raided by Israel

AFP, Ramallah
Israeli forces have raided the West Bank offices of Palestine Today television and arrested its manager over allegations of inciting violence, Israel's security agency said yesterday. The overnight operation targeting the station's Ramallah offices was the latest attempt to silence Palestinian broadcasters Israel believes are fuelling a five-month wave of violence.

US Senate passes F16 sale to Pakistan

TNN, Washington
The US Senate on Thursday rejected by a 71-24 margin efforts by some lawmakers to block the sale of eight F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan. Despite strong opposition, the Senate's foreign relations committee leadership maintained that it was better to dangle the planes before Pakistan so that Washington could have leverage over Islamabad, lest it gravitate towards China and Russia for such purchases. Republican Senator Bob Corker said he supports the sale but will not allow US taxpayer to subsidize it.

Egypt diplomat named Arab League head

AFP, Cairo
Veteran Egyptian diplomat Ahmed Abul Gheit was named Thursday as the Arab League's new secretary general, at a time when the regional body faces multiple wars and a widening jihadist threat. In a sign of divisions within the pan-Arab body, however, Qatar voiced reservations over Abul Gheit's candidacy due to his "hostile positions" towards Doha, Arab diplomats said.

Indian investigators summon Vijay Mallya

AFP, New Delhi
India's financial crimes agency yesterday summoned indebted entrepreneur Vijay Mallya in connection with a money-laundering probe, after he left the country owing more than \$1 billion in unpaid loans to banks. The Enforcement Directorate issued a summons for the liquor baron, who is thought to be in Britain, to appear before investigators in Mumbai on March 18.

Legion d'Honneur at request!

AFP, Paris
The awarding of France's top honour to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, which sparked a storm of criticism, was done at the royal's request, a French magazine reported this week. Causette, a monthly women's magazine, published an exchange of emails between French diplomats ahead of the awarding of the Legion d'Honneur on March 7. President Francois Hollande awarded the honour to Prince Mohammed, who is also Saudi interior minister, during a visit to the Gulf nation. Saudi Arabia is regularly criticised by international watchdogs for human rights violations and there was harsh criticism of Nayef's award on social media, particularly over its use of the death penalty, with people using the hashtag #honte (#shame) on Twitter.



IN TEARS, IN PRAYERS

A woman puts flowers into the sea to pray for victims of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Sendai, northern Japan, yesterday. Inset, Participants observe a moment of silence at 2:46 local time, the time when the magnitude 9.0 earthquake struck off Japan's coast in 2011, during a rally in Tokyo. Japan yesterday mourned in silence the thousands who lost their lives in a massive earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011 that turned towns to matchwood and triggered the world's worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl in 1986.

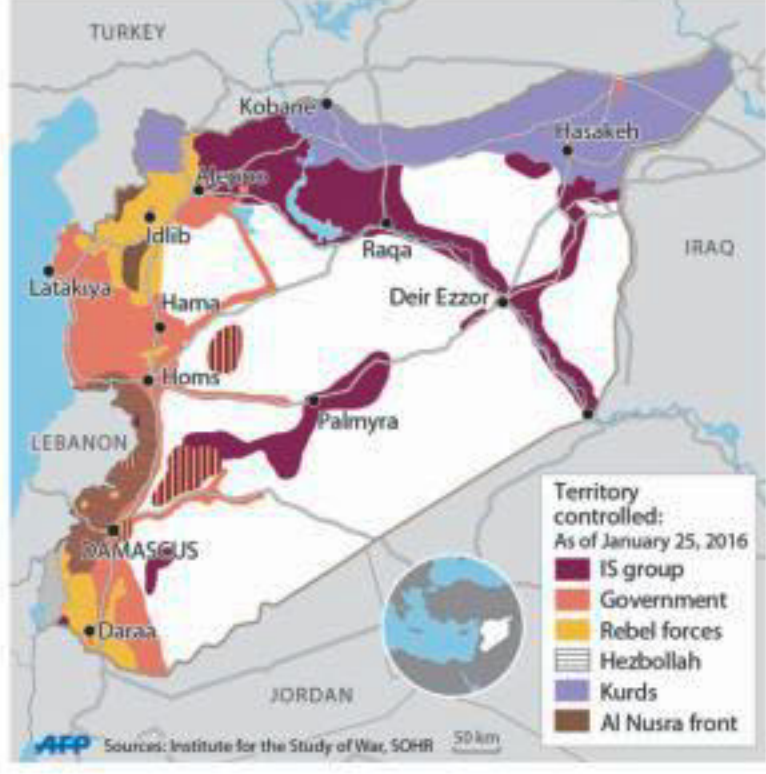
PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP

Powers eyeing federal Syria

Says UN mediator as opposition to join Geneva peace talks

AGENCIES
The United Nations envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, has said that the possibility of federalism for the war-ravaged country has not been taken off the table for the upcoming peace talks in Geneva. The latest round of negotiations in the Swiss city, scheduled for Monday, coincide with the fifth anniversary of a conflict that started with protests against President Bashar al-Assad before descending into a multi-sided war.

He also said that the prospects for reaching a deal to end the war were better than at any time before. A UN Security Council diplomat told Reuters that a number of major Western powers had been considering the possibility of a federal structure for Syria and had passed on suggestions to de Mistura. Speaking in September, Assad did not rule out the idea of federalism, but said any such change should only come about as a result of dialogue among Syrians and a referendum to ratify any changes to the constitution.



Syria's main opposition body, the High Negotiations Committee, yesterday said that it would attend indirect peace talks with the government in Geneva on March 14. A source close to the Syrian government confirmed earlier this week that its delegation would be attending. Diplomats told the Reuters news agency that major powers close to the UN-brokered talks were discussing the possibility of federal division in Syria that would grant broad autonomy to regional authorities, while maintaining the country's unity as a single state. "All Syrians have rejected the division [of Syria] and federalism can be discussed at the negotiations," de Mistura told Al Jazeera.

