

"Discovering International Relations and Contemporary Global Issues"

Cultural Relations Policy

News and Background

March 2016





About CRP News & Background

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As an initiative of ICRP, the content of this magazine is written and edited by student authors. The project, as part of the Institute's Internship Programme provides the opportunity to strengthen professional skills.



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Bombings in Brussels' airport and metro station

On the 22nd of March 2016, twin blasts happened in Zaventem airport Brussels around 07:00 GMT. Another explosion also happened in Maelbeek metro station one hour later that day. In total, around 32 people died at the airport and around 19 people were killed at the metro station while many are injured due to the explosions. In total, 340 people were injured and 57 people remained at the hospital for intensive care.



People gathering, chalk drawings and flowers for the victims. Photo: Miguel Discart [Flickr]

The explosions were believed to be organised by Islamic State (IS) militants. Three people were captured on CCTV camera at the Zaventem airport who then became the suspects of the explosions. The acts were believed to involve suicide bombers. A suspect witnessed that people who panicked and fled after the first bomb were caught up with the second bomb.

There was a third bomb but it failed to explode after it was detonated by security services.

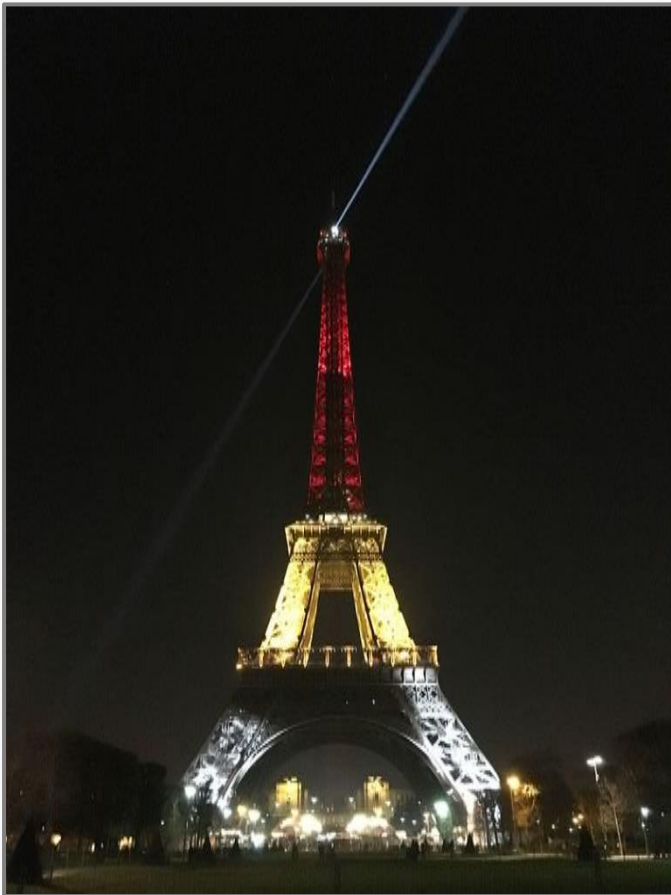
Right after the explosions, people were evacuated to a safe sports hall nearby which later became the reception hall for the confused and scared people who were at the airport when the explosions happened. The airport was closed for few days and Belgium raised its security amidst the incidents.

The explosion at Maelbeek metro station happened in the middle carriage of a three-carriage train while it was moving away from the platform. The location was very close to the European Union institutions, such as the Council of European Union and the European Commission Headquarter.

In light of the Brussels incidents, European countries had raised their security at the airports and stations. Local and international travels to and from Brussels had been suspended or disrupted. The planned flights to and from Brussels were cancelled. The trains going to and from Brussels were also suspended due to the security measures. The United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Hungary, and many other countries had increased their



security at the airports to prevent, or at least to be able to control, the incidents to happen there.



*Eiffel tower illuminated in colors of Belgian flag in memory of the victims of March 2016 Brussels attacks.
Photo: LectriceDuSoir [Wikimedia Commons]*

In related to the incidents, Belgian police have arrested Mohamed Abrini, the key remaining suspect in November's Paris attacks. Sources cited in reports that the suspect was seen on CCTV camera at Zaventem airport before the explosions.

Authorities also confirmed that several arrests have been conducted in related to the Brussels attacks, but they did not give further details. Nine people have been arrested in Belgium and two in Germany as they were believed to have connection to the attacks in Brussels and Paris.

European security experts had been braced for other attacks for months after the arrest of one of the suspects of Paris attacks, Salah Abdeslam. However, it was quite shocking on how the terrorist network functions and how it responded so quickly and with such devastating effect. It shows how much advanced the planning was in terms of logistics, explosives, weapons and people willing to carry out such attacks on civilian targets.

The priority of European countries now is to ensure that anyone else who poses an imminent threat to the public is apprehended as soon as possible. However, there are still huge gaps in intelligence, and Brussels is seen as a soft target. French President Francois Hollande argued that Europe in longevity will need to respond as calm, lucid and determined as possible to such threats. The attacks in Brussels have raised a question on how European countries will work together to deal with IS militants in Europe.

“it was quite shocking on how the terrorist network functions and how it responded so quickly and with such devastating effect”



Referendum over EU membership: a British exit?

“Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?” This is the question proposed for the referendum that is going to take place on Thursday 23rd of June 2016 in Britain. People from Britain, Ireland and Commonwealth citizens over 18 years old who are resident in the UK, along with UK nationals living abroad, who have been on electoral register in the UK in the past 15 years have to decide between “Remain a member of the European Union” or “Leave the European Union”. That is the so-called “Brexit”, thus a shorthand way to mean a possible British exit from the EU.

David Cameron, the UK Prime Minister, wanted to renegotiate the terms of the UK's membership and he tried to get a “new deal for Britain”. He has asked in terms of sovereignty, competitiveness, migration and protection from the Eurozone. First, he wants more power to Parliaments in order not to be directly subjected to Brussels legislation and to avoid the idea of a closer union. Second, he demands to develop and make larger the single market including banking and insurance, areas in which UK is traditionally really strong. Additionally, he requests that Britain will not be disadvantaged because



