

NEWS IN BRIEF

Iran nuclear deal parties meet amid US pressure

The signatories to the faltering Iran nuclear deal kicked off a meeting in Vienna yesterday as the United States is bidding to restore international sanctions on the Islamic republic and extend an arms embargo. Britain, France, Germany, China and Russia are struggling to save the landmark 2015 accord with Iran, which has been progressively stepping up its nuclear activities since last year. Tehran insists it is entitled to do so under the deal -- which swapped sanctions relief for Iran's agreement to scale back its nuclear programme -- following the US withdrawal from the accord in 2018 and the reimposition of sanctions. In a boost to the talks, the Iran last week agreed to allow inspectors of the UN nuclear watchdog to visit two sites suspected of having hosted undeclared activity in the early 2000s.

Nepal lifts virus ban for Bahrain royal expedition

Nepal is making a royal exception to its coronavirus ban on foreign arrivals, with a mountaineering team including a Bahrain prince set to tackle two major peaks. The Himalayan country shut its borders in March including grounding international flights just ahead of the busy spring season, devastating the local tourism sector. The 18-member party were given special permission to enter Nepal to climb the 8,163-metre Mount Manaslu and the 6,119-metre Loboche. "A 15-member Bahrain team including the prince of Bahrain and three British citizens will be allowed to come to Nepal in a chartered flight... following the health protocols," government spokesman Yuba Raj Khatiwada said late Monday.

World's most expensive sheep sold in Scotland



A sheep sold for a record 350,000 guineas -- or around US\$490,000 -- at an auction in Scotland this week. The lamb, named Double Diamond, had generated buzz before the Scottish National Textile sale in Lanark started, according to a news release from the Texel Sheep Society. Bidding started at 10,000 guineas (about US\$13,000). A bidding war drove up the price until an agreement was reached for the sheep to be shared between three farms. The farmers hope to see returns on their investment by breeding. Texel sheep originated in Holland and are a butcher favorite, according to the Texel Sheep Society. The previous record for one sheep was 230,000 pounds -- over \$307,000 in US money -- for a sheep named Deveronvale Perfection in 2009.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



People pray in front of a painting of India's former president Pranab Mukherjee, who died on Monday after a lung infection, in Kolkata, India, yesterday. Pranab Mukherjee's funeral took place yesterday with full military honours. Indian President Ram Nath Kovind, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi were among many political heavyweights who visited Pranab Mukherjee's residence and paid their last respects.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Junk food linked to aging in chromosomes: study

AFP, Paris

People who eat a lot of industrially processed junk food are more likely to exhibit a change in their chromosomes linked to ageing, according to research presented Tuesday at an online medical conference.

Three or more servings of so-called "ultra-processed food" per day doubled the odds that strands of DNA and proteins called telomeres, found on the end of chromosomes, would be shorter compared to people who rarely consumed such foods, scientists reported at the European and International Conference on Obesity.

Short telomeres are a marker of biological ageing at the cellular level, and the study suggests that diet is a factor in driving the cells to age faster.

While the correlation is strong, however, the causal relationship between eating highly processed foods and diminished telomeres remains speculative, the authors cautioned.

Each human cell has 23 pairs of chromosomes that contain our genetic code. Telomeres do not carry genetic information, but are vital for preserving the stability and integrity of chromosomes and, by extension, the DNA that all the cells in our body relies on to function.

As we get older, our telomeres shorten naturally because each time a cell divides, part of the telomere is lost. That reduction in length has long been recognised as a marker of biological age.

Earlier studies had pointed to a possible link with sugar-sweetened drinks, processed meats and other foods loaded with saturated fats and sugar, but the findings were inconclusive.

India 'controls South Pangong'

Say top army officials after face-off with PLA along LAC in Ladakh

AGENCIES

The Indian Army, now controlling multiple key ridges on the south bank of the Pangong Lake, has effective military control of the entire disputed area in the region.

Senior officials said yesterday the army's occupation of these key heights is an entirely defensive move, done to counter a Chinese build-up with tanks and troops on their side of the LAC in the area.

China denied that it had moved first, with an embassy spokeswoman in New Delhi accusing Indian troops of trespassing across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) - the de facto border - and conducting "flagrant provocations".

