

NEWSIN brief

Germany to go to polls on Sep 24

German Chancellor Angela Merkel's government yesterday set September 24 as the date for a general election, as she seeks a fourth term facing populist headwinds over a record migrant influx. The announcement fires the starting gun for an election campaign that Merkel has said will be her toughest yet due to opposition to her liberal asylum policy.

London mayor issues toxic air alert

A toxic air alert has been issued for London over the next three days, as Mayor Sadiq Khan warned of a "public health emergency". Air pollution is set to hit a "high peak" on Wednesday in central parts of the capital. While levels of toxicity are set to return to normal tomorrow, airtext forecasts issued by the Mayor suggest many of London's busiest roads will suffer "high" pollution on all three days.

Salman Khan cleared in illegal arms case

An Indian court yesterday acquitted Bollywood superstar Salman Khan of using unlicensed firearms to kill protected wildlife almost two decades ago citing lack of evidence. Khan, 51, has now been acquitted in three out of four cases filed against him for hunting rare black bucks, a native species of antelope, while shooting a film in the northwestern state of Rajasthan in 1998.

Egyptian football star placed on 'terror' list

Egypt has added Mohamed Aboutrika -- one of the most successful African footballers of his generation -- to its terror watch list on suspicions he financed the banned Muslim Brotherhood, his lawyer said Tuesday. The Brotherhood was outlawed in 2013, months after the army overthrew Islamist president Mohamed Morsi, who hailed from the movement.

European Parliament elects new chief

Italian centre-right politician Antonio Tajani was elected the new president of the European Parliament yesterday after a final round of voting, officials said. Tajani, an ally of former Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi, got 351 votes while his socialist rival Gianni Pittella got 282, outgoing leader Martin Schulz said.



(From top, clockwise) Arab Israeli women sit next to the ruins of their dwellings in Umm Al-Hiran, a Bedouin village in Israel's southern Negev Desert, yesterday; the head of Israel's Arab parliamentary bloc Ayman Odeh lays on the ground after he was injured during clashes following the demolition job; and Israeli policemen detain a Bedouin man during the clashes. Demolitions in the village that activists say has been targeted by racist policies sparked violence yesterday in which a policeman and his alleged attacker were killed.

East Mosul liberated from IS

Says Iraq commander as elite forces prepare offensive on west of city

Iraqi forces have fully retaken east Mosul from the Islamic State group, a top commander said yesterday, three months after a huge offensive against the jihadist bastion was launched.

Elite forces have in recent days entered the last neighbourhoods on the eastern side of Mosul, on the left bank of the Tigris River that runs through the city.

Speaking at a press conference in Bartalla, a town east of Mosul, Staff General Talib al-Sheghati, who heads the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), announced "the liberation... of the left bank".

Sheghati added however that while the east of the city could be considered under government control, some work remained to be done to flush out the last holdout jihadists.

The "important lines and important areas are finished," he said, adding that "there is only a bit of the northern (front) remaining."

Yesterday's announcement marks the end of a phase in the operation launched on October 17 to retake Mosul, Iraq's second city and the last major urban stronghold IS has in the country.

The offensive, Iraq's largest military operation in years

with tens of thousands of fighters involved, began with a focus on sparsely populated areas around Mosul.

CTS entered the city proper in November and encountered tougher than expected resistance from IS, whose fighters launched a huge number of suicide car bombs against advancing Iraqi forces.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said late on Tuesday that IS had been severely weakened in the Mosul campaign, and that the military had begun "moving" against it in western Mosul, without elaborating.

Residents reached by phone said air strikes against IS deep inside western Mosul had increased in recent days.

The fighting inside Mosul has been complicated by the continued presence of much of its population, which did not or could not flee when Iraqi forces started advancing.

According to the United Nations, around 150,000 people are currently displaced as a result of the three-month-old offensive.

Mosul lies around 350 kilometres (220 miles) northwest of Baghdad in the country's north and had an estimated population of close to two million when IS overran it in early June 2014.



Civilians give sweets to security forces in the al-Zirai district of Mosul, yesterday.

Russia is threat to liberal order: Biden

US Vice President Joe Biden, in his last major speech before leaving office, yesterday described Russia as the biggest threat to the international liberal order and said Washington must work with Europe to stand up to Vladimir Putin.

Biden was speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos two days before the inauguration of Donald Trump as US president.

Trump has sent conciliatory signals to Putin and seemed to encourage the disintegration of the European Union by praising Britain's decision to leave the bloc and predicting that more countries could bolt.

Biden pushed back forcefully against Trump's message, warning hundreds of leaders, CEOs and bankers gathered in a vast conference hall in the Swiss Alps resort town that Putin was likely to try to influence a series of elections in Europe this year, as it is accused of doing in the recent US vote.