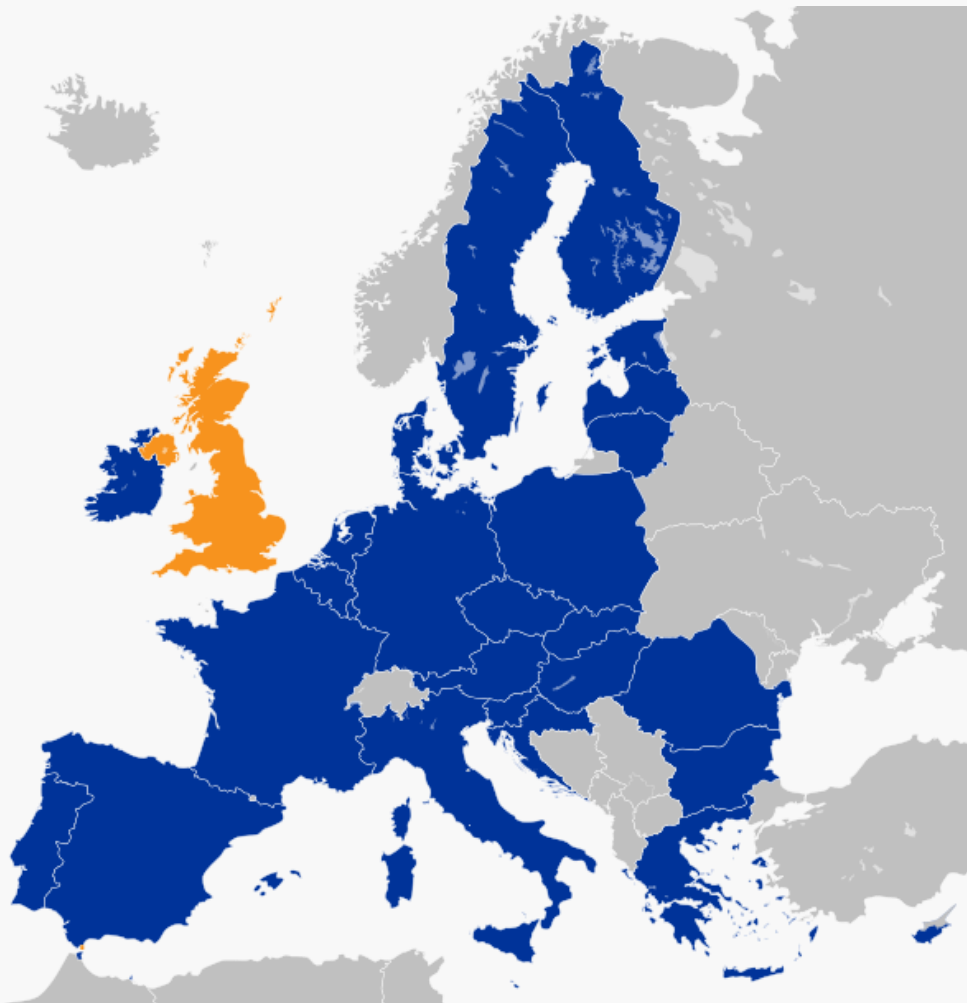
EU referendum "remain" poster in Belfast. Photo: geograph.org.uk

it is not part of Eurozone members and he wishes to have recognised explicitly the idea that euro is not the only currency of the European Union in order not to have imposed further financial union on non-eurozone members. Finally, in terms of migration, UK wants to stop paying for new immigrants, according to the so-called emergency brake. Some countries are objecting their requests as for example Belgium wants more Europe and integration and it does not like the idea of less closer union for the future. France and Germany also do not like the idea of Britain veto power because it could cause disadvantages for their financial centres.



Michael Gove, Britain's justice secretary, has illustrated his position in favour of Brexit. He thinks that their membership of the EU precludes them to be able to make huge changes and to decide who makes crucial decisions for all UK's people. He continues also that Euro has created poorest countries, a failure. However, Mr Cameron thinks that they should remain in the EU, because UK "is out of the things we don't want to be in" as euro, borders agreement, full access to single market, out of ever-

closer union. He adds that if Britain chooses to leave, there will be 7 years of uncertainty and thus, no certainties of success in terms of business and jobs for the future. Economic consequences will of course take place as damaged confidence and investments. Anyway the key question is if Britain will be better in or out. It depends on which way Britain is going to follow later. Leaving EU is going to be huge step but it will imply a condemnation or freedom for the nation.



EU-Turkey deal comes into force

After a lot of trouble on finding a solution to handle the migration crisis in Europe, the EU has struck a deal with Turkey to maintain the incoming refugees crossing the Aegean sea by sending back refugees who are crossing to Greece to Turkey. In the deal, Turkey will receive money for handling the refugees, Turkish citizens will be able to travel in Schengen area without visa, and also the talks on Turkey's accession will be "re-energised". The refugees who are sent back will, ideally, be processed through the official asylum system which still needs a lot of improvement. This deal will also apply to the refugees whose asylum request is rejected. If their requests are accepted, the relocation to other EU countries will be processed. That is the ideal concept of this deal.

However, the EU-Turkey deal has been receiving a lot of criticism from aid organisations and human rights organisations. One of the criticisms says that this deal is inhumane for the refugees. They are questioning how the deal would work in practice since the Greek's asylum process still needs a major improvement on assessing refugees. It will give uncertainty of

the refugees' future within the asylum and relocation process. There is no guarantee that the vulnerable life of refugees will be protected. It has also been criticised due to the possibility of Turkey's accession process to be re-energised while there are still human rights issues in the country. International organisations highlight the deal as a failure of EU to respect its values and refugee convention. Action Aid organisation predicts the relocation of refugees to another refugee camps on Greek islands will not help, instead the islands will turn into prison camps for refugees before they are deported back to Turkey.

The one-for-one deal: for every Syrian refugee that EU sends back across the Aegean Sea, a Syrian in Turkey will be given a new home in Europe. But instead of preparing a cap of 108,000 places a year as recommended by international aid agencies, EU has only 72,000 places which is far too low from the expectations. However, EU officials are confident that the plan to relocate 6,000 refugees per month will work out well despite the imperfect mechanism of asylum process.



Greece begins moving hundreds of refugees stranded at port to other towns

The condition of the refugees in Greece is not yet affected even though the deal with EU and Turkey has come into force. Greek officials have been working on moving hundreds of refugees from across Greece to a port in Athens, in which they have to live in a filthy condition. Nearly 6,000 refugees, mostly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, have been stuck in a port of Piraeus, which is located within 12 km of Athens, and the condition has gotten worse as there are tensions over food and phone chargers. The 6,000 refugees are only a part of total 51,000 refugees stuck in Greece after the neighbouring countries closed their borders. The Greek officials are trying to move the refugees to the port town of Kyllini which is located 280 km away from Athens where they will be housed in a tourist complex. Despite the housing facility the Greek officials are offering, most of the refugees are afraid to move into a new place when there is a chance of the borders to be opened again anytime. On the other hand, German Chancellor Angela Merkel tries to convince the refugees, especially the ones who are currently staying in Idomeni, a town next to the Macedonian border, to trust the Greek government and to move to the designated place.



Syrian and Iraqi immigrants getting off a boat from Turkey on the Greek island of Lesbos. Photo: Ggia [Wikimedia Commons]



Bomb attack in Turkey

For the fifth time since October Ankara was again the theatre of a bomb attack, but another bomb has rocked one of Turkey's two biggest cities. Turkey has been on high alert after suffering a string of deadly terrorist attacks on its soil. More than 200 people have died in five major bombings since July of last year. Istanbul and Ankara have recorded in recent months around 200 deaths with hundreds more injured.

