

NEWSIN brief

Israel to re-engage with UNHRC

AFP, Geneva

Israel has vowed to re-engage with the UN Human Rights Council, six months after it became the first country to boycott a review of its rights record, an official said yesterday. "The president (of the Human Rights Council) received a letter from Israel this week to express the desire to re-engage discussion to come back to the Human Rights Council," the UN body's spokesman told reporters.

Ex-French PM Pierre Mauroy dies

AFP, Paris

Former French Socialist prime minister Pierre Mauroy, whose reforming government conducted a slew of pathbreaking social reforms, has died at the age of 84, it was announced yesterday. Mauroy, who was premier between 1981 and 1984 under France's first Socialist president Francois Mitterrand, had undergone surgery in April last year for a cancerous tumour in his lung.

18 killed in India bus accident

TNN, Shimla

Eighteen people were killed and 14 others injured, some of them seriously, when a bus rolled down in a 500 feet deep gorge in Sangrah Tehsil of Sirmaur district of Himachal Pradesh yesterday. Sources said that the ill-fated bus carrying 40 passengers was on its way from Punradhar to Solan when the mishap took place. Sources said the death toll is likely to rise.

Prince Philip to undergo surgery

AFP, London

Queen Elizabeth II's husband Prince Philip was to undergo exploratory surgery on his abdomen yesterday after spending the night in a London hospital, raising fresh questions about his health. The Duke of Edinburgh, who turns 92 on Monday, was admitted to the private London Clinic on Thursday for what Buckingham Palace said was a planned operation under general anaesthetic.

Tropical Storm drenches Florida

AFP, Miami

Tropical storm Andrea dumped heavy rains on Florida Thursday and threatened to bring high winds and rough seas to much of the US East Coast after earlier tearing across western Cuba. The storm could whip up tornadoes in central and southern Florida, the NHC said.

First woman in space ready for Mars trip



AFP, Star City

Russia's Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman to go to space, yesterday said she was ready to score another coup and fly to Mars, even if it would be just a one-way trip. "Mars is my favourite planet," the 76-year old told a news conference in Zvyozdny Gorodok (Star City) outside Moscow, home to a cosmonaut training centre. Tereshkova, who became a national heroine at the tender age of 26 when she made a solo space flight in 1963, said she had been part of the group who studied the possibility of going to the Red Planet. "But we know the human limits. And for us this remains a dream. Most likely the first flight will be one way. But I am ready," she said. Under the call sign Chaika (Seagull), Tereshkova during her three-day mission circled the Earth 48 times, her flight becoming a major propaganda coup for the Soviet Union. On June 16, Russia will celebrate the 50th anniversary of Tereshkova's historic flight. In 1961, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first man to go to space.



Chinese President Xi Jinping, centre, his wife lady Peng Liyuan and Mexico's President Enrique Pena Nieto walks during a tour at archaeological site of Chichen itza, State of Yucatan on Thursday. Xi was to meet his American counterpart President Barack Obama in a desert oasis in California, USA for an unusually relaxed US-China summit, called to forge some personal chemistry between the two men.

PHOTO: AFP

UN in record Syria aid appeal as crisis deepens

AFP, Damascus

The United Nations launched a record \$5.2-billion aid appeal for Syria yesterday as regime forces sought to capitalise on recent victories over the rebels, sending reinforcements to battlefields Homs and Aleppo. The world body, meanwhile, scrambled to find replacement troops for its peacekeeping mission on the Golan Heights after heavy fighting between regime forces and rebels near its headquarters on Thursday prompted Austria to announce it was pulling out. The sum sought by the UN by far overshadows the \$2.2 billion (1.7 billion euros) that it appealed for in 2003 to help cope with the crisis sparked by the war in Iraq. But UN officials said the number of people in need inside Syria and in neighbouring countries was set to spiral as the conflict drags on for a third year. The world body said that a total of \$3.8 billion was needed to help

Syrian refugees who have spilled across the country's borders to escape fighting in their homeland. The figure for operations inside Syria, meanwