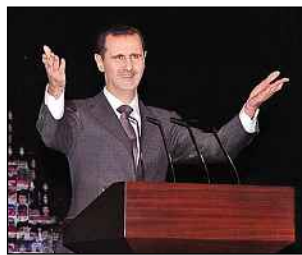


Abidjan, Ivory Coast

New Year tragedy: Three days of national mourning were announced in Ivory Coast last week, following the deaths of around 60 people – most of them children – in a stampede in the early hours of New Year's Day. Thousands of people were pouring out of a stadium in the city centre where they had been watching a fireworks display when a bottleneck developed, for reasons that remain unclear. According to reports, some people panicked when the security forces arrived, leading to the fatal stampede. The average age of the victims was 18, with many aged between eight and 15. The government had organised the fireworks to celebrate the return of peace in Ivory Coast: the once relatively stable country was rocked by months of violence after disputed elections in 2011 in which around 3,000 people were killed.



Damascus

Assad defiant: In his first public speech for six months, Bashar al-Assad told a

crowd of wildly cheering supporters that he would fight to the bitter end rather than relinquish power. Speaking at an opera house named after his father, Assad (above) defiantly ruled out any compromise with an opposition he described as “a gang of killers”, “al-Qa’eda terrorists” and “puppets” of the West – and instead pledged “total national mobilisation” to defeat them. The UN says that 60,000 people have died in Syria’s conflict.

Pyongyang

Conciliatory Kim: Kim Jong-un surprised the international community last week by making a televised speech – the first by a North Korean leader since 1994 – in which he sent New Year greetings to Seoul and called for warmer relations. “An important issue in putting an end to the division of the country... is to remove confrontation between North and South,” he said, in an apparent early effort to reach out to South Korea’s President-elect Park Geun-hye, who takes office next month. He also hinted at economic reforms, promising “a new phase” in a “radical turnaround” of the country’s moribund economy. Kim’s father, Kim Jong-il, never once made a televised address; the new leader’s more relaxed public persona, and even his haircut, appear to be modelled on his grandfather, the state’s founder Kim Il-sung.



Guangzhou, China

Censorship protest: Almost 100 staff at one of China’s most respected newspapers, Southern Weekly, went on strike this week and joined pro-democracy street demonstrations in a rare protest against state censorship that is being seen as the first major challenge to China’s new rulers. The row began last week when reporters accused local censors of replacing a New Year editorial calling for political reform with a gushing tribute to the Communist party.

Naivasha, Kenya

Fake police chief: A Kenyan man who posed as the Rift Valley’s assistant commissioner of police for five years has been unmasked as a fraud and charged with impersonating a police officer. Joshua Waiganjo allegedly used his “position” to hire and fire officers in the Rift Valley, and extort money from civilians. According to media reports, his cover was blown when he started attending meetings of a team of senior officers investigating the massacre of at least 34 police officers by bandits in Kenya’s northwestern region in November. This week, the authorities demanded an investigation into who gave Waiganjo orders, and launched an audit to discover whether any other “ghost” officers are serving in the force.



Jerusalem

Right-wing surge: The Israeli election has been turned on its head by a dramatic surge in support for Naftali Bennett, a charismatic right-wing Zionist who leads the Jewish

Home party. A former commando turned software tycoon, Bennett (pictured) favours annexing most of the West Bank and vows that there will never be a Palestinian state within Israel. Polls suggest that Benjamin Netanyahu will survive as PM, but he may be forced into a coalition with Jewish Home.



Hobart, Tasmania

Heatwave and fires: Australia is in the grip of a deadly heatwave that has seen temperatures reach 45°C (113°F) in some areas. With wildfires blazing in Victoria, New South Wales and other states, the authorities described the conditions as “catastrophic”, and urged householders to flee affected areas. In Tasmania, where fires destroyed 50,000 acres of fields and forest, 1,200 people had to be evacuated by boat after taking refuge along the south coast. This week, 100 were unaccounted for. However, police said they expected only a small number of confirmed fatalities.