On 19 March 2016, Istanbul became a theatre of explosion when a bomb blast happened at the local district governor's office on Istiklal street in Taksim where more than 37 people lost their lives; Istiklal street is one of Istanbul's main shopping streets and a favourite tourist place. It killed three Israelis, one Iranian and injured 36 others in which 12 are foreigners; six Israelis, two Irish and the four others were from Germany, Iceland, Iran and Dubai. Two of the Israeli citizens who died also had US citizenship reported by Mehmet Muezzinoglu, the health minister.

On 20 March Mehmet Ozturk, born in 1992 in the southern city of Gaziantep was identified by Efan Ala, the Turkish Interior Minister as a suicide bomber. Ala argued Ozturk had links with jihadist ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Levant) group.



*Demirören AVM on Istiklal Avenue, near which the bombing took place.
Photo: CeeGee [Wikimedia Commons]*

CNN Turk reported that the bomb went off early and the attacker had wanted to hit a different target. Unable to reach his target, the suicide bomber exploded himself on the pedestrian boulevard line in front of different international stores and restaurants. The radical Islamist attack on tourist groups was the second in Istanbul since the one in January.

In January, another tourist attraction area in Istanbul was bombed and 10 German tourist have been killed. On 13 March Ankara was attacked by two suicide bombers which killed 35 civilians and injured more than 125, the attack was claimed by the militant Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK).



After the bombing, Germany decided to close its embassy and its schools in Istanbul. These attacks have affected Turkey's relations with many countries – especially those countries whose citizens fell victims to the attacks.

After the attacks, in Istanbul, for security reasons many roads were highly secured, and TV footage showed streets and areas that were usually crowded nearly deserted. A football derby game between Galatasaray and Fenerbahce was also postponed. Also in Ankara, main roads were secured

and streets that are usually crowded on Sundays became empty with rare cars driving and fewer pedestrians.

Jens Stoltenberg, NATO's Secretary General argued that the attack was "yet another terrorist outrage targeting innocent civilians and our ally Turkey."

Ahmet Davutoglu Turkish prime minister denounced the attack as "inhumane" and declared that his country would continue its struggle against terrorism. He went on to say that "No centre of terrorism will reach its aim with such monstrous attacks."

“the radical Islamist attack on tourist groups was the second in Istanbul since the one in January”



Syria: an overview of the March events

The United Nations delayed the round of Syria peace talks by two days to allow the cessation of hostilities in force since 27 of February to take hold. International observers have acknowledged violations of the agreement intended to halt nearly five years of fighting while reporting that the level of violence has decreased considerably. The opposition in turn says the Syrian government has breached the fragile truce by repeatedly attacking its positions, which the government denies. The cessation of hostilities agreement, drawn up by the United States and Russia, is seen by the UN as an opportunity to revive peace talks which collapsed before they had even started a month ago in Geneva. It also hopes the truce will allow humanitarian aid to be sent into besieged areas where many Syrians are living in dire conditions.

On 15 March, Lavrov and Kerry reaffirmed the importance of coordination, chiefly military, between Moscow and Washington to strengthen the truce.

Syria's Ambassador to the UN in Geneva, Hussam Aala, said his government was cooperating over aid deliveries, including to rebel-led areas. The agreement does not

include Islamic State or the Nusra Front, and Assad and his Russian backers have made clear they intend to keep attacking them.

On 24 March, Syrian government forces fought their way into Palmyra as the army backed by Russian air cover sought to recapture the historic city from Islamic State (IS) insurgents, Syrian state TV said.



*Two destroyed Syrian Army tanks in Azaz, August 2012.
Photo: Christian Triebert [Flickr]*

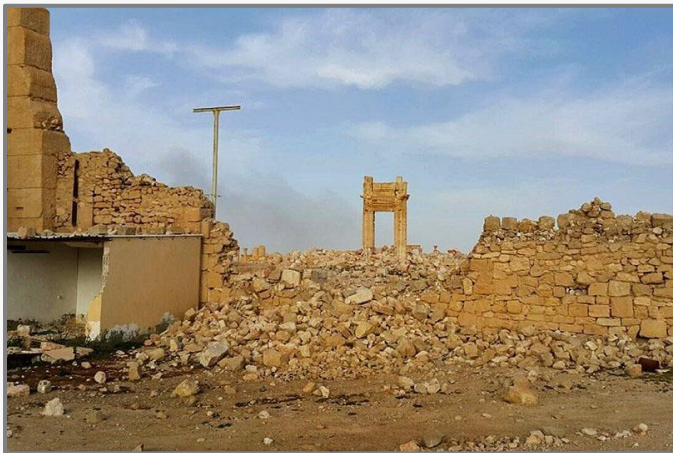
The Islamic State has blown up ancient temples and tombs since capturing Palmyra, something the UN cultural agency UNESCO has called a war crime. The city, located at a crossroads in central Syria, is surrounded mostly by desert. The area is also rich in oil. The capture of Palmyra and advances further eastwards into Deir al-Zor



would mark the most significant Syrian government gain against Islamic State since the start of Russia's military intervention last September.

At the end of March Russia and the US are working to liberate the Islamic State stronghold of Raqqa. The tone of the Putin-Kerry meeting was warm enough to suggest that Putin believed America had come to recognise the legitimacy of the Russian position in Syria, and closer coordination between the two countries was likely.

Russia and the US have slowly been working more closely in the wake of the



Palmyra after Islamic State's defeat by Russia–Syria–Iran–Iraq coalition and freedom.
Photo: Jawad Shaar [[tasnimnews](#)]

partial Russian withdrawal of its aircraft from Syria, including the agreement to press President Bashar al-Assad to hold talks with the opposition about a political transition once peace talks recommence after 9 April in Geneva.

Assad seemed to hold out against the formation of a transitional governing body with full executive powers, even though this is proposed as part of the UN roadmap and is the key demand of the opposition. Assad said a preliminary draft version of the constitution could be drawn-soon, but added the country would only adopt a new constitution after a public vote. He said the conflict had cost his country \$200bn.

Syria's crisis erupted five years ago with protests against Assad which were put down with force. It descended into a civil war which has killed more than 250,000, drawn in global military powers and helped Islamic State establish its self-declared caliphate. Nearly five million refugees have been driven abroad.

“the Islamic State has blown up ancient temples and tombs since capturing Palmyra, something the UN cultural agency UNESCO has called a war crime”



Suicide attack in Baghdad

A suicide bomber has blown himself up at a football stadium south of the Iraqi capital, killing at least 30 people and injuring 95 others. The blast in Iskandariya happened in the early evening on Friday 25th at the end of an amateur football game, Falah al-Khafaji, the head of security for Babel province, said.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) – which controls large areas of the country's north and west – later claimed responsibility for the attack.

Mobile phone footage widely shared by Iraqis on social media showed players in football kits gathering to collect trophies and footballs as at least one child stood nearby.

One man throws a new football to the crowd, before the camera shakes violently and the footage ends, at what witnesses said was the moment a bomber in the crowd detonated an explosives belt. The mayor, Ahmed Shaker, was among the dead.

