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INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

China provoked

- A top Chinese Army General slammed the United States and Japan for “provoking” China, a day after U.S. Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel had accused Beijing of “destabilising” the region.
- At the conference, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe also hit out at China over the disputes, pledging support to Vietnam and the Philippines. Mr. Abe said Japan would supply naval patrol vessels to both countries and boost its security presence in the region.
- People’s Liberation Army Deputy Chief of General Staff Wang Guanzhong blasted Mr. Hagel and Mr. Abe, saying they were “singing notes in chorus”.
- The PLA official was particularly aggrieved by the Japanese leader’s speech, which did not directly mention China but warned of “elements that spawn instability” in the region.

Release of captured US soldier

- President Barack Obama is welcoming the release of the lone U.S. soldier held in Afghanistan, Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl.
- Sgt. Bergdahl was turned over by the Taliban in exchange for the release of five Afghan detainees who were held at the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.
- Mr. Obama says the U.S. “does not ever leave our men and women in uniform behind.”

A new U.S.-Russia proxy war

- With Russia and the United States as far apart as ever on ways of resolving the crisis in Ukraine’s southeast, its outcome may well be decided on the battlefield.
- Russia’s President Vladimir Putin has not spoken with U.S. President Barack Obama since Kiev launched its “anti-terrorist operation” against anti-government protesters in Russian speaking regions in the east six weeks ago.
- While Moscow denounces the Ukrainian crackdown in the east as a “punitive operation” against the civilian population, Washington maintains that Kiev’s authorities “have every right to take steps to maintain law and order in their own country.”
- The Ukrainian border guard service has reported several convoys of trucks with militants and weapons crossing the porous border from Russia in recent weeks.
- Russia has refrained from openly supporting separatists in eastern Ukraine and still hopes to persuade Kiev to resolve the conflict by granting broad autonomy to the region.
- The conflict in the east is fast morphing into civil war. This was in stark display earlier this month in Odessa, a peaceful multiethnic Ukrainian port city on the Black Sea, where a group of ultranationalists from western Ukraine

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burnt alive and clubbed to death at least 48 pro-Russian activists.

Obama's energy policy

- The path breaking clean energy policy unveiled by the Obama administration would put the US at a disadvantage against countries like India and China, top US lawmakers and policy advocacy groups have said.
- The US Environmental Protection agency has announced to cut carbon emission from existing power plants, which is the single largest source of carbon pollution in the US, by 30 per cent by the year 2030.
- It also announced to cut by 2030 particle pollution, nitrogen oxides, and sulfur dioxide by more than 25 per cent as a co-benefit.
- The White House described this as American leadership to the world.
- But Republicans and many others are not willing to buy the argument, according to whom such a policy would put the United States at an disadvantage against countries like India and China.
- The United Mine Workers of America international president Cecil E Roberts alleged that the proposed rule issued by the Environmental Protection Agency will lead to long-term and irreversible job losses for thousands of coal miners, electrical workers, utility workers, boilermakers, railroad workers and others without achieving any significant reduction of global greenhouse gas emissions.

Spain's abdication law

- The cabinet of Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has approved a proposal for emergency legislation that allows King Juan Carlos to abdicate and hand over his duties to Crown Prince Felipe.

- The proposal will be fast—tracked by the Spanish Parliament and is expected to pass easily because Mr. Rajoy's Popular Party has the majority of seats and the leading opposition Socialist Party also supports the legislation.
- Jesus Posada, who leads the Parliament's lower house, predicted the law will take effect by June 18, meaning Prince Felipe would be proclaimed king before lawmakers shortly after that.
- Juan Carlos is widely respected for leading Spain's transition from dictatorship to democracy and staring down a 1981 coup attempt, but was hit hard by royal scandals over the last several years.

Iran oil sanctions suspended

- With Iran complying with its commitment on a controversial nuclear weapons programme, US President Barack Obama has suspended his action on Iranian oil sanctions for the next six months.
- Even though there is enough oil in the international market for countries like India and China to reduce their dependence on Iranian oil, so as to avoid US sanctions as per Congressional Act, Mr. Obama determined that there is no need to do so for the next six months as Tehran is fully co-operating with the US-led international community to address their concerns about its nuclear weapons program
- The International Atomic Energy Agency has verified that Iran is complying with these commitments.
- The analysis contained in the Energy Information Administration's report of April 24, indicates that global oil consumption has exceeded production in recent months.

Renewable power in Germany

- May 11, 2014 was a red letter day for renewable power in Germany. The biggest clean energy market reached an enviable record of almost 75 per cent renewable market share for several hours that day. Germany faces its own travails over its chosen path.
- Germany is indeed avoiding blackouts-by opening new coal and gas fired plants. Renewable electricity is proving so unreliable and chaotic that it is starting to undermine the stability of the European grid and provoke international incidents.
- The spiraling cost of the renewables surge has sparked a backlash, including government proposals to slash subsidies and deployment rates.
- For all modes of power generation, capacity factor — CF (the amount of electricity, a generator produces in a year divided by the amount it will produce if it ran at full capacity for all 8,760 hrs a year) — is important. Typically during 2012, CFs (per cent) in Germany were, for solar: 11; wind: 17; fossil fuel: 80 and for nuclear: 94.
- Since India has in place an ambitious renewable energy programme, we must learn from the experiences of other countries particularly Germany; Germany's tryst with renewable power is often taken as a model.
- India must promote all modes of power generation including solar and wind. Copious sunshine and abundant wind may lead to over production in the grid. Balancing the grid may be a challenge. Central Government must organise a systematic review of the challenges to arrive at India- centric solutions.

G-7 summit

- Russian President Vladimir Putin was kept out of the summit of world leaders

but dominated the meeting as President Barack Obama and his counterparts from the G-7 group of major economies sought the Kremlin chief's renewed cooperation to end the Ukraine crisis.

- In March, the U.S. and its most important allies retaliated for Mr. Putin's military occupation and subsequent annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula by suspending Russia's membership in what had been the G-8 club of rich countries.
- They also nixed Mr. Putin's plan to hold the meeting in Sochi, the city Russia lavished billions on to host the 2014 Winter Olympics.
- Mr. Obama, however, has no plans to meet with Mr. Putin — a clear indication the U.S. is more reluctant than its European peers about renewing the dialogue.
- The meeting was not expected to produce any major decisions. Many observers criticise the format as being mostly a talking shop since the role of setting rules for global economic governance in the wake of the 2008-2009 financial crisis has shifted to the wider Group of 20, which also includes emerging economies like China, India and Brazil.

China urged to reduce finance risk

- The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are urging China to focus on controlling risks from rapidly rising debt due to its reliance on credit-fuelled growth.
- The World Bank said Beijing should pay close attention to rising credit, especially in its largely unregulated informal lending market, and reduce debts owed by local governments.
- Rising debts owed by local governments and uncertainty about informal lending have fuelled concerns China's economic slowdown might cause a rise in defaults

and hurt its financial system.

- Chinese regulators have taken steps to cool credit growth but still are allowing a relatively fast expansion to support economic growth that slowed to 7.4 percent in the three months ending in March.
- By the country's broadest measure, total outstanding debt rose from the equivalent of 124 percent of gross domestic product in 2007 to more than 200 percent in 2013, according to the World Bank.
- Corporate debt in Chinese economy, at the equivalent of 125 percent of GDP, is "among the highest in Asia."

New high commissioner for human rights

- U.N. secretary-general Ban Ki-moon has said he will appoint Jordan's ambassador as the new high commissioner for human rights, bringing to that post a voice from the West Asia.
- Mr. Ban's office announced that Prince Zeid al Hussein, a long-time diplomat and former U.N. peacekeeper, has been nominated to replace Navi Pillay.
- The South African-born Ms. Pillay's term as U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights was originally set to end in 2012 but was extended for two years.
- Prince Zeid, who has been ambassador to both the U.N. and the United States, announced in late April he would resign as U.N. ambassador.

New Ukraine President

- Petro Poroshenko has taken the oath of office as Ukraine's President, assuming leadership of a country mired in a violent uprising and economic troubles.
- Mr. Poroshenko, who became a billionaire as a candy tycoon, was elected after the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich

fled the country in the wake of months of street protests.

- The ceremony in the Ukrainian Parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, was attended by high-ranking delegations from Western governments, which include U.S. Vice-President Joe Biden, E.U. President Herman Van Rompuy and the presidents of Poland and Germany, Bronislaw Komorowski and Joachim Gauck.

Egypt president sworn in

- Egypt's former army chief Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has been sworn in as President for a four-year term, taking the reins of power in a nation roiled since 2011 by deadly unrest and economic woes.
- Mr. el-Sisi's inauguration came less than a year after the 59-year-old career infantry officer ousted the country's first freely elected President, Mohammed Morsy, following days of mass protests by Egyptians demanding he step down.
- 8th of June was declared a national holiday and tight security was enforced by the police and military throughout Cairo.
- Outside the building, modelled to look like an ancient Egyptian temple, around a hundred el-Sisi supporters gathered, waving Egyptian flags and posters of the country's new President.

Nepal Parliament obstruction

- Belying hopes of breakthrough to resume proceedings of the Parliament, the three major political parties on S failed to reach agreement after claiming they were close to it. As a result, the opposition parties obstructed Parliament for the 10th straight day.
- Speaking in the Parliament after the talks ended inconclusively, Bijay Gachchhadar

of Madhesi Janaadhikar Forum (Democratic) accused the ruling coalition of breaching a previous agreement on a number of issues, including forming a high level political committee (HLPC) comprising of political parties.

- When Mr. Gachchhadar said NC President and Prime Minister Sushil Koirala and other ruling party leaders should go to Sarnath in India if they failed to deliver a Constitution, the ruling MPs objected to his remarks. With neither side relenting, Speaker Subas Nembang, adjourned the House.
- Mr. Nepal said the Nepali Congress and his party are in favour of rotating leadership of the HLPC.

City seized by Iraqi militants

- Iraqi police and army forces abandoned their posts in the northern city of Mosul after militants overran the provincial government headquarters and other key buildings, dealing a serious blow to Baghdad's efforts to control a widening insurgency in the country.
- The insurgents seized the government complex, a key symbol of state authority following days of fighting in the country's second—largest city, a former al—Qaida stronghold situated in what has long been one of the more restive parts of Iraq. The gunmen also torched several of the city's police stations, freeing detainees held in lockups.
- The fighters are believed to be affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, an al—Qaida splinter group that is behind the bulk of the bloody attacks in Iraq and is among the most ruthless rebel forces fighting to topple President Bashar Assad in neighboring Syria. The group has also tried to position itself as a champion for Iraq's large and disaffected

Sunni minority.

- The militants' push comes as Iraq's embattled Shiite prime minister, Nouri al—Maliki, struggles to hold onto power following parliamentary elections in late April that left him with the most seats but short of a majority needed to form a new government outright.
- Iraq has been grappling with its worst surge in violence since the sectarian bloodletting of 2006 and 2007.

