

Myanmar to free prisoners

YANGON - Myanmar announced a mass prisoner amnesty on Tuesday, raising hope for the imminent release of hundreds of political detainees in what would be a major sign of change in the authoritarian state.

More than 6,300 prisoners will be pardoned from Wednesday "on humanitarian grounds", state television announced, without saying whether political prisoners would be among them.

The fate of the country's estimated 2,000 political detainees, who include pro-democracy campaigners, journalists, monks and lawyers, has long been a top demand of Western nations that have imposed sanctions on Myanmar.

The announcement came just hours after a government-appointed human rights panel called for a pardon for the country's "prisoners of conscience".

The National Human Rights Commission said freeing detainees "who do not pose a threat to the stability of state" would allow them to participate in "nation-building", according to an official English-language newspaper.

It noted that UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and foreign governments were

calling for "the release of what is referred to as 'prisoners of conscience'," in a rare official acknowledgement of their existence.

On Monday a government official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that political prisoners were expected to be freed within days.

Their release would be arguably the clearest sign yet of change under a new leadership that has reached out to critics including opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, freed in November after seven straight years of detention.

President Thein Sein, a former general and senior junta figure, has surprised critics by signalling a series of political reforms since taking power following a controversial election last November.

He has been applauded by international observers for holding direct talks with Suu Kyi, whose National League for Democracy on Monday said it was "expecting" all political detainees to be released.

A top US official, Kurt Campbell, on Monday hailed recent developments in Myanmar, including what he described as "very consequential dialogue" between Suu Kyi and the leadership.

Putin arrives in China after \$7 bln deals signed

BEIJING - Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin arrived in Beijing on Tuesday for talks with Chinese leaders, a day after his gas-rich nation signed deals worth over \$7 billion with the world's top energy consumer.

Putin is due to meet his Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabao and President Hu Jintao on his two-day visit - his first abroad since he announced plans last month to reclaim the Russian presidency.

China's foreign ministry said on Tuesday the two countries had already signed 16 economic and trade agreements worth more than \$7 billion "in the fields of technology transfer, research and development and mineral development".

It gave no further details of the deals, which were signed at a summit Monday, held ahead of Putin's visit.

Observers say the Russian prime minister may lay out his foreign policy priorities for years to come during the trip.

Putin has paid frequent visits to China - where he is very well known - in his capacities as president and then prime minister since he took power in 1999.

Russia is the world's largest energy producer and its plans to pump gas to China are expected to top discussions, although Chinese state media played down the prospect of any breakthrough on a long-delayed deal.

WORLD NEWS

FRESH OIL SPILLS IN N.Z.'S WORST SEA POLLUTION DISASTER

TAURANGA, New Zealand - New Zealand on Tuesday declared its worst maritime pollution disaster, as oil gushed into a pristine bay from a stranded container ship which was being pounded in heavy seas.

The crippled container vessel Rena, which hit a reef off the North Island coast last Wednesday, leaked up to 350 tonnes of heavy fuel after being further damaged in the storm, dwarfing an initial spill, maritime authorities said.

"I'd like to acknowledge this event has come to a stage where it is New Zealand's most significant maritime environmental disaster," Environment Minister Nick Smith told reporters at Tauranga.

UKRAINE JAILS TYMOSHENKO FOR SEVEN YEARS

KIEV - A Ukrainian judge on Tuesday sentenced former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko to seven years in jail for abusing her powers in a 2009 gas deal with Russia, a verdict that is set to harm ties with the European Union.

Amid emotional scenes in the packed court, judge Rodion Kireyev said the 10 year contract for gas imports from Russia had sustained heavy losses for Ukraine and ruled that her actions were criminal.

NOBEL WINNER SEEKS RE-ELECTION IN LIBERIA

MONROVIA - Liberians lined up outside polling stations on Tuesday to vote as incumbent president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf sought a second term only days after jointly winning the Nobel Peace Prize.

United Nations peacekeepers and police deployed in numbers around polling stations in the capital Monrovia and elsewhere as hundreds queued up under light rain to vote in presidential, senatorial and legislative elections.