An apparent escalation of large bombings in areas outside ISIL's control suggests that Iraqi government forces may be stretched thin after recent gains against the group in the western and northern provinces. "What ISIL is trying to do is to restart the sectarian war that boiled over in Iraq several years ago and they are doing that by attacking

Shia targets - ordinary people or market places - in the hope that there will be retaliation." Al Jazeera said.

Separately, thousands of people rallied in Baghdad in support of influential Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who has taken the lead in protests demanding government reform. An associate of al-Sadr, Sheik Asad al-Nasiri, delivered a message from the cleric at the rally in the capital, giving Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi 24 hours to implement wide-ranging reforms. The weekly rallies in Baghdad are meant to put pressure on Iraq's political leadership.

The prime minister's efforts to implement reform have been thwarted by his own political mis-steps as well as increasingly sectarian politics.

Last month, Abadi said he wanted to replace ministers with technocrats to challenge a system of patronage that critics say encourages corruption by distributing posts along political, ethnic and sectarian lines.

Sadr and his supporters have held regular demonstrations demanding the government tackle corruption, which is eating into Baghdad's resources even as it struggles with falling revenues due to a slump in global oil prices and the high financial cost of fighting ISIL.



Easter Sunday attacks kill 72 people in Lahore

At least 72 people were killed after an attack in Lahore, Pakistan on Easter Sunday. A three day mourning period was immediately launched after the large scale suicide bombing sought to victimise Pakistan's Christian minority. The attack aimed to target families celebrating Easter in the park this resulted in the majority of victims consisting of women and children. Regardless of their intentions, the attackers killed people of both Muslim and Christian faith in this cruel attack. A breakaway Taliban faction, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, claimed responsibility for the events. The group has previously declared public support for the so called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

The first suicide bomber detonated the explosives beside children's rides in the Gulshan-i-Iqbal park in Allama Iqbal Town. Aftab Gil, the uncle of a young boy killed in the attacks, speaking at his funeral claimed that "the government of Punjab had no security arrangements for the parks or even today here in this church". Many Christians, who are one of the most economically disadvantaged group, had chosen to go to the park partly due to the attraction of inexpensive fun.

There are heightened concerns over the protection of the Christian minority. Christians make up approximately 2% of Pakistan's population and have been the target of such brutal violence before. In December 2014, 130 school children were massacred in the city of Peshawar. Regardless of faith, many Pakistani citizens feel that they cannot be adequately pro-

tected by the government. Many citizens argue that there is a distinct lack of systematic protection for Christians, especially during times of holy celebration.

Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, who also claimed responsibility for the bombing of a Christian Church in the same area of Lahore in 2015, have declared that they intend to repeat such attacks.

A spokesperson for Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, Ahsanullah Ahsan, reported that the suicide bomber intentionally chose to targeted the Christian community whilst they were celebrating Easter. Ahsan also claimed that the attack was in protest against Pakistan's military operations in tribal regions. However, in the aftermath of the attacks Pakistan's army conducted large scale raids and arrests across Punjab. The military seemed to adopt a leading role in the operation indicating a decline in resistance against use of Rangers, a paramilitary wing of the army. More recently, it has been declared that amidst the counter-terror offensive more than 5,000 people were questioned. In addition, a significant amount of weapons and ammunition has been seized by forces.

The people of Lahore have faced an unimaginable level of pain and grief this Easter. Of the 72 killed, 28 were children. The chief minister of Punjab assured that families of the dead will receive a payment of 1 million rupees (just over 13,000 euros) in an attempt to compensate their grief.

A pastor who oversaw the burial of 6 children said "I'm not angry, I'm just full of despair".



Al-Qaeda attack in Ivory Coast

Grand Bassam is a small and sunny beach side town in the Ivory Coast. A former capital city of the historical French colony, today it is popular for its beach resorts as well as for being a UNESCO world heritage site. Grand Bassam is 40 km (or 25 miles) away from the bustling city of Abidjan, the economic capital. On Sunday the thirteenth of March, 2016 the town was suddenly written into headlines worldwide when six gunmen stormed the popular luxury hotel Etoile del sud and shot 16 people, four of them Europeans.

Eyewitnesses painted a gruesome scene, saying six gunmen dressed in covering clothing, identities concealed by balaclavas, were seen to have strolled calmly along the beach, shooting as they went. The gunmen used Kalashnikovs and grenade belts in the attack. Some claimed the shooting was random, while others say the gunmen targeted non-Muslims. They began their attack from the beach in front of Etoile del sud, and worked their way down the beach from there. It is believed the gunmen arrived at the scene by boat. Some eyewitnesses claimed the gunmen forced people to say "Allahu akbar", and to have shot those who did not. Other witnesses say they saw only four gunmen, three who walked side by side shooting everyone in their way, and a fourth, walking behind and killing any survivors. Security forces from the Ivory Coast engaged in a shootout with the gunmen.

Some news sources reported that one or two of the gunmen died and the others escaped. The Guardian contradictorily wrote that the government of the Ivory Coast says that all the attackers were killed. The North African branch of Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attack. This comes as part of a series of attacks in West Africa directed against luxury hotels and places of tourism. Most newspapers are reporting it as the third attack since November in West Africa. The attack against the Radisson Blue hotel in the capital city of Bamako, Mali killed 20. January saw an attack in Burkina Faso's capital of Ouagadougou at the popular Cappuccino cafe which killed 30. The attacks are the work of Al-Qaeda and al-Mourabitoun. These two groups are historically rivals, but they have recently joined forces in the area of West Africa.

Experts believe the attacks were aimed at intimidating the French, as the French have a historically large presence in the region. French troops are also stationed nearby in support of the Sahel 5, which is a coordinated effort of several African countries against terrorism. Many governments and experts also warn that this is unlikely to be the last attack of its kind. The growth of terrorism in the region combined with lax security and porous borders has governments warning caution for foreigners, particularly westerners, in the region.



Double suicide bombing in Nigerian mosque

22 people have been killed and an additional 18 have been injured as a result of two suicide bomb attacks which occurred at a mosque near the Nigerian city of Maiduguri on 16th March. The first attacker blew herself up during morning prayer inside the mosque whilst the second waited until victims tried to flee before she detonated the explosives. The blasts happened within two minutes of each other. No immediate claim of responsibility was declared after the two women, disguised as males, conducted the attacks.

However, the area of Maiduguri has been repeatedly attacked by members of Boko Haram; the extremist Islamist group which continues to inflict terror across the country. The double suicide attack was the second time a mosque was targeted in the Molai area within the past 6 months. President Muhammadu Buhari stated “while we commiserate with the families of the victims of this dastardly act, we wish to reassure the public that we would continue to rout the remnants of the Boko Haram terrorists wherever they may be hiding.”



A picture of the Molai-Umarari mosque shortly after being attacked by two suicide bombers on the 16th March 2016.

