

NEWS IN brief

North Korea sentences US student to 15 yrs

North Korea yesterday sentenced an American student who admitted stealing a propaganda banner from a hotel to 15 years' hard labour for subversive activities, state media said. The judgement was handed down on Otto Warmbier, a 21-year-old student from the University of Virginia, by North Korea's Supreme Court, the North's official KCNA news agency said.

Ecuador army plane crash kills 22

An Ecuadoran army plane crashed in the Amazon rainforest Tuesday, killing all 22 people on board, President Rafael Correa said. "There are no survivors," Correa wrote on Twitter, several minutes after first posting news of the crash. "This is a tragedy." He said the plane was carrying 19 paratroopers, two pilots and a mechanic.

French woman, 91, gets PhD after 30 yrs

A woman aged 91 has become one of the oldest women in France to gain a PhD after she completed a thesis that she had begun three decades earlier. Colette Bourlier was awarded the mark of "high distinction" for her work, which she successfully defended on Tuesday before a jury of the University of Franche-Comte in Besancon, eastern France.

Pak court lifts travel ban on Musharraf

Pakistan's top court yesterday ordered the government to lift a travel ban on former military ruler Pervez Musharraf, a move that could let him leave the country while awaiting trial for treason. Musharraf's lawyers say he needs to go abroad for urgent spinal treatment not available in Pakistan. The former ruler was barred from taking part in the polls and instead forced to face a barrage of legal cases.

Obama picks US top court nominee

US President Barack Obama has announced he is nominating veteran appeals court judge Merrick Garland to be the next US Supreme Court Justice. The Supreme Court vacancy follows the death of Justice Antonin Scalia last month at the age of 79. Judge Garland, 63, is the chief judge of the Washington appeals court and a former prosecutor. The Republican majority in the Senate has said it will block a vote on any Supreme Court nominee from Obama. Republicans have called on Obama to leave the nomination to his successor, who will be elected in November. The death of Scalia, a staunch conservative, left the nine-member Supreme Court evenly divided between conservatives and liberals. Announcing the nomination, Obama said Merrick Garland enjoyed respect from Democrats and Republicans alike. He praised Garland's decency, integrity and even-handedness during his long career in public service, and described him as an exemplary judge.



Police officers take position at the site of a shooting in the southern Forest district of Brussels on Tuesday.

Vast anti-terror ops under way in Brussels

IS flag found beside dead Algerian suspect at shootout scene; two more on the run

Police found an Islamic State flag next to the body of an Algerian killed during a major anti-terror raid in Brussels, prosecutors said yesterday, as investigators raced to track down two suspected extremists who escaped. The man had been identified as Mohamed Belkaid, 35, an Algerian national who was illegally in Belgium, the federal prosecutor said a day after the chaotic shootout. Two suspects were still at large after the gunbattle, which erupted as Belgian and French police searched a property in connection with the November Paris massacre claimed by IS in which 130 people died. Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel yesterday said the country's terror alert would stay at the second-highest level. Michel told a press conference that the OCAM national crisis centre "maintains its level three alert level, which means a threat is possible and likely". Prosecutors said at least two suspects fired on police as the door was opened

during a search of the property in the quiet Forest district, wounding three officers including a French policewoman. A series of gunbattles then erupted, wounding a fourth officer in the head, and a man was "neutralised by a sniper of the special forces when he tried to open fire from the window of the flat", spokesman Thierry Werts said. "Next to his body was a Kalashnikov, a book on Salafism and an Islamic State flag," Werts told a packed press conference. Belkaid was unknown to Belgian authorities except for a case of theft in 2014, they said. Werts said that "two persons who were probably fled the scene and are being tracked down". Searches throughout the southern district of Brussels found "no results", he said. By early yesterday calm had largely returned to the area and most locals had been allowed to return to their home. Access to the scene of the shootout was also reopened with the windows in the building blown out and taped up with plastic.