Taliban attack in Pakistan

- Taliban militants attacked a training camp of the Airport Security Force near Karachi international airport in Karachi, but fled after Pakistani forces repulsed the assault, a day after an all-night siege at the facility left nearly 40 people dead.
- Two militants attacked the camp number 2, located at the ASF academy in Bitai Abad, near the Jinnah International Airport which had been cleared of militants after fierce clashes between forces and terrorists on Monday.
- The attackers failed to penetrate the security cordon and managed to flee into nearby residential areas.
- Eleven airport security guards, along with a paramilitary ranger and a policeman, 14 civilian workers and 10 militants were killed in the previous attack.
- The attack came a day after the deadly assault at Karachi international airport. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan has claimed responsibility for the attack on the airport.

Russia's 'gas discount'

- Ukraine's Prime Minister has rejected a Russian proposal to sell Ukraine gas at a discount, insisting that the contractual price be lowered.
- Russia had insisted that cash-strapped

Ukraine pay about 2 billion dollars to settle its gas arrears, but Ukraine now has until 0800 GMT .

- Russia upped the price to 485 dollars after it annexed Ukraine's Crimea region in March, saying that a previous discount hinged on the lease agreement for its Black Sea Fleet stationed on the peninsula.
- The gas talks in Brussels are being watched closely across Europe as Russia has threatened to shut down gas shipments to Ukraine. Such an action would threaten a large source of supplies to Western Europe, which happened in 2009.

Iraq crisis and concerns in oil market

- The rapid advance of jihadists through large swathes of Iraq raises concerns in the oil market about the ability of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to meet global demand, industry experts say. Analysts estimate that the cartel needs to ramp up production by at least 700,000 million barrels per day (bpd) in the second half of the year to meet global demand, and their hopes are partly based on increased output from Iraqi oil wells.
- In the longer term, 60 per cent of growth in OPEC's production capacity is expected to come from Iraq, the International Energy Agency in Paris estimated Friday.
- The European benchmark price for Brent oil from the North Sea shot up to a 9-month high of 114.5 dollars per barrel early on Friday morning, before retreating below 113 dollars later in the day.
- Iraq pumped 3.33 million bpd last month, making it the second-largest OPEC producer after Saudi Arabia.
- Oil from the north of the country stopped reaching markets in March, following

violence in Anbar province and an attack on a pipeline to Turkey.

Iran and P6 begins talks

- Nuclear negotiators from Iran and six world powers got down to business on Tuesday seeking to strike a momentous deal before a July 20 deadline but with significant differences still to bridge. The United States and Iran briefly discussed the crisis raging in Iraq, U.S. officials said, but the focus in Vienna on the second day of talks was the mooted atomic agreement.
- The many problem areas include the duration of any final accord, the pace of sanctions relief, Iran's partially-built Arak nuclear reactor and allegations of past efforts to build a bomb. But the main sticking point remains uranium enrichment: a process that can produce nuclear fuel but also, when highly purified, the core of an atomic bomb.
- The West hotly disputes Iran's claim that it needs this material for nuclear facilities around the country. The parties have set themselves a deadline of July 20, when an interim deal struck in November expires, and many experts believe an extension is already being talked about.

Possible Nuclear deal

- A nuclear deal between Iran and the West was possible within the next five weeks, according to Iranian President Hassan Rowhani .
- The target date for a comprehensive agreement between Iran and six world powers — Britain, China, France, Russia, the United States and Germany — to end the decade-long row over Iran's nuclear activities is July 20.
- In November, the parties reached an interim deal under which Iran agreed to

limit its uranium enrichment programme and reduce some levels of enrichment in exchange for some relief from international sanctions.

- The US and its allies are seeking an agreement to guarantee that Iran will use its nuclear programme solely for peaceful purposes. Tehran has insisted that it is not seeking nuclear weapons.

Norwegian ex-PM named for Asian 'Nobel'

- Former Norwegian premier Gro Harlem Brundtland was named as the first recipient of the Tang Prize, touted as Asia's version of the Nobels, for her work as the "godmother" of sustainable development.
- Ms. Brundtland was awarded the debut prize, created by one of Taiwan's richest men with a \$100 million donation, with winners in three other categories to be announced this week. She was awarded the biennial prize for "her innovation, leadership and implementation" of sustainable development.

U.S. to send 300 'military advisers' to Iraq

- Firmly ruling out the possibility of American boots on the ground in Iraq in the face of escalating sectarian violence there, U.S. President Barack Obama announced that he would nevertheless be sending 300 "military advisers" to Baghdad and also remain prepared to take "targeted," "precise," military actions in the future.
- "American combat troops will not be fighting in Iraq again," Mr. Obama said, adding, "Ultimately this is something that will have to be solved by Iraqis."
- The President explained that the military personnel would be sent to Iraq to

examine how to train and equip Iraqi forces, and this would come on the heels of Washington's steps to increase its intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance operations to better understand the threats to Baghdad. Yet, Mr. Obama appeared determined to hold firm to the view that U.S. combat troops would not return to Iraq as that could not resolve the core issues the country is currently facing.

- Among the key priorities that Washington had in the country, he said, was to create joint operation centres in Baghdad and northern Iraq, which would share intelligence and coordinate planning to confront the terrorist threat of ISIS, the extremist group that has captured at least two cities and a major oil facility.

Ukraine rebels refuse ceasefire

- Ukraine's military waged new battles with pro-Moscow rebels who rejected Kiev's unilateral ceasefire, while the government raised alarm over the Kremlin's decision to put troops across Russia on combat alert.
- The resurgence of violence in the 11-week insurgency threatening to splinter the ex-Soviet nation came as Washington slapped sanctions on top separatist leaders and warned the Kremlin against sending forces into Ukraine.
- But Russian President Vladimir Putin appeared unfazed as he ordered units from the Volga to western Siberia to conduct snap military drills.
- The militia used sniper fire and grenade launchers to strike a base in Donetsk.

NESCO granted heritage status for cave drawings

- U.N. cultural agency Unesco granted its prized World Heritage status to a

prehistoric cave in southern France containing the earliest known figurative drawings.

- Delegates at Unesco's World Heritage Committee voted to grant the status to the Grotte Chauvet at a gathering in Doha, where they are considering cultural and natural wonders for inclusion on the U.N. list.
- The cave in the Ardeche region, which survived sealed off for millennia before its discovery in 1994, contains more than 1,000 drawings dating back some 36,000 years to what is believed to be the first human culture in Europe.
- The painted images include representations of human hands and of dozens of animals, including mammoth, wild cats, rhinos, bison, bears and aurochs.

Jail for three AL Jazeera journalists

- An Egyptian court sentenced three Al Jazeera journalists, including Australia's Peter Greste, to jail terms from seven to 10 years. Mr. Greste and Egyptian-Canadian Mohamed Fadel Fahmy each got seven years, while producer Baher Mohamed received two sentences — one for seven years and another for three.
- Eleven defendants tried in absentia, including one Dutch journalist and two British journalists, were given 10-year sentences.
- Of the six defendants in custody along with Mr. Greste, Mr. Fahmy and Mr. Mohamed, four were sentenced to seven years and two were acquitted.
- All of the defendants had been accused of aiding the blacklisted Muslim Brotherhood and tarnishing Egypt's reputation after the ouster of Islamist president Mohamed Morsy by spreading false news.

More women abducted in Nigeria

- Suspected Boko Haram militants have abducted more than 60 women and girls, some as young as three, in the latest kidnappings in northeast Nigeria and over two months since more than 200 schoolgirls were seized.
- Analysts said the kidnapping, which happened during a raid on Kummabza village in the Damboa district of Borno state, could be an attempt by the Islamist group to refocus attention on its demands for the release of militant fighters.
- Boko Haram has indicated that it would be willing to release the 219 schoolgirls that it has held hostage since April 14 in exchange for the freedom of its brothers in arms currently held in Nigerian jails. Nigeria initially refused to sanction any deal but efforts have since been made to open talks with the group, with a possible prisoner swap part of discussions.
- The military in Abuja said in a tweet late that it could not confirm the latest abductions and spokesmen were not immediately available for comment when contacted by AFP. The Chibok abduction triggered a groundswell of outrage within Nigeria that spread overseas, leading to a social media campaign and international pressure on the government to act.

Follow up ceasefire with concrete talks: Putin

- Moscow will continue to protect ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin said after dismissing a week-long ceasefire between pro-Kremlin rebels and Ukrainian troops as "too short."
- "We will always protect ethnic Russians in Ukraine, as well as the part of

Ukrainian people who ... feel part of the wider Russian world, and we will not only monitor this but also react," Mr. Putin said during a visit to Austria. "I hope that armed forces will not be necessary for this."

- Mr. Putin asked Russian lawmakers on Tuesday to revoke a resolution allowing him to invade Ukraine in a shock change of heart that Kiev hailed as the "first practical step" in defusing the months-long crisis.
- The Russian leader however insisted that the seven-day truce between separatist rebels and forces loyal to Kiev in Ukraine's restive east be followed by concrete talks.

Kiev seeks talks with Moscow

- Ukraine's new Western-backed leader sought urgent talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday after separatist rebels shot down an Army helicopter despite orders from their own commander to observe a fragile truce.
- The death of nine servicemen outside the pro-Russian stronghold city of Slavyansk and loss of two other soldiers in militia attacks prompted Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to threaten to unleash a powerful new military campaign in the industrial east. The warning dealt a crushing blow to hopes of the sides mediating an end to 11 weeks of fighting that has killed more than 435 people and brought the ex-Soviet nation to the brink of collapse.
- Kiev's temporary ceasefire was picked up by separatist commanders but was due to expire on Friday morning after just one round of inconclusive and indirect talks.

Russia to join Kiev talks with EU

- Russia said it had finally got Brussels and

Kiev to include it in talks over a landmark association agreement between Ukraine and the EU to be signed this week.

- Much to Russia's chagrin, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko is set to sign the final chapters of the landmark EU pact that has been at the heart of a raging crisis in his country.
- However Moscow hopes it will still be able to raise its concerns over possible damage to its economic interests as a result of the agreement which has seen it threaten to protect its markets against Ukrainian goods.

Ukraine signs landmark deal with EU

- Ukraine's new Western-backed president signed a landmark EU pact whose rejection by his pro-Moscow predecessor plunged the ex-Soviet country into turmoil and sent East-West relations to their lowest level since the Cold War.
- Ukraine President Petro Poroshenko hailed the deal, which pulls Kiev out of Kremlin's orbit, as a turning point for the strategic country sandwiched between Europe and Russia.
- But the agreement bursts Russian President Vladimir Putin's dream of enlisting Kiev in a Kremlin-led alliance that could rival the European Union and NATO and Moscow warned it would have "serious consequences."
- The Association Agreement is also deeply unpopular in Ukraine's heavily Russified eastern rustbelt, where pro-Russian insurgents are battling Kiev government troops.
- The European Union also sealed similar partnership agreements with Georgia and Moldova — two former Soviet nations with similarly complicated relations with Russia.
- Mr. Poroshenko said the deal offered

Ukraine “an absolutely new perspective for my country,” hailing a “historic day, the most important day since independence.”