Photo: aljazeera.com



South China Sea dispute escalated

The dispute on South China Sea border issues has not been resolved after a long period of dispute between Indonesia, China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei Darussalam, Taiwan and Malaysia. Indonesia is not a claimant in the dispute, but it is involved as an interested party since China's nine-dash line overlaps with the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) around the resource-rich Natuna Islands, a point that has long miffed Jakarta.

Recent updates on the dispute, Indonesia confiscates a Chinese boat who was caught doing illegal fishing within Indonesian territory. On that matter, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi protests Chinese Coast Guard's violation of Indonesian sovereignty to the Chinese Embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia. Indonesian lawmakers are also reiterating the needs to build a military base on Natuna to increase protection.

China has been reported on building military assets in Spratly islands. This action is seen by Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull as counterproductive. Australia has been supporting the US on "freedom of navigation" on South China Sea area. The US has accused China as raising the tension in the dispute by its action, a move China neither confirmed nor denied. On the other hand, China has repeatedly accused US on militarising the South China Sea with its

"freedom of navigation" and building military alliances with countries in the territory, for example the Philippines.

US and the Philippines are reported to have made a pact, which is released in a joint statement, that allows US military to rotate around five Philippine bases for ten years. This pact does not push for US permanent base in the region. However there is a possibility of US military to extend their rotation to other Philippine bases. This action taken by the US has been criticised by China as it seems that the US is treating Asia Pacific similar to how the US treats Middle East. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying questions the US' action as whether to maintain peace or to militarise the dispute.

Malaysian Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein is going to have a meeting with Australian Defence Minister Marisa Payne to discuss the possibility to ensure that China will not hold military assets in the disputed islands. The reports about China building a military base in Spratly islands will change the course of actions of other countries who have claims on the islands. Malaysia suggests the ASEAN countries who are involved and have claims in this dispute, which are the Philippines and Vietnam, should come together to prepare for China's actions related to the military assets placement in Spratly islands.



North Korea sentences US student to 15 years hard labour

North Korea has sentenced an American student to 15 years of hard labour following the accusation that the student removed a political poster from a hotel. The North Korean government have argued that Otto Frederick Warmbier, who had travelled to the capital Pyoungyang on a trip organised by a China based travel company, was pushed into committing such a “hostile

act” by secret organisations in his home state of Ohio. Warmbier was accused of committing crimes against the regime, the authorities presented fingerprint and CCTV evidence in court in order to prove his guilt. Warmbier gave an emotional plea urging authorities to see that he “is only human”. In addition, Warmbier claimed he wished that “the United States administration never manipulate people like myself in the future to commit crimes against foreign countries”. It is unknown whether the statement was made under duress. The 15 year long sentence comes after calls that North Korea is heavily politicising arrests. White House spokesman Josh Earnest claims that North Korea is using US citizens as “pawns to pursue a political agenda” and called for authorities to free the young man. Many observers argue that the sentence reflects the heightened tension which has amounted between the two states as a result of the North Korean nuclear test and long range rocket launch earlier this year. The US has played a pivotal role in ensuring that the UN Security Council imposes sanctions against North Korea.



A map of political prison camps in North Korea. An estimated 40% of prisoners die of malnutrition.



President Obama's visit to Cuba

US President Barack Obama made a historic trip to Cuba, being the first American President in 88 years, since Calvin Coolidge's visit in 1928. His visit symbolises the changing of relations between the two countries.



U.S. President Obama and Cuban President Castro at Estadio Latinoamericano during Obama's visit to Havana. Photo: U.S. Department of State

For decades, relations between the US and Cuba have been strained or non-existent. The countries officially cut ties in 1961 after the rise of communism in Cuba and the increased trade between Cuba and the Soviet Union. The blockade was announced by President Kennedy shortly after in 1962. The history of relations between the countries after the blockade was riddled with tensions including the Bay of Pigs incident, Soviet Missiles in Cuba, and

botched US attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro. For decades the Cuban community within the US has been pushing for the end of the blockade and renewed relations with Cuba. They were disappointed during the Bush administration, which further tightened the embargo, and pushed for a democratisation of Cuba. When Raul Castro took over the country, he stated that he would like to open relations with the US, but refused to do so until after the 2008 election, showing a serious distaste of doing business with the Bush administration.

Relations warmed during the Obama administration. He first allowed Cuban Americans to begin sending money to, and visiting their family members in Cuba. This led to a rush of travel, with more than 400,000 families traveling annually. The policy was popular even with Cuban Americans who were in favour of the embargo. Obama then made several executive orders allowing American tourists to travel to Cuba. The moves weren't one sided only, Raul Castro also softened regulations against Cubans travelling abroad without fearing a loss of their Cuban citizenship. He also created allowances for Cubans to become self-



employed, with many receiving illegal loans from family members in the US to fund their businesses.

The Obama administration began feeling even more pressure to open towards Cuba during the 2012 Americas Summit Meeting, which many members boycotted due to the continued ban on Cuba's participation. In December of 2014, Obama made a speech to the American Congress urging them to lift the embargo on Cuba, in order to fuel closer relations between the countries.

In April of 2015, Obama and Raul Castro met for the first time on the eve of the Americas Summit talks, to commence the first bilateral relations in decades.

The Obama administration's work towards renewing relations with Cuba did not stop there. In December of 2014 it was announced that Alan Gross, the journalist famously imprisoned in Cuba for "spying", would be released in a humanitarian prisoner exchange. The exchange was the work of a year's worth of back channel talks on a high level between the US and Cuba. Of the event Obama said, "Today, the United States is taking historic steps to chart a new course in our relations with Cuba and to further engage and empower the Cuban people. We are separated by 90 miles of water, but brought together through the relationships between the two million Cubans and Americans of Cuban descent that live in the United States, and the 11 million Cubans who share similar hopes for a more positive future for Cuba."

This historic move further set into motion the continuation of more normal relations between the two countries.

The latest move towards normalised relations was the visit of the Obama's to the sunny island of Cuba at the end of March, 2016. While many praise the visit as ground-breaking, and a good sign of a commitment towards renewed relations, others are sceptical. A New York Times' writer described the meeting as awkward. Fidel Castro had many bitter words to say about the visit as reported by Time magazine. He is reported to have said that Cuba, "needs no gifts from the US." Fidel Castro also seemed upset by the fact that Obama had not recognised the fact that racism and inequality in the form of salaries and retirement were ended by the revolution.

The blockade is still in place, but there is hope that as relations keep moving forward, the US government will end the embargo once and for all.



