

NEWS IN brief

'Taliban driven back from Kunduz'

REUTERS, Kunduz

Afghan security forces drove back Taliban insurgents attacking areas around the northern city of Kunduz, officials said yesterday, after heavy fighting overnight in which dozens were killed and wounded. Kunduz, Afghanistan's fifth-biggest city, fell briefly to the Taliban last year and the militants have stepped up the pressure since announcing the start of its annual spring offensive this week.

EU foreign policy chief visits Iran

AFP, Tehran

The European Union's top diplomat Federica Mogherini arrived in Tehran yesterday on her first visit since a nuclear deal between Iran and world powers came into force as tensions surface over its implementation. Her one-day trip comes after Iran raised concerns about banking sanctions, saying the international community was not sticking to its promises.

UNSC condemns N Korea missile test

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council strongly condemned North Korea's test-firing of a missile on Friday, saying that the launch violated UN resolutions even if it was a failure. In a unanimous statement, the council said it would closely monitor the situation and was ready to "take further significant measures" against the reclusive state. Last month, the council imposed its toughest sanctions to date on North Korea.

Actor Dilip Kumar admitted to hospital

TNN, Mumbai

Veteran actor Dilip Kumar has been admitted to Lilavati hospital in Mumbai for respiratory problems. Doctors are keeping a close watch on Dilip Kumar, said the hospital authority. Kumar was awarded Padma Vibhushan in 2015. Earlier, he was honoured with Padma Bhushan in 1991 and the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 1994 for his outstanding contribution to Indian cinema.

India to pay \$8.8b for Rafale jets

AFP, New Delhi

India has agreed to pay \$8.8 billion to France's Dassault for 36 fighter jets, reports said Friday, as sources from both countries hinted a long-delayed deal to purchase the aircraft was imminent. NDTV broadcaster said the final agreement is set to be signed in India in three weeks, but delivery of the aircraft will not take place for another 18 months.



TWIN QUAKES HIT JAPAN

(From top right, anti-clockwise) The aftermath of a landslide and destroyed houses caused by an earthquake are seen in Minamiaso town; cracks are seen at a parking lot in the town; a woman reacts in front of her collapsed house in Mashiki; collapsed houses in the town; and a woman takes shelter after another aftershock hit the area at a hotel in Kumamoto, southern Japan. Story on page 16.

PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP

'We are all migrants'

Tears flow as Pope visits Europe's migrant frontline

AFP, Lesbos

Declaring "we are all migrants," Pope Francis yesterday brought a message of hope to thousands of people facing expulsion from Greece as he slammed the world community for failing to end the wars fueling the crisis.

In an emotional visit that saw people kneeling in tears at the pope's feet, the pontiff told exiles they were "not alone" and pleaded for the world to show "common humanity" following a hardening of the EU's stance on migrants.

And in a clear message to headline states who have refused to participate in a European Union migrant relocation scheme, the 79-year-old leader of the Catholic Church took with him three Muslim Syrian families whose homes have been bombed.

"You are not alone... do not lose hope," the pope told migrants at the Moria registration centre, where around 3,000 people are being held.

The vast majority have requested asylum but will likely be deported under a controversial agreement reached last month to tackle Europe's refugee crisis by

sending all irregular migrants who land in Greece back to Turkey.

As the pope was escorted through Moria to meet a select number of migrants, one man broke into tears as he knelt at the pontiff's feet, requesting his blessing. Another woman who slipped past security to approach the pontiff also broke down in tears as he paused to listen to her.



Other migrants gathered outside held handmade signs that read 'We want freedom', 'Let my people go' and 'Papa cherche a nous sauver' ('Pope, try to save us').

The religious leader held a prayer at Lesbos harbour in memory of the hundreds of migrants who have drowned during the voyage in overcrowded smuggler boats.

The pope stressed that migrants were not numbers but people with "faces, names and individual stories" who were preyed on by "unscrupulous thugs" and called for "resolute" efforts to clamp down on arms trafficking.

"The world will be judged by the way it has treated you. And we will all be accountable for the way we respond to the crisis and conflict in the regions that you come from," Bartholomew said.



Pope Francis welcomes a group of Syrian refugees after landing at Ciampino airport in Rome, yesterday. The Pope took twelve Syrian refugees, who will be housed in Vatican City, with him after his visit to Lesbos.

PHOTO: AFP

UN rights chief attacks 'bigotry in US campaign'

REUTERS, Geneva

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights launched a thinly veiled attack on US Republican presidential front-runner Donald Trump and other presidential hopefuls on Friday, in a speech entitled "The road to violence."

"Bigotry is not proof of strong leadership. It is evidence of the lowest and most craven lack of faith in the principles that uphold a 'land of the free'," Zeid Ra'ad al Hussein said in a speech at a university in Cleveland, Ohio.

"Less than 150 miles away from where I speak, a front-running candidate to be President of this country declared, just a few months ago, his enthusiastic support for torture... inflicting intolerable pain on people, in order to force them to deliver or invent information that they may not have."



"We have heard hateful slander of foreigners, and multiple candidates declaring their support for extensive and intrusive surveillance of people based on their religious beliefs - vast and discriminatory systems to single out and discriminate against Muslims."