Panchsheel still relevant: China

- Quoting from one of Rabindra Nath Tagore’s verses on friendship, ‘... If you think friendship can be won through war, spring will fade away before your eyes’, President Xi Jinping reiterated the virtues of good relations between neighbours, peace and cooperation and amity in the region as envisaged six decades ago in the Panchsheel treaty among India, China and Myanmar.
- At the 60th commemoration of the Panchsheel, he asserted that China would follow the five principles of Panchsheel even as it is ready to work with the West to uphold world peace and development.
- Mr. Xi spoke of adhering to territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression and non-interference in internal matters, and peaceful co-existence — the basics of Panchsheel, and said these continue to remain relevant and grow.

Israel is “ready” to expand its operations in Gaza

- Israel is “ready” to expand its operations in Gaza, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned after the air force struck 12 targets overnight following a surge in militant rocket fire.
- Speaking to ministers at the weekly cabinet meeting, the Israeli Premier said the almost-nightly military strikes on Gaza could be expanded should the need arise.
- Israeli warplanes struck Gaza 12 times overnight, with Palestinian officials saying two people had been lightly injured.

Constitution a key priority in Nepal

- Nepal President Dr. Ram Baran Yadav presented the government’s programmes and policies for the fiscal year 2014-15 in the Parliament.
- Dr. Yadav emphasised the importance of promulgating the Constitution in time through consensus. The coalition government’s road map also talks about adopting zero tolerance to corruption. On foreign aid, the government aims to channelise it into the national system and mobilise in areas of national priority.
- The road map reiterates the government’s commitment to form the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Commission on Investigation of Disappeared Persons as per the Interim Constitution. Legislation passed by the Parliament on formation of these two transitional justice bodies faces challenge in the Supreme Court.

Israel issued a brusque warning to Hamas

- Israel issued a brusque warning to Hamas, demanding it prevent rocket fire from Gaza as fears grew of a new confrontation around the coastal Palestinian enclave.
- Militants fired 14 rockets at southern Israel during the morning, sending tension soaring and drawing a warning from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that unless the Islamist movement cracked down on those behind the attacks the Israeli military would step in.
- If this fire continues there are two possibilities: either Hamas stops it as the responsible authority in the area, or we will stop it.

@atrd ne Onvdq B`rd

- Thailand’s Prime Minister Yingluck

Shinawatra defended herself against abuse of power allegations in a crucial court case that is one of several legal challenges, which could remove her from office.

- Ms. Yingluck is accused of abusing her authority by transferring her National Security Council chief in 2011 to another position. Critics say the transfer was to benefit her ruling party and violated the Constitution.
- The case was lodged by anti-government senators, who won an initial victory in February when another court ruled that the official, Thawil Pliensri, must be restored to his job.
- If Ms. Yingluck is found guilty of interfering in state affairs for her personal benefit or that of her political party, she would have to step down as Prime Minister.

First 'Born Free' election

- South Africans voted in the first "Born Free" election, although polls suggest the allure of the ruling African National Congress as the conqueror of apartheid will prevail even among those with no memory of white-minority rule.
- Opinion polls suggest there is no doubt about the overall result, with ANC support estimated at around 65 percent, only a shade lower than the 65.9 percent it won in the 2009 election that brought President Jacob Zuma to power.
- The resilience of ANC support has surprised analysts who a year ago were saying it could struggle at the polls as its glorious past recedes into history and voters focus instead on the sluggish economic growth and slew of scandals that have typified Zuma's first term.
- Africa's most sophisticated economy has struggled to recover from a 2009 recession

- its first since the 1994 demise of apartheid - and the ANC's efforts to stimulate growth and tackle 25 percent unemployment have been hampered by powerful unions.

- South Africa's top anti-graft agency accused Zuma this year of "benefiting unduly" from a \$23 million state-funded security upgrade to his private home at Nkandla in rural KwaZulu-Natal province that included a swimming pool and chicken run.

Ceasefire in South Sudan

- South Sudan's President has reached a ceasefire agreement with a rebel leader, an African regional bloc said, after a vicious cycle of revenge killings drew international alarm.
- The deal means "an immediate cessation of hostilities within 24 hours of the signing" and "unhindered humanitarian access" to all people affected by the months-long conflict, said a statement by the political bloc known as IGAD, which is mediating the conflict.
- Ethnically targeted violence in the world's youngest country broke out in December, killing thousands of people and forcing more than 1.3 million to flee their homes. The U.N. Security Council has expressed "horror" at recent killings of civilians.
- U.S. National Security Adviser Susan Rice welcomed the peace agreement in a statement, saying it "holds the promise of bringing the crisis to an end".
- South Sudan is a largely Christian nation that broke off from the Muslim-dominated Sudan after a 2011 referendum. The fighting is an embarrassment to the U.S., which has provided hundreds of millions of dollars in aid and has been its strongest international champion.

Rockets fired in southern Israel

- Three rockets from Gaza were fired into Israel recently.
- The projectile struck uninhabited areas in the Sha'ar Hanegev Regional Council and set off sirens.
- Few days back, Israel Air Force jets struck five terror targets in the Gaza Strip, following rocket attacks on southern Israel the previous night. The IAF hit sites in northern and central Gaza, including two Hamas posts. .
- Also last week, a rocket siren went off in the Sha'ar Hanegev region, but an army spokeswoman later said no projectiles were detected in Israeli territory.
- Last month, the air force struck 29 targets across the Gaza Strip in response to Islamic Jihad rocket attack on the South. More than 30 rockets - fired in simultaneous barrages from northern and southern Gaza - exploded in Israeli territory. The Iron Dome anti-rocket battery stationed in Sderot shot down three projectiles over the town. The bombardment of the western Negev in March marked the largest flare-up of Gazan terrorism since 2012.

New sanctions against Russia

- The United States and other nations in the Group of Seven agreed to "move swiftly" to impose additional economic sanctions on Russia in response to its actions in Ukraine.
- In a joint statement released by the White House, the G-7 nations said they will act urgently to intensify "targeted sanctions." The statement said the G-7 will also continue to prepare broader sanctions on key Russian economic sectors if Moscow takes more aggressive action.
- The announcement came as top

Ukrainians spoke of imminent invasion and Moscow said that pro-Russian separatists would not lay down their arms in eastern Ukraine until activists relinquish control over key sites in Kiev.

- The G-7 nations said they were moving forward on the targeted sanctions now because of the urgency of securing plans for Ukraine to hold presidential elections in May.
- The penalties are expected to target wealthy Russian individuals who are close to President Vladimir Putin, as well as entities they run. However, the U.S. will continue to hold off on targeting broad swaths of the Russian economy, though the president has said he is willing to take that step if Putin launches a military incursion in eastern Ukraine.
- Tensions were heightened on the ground, with Russian fighter jets reported crossing into Ukrainian airspace and a team of unarmed foreign military observers detained by pro-Russian forces in Slovyansk, the heart of the separatist movement in the east.

Hatf-III

- Pakistan conducted a successful training launch of short range surface to surface ballistic missile Hatf III (Ghaznavi) recently.
- The missile can carry nuclear and conventional warheads to a range of 290 kilometres.
- The successful launch concluded the field training exercise of strategic missile group of Army Strategic Forces Command.
- As per the statement released by Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the training launch was witnessed by Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee General Rashad Mahmood, Director General Strategic Plans Division

Lieutenant General Zubair Mahmood Hayat, Commander Army Strategic Forces Command Lieutenant General Obaid Ullah Khan, Chairman NESCOM Muhammad Irfan Burney and other senior military officials and scientists.

Code Of Conduct On Communication

- Naval chiefs from US and Asian-Pacific nations including Vietnam adopted a code of conduct aimed at improving communication at sea to reduce the possibility of conflict.
- Citing Australian media reports, VNA said that the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea was approved by countries including the US, China, Japan, the Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium in China's eastern coastal city of Qingdao.
- The pact outlines how naval ships should communicate and manoeuvre when they unexpectedly come into contact in sea lanes surrounding China, Japan and Southeast Asia.
- Although not legally binding, the code of conduct is said to help establish international standards in relation to the use of sea lanes.

FATA demand

- The clamour for holding local government elections in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) is growing in a region where a governance system is non-existent at a local or provincial level.
- A new research study by the FATA Research Centre (FRC) titled 'Local Government in FATA, Past failures, Current challenges and Future prospects' highlights the century old political vacuum in the region coupled with bad governance and corruption which has

resulted in a gap between the state and society in this volatile tribal belt.

- The growing exclusion of people from the political process has created a sense of deprivation and frustration among the masses, the report says and this disconnect was the reason that Taliban were able to consolidate their position in FATA by cutting away at the existing political system and killing the tribal elders and maliks.
- The Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) is a draconian law which still operates there and power is wielded by the all powerful political agent even today. Lt Gen (retd.) Abdul Qadir Baloch, the minister for States and Frontier Regions said there are no two opinions that local government elections should be held in FATA and he said the driver of reforms must be the people themselves.
- Senator Farhatullah Babar said the FATA region which was a buffer zone earlier to press the strategic depth policy was now a strategic threat.

Pope Francis declaration

- Pope Francis declared his two predecessors John XXIII and John Paul II saints on before hundreds of thousands of people in St. Peter's Square, an unprecedented ceremony made even more historic by the presence of retired Pope Benedict XVI.
- Never before has a reigning and retired pope celebrated Mass together in public, much less at an event honouring two of their most famous predecessors.
- Pope Benedict's presence was a reflection of the balancing act that Pope Francis envisioned when he decided to canonize Pope John and Pope John Paul together, showing the unity of the Catholic Church by honouring popes beloved to

conservatives and progressives alike.

- Pope Francis took a deep breath and paused for a moment before reciting the saint-making formula in Latin, as if moved by the history he was about to make.

Chemical weapons destroyed in Syria

- The head of an international mission to Syria charged with destroying the country's chemical weapons called on President Bashar Assad's government to ensure it meets a deadline to destroy all its toxic chemicals amid a raging civil war.
- Sigrid Kaag of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) told reporters in Damascus that 92.5 percent of Syria's chemical materials had been removed from the country and destroyed. She called it "significant progress," although she called on Syria's government to ensure remaining materials would be eradicated by the end of April.
- Syria missed an April 13 deadline to destroy all its chemical weapons in accessible locations. International experts say that could impact on reaching a June 30 deadline to remove all Syria's chemical weapons.
- Another 12 chemical weapons production facilities are still being reviewed by the OPCW to see how they will be destroyed.

Assad regime

- France has 'information' but no firm proof that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime is still using chemical weapons, according to President Francois Hollande.
- There are conflicting accounts about one attack that happened in the town of Kafr Zita in the central Hama province earlier in April, with both the government and the opposition accusing each other of

being responsible.

- Activists in the area accused the regime of using chlorine gas, saying it caused 'more than 100 cases of suffocation'.
- Throughout Syria's conflict, the Assad regime has sought to portray itself as the protector of the country's religious minorities against a revolt it says is led by foreign-backed extremists.
- The Syrian opposition dismisses such claims as part of a divide-and-rule strategy which is also aimed at deterring the West from providing greater support to the rebels.
- Syria's uprising began in March 2011 as a peaceful revolt against the Assad family's four-decade rule but escalated into an insurgency and then a civil war when the regime launched a brutal crackdown.
- As the war has intensified, claiming an estimated 150,000 lives, it has also grown more sectarian, with jihadists flocking to the ranks of the Sunni-led rebellion and Lebanon's Shiite Hezbollah movement fighting alongside the regime.

