

NEWS IN
brief

Brussels airport to reopen today

BBC ONLINE

Brussels airport plans to partially reopen today with new security controls, 10 days after it was attacked by suicide bombers. Zaventem has not handled passenger flights since the attack on its departure hall claimed by the so-called Islamic State group that killed at least 32 people.

Indian beggar wins Rs 65 lakh lottery

PTI, Thiruvananthapuram

Lady luck smiled on a 35-year-old physically-challenged beggar who had come to Kerala seeking "better pastures" from Andhra Pradesh with the man winning a prize money of Rs 65 lakh of a state-run lottery. A regular punter of lotteries, he also won a series of consolation prizes to the tune of Rs 90,000 in the lots, drawn on Wednesday. The incident came close on the heels of a 22-year-old migrant worker from West Bengal had won Rs one crore Kerala government lottery last month.

'Women have equal right to enter temple'

AFP, Mumbai

Women have a fundamental right to enter temples, the high court in Mumbai has said, possibly paving the way for an easing of gender restrictions at places of worship across the country. Some Hindu temples in India ban women from entering the inner sanctum, with Kerala's famous Sabarimala temple barring all female worshippers aged between 10 and 50 years. The court's directive came Friday after an activist challenged the centuries-old ban on women entering the inner sanctum of Shani Shingnapur temple in Maharashtra state's Ahmednagar district.



Rahul Gandhi (centre L), vice president of the All India Congress Committee, visits the site of a collapsed flyover in Kolkata, yesterday. Three employees of the Indian construction firm building the flyover that collapsed on Thursday appeared in court yesterday facing four initial charges including murder, a public prosecutor said, as the death toll rose to 26.

PHOTO: AFP

REFUGEE CRISIS IN EUROPE
Concern rises as EU-Turkey deal looms

AGENCIES

There is growing concern over a lack of preparation for the plan to send migrants back from Greece to Turkey, two days before it goes into effect.

Greek authorities were gearing up yesterday to send hundreds of failed asylum-seekers back to Turkey, which is racing to set up reception centres under a controversial EU migrant deal.

"Planning is in progress," Yiorgos Kyritsis, spokesman for Greece's refugee coordination unit, told AFP as Greek state agency ANA said some 750 migrants would be sent back between Monday and Wednesday, the first wave of deportations under the much-criticised deal.

On the other side of the Aegean -- a sea crossed this year alone by more than 150,000 people searching for a new life in Europe -- work is underway on a centre in the Turkish tourist resort of Cesme to host those sent back, the town's mayor Muhittin Dalgic said yesterday.

But a BBC correspondent who has been to one of the registration sites in Turkey says there are few signs it is ready.

The UN and rights groups have expressed fears about migrant welfare and whether some may be forced back into Syria. A report from Amnesty International released on Friday has accused Turkey of illegally forcing thousands of refugees back to Syria.

TENSION IN SOUTH CHINA SEA
US plans third patrol near disputed islands

REUTERS, Washington

The US Navy plans to conduct another passage near disputed islands in the South China Sea in early April, a source familiar with the plan said on Friday, the third in series of challenges that have drawn sharp rebukes from China.

The exact timing of the exercise and which ship would travel inside a 12-nautical mile limit around a disputed island was not immediately clear.

The United States has conducted what it calls "freedom of navigation" exercises in recent months, sailing near disputed islands to underscore its right to navigate the seas. US Navy officials have said they plan to conduct more and increasingly complex exercises in the future.

Experts predict the next US challenge to the various claims in the South China Sea could occur near Mischief Reef, a feature claimed by the Philippines and which was submerged at high tide before China began a dredging project to turn it into an island in 2014.

Mischief Reef is now the site of one of three military-length airfields China has built on man-made islands in the Spratly Islands archipelago.

US Navy ships regularly patrol the South China Sea, through which more than \$5 trillion of world trade travels every year. China claims most of the area, and Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines and Taiwan have rival claims.

News of the planned exercise comes a day after US President Barack Obama met with Chinese President Xi Jinping at a nuclear summit in Washington. During the meetings, Xi told Obama that China would not accept any behavior in the disguise of freedom of navigation that violates its sovereignty, in a clear warning to the United States.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei yesterday told Reuters that China opposed any such exercise.



PATHANKOT ATTACK
China blocks UN bid to blacklist Pak mastermind

AGENCIES

China has blocked a request from India to add the head of the Pakistani militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad to a UN sanctions blacklist, UN diplomats said Friday.