Around 1.8 million people are eligible to vote in only the second election since the end of a 14-year civil war and seen as a litmus test of the west African nation's fragile democracy.

UN humanitarian chief to hold food talks in N.Korea

UNITED NATIONS - UN humanitarian chief Valerie Amos was headed for China ahead of a visit to North Korea, stricken by a new food crisis, as the UN presses Pyongyang to give aid agencies more freedom.

Amos will have talks with government officials in China this week, before going on next Monday to meet ministers in the isolated North where the UN estimates that a third of children aged under five are malnourished.

North Korea puts severe restrictions on the movement of foreigners, however, and the United Nations became so frustrated that it would only send aid to areas where it could get access.

"Those living in counties which remain off limits to humanitarian agencies, therefore, do not receive assistance," UN leader Ban Ki-moon said in a report last month on human rights in the North.

Amnesty urges Indonesia to probe 'deadly force' at mine

JAKARTA - Rights group Amnesty International on Tuesday urged Indonesia to investigate the use of "deadly force" by police who shot dead one protester and injured six others at a mining protest.

Indonesian security forces opened fire on Monday on workers striking over wages at a mine run by US company Freeport McMoRan in remote Papua province, Amnesty said in a statement.

Mine worker Petrus Ayemseba died after being shot in the buttocks and six others were injured in the shooting, it added.

Rumsfeld urges Taiwan to make known defence needs

TAIPEI - Former US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld insisted on Tuesday that further United States arms sales to Taiwan were needed as China continued with its ambitious military modernisation plans.

Rumsfeld, who considers himself "a longtime friend of Taiwan", urged the island to keep seeking weapons from the US, and said it should not be upset by Washington refusing to sell it advanced fighters.

In a speech organised by a non-profit think tank in Taipei, Rumsfeld said: "As Taiwan identified further requirements and those needs are assessed as legitimate and reasonable in light of China's military posture, Taiwan has the responsibility to continue to make known its requests for responsible consideration."

SARAH PALIN VISITS SOUTH KOREA, TAKES AIM AT ELITES

SEOUL - Former Alaska governor Sarah Palin took aim on Tuesday at the political elite in the United States, Europe and China, as she brought her criticisms of big government and "crony capitalism" to South Korea.

Days after announcing she would not run for president in 2012, Palin said there "will be a woman president of the United States of America, and I look forward to that day", but did not elaborate on why she did not enter the race.

The 2008 vice-presidential candidate told supporters last week she could help the Republican cause more by working to elect others.

In a wide-ranging speech to a forum in Seoul, the conservative commentator accused China of seeking to use its military influence in regional disputes and said she looked forward to the ousting of North Korea's regime.

Syria must move faster to implement reforms: China

BEIJING - China urged Syria on Tuesday to move faster to implement reforms, a week after Beijing infuriated the West by blocking a UN resolution against President Bashar al-Assad's deadly crackdown on protests.

It is the first time that China has veered away from its longstanding policy of non-interference in the affairs of Syria, which has been rocked by anti-government protests and violence since earlier this year.

"We believe the Syrian government should move faster to honour its reform pledges and swiftly start to push forward the inclusive political process with the broad participation of all parties in Syria," foreign ministry spokesman Liu Weimin told reporters.

Myanmar seeks to ease Beijing worries over dam

BEIJING - Myanmar's foreign minister held talks on Monday with Chinese leaders to try to ease Beijing's concerns over the halting of a \$3.6 billion Chinese-backed mega dam project, state media and an official said.

Myanmar last month ordered work on the Myitstone Dam on the Irrawaddy River to stop - triggering a rare public rebuke from China, its second-largest trading partner and biggest foreign investor.

Wunna Maung Lwin told Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping in Beijing that Myanmar "cherishes friendly relations with China" and attaches "great importance" to its concerns over the hydropower project, state media said.

Hong Kong Apple tribute designer denies plagiarism

HONG KONG - A Hong Kong design student whose sombre tribute to Steve Jobs became an overnight Internet sensation denied on Tuesday that he had copied another artist's work.

Jonathan Mak's design, which featured the late Apple founder's silhouette incorporated into the bite of a white Apple logo on a black background, went viral online after Jobs died at the age of 56 last week.