Internet 'Bill of Rights' to protect online privacy

- Brazil's president signed into law on a "Bill of Rights" for the digital age that aims to protect online privacy and promote the Internet as a public utility by barring telecommunications companies from charging for preferential access to their networks.
- The law signed by President Dilma Rousseff at a global conference on the future of Internet governance puts Brazil in the vanguard of online consumer protection and what is known as "net neutrality," whose promoters consider it profoundly democratic in part because it keeps financial barriers for innovators low.

- The new law promotes privacy by limiting the data that online companies can collect on Internet users in this nation of 200 million people, deeming communications over the Internet "inviolable and secret." Service providers must develop protocols to ensure email can be read only by senders and their intended recipients. Violators are subject to penalties including fines and suspension.
- The law obliges Internet companies, however, to hold on to user data for six months and hand it over to law enforcement under court order.

World's Tallest Building

- Kingdom Tower will be 568 feet taller than Khalifa Tower, the current Guinness World Record holder in neighboring Dubai, once it is completed. The tower is the first phase of Jeddah Economic Company's approximately \$20 billion, 17 million-square-foot Kingdom City project, of which it will be the focal point. Saudi Arabia's Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, a nephew of Saudi King Abdullah, is chairman of the Kingdom Holding Company, a partner in JEC.
- Foundation work for the \$1.2 billion skyscraper began in December, and above-ground work will start April 27. The 200-floor tower will be located in Jeddah, a culturally significant city near the Red Sea that is known as the gateway to Mecca.
- Kingdom Tower will house a Four Seasons hotel, luxury condominiums, office space and an observatory.

TIME Magazine's Online Poll

- Indian politician Arvind Kejriwal has won the readers' poll for the 2014 TIME 100,

TIME's annual list of people who influenced the world this past year for better or worse.

- As the world's largest democracy votes in the ongoing elections, the key candidates obviously have made an impact internationally.
- Narendra Modi, who is already being hailed as the leader at the helm of affairs by Goldman Sachs and other agencies, was expected to be the top candidate from India on TIME magazine's list. But Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Arvind Kejriwal has managed to edge past the BJP's prime ministerial candidate by a small margin.
- Kejriwal has edged past international icons such as Malala Yousafzai, Katy Perry, Lady Gaga, Jared Leto, Vladimir Putin, Janet Yellen, and Michael Bloomberg among others. Narendra Modi, who has gained much prominence of late, has secured the third post. According to TIME, Modi may clamour past pop star Katy Perry to the second spot and give Kejriwal a run for his money.

Rape in Conflict

- A new UN report names 21 countries where rape and other sexual violence has been committed in current and recent conflicts - from Afghanistan and Central African Republic to Myanmar and Syria.
- Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's report, says there is now unprecedented political momentum globally to end conflict-related sexual violence but more action is needed regionally and nationally to respond to these crimes.
- Covering 21 countries of concern in Europe, Asia, Africa, South America and the Middle East, the report shows that sexual violence in conflict is truly is a

global crime.

- The report identifies 34 armed groups - including militias, rebel groups and government security forces - suspected of rape and sexual violence in conflict situations.

North Korean Nuclear Threats

- Dismissing North Korea's nuclear threats, US President Barack Obama has reportedly warned the country of tougher sanctions if it were to go ahead with its fourth nuclear test.
- Obama said at a joint press conference with South Korean President Park Geun-Hye that threats will get North Korea nothing, other than greater isolation.
- South Korea's satellite images revealed the North could be preparing for another test, Obama stressed that Washington and Seoul stood "shoulder to shoulder" in their refusal to accept a nuclear North Korea.
- Obama also said that China is beginning to recognise that North Korea is not just a nuisance but a significant problem for their own security.

No TOEFL and TOEIC tests by ETS

- Dealing a blow to many visa aspirants especially students, British authorities have said global testing giant ETS will no longer offer TOEFL and TOEIC tests for U.K. visa-granting purposes, in the wake of a recent controversy.
- As per the U.K. Council for International Student Affairs' official website, "ETS is no longer providing TOEIC and TOEFL tests for people who want to use them in support of U.K. immigration applications. This is because of allegations of fraud."
- Following the broadcast of a BBC Panorama programme in February 2014 which highlighted an organised element seeking to circumvent the U.K.'s visa-

granting process, ETS has made the decision not to extend our Secure English-language Testing (SELT) licence with the Home Office. As a result, TOEIC and TOEFL iBT testing will no longer be offered for U.K. visa-granting purposes.

- The TOEFL test remains the most widely respected English-language test in the world recognised by more than 9,000 institutions in more than 130 countries.

Afghan landslide

- Afghan officials gave up hope of finding any survivors from a landslide in the remote northeast, putting the death toll at more than 2,100, as the aid effort focused on the more than 4,000 people displaced.

Officials expressed concern the unstable hillside above the site of the disaster may cave in again, threatening the thousands of homeless and hundreds of rescue workers who have arrived in Badakhshan province, bordering Tajikistan.

- Villagers and a few dozen police, equipped with only basic digging tools, resumed their search when daylight broke but it soon became clear there was no hope of finding survivors buried in up to 100 meters of mud.
- The United Nations mission in Afghanistan said the focus was on the more than 4,000 people displaced, either directly as a result of Friday's landslide or as a precautionary measure from villages assessed to be at risk.
- Their main needs were water, medical support, counselling support, food and emergency shelter, said Ari Gaitanis, a spokesman from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan.
- The impoverished area, dotted with villages of mud-brick homes nestled in valleys beside bare slopes, has been hit by several landslides in recent years.

Tunisia's New Law on Elections

- Tunisian lawmakers have adopted a sweeping new electoral law that paves the way for general elections later this year and is a milestone in this country's new democracy.
- The law requires party lists for legislative elections to be half women and half men. It also allows members of the authoritarian regime ousted in 2011 to run for office.
- The members of the National Constituent Assembly approved the law after weeks of heated debate over its 270 articles. The overall law was approved 132-11 with nine abstentions.
- Tunisia's path to democracy has been rocky but is seen as a model for other countries, after street protests overthrew a dictator and unleashed uprisings across the region known as the Arab Spring.

Obama's wage bill

- Senate Republicans deployed a filibuster to block a White House proposal to increase the U.S. minimum wage by \$2.85 to \$10.10 per hour, thereby denying President Barack Obama an important election-year policy achievement.
- With mid-term elections scheduled for November 2014, the defeat of the Bill on the floor of the Senate, by a vote of 54 'ayes' and 42 'nays' - short of the 60 votes required for passage - could spell trouble for Democrats.
- Although polls have shown that more than 60 per cent of Americans support raising the minimum wage, a measure that Mr. Obama promised in his state-of-the-union address in January, all Senate Republicans but one, Robert Corker of Tennessee, voted against holding a debate on the Bill and getting it passed.

- While he appeared frustrated with the proceedings on Capitol Hill and slammed Republicans for preventing "a raise for 28 million hardworking Americans," he emphasised that several U.S. States had taken the matter into their hands and raised the minimum wage through State Legislatures.
- For the Democrats the Bill represented a key component of its broader 'Fair Shot for All' midterm campaign, a platform that aimed to project the party as a supporter of the common man, in opposition to Republican pandering to special interests.

Anti-Qaeda offensive

- Yemeni forces have launched an operation to drive Al-Qaeda fighters out of southern towns, where blistering air strikes killed nearly 60 militants recently. military officials.
- Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula jihadists established strongholds in towns and rugged zones in Abyan and Shabwa provinces after security forces chased them from major cities in Abyan in 2012.
- Yemeni and US drone strikes targeted bases of AQAP, considered by Washington as the most dangerous affiliate of the global jihadist network with links to several failed terror plots against the United States.
- AQAP took advantage of the weakening of the central government in Sanaa after the nationwide uprising, establishing strongholds in the southern and eastern regions.
- In June 2012, government forces backed by the Popular Committees drove militants out of major cities in Abyan after they had been in control for around a year.
- US drones frequently strike suspected militants in the country despite mounting

criticism from rights groups concerned about civilian casualties.

- The United States has defended its use of drones against Al-Qaeda, saying they allow it to target jihadists without sending soldiers into lawless areas where local authorities have little or no control.

US Security deal with Philippines

- Protesters have clashed in the Philippines as a 10-year agreement was signed ahead of President Barack Obama's visit which will beef up military forces there.
- The military will get greater access to bases across the region as an effort by Washington to counter Chinese aggression.
- The presence of foreign troops is a sensitive issue in the Philippines, a former American colony.
- The Philippine Senate voted in 1991 to close down U.S. bases at Subic and Clark, northwest of Manila.
- However, it ratified a pact with the United States allowing temporary visits by American forces in 1999, four years after China seized a reef the Philippines contests.
- Following the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States, hundreds of U.S. forces descended in the southern Philippines under that accord to hold counter terrorism exercises with Filipino troops fighting Muslim militants.
- However this time, the focus of the Philippines and its underfunded military has increasingly turned to external threats as territorial spats with China in the potentially oil and gas-rich South China Sea heated up in recent years.

Tornadoes Strike Central, Southern US

- A tornado system ripped through the central US and left at least 12 dead in a

violent start to this year's storm season.

- A tornado carved through several Little Rock suburbs. A separate tornado from the same storm system killed one person in Oklahoma.
- The large tornado outside Little Rock, Arkansas, stayed on the ground as it moved northeastward for at least 30 miles (48 kilometres).
- Emergency workers and volunteers went door-to-door to look for victims. Law enforcement officers checked the damaged and toppled 18-wheelers, cars and trucks on a stretch of Interstate 40, a major thoroughfare in and out of the state's capital.
- Tornadoes also touched down in Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri and Kansas, where dozens of homes in Baxter Springs were destroyed. Twenty-five people were injured and one person died.
- Forecasters had warned for days that violent weather would strike over the weekend.

Security for World Economic Forum

- Nigeria has assured that it will provide adequate security arrangements during the World Economic Forum on Africa, which begins May 7 in Abuja.
- The government would provide adequate security for participants. His remark came after some countries expressed concern over security issues, following a blast in Abuja, which left at least 19 people dead.

The recent U.N. Security Council meet

- The U.N. Security Council recently met in emergency session amid growing violence in eastern Ukraine, with Western powers and Russia blaming each other for the deepening crisis.
- Russia called the meeting hours after Ukrainian special forces exchanged

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gunfire with a pro-Russia militia in an eastern city, and at least one security officer was killed and five others wounded. Ukraine's president accused its powerful neighbour of fomenting unrest, and announced that it would deploy armed forces to quash an increasingly bold pro-Russian insurgency.

- Russian Ambassador Vitaly Churkin denied Western and Ukrainian claims that Moscow was behind the violence, and told U.N. diplomats that Ukraine has been using radical neo-Nazi forces to destabilize its eastern region.
- Russia has tens of thousands of troops massed along Ukraine's eastern border, and there are fears that Moscow might use the violence in the mainly Russian-speaking region as a pretext for an invasion, in a repeat of events in Crimea earlier this year.

U.S. -Taiwan update

- The United States has said it will help Taiwan to build diesel-electric submarines on its own.
- Asked at the committee hearing whether a policy to build submarines locally has been finalized, Yen said Taiwan has launched a plan to build submarines domestically after trying to buy U.S. submarines without success for 13 years.
- The Ministry of National Defense (MND) confirmed that it has begun preparations to build submarines on its own and that the chances for success would grow if the U.S. could help with project management and technology transfer or even engage in co-production.
- The MND said Washington agreed to sell Taiwan submarines in 2001, but no progress has been made on the deal.
- Pressured by lawmakers across party lines and the people of the country, the

MND has decided to begin the pre-production phase of the process to show its resolve to defend itself.

- The ministry said it has exchanged views with the U.S., and Washington has expressed its understanding of Taiwan's determination to build its own submarines.
- It will also seek support from U.S. policymakers to help Taiwan with its plans through bilateral military exchanges.

Military operation to crush anti-government protests in Ukraine

- Ukraine has launched a military operation to crush anti-government protests in the Russian-speaking eastern part of the country, deploying thousands of troops, armour and aircraft to Donetsk region where protesters seized government buildings in a dozen cities and towns.
- The military, in armoured personnel carriers backed by aircraft, stormed a small airfield near Kramatorsk. Unconfirmed reports said between four and 11 protesters had been killed in the attack.
- Following the attack, hundreds of unarmed Kramatorsk residents drove to the airfield to protest against the killing of civilians.
- The Russian TV channel Rossiya-24, which has several reporters in eastern Ukraine, said about 500 government troops and 20 armoured personnel carriers entered the city of Sloviansk, not far from Kramatorsk.
- A militia commander in Sloviansk, which is under full control of the protesters, told Russia's Itar-Tass news agency that the city had been surrounded by Ukrainian tanks and armoured vehicles.

- In Kiev, two presidential candidates representing eastern Ukraine were attacked by armed far right radicals. Oleg Tsarev, an independent, was severely beaten after appearing in a TV show called "Freedom of Speech." The mob demanded that he and the other candidate, Mikhail Dobkin, withdraw from the elections scheduled for May 25.
- Ukrainian authorities confirmed that a battalion of newly formed "National Guard" made up of "Maidan activists" had been deployed for action against pro-Russian protesters in the east.

Germany's new initiatives

- Germany, one of the three most-visited places in Europe for Indian, plans to grow this traffic of travellers by about 10 per cent this year with a focus on its heritage sites.
- The German tourism department has budgeted 5 lakh euros for promotional activities in this respect.
- Germany is known not only for its excellent cars and high tech, but even more for its heritage - a vibrant, reunified Berlin, modern designs and magnificent monuments that have stood the test of time, like the castles in Potsdam and the Cologne Cathedral.
- There are 38 UNESCO world heritage sites in Germany, 36 of them cultural and two natural. Among these are also the top three heritage sites in Europe.
- Last year, more than 615,000 Indians visited the country. The plan is to increase that by 8-10% this year and towards this it will spend an equivalent of Rs4 crore. That might not be so difficult after the 5% growth they managed last year.

Accord on Ukraine

- Russia, the United States, the European

Union and Ukraine have agreed on a plan to resolve the crisis in Ukraine through a constitutional reform that would grant more powers to Russian-speaking regions.

- After eight-hour talks in Geneva, the Foreign Ministers of the four nations signed a joint statement on de-escalation of the Ukraine crisis.
- Russia, the U.S. and the E.U. have called on Ukraine to launch a broad national dialogue involving all political forces and all regions with the aim of undertaking a constitutional reform.
- The constitutional reform should provide for "decentralization" of authority, election of regional bodies of power and guaranteeing the language rights of Russian-speaker.
- The monitoring mission of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which has already been deployed in Ukraine, must play "the lead role" in assisting the Ukrainian authorities to resolve the crisis.
- The plan, at least on paper, has incorporated Russia's main demands for a settlement in Ukraine.

Pakistani Madrassa's Library in honour of Osama Bin Laden

- A controversial Pakistani cleric who runs an Islamic seminary for girls in the capital of Islamabad has named the school's newly built library in honour of Osama bin Laden.
- The tribute is an unusual first, though there have been cases in recent years of Pakistanis naming their sons or even their stores and places of business after the terror network's slain leader.
- Bin Laden was killed in a May 2011 raid by U.S. Navy SEALs in his hiding place

in Abbottabad, a garrison town about 125 kilometres north of Islamabad. The unilateral raid at the time angered the Pakistani government, which said the United States had violated the country's sovereignty.

- In the immediate aftermath of bin Laden's death, Islamists held small rallies across Pakistan to denounce the killing. The slain al-Qaeda chief is still regarded as a hero by most students at Islamic schools, or madrassas.

Everest's Worst Tragedy

- An avalanche swept down a slope of Mount Everest on Friday killing 12 Nepali mountaineering guides at the beginning of the main climbing season.
- The avalanche, the deadliest in eight years, hit the most popular route to the mountain's peak. Three Nepali guides were injured and up to five people were missing. It was the first major avalanche on Mount Everest this climbing season, when hundreds of foreign and Nepali climbers flock to the mountain to attempt to reach its 8,850 metre peak.
- More than 4,000 climbers have scaled Everest's summit since it was first climbed by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay Sherpa in 1953. The route they took is the one hit by the avalanche. Nearly 250 people have died on the mountain.
- Everest is on the border between Nepal and the Chinese region of Tibet and can be climbed from both sides.
- Nepal's Tourism Ministry has issued permits to 334 foreign climbers to scale Mount Everest this season, up from 328 the whole of last year. Nepal plans to cut fees to climb the mountain despite concern about overcrowding.

Bill That Bars Iran's Envoy

- President Obama signed a bill into law recently that would prohibit anyone who has engaged in espionage or terrorism against the United States from obtaining a visa to enter the country as a representative to the United Nations.
- Congress passed the bill last week after Iran named Hamid Aboutalebi as its ambassador to the United Nations; Mr. Aboutalebi was an interpreter for the militant student group that stormed the American Embassy in Tehran in 1979 and held Americans hostage for 444 days.
- Iran has insisted that the United States has no right to dictate whom it may choose to represent it. Mr. Obama said the Constitution gave him exclusive discretion to receive or reject ambassadors, and if a case arose where the law would interfere with his exercising that discretion, he would treat it as advisory.

Maritime Silk Road

- China has for the first time released details of its recently announced "maritime Silk Road" plan, announcing that the Indian Ocean-focused initiative will prioritise building ports and improving infrastructure in littoral countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.
- China is also planning to establish free trade zones in Indian Ocean countries as part of the plan - a move that will reinforce China's deepening economic presence in the Indian Ocean Region and in India's neighbourhood.
- The maritime Silk Road plan was unveiled in October last year when President Xi Jinping travelled to Southeast Asia. Since then, Chinese officials have highlighted the initiative as a key

diplomatic priority for Mr. Xi's government.

- Nations from Malaysia and Singapore to India, Sri Lanka and the Gulf countries have all been sounded out about the plan. It had, however, remained unclear what the plan would actually entail.
- The plan is expected to focus on infrastructure construction of countries along the route, including ports of Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. China is already involved in port projects in the three countries, in Gwadar, Hambantota and Chittagong.
- China hopes to "coordinate customs, quality supervision, e-commerce and other agencies to facilitate the scheme", as well as set up free trade zones.

Manila forum

- Hundreds of government, business and academic leaders gathered in the Philippines to discuss East Asia's economic prospects amid tensions in the South China Sea and political instability in some countries in the region.
- The 23rd World Economic Forum on East Asia was being held for the first time in Manila, allowing the Philippines to showcase its recent economic turnaround.
- The meetings would discuss how to address rising inequality amid the region's robust growth.
- The income gap in the Philippines is larger than in other regional economies, such as Indonesia and Thailand, with the top 10 per cent of the population earning about 20 times as much as the poorest 10 per cent.
- Another "notable danger for the region" is political instability both within and between countries.
- The meeting was being held amid increasing tensions over territorial

disputes in the South China Sea between Vietnam, the Philippines and China, as well as concerns over the impact of anti-Chinese protests and martial law in Thailand.

U.N. Security Council meet

- ♦ The U.N. Security Council recently met in emergency session amid growing violence in eastern Ukraine, with Western powers and Russia blaming each other for the deepening crisis.
- ♦ Russia called the meeting hours after Ukrainian special forces exchanged gunfire with a pro-Russia militia in an eastern city, and at least one security officer was killed and five others wounded. Ukraine's president accused its powerful neighbour of fomenting unrest, and announced that it would deploy armed forces to quash an increasingly bold pro-Russian insurgency.
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- ◆ More than 4,000 climbers have scaled Everest’s summit since it was first climbed by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay Sherpa in 1953. The route they took is the one hit by the avalanche. Nearly 250 people have died on the mountain.
- ◆ Everest is on the border between Nepal

and the Chinese region of Tibet and can be climbed from both sides.

- ◆ Nepal's Tourism Ministry has issued permits to 334 foreign climbers to scale Mount Everest this season, up from 328 the whole of last year. Nepal plans to cut fees to climb the mountain despite concern about overcrowding.

Bill That Bars Iran's Envoy

- ◆ President Obama signed a bill into law recently that would prohibit anyone who has engaged in espionage or terrorism against the United States from obtaining a visa to enter the country as a representative to the United Nations.
- ◆ Congress passed the bill last week after Iran named Hamid Aboutalebi as its ambassador to the United Nations; Mr. Aboutalebi was an interpreter for the militant student group that stormed the American Embassy in Tehran in 1979 and held Americans hostage for 444 days.
- ◆ Iran has insisted that the United States has no right to dictate whom it may choose to represent it. Mr. Obama said the Constitution gave him exclusive discretion to receive or reject ambassadors, and if a case arose where the law would interfere with his exercising that discretion, he would treat it as advisory.

Maritime Silk Road

- ◆ China has for the first time released details of its recently announced "maritime Silk Road" plan, announcing that the Indian Ocean-focused initiative will prioritise building ports and improving infrastructure in littoral countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.
- ◆ China is also planning to establish free trade zones in Indian Ocean countries as part of the plan — a move that will

reinforce China's deepening economic presence in the Indian Ocean Region and in India's neighbourhood.

- ◆ The maritime Silk Road plan was unveiled in October last year when President Xi Jinping travelled to Southeast Asia. Since then, Chinese officials have highlighted the initiative as a key diplomatic priority for Mr. Xi's government.
- ◆ Nations from Malaysia and Singapore to India, Sri Lanka and the Gulf countries have all been sounded out about the plan. It had, however, remained unclear what the plan would actually entail.
- ◆ The plan is expected to focus on infrastructure construction of countries along the route, including ports of Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. China is already involved in port projects in the three countries, in Gwadar, Hambantota and Chittagong.
- ◆ China hopes to "coordinate customs, quality supervision, e-commerce and other agencies to facilitate the scheme", as well as set up free trade zones.

Tussle between US and China over Hong Kong

- ◆ China has cautioned the United States not to interfere in Hong Kong affairs after Vice President Joseph Biden met two prominent pro-democracy advocates who have warned of Beijing's tightening control of the territory.
- ◆ A former British colony that reverted to Chinese rule in 1997, Hong Kong enjoys considerable autonomy and broad freedoms as a capitalist hub.
- ◆ But it has been locked in a lengthy battle with Beijing's leaders to push through reforms that could culminate in a direct election of its leader in 2017.
- ◆ Tension has grown over China's meddling in Hong Kong affairs as well as a proposal

that all candidates in the 2017 poll be vetted by a panel stacked with Beijing loyalists, which would essentially keep opposition candidates out of the running.