India accuses Masood Azhar of involvement in an attack on the Pathankot air base in the northern state of Punjab in January.

Chinese Ambassador Liu Jieyi said that the request to add the militant leader to the UN al-Qaeda/Islamic State sanctions list did not meet certain requirements, but did not elaborate.

"Any listing would have to meet the necessary requirements," said Liu. "It is the responsibility of all members of the council to make sure that these requirements are followed."

UN diplomats said the request would be discussed by the sanctions committee on April 20 and that China would then provide an update on its decision to oppose the request.

The Pakistani extremist Islamist group, which is fighting Indian control of Kashmir, has already been blacklisted by the UN Security Council, but not Azhar.

India was highly critical of the move.

"We find it incomprehensible that while the Pakistan-based JeM was listed in UN Security Council Committee established under UN Security Council Resolution 1267/1989/2253 as far back as 2001 for its well known terror activities and links to the al-Qaeda, the designation of the group's main leader, financier and motivator has been put on a technical hold," India warned in a statement.

Mass grave found in Palmyra

AFP, Damascus

Syrian troops have found a mass grave containing the bodies of 42 people executed by Islamic State jihadists in Palmyra, as Washington warned the group's leader will eventually "taste justice".

IS has in recent months claimed responsibility for deadly attacks in Brussels and Paris, but has lost ground in Syria and Iraq.

Days after Syrian troops backed by Russian forces recaptured Palmyra and its ancient ruins, the army "uncovered a mass grave of officers, soldiers, members of the popular committees (pro-regime militia) and their relatives," a military source told AFP yesterday.

Twenty-four of the victims were civilians, including three children, he said, asking not to be named.

"They were executed either by

beheading or by shooting."

The bodies, which were found on Friday, have been transferred to a military hospital in the provincial capital Homs and some have been identified.

In a major symbolic and strategic coup for President Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian army on Sunday recaptured

Palmyra and its UNESCO World Heritage Site, which IS had overrun in May 2015.

During their nearly 10-month occupation of Palmyra, the jihadists executed at least 280 people, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitor which confirmed the discovery of

the mass grave.

Soon after IS stormed Palmyra, it shot dead 25 soldiers in the ancient Roman theatre. It later released a video of the mass killing in which the executioners appeared to be children or teenagers.

Syria's five-year war has left at least 270,000 people dead. Few mass graves have been found, however.

On Friday, the Pentagon warned that Baghdadi himself, who in 2014 appointed himself "caliph" of swathes of Iraq and Syria, would eventually be hunted down and killed.

"Just like we found his mentor, (Abu Musab) al-Zarqawi and killed him. Just like we found the grand master of terrorism, Osama bin Laden, we killed him. We are going to find Baghdadi, and he will taste justice," military spokesman Colonel Steve Warren said.

ISLAMIC STATE ATROCITIES



'CIA mistakenly left explosives on a Virginia school bus'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

CIA agents accidentally left explosive materials on a Virginia school bus that transported children to and from school this week.

The CIA and the Loudoun County Sheriff's Office issued statements on Thursday saying that the explosives were left on the bus after a training exercise at Briar Woods High School on March 31.

"During the exercise, explosive training material was inadvertently left by the CIA K-9 unit in one of the buses used in the exercise," the CIA said in a statement, adding that the material "did not pose a danger to passengers on the bus."

Before the discovery, the bus made eight runs carrying 26 students for 145 miles from Rock Ridge High School, Buffalo Trail Elementary School and Pinebrook Elementary School.



Loudoun schools spokesman Wayne Byard told reporters the CIA requested the school system keep the discovery private. The Washington Post reports. Byard then described the material as "putty-type" material that requires a special detonator to ignite.

"The training materials used in the exercises are incredibly stable and according to the CIA and Loudoun County explosive experts, the students on the bus were not in any danger from the training material," the Sheriff's Office said in a statement.

Officials from both agencies also checked every bus at the school as a precaution.

The CIA also announced that an independent review of the unit is underway and promised to make "immediate steps" to strengthen inventory and control procedures in its K-9 program.

'Trump doesn't know much about foreign policy, world'

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama said on Friday that Donald Trump's recent comments that South Korea and Japan should acquire nuclear weapons show the leading Republican presidential candidate is not well informed on international relations.

Trump told The New York Times in an interview published on last Sunday that he would consider letting the countries build their own nuclear weapons, rather than having them count on US protection against North Korea and China.

