

NEWSIN brief

New Thai king leads prayers for late father

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's new monarch King Maha Vajiralongkorn led prayers for his late father yesterday, his first appearance at Bangkok's Grand Palace since he was officially appointed the day before after a seven week delay. The ceremony offered Thais their first glimpse of Vajiralongkorn presiding over official duties as their new king, the tenth ruler of the current Chakri dynasty.

World cities seek \$375b to fight climate change

AFP, Mexico City

The world's big cities will need \$375 billion of investment to curb climate change, a large gathering of mayors heard in Mexico on Thursday. "It is a lot, but there is no other option. Together we will seek that money," said the new president of the C40 network of big cities, Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo. If that amount is made available "humanity will have a chance of surviving," she said.

Bolivia shuts down Colombia crash airline

AFP, Medellin

The authorities on Thursday shut down a Bolivian charter airline whose plane ran out of fuel and crashed in the Colombian mountains, killing 71 people including most of a Brazilian football team. As grieving relatives identified their loved ones and the first body was sent home, a harrowing recording emerged of the pilot's final minutes seeking to land the plane without fuel.

China clears man 21 yrs after execution

AFP, Beijing

China's top court yesterday cleared a man executed 21 years ago for murder -- more than a decade after another man confessed to the killing -- in the latest miscarriage of justice in the Communist-ruled country. Nie Shubin was 20 years old when he faced a firing squad in 1995, two days after being convicted of rape and murder.

Armed robber holds 7 people hostage in Paris

AFP, Paris

A robber armed with a handgun was holding seven people in a Paris travel agency last night, police sources said. "Intervention under way in an armed robbery. Drivers should avoid the area" of the Massena boulevard in the Porte d'Italie area in the south of the French capital, local police tweeted. Cops are positioned at the site and a security perimeter has been established in the neighbourhood near the ring road around Paris, said police sources.

Fighting rages in Aleppo

Syria rebels mount fierce defence against regime offensive; Russia proposes aid corridors

AFP, Aleppo

Rebels put up fierce resistance yesterday in a key district of Syria's battered Aleppo, where a regime offensive has left bodies in the streets and sparked a global outcry.

The government assault on the northern city has spurred a mass exodus of tens of thousands of residents from the opposition-held east and prompted fresh calls by Russia for aid corridors.

President Bashar al-Assad's forces captured the city's northeast this week and were focused on seizing Sheikh Saeed, a large district on the city's southeast edges.

But anti-government fighters put up a strong defence there overnight, rolling back recent government gains, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

"The regime and allied fighters... wanted to take this neighbourhood at any cost, because capturing it would allow them to target all remaining rebel-held districts," said Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman.

"But rebels put up ferocious resistance, because they knew they would be trapped if Sheikh Saeed fell," Abdel Rahman added.

The head of the Britain-based

monitor said opposition forces were now once again in control of at least 70 percent of the neighbourhood.

Sheikh Saeed borders the last remaining sections of Aleppo still in rebel hands -- a collection of densely populated residential neighbourhoods where thousands have sought



A Syrian woman, who fled from rebel-held areas in the city of Aleppo, keeps warm at a shelter in the neighbourhood of Jibrin, east of Aleppo. PHOTO: AFP

refuge from advancing regime forces.

In preparation for street-by-street fighting in these districts, hundreds of fighters from Syria's elite Republican Guard and Fourth Division arrived in Aleppo yesterday, according to the Observatory.

More than 300 civilians, including

dozens of children, have been killed in east Aleppo since the government began its offensive on November 15, according to the Observatory.

Retaliatory rocket fire by the rebels on government-held western areas of the city has killed 55 civilians, the monitor says.

Russia on Thursday proposed setting up four humanitarian corridors into east Aleppo to bring in aid and evacuated severely wounded people.

Moscow has announced several humanitarian pauses in Aleppo to allow civilians to flee, but until the recent military escalation, only a handful did so.

Its support for Assad, including launching a bombing campaign in support of his forces in September 2015, means many residents of east Aleppo have been wary of such offers in the past.

Since Saturday more than 50,000 people have poured out of east Aleppo into territory controlled by government forces or local Kurdish authorities, according to the Observatory.

Many are transported to temporary shelters outside the city, where they register with Syrian authorities to receive food, blankets, and mattresses.

rocked a block of residential buildings on the city's eastern edges, where advancing regime forces have sought to secure the road leading towards Aleppo's airport.

The escalation of violence in Aleppo has been met with international outrage, including a warning by the UN that the city's east could become "a giant graveyard."