"Under President Putin, Russia is working with every tool available to them to whittle away at the edges of the European project, test the fault lines of western nations and return to a politics defined by spheres of influence," Biden said.

"With many countries in Europe slated to hold elections this year, we should expect further attempts by Russia to meddle in the democratic process. It will occur again, I promise you. And again the purpose is clear: to collapse the liberal international order," Biden added.

2016 breaks record for hottest yr ever

Last year, the Earth sweltered under the hottest temperatures in modern times for the third year in a row, US scientists said yesterday, raising new concerns about the quickening pace of climate change.

Temperatures spiked to new national highs in parts of India, Kuwait and Iran, while sea ice melted faster than ever in the fragile Arctic, said the report by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Taking a global average of the land and sea surface temperatures for the entire year, NOAA found the data for "2016 was the highest since record keeping began in 1880," said the announcement. The global average temperature last year was 1.69 Fahrenheit (0.94 Celsius) above the 20th century average, and 0.07 degrees F (0.04 C) warmer than in 2015, the last record-setting year, according to NOAA.

A separate analysis by the US space agency Nasa also found that 2016 was the hottest on record.

The World Meteorological Organization in Geneva, Switzerland confirmed the US findings, and noted that atmospheric concentrations of both carbon dioxide and methane reached record levels. "2016 was an extreme year for the global climate and stands out as the hottest year on record," said Petteri Taalas, the agency's secretary general.



This handout image received courtesy of Doctors Without Border (MSF) on Tuesday, shows people standing next to ruins after an air force jet accidentally bombed a camp for those displaced by Boko Haram Islamists, in Rann, northeast Nigeria. Inset, A wounded child stares at camera in the camp. The death toll from the botched air strike in northeast Nigeria rose to 70 yesterday, as aid agencies indicated more could die without urgent treatment.

Planned purge triggered coup

Secret EU intel report claims Erdogan's looming crackdown on dissenting army officials triggered last summer's putsch

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was planning to purge the country's armed forces of suspected dissenters to his government before the failed military-led coup in July 2016, new European intel says.

A secret report written by Intcen - the EU's intelligence agency - found that the hastily organised attempt to overthrow Erdogan last year was motivated by the fact that military generals feared they were going to be subject to an imminent crackdown on the opposition.

"The decision to launch the coup resulted from the fears of an incoming purge," the August 2016 report, seen by The Times, read. "The coup was just a catalyst for the crackdown prepared in advance."

Before the coup, several factions within Turkey's army were unhappy

with the government's attempts between 2013 - 2015 to make peace with the PKK, the militant Kurdish separatist movement, and Erdogan's interventionist stance on the conflict in neighbouring Syria.

"It is unlikely Gulen really had the abilities and capacities to take such steps... The Gulen movement is very disconnected and somewhat distant from the secular opposition and Turkish army," the report said.

Erdogan has cracked down on Gulen's followers since he became president in 2014, as well as civil rights activists, academics and journalists.

Following the July coup attempt, the government declared a state of emergency, during which thousands more deemed hostile to Erdogan's ruling AK party have been jailed or fired from state sector jobs.



Reeling Italy hit by quake triple-punch

Three earthquakes hit central Italy yesterday in a seismic triple-punch that brought fresh terror to a snowbound mountainous area still reeling from deadly quakes last year.

The epicentres were all close to the town of Amatrice, where nearly 300 people died in an earthquake in August. There were no reports of casualties in the three hours after yesterday's first shock struck at 10:25 am.

Monitors put its strength at between 5.1 and 5.3 magnitude. A second, 50 minutes later, was measured at 5.7 by the European Mediterranean Seismological Centre.

Assange to go to US only if rights guaranteed

Says WikiLeaks after Obama grants Manning clemency

WikiLeaks said Wednesday its founder Julian Assange could travel to the US to face investigation after one of the whistleblowing site's main sources was given clemency -- but only if his rights were "guaranteed".

"Assange is still happy to come to the US provided all his rights are guaranteed," WikiLeaks said on Twitter, the day after US President Barack Obama commuted a prison sentence for former soldier Chelsea Manning.

Manning was sentenced to 35 years behind bars in 2013 for handing 700,000 sensitive military and diplomatic documents to WikiLeaks. The White House said her sentence would end on May 17 this year.

Assange said last week he would abandon his refuge in the Ecuadoran embassy in

London, where he has been since 2012, if the United States agreed to free Manning.

Washington has maintained the threat of prosecuting Assange over the 2010 documents leak, although no charges have been publicly filed.

Assange has been living in the Ecuadoran embassy to avoid extradition to Sweden to face sexual assault allegations, which he says are politically motivated and intended as a stepping stone to extradite him to the US.

meanwhile, former US intelligence contractor Edward Snowden has legal right to become a Russian citizen after he was given leave to remain in Russia for another three years. Snowden's residence permit has been extended "until 2020," Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told AFP.

