

News in brief

◆ **President Emmanuel Macron's** new special envoy for Lebanon heads to Beirut in the coming week as France seeks a new push to end a political crisis that has left the country without a president for over half a year, a diplomatic source said yesterday.

Former foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, appointed by Macron to the role earlier this month, is to fly to Beirut on Wednesday, the source told AFP, asking not to be named. Another source close to the issue also said Le Drian would leave on Wednesday but it was not clear how long he would stay in Beirut or who he would meet. His visit comes after Lebanese lawmakers last week failed for a 12th time to elect a new president, an impasse that is causing increasing exasperation in Paris as the country faces an economic and financial crisis. Macron and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman after talks on Friday called for a "rapid end to the institutional political vacuum in Lebanon".



Macron envoy heads to Lebanon in bid to end crisis

◆ **Yemen's government** and Iran-backed Huthi rebels are locked in talks in Jordan to set the ground for a possible prisoner exchange, a Red Cross official said yesterday.

Yemen rivals discuss possible prisoner swap in Jordan: Red Cross



The negotiations since Friday in the Jordanian capital Amman are overseen by the office of the UN special envoy to Yemen and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), said Jessica Moussan, ICRC's media adviser for the Middle East. They are meeting "together with... parties to the conflict in Yemen to address issues pertaining to negotiations on a future release operation", she told AFP. On Friday, the UN envoy's office said the Amman talks were a follow-up to an agreement struck by the two sides in Stockholm five years ago.

◆ **Pope Francis** led Angelus prayers at Saint Peter's Square in the Vatican on Sunday before thousands of pilgrims, just days after undergoing a hernia operation.

Pope leads Vatican prayers after surgery



Francis expressed his gratitude to those who had sent him messages of support during his stay at Rome's Gemelli hospital as he spent 10 days convalescing. "I want to express my gratitude for the affection, the concern, the friendship" expressed in those messages of support, the Argentine pontiff said, following his third stay in hospital in the past two years. "This human support has been a great help and comfort to me," said Francis to cheers and applause from the thousands assembled in the square. The 86-year-old has suffered a series of health issues since his election in 2013, from hip problems, knee pain and weight gain, to an inflamed colon and respiratory infection.

CURIOSER & CURIOSER

Iraq unveils ancient stone tablet returned by Italy



A 2,800-year-old stone tablet is presented during a press conference in Baghdad, after it was handed over by the Italian authorities to the Iraqi president during his recent visit to Bologna

Baghdad

Iraq unveiled yesterday a 2,800-year-old stone tablet returned by Italy, as the war-ravaged country works to recover from abroad antiquities looted from its territory.

The tablet -- whose text is written in cuneiform, the Babylonian alphabet -- bears the insignia of Shalmaneser III, the Assyrian king who ruled the region of Nimrod, in present-day northern Iraq, from 858 to 823 BC.

The circumstances surrounding the tablet's arrival in Italy remain unclear, but the Italian authorities handed it over to Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid during a visit to Bologna over the past week.

"I would like to thank the Italian officials for their efforts and cooperation in bringing back this piece," Rashid said during a ceremony Sunday at a Baghdad presidential palace to hand the artefact over to the national museum.

The tablet had arrived in the 1980s in Italy, where it was seized by police, said Laith Majid Hussein, director of Baghdad's council of antiquities and heritage.

Iraqi Culture Minister Ahmed Fakak al-Badrani said the circumstances behind its discovery were unclear.

"Perhaps (it was found) during archaeological excavations or during work on the Mosul dam," Iraq's biggest built in the 1980s, he said.

Jailed Bangladesh hangman freed after sentence

AFP | Dhaka

Jailed Bangladeshi hangman who executed more than two dozen fellow prisoners including killers and coup plotters in exchange for sentence reductions was released yesterday, officials said.

Shahjahan Bhuiyan gained notoriety for putting 26 people to death during his time inside after he highlighted to officials his skills with a noose upon entering prison 32 years ago for murder.

His executions included military officers found guilty of plotting a 1975 coup and of killing the country's founding leader, who is

the father of current prime minister Sheikh Hasina.

"His jail sentence was reduced for hangings he carried out," Tania Zaman, deputy chief of Dhaka Central Jail, told AFP, saying his executions numbered 26 while incarcerated.

Among those he hanged were top Islamist leader Ali Ahsan Mujahid and opposition stalwart Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury after both were charged with war crimes, according to another jail official who spoke on condition of anonymity.

In 2007 he also hanged Siddique Islam, alias Bangla Bhai, an Islamist leader of the outlawed

Jamayetul Mujahideen Bangladesh, which led a nationwide bombing campaign two years earlier, the official added.

The 74-year-old defended his acts, saying it helped him cut his sentence.

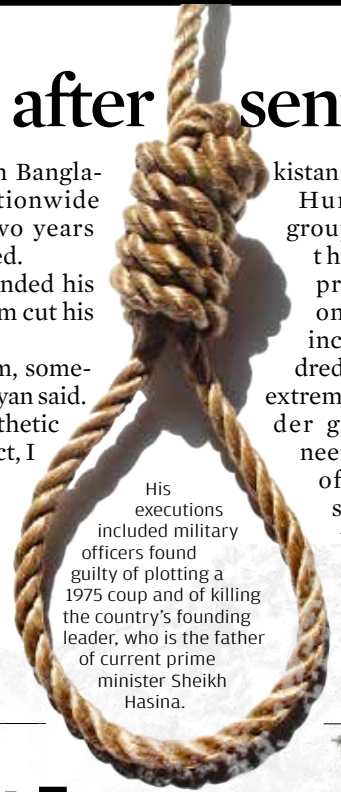
"If I didn't hang them, someone else will do it," Bhuiyan said. "Even if I feel sympathetic towards him, as a convict, I am bound to do it."