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IS tactics evolving

Says Europol, warns dozens of militants may be in Europe

REUTERS, The Hague

Islamic State is likely to launch more attacks in Europe, the EU police agency Europol warned yesterday, with several dozen militants already in place and more possibly arriving as IS faces setbacks in Syria and Iraq.

In a report on the threat the Islamist group poses to the 28-nation bloc, Europol said the most probable forms of attack would be those used in recent years, from the mass shootings and suicide bombings seen in Paris and Brussels to stabbings and other assaults by radicals acting alone.

Car bombs and kidnappings, common in Syria, could emerge as tactics in Europe, it said, while protected sites such as power grids and nuclear power stations were not seen as top targets.

Essentially the entire European Union is under threat as almost all its governments back the U.S.-led coalition in Syria, the agency said, warning that IS was likely to infiltrate Syrian refugee communities in Europe in an effort to inflame hostility to immigrants that has shaken many EU governments.

"If IS is defeated or severely weakened in Syria/Iraq by the coalition forces, there may be an increased rate in the return of foreign fighters and their families from the region to the EU or to other conflict areas," Europol said in a statement.

It said Islamic State was also likely to start planning attacks and sending militants to Europe from Libya and that other groups, including al Qaeda and its affiliates, also continue to pose a threat to the continent.

Europol Director Rob Wainwright said EU states had stepped up their security cooperation in the wake of IS attacks in the last couple of years, allowing more plots to be thwarted.

Hollande bows out

French presidential race now centres on PM Valls

AFP, Paris

French President Francois Hollande's dramatic announcement that he will not seek a second term opens the way for his prime minister Manuel Valls to make a bid for power in next year's increasingly open election.

Hollande's decision to bow to historically low approval ratings and step down next year opens up the leftwing field in an election that is proving more and more unpredictable.

Valls, who had been a loyal prime minister to Hollande until recently but hinted at the week-end he might run against his boss in planned leftwing primaries, is now expected to throw his hat in the ring.

Polls show however that no leftwing candidate will reach the second round of the election in May.

Surveys currently tip rightwing Republicans party candidate Francois Fillon to become president, beating far-right

National Front (FN) candidate Marine Le Pen in the runoff.

But after a wave of populism swept Donald Trump to the White House and led Britons to vote to leave the European Union, no-one is dismissing Le Pen's chances of victory.

The full field of candidates remains unknown and the role of independents such as Hollande's 38-year-old former economy minister Emmanuel Macron is difficult to predict.

In a solemn TV address Thursday in which he defended his troubled four years in power, Hollande said: "I have decided that I will not be a candidate."

Valls hailed Hollande's decision as "the choice of a true statesman".

The French press greeted the news with front-page headlines proclaiming "The End", "Goodbye, president" and "Hollande gives up", but there was also praise for his decision.



Hollande



Valls

Mad rush to spend old notes

Cash catastrophe prompts chaos across India; opposition criticises note ban

AFP, New Delhi

Indians endured more turmoil yesterday as they rushed to spend old notes at petrol stations before a midnight deadline as the opposition denounced the scrapping of high denomination bills as a catastrophe.

Indians had been given until December 15 to use the old bills at filling stations but the government rushed forward the deadline on Thursday evening, giving people barely 24 hours to spend their old notes.

The surprise move sparked uproar among millions of commuters who queued outside filling station to use their bills while an attendant said fights had broken out among frustrated motorists.

"This cannot be right. First you say we have until December 15 and suddenly now you are saying something else," said R S Yadav as he waited for his turn on a rickety two-wheeler in New Delhi.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi unleashed chaos with his shock announcement last month that all 500 rupee (\$7.30) and 1,000 rupee notes -- some 86 percent of all bills in circulation -- would cease to be legal tender.

The sweeping abolition was meant to bring billions in so-called "black", or undeclared, money back into the formal system, the government says.

The so-called demonetisation initially won widespread

approval but the government has been forced onto the defensive as frustration grows at limits on withdrawing new banknotes.

Cash accounts for 90 percent of transactions in India and the government has said it would take time before new bills are distributed.

"I was using my old notes up till now for filling petrol. Now I am dreading going to the bank. The government has no clue what we are being made to go through," said Saurav Mallik, who works in the private sector.

As anger mounted at the continued shortage of cash, the leader of the opposition Congress party accused Modi of experimenting "with the financial future of 1.3 billion people".

In a speech to party supporters, Rahul Gandhi said "the results of this catastrophic experiment will soon be revealed" as a report said that there had already been a sharp fall in consumer spending.

"Every economist of any repute has already condemned it," added Gandhi.