April 11, 2015 "The culmination of years of talks resulted in this handshake between the President and Cuban President Raúl Castro during the Summit of the Americas in Panama City, Panama."
Photo: Pete Souza [White House]



■ News in Brief

Domestic Affairs affecting international relations

Bulgaria angered by US embassy warning of threat to Sofia buses

■ On Wednesday March 23, the US Embassy issued a warning for US citizens to avoid a busy transport hub around Hotel Pliska in Sofia due to a potential threat to a bus line in the area. The Bulgarian government was outraged by the warning as they declared the information given out by the US Embassy to be inaccurate. The Bulgarian government claimed that the threat in question was over a love affair gone wrong, and posed no real threat to anyone in the city. They were upset by the fears the US Embassy's announcement caused as the tragedy in Brussels had occurred only two days previously. The government of Bulgaria assured the international community and residents of Sofia that they fully investigate any threats and make warnings when necessary.

Blasts and heavy gunfire in Tripoli

■ Several loud explosions followed by heavy gunfire were heard over Tripoli in the early hours on 30 March, a witness said. Unofficial sources said that a UN-backed unity government was about to travel to Tripoli from Tunisia. The self-declared government in Tripoli and some armed factions in the city oppose the unity government and have warned it not to move. Tripoli government was brought to power after armed brigades backing it won a battle for the capital in 2014. A rival government moved to eastern Libya. The unity government is the result of a December deal to heal Libya's divisions and end its armed conflict, but the new government has faced opposition from hardliners in both the East and West of the country. On the previous Sunday and Monday Tripoli's airspace was closed for periods of several hours, a move that the unity government's Presidential Council said was designed to prevent it traveling into Libya.

Bahrain punishes opponents by revoking citizenship

■ The Government in Bahrain has begun punishing its political opponents by revoking their citizenship. Under Bahraini law, the government may strip the citizenship from any individual who causes harm to the state's security. 59 year old Taimoor Karimi took part in the protests against the Bahraini government in 2011. The Bahraini government, in retaliation against him, decided to revoke his citizenship afterwards in 2012, a decision he has been fighting against for three years. His fight to keep his citizenship has resulted in the loss of his licence to practice law, and this his job, his bank account, and his ID. Karimi can no longer travel, and fears that he will be deported and separated from his family. He has four children. Karimi is not the only one affected by this law, the government in Bahrain is being increasingly criticized for using the law to strip its political opponents of their citizenship. Lawyers, journalists, and human rights activists are often targets of these attempts. International organizations say these proceedings are unfair as the government is not required to provide any specific incidences or proof when convicting someone of damaging state security. Taimoor Karimi will stand his final appeal on April 17. If he does not win, he will be expelled from the country.



Lebanese newspaper announces its close

■ Lebanese daily As-Safir, founded in 1974 by Salam with the slogan “a voice for those who have no voice” has announced its death. After 40 years there will be no more print and online operations for them. The falling of circulation and advertising income is a problem common to other print media in Lebanon jointly with all the difficulties linked to the political environment of the state. “The press is connected with political life. In Lebanon there is no politics and no political life” said Salam. Media, in particular As-Safir, is the first victim of this alarming situation.

Iran's future: missiles, not just negotiations

■ Commenting the words of the former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani about a possible future through just talks, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that missiles would be the crucial mean in their future prospective. Additionally Khamenei has offered support to the hard-line Revolutionary Guards that have managed some ballistic missile test this month as expression of Iran's power. However they declare that these missiles are not able to carry nuclear weapons, they have provoked a general alarm and tension between United States and several EU countries. From another point of view Russia, a veto permanent member of the Security Council, said that they are not violating Resolution 2231, the long-period nuclear resolution between Iran and six world powers including the US, China, France, Germany, the Russian Federation, the UK and the High Representative of the European Union.

Kazakh succession unclear as Nazarbayev's daughter stays out of parliament

■ In spite of expectations, the daughter of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Dariga Nazarbayeva, will not become a member of parliament despite appearing on the Nur Otan party list. Many observers had anticipated that the current deputy prime minister would join the lower house of the parliament and become its speaker as a result of the most recent election. Such a position would have represented her role as potential successor to the president. However, Nazarbayeva was not nominated by her father's office despite the Nur Otan party winning 82% of the vote. The succession question has long plagued the minds of potential foreign investors and the recent events have not made the prospects much clearer. Last April, the President managed to secure another five year term and has not yet indicated any clear plans for his succession.

Indonesia's government under pressure for indigenous rights issue

■ Tension increases on Jakarta for the protection of indigenous people's rights. The National Commission on Human Rights have identified 40 cases, in which they are violated. The natives did all they can to protect forests and tried to find help from local government but they experienced intimidation, blame and abuses. They are not will to have a healthy and safe environment and to feel free from degrading treatment and torture. For example because of sugarcane plantation they women and men fail to find enough food or just for females they cannot find herbs that guarantee the right to reproductive health. An action of solution from Jakarta is likely and urgent.



No more army ties for the Myanmar's new president

■ Htin Kyaw, member of the National League for Democracy Party (NLD), is the new president Myanmar has sworn in. Tears flow between NLD affiliates after his election. It is an important changing in the history of Myanmar which have experienced for more than 50 years presidents with military ties. It is the first time that NLD lawmakers hear words as “respect, national reconciliation, peace in the country and emergence of a constitution”. His goals will be to find a possible way to a democratic union and to increase people’s living standard. There are great hopes and expectation about future challenges from economic and political point of view.

Lula da Silva named as Brazil's chief of staff and political situation in Brazil

■ After a week that began with the country’s largest anti-government protests ever seen and ended with its revered former leader, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, blocked from taking up a cabinet post as a result of his alleged involvement in the Petrobras corruption scandal, Rousseff now faces impeachment in Congress that could see her forced out of office next month. If there was any hero for the protesters, it was Sérgio Moro, the investigative judge leading Operation Car Wash, a two-year probe into corruption at Petrobras, the state-run oil firm that was once the largest company in Latin America. Over the course of the investigation, prosecutors have discovered a massive web of corruption in which the executives of Brazil’s top engineering and construction companies colluded with politicians to overcharge on public works contracts at the oil giant. Lula is accused of being the real owner of two upmarket properties that have been refurbished by some of the construction companies linked to the Petrobras scandal. He denies the charges. On 4 March, police raided his house and detained the former president for four hours of “coercive questioning”. After his release, a clearly emotional Lula described his ordeal as a “kidnapping” and questioned why such aggressive tactics were considered necessary when he had freely presented himself to the police on previous occasions. Rumours surfaced that Lula might be appointed to the cabinet, which would both strengthen Rousseff’s government and shield Lula from prosecution. In Brazil, cabinet ministers can only be tried in the “privileged forum” of the Supreme Court, which can take much longer to get around to hearing cases than lower-level criminal courts. Opposition activists organized immediate protests and vowed to call a general strike. Meanwhile trade unions and left-wing movements, took to the streets in a major show of force for Rousseff and Lula.

