

NEWS IN brief

Road accidents kill 17 an hour in India

India's transport ministry yesterday admitted it has so far failed to improve road safety but said it was pushing for stricter laws, as new figures revealed 17 people die in traffic accidents every hour. The report found 146,133 people died in 501,423 road accidents in 2015, an increase of almost five percent from 2014, while half a million more were injured. Nearly eight in ten accidents were caused by drivers, with 62 percent of those blamed on speeding.

PKK claims attack on police in Turkey

Outlawed Kurdish rebels yesterday claimed a deadly attack on a police station in southeastern Turkey that killed six people including a pregnant policewoman. In all, at least 17 people were killed in two days bombings blamed on Kurdish militants in the southeast and the main city of Istanbul, the latest in a wave of deadly attacks in Turkey over the past year.

Liberia declares latest Ebola outbreak over

Liberia's health ministry yesterday said the country was free of Ebola, meaning there are now no known cases of the deadly tropical virus left in west Africa. Liberia was the country worst hit by the outbreak that began in neighbouring Guinea in December 2013, with more than 4,800 Liberians killed by the virus.

Brazil bus plunges into ravine; 18 killed

A bus lost control and plunged into a ravine in Brazil's Sao Paulo state Wednesday night, killing at least 18 people and injuring 28, most of them students, authorities said.



An Iraqi fireman sits after fire was extinguished at the site of car bomb attack in the mostly Shia neighbourhood of Baghdad Jadida in the Iraqi capital, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

IS bombings kill 25 in Baghdad

Falluja siege continues

Two suicide bombings that killed about 25 people in Baghdad yesterday were claimed by Islamic State, whose stronghold of Falluja near the capital is surrounded by Iraqi forces which are now advancing on the city.

The ultra-hardline Sunni insurgents said one attack was carried out with a car laden with explosives and the second with an explosive vest.

Iraqi forces began an offensive against Falluja, 50 km west of Baghdad, on May 23 after a series of deadly bombings hit Shi'ite districts of the capital. The troops yesterday began advancing against the militants inside the city, after completing its encirclement last week.

A police officer said a suicide car bomb had targeted a commercial street of Baghdad al-Jadeeda (New Baghdad), in the east of the capital, killing 17 people and wounding over 50.

A man wearing an explosive belt blew himself up at checkpoint near the barracks of Taji, just north of Baghdad, killing seven soldiers and wounding more than 20, he said.

Falluja is a historic bastion of the Sunni insurgency, first against the U.S. occupation of Iraq, in 2003, and then against the Shi'ite-led authorities that took over the country.

Meanwhile, Islamic State insurgents have posted a video showing a 3,000-year-old temple being blown up at the Assyrian city of Nimrud in northern Iraq, in their latest assault on some of the world's greatest archaeological and cultural treasures.

The United Nations confirmed in a statement on Wednesday evening that satellite imagery showed "extensive damage to the main entrance" of the temple of Nabu, the Babylonian god of wisdom.

No formal talks for now

Says UN; regime allows aid convoys to all besieged areas

AGENCIES
The United Nations will not hold another round of Syria peace talks in Geneva until officials on all sides agree the parameters for a political transition deal, which has an Aug. 1 deadline, the U.N. envoy Staffan de Mistura said yesterday.

In the meantime, a series of "low-profile" technical meetings will be held in various cities to discuss issues ranging from the role of the Syrian army and national institutions after any peace deal, de Mistura said.

"I have informed the Security Council just a few days ago ... The time is not yet mature for the official third round of the intra-Syrian talks," de Mistura told reporters.

"Why? Because we are aware that a third round needs to be a concrete one," he said, adding that this meant steps toward a political transition to end the five-year war.

More than 100,000 people are believed to be languishing in government detention centres after five years

of civil war. An unknown number are held by rebel and jihadi groups after being abducted.

The news came as Syria yesterday given approval for humanitarian convoys to reach all of the country's 19 besieged areas by the end of this month, the UN said, but warned "approval... does not mean delivery".

WAR IN SYRIA
130 IS fighters killed in battle for Manbij
French govt says special forces on ground helping Kurdish-Arab alliance

On the battle ground, more than 130 Islamic State group fighters were killed in a US-backed offensive on the key jihadist-held city of Manbij in northern Syria, a monitoring group said yesterday.

US-led coalition air strikes supporting the assault by Kurdish and Arab fighters, launched on May 31, have also

left 30 civilians dead, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The Syrian Democratic Forces have been pushing west from the Euphrates River and have nearly encircled Manbij, a key point along IS's main supply line from the Turkish border to its eastern Syrian stronghold of Raqa.

The SDF alliance has surrounded the city from the north, east and south. Early on Thursday its fighters were advancing towards the main road leading west out of Manbij, according to Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman.

French special forces are advising rebels on the ground in northern Syria in an offensive against Islamic State fighters for control of the border town of Manbij, the military said yesterday.

An army spokesman said Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian had confirmed that France was providing weapons, air support and advice in the campaign aimed at driving Islamic State from territory along the Syria-Turkey border.

Clinton begins search for running mate

Obama calls for unity in Democratic party

AGENCIES
Hillary Clinton said Wednesday she'll consider "the most qualified people" for the Democratic vice presidential nomination -- which would include women.

Now that she's clinched the party's presidential nod, Clinton told CNN's Anderson Cooper that she is turning her attention to selecting a running-mate ahead of the party's convention in Philadelphia in July.

"I'm looking at the most qualified people, and that includes women, of course, because I want to be sure that whoever I pick could be president immediately if something were to happen -- that's the most important qualification," Clinton said.

"I'm going to really begin to pay attention to that now that we've wrapped up the primary process," she said. "But it doesn't matter to me who the person is, as long as that person can really do the job that is required."

Clinton said she's not sure when she'll name a vice presidential choice.

Meanwhile, Barack Obama expressed hope Wednesday that Bernie Sanders in "the next couple of weeks" will finally concede having lost the Democratic presidential nomination to Hillary Clinton, despite having vowed to fight on through the party's convention next month.

Speaking to late night talk show host Jimmy Fallon, Obama said that on balance, Sanders' candidacy in the hardfought Democratic campaign was a positive. "It was a healthy thing for the Democratic Party to have a contested primary," Obama told Fallon during recording of an episode of The Tonight Show.

"I thought that Bernie Sanders brought enormous energy and new ideas. And he pushed the party and challenged them. I thought it made Hillary a better candidate."

He added: "My hope is, is that over the next couple of weeks, we're able to pull things together."



SHABAAB MENACE IN SOMALIA

Scores dead as militants attack Ethiopian base

AFP, Mogadishu

Shabaab fighters attacked an Ethiopian army base in central Somalia yesterday, in the latest raid targeting foreign soldiers deployed as part of an African Union force in the country.

The al-Qaeda linked militants attacked the base in Halgan in Hiran region, using a suicide car bomber and gunmen but there were wildly divergent accounts of the death toll.

The Shabaab quickly claimed to have killed 60 Ethiopian soldiers and lost 16 of its own fighters.

Ethiopia's government said that figure was "an absolute lie" and claimed to have foiled the raid killing 101 militants.

The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) gave a figure of 110 dead militants and Somalia's government initially said 120 Shabaab fighters were killed before doubling the figure to 240. In a statement the African Union added that "hundreds" of Shabaab fighters were captured.

Casualty figures from this type of attack in isolated parts of Somalia are impossible to verify independently. The Shabaab generally exaggerates, while AMISOM usually downplays losses.

Residents in the area close to Halgan said the attack began when a vehicle driven by a suicide bomber exploded at the entrance to the base, after which shooting erupted between jihadist gunmen and Ethiopian soldiers.

The Shabaab launched its first such "swarming" style of attack a year ago and has since overrun forward operating bases manned by Burundian troops in Lego in June, Ugandan troops in Janale in September and Kenyan troops in El Adde in January.

While the countries contributing soldiers to the peacekeeping effort refuse to confirm casualty numbers, it is believed that scores of AMISOM soldiers were killed in each attack.

In the El Adde raid alone more than 140 Kenyan soldiers are believed to have been killed, although the Kenyan government has refused to confirm any numbers.

This is the first such raid on an Ethiopian outpost in Somalia but appears to have been less effective with local officials saying the base and town quickly returned to Ethiopian army and Somalia government control.



People hug each other following a shooting attack that took place in the center of Tel Aviv on Wednesday. Israel clamped down on Palestinian movements and planned to deploy more troops yesterday after Palestinian gunmen shot dead four people at a popular Tel Aviv nightclub, the deadliest attack in a months-long wave of violence. PHOTO: REUTERS



A woman takes part in the jenzah, an Islamic funeral prayer, for the late boxing champion Muhammad Ali in Louisville, Kentucky, US, yesterday. The world begins two final days of mourning for Muhammad Ali yesterday when the boxing great will be honoured with a Muslim funeral a day before receiving a final goodbye with an interfaith service.

ARREST OF KEY MIGRANT SMUGGLER

'Italy extradited wrong man from Sudan'

REUTERS, Khartoum

Eritreans in Sudan yesterday said that a man extradited to Italy and accused of being a kingpin in an international people-smuggling ring was actually one of their friends and police had arrested the wrong man.

Italian and British officials said on Wednesday they had worked together to secure the arrest of Medhane Yehdego Mered, nicknamed "the General", in Sudan and hailed his extradition as a rare victory in the struggle against human trafficking.

Italian police released a video of the man they said was Mered arriving at an airport in Rome, but two Eritreans who live in Sudan told Reuters yesterday it was a case of mistaken identity.

Instead the man is Medhanie Tesfamariam Berhe, an Eritrean refugee who wanted to emigrate to Europe, the two friends said. Other Eritrean witnesses in Sudan told Britain's Guardian newspaper the same thing.

Britain's National Crime Agency (NCA) said on Wednesday it helped track down Mered in Sudan. In response to the Guardian article, an NCA spokesperson said: "This is a complex multi partner operation and it is too soon to speculate about these claims."

ARMENIAN GENOCIDE ROW

Germany hit back at Erdogan's 'tainted blood' comment

AFP, Berlin

German politicians yesterday hit back at Turkey's president for accusing lawmakers of Turkish origin of having "tainted blood" in a row over whether the Ottoman Empire committed genocide in World War I.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reacted furiously after the 11 German MPs with Turkish roots last week backed a parliamentary resolution that recognised the mass killings of Armenians as a genocide.

The sensitive issue has infuriated Erdogan at a time when relations are already strained by disputes about media freedom, while the EU is banking on Turkey to stop the cross-border flow of migrants.

A group of Turkish lawyers has also filed a complaint with prosecutors asking for the 11 German lawmakers to be charged with

"insulting Turkishness and the Turkish state," the Hurriyet daily reported.

European Parliament President Martin Schulz wrote to Erdogan to voice his "great concern" about his "verbal attacks and allegations concerning freely elected members of the German Bundestag".

The German parliament's president, Norbert Lammert, said that statements by Turkish leaders had prepared the ground for a torrent of "hateful threats and insults" that were mailed to the MPs.

"I would not have thought it possible that a democratically elected president in the 21st century mixes his criticism of democratically elected representatives of the German Bundestag with doubts about their Turkish origin, that he refers to their 'tainted blood'," Lammert said in an address to the chamber.