



Panetta touts US military ties at Asean

AFP, Siam Reap

US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta yesterday sought to promote Washington's strategic shift to the Asia-Pacific and a tentative rapprochement with Myanmar as he met counterparts in the region. The US tilt to Asia reflects a concerted effort by President Barack Obama's administration to assert American influence in the face of China's growing economic and military might. "The message I have conveyed on this visit is that the United States' rebalance to the Asia-Pacific is real, it is sustainable, and it will be ongoing for a long period of time," Panetta said. The Pentagon would increase the size and number of its defence exercises with its Southeast Asian partners, he told the 10-nation regional bloc.

Israeli APC armored personnel carries are stationed at the Israeli-Gaza Strip border yesterday. Israeli officials said the Jewish state was preparing to launch its first ground offensive in four years into the Gaza Strip.

PHOTO: AFP



Egypt backs under-fire Gazans

World divided as Israel calls up reserves; death toll hits 23

STAR DESK

Egyptian leaders yesterday promised to support Gaza against Israeli attacks, as violence escalated for a third day amid fears that the violence escalate into a full-blown war. President Mohammed Morsi said he would not leave Gaza on its own and condemned Israel's "blatant aggression", hours after his prime minister visited Gaza. Israel mounted a huge attack overnight, targeting dozens of locations. Later, Gaza militants targeted Tel Aviv with a missile but there were no casualties. Israel targeted more than 130 locations in an overnight assault it said was aimed at knocking out rocket-firing facilities. Sporadic Israeli air strikes have continued throughout yesterday, and militants in Gaza have fired dozens of rockets. Twenty Palestinians and three Israelis have been killed since Wednesday. Fuelling the tension, the Israeli army yesterday began an initial draft of 16,000 reservists,

after the government authorised the call-up of 30,000. Rumours have been swirling that a ground attack is imminent, but Israeli officials have said no decision has yet been made. Militants and civilians, including at least five children, were among the Palestinian dead, Palestinian officials said. They include Hamas's military leader Ahmed Jabari, killed by an Israeli air strike on Wednesday following a surge in rocket attacks from Gaza. The conflict has already divided the world opinion with West backing the Israel and Arab leaders condemning the attack. Iran and Egypt led the angry protests. Morsi sent Prime Minister Hisham Qandil to the territory for a three-hour visit yesterday to show solidarity with the Palestinians. "Egypt will not leave Gaza on its own, and what is happening is a blatant aggression against humanity," the president said shortly after Qandil returned from Gaza. Tehran called on the United Nations and the European Union to halt the "barbaric" offen-

sive against the Gaza Strip. The call was made in separate letters to UN chief Ban Ki-moon, EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, IRNA reported. An emergency UN meeting concluded Wednesday without a decision and clear signals of concern over the first escalation of Middle East violence since the 2011 Arab Spring altered the political map of the historically volatile region. The United States called Thursday on Egypt, Turkey and European powers to press Hamas to end bloodshed in Gaza, putting the onus on the Islamist movement to end rocket attacks on Israel. British, France and Germany have expressed concerns but put their support behind Tel Aviv. But West's regional allies were not happy. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu called the Israeli offensive a "crime against humanity".

Xi raises hopes, but reform outlook bleak

AFP, Beijing

China's Xi Jinping yesterday hinted at a more open style as he took the reins of the Communist Party, but conservatives on his leadership team could limit his scope for reform, analysts said. In a speech that introduced China's new leader to his country and the world, Xi indicated a desire to improve relations with the international community which has grown concerned by Beijing's growing economic and military clout. "China needs to learn more about the world and the world needs to learn more about China," he said, looking relaxed and confident after emerging at the helm of a seven-man Politburo Standing Committee (PSC), the nation's top decision-making body. But many of its members are seen as traditionalists, despite growing calls for action on corruption, enforcement of the rule of law, and an overhaul of China's economic model as growth stutters. "The line-up reflects considerable conservatism," said Joseph Cheng, a political analyst at City University of Hong Kong. "Everything will depend on Xi Jinping and whether he exercises leadership. Will he be someone who can introduce reforms? I'm still very sceptical." In his speech -- a marked departure from the dry, jargon-laden lectures of his predecessor Hu Jintao -- Xi spoke of the people's desires for better education and health care, more stable jobs and a better environment. But Chinese political observer Bo Zhiyue of the National University of Singapore cast doubt on the prospects for change. "I don't think we can name individuals as reformers or conservatives, in China if the environment is conservative then everyone is a conservative, and if the environment is reformist then everyone is a reformist. "There has been no shift in the last 10 years, and we can't now expect anything different. There is not going to be substantial reform."