“prosecutors have discovered a massive web of corruption in which the executives of Brazil’s top engineering and construction companies colluded with politicians”



El Salvador plans “extraordinary” moves to fight violence

■ President of El Salvador Sanchez Ceren has claimed that a new initiative to increase prison security as well as greater police presence in the streets will be necessary in order to combat the recent surge in gang violence. El Salvador is currently facing staggeringly high murder rates and has declared a state of emergency in seven of its prisons. Officials claim that they intend to deploy 1,000 reserve soldiers in order to regain control over “maras”: areas where gangs have taken over. Incarcerated leaders continue to organise criminal activity on the outside, therefore the government aims implement a vast number of measures in order to cease such activity. During a national broadcast Sanchez Ceren stated that “faced with this irrational violence, we are forced to take urgent measures, of an extraordinary character, in order to guarantee security (and) peace for all Salvadorans.”

Argentine senate approves deal to end debt dispute, re-enters market

■ Senate gave the green light to a deal to repay creditors, marking the end of a 14-year legal battle that had made the country a global financial pariah. The deal is the cornerstone of new President Mauricio Macri's plan for revitalizing an economy hobbled by low investment, high inflation and precarious central bank reserves. The country has until April 14 to pay \$4.65 billion to the main hedge funds that fought for and won an advantageous settlement after balking at steep payment reductions offered in Argentina's 2005 and 2010 bond revamps. A US court ordered Argentina to negotiate a settlement, which should set the stage for the country to once again issue global bonds. Locked out of the capital markets since its 2002 default, Argentina needs international financing to close its wide fiscal deficits, improve infrastructure and start rebuilding investor confidence. The deal allows Argentina to issue up to \$12.5 billion in new bonds. Money left over from the bond issuance would give financial breathing room to Macri as he carries out free-market reforms and starts paying down deficits run up by previous Argentine leader Cristina Fernandez.

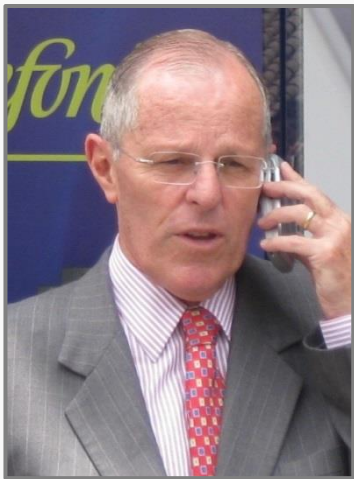


“Argentina needs international financing to close its wide fiscal deficits, improve infrastructure and start rebuilding investor confidence”



Peru electoral court keeps Fujimori in presidential race

■ The allegation against Keiko Fujimori, the frontrunner to win Peru's presidential election next month, related to an event she presided over where cash prizes were distributed to the winners of a breakdancing competition. However, the electoral court in Lima said that Fujimori, did not break any rules. It noted that the money distributed was not hers and the event was not a campaign rally. A decision that will likely infuriate opponents and do little to calm a hotly disputed contest. Her closest rival, investor-favourite Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, is also facing allegations that he infringed rules by supplying beer for a town festival. The charges were contained in a citizen's petition filed to the board, but the board has not begun a formal investigation into Kuczynski to date. Latest polls suggest around 34 percent of voters support Fujimori, enough for her to win the first round but not enough to prevent a run-off.



Pedro Pablo Kuczynski.
Photo: Cestrada [Wikimedia Commons]



Alberto Fujimori.
Photo: TopNews.in

Several months and million dollars later, New Zealand decides to keep the flag

■ On March 24th, the preliminary referendum result declared that New Zealand will keep its current flag. After a 16 month process amounting to 17 million dollars of tax payer money, some participants were slightly disappointed with the outcome. Prime Minister John Key was hoping to discard the flag which still harbours the colonial Union Jack in the upper left corner. Colonial history and similarity to the Australian flag were two of the primary reasons driving the calls for change. However, many people felt that the alternative flag choice which featured a silver fern and four red stars, the winner out of 10,000 entries, was gauche and "towel like". 56.6% of the 67.3% of citizens registered to vote voted in favour of keeping the flag.



■ News in Brief

Bilateral relations

German on US presidential election: Trump is seen as a threat, Merkel respects Clinton

■ The outcome of the upcoming US presidential election can affect not only Americans but also people around the world. German Economy Minister Sigmar Gabriel mentions that if the US Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump wins the election, it will be a threat to peace and prosperity. Minister Gabriel sees Trump's point of view as threatening not only to the peace and social cohesion but also to the economic development. When talking about US presidential candidates, German Chancellor Angela Merkel mentions that she has been working a lot with the US Democrat presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and she respects Clinton's work on women's rights, family issues, health-care, and also Clinton's long list of experience in the political arena.

Informal talks between the US and Turkey during the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington

■ The US President Barack Obama will have an informal talk with Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan to discuss about Turkish domestic policies and the differences over Syria. The informal talk will be held during the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington DC, from 31 March 2016 until 1 April 2016. The tension between the US and Turkey is wrapped under the fact that the Kurdish militants are supported by the US military while Turkey sees it as a threat to their sovereignty since there are many Kurdish-Turks in the border between Syria and Turkey. The US is also concerned about the growing of restrictions against freedom of expression in Turkey. Meanwhile, President Erdogan has requested the US authorities to take actions against a network of schools run by a movement affiliated with Islamic preacher Fethullah Gulen, a US-based Turkish cleric whom he accuses of plotting against him.



Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan (L) talks to US President Barack Obama (2nd L) after their bilateral meeting in Seoul on March 25, 2012. Photo: Pete Souza [White House]

“The US is also concerned about the growing of restrictions against freedom of expression in Turkey”



Obama could decide on greater troop presence in Iraq soon

■ US Marine General Joseph Dunford said on 17 March 2015 that President Barack Obama will have the chance to decide on whether to increase the number of US forces in Iraq in the “coming weeks”. Dunford told a news briefing that he expected an increase in the level of US forces in Iraq from the current 3,800, but that those decisions had not been finalised. US officials have said they hope to capitalise on recent battlefield successes against Islamic State, such as the retaking of Ramadi by Iraqi forces late last year. “The timing really now is focused on the next phase of the campaign, which is towards Mosul, and maintaining the kind of momentum that we had in Ramadi,” Dunford said.

Malian national pleads guilty over 2000 killings of US diplomats

■ In December of 2000, William Bultemeier an American working for the Pentagon in Niger, was shot dead outside a restaurant in Niger’s Capital city. US Marine Staff Sgt. Christopher McNeely was shot hurrying to help Bultemeier, but recovered from his injuries. The suspect, Alhassane Ould Mohamed, a Malian national was arrested. However, he managed several escape attempts before finally being recaptured in 2013, and extradited by the French in 2014. Mohamed committed numerous other crimes including the slaying of Saudi nationals in 2010, and the kidnapping of several Western journalists in 2008. He is known to be connected to several terrorist groups. On March 24, 2016 Mohamed plead guilty to the charge of conspiring to kill an American Diplomat in Brooklyn, New York. He will face 25 years in prison.

