

NEWS IN brief

Turkey 'illegally returning Syrian refugees'

Says Amnesty
AFP, Istanbul

Amnesty International yesterday accused Turkey of illegally forcing groups of Syrians to return to their conflict-torn country, saying the alleged expulsions showed the "fatal flaws" in a migrant deal agreed with the EU.

The claim by Amnesty comes just days before Turkey is due to start taking back migrants expelled from the EU under an accord reached last month.

US leads 17 strikes on IS in Syria, Iraq

REUTERS, Washington

The United States and its allies staged 17 strikes against Islamic State on Thursday in their latest round of daily attacks in Iraq and Syria against the militant group, the coalition leading the operations said. In Iraq, a dozen strikes near eight cities, hit six tactical units and destroyed several improvised explosive devices (IEDs). In Syria, five strikes near three cities hit three of the militants' tactical units.

Former German FM Genscher dies

AFP, Berlin

Germany's longest-serving foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, whose tireless Cold War diplomacy paved the way for his country's peaceful reunification, has died at age 89, his office said yesterday. His marathon 1974-92 tenure as Germany's chief diplomat broke longevity records in Europe and spanned some of the continent's most dramatic moments, including the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall. When Genscher took office, Europe looked to be forever divided into two nuclear-armed camps, Nato and the Warsaw Pact. When he stepped down, Germany was reunited and Soviet communism had been consigned to history.



Architect Zaha Hadid dies at 65

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Iraqi-born British architect Zaha Hadid, the first female winner of the top Pritzker Architecture Prize, has died at the age of 65. Hadid died after suffering a heart attack at a Miami hospital. In 2004, Hadid became the first woman to win the Pritzker Prize, known as the Nobel for architecture. Hadid designed the London Aquatics Centre, which was used during the 2012 London Olympics.



(From left) Chinese President Xi Jinping; US President Barack Obama and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi attend a working dinner in the East Room of the White House on Thursday in Washington, DC. World leaders are gathering for a two-day conference that will address a range of issues including ongoing efforts to prevent terrorist groups from accessing nuclear material.

More obese people than underweight

Says study

There are now more adults in the world classified as obese than underweight, a major study has suggested. The research, led by scientists from Imperial College London and published in The Lancet, compared body mass index (BMI) among almost 20 million adult men and women from 1975 to 2014. It found obesity in men has tripled and more than doubled in women. Lead author Prof Majid Ezzat said it was an "epidemic of severe obesity" and urged governments to act. The study, which pooled data from adults in 186 countries, found that the number of obese people worldwide had risen from 105 million in 1975 to 641 million in 2014.

Meanwhile the number of underweight people had risen from 330 million to 462 million over the same period. Global obesity rates among men went up from 3.2% in 1975 to 10.8%, while among women they rose from 6.4% in 1975 to 14.9%.

This equates to 266 million obese men and 375 million obese women in the world in 2014, the study said. The research also predicted that the probability of reaching the World Health Organisation's global obesity target -- which aims for no rise in obesity above 2010 levels by 2025 -- would be "close to zero".

The clinical definition of obese is a BMI - a measurement that relates weight and height - of 30 kilograms per metre squared (kg/m²). Prof Ezzati said: "Our research has shown that over 40 years we have transitioned from a world in which underweight prevalence was more than double that of obesity, to one in which more people are obese than underweight."

Shocked to the core

Says Ban Ki-moon on sexual abuse by UN peacekeepers as more than 100 victims tell horror tale

More than 100 victims have come forward in the Central African Republic with appalling new accounts of sexual abuse, including bestiality, by UN peacekeepers and French troops, the United Nations said Thursday.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was "shocked to the core" by the allegations that emerged after a UN team traveled to south-central Kemo prefecture to interview the women and girls.

"We must face the fact that a number of troops sent to protect people instead acted with hearts of darkness," UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

UN rights officers have so far interviewed 108 alleged victims, "the vast majority" of whom are under-age girls who were raped, sexually abused or exploited by foreign troops, he said.

UN teams received accounts that troops from France's Sangaris force coerced girls to engage in bestiality in return for small amounts of money.

AIDS-Free World, a civil society group that tracks peacekeeper sex abuse cases, said three girls told a UN rights officer that in 2014 they were tied up and undressed by a Sangaris commander inside a camp and forced to have sex with a dog. Dujarric stressed that "the facts have not been

ascertained" in what could be the most serious wave of allegations to date to hit the troubled peace mission in the Central African Republic.

France's UN Ambassador Francois Delattre and US Ambassador Samantha Power both called the allegations "sickening."

French authorities are determined to "shed full light" on the reported cases and will take "exemplary disciplinary action" if the allegations are substantiated, said Delattre.

France sent its Sangaris intervention force to the Central African Republic in December 2013 and while the troops are not part of the UN mission, they have been mandated by the Security Council to help restore peace to the country.

Under UN rules, the responsibility for investigating and prosecuting peacekeeper sexual abuse lies with the countries that contribute the troops and police to the peace missions.

As disturbing allegations of sexual assault by troops targeting civilians mounted, Ban in August fired the mission chief, but new claims have continued to emerge.

Earlier this week, the United Nations reported two new cases of sexual abuse by Burundian and Moroccan troops, including one that involved a 14-year-old girl.



Suu Kyi as 'STATE ADVISOR'

Ruling party, military clash in Myanmar

Myanmar's upper house of parliament yesterday approved a bill that gives Aung San Suu Kyi a powerful government role, despite opposition from the military on the second day of her party's new administration.

The bill creates the post of state counsellor and would allow the Nobel laureate to coordinate ministers and influence the executive. It would help Suu Kyi circumvent a constitution written under the former junta that prevents her leading the country because her two sons are not Myanmar citizens.

Suu Kyi, who spent years under house arrest because of her push for democracy, has described those constitutional provisions as "silly" and said she would rule regardless after she led her National League for Democracy (NLD) to a landslide election victory in November.

Members of parliament from the military - who under the constitution hold a quarter of seats - opposed the NLD bill, describing it as unconstitutional. They said the state counsellor position concentrated too much power in the hands of one person and lacked checks and balances.

"The provisions in the bill are tantamount to meaning the state counsellor is equal to the president, which is contrary to the constitution," said Colonel Myint Swe, a military member of the upper house.

Some lawmakers suggested the Constitutional Tribunal should decide on the bill. Despite military resistance, the bill passed and moved to the lower house for debate on Monday. The NLD has a majority in both houses so does not need military approval to pass bills.

The role of state counsellor will add to the list of Suu Kyi's jobs - she is already foreign minister, education minister, energy minister, and minister of the president's office - and has renewed questions about her willingness to delegate power.



Support grows for Libya's UN-backed unity govt

Libya's UN-backed unity government has won increasing pledges of loyalty as it gradually exerts its authority in the face of strong opposition from rival political forces in the conflict-racked country.

Libya's warring sides are under intense international pressure to cede power to prime minister-designate Fayez al-Sarraj, whose arrival in the capital on Wednesday angered a rival Tripoli-based government.

Ten western cities called on all Libyans Thursday to back the Government of National Accord (GNA) in a major blow to the unrecognised Tripoli authority which is refusing to give up power.

On Thursday Sarraj met with the head of Libya's Tripoli-based central bank and discussed measures to safeguard banks and tackle the country's "cash flow problem," according to his office.

Perhaps crucially, the unity government also now has the support of the main armed group in the city, Nawasi, signalling a split

within the security forces once loyal to the Tripoli authorities.

The head of the Tripoli-based National Salvation Government, Khalifa Ghwell, has vehemently opposed any transfer of power. But a statement posted late on Thursday on the government's website struck a milder tone, saying opposition would be "by peaceful and legal means without use of force or incitement to violence".

The Tripoli government demanded that Sarraj leave or surrender following his arrival by sea this week with a naval escort, after the airspace was closed to prevent him flying into the capital.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault urged the international community to prepare to help the unity government if asked, providing military support if necessary.

"The chaos which reigns there today aids the rapid development of terrorism. It is a direct threat to the region and to Europe," he said in comments to a French newspaper.



School children pray inside their classroom for the victims of Kolkata's collapsed under-construction flyover, in Agartala, India, yesterday. Rescue officials yesterday said there are no more survivors trapped under the rubble of a flyover that collapsed killing at least 25 people, as Indian police detained five construction company staff over the accident. Story on page 16.

Google left red-faced after April Fools' prank backfires

The joke was on Google yesterday when it had to pull an April Fools' Day prank featuring characters from the "Despicable Me" movies that landed users of its Gmail service in trouble.

To mark the annual day of practical jokes, the US technology giant added an extra send button to its email service that included a gif of a minion, one of the yellow creatures from the popular animated comedy films.

But many unsuspecting users hit the button and sent important business emails and reportedly even funeral arrangements with the light-hearted cartoon.

"This is horrible -- just sent an email to a client with this stupid icon on it," wrote user David Kitner on the Gmail help forum. "I can't afford these stupid pranks!"

Google later withdrew the feature and apologized. "Well, it looks like we pranked ourselves this year," it said. "The MicDrop feature inadvertently caused more headaches than laughs. We're truly sorry. The feature has been turned off."

Meanwhile readers of newspapers

'Won't take any cards off the table'

Trump refuses to rule out using nuke against Europe

Donald Trump has refused to rule out dropping a nuclear bomb on Europe, saying he is not willing to "take any cards off the table".

In an MSNBC interview which has already made headline for Trump's comments on punishing women for having abortions, the presidential candidate said if the US wasn't willing to use its nuclear weapons, "why are we making them?"

Trump did say he "would be the last one to use the nuclear weapons" and added his now-familiar line that he was "against Iraq" - which is not strictly the case.

"I would be very, very slow to pull that trigger," Trump said. "[But] if someone hits us with a nuke, you wouldn't fight back with a nuke?"

Earlier this week, Trump struggled with another question on the nuclear issue when he was asked by right-wing radio host Hugh Hewitt which of the US's "trident" of weapons - by land, by sea or by air - was in most urgent need of an upgrade.

The candidate appeared not to understand the question, even when it was repeated, eventually responding: "I think - I think, for me, nuclear is just the power, the devastation is very important to me."



'TEST FOR PRESS FREEDOM' IN TURKEY

Two journo back in court

The controversial trial of two well-known Turkish journalists entered its second day yesterday in a case seen as a test of press freedom under the increasingly autocratic President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Can Dundar, editor-in-chief of leading opposition daily Cumhuriyet, and Erdem Gul, his Ankara bureau chief, are charged with espionage and revealing state secrets over a story accusing the government of seeking to illicitly deliver arms to rebels in Syria.

The prosecution of the journalists has sparked outrage among opposition and rights groups in Turkey as well as in the West, where it is seen as proof of Erdogan's determination to silence his opponents.

Almost 2,000 people have been prosecuted for "insulting" Erdogan since the former premier became president in August

2014, Turkey's justice minister said in March.

The journalists could face life in prison, but a defiant Dundar voiced optimism they would be found not guilty as he arrived at the Istanbul criminal court. "We will win. We have always won throughout history. We think the laws will show we are right and we will be acquitted," Dundar told reporters.

"It's journalism that is on trial here. This trial should not be taking place," added Gul.

As on the first day of the proceedings -- which opened March 25 -- the case was going on behind closed doors. On the

first day of the trial, the court granted a prosecution request to hold the hearings in secret. Prosecutors cited "national security" concerns.

That decision was met with cries of dismay inside the courtroom and opposition politicians refused to leave, prompting the judge to adjourn the trial to April 1.