Some people have found themselves queuing for many hours to access their own cash while ATMs have been regularly running out of notes.

Frequent rule changes in response to pressure from various groups and growing disorder have made matters worse.



US renews Iran sanctions act

AFP, Tehran

Iran said yesterday that Congress's decision to renew US sanctions for 10 years was a violation of last year's nuclear agreement and promised an "appropriate" response.

"As repeatedly stated by high-ranking Iranian officials, the recent bill passed by the House of Representatives and the Senate to renew sanctions against Iran is against the (nuclear deal)," foreign ministry spokesman Bahram Ghasemi said.

"Iran has proved that it sticks to its international agreements but it also has appropriate responses for all situations."

The Iran Sanctions Act passed the Senate 99-0 on Thursday, after easily clearing the House of Representatives last month.

President Barack Obama is expected to sign the measure, a White House official said, adding that the administration does not believe the extension violates the nuclear deal.

The legislation does not directly address the nuclear pact. But some say the restrictions in the bill go against the spirit of the agreement, under which Tehran curbed its nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief from the United States and other nations.

The bill includes penalties against Iran's banking sector, as well as its energy and defence industries.

Senate Democrats Dianne Feinstein and Tim Kaine, who both backed the nuclear deal, said that while the president was currently waiving some sanctions as part of the agreement, "sanctions legislation must remain in place to allow an immediate snap-back" in the event of any violation by Iran.



Cholera epidemic Ban sorry for world body's role in Haiti

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon on Thursday apologized for the first time to the people of Haiti for the role played by the world body's peacekeepers in sparking a devastating cholera epidemic in the country.

"On behalf of the United Nations, I want to say very clearly we apologize to the Haitian people," he said three times -- in Haitian Creole, French and English -- to the UN General Assembly.

"We simply did not do enough with regards to the cholera outbreak and its spread in Haiti," Ban said. "We are profoundly sorry for our role."

According to numerous independent experts, cholera was introduced to Haiti by infected Nepalese UN peacekeepers sent to the Caribbean country after the massive 2010 earthquake.

The cholera epidemic has claimed more than 9,000 lives in Haiti, the most impoverished country in the Americas, and infected 800,000 people.

The United Nations reiterated its rejection of claims that it is also legally responsible for the damages from the health emergency.

"We do not change our basic legal position," UN Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson told reporters.

Ban insisted the UN has "a moral responsibility to act."

"This has cast a shadow upon the relationship between the United Nations and the people of Haiti," he said. "It is a blemish on the reputation of UN peace-keeping."



US President Barack Obama marked his final time lighting the National Christmas Tree on The Ellipse, near the White House, in Washington, US on Thursday night.

N Korea drill targets South

AFP, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un conducted a large-scale artillery drill simulating an attack on the South Korean capital and other targets, as Seoul and Tokyo yesterday unveiled fresh unilateral sanctions against Pyongyang over its nuclear weapons programme.

The military exercise, involving multiple batteries of frontline heavy artillery units, targeted five border islands, as well as "reactionary ruling organs" in Seoul and other cities, the North's official KCNA news Agency said.

It took place on Thursday, just hours after the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a new resolution imposing tough new sanctions on North Korea following its fifth nuclear test in September.

International attention fuelling divisions in north

Says Suu Kyi

REUTERS, Singapore/sittue

Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday accused the international community of stoking resentment between Buddhists and Muslims in the country's northwest, where an army crackdown has killed at least 86 people and sent 10,000 fleeing to Bangladesh.

Suu Kyi appealed for understanding of her nation's ethnic complexities, and said the world should not forget the military operation was launched in response to attacks on security forces that the government has blamed on Muslim insurgents.

"I would appreciate it so much if the international community would help us to maintain peace and stability, and to make progress in building better relations between the two communities, instead of always drumming up cause for bigger fires of resentment," Suu Kyi told Singapore state-owned broadcaster Channel News



Asia during a visit to the city-state.

"It doesn't help if everybody is just concentrating on the negative side of the situation, in spite of the fact that there were attacks against police outposts."

The violence in the northwest poses the biggest challenge so far to Suu Kyi's eight-month-old government, and has renewed international criticism that the Nobel Peace Prize winner has done too little to help the country's Rohingya Muslim minority.

Soldiers have poured into the north of Rakhine State, close to the frontier with Bangladesh, after attacks on border posts on October 9 that killed nine police officers.

Humanitarian aid has been cut off to the area, which is closed to outside observers.

Myanmar's military and the government have rejected allegations by residents and human rights groups that soldiers have raped Rohingya women, burned houses and killed civilians during the operation.