SYRIA CONFLICT

Putin 'willing to ditch Assad'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Vladimir Putin is willing to jettison President Bashar al-Assad as part of a deal to end the five-year conflict in Syria, Western powers believe.

Following the surprise declaration by the Russian President that his five-month military mission in the country had fulfilled its objective, diplomats are convinced that Moscow could be ready to force the Syrian leader to allow a political transition.

Russian warplanes and troops began leaving bases in Syria on 15 March, just hours after Putin's shock announcement that he would begin a partial draw-down, timed for maximum impact to coincide with the fifth anniversary of the Syrian uprising and the resumption of peace talks in Geneva.

While they remain cautious about the extent of the military reduction, Western diplomats predict that Putin is now prepared to sacrifice the Syrian President.

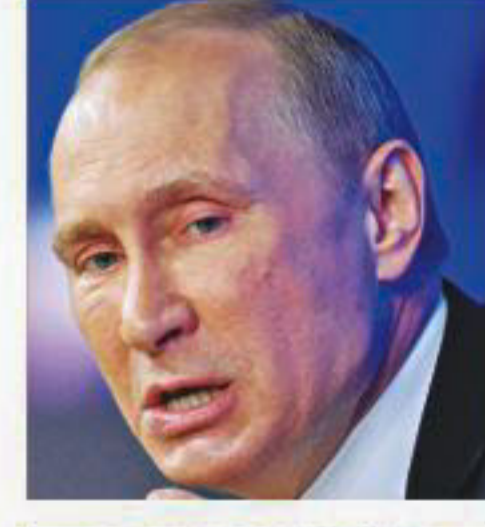
The diplomats say that the Russian president has achieved his aims of protecting Russia's interests in Syria and re-establishing Moscow as a major player in the Middle East.

Even if Putin fulfils his promise to reduce troops, Western officials expect that he will still have a bigger military presence in Syria than he did before the start of his military campaign at the end of September. An airbase at Hmeimim and a naval facility at Tartus, both on the Syrian coast, mean that Russia will retain the ability to rapidly scale its presence in the country back up. By leaving in place a powerful S-400 air defence system, it will retain control of the airspace.

Optimists suggested, however, that Putin could be serious about trying to put an end to the fighting. They point to the fragile ceasefire forged between Washington and Moscow that has exceeded all expectations by lasting more than two weeks thanks to heavy pressure from international powers on their clients in Syria. They also highlight increasing signs of gaps between Moscow and Damascus which have seen Russian officials publicly warn Mr Assad against spoiling peace efforts.

John Kerry, the US Secretary of State, announced that he would visit Moscow next week, adding that the world had reached "a very important phase" in the peace efforts.

Huge questions remain about the steps that would be required to put an end to President Assad's 16-year rule. While de Mistura has said that he aims to create a transitional governing body and hold elections within 18 months, it remains unclear who would be a member of that body and what role Assad would play.



US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2016

Game over for Sanders?

Clinton now needs only a third of remaining delegates to win nomination

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

After all the excitement over Bernie Sanders, his candidacy must face the cold reality of the results so far.

Thanks to her clean sweep of five victories last night, Hillary Clinton now has a pledged delegate lead of more than 300. She now has 1599 delegates.

The Sanders camp claims that Clinton must win a majority of pledged delegates before declaring herself the nominee, but the rules say she wins once she has a majority of super and pledged delegates (which is 2,383 in total).

To cross that line, 'the Secretary', as Sanders calls her, will need to win just one-third of all remaining delegates in the 28 contests yet to vote.

A third of all those remaining means just under 800 delegates.

And Clinton would win nearly 900 just by winning 60 per cent of the vote in California, New York, Maryland, New Jersey and Arizona while splitting the vote in Pennsylvania (and winning 60 per cent in the small, quasi-states of Puerto Rico and Washington DC).

The nearly 900 delegates she'd win from these states doesn't include the many delegates she'll win even when she loses.

The Democratic race allocates all delegates proportionally, so she can lose to Sanders by 20 points in states like Washington, Wisconsin, Connecticut and Oregon and still win dozens of delegates.