Indian and Chinese troops have been locked in a high-altitude border confrontation for months in the western Himalayan region of Ladakh. The two sides have disputed the course of the frontier for more than half a century.

The Indian official, who was briefed

on the latest incident, said the Indian troop move responded to an attempt by a large number of Chinese infantry to push through a key mountain pass late on Saturday.

"We mobilised and occupied the four heights," the official said, adding all four hilltops were on India's side of the LAC.



The Indian official said the Chinese soldiers were backed up by military vehicles and drew close enough to engage Indian troops in verbal arguments, but there were no clashes, reports Reuters.

He said the incident occurred on

the southern bank of Pangong Tso, a picturesque lake in the snow desert region where Indian and Chinese troops have been facing off since April.

The Indian official said the Chinese had also been consolidating positions on the northern bank of the lake with what appeared to be new defensive positions.

But Ji Rong, a spokeswoman for the Chinese embassy in New Delhi, said Indian troops had violated the LAC at Pangong Tso's southern bank and near another mountain pass.

In June, 20 Indian soldiers were killed in hand-to-hand combat with Chinese troops in Ladakh's Galwan area, the most serious clash between the two countries in 50 years.

Both sides then agreed to pull back with military chiefs in the region holding five rounds of talks. But the Indian military said this week Beijing had reneged on the deal by carrying out "provocative military movements to change the status quo".

Suga cements frontrunner status in Japan PM race

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's chief cabinet secretary Yoshihide Suga yesterday cemented his status as the clear frontrunner in the race to become the country's next prime minister, ahead of a vote expected on September 14.

Suga has yet to officially announce he is running for the top job, after Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said last week he would resign over health problems.

But he has nonetheless already become the favourite, with the largest faction within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party throwing its support behind him yesterday, local media said.

Two other key factions have also said they will back Suga, who is set to make his candidacy official today, when the LDP is expected to confirm the election date.

Local media said candidates will be required to register their run on September 8 -- with campaigning beginning immediately after.

Two candidates, former defence minister Shigeru Ishiba and LDP policy chief Fumio



Kishida, have so far officially announced plans to stand.

The LDP election is for the party leadership, with a parliamentary vote for prime minister following on September 16, reports said. Opposition candidates are expected to stand, but the vote is seen largely as a formality that will endorse the ruling party's choice.

A leadership contest would usually poll ruling-party lawmakers and LDP members nationwide. But the LDP has opted for a constrained format, polling only its MPs and three representatives from each of the country's 47 prefectures.

The decision has elicited some criticism, but party officials said it would take too long to organise a broader vote.

"The prime minister is sick, his illness has re-emerged. He is working hard under very difficult conditions," Shunichi Suzuki, chairman of the party's general council, told reporters on Tuesday.

"If we were to hold a full-scale election, it would take two months. With the prime minister's health, two months is very long. We can't take that long," he said.



An Israeli soldier kneeling on a Palestinian demonstrator to arrest him during a protest against Jewish settlements in Jbarah village south of Tulkarm in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, yesterday. Despite an outrage over kneeling arrests after the death of a Black American in US, the practice is widely used against Palestinian protesters by Israeli forces.

PHOTO: REUTERS

UAE 'betrayed' Muslim world with Israel deal

Says Khamenei

AFP, Tehran

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei yesterday accused the United Arab Emirates of betraying the Muslim world with its agreement to normalise relations with Tehran's arch-foe Israel.

"The #UAE betrayed the world of Islam, the Arab nations, the region's countries, and #Palestine," Khamenei said, according to his official Twitter account.

"Of course, this betrayal won't last long but the stigma will stay with them," he added in a series of tweets.

In the agreement, only the third such deal it has struck with an Arab country, Israel pledged to suspend annexation of Palestinian lands.



But Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stressed that did not mean Israel was abandoning plans to annex the Jordan Valley and Jewish settlements across the occupied West Bank.

"I hope the Emiratis soon wake up and compensate for what they have done," Khamenei said. "The UAE rulers opened the door of the region to the Zionists, and they have ignored and normalised the question of Palestine."

It was Khamenei's first reaction to the deal.