Bangladesh inherited capital punishment from its British colonial rulers, and has executed nearly 500 people since independence from Pa-

kistan in 1971.

Human rights groups say more than 2,000 prisoners are on death row, including hundreds of Islamist extremists and border guard mutineers convicted of murdering senior military officers.

The nation is one of a handful that still carry out



His executions included military officers found guilty of plotting a 1975 coup and of killing the country's founding leader, who is the father of current prime minister Sheikh Hasina.

US, China see path to more stable ties

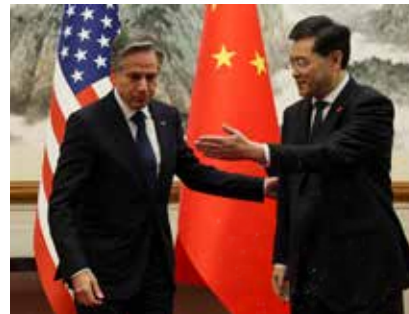
AFP | Beijing

The United States and China agreed yesterday to expand dialogue to try to bring relations back from historic lows, as Secretary of State Antony Blinken held what officials called candid talks on soaring tensions during a rare trip to Beijing.

The highest-ranking US visitor to Beijing in nearly five years, Blinken spoke to his Chinese counterpart for seven and a half hours -- an hour more than expected -- at an ornate state villa, including over a banquet dinner.

The two sides said Foreign Minister Qin Gang agreed to pay a return visit to Washington at a later date and that the two top diplomats would work together to expand flights between the world's two largest economies.

Blinken stressed "the importance of diplomacy and maintaining open channels of communication across the full range of issues to reduce the risk of misperception and miscalcu-



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (L) and China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang greet each other ahead of a meeting at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing

lation", State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said, calling the talks "candid, substantive and constructive".

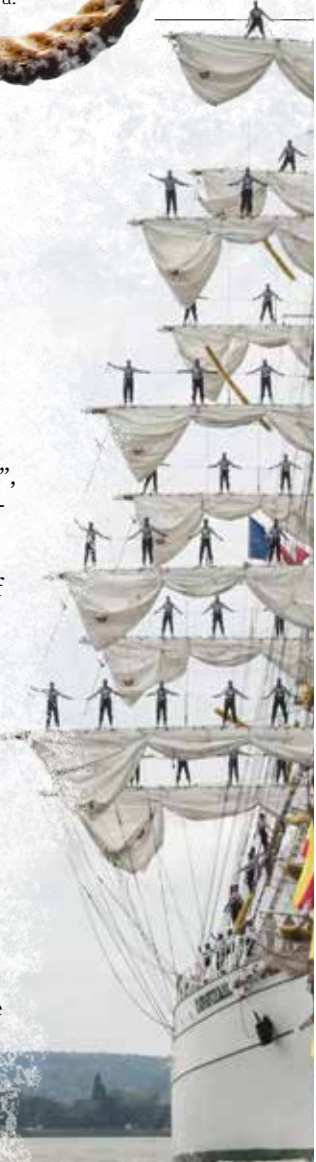
Blinken will hold a second day of meetings today and address reporters before leaving. Behind closed doors, Qin told Blinken that relations between the United States and China "are at the lowest point since the establish-

ment of diplomatic relations", according to state-run broadcaster CCTV.

"This does not conform to the fundamental interests of the two peoples, nor does it meet the common expectations of the international community," Qin said during the talks at the ancient Diaoyutai gardens.

But he issued a warning on Taiwan, the self-ruling democracy claimed by Beijing, which has launched live-fire military drills twice near the island since August in anger over actions by top US lawmakers.

"The Taiwan issue is the core of China's core interests, the most important issue in China-US relations, and the most prominent risk," Qin said.



Pakistani migrant's final call home foretold Greece

● **Authorities in Europe still have no clear idea how many people were aboard the boat when it sank**

● **Estimates range from 400 to over 700**

Muzaffarabad

Before 21-year-old Pakistani Muhammad Akash boarded a rickety fishing trawler in Libya on a journey he hoped would take him to a brighter future in Europe, he contacted his family one last time.

"He made a heartfelt phone call to his brother, urging the family to pray for him as he embarked on what he acknowledged to be a perilous journey," his uncle Amanat Ali told AFP Sunday after learning Akash was one of hundreds who drowned off the coast of Greece on Wednesday.

Authorities in Europe still have no clear idea how many people



A view taken from a rescue helicopter, of migrants onboard a fishing vessel in the waters off the Peloponnese coast of Greece

were aboard the boat when it sank -- estimates range from 400 to over 700 -- but likely hundreds came from Pakistan, and many from Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

Four of Akash's friends from the town of Khairatta were also aboard, but only two survived. They had the grim task of breaking the news to his family.

The uncle told AFP that Akash started his journey three months ago. He had been in regular contact with two other friends who

had already made their way to Italy by similar means, and he wanted to follow them.

'Severe punishment'

On Sunday Pakistan officials said 10 suspected human traffickers had been arrested, and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif vowed "severe punishment" for those involved in the trade.

Pakistan is in economic free-fall. A dire downturn has drained dollar reserves, spurred runaway inflation and caused widespread

factory closures.

The desperate situation is creating an incentive for Pakistanis to take perilous, illegal routes to Europe. Akash's father passed away 12 years ago, leaving him to assist his older brother in managing the family-owned catering business in Khairatta.

"He became fascinated by the enhanced living standards of the local residents whose families had established roots in Europe," said Ali.

"The family isn't impoverished,