The Democratic race may drag on until June, but Clinton is - as has always seemed likely, and become increasingly certain over the past month - going to be the nominee.



Trump warns of 'riots' if denied nomination

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump warned Wednesday that "riots" could break out if he is denied the Republican presidential nomination despite having won most of the party's primary and caucus elections.

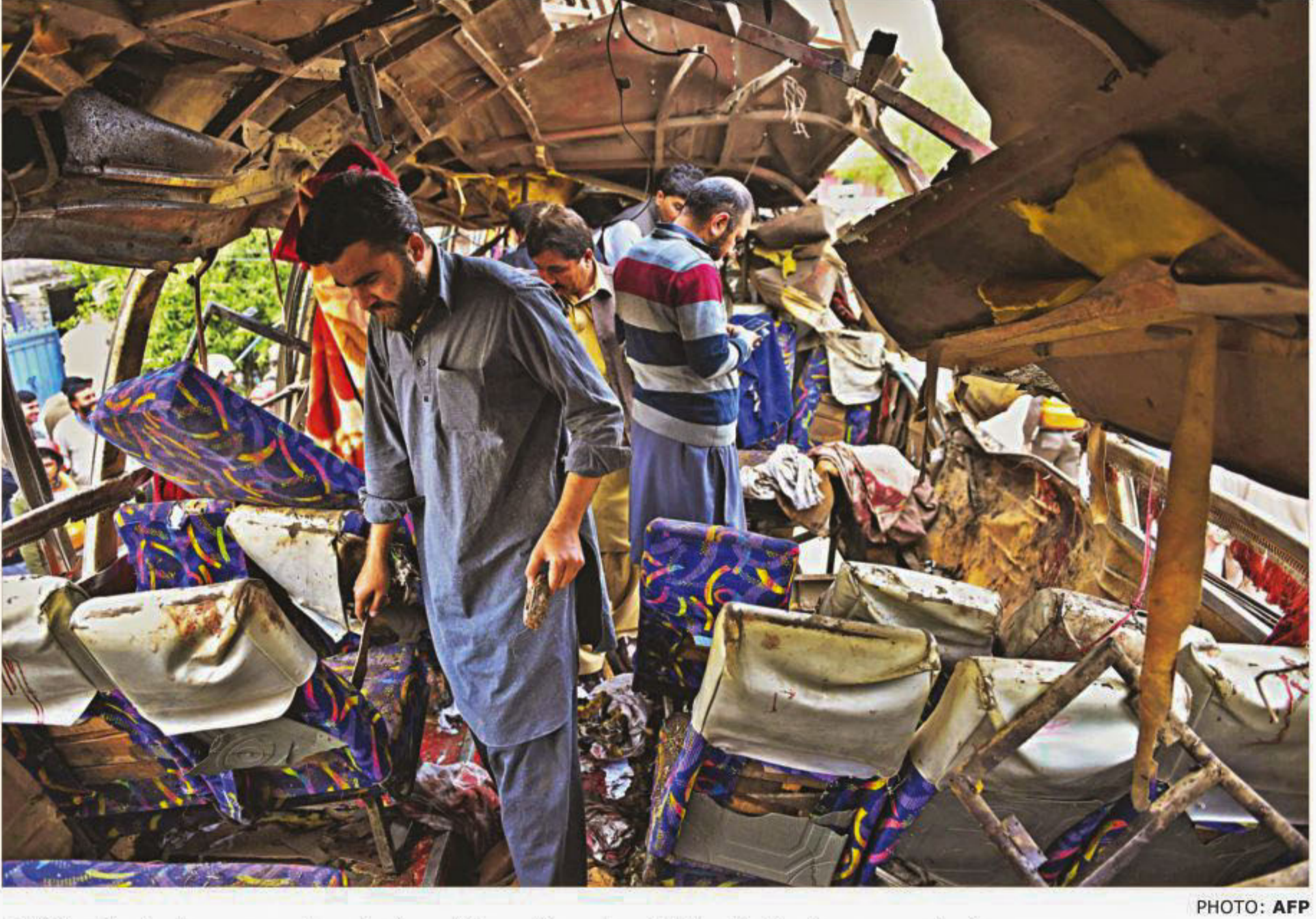
"We're way ahead of everybody. I don't think you can say that we don't get it automatically," Trump told CNN the morning after his latest round of election victories, in the states of Illinois, North Carolina and Florida. "I think you would have riots," he said. "You know, I'm representing many, many millions of people."

