

NEWSIN brief

Terrorism deaths fall in 2015: report

AFP, London
Terrorism deaths fell last year thanks to a weakening of the Islamic State group in Iraq and Boko Haram in Nigeria, but both groups expanded their geographic reach, a new index revealed yesterday. Some 29,376 people died from terrorism in 2015, down 3,389 on the previous year and the first fall since 2010, according to the Global Terrorism Index published by the Institute for Economics and Peace.



Indian FM Swaraj suffers kidney failure

AFP, New Delhi
India's Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj yesterday said that she is being treated for kidney failure and undergoing tests for a possible transplant. Swaraj, a veteran leader of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, tweeted that she was undergoing dialysis at a private hospital in New Delhi. Swaraj, who suffers from chronic diabetes, had been admitted to AIIMS on November 7.

Pak top diplomat plans to visit India

AFP, Islamabad
Pakistan's top foreign affairs official has said he plans to visit India next month for a regional conference, the first high-profile visit since tensions spiralled between the arch-rivals after a deadly attack on an Indian army base. Sartaj Aziz, adviser to Pakistan's prime minister Nawaz Sharif and de facto foreign minister, said he will attend the Heart of Asia conference on Afghanistan, to be hosted by India in December, "to defuse the tension".

Blast kills six in Kabul

AFP, Kabul
A suicide bomber on foot struck a government vehicle in Kabul yesterday, killing at least six people and wounding 10 others, officials said, in an attack claimed by the Islamic State group.

US mayor quits over racist first lady post

AFP, Washington
A mayor from West Virginia has resigned amid a furor over a racist Facebook post that described First Lady Michelle Obama as an "ape in heels," US media said. Beverly Whaling, the mayor of the tiny town of Clay, had appeared to applaud the incendiary comment made by one of her employees Pamela Ramsey Taylor and stepped down Tuesday amid the ensuing firestorm. Taylor had been removed from her position.



Globalisation 'demands a course correction'

Obama warns against 'crude nationalism in the 'cradle of democracy' in his last Europe tour as leader



AFP, Athens

Globalisation has brought many economic benefits to the world but needs a "course correction" to address growing inequality, US President Barack Obama said yesterday on his European farewell tour.

Obama spoke during a visit originally planned as a valedictory lap, but which has become focused on reassuring jittery allies after the shock election victory by Donald Trump, a staunch critic of free trade agreements. "The global path of globalisation demands a course correction," Obama said in an eagerly-awaited speech in Athens, before continuing his journey to Berlin.

"When we see people, global elites, wealthy corporations seemingly living by a different set of rules, avoiding taxes, manipulating loopholes... this feeds a profound sense of injustice," he added.

During the trip, the outgoing president has repeatedly referred to the anger that lately brought success to populist movements in Europe and the United States, such as the Brexit referendum and Trump's shock victory last week.

In comments Tuesday Obama cautioned the world must guard against "a rise in a crude sort of nationalism or ethnic identity or tribalism that is built around an 'us' and a 'them'".

European governments, especially eastern countries close to Russia's orbit, have been shaken after Trump appeared to call into question Washington's near 70-year security guarantee by saying he would only help NATO allies if they paid their way.

Trump welcomed Britain's shock vote in June to leave the European Union (EU) and has been a critic of global free trade agreements.

However, Obama was at pains to stress that Europe -- and NATO -- would remain the cornerstone of US foreign policy.

The US-led NATO grouping is "absolutely vital" to US interests and a strong, unified Europe was good for America and the world, Obama said in comments aimed at reassuring old partners.

"We know what happens when Europeans start dividing themselves up... the 20th century was a bloodbath," he said pointedly on Tuesday.

Following his speech, the president will head to Germany to visit Chancellor Angela Merkel, whom he has described as "probably... my closest international partner these last eight years."

During his time in Berlin, he will also huddle with the leaders of Britain, France and Italy, as Europe desperately seeks clues to future US policy in a Trump world.

Russia quits International Criminal Court

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday said it is formally withdrawing its signature from the founding statute of the International Criminal Court, saying the tribunal has failed to live up to the hopes of the international community.

Russia in 2000 signed the Rome Statute setting up the ICC, the world's first permanent war crimes court, but never ratified the treaty.

"The court did not live up to the hopes associated with it and did not become truly independent,"

Russia's foreign ministry said, describing its work as "one-sided and inefficient".

Moscow said it is unhappy with the ICC's treatment of the case on Russia's short war with neighbouring Georgia in 2008, saying the court ignored aggression by Tbilisi against civilians in South Ossetia -- a pro-Moscow separatist region of Georgia.

"In these conditions one cannot speak of trust in the International Criminal Court," the ministry said, adding that the decision to "not be a participant in the ICC statute" was taken by President Vladimir Putin and entails "withdrawing the signature from this document".

Merkel: new 'leader of the free world'?

AFP, Berlin

The shock election of Donald Trump as US president has forced greater responsibility for defending Western values and interests onto German Chancellor Angela Merkel's shoulders, analysts say, with some even crowning her the new "leader of the free world".

While the last decade has been defined by Britain, France, Germany and the US showing a largely united front on issues ranging from Nato affairs to defence of basic freedoms, the coming four years may present a more fragmented picture.

During his campaign Trump signalled a protectionist and anti-immigration stance, while Britain is preoccupied with securing its future outside the European Union after June's stunning referendum vote to exit the bloc.

France's President Francois Hollande is grappling with record low ratings ahead of next May's election that could see far-right Marine Le Pen reaching the second round run-off vote.

Merkel, after 11 years at the helm, now looks increasingly like the only bulwark of stability and liberal freedom among Western allies.

The historian and columnist Timothy Garton Ash agreed in an editorial for Britain's Guardian newspaper: "I'm tempted to say that the leader of the free world is now Angela Merkel."

Rather than visit Britain -- a natural stop for any US leader given the two countries' special relationship, US President Barack Obama is travelling to Berlin today on his last official trip to Europe, in what almost seems like the passing of a baton to Merkel.

Stefani Weiss, an expert on European integration and foreign policies at the Bertelsmann Foundation, said the US had started to retreat as "world police" under Obama and cede more responsibility to Europe.

"This is a trend that will likely prevail and intensify with Trump's presidency," she said. But can she deliver?



INFIGHTING IN TRUMP'S TRANSITION TEAM

Sources blame his son-in-law

AGENCIES

Donald Trump's son-in-law and close adviser Jared Kushner is at the center of the "infighting" inside President-elect Donald Trump's transition team, multiple sources tell CNN.

Trump, however, tweeted Tuesday night that the process was "very organized."

"Very organized process taking place as I decide on Cabinet and many other positions. I am the only one who knows who the finalists are!" he said.

Despite his lack of political experience, the businessman is believed often to have the final word in advising Trump, according to The New York Times, which expects him "to wield great influence over the new president."

That influence is already playing out at Trump Tower, where the president-elect's team has been taking shape since the end of last week -- in a process reportedly fraught with vicious infighting.

Sources tied to the transition team talking to CNN



Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump

described the organization's internal disagreements -- mainly divided along the lines of establishment Republican operatives against more non-traditional influences on national security issues -- as a "knife fight" on Monday.

When two transition officials were ousted Tuesday, The New York Times reported that they were victims of a purge orchestrated by Kushner.

Trump transition official Jason Miller dismissed the reports as "palace intrigue". But several US media similarly reported that Kushner was working to drive out associates of New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, who himself was removed Friday as head of the transition team.

The feud is personal: back in 2004, then-US attorney Christie prosecuted and jailed Kushner's father for tax evasion, witness tampering.

The Harvard graduate, analysts said, earned Trump's trust though sheer hard work on the election trail where he is believed to have written several of the candidate's speeches and played a key role in promoting his message on social media.



SYRIA WAR

Rescuers and civilians inspect a destroyed building in the Syrian village of Kfar Jales, on the outskirts of Idlib, following air strikes by Syrian and Russian warplanes, yesterday. Syrian and Russian warplanes bombed rebel-held areas in Aleppo and Idlib province overnight, a monitor said, a day after Moscow announced a fresh offensive against opponents of its Damascus ally. The renewed bombardment has killed at least 32 people in Aleppo in the last 24 hours, and sparked anger from Washington and the United Nations.

PHOTO: AFP

BILL TO LEGALISE SETTLER HOMES IN WEST BANK

Israel gives initial backing

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli parliament yesterday gave initial approval to a bill to legalise thousands of West Bank settler homes, a measure drawing international anger and posing the government's biggest test since 2015 polls.

The measure, which would apply to an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 Jewish homes in the occupied West Bank, requires three more full parliamentary votes to become law.

There have been reports that a behind-the-scenes compromise could see the bill now stall.

The vote in the Knesset, or parliament, was 58-50.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu initially opposed the bill, fearing an international backlash and legal implications, but voted in favour yesterday.