After five years of war that has killed 250,000 people and driven about 11 million from their homes, Syria's territory is already divided between various parties, including the government and its allies, Western-backed Kurds, opposition groups and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS). However, Syrian opposition coordinator Riad Hijab said "any mention of federalism or something which might present a direction for dividing Syria is not acceptable at all". In contrast, the co-leader of the Syrian Kurdish PYD party, which has wide influence over Kurdish parts of the country, has made it clear that the PYD is open to the idea.

ROW OVER 'ISLAM HATES US' COMMENTS

Trump win can provoke 'clash of civilizations'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A "clash of civilisations" between the West and the Islamic world would erupt if Donald Trump wins the US presidential election, a senior Arab Gulf security official has said.

In the latest sign of disquiet in the Middle East over the Republican presidential frontrunner's comments about Muslims, Lt Gen Dhahi Khalfan Tamim suggested a Trump victory would result in a face-off with IS and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Lt Gen Tamim, Dubai's deputy chairman of police and security, tweeted after Trump declined to row back on his recent statement that "Islam hates the West" during Thursday's Republican debate in Miami.

Trump said during the debate that to do so would be bowing to the forces of political correctness.

On Thursday, at a two-hour, televised melee that was striking mostly for its relative civility, the four remaining Republican rivals highlighted their differences and their areas of agreement on topics ranging from normalising relations with Cuba and climate change, both hot topics in Florida, to immigration and trade.

But the static returned with Trump continuing to suggest that Islam as a whole has pitted itself against the US.

It has been his stance on Muslims, especially his pledge to keep them from entering the US, that has both been a main engine of Trump's campaign, and the main source of angst in the party establishment that such positions will make him a catastrophic nominee. Asked specifically whether he meant "all of Islam" when he made the comments earlier this week to CNN, Trump would only say: "I mean a lot of them...we have a serious, serious problem of hate. There is tremendous hate."



Return to nuke talks

Russia, China tell North Korea

REUTERS, Moscow

Russia and China yesterday told North Korea its nuclear ambitions were unacceptable, urging Pyongyang to resume talks over its nuclear weapons programme and heed a UN Security Council resolution banning ballistic missile tests.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stepped up pressure on Pyongyang after holding talks in Moscow a day after North Korea defied the United Nations by firing two short-range ballistic missiles into the sea.

"We do not recognise the nuclear status of the DPRK," Wang told a news briefing via a translator, using the official acronym for North Korea.

The North should "fully and comprehensively" implement the UN resolution, Wang said. "At the same time, we will not spare efforts to return to the six-way talks," he added. Russia's Lavrov said Moscow deemed Pyongyang's behaviour "irresponsible".

Pyongyang has a large stockpile of short-range missiles and is developing long-range and intercontinental missiles.

Earlier on Friday, the reclusive country's official KCNA news agency reported that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un had watched a ballistic missile launch test and ordered the country to improve its nuclear attack capability by conducting more tests.



A migrant woman reflects in a puddle yesterday, in a makeshift camp at the Greek-Macedonian border, near the Greek village of Idomeni, where thousands of refugees and migrants are stranded by the Balkan border blockade. Turkey's controversial draft deal with the European Union to help ease the migrant crisis will respect international law, Ankara insisted Friday, following serious criticism from the United Nations

PHOTO: AFP

LIBYA INTERVENTION

Obama hits out at Cameron, Sarkozy

AFP, Washington

In a rare public rebuke of two of Washington's closest allies, President Barack Obama has hit out at British Prime Minister David Cameron and former French leader Nicolas Sarkozy over their roles in Libya after the fall of the Gaddafi regime.

Cameron became "distracted" and Sarkozy wanted to promote his country during the 2011 Nato-led military intervention in Libya, Obama said in an interview with The Atlantic magazine published Thursday.

In the extensive interview, Obama discussed the conditions surrounding the British and French-led bombing campaign that led to the fall of Gaddafi's regime.

Obama said when he considered what went wrong in Libya, "there's room for criticism because I had more faith in the Europeans, given Libya's proximity, being invested in the follow-up."

Cameron stopped paying attention soon after the military operation, he said, becoming "distracted by a range of other things." Despite the criticism, a US National Security Council spokesman insisted that Cameron remained a "close partner" of Obama's.

UN blasts rape for wages, child killings in S Sudan

BBC ONLINE

Militias allied to the South Sudanese army have been allowed to rape women in lieu of wages while fighting rebels, a UN report says.

Investigators found that 1,300 women had been raped last year in oil-rich Unity State alone, it said.

The army operated a "scorched earth" policy to deliberately target civilians for killing and rape, which amounted to war crimes, the UN said.

According to the UN report, militias operated under a "do what you can and take what you can" agreement that allowed them to rape and abduct women and girls as a form of payment. They also raided cattle and stole personal property, it added.

The scale and type of sexual violence committed in South Sudan constitute some of the most horrendous human rights abuses in the world, UN High

Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said.

The UN said government forces and allied militias gang-raped girls and cut civilians to pieces. It also accused opposition fighters of committing human rights abuses.

In a separate report, Amnesty International says more than 60 men and boys were suffocated in a shipping container by government forces. Researchers from the UK-based campaign group said bodies of those suffocated had been dumped in a field after they were killed last October in Leer Town, Unity State.

The civil conflict erupted in December 2013 after Kiir accused his sacked deputy, Riek Machar, of plotting a coup. Machar denied the allegation but then formed a rebel army to fight the government. Tens of thousands have died and more than two million have been displaced since then.