Trump, who has never held elected office, has dominated the 2016 presidential campaign thus far with his bombastic style and his unexpectedly strong popularity with masses of American voters.

But while Trump is the frontrunner for the nomination, political observers believe he may fall short of the 1,237 delegates needed for an outright win.

That could lead to a complicated process of horse-trading and backroom dealing at the party convention in Cleveland, Ohio this summer which supporters fear could result in someone other than Trump being named the Republican standard bearer.

"Now, if you disenfranchise those people and say, 'I'm sorry, you're 100 votes short, even though the next one is 500 votes short, I think you would see problems like you've never seen before. I think bad things would happen. I really do,'" he told CNN.



Pakistani volunteers search a destroyed bus after a bomb blast in Peshawar, yesterday.

Pak bus blast kills 17 govt employees; 47 wounded

AFP, Peshawar

At least 17 people were killed and dozens wounded yesterday when a bomb exploded inside a bus in Peshawar, the main city in Pakistan's insurgency-racked northwest, officials said.

No group has claimed responsibility for the explosion, which happened as the bus carrying mainly government employees was passing through the city's crowded shopping district of Saddar.

But Pakistan has been battling a home-grown Islamist insurgency for more than a decade, with groups such as the Pakistani Taliban routinely carrying out attacks as part of their struggle to overthrow the government.

"Another injured from the bus blast has expired and the death toll is now 17," Jamil Shah, a spokesman for Peshawar's main Lady Reading Hospital, told AFP.

"A total of 47 wounded were brought to hospital and many have been discharged after first aid. Five people among the 19 injured admitted are still critical,"

the spokesman said.

Bomb disposal officials said a four-kilogram improvised explosive device had been planted near the bus's gas cylinder and appeared to have been detonated remotely.

"The IED was fitted with ball bearings and was planted beneath the sixth row of seats from the back," police official Abbas Majeed added.

Majeed told reporters at the scene the bus was carrying government employees from the northwestern town of Mardan to Peshawar. Rescue workers carried the injured from the blue bus on stretchers to waiting ambulances.

A survivor said the vehicle appeared to leap in the air after the explosion.

"A huge blast occurred and I felt that the bus had jumped in the air. I could only see flames and smoke in the rear of the bus. People started crying. I got an injury on my head and light wounds on the body," said Faqir Gul, 32, a shopkeeper from Charsadda district.

Suicide bombers kill 22 in Nigeria mosque

AFP, Maiduguri

At least 22 people were killed in a twin suicide bombing at a mosque in northeast Nigeria yesterday, prompting condemnation from President Muhammadu Buhari and stoking fresh fears about security.

The attack, carried out by two women disguised as men, took place at about 5:30 am in the Molai district of Maiduguri, which Boko Haram insurgents have repeatedly targeted in the past. 18 others were injured in the attack.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack. Both the Borno State Emergency Management Agency spokesman Abdullahi Omar and the army confirmed the powerful blast, which brought down the mosque's ceiling and tore off its roof.

The attack was only the second in northeast Nigeria this month and came after four raids and suicide bombings in February and eight in January -- a marked fall in frequency since last year.

The military has said its sustained counter-offensive over the last year has the Islamists on the run, cutting off their supply lines and reducing their ability to conduct conventional fighting.

But fears remain about the group's use of suicide bombers and improvised explosive devices against "soft" civilian targets such as mosques, markets and bus stations.