



HONG KONG: Fireworks explode over Victoria Harbour in Hong Kong early today. Just like previous years, the city's iconic skyline along Victoria Harbour will light up with an eight-minute pyrotechnic display, as tens of thousands of partygoers will flock to the waterfront to celebrate. — AFP

## SYDNEY SPECTACULAR LEADS NEW YEAR CELEBRATIONS

Continued from Page 1

pyrotechnic display after a year which had seen busy thoroughfares paralyzed by pro-democracy protests in the final months of 2014.

"I think a more peaceful year would be good for everybody," said Louis Ho, 65. Students on one prome-

nade handed out free hugs. Earlier, Australia's biggest city kicked off the global New Year celebrations with a massive fireworks display that lit up Sydney Harbour, defying terrorist fears days after a deadly siege.

Tons of fireworks exploded over the harbor, watched by a crowd estimated at more than one million, streaming across the sky in one of the world's first major cele-

brations to ring in the new year. "We are celebrating that we are a multicultural, harmonious community but we will be thinking about what happened," Lord Mayor Clover Moore said in reference to the drama when an Iranian-born gunman with a history of violence and extremism took 17 hostages in a cafe. Two hostages and the gunman died. In the aftermath of the siege, Prime Minister Tony Abbott warned that "the terror threat remains high and... at this level, an attack is likely". But the fireworks display went ahead without incident.

celled, with many companies instead launching fundraising campaigns for flood victims. In Indonesia, Surabaya was holding a candlelight vigil in the hours leading up till midnight to remember the people on the plane which departed that city on Sunday. In Afghanistan, the last French troops in the country held a ceremony in Kabul to mark the end of their deployment after NATO combat operations closed down as a new "train and support" mission takes over.

## PALESTINIANS TURN TO ICC AS UN BID FAILS

Continued from Page 1

Abbas signed the request along with applications to join 20 other international conventions during a meeting broadcast live on Palestinian television. It came one day after the UN Security Council rejected a resolution on ending the Israeli occupation. The resolution would have set a 12-month deadline for Israel to reach a final peace deal with the Palestinians, and called for a full withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Palestinian territories by the end of 2017.

Israel hailed the rejection as a victory, saying it dealt a blow to Palestinian efforts to diplomatically "embarrass and isolate" the Jewish state. The Palestinians denounced as "outrageously shameful" the failure of the text to win the necessary nine votes for passage.

### French envoy summoned

Council heavyweights China, France and Russia were among eight countries voting in favour, while the United States and Australia voted against. Nigeria, which had been expected to support the resolution, was among five abstentions, which included Britain, Rwanda, Lithuania and South Korea.

Nigeria had assured the Palestinians it would support them, but abstained after lobbying efforts by Israel and Washington. Israel yesterday summoned the French ambassador, saying it was "disappointed and perplexed" by his country's support for the UN resolution. The fail-

ure to win the nine votes necessary for adoption spared Washington having to wield its veto, which would have caused it embarrassment with key Arab allies.

But it was also a diplomatic blow for the Palestinians, who had counted on the symbolic victory of nine votes, even though the resolution would in all likelihood have been vetoed by the United States.

Speaking yesterday, Netanyahu extended his special thanks to Nigeria and Rwanda. "This is what tipped the scales," he said. Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman said the resolution's failure "should

teach the Palestinians that provocations and attempts to force Israel into unilateral processes will not achieve anything—quite the opposite." But Russia denounced the outcome of the UN vote as "a strategic error." Arab League chief Nabil Al-Arabi also expressed regret, criticizing the

African nations that abstained and pledging to continue "intensive Arab diplomatic activity" in support of the Palestinian cause. The Palestinians reacted furiously to the vote. "The UN Security Council vote is outrageously shameful," said senior PLO official Hanan Ashrawi. "Those countries that abstained demonstrated a lack of political will to hold Israel accountable and to act in accordance with the global rule of law and international humanitarian law." The Islamist movement Hamas blamed Abbas for the setback, demanding he "make good" on threats to cut security cooperation with Israel and join the ICC. — AFP

### Remembrance for lost AirAsia flight

In China, Beijing's bid to stage the 2022 Winter Olympics was to be the theme of celebrations. Concert pianist Lang Lang will be the star performer at an extravaganza at Olympic Park. The Chinese capital has held New Year countdowns at the historic Temple of Heaven since 2011, but has moved the event to the site of the 2008 summer games to raise the profile of its winter Olympics bid.

In Taiwan the landmark skyscraper Taipei 101 was at the centre of celebrations, with performances by pop singers and a firework display at midnight expected to attract hundreds of thousands.

And in Japan, the Meiji Jingu shrine in Tokyo brought out stocks of lucky charms and set up large offertory boxes as it prepared to welcome a huge wave of worshippers overnight. The huge shrine expects three million visitors in the first three days of the new year. Hundreds of revellers were due to gather around a popular British-colonial era shopping arcade in central Delhi to greet the New Year, braving unusually chilly weather. Pubs and eateries were festooned with fairy lights and brightly colored balloons.

But in Malaysia, a sombre mood prevailed after the crash of AirAsia Flight QZ8501 carrying 162 people in Indonesia and flooding in the country's northeast which has displaced almost 250,000 people.

Year-end countdown celebrations have been can-

### Hasselhoff in Berlin

The end of another era will be remembered in Berlin with "Baywatch" star David Hasselhoff joining a huge open air concert in front of the Brandenburg Gate, where he famously sang for freedom after the Berlin Wall fell 25 years ago. Dubai has promised to dazzle again with a pyrotechnic and lights show at Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest tower.

In Paris, the Champs-Elysees will be reserved for pedestrians to let them watch a visual spectacle projected onto the Arc de Triomphe 15 minutes before the start of the new year.

The ticking of the clock past midnight will be significant for Lithuania as it adopts the euro. Another Baltic state, Latvia, takes over the rotating presidency of the European Union, putting it on the front line of negotiations with neighboring Russia over the crisis in Ukraine.

In Spain, millions of revellers will descend on Madrid's Puerta del Sol while in Barcelona a massive fireworks display will be held. London stages New Year's Eve fireworks along the Thames and Edinburgh will be holding its traditional Hogmanay street party.

Marking 2015 on Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro, more than two million people are expected to attend a huge fireworks show that will open celebrations marking 450 years since the founding of the city. And in New York about one million revellers are expected to descend on Times Square to watch the New Year's Eve Ball Drop. — AFP

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