- ◆ China has agreed to let Hong Kong elect its next leader in 2017 in what promises to be the most extensive exercise of democracy on Chinese soil. Specific arrangements, however, have yet to be hammered out, including whether public nominations of candidates will be allowed.
- ◆ A group of pro-democracy activists has threatened to shut down the city's central business district in a campaign of civil disobedience called "Occupy Central", should Beijing bar a fully democratic poll in line with international norms.

Sanctions against Palestinians

- ◆ Israeli and Palestinian officials held fresh US-mediated talks, but the crisis-hit peace process was dealt a new blow as Israel unveiled sanctions against the Palestinians.
- ◆ Israel, which collects about \$80 million (Dh408 million) in taxes on behalf of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) — two-thirds of its revenues — has decided to freeze the transfer of that money.
- ◆ Israel was also suspending its participation with the Palestinians in developing a gasfield off the Gaza Strip and putting a cap on Palestinian deposits in its banks, the Israeli official said, asking not to be named.
- ◆ Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erekat lashed out at the move, calling it an act of "Israeli hijacking and the theft of the Palestinian people's money.
- ◆ Washington remains in "intensive negotiations" with both sides.
- ◆ The talks hit a new impasse last week after Israel refused to release a final batch of

Palestinian prisoners and the Palestinians retaliated by seeking accession to several international treaties.

- ◆ The Israelis have repeatedly asked Barack Obama and previous US presidents to release Pollard, sentenced to life in 1987 for passing US secrets on Arab and Pakistani weapons to Israel.
- ◆ Psaki revealed that Indyk would return to Washington this week for consultations with Kerry and the White House.
- ◆ The Palestinians responded by abandoning their own commitment not to seek international recognition until the nine months of talks ended, applying for accession to 15 treaties.

Pakistan Protection bill

- ◆ The Nawaz Sharif Government managed to get the Protection of Pakistan (Amendment) Bill passed in the National Assembly, but the Opposition parties, which tore up the bill in the House are determined to take the fight to the Supreme Court.
- ◆ The controversial law which started off as an ordinance, was referred to the Standing Committee on Interior and Narcotics which debated the bill and approved it while proposing some amendments.
- ◆ The bill, which is expected to give more powers to the security forces to tackle terrorism and powers to search and arrest apart from preventive detention of up to 90 days and excluding the public from proceedings of the special court.
- ◆ The ordinance, which was notified in January, was not approved by the Senate and the bill too is going to run into difficulties in the Upper House.
- ◆ The ordinance is not very different from the bill, and members of the Opposition feared that Pakistan could be turned into

a police state using this law and its stringent provisions would be misused. While there are no two opinions about the need to tackle terrorism, there are provisions in the existing law which could be efficiently implemented, some felt.

NATO and the Ukrainian Crisis

- ◆ Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula has placed the spotlight on NATO. Russia's military incursion into Ukraine was a wake-up call for the 28-member western alliance.
- ◆ Since the end of the Cold War, the western alliance has been trying to redefine its mission.
- ◆ Poland and Romania are NATO members that border Ukraine on the west. Russia has amassed thousands of troops on its border on the other side of Ukraine, prompting some western experts to say an incursion into Eastern Ukraine is likely.
- ◆ As a result of Russia's military intervention in Crimea, NATO has suspended all civilian and military cooperation with Moscow. NATO officials say they will review their relationship with Moscow in view of Russia's actions.

China-backed Boao Forum

- ◆ Ratan Tata, the doyen of Indian industry, was recently inducted as a member of the Board of Boao Forum for Asia (BFA), a rare distinction for an Indian in the Chinese government-backed influential body.
- ◆ This is the first time a senior Indian business leader was accorded the distinction. It is also a recognition for Tatas as a global conglomerate, he said.
- ◆ The 15-member Board of BFA included former Japanese prime minister Yasuo Fukuda, former Malaysian prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badwai, former

Singapore prime minister Goh Chok Tong and former prime minister of France Jean—Pierre Raffarin besides former US Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson.

- ◆ BFA was formed in 2001 on the lines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.
- ◆ Every year top world's political and business leaders gather at Boao to brainstorm on global political and economic issues.
- ◆ The Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce (FICCI) is an ordinary member of the forum.

172,000 H1B visa petitions

- ◆ The US, which received more than 172,000 applications for the H-1B visas, has conducted a computerised draw of lots to determine who all would be given the most sought after work visas that are highly popular among IT professionals from countries like India.
- ◆ The US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) conducted the computerised draw of lots to select the Congressionally mandated 65,000 applicants, who would receive the H-1B visas.
- ◆ The USCIS, in a statement, said it also conducted draw of lots for Congressional mandated 20,000 H-1B petitions filed under the advanced degree exemption.
- ◆ The USCIS conducted the selection process for the advanced degree exemption first.
- ◆ All advanced degree petitions not selected then became part of the random selection process for the 65,000 limit.
- ◆ However, the USCIS will continue to accept and process petitions that are otherwise exempt from the cap.
- ◆ Petitions filed on behalf of current H-1B workers who have been counted

previously against the cap will not be counted towards the congressionally mandated fiscal 2015 H-1B cap

Emergency rule lifted in Tunisia

- ◆ Tunisia's president has lifted a state of emergency in force since the 2011 uprising that ousted dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, despite a string of recent jihadist attacks.
- ◆ The country has been rocked by sporadic violence since the January 2011 revolution, which ignited the Arab Spring across North Africa and the Middle East.
- ◆ The end to the state of emergency however "does not limit the capacity of the security services to implement the law and does not preclude any request for military support should it be needed,"
- ◆ Emergency rule amounted to "a restriction of rights, freedoms, the movement of people and goods" as Tunisia's political crisis was ending and security conditions improving.
- ◆ Much of the deadly violence witnessed in Tunisia since the uprising has been blamed on Ansar al-Sharia, a hardline Islamist movement accused of having links to Al-Qaeda.

NATO airstrike

- ◆ The recent NATO airstrike in Afghanistan's central Logar province killed 5 Afghan National Army soldiers and wounded another 17.
- ◆ If it turns out that a NATO strike killed ANA troops, it is likely to set Afghan President Hamid Karzai on another attack against U.S. and NATO soldiers in his country. The President has been deeply critical of civilian deaths by international forces.

Protest in Libyan parliament

- ◆ Dozens of Libyans stormed the building of the parliament in the capital Tripoli in protest against the extension of its mandate..
- ◆ Earlier in the day, anti-parliament activists had blocked roads to the parliament to protest an attack by Congress' supporters on protesting campers outside the building.
- ◆ The Congress, Libya's highest authority, has recently extended by one year its mandate, which was originally due to expire in February.
- ◆ Libya has in recent weeks seen mass protests against the parliament and the interim government due to a lack of security in the country.

BIMSTEC summit

- ◆ Prime Minister Manmohan Singh arrived in Myanmar to attend the BIMSTEC Summit, making a strong pitch for giving a fillip to India's Look East policy and explore ways to enhance connectivity, transport, trade, tourism and other linkages to all the northeastern states.
- ◆ Dr. Singh, who is travelling to Myanmar after a gap of nearly two years to attend the two-day summit, is accompanied by National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon.
- ◆ BIMSTEC is an expression of India's Look East Policy of the 1990s, coinciding with Thailand's Look West Policy.
- ◆ The seven members — India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Bhutan and Nepal — bring together over 20 per cent of the world population, which is about 1.5 billion, and a GDP of over USD 2.5 trillion.
- ◆ The Summit is expected to discuss steps to bolster cooperation in counter-

terrorism. India has led negotiations and finalised the BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters.

- ♦ India also wishes to see BIMSTEC promote economic and energy cooperation, encourage cultural links and strengthen security contacts.

International Women's Day

- ♦ Google is celebrating International Women's Day with a homepage doodle featuring footage of women from around the world including the education rights campaigner Malala Yousafzai and the British businesswoman and charity worker, Camila Batmanghelidjh.
- ♦ The search engine's creative team put together the doodle, which features 27 female chromosomes and a video package with the faces of more than 100 women as well as a musical soundtrack from the Belgian-Congolese vocal group Zap Mama. Others who make an appearance include the President of Lithuania, Dalia Grybauskaitė.
- ♦ The doodle was designed by Google with the intention of providing "a glimpse" of what some women across the world are doing and to focus in a positive way on their lives.
- ♦ International Women's Day has been observed since in the early 1900s, a time of turbulence in the industrialized world that saw booming population growth and the rise of radical ideologies. The first National Woman's Day (NWD) in the US was observed across the United States on 28 February, 1909.

Election in North Korea

- ♦ North Korean state media reported that nearly all registered voters had cast their ballots to elect members of the Supreme People's Assembly for the first time since

Kim Jong Un took leadership of the authoritarian regime after his father's death two years ago.

- ♦ The Assembly is nominally the highest legislative power, but in practice only meets once or twice a year to rubber-stamp policies drawn up by the Workers' Party.
- ♦ At the previous election in 2009, 99.98 per cent of voters turned out, to vote 100-per cent unanimously for their respective designated candidates.
- ♦ One candidate was present in each constituency, leaving voters only the choice between voting "yes" or "no," but observers of the isolated, communist regime were watching the designation of candidates for signs of change.
- ♦ A shake-up of the top officials is thought to be under way in the reclusive country in the wake of the execution of Kim's uncle and former mentor Jang Song Thaek in December.

Crash of Malaysia Airlines plane

- ♦ A Beijing-bound Malaysian Airlines plane that went missing with 239 people on board, including five Indians, crashed into the sea off Vietnam's southern Phu Quoc Island.
- ♦ The plane disappeared in the night somewhere over South China Sea while enroute to Beijing from Kuala Lumpur.
- ♦ Those on board include 152 Chinese, 38 Malaysians, 5 Indians, 7 Indonesians, 6 Australians, 3 French, 4 including an infant from the US, 2 New Zealanders, 2 Ukrainians, 2 Canadians, 1 each from Russia, Italy, Taiwan, Netherlands and Austria.
- ♦ Malaysia Airlines is currently working with the authorities who have activated their Search and Rescue team to locate the aircraft.

Death sentence for 529 Muslim Brotherhood members.

- ◆ A court in southern Egyptian convicted 529 supporters of ousted president Mohamed Morsy, sentencing them to death on charges of murdering a policeman and attacking police.
- ◆ Those convicted are part of a group of 545 defendants on trial for the killing of a police officer, attempted killing of two others, attacking a police station and other acts of violence.
- ◆ More than 150 suspects stood trial, the others were tried in absentia. Sixteen were acquitted.
- ◆ The defendants were arrested after violent demonstrations that were a backlash for the police crackdown in August on pro-Morsy sit-ins in Cairo that killed hundreds of people.