He said the eyes of the world would be on Cleveland when it hosts the Republican National Convention in July, and it was his "deepest hope" that Americans would use it to demonstrate their profound understanding of human dignity and human rights.

He said the price for the "dangerously divisive" rhetoric would be paid by innocent people falling victim to violent acts, not by politicians. "We have heard these calls to hatred - calls stigmatising and demonising minorities, beginning the validation of violence," he said. "Real courage would mean standing up for the great and enduring values of this society."

Delhi sends more troops to tense Kashmir

PTI, New Delhi/Srinagar

Concerned over violence in Jammu and Kashmir in last four days, the India's Centre yesterday decided to rush 3,600 additional paramilitary personnel to the valley and asked the state government to ensure that there is no further loss of lives.

Curfew-like restrictions continued for the fourth day in parts of Kashmir following killing of five persons in security forces action during violent protests since Tuesday.

The central government is concerned over the loss of human lives in Jammu and Kashmir, a home ministry spokesperson said.

SYRIA CRISIS HNC rejects UN proposal for Assad to stay

AFP, Geneva

Syria's opposition has rejected a proposal from the UN envoy that would have kept Bashar al-Assad as president during a political transition, with three deputies of his opponents' choosing.

UN envoy Staffan de Mistura told Syria's opposition attending peace talks in Geneva that the proposal could end the "vicious cycle" of debate over a transitional period to end the war, a source told AFP yesterday.

The HNC insists Assad must leave, but Damascus objects to that demand.

The HNC source said de Mistura had presented the idea of Assad transferring most of his powers to three deputy presidents from the opposition as a way to end that "vicious cycle" of debate.

Saudi strips religious cops of arrest powers

CNN ONLINE

Saudi Arabia has stripped its religious police of the power to arrest when carrying out duties and enforcing Islamic law.

Under the new directives approved on Tuesday, members of the force -- formally known as the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice -- can no longer detain people they identify as breaking the kingdom's strict standards of moral conduct.

Now, the so-called Haia force must report individuals' "misbehaviors" to the police or drug police, the official Saudi Press Agency reports.

Fawaz Gerges, professor of Middle Eastern studies at the London School of Economics, described the update in regulations from the Saudi Cabinet as a "significant development."

Gerges said many of the incidents that have increased public debate around the role of the country's religious police have centered around its treatment of women.

But while this is a "positive step" from a public point of view, Gerges said the move should not be mistaken as the beginning of significant social reform across the country.

He said King Salman, who inherited the throne in January 2015, is "very much liked by the ultraconservative religious authority" but is trying to ease civic tensions and find a middle ground. His predecessor, the late King Abdullah, was seen as a "liberal" reformer.

"We should not over-read into this particular decision. It is a balancing act," Gerges added.



IMPEACHMENT BID 'They want to convict an innocent'

AFP, Brasilia

Brazil's President Dilma Rouseff fought for her political life yesterday, lobbying lawmakers to defeat a looming impeachment vote while lashing out at "corrupt" critics seeking to ouster her.

On the eve of the vote in the lower house of Congress, the 68-year-old leftist leader published a searing column reaffirming her belief that she was the victim of a "coup."

"They want to convict an innocent woman and save the corrupt," Rouseff wrote in the daily Folha de Sao Paulo. The political crisis is threatening to destabilize Latin America's biggest economy as it struggles through a crippling recession and prepares to host the Rio Olympics in four months.

Pro- and anti-Rouseff rallies are planned in all major cities today.

Rouseff faces charges that she illegally used creative accounting to mask government shortfalls during her 2014 reelection. She accepts the accusations but defends her behavior by saying that previous governments used similar measures.

The pro-impeachment camp appears to have the two-thirds majority -- 342 out of 513 votes -- needed to pass the impeachment motion up to the Senate, according to a tally by Brazilian newspapers.

Nationwide protests denounce big money in US politics

REUTERS, Boston/Washington

Conservative and independent protesters channeling themes from the presidential campaigns of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders dumped faux contributions into Boston Harbor on Friday, one of some 30 nationwide demonstrations planned against big money in politics.

In Washington, police arrested 142 members of a more liberal group called Democracy Spring including 12 who cuffed themselves inside the Capitol Rotunda to protest the influence of special interests and to denounce laws making it more difficult to vote.

Both the week-long protests in Washington and Friday's nationwide demonstrations led by the activist group Represent.Us have tapped into some of the

voter frustration seen on the presidential campaign trail.

"From super PACs (political action committees) to lucrative job offers and campaign contributions, there are tons of perfectly legal ways to bribe a politician," said Charlotte Hill, communications director for Represent.Us.

"It doesn't matter if you're conservative or progressive. Two hundred and forty-three years after the original Boston Tea Party, Americans of all political stripes are still facing taxation without political representation," said Dan Krassner, political director of Represent.Us. About 40 activists attended the symbolic re-staging of the Boston Tea Party near the spot where American colonists dumped tea into the harbor to protest taxes levied by the British.



Britain's Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, and Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, pose at The Taj Mahal in Agra, yesterday. The royals wrapped up their week-long trip to India and Bhutan with the visit that carries poignant echoes for Britain's royal family. When the late Princess Diana was photographed (inset) sitting alone outside the tragic monument to love in 1992, it sparked much media speculation and later became a symbol of her failing marriage.

PHOTO: AFP