Bob Dylan to skip Nobel ceremony

AFP, Stockholm

Music icon Bob Dylan will not attend the Nobel ceremony in December to accept his literature prize because he has "other commitments," the Swedish Academy said yesterday.

"The Swedish Academy received a personal letter from Bob Dylan yesterday where he explained that he could not make himself available in December and leave to Stockholm to accept the Nobel prize in literature," it said in a statement.

"He wishes that he could accept the award personally, but other commitments make it unfortunately impossible. He underlined that he feels incredibly honoured by the Nobel prize," it added.

"We look forward to Bob Dylan's Nobel lecture, which he must carry out - it is the only requirement - within six months starting from December 10, 2016," the academy said. The 75-year-old is the first songwriter to win the literature prize.



'Shoot first, ask questions later'

CNN ONLINE

Concerns are mounting about escalating violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State after a series of army raids on villages that have left dozens dead and hundreds arrested. At least 17 members of Myanmar's security forces and 69 people described as "violent attackers" were killed in the latest uptick of violence in the state, home to the country's Rohingya Muslims, according to state media.

Though the government says it's going after terrorists, Myanmar security forces have been accused of conducting a violent, heavy-handed response that's targeting Rohingyas. "The problem is the Burma Army has a really lousy record when it comes to civilians," says Phil Robertson, the deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Asia division. "It's really shoot first, ask questions later."

Robertson said Human Rights Watch has heard about cases of arbitrary arrests, torture, looting and arson by Burmese soldiers and allegations of extrajudicial killings.

Former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who chairs the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, issued a statement expressing his concern over the recent violence in northern Rakhine, which he said "is plunging the

state into renewed instability and creating new displacement."

The US State Department also said it was monitoring the spike in violence in Rakhine State.

"It's a real escalation [of violence], and this is combined keeping it out of everyone from the area," Robertson said. "Leaving it to the Burma Army to investigate it themselves is a recipe for a cover-up."

Rakhine State is home to a large population of Rohingya Muslims, a stateless ethnic minority that's faced discrimination and persecution for years. The Myanmar government's official position denies recognition of the term "Rohingya" and regards them as illegal Bengali migrants.

The latest round of violence kicked off last month, when more than a dozen soldiers and police were killed after troops in the town of Maungdaw were attacked by about 300 armed men, state media reported.

The attackers were not identified by the Myanmar government, but the United Nations said "ethnic armed organizations" had clashed with the country's security forces.

Since then, the army and police have basically shut down the area and turn it into special ops zone, sweeping through villages where they believe militants are hiding, HRW's Robertson said.

VIOLENCE IN RAKHINE



US Students ditch classes to protest Trump

AFP, Washington

Hundreds of students in Washington ditched school Tuesday to protest against US President-elect Donald Trump, marching through the heart of the US capital before descending on the White House.

They joined youth across the country who have staged similar walkouts since Trump's shock victory on November 8, carrying signs with messages like "spread love," "my black is beautiful" and "make America gay again."

Hundreds of high school students also demonstrated in New York Tuesday morning outside Trump Tower, protesting in the pouring rain as the president-elect huddled inside with Vice president-elect Mike Pence to nail down cabinet appointments.

240 die in a week

AFP, Rome

More than 240 people have died in migrant boat sinkings in the Mediterranean this week, officials said yesterday as horrifying new testimony emerged from survivors of another tragedy.

Departures from Libya are continuing unabated despite worsening weather in the Mediterranean, with over 3,200 people rescued from crowded and unseaworthy dinghies since Saturday. The total is the same as for the whole month of November 2015.

The new death toll was based on information gathered by UNHCR from 15 survivors, who said some 135 people had drowned or lost when a dinghy sank on Monday. Some 95 others are presumed dead after another dinghy sank on Tuesday.

Italy's coastguard said 580 people had been brought to safety yesterday in five separate rescue operations.

MIGRANT TRAGEDY IN MED



The survivors of Monday's shipwreck off Libya -- overwhelmingly from sub-Saharan Africa -- arrived yesterday in the port of Catania in Sicily, where they spoke of their ordeal. They had set off from Libya on Sunday night with about 150 people on board, "so there would be about 135 missing," UNHCR spokesman Iosta Ibba told AFP.

"Their dinghy, which was already in a poor state, began taking on water several hours after they set off. It then overturned, tipping all 150 into the sea. Only 15 managed to survive by clinging to a part of the vessel which floated," he said. "They stayed like that several hours before help arrived," he added.

The latest deaths lift the total number of migrants who have died trying to cross the Mediterranean this year to just over 4,500, according to a UNHCR count based on bodies recovered and survivor accounts.