Syrian warplane shot down by Syria

- ◆ Turkish armed forces shot down a Syrian military jet which had violated its airspace. An F-16 fighter jet, which was on duty in the region, fired against the Syrian MIG-23 warplane due to rules of engagement.
- ◆ When two Syrian MIG-23 warplanes approached, the Turkish air forces warned them four times that they have approached 10 sea miles to the Turkish border.
- ◆ The incident reportedly took place in the northern border region, near an area where Syrian rebels and government forces are fighting for control of a border crossing.
- ◆ Hundreds of thousands have fled Syria for Turkey to escape the three-year uprising against President Assad.

Flight MH370 crashed in Indian Ocean

- ◆ Malaysia announced that MH370 jetliner had crashed into the Indian Ocean and naturally it was greeted with hysteria by relatives of those on board.
- ◆ Citing groundbreaking satellite-data analysis by the British company Inmarsat, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak said that Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370, which vanished more than a fortnight ago while flying to Beijing from Kuala Lumpur, had crashed thousands of miles away in the southern Indian Ocean.
- ◆ His statement may go some way toward tamping down some of the more fevered speculation about the plane's fate, including one theory some grief-stricken relatives had seized on: that the plane had been hijacked and forced to land somewhere.

All 239 people on board were presumed dead.

- ◆ That announcement opened the way for what could be one of the most costly and challenging air crash investigations in history.
- ◆ The Inmarsat data showed the Boeing 777's last position was in the Indian Ocean west of Perth, Australia.
- ◆ In a further sign the search was bearing fruit, the US Navy was flying in its high-tech black box detector to the area.
- ◆ The so-called black boxes — the cockpit voice recorder and flight data recorder — record what happens on board planes during flight. At crash sites, finding the black boxes soon is crucial because the locator beacons they carry fade out after 30 days.

Two missiles test-fired by North Korea

- ◆ North Korea test-fired two missiles into

- the sea, prompting condemnation from South Korea, Japan and the United States.
- ◆ It was the latest of several such launches, as South Korean, Japanese and US leaders criticised North Korea's nuclear weapons programme at a meeting in the Netherlands.
 - ◆ The missiles were fired from north of Pyongyang and flew around 650 kilometres before falling into the waters east of the Korean Peninsula.
 - ◆ The United States said the latest launches of No-Dong type missiles, as well as those of Scud missiles on March 3 and February 27, violated UN Security Council resolutions that established missile moratoriums for Pyongyang.

Pakistan -Taliban talks

- ◆ Government negotiators flew down to the North Waziristan tribal region to hold the first-ever direct talks with the Pakistani Taliban to end the deadly cycle of violence that has claimed over 40,000 lives.
- ◆ The government's team was accompanied by the nominated negotiators from the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).
- ◆ The much-anticipated direct talks would be attended by all four members of the government's reconfigured negotiating committee, TTP intermediaries and members of the Taliban 'Shura'.
- ◆ The new committee consists of former ambassador Rustam Shah Mohmand, Additional Chief Secretary, FATA, Arbab Arif, Secretary Ports and Shipping, Habibullah Khattak and Additional Secretary to Prime Minister, Fawad Hasan Fawad.
- ◆ The Taliban's intermediaries are Maulana Samiul Haq — head of his own faction of the Jamiat Ulema Islam (Sami group), Jamaat-e-Islami's Ibrahim Khan, and JUI-S spokesperson Maulana Yousaf Shah.

- ◆ The committee will also seek extension of the month-long ceasefire announced by the TTP.
- ◆ The talks struck an impasse last month after a faction of the banned militant group killed 23 kidnapped Pakistani paramilitary soldiers, resulting in multiple targeted airstrikes by the military against militant hideouts in the tribal region of the northwest.

49 per cent of Syria's chemicals scheduled for destruction

- ◆ The world's chemical weapons watchdog says more than 49 per cent of the raw materials for Syria's poison gas and nerve agent program scheduled for destruction have been shipped overseas, with the rest expected to leave by the end of April.
- ◆ The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) said in a report, that the total percentage of chemicals either removed or already destroyed inside Syria is 53.6 per cent.
- ◆ The report said Syria pledges to remove all chemicals by April 13, except for those in areas "that are presently inaccessible," which face an April 27 deadline.
- ◆ The international community, shocked by a chemical attack in August that killed hundreds near Damascus, aims to remove and destroy 1,300 metric tons of chemicals by June 30.

New Guinness world record by Bangladesh

- ◆ Creating a new Guinness world record, over two-and-half lakh Bangladeshis performed a chorus of their national anthem at the national parade ground here to mark the country's 43rd Independence Day.
- ◆ The erstwhile East Pakistan witnessed a historic moment after 2,54,681 persons

gathered at the venue to chant “Amar shonar Bongla, ami tume balobashi... (My golden Bengal, I love you)” — penned and tuned by poet Rabindranath Tagore — which inspired the nation during the liberation war against Pakistan in 1971.

- ◆ The venue bore a sea of humanity draped in national colours, red and green clothes and badges, during the much-publicised ceremony attended by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the Speaker of Parliament, Ministers, MPs, armed forces officials and foreign diplomats.
- ◆ The previous record for largest chorus to sing a national anthem at a single venue was held by Sahara India Pariwar, which organised 1,21,653 people to sing the Indian anthem in unison.

Russia not to intervene in Ukraine

- ◆ Russia has ruled out intervening militarily in mainland Ukraine even as it sought to shift into higher gear diplomatic efforts to resolve the worst post-Cold War crisis.
- ◆ Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said Moscow has “absolutely no intention” of moving its forces into Ukraine, in what is the most categorical refutation to date of alarmist Western reports of imminent Russian “invasion.”
- ◆ Russia, for its part, has set forth its vision for resolving the Ukraine crisis.
- ◆ In Moscow’s view, presidential elections in Ukraine, now scheduled for May 25, should be postponed and held only after the new Constitution has been approved in a national referendum.

Border crossing with Gaza re-opened by Egypt

- ◆ Egypt has partially reopened its border crossing with the Hamas—ruled Gaza Strip after closing it for almost two months.
- ◆ The Hamas—run Interior Ministry said on its website that Egypt partly opened

the Rafah crossing, the Palestinian enclave’s only window to the outside world, in both directions for three days.

- ◆ The travel is limited to patients, students, and holders of foreign passports.
- ◆ Up to 10,000 Palestinians have applied to exit through Rafah, the ministry said.
- ◆ Around 150 to 300 people can leave Gaza each day through the crossing.
- ◆ Since the closure, Egypt has partly reopened it three times to allow the travel of Palestinian pilgrims to Saudi Arabia.
- ◆ The crossing has been repeatedly closed since the Egyptian military overthrew Islamist president Mohammed Morsi in July.
- ◆ Ties between Hamas, an offshoot of Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood, and Egypt’s military—backed government have since worsened.
- ◆ In December, Egypt designated the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.

Provincial council polls in Sri-Lanka

- ◆ Sri Lankans went to polls to elect representatives to provincial councils, which in a way might be a form of referendum on a resolution against Sri Lanka adopted at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva.
- ◆ Elections for the western and southern provincial councils got underway with both the government and the opposition confident of coming out on top.
- ◆ The government is confident of winning the elections and says it will use the results to tell the international community that the public have opposed international intervention in Sri Lanka.
- ◆ The government rejected the resolution adopted by the U.N. Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva which called for an international investigation

- ♦ in Sri Lanka over alleged civil war crimes.
- ♦ Meanwhile, the main opposition is seeking a mandate to push for early presidential and general elections to remove the Mahinda Rajapaksa government.
- ♦ The incumbent government has won successive elections following the end of the civil war in 2009, except elections in the Tamil-dominated north of the country held last year.

Black box of crashed C-130J sent to U.S.

- ♦ The black box of the C-130J transport aircraft that crashed near Gwalior has suffered damage and the Air Force has sent it to the U.S. to seek the assistance of its manufacturer Lockheed Martin in decoding the data.
- ♦ The connectors of the Flight Data Recorder or the black box are damaged along with the card inside the Cockpit Voice Recorder (CVR).
- ♦ The delay in decoding the black box data would also mean a delay in determining the cause of the crash.
- ♦ The Super Hercules Special Operations transport aircraft crashed near Gwalior killing five crew members last after taking off from Agra.
- ♦ The aircraft had apparently hit a hillock before crashing on the rocky surface on the banks of Chambal river near Gwalior.
- ♦ India had recently inducted six C-130J Super Hercules aircraft, which were bought from the U.S. at a cost of around Rs. 5,780 crore (\$962 million) four years ago.
- ♦ The home base of the 77 squadron 'Veiled Vipers' operating the aircraft is Hindon in Ghaziabad near New Delhi.
- ♦ On the demands of the IAF, the Defence Ministry recently placed orders for six more such aircraft from the U.S.

- ♦ The loss of such a big asset is considered a setback for the IAF.

World Poetry Day

- ♦ The head of Unesco (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) marked World Poetry Day by extolling the virtues of one of the highest forms of linguistic and cultural expression and calling for support to those who give it life.
- ♦ Unesco proclaimed March 21 as World Poetry Day in 1999, with the aim of supporting linguistic diversity through poetic expression and offering endangered languages the opportunity to be heard.

Coalition in Maldives

- ♦ Maldives President Abdulla Yameen's party, with the help of its coalition partners, has attained majority in parliament in elections that was held recently.
- ♦ Vote counting gave the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), led by former president Mohammad Nasheed, who was controversially ousted from power in 2012, a slim lead initially but it was soon overtaken by Yameen's Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM).

Biggest tunnel in Gaza

- ♦ The Israeli military has uncovered another tunnel the biggest so far dug from the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, stretching into Israel and intended for militant attacks or abducting soldiers and civilians.
- ♦ The tunnel was found by Israeli intelligence and the military. The structure was lined with concrete and describing it as very sophisticated, resembling a subway tunnel.

- ◆ In 2013, Israel announced finding three such tunnels, including one that was over a kilometer and a half (mile) long and 18 meters (yards) deep.
- ◆ Last week, Gaza militants fired the heaviest rocket barrage at Israeli communities since 2012, and Israel responded with air strike on militant targets.
- ◆ Earlier this month, Israeli special forces captured a ship in the Red Sea carrying rockets and other weapons that Israel said were supplied by Iran and destined for militants in Gaza.
- ◆ Of the 85 constituencies, 34 seats were won by PPM while its coalition partners Jumhoory Party (JP) bagged 15 seats and the Maldives Development Alliance (MDA) five seats. Nasheed's MDP secured only 24 seats and lost its majority in parliament.
- ◆ water resources .
- ◆ The award was announced by the United Nations Office during an official ceremony to mark World Water Day 2014.
- ◆ The prize is awarded yearly for "best water management practices" and "best participatory, communication, awareness-raising and education practices".
- ◆ This year's "best water management practices" went to the International Water Management Institute (IWMI)-Tata Water Policy Programme, a project based on water scarce across India.
- ◆ Singapore-based "NEWater programme", which can meet 30 per cent of Singapore's daily water needs, won the "best participatory, communication, awareness-raising and education practices" for its strong social component and enduring partnerships in its manifold and remarkable water management practices.

Myanmar's anti-dam march

- ◆ Recently, dozens of protesters went on a 2,400-km march to northern Myanmar, calling for the cancellation of a Chinese-backed hydroelectric dam project over environmental concerns.
- ◆ The \$3.6 billion dam along the Irrawaddy River, which was supposed to export 90 per cent of its power to China, was suspended in 2011.
- ◆ Waving banners were called for permanent cancellation of the Myitsone dam, in a suburb of the main city of Yangon.
- ◆ It is a disturbing fact that the vast majority of Burmese do not have access to electricity.

