

POPE FRANCIS TO RECEIVE TOP SUNNI IMAM AT VATICAN

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis will meet the spiritual leader of the world's Sunni Muslims in an unprecedented encounter at the Vatican on Monday, the pontiff's spokesman said yesterday. Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, the grand imam of Cairo's Al-Azhar, the most prestigious institution in Sunni Islam, will have an audience with the leader of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics at St Peter's, Father Federico Lombardi told AFP. "This audience is being prepared and has been scheduled for Monday," he said. "It will be a first." The visit marks the restoration of cordial relations between the two faiths. Ties were soured under Pope Benedict XVI after Francis's now-retired predecessor made a September 2006 speech in which he was perceived to have described Islam as a violent religion.

Dialogue resumed in 2009 but was suspended again by Al-Azhar in 2011 when Benedict called for the protection of Christian minorities after a bomb attack on a church in Alexandria, an intervention that was perceived as meddling in Egypt's internal affairs. Relations have steadily improved since Francis became pope in 2013 with inter-faith dialogue near the top of his agenda, something he underlined with a personal message to the Muslim world to mark the end of the first month of Ramadan of his pontificate.—AFP



VATICAN CITY: This combination of file pictures shows Pope Francis and Grand Imam of al-Azhar Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayeb.—AFP

SIX RUSSIAN SERVICEMEN DIE IN ACCIDENT IN BREAKAWAY SOUTH OSSETIA

MOSCOW: Six Russian military servicemen died and 16 were injured when a bus carrying them veered off a mountain road in the breakaway South Ossetia region of ex-Soviet Georgia yesterday, the local emergencies minister told Reuters.

"Most probably, the equipment was out of order. The bus plunged from a height of some forty meters," Sergei Sanakoyev said by telephone. He said four servicemen were in grave condition and would be taken to Moscow by plane. A failure of the brakes could have caused the accident, Russian news agencies cited Russia's defense ministry as saying. Russia sided with separatist rebels when it fought a five-day war against Georgia over South Ossetia in August 2008. After that conflict, Moscow beefed up its military presence in the breakaway region.—Reuters

FRENCH PARLIAMENT EXTENDS "STATE OF EMERGENCY"

PARIS: The French National Assembly, or lower house of parliament, yesterday voted to extend for another two months the State of Emergency in place since the November terrorist attacks, giving police, the intelligence services and the judiciary special arrest, detention and search powers. The National Assembly press office confirmed that the extension of the emergency powers was backed by a strong majority, with 46 of 68 deputies present for the

vote supporting the move. Twenty voted against the motion and two abstained.

The motion already got Senate approval here on May 10 and will come into force until the end of July and the completion of the Euro '16 soccer internationals. France has been on highest alert since so-called Islamic State terrorists and their accomplices carried out a spate of attacks in and around Paris on November 13 last, killing 130 people and

wounding hundreds in shootings and bombings. The State of Emergency special powers allow police and magistrates to carry out searches without warrants, to arrest and place suspects under house arrest without charges and ban others from travelling within or outside of France. The authorities are also allowed to spy on and close down Internet sites found to be supporting terrorism or recruiting terrorist fighters.—KUNA

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