But the 19-year-old student has been forced to fend off allegations of plagiarism after web users pointed out that a similar logo was first created by a UK-based designer, known as Raid71 online.

"I did my best to ensure that the idea hadn't been done before by searching for terms such as 'Apple, Steve Jobs, logo, silhouette' before I came out with the design," the second-year student said.

Korean pop star Rain reports for military service

SEOUL - South Korean pop star Rain entered a boot camp on Tuesday to begin mandatory military service, bidding farewell to weeping fans.

"Thank you for coming... I'll see you later," he said, beaming and bowing to about 1,000 people including journalists and fans outside the camp in the northern suburbs of Seoul.

Many fans, including hundreds from Japan, Taiwan, China and elsewhere in Asia, burst into tears when the singer disappeared into the camp, Yonhap news agency reported.

Rain, 29, whose real name is Jung Ji-Hoon, is one of the country's most popular male celebrities and helped spark the Korean Wave of pop culture in Asia and elsewhere.

Japanese scientist unveils 'thinking' robot

TOKYO - Robots that learn from experience and can solve novel problems - just like humans - sound like science fiction. But a Japanese researcher is working on making them science fact, with machines that can teach themselves to perform tasks they have not been programmed to do, using objects they have never seen before.

In a world first, Osamu Hasegawa, associate professor at the Tokyo Institute of Technology, has developed a system that allows robots to look around their environment and do research on the Internet, enabling them to "think" how best to solve a problem.

ASIAN STOCK INDICES

	TueCl s	PvsCl s
Tokyo Ni kkei 225	8773. 68	8605. 62
Hong Kong HangSeng	18141. 59	17711. 06
Sydney AFJ Ords	4288. 83	4262. 29
Bangkok SET	944. 80	923. 17
Jakarta JSX Comp	3531. 75	3451. 08
Kuala L Composite	1411. 65	1397. 04
Manila PSE	4109. 27	4040. 58
Seoul KOSPI	1795. 02	1766. 44
Shanghai Composite	2348. 52	2344. 79
Shenzhen Composite	992. 31	997. 84
Spo re Straits T	2693. 05	2668. 30
Taipei Weigthed	7398. 71	7211. 96

SPORTS RESULTS

World Cup - Qualification

Second stage

Group A

Chi na	- Iraq	0-1 (0-1)
Si ngapore	- Jordan	0-3 (0-1)

Group B

South Korea	-Arab Emi rates	2-1 (0-0)
-------------	-----------------	-----------

Group C

Japan	- Taj i ki stan	8-0 (4-0)
North Korea	- Uzbeki stan	0-1 (0-1)

Group D

Australia	- Oman	3-0 (1-0)
Thai land	- Saudi Arabi a	0-0 (0-0)

Group E

Indonesi a	- Qatar	2-3 (2-2)
------------	---------	-----------

"Most existing robots are good at processing and performing the tasks they are pre-programmed to do, but they know little about the 'real world' where we humans live," he said. "So our project is an attempt to build a bridge between robots and that real world," he said.

China's thirst for blockbusters worries filmmakers

BUSAN - The growing power of China's cinema industry is on show at Asia's top film festival, but some filmmakers worry that a thirst for blockbusters is hurting quality and creativity.

"It's a big population and a big market and a lot of opportunity to increase that market," independent Chinese filmmaker Wang Xiaoshuai said on the sidelines of the 16th Busan International Film Festival (BIFF).

"The problem is that people are doing the one type of film - the big budget, commercial type of film - and there is not much left for the rest of us." China has a major presence at the festival with 14 films in the main programme, studios strongly represented at the concurrent Asian Film Market and Chinese directors and acting talent out in force.

Myanmar film in running for movie award

BUSAN - A movie shot secretly in Myanmar is in the running for a major award at Asia's top film festival this week with its director saying he wanted to portray the "real" state of life in the country.

"It is about the truth of Burma," said Myanmar-born director Midi Z of his first full-length feature, 'Return To Burma'. "It is reality cinema."

The film is among 13 wildly diverse productions from 12 countries vying for two New Currents awards at the BIFF, open to first or second-time Asian filmmakers and carrying prizes of US\$30,000.