UN Water for Life award, 2014

- ◆ India and Singapore won the 2014 edition of the UN-"Water for Life" Best Practices Award for their sustainable practices of

Thailand general election

- ◆ Thailand's Constitutional Court annulled the February 2 general election for failing to hold nationwide voting in every constituency on the same day.
- ◆ The court's judges voted 6 to 3 to void the election, which was boycotted by the opposition Democrat Party and could not be held in 28 of 375 constituencies nationwide.
- ◆ No balloting was held in 28 constituencies, all of them in southern provinces that are the traditional power base of the Democrat Party, because no candidates had been registered amid anti-government protests.
- ◆ The ruling Pheu Thai party effectively ran unchallenged for the other seats because of a boycott by the opposition, which accused the government of corruption and vote-buying.

Accession pact signed

- ♦ Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a treaty on Crimea's accession to Russia after delivering a defiant speech defending his move and blasting the West for pursuing "containment" of Russia and flouting international law.
- ♦ The treaty was also signed by the Crimean leaders who attended a special joint session of the Russian Parliament in the Kremlin. Mr. Putin said he was confident the Russian Parliament would ratify the pact.
- ♦ Western accusations that Russia had invaded Crimea was denied. Russian "reinforcements" were in line with a treaty with Ukraine that allows Russia to have up to 25,000 troops at its Black Sea Fleet base in Crimea. Mr. Putin dismissed concerns that Russia could seize other regions in Ukraine.

Emergency in Thailand to end

- ♦ Thailand will lift a nearly two-month-old state of emergency in Bangkok and surrounding areas following an easing of political protests in the capital.
- ♦ The emergency decree will be replaced by another special law, the Internal Security Act, until April 30.

UK's military presence in Afghanistan reduced

- ♦ The United Kingdom has reduced its military presence in Afghanistan to just two bases in Helmand province, handing over the rest to Afghan control.
- ♦ The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), of which Britain is a member, has committed to withdrawing all combat forces in Afghanistan by December this year.
- ♦ From 137 UK bases, there now remains

Camp Bastion, which is the main base for UK personnel, and Observation Post Sterga 2. The majority of the former UK bases are now in the hands of the Afghan National Security Forces.

- ♦ Britain has always maintained that the reason for its military presence in Afghanistan is to keep the UK free from terrorism, although the two main terrorist attacks on British soil – the July 2005 bombings of the London underground, and the killing of soldier Lee Rigby – took place after its Afghanistan intervention.

Israel opens border crossing with Gaza

- ♦ Israel opened a border crossing with Gaza to allow the transfer of gas, after the coastal salient's only power plant shut down for one day due to lack of fuel.
- ♦ Israel closed its border crossings with the Gaza Strip some time back after the Palestinian group Islamic Jihad launched a massive barrage of rockets from the Strip into Israel.
- ♦ Israel agreed to allow the entry of 500,000 litres of diesel and gasoline for the private sector, 160,000 tons of cooking gas, and 200,000 litres of diesel for the power plant.
- ♦ Since Egypt shut down nearly all smuggling tunnels under its border with Gaza, the enclave is all but entirely dependent on deliveries from Israel, financed by the Palestinian Authority.

Sri Lanka seeks help from NAM

- ♦ Sri Lanka has sought the support of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) nations to ward off the U.S. sponsored rights resolution against it at the next U.N. Human Rights Council meet in Geneva.
- ♦ The UNHRC is to vote a U.S. sponsored resolution on Sri Lanka which is widely expected to advocate an international probe into alleged war crimes in the

country during the final phase of military battle with the LTTE which ended in 2009.

- ◆ Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa's human rights envoy Mahinda Samarasinghe had urged the NAM nations in the 47-member U.N. Human Rights Council to stand in solidarity with the island.
- ◆ At least 33 in the 47 member UNHRC are either NAM members or nations with observer states.
- ◆ India was a leading NAM member who had voted in favour of the U.S. resolutions in 2012 and 2013 against Sri Lanka.

Worst online spies

- ◆ US' National Security Agency, India's Centre for Development of Telematics, and the UK's GCHQ have been named among the worst online spies by a non-profit group for implementing censorship and surveillance.
- ◆ Three of the government bodies designated by Reporters Without Borders as 'Enemies of the Internet' are located in democracies that have traditionally claimed to respect fundamental freedoms.
- ◆ Besides these, the report names several government bodies from other countries. These include Pakistan's Telecommunication Authority, North Korea's Central Scientific and Technological Information Agency, Vietnam's Ministry of Information and Communications and China's State Internet Information Office.

Reconnaissance Aircraft

- ◆ NATO is going to deploy reconnaissance planes in Poland and Romania to monitor the Ukrainian crisis, shortly after the U.S. announced that it was sending fighter jets to the same region in a show of support for its allies.

- ◆ The flights, carried out by E-3 Airborne Warning and Control System, or AWACS aircraft, "will enhance the alliance's situation awareness and all will take place solely over alliance territory."
- ◆ Poland invoked Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which entitles any NATO member the right to consultation with allied military officials if it feels threatened. As a result, NATO has doubled its air presence in the region, deploying six F-15 fighter jets to the Baltic states, while U.S. and Polish military officials are finalizing plans for a ramped up joint-training exercise between their air forces.

Global trade to increase

- ◆ Global trade is expected to increase by 4.7 per cent in 2014, better than the average of 2.2 per cent in the past two years, on the back of projected improvements in the developed economies, according to the World Trade Organisation (WTO).
- ◆ The world trade growth is projected to accelerate to 5.3 per cent in 2015.
- ◆ Although the 2014 forecast of 4.7 per cent is more than double the 2.1 per cent increase of last year, it remains below the 20-year average of 5.3 per cent. For the past two years, growth has averaged only 2.2 per cent.
- ◆ The sluggish pace of trade growth in 2013 was due to a combination of flat import demand in developed economies (0.2 per cent) and moderate import growth in developing economies (4.4 per cent).
- ◆ On the export side, both developed and developing economies only managed to record small, positive increases (1.5 per cent for developed economies and 3.3 per cent for developing economies).
- ◆ In 2013, the dollar value of world merchandise exports rose 2.1 per cent to \$18.8 trillion, while the value of world commercial services exports rose 5.5 per

cent to \$4.6 trillion.

- ◆ The trade forecast for 2014 is premised on an assumption of 3 percent growth in world GDP growth at market exchange rates, while the forecast for 2015 assumes output growth of 3.1 percent.

March Inflation at 5.7 per cent

- ◆ Snapping the declining trend, the inflation rose to a three month high of 5.7 per cent in March mainly due to spurt in prices of food items like potato, onion and fruits.
- ◆ The inflation in the food items, based on the wholesale price index (WPI), shot up by 9.9 per cent in March as against 8.12 per cent in the previous month.
- ◆ The overall WPI inflation, which was on decline since December, had dropped to a nine-month low of 4.68 per cent in February.
- ◆ The government further said the build up of inflation rate in the 2013—14 financial year was 5.70 compared to a build up rate of 5.65 per cent in the earlier fiscal.
- ◆ The data further revealed that prices of sugar, pulses, cereals, cement and minerals eased in March compared to the previous month.
- ◆ Inflation in the fuel and power category (LPG, petrol and diesel) rose to 11.22 per cent versus 8.75 per cent in February.

Pact between Green Trend and BMB

- ◆ Trends in Vogue, Cavinkare's arm that manages unisex hair salon network Green Trends, and Bharatiya Mahila Bank (BMB) have entered into a pact that seeks to make the entrepreneurial plunge easier for women.
- ◆ Budding women entrepreneurs who take up a franchisee of Green Trends (GT) can get two-thirds of their total investment (Rs.40-50 lakh) financed by BMB without any collateral.
- ◆ Collateral security is the key in getting

loans from banks for entrepreneurs. This agreement will help all prospective franchisees, especially women, across the country to get collateral-free loans.

- ◆ The company helps franchisees choose right location, get good realty deal and select right vendors for supplying equipment and systems. It has lined up a string of vendors who could do the works in salons at a competitive rate than others.

El- Nino and it's impact on Indian economy

- ◆ Recently, private forecaster Skymet predicted a sub-normal monsoon in India, courtesy El Nino that's threatening a widespread devastation globally. Given the fears of an imminent drought, the next government has a tall task ahead of it
- ◆ The Skymet CEO feels an equitable distribution of rains can be a silver lining in this situation. According to him, there is a 40% chance that rainfall in June-September would be less than average, a 25% chance of a drought and zero percent chance of excess rains.
- ◆ The impact of El Nino need not be source of concern for staples. Its impact on food prices is expected to be minimal as India has sufficient stock of cereals. Most fruits track 30% import duty, if that is brought down, it can be controlled too.
- ◆ Staple inflation is never a problem, but soaring prices of fruits, vegetables, pulses, fruits etc are.
- ◆ By June-July the monsoon effects will begin to feed into the households and market.
- ◆ Statistically India has faced drought every 4.4 years. All El Nino years were not necessarily drought years, though the opposite is true. Since last drought in India was in 2009, this year can be a drought year. There is a consensus among

the experts that if the next government manages to keep the lid on fiscal deficit, and if RBI governor Raghuram Rajan keeps his promise on rates, India may avert El-Nino devastations.

IFFCO's urea plant in Canada

- ◆ Leading fertiliser cooperative IFFCO said that its subsidiary received permission from the provincial government of Quebec to set up a \$ 1.6 billion urea plant.
- ◆ The proposed facility will have a production capacity of up to 1.6 million tonnes of urea and 7,60,000 tonnes of diesel diesel exhaust fluid (DEF).
- ◆ The estimated project cost of \$ 1.6 billion is based on the most recent feasibility study.
- ◆ La Coop fr an agri-food organisation in Quebec that is one of the project shareholders, has agreed to purchase some 5,00,000 tonnes of urea a year for distribution across the province, Canada and several US states.
- ◆ In January 2013, IFFCO's Canadian subsidiary acquired the land for the plant. The site is at Bncour Port and Industrial Park, which provides access via land, rail and water to markets across North America.
- ◆ The deep-water port will also facilitate exports, especially to markets in Europe.

Quebec province, Canada's largest, is located in the east-central region of the country.

Universal numbers by EPFO

- ◆ Retirement fund body EPFO will provide permanent or universal account numbers (UAN) on the pattern of core banking services to its over five crore active subscribers by October 15 this year.
- ◆ Under core banking services, a customer can avail the bank services in any of its branch through his allotted unique account number.
- ◆ The UAN will facilitate subscribers in avoiding filing of PF transfer claims on changing jobs.
- ◆ UAN will be allotted to the present active members by October 15, 2014 and thereafter the coverage of other members will be taken up.
- ◆ After getting UAN, a subscriber would not be issued new PF account number on joining new firm. It is expected to provide great relief to those workers in organised sector who frequently change jobs, particularly, in construction sector.
- ◆ The UAN would be one account number which would be allotted to a subscriber for various schemes run by the EPFO for his entire service period with different employers.



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