Kyrgyz leader accuse opponents of fomenting unrest

■ Kyrgyzstan’s President Almazbek Atambayev was accusing his political opponents to destabilise the country by escalating tensions between Uzbekistan and his country. Sharing border which is not well demarcated, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan had numerous bilateral tensions in the past. Recently, Uzbekistan stationed two armoured personnel carriers and about 40 soldiers in the border zone, a step that pushed the smaller Kyrgyzstan to reinforce deployments on its side. President Atambayev described the situation as “tense and unfriendly” and accused the opposition of trying to incite violence. Atambayev said he would cancel a planned visit to Uzbekistan in June, to attend a summit of another regional security body, unless the border standoff was resolved. According to the Kyrgyz state news agency, Uzbekistan had since withdrawn the armoured vehicles and both countries pulled back most of the soldiers, leaving only a few border guards.



■ News in Brief

International relations

North Korea will boycott the UN Human Rights Council's resolution against the country

■ North Korea reportedly will boycott any session of the UN Human Rights Council that examines its human rights records and will not be bound to any resolutions coming out of the council. North Korea also accuses the US, Japan and South Korea of sending agents into the country to recruit criminals to become “so-called North Korean defectors”. North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Su Yong argues that the UN rights forum is marked by worsening politicisation, selectivity and double standards, and criticised gun-related violence in the US and Europe's migration crisis.

Obama to host China's President Xi on March 31, 2016

■ On March 31st, alongside the Nuclear Security Summit, Obama met for bilateral talks with President Xi of China. The meeting was concluded to have been successful, with both sides committing to the denuclearization of North Korea, and with China agreeing to carry out the United Nation's new economic restrictions against North Korea. China's agreement to the UN's restrictions is being lauded as an important step, as China is one of North Korea's historical trading partners. China was quoted as having said the talks were “constructive”, as the two countries even agreed to sign a climate change accord in April. These talks were not free of problems, as the countries have large disagreements over the South China Sea issue, Obama's push for freedom of navigation, and the United States' plans to employ a new missile defence system in South Korea.

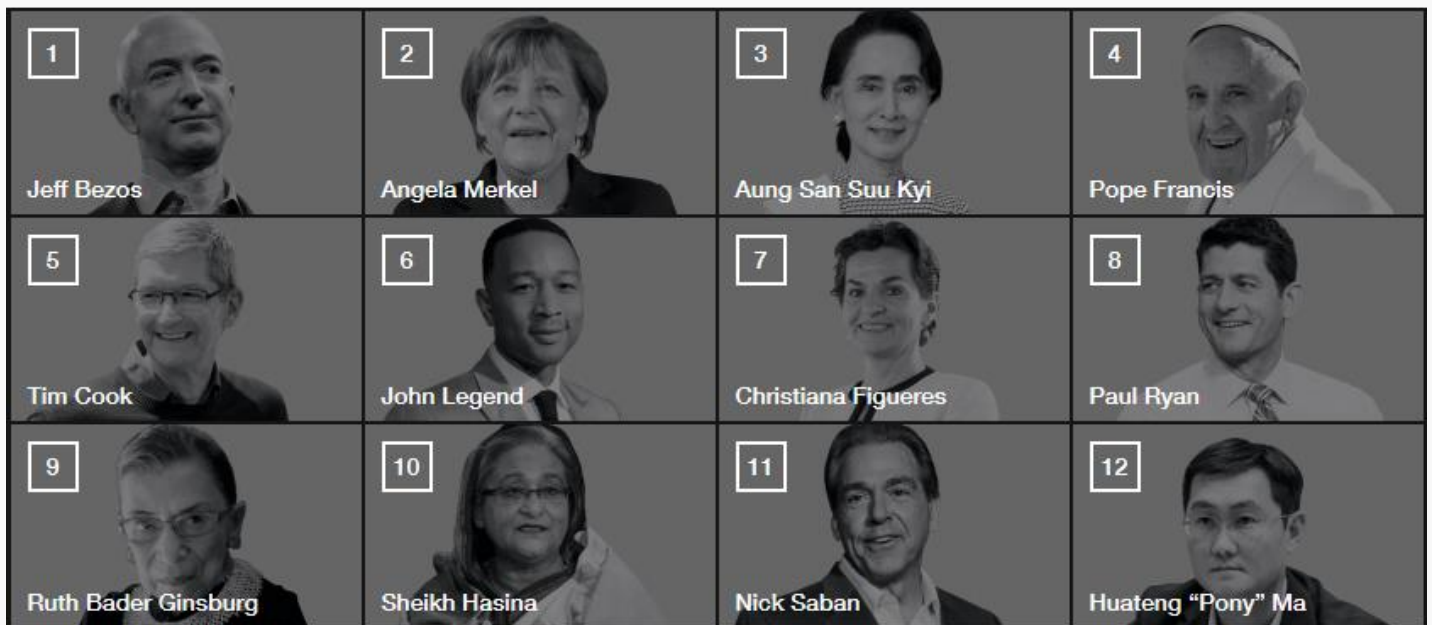
US hopes China will agree to talk about South Korea missile defence

■ Antony Blinken, a senior US diplomat, said on 29 March he hopes China will accept an offer for a technical briefing on a new missile defence system (THAAD) the United States wants to deploy in South Korea, a prospect Beijing sees as a threat to its national security. The United States and South Korea agreed to begin talks on possible THAAD deployment last month after North Korea tested its fourth nuclear bomb on 6 January and launched a long-range rocket on 7 February. China backed tough new sanctions on North Korea following the tests but has voiced opposition to THAAD as its radar has a range that would extend far beyond the Korean peninsula and into China. Asked whether China would accept a US briefing on THAAD, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei would not directly reply. South Korea's military said on 29 March that North Korea test fired a short-range missile on its east coast in the latest of a string of launches that Pyongyang has characterised as a response to the sanctions. Blinken confirmed THAAD deployment was a necessary step until Pyongyang's behaviour changed.



Champions for refugees, violence victims cited by Fortune for leadership

■ In March Fortune 500 magazine published their annual list of the World's Greatest Leaders. The purpose of the list is to act as tribute to leaders who show good values, commitment, and effectiveness. This year's list showcased many individuals who advocate for refugees, victims of violence, and for the environment. The list highlights people as diverse as Pope Francis, Christiana Figueres, executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) for her work on the Paris Climate Talks, to Mukwege of the Democratic Republic of The Congo, a surgeon and gynecologist who founded Panzi Hospital for his work treating victims of sexual violence by soldiers and rebels. Those interested in learning more can read the full list here: <http://fortune.com/worlds-greatest-leaders>



Activist women were forced silence with violence in Sudan

■ Sudan security forces are perpetrating sexual assault and threats against female activist according to the Human Rights Watch (HRW). Additionally, violence and abuse of women have risen in the recent years; lots are the witnesses and the victims. Compared to the men, they are not just subject to political pressure but they are also more vulnerable to intimidation and ravishment. According to the Sudan's public morality law "Good Girls don't Protest" and their way of dressing, movements and role in public life are under control. They can also be subject to lashing and stoning and the government officials make them not to speak out.





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