SPORTS NEWS

Japan hammer Tajikistan 8-0

OSAKA - Asian champions Japan roared back to form with an 8-0 thrashing of Tajikistan in World Cup qualifying on Tuesday as they eased frustrations after a run of poor results.

Four goals in each half from the Blue Samurai put the hapless Tajiks to the sword and boosted coach Alberto Zaccheroni's of early progression to Asia's final qualifying stage.

Japan's lop-sided victory at Osaka Nagai Stadium followed last week's unimpressive 1-0 friendly win against Vietnam and their 1-1 draw in Uzbekistan last month.

Nadal tight-lipped over player action

SHANGHAI - Rafael Nadal refused to be drawn on Tuesday over any potential meeting between players in Shanghai this week to discuss the punishing demands of the tennis schedule.

America's Andy Roddick said Monday that Shanghai Masters no-shows from Novak Djokovic and Roger Federer were stark evidence of the toll put on players by heavy playing commitments.

It followed comments from Britain's Andy Murray last month that he had held several talks with other players at the US Open and they would be discussing the issue in Shanghai.

"There is something there, but is not the right moment to talk about it, especially when nothing clear is done," Nadal said.

PLASTIC FANTASTIC FOR FILIPINO SUPERMAN FAN

MANILA - A Philippine man obsessed with Superman has gone under the knife in a bizarre attempt to transform himself into his comic book hero, a report said on Monday.

Herbert Chavez, 35, has had plastic surgery repeatedly over the past 16 years to get Superman's famous cleft chin and defined nose, according to ABS-CBN television. He also had silicone injections for fuller lips, and thigh implants to achieve a more muscular look, the report said.

"I decided to look like Superman because since I was a kid, I want to be like him, and I know that having a look like Superman will make me happy and contented as long as I don't hurt anyone," a Chavez said in a message posted on Facebook on Monday.

Chavez wrote that while he did not have special Superman-like powers, he hoped to inspire people by showing them that they could achieve what they wanted in life through hard work.

Gymnastics: China slip in world men's qualifying

TOKYO - World and Olympic men's team gymnastics champions China dropped to a surprise third place in qualifying at the world gymnastics championships in Tokyo on Monday as hosts Japan took first place.

Japan - who have not won a world team gold in 33 years - came top with 364.291 points, ahead of the United States on 361.583 and China, who performed on Monday, back on 359.126.

China's squad, studded with world and Olympic apparatus champions, insisted they would come out on top in the team finals on Wednesday.

F1: Ferrari boss ready to welcome Vettel

ROME - Ferrari team principal Stefano Domenicali said Tuesday the Italian Formula One stable could welcome newly-crowned two-time world champion Sebastian Vettel from 2014.

Domenicali said that Vettel, whose contract with Red Bull runs until 2014, could easily work alongside current number one driver Fernando Alonso, 30, the world champion in 2005 and 2006.

 WEATHER

Tuesday, October 11, 2011		
	Min	Max
Bangkok	25	32
Beijing	14	22
Hanoi	24	32
Hong Kong	25	29
Jakarta	25	33
Kuala Lumpur	25	30
Manila	25	32
Seoul	9	22
Taipei	24	29
Tokyo	19	25

"Would Alonso accept Vettel? I think yes, I think it could work," Domenicali told the Gazzetta dello sport. "Fernando's strength is that he's afraid of noone, a strength that comes from maturity."

 FINANCIAL NEWS

China bank shares surge on Beijing stake buys

SHANGHAI - Shares in Chinese banks surged Tuesday after a government investment arm bought stakes in the country's major lenders in a move analysts said was aimed at shoring up support for the flagging market.

Central Huijin Investment, the domestic arm of China's \$300 billion sovereign wealth fund, said in a statement it had bought stock in the four largest state-run banks on Monday as the Shanghai index sank to a 30-month low.

Huijin, already a shareholder, bought around 64.55 million shares combined in the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, China Construction Bank, Bank of China and Agricultural Bank of China, the banks said in statements.

China currency bill set to clear US Senate

WASHINGTON - Defying Chinese anger and White House warnings, the US Senate was set on Tuesday to approve legislation to punish China for alleged currency manipulation widely blamed for costing American jobs.