His remarks came after a US-Israeli delegation landed in Abu Dhabi on Monday on the first direct commercial flight from Tel Aviv to mark the normalisation of ties, with Saudi Arabia allowing the flight to cross its airspace.

The Israeli press gave an emotional thumbs-up yesterday to the event calling it "the flight of peace."

MANDARIN-BASED CURRICULUM IN SCHOOL

Ethnic Chinese Mongolians protest to save identity

AFP, Beijing

Tens of thousands of people in an ethnic Mongolian region of northern China have joined rare protests and school boycotts against a new curriculum they fear will wipe out their minority culture, residents said yesterday.

The policy change in Inner Mongolia means all ethnic minority schools in the remote region will now be required to teach core subjects in Mandarin rather than Mongolian, echoing similar moves in Tibet and Xinjiang to assimilate local minorities into the dominant Han Chinese population.

"Almost every Mongolian in Inner Mongolia is opposed to the revised curriculum," a 32-year-old herder from Xilingol League, who gave his surname as Hu, told AFP, warning Mongolian children were losing fluency in their mother tongue.

"In a few decades, a minority language will be on the verge of extinction."

Tensions flared across the vast grassland region bordering Mongolia and Russia after the policy was

announced by the Inner Mongolia Education Bureau last Wednesday.

Mass demonstrations, with hundreds of parents and students facing off against police, have erupted across the region, according to video clips provided by residents to AFP.



while thousands of students have boycotted classes.

Enghebatu Togochog, director of the New York-based NGO Southern Mongolian Human Rights Organization, called the protests a "civil disobedience resistance movement" that has spread throughout Inner Mongolia, home to more than four million ethnic Mongolians who

make up 16 percent of the region's population.

"Parents are refusing to send their children to schools that use Chinese as the only language of instruction," he said.

WeChat messages and photos of petitions against the policy written in the traditional vertical Mongolian script have been mass-censored by authorities in recent days, he added.

The Inner Mongolia Education Bureau did not respond to faxed requests for comment. It claimed in a Monday post that the number of Mongolian-language teaching hours remained unchanged.

It is the only region left in the world that uses the traditional Mongolian script, as neighbouring Mongolia adopted the Cyrillic alphabet under Soviet influence.

For decades, the region's bilingual curriculum for ethnic minority schools offered a full range of subjects taught in Mongolian, as well as Mandarin, English and Korean classes.

AUSTRALIA'S PUSH TO MAKE TECH GIANTS PAY FOR CONTENT

FB threatens to block users, media from news sharing

AFP, Sydney

Facebook yesterday threatened to block users and media organisations in Australia from sharing news stories in an escalating challenge to government plans to force digital giants to pay for content.

Australians would be stopped from posting local and international articles on Facebook and Instagram, the company said, claiming the move was "not our first choice" but the "only way to protect against an outcome that defies logic".

Government officials quickly shot back, with Treasurer Josh Frydenberg rejecting what he called "coercion or heavy-handed threats" from the social media giant.

Rod Sims, head of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), which drew up the draft law, called the threat "ill-timed and misconceived".

In one of the most aggressive moves by any government to curb the power of US digital giants, Canberra has drawn up legislation to force Facebook and Google to pay struggling local news organisations for content or face millions of dollars in fines.

The measures would also force transparency around the closely guarded algorithms that tech firms use to rank

content.

Facebook Australia and New Zealand managing director Will Easton said the proposed overhaul "misunderstands the dynamics of the internet and will do damage to the very news organisations the government is trying to protect".

Google has also campaigned forcefully against the proposed changes, creating pop-ups on the search engine warning "the way Aussies use Google is at risk" and urging YouTube users around the world to complain to Australian authorities.

The legislation, due to be passed into law this year, will initially focus on Facebook and Google -- two of the world's richest and most powerful companies -- but could eventually apply to any digital platform.

The initiative has been closely watched around the globe as news media worldwide have suffered in an increasingly digital economy, where advertising revenue is overwhelmingly captured by Facebook, Google and other big tech firms.

The crisis has been exacerbated by the economic collapse caused by the coronavirus pandemic, with dozens of Australian newspapers closed and hundreds of journalists sacked in recent months.