

NEWSIN brief

Turkey lifts ban on headscarf in army

AFP, Istanbul
Turkey will lift a historic ban on female officers wearing the Islamic headscarf in the officially secular country's armed forces, state media said yesterday. The military was the final Turkish institution where women were prohibited from wearing the headscarf, after reforms by the Islamic-rooted government under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Khmer Rouge cadre given clean chit

AFP, Phnom Penh
A UN-backed court yesterday dismissed a case against a former Khmer Rouge cadre charged with crimes against humanity, highlighting the difficulties of bringing lower level members of the brutal regime to justice. Mid-ranking cadre Im Chaem was among four Khmer Rouge members facing prosecution for charges including genocide, war crimes.

S African court slaps down bid to leave ICC

AFP, Johannesburg
A South African court yesterday ordered the government to withdraw its "unconstitutional" bid to pull out of the International Criminal Court, in a boost to the embattled Hague-based institution. The decision was a blow to President Jacob Zuma but a welcome piece of good news for the ICC.

Aussie PM slams UN's Israel resolution

AFP, Sydney
Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull attacked the United Nations for "one-sided resolutions" against Israel's push to build settlements on occupied land as he welcomed Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday on his first official visit to the country. Turnbull said he supported direct negotiations towards a two-state solution.



Smoke billows from buildings following reported air strikes on the southern Syrian city of Daraa, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Pak launches anti-militant operation

AFP, Islamabad
Pakistan's military yesterday launched a nationwide anti-terrorist operation days after a series of bloody extremist assaults killed dozens of people across the country, the military said. "Pakistan army launches 'Operation Radd-ul-Fassad' (elimination of violence) across the country," a military statement said. The announcement came after army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa chaired a high-level security meeting in the eastern city of Lahore. Troops and police have been on high alert in Pakistan after last week's wave of attacks, including one in Lahore and another on a Sufi shrine in Sindh province, killed more than 100 people. After the attacks, Islamabad launched a violent crackdown, with Pakistani forces saying they had killed dozens of "terrorists" and carried out strikes on militant hideouts along the border with Afghanistan. "Pakistan air force, navy, civil armed forces and other security/law enforcing agencies... will continue to actively participate/intimately support efforts to eliminate the menace of terrorism from the country," the statement said. Prior to last week's attacks, Pakistani forces have been engaged in a series of offensives, mainly in the country's troubled northwestern tribal region, in pursuit of Taliban and al-Qaeda linked militants. Thursday's devastating assault on the Sufi shrine was claimed by the Islamic State (IS) group and came after a series of violent attacks, including a Taliban suicide bomb in Lahore on February 13 which killed 13 people and wounded dozens.

Bahrain okays military trial of civilians

AFP, Doha
Bahrain police have arrested 20 people in a crackdown on Shia villages, as legislators approved a constitutional amendment that could see civilians tried in military courts in the Sunni-ruled kingdom. The lower house of parliament on Tuesday voted in favour of a constitutional amendment which drops a clause restricting military trials to offences committed by members of the army, police or other security branches. Under the amendment to Article 105, which also needs approval in Bahrain's appointed upper house, civilians charged with "damaging public interest" or with terrorism -- broadly defined -- could now face trial in a military court.

Expectations pretty low

Officials, rebels gather in Geneva for more meetings; prospect of war ending fades with ceasefire falling apart

AGENCIES
Negotiations aimed at finding a political solution to the war in Syria are set to begin at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva today as a nationwide ceasefire steadily falls apart and UN officials soften their expectations on achieving any major breakthroughs. The intra-Syrian talks - which will bring together representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition, along with their respective international backers - will resume after UN envoy Staffan de Mistura broke them off nine months ago as several rounds of meetings ultimately led to an escalation of violence across the country. The talks are part of the latest initiative to bring an end to a destructive six-year war that has killed nearly half a million people, injured more than a million, and displaced over 12 million. They come on the heels of multilateral meetings in the Kazakh capital of Astana aimed at consolidating a shaky nationwide truce and paving the way towards political negotiations. But the ceasefire has steadily fallen apart and an all-out fighting has returned to key areas across the country, reported Al Jazeera. Over the weekend, de Mistura evaded questions from reporters as to why he has shied away from using the phrase "political transition". De Mistura instead said he remained focused on UN Security Council Resolution 2254, a document that mentions the word transition several times but uses vague language too broadly focus on three key issues: governance, a new constitution and new elections. Meanwhile, Turkey said yesterday fewer than 100 Islamic State jihadists were still holed up in a flashpoint Syrian town which has seen the bloodiest clashes of Ankara's half-year campaign inside the conflict-torn country, reported AFP. Speaking to NTV television, Defence Minister Fikri Isik said half of the town of Al-Bab was in the hands of Turkish troops and allied pro-Ankara Syrian rebels, after the government repeatedly said it was "largely under control".