China held straw poll to select leaders

REUTERS, Beijing

China's ruling Communist Party has lifted the lid on the opaque backroom selection of the country's top leaders, revealing that it had held a straw poll for the first time in May to decide on the membership of its top decision-making body. The party, which has held power since 1949, has flirted with what it calls intra-party democracy as it strives to maintain its legitimacy in the face of widespread corruption, growing social unrest and rising inequality, even as the world's second biggest economy bounds ahead. The party held a meeting of leading cadres in Beijing in May and "democratically recommended" members of the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee and the 25-seat Politburo, state news agency Xinhua said late on Thursday. Such a poll hardly signals a desire for democratic political reforms, but it suggests that the party is trying to increase accountability and subjecting its members to more checks and balances.

Hillary to testify on Benghazi attack

AFP, Washington

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will testify before US lawmakers about September's deadly attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, US lawmakers and officials said Thursday. The officials did not provide further details, such as when Hillary will appear. It is widely expected that Hillary will step down from her post near the beginning of President Barack Obama's second term in late January. Republican lawmakers have pressed for Clinton to testify on the Benghazi crisis. Hillary said on October 16 that she took responsibility for the incident, and has launched a comprehensive review of security operations at the US mission in Libya. She has already appeared before lawmakers when she briefed them behind closed-doors shortly after the attack, which has now been linked to militants with ties to al-Qaeda. Meanwhile, ex-CIA chief David Petraeus was to testify before lawmakers yesterday about the September 11 assault, his first public appearance since resigning in disgrace a week ago.

INDIAN POLL 2014 Congress party gets battle ready

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Although next parliamentary elections in India are 18 months away, the country's ruling Congress party can take the credit for being the first off the block to get battle ready. By announcing the appointment of her son Rahul Gandhi as the head of the Congress' Coordination Committee that will oversee all party activities related to the elections due in 2014, Congress President Sonia Gandhi not only quickly delivered on her promise to gear up the party for the big electoral battle, a promise she had made just a week ago, but signalled the beginning of the party's poll preparations in earnest. Senior Congress party leader and external affairs minister Salman Khurshid yesterday welcomed the elevation of Rahul Gandhi, describing him as the Congress's new commander. Besides appointment of Rahul as the head of the six-member coordination committee, what further reinforced the perception that Congress has moved into election mode was Sonia Gandhi's announcement about the formation of three other separate sub-groups on pre-poll alliances, manifesto and communication and publicity. An organizational reshuffle of the party is also on the cards, possibly before the start of the winter session of Parliament starting on November 22. The most talked-about announcement made by Sonia Gandhi on Thursday night was, of course, the appointment of Rahul as the Coordination Committee head, which political analysts see as not only formalizing his role as the party's mascot for the next parliamentary elections but as a precursor to his possible projection as Congress' prime ministerial candidate.



WAR CRIMES UN court frees Croatian generals

AFP, The Hague

A UN court yesterday acquitted Croatian ex-generals Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markac of war crimes during the bloody 1990s breakup of Yugoslavia, to shouts and tears of joy from their supporters and outrage in Serbia. Gotovina and Markac, considered heroes in Croatia, were last year jailed for 24 and 18 years respectively for the murder of Croatian Serbs during their country's struggle for independence and the bloody break-up of Yugoslavia.

NEWS IN brief

Japan PM dissolves parliament

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda dissolved the lower house of parliament yesterday for an election next month, in a political gamble widely expected to strip his centre-left party of power. Japan's sixth new prime minister in as many years set the revolving door of premiership spinning despite resistance from his fragmenting party, but after having stared down his opponents over crucial legislation. A later cabinet meeting endorsed December 16 as election day.

Petraeus scandal: CIA opens probe

AFP, Washington

The CIA has launched an internal inquiry following the resignation of its director David Petraeus, who confessed to an extramarital affair, a spokesman for the US intelligence agency said Thursday. Petraeus resigned last week to pre-empt the revelation that he had had an affair with his biographer. Petraeus has yet to speak publicly, but he told a friend that he had never passed secret documents to his lover.

Meat bad for morals!

AFP, Mumbai

The pros and cons of meat-eating may be the subject of debate for nutritionists, but one Indian school textbook is clear: a fleshy diet will make you lie, steal and even commit sex crimes. The unusual moral guidance appeared in a school book for 11-year-olds, purporting to offer education on issues from health and hygiene to sex education and exercise, the NDTV news channel reported. On a page about non-vegetarians, the book said that they "easily cheat, tell lies, they forget promises, they are dishonest and tell bad words, steal, fight and turn to violence and commit sex crimes". It also claimed that "it is the waste products which largely produce the flavour of meat".

DR Congo clashes kills 150 rebels

BBC ONLINE

More than 150 rebels have been killed in fighting with government forces in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the regional governor has told the BBC. Julien Paluku said the fighting was continuing on yesterday morning near the main regional city, Goma. Thousands of people have fled the latest fighting, he said. 2 more self immolations in China

AFP, Beijing

Two Tibetans were reported to have set themselves on fire in protest against Chinese rule, said a rights group, on the same day the Communist Party unveiled its new generation of leaders. If confirmed, the incidents would bring the total number of people setting themselves on fire in Tibetan areas to 12 in ten days, since Wednesday last week -- the day before the start of the 18th Communist Party congress in Beijing.



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