The proposal, powered by a tide of US voter frustration at a sour economy and high unemployment ahead of November 2012 elections, envisions retaliatory duties on Chinese exports if the yuan's value is unfairly "misaligned."

The Democratic-held Senate was due to approve the measure after 5:30pm, shifting the spotlight to the Republican-led House of Representatives, where Speaker John Boehner has condemned the "dangerous" bill.

ASIAN STOCKS UP AHEAD OF EU BAILOUT VOTE

BANGKOK - Asian stocks surged on Tuesday but shares in Europe hit a snag as hopes that the continent is ready to resolve its sovereign debt crisis once and for all began to fade.

Oil prices hovered below \$85 a barrel while the dollar strengthened against the euro but slipped against the yen.

Asian shares ended the day high, boosted by a pledge by European leaders over the weekend to protect the region's banks from the debt crisis - and by Beijing's move to buy shares of major Chinese lenders.

Japan's Nikkei rose 2 per cent to close at 8,773.68. Hong Kong's Hang Seng shot up 2.4 per cent to 18,141.59. South Korea's Kospi rose 1.6 per cent to 1,795.02, and Australia's S&P-ASX 200 added 0.6 per cent to 4,227.60.

China's Shanghai Composite Index rose 0.2 per cent to 2,348.52, a day after a government investment fund announced it had bought shares in major banks, helping to bolster the country's sagging stock market.

Japan's Azumi to press EU on debt fears at G20

TOKYO - Japan's finance minister said on Tuesday he would press Europe to take action to deal with the continent's debt crisis at this week's meeting of finance officials from the Group of 20 nations.

"A more stable situation in Europe would stop the yen's uptrend and lead to stable growth in the Japanese economy," Jun Azumi said at a news conference. Azumi will attend the G20 meeting later this week in Paris.

Azumi welcomed a pledge made French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel during the weekend to find a solid plan to address the eurozone crisis.

But Azumi added: "Primarily, I would like Europe to talk about what scheme, including an increase in fund injections, it is going to go ahead with."

Thailand tallies rising cost of nationwide floods

BANGKOK - Thailand is counting the multibillion dollar cost of nationwide flooding that has killed nearly 270 people and may yet cause more havoc as waters threaten to engulf the country's capital.

Headland Media produces the market-leading Headland SatNews service, incorporating the News On-Board and HotelNewspapers brands. The service covers 30 countries in more than 12 languages and is delivered daily by e-mail or via satellite.
Tel: +44 151 236 4124 (UK)
and +1 954 492 2292 (US)
E-mail: news@headlandmedia.com
Website: www.headlandmedia.com

Bank of Thailand Governor Prasarn Trairatvorakul said a preliminary estimate by the central bank shows economic losses from flooding that began in late July range from baht 60 billion to baht 80 billion.

That figure doesn't include damages to assets or reconstruction costs and is expected to rise as the flood waters surge toward Bangkok, a city of about 10 million people. Some of its outlying areas are already under water.

Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and Bangkok officials pleaded on Tuesday with the city's residents not to panic as workers raced to complete three critical flood walls with only one or two days to go before the already swollen river that winds through the capital bursts its banks.

Singapore Airlines budget arm 'to launch in April'

SINGAPORE - Singapore Airlines (SIA) plans to launch its long-haul budget carrier in April with inflight Internet access among the attractions, a report said on Tuesday.

SIA had no immediate comment on the details of the Straits Times story, which said the unit could be called Scoot Airlines.

The newspaper said the airline will start off with just one Boeing 777-200 before increasing its fleet to four aircraft within three months and 14 planes by mid-2016.

The firm is expected to serve destinations in Europe, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, it added.

Japan August current account surplus falls 64.3%

TOKYO - Japan's current account surplus shrank 64.3 per cent year-on-year in August, the sixth straight monthly fall as higher energy import costs overshadowed a small gain in exports, data showed on Tuesday.

Higher oil prices and utilities' boosting of liquefied natural gas imports to compensate for the shutdown of the majority of Japan's atomic reactors after the March Fukushima crisis helped push Japan's trade balance into a deficit.