SYRIA PEACE TALKS
Turkey says '100 IS fighters' left in Al-Bab

Canada will not halt illegal border crossings from US

REUTERS, Ottawa
Canada will continue to accept asylum seekers crossing illegally from the United States but will ensure security measures are taken to keep Canadians safe, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Tuesday. The number of would-be refugees crossing into Canada at isolated and unguarded border crossings has increased in recent weeks amid fears that US President Donald Trump will crack down on illegal immigrants, and photos of smiling Canadian police greeting the migrants have gone viral. Opposition Conservatives want Trudeau's centre-left Liberal government to stem the flow of asylum seekers from the United States because of security fears and a lack of resources to deal with them. "One of the reasons why Canada remains an open country is Canadians trust our immigration system and the integrity of our borders and the help we provide people who are looking for safety," Trudeau told parliament. "We will continue to strike that balance between a rigorous system and accepting people who need help." Immigration Minister Ahmed Hussein also said Canada would continue to honor the Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement, which requires it to turn back refugees if they make asylum claims at Canadian border crossings with the United States. Refugee advocates have argued this drives asylum seekers to cross illegally at isolated locations, risking their lives in frigid weather. Amnesty International and other groups are pressuring the Canadian government to abandon the agreement, arguing the United States is not safe for refugees. Canadian police said on Monday they had bolstered their presence at the Quebec border and that border authorities had created a temporary refugee center to process the asylum



North Korea envoy wanted for questioning

AFP, Kuala Lumpur
Detectives probing the assassination of Kim Jong-un's half-brother want to question a North Korean diplomat, Malaysia's top policeman said yesterday. Investigators have put five North Koreans in the frame for last week's brazen killing of Kim Jong-nam at Kuala Lumpur International Airport and have said they are seeking three more for questioning. They include the embassy's second secretary, Hyon Kwang Song, as well as a North Korean airline employee called Kim Uk Il, Khalid Abu Bakar told reporters. "We have written to the ambassador to allow us to interview both of them. We hope that the Korean embassy will cooperate with us and allow us to interview them quickly. If not, we will compel them to come to us," he said. Asked whether the five North Korean suspects had masterminded the attack, Khalid said he believed they were "heavily involved" in the murder. Jong-nam died on February 13 after being attacked as he waited for a plane to Macau. Leaked CCTV footage from the airport shows the chubby 45-year-old being approached by two women, one of whom grabs him from behind and appears to shove a cloth in his face.



Palestinian children and their mother sit on the rubble of their house that was demolished by Israeli army bulldozers in the Arab east Jerusalem neighbourhood of Beit Hanina yesterday on the grounds that it was built without a construction permit. PHOTO: AFP

Bacha bazi: a heinous Afghan practice

AFP, Kabul
Afghanistan is set to criminalise the practice of "bacha bazi", sexual exploitation of boys, with a slew of stringent punishments laid out for the first time in a revised penal code. The move comes after an AFP report last year found the Taliban are exploiting the centuries-old practice, one of the most egregious violations of human rights in the country, to mount deadly insider attacks in the volatile south. Here are some key answers about bacha bazi. What is it? Powerful warlords, commanders, politicians and other members of the elite often keep "bachas" as a symbol of authority and affluence. Bachas, sometimes dressed as women, are often sexually exploited. They can also be used as dancers at private parties. Bacha bazi is not widely seen as homosexual behaviour -- popularly demonised as a deviant sexual act, prohibited in Islam -- and is largely accepted as a cultural practice. How common is it? "Women are for child-rearing, boys are for pleasure" is a common saying across many parts of Afghanistan. The ancient custom, banned under the Taliban's 1996-2001 rule, has seen a resurgence in recent years. It is said to be widespread across southern and eastern Afghanistan's rural Pashtun heartland, and with ethnic Tajiks across the northern countryside. Tight gender segregation in Afghan society and lack of contact with women have contributed to the spread of bacha bazi, rights groups say. Several other factors such as an absence of the rule of law, corruption, limited access to justice, illiteracy, poverty, insecurity, and the existence of armed groups have also helped the practice spread, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) said in a report in 2014. Bachas are typically aged between 10 and 18. Many of them are kidnapped and sometimes desperate poverty drives their families to sell them to abusers. "The victims of bacha bazi suffer from serious psychological trauma as they often get raped," AIHRC's report said. "Such victims suffer from stress and a sort of distrust, hopelessness and pessimistic feeling. Bacha bazi results in fear among the children and a feeling of revenge and hostility develop in their mind." In turn, many adolescent victims are said to grow up to have boy lovers of their own, repeating the cycle of abuse.



Life expectancy to break 90 barrier by 2030: study

REUTERS, London
Average life expectancy will rise in many countries by 2030, breaking through 90 years in some places, and policymakers need to make more efforts to plan for it, according to a large international study. South Koreans are likely to have the highest life expectancy in the world by 2030 and the United States one of the lowest among developed countries, the study showed. "The fact that we will continue to live longer means we need to think about strengthening the health and social care systems to support an ageing population with multiple health needs," said Majid Ezzati, the lead researcher and a professor at Imperial College London's school of public health. The study, published in The Lancet medical journal yesterday, covered 35 developed and emerging countries, including the United States, Canada, Britain, Germany, Australia, Poland, Mexico and the Czech Republic. Led by Imperial scientists in collaboration with the World Health Organization, the study found that among high-income countries, the United States is likely to have the lowest life expectancy in 2030, with men and women expected to live 79.5 and 83.3 years respectively - similar to middle-income countries like Croatia and Mexico. This was partly due to a lack of universal healthcare in the United States, and also due to factors such as relatively high child and maternal mortality rates, and high rates of homicides and obesity, the study said. In Europe, French women and Swiss men were predicted to have the highest life expectancies, averaging 88.6 years for French women and nearly 84 years for Swiss men. South Korea came out top of the predictions, with the researchers predicting a girl born in South Korea in 2030 should expect to live 90.8 years, while a boy could reach 84.1 years. "Many people used to believe that 90 years is the upper limit for life expectancy, but this research suggests we will break that