"What do the statements you mentioned tell us?" Obama told reporters at a news conference at the conclusion of a nuclear security summit. "They tell us that the person who made the statements doesn't know much about foreign policy or nuclear policy or the Korean peninsula, or the world generally."

Obama said Trump's candidacy had come up as a topic with world leaders on the side-

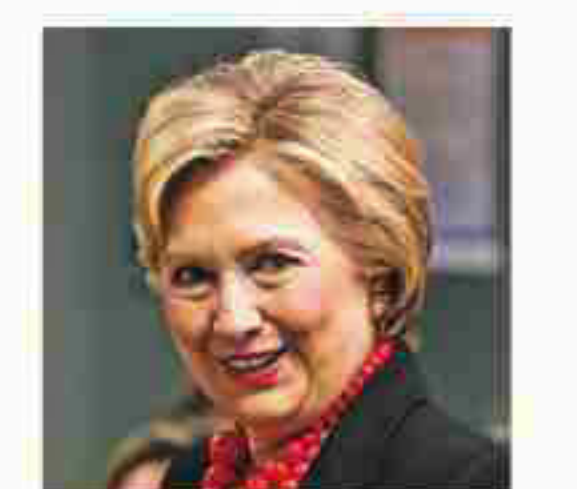
lines of the summit, and he lamented the state of the Republican race.

"Even ... those countries that are used to a carnival atmosphere in their own politics want sobriety and clarity when it comes to US elections because they understand the president of the United States needs to know what's going on around the world," he said.

The US alliance with Japan and South Korea was one of the cornerstones of America's presence in the Asia Pacific region and had underwritten peace and prosperity there, he said.

The relationship had been a boon to US commerce and influence in addition to preventing nuclear escalation and conflict, he added.

"You don't mess with that. It is an investment that rests on the sacrifices that our men and women made back in World War II when they were fighting throughout the Pacific," Obama said. "We don't want somebody in the Oval Office who doesn't recognize how important that is."



CLINTON EMAIL ROW
State Dept. halts probe at FBI's request

REUTERS, Washington

The US State Department has suspended plans for an internal review of whether classified information was properly handled in former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's emails at the request of the FBI, a spokeswoman said on Friday.

Clinton, the front-runner in the race for the Democratic Party nomination in the Nov 8 presidential election, has apologized for using a private email server for official business while in office from 2009 to 2013 and said she did nothing wrong. The Federal Bureau of Investigation is probing the arrangement.

On Jan 29, the State Department said 22 emails sent or received by Clinton had been upgraded to top secret at the request US intelligence agencies and would not be made public as part of the release of thousands of Clinton's emails. It said that none of the emails was marked classified when sent.

The government forbids handling of classified information, which may or may not be marked that way, outside secure government-controlled channels, and sometimes prosecutes people who remove it from such channels. The government classifies information as top secret if it deems a leak could cause "exceptionally grave damage" to national security.

US drone 'kills' Shebab leader in Somalia

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A drone strike has targeted a jihadist commander suspected of involvement in two terror attacks in Somalia.

US officials believe Hassan Ali Dhoore was killed alongside two other people after being targeted on Thursday but the results of the operation are still being formally assessed.

Dhoore is said to have planned and overseen atrocities that killed more than 30 people, including an attack near Mogadishu Airport.

The Pentagon said Dhoore was also "directly responsible" for a massacre at the Maka al-Mukarram Hotel in March 2015, where 15 people died.

Saudi executions set to hit record
Says leading rights organisation

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Saudi Arabia has already executed 82 people this year and is on course to behead twice as many prisoners as it did in 2015, according to new statistics compiled by a leading human rights organisation likely to raise fresh concerns about the UK's close ties to the Kingdom.

The British Government has been urged to do more to put pressure on its Gulf allies to halt the bloodshed in light of the figures, which would see the total death toll in Saudi Arabia reach a record high of more than 320 by the end of the year if the current rate is maintained.

This would be more than double the 158 executions carried out by the Kingdom last year, which was in itself a dramatic rise on the 88 people it beheaded in 2014. The figures were compiled by the UK organisation Reprieve using a combination of official statements from the Saudi government and reliable local media reports.

Earlier this week, the Defence Secretary Michael Fallon paid a low-key visit to Saudi Arabia to "help strengthen the UK-Saudi defence relationship". Days later, at least two more prisoners were beheaded.



Indian Kashmiri Muslims pray before a priest shows a relic believed to be hair from the beard of Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) during special prayers on the death anniversary of Abu Bakr Siddiq, the first Caliph of Islam at the Hazratbal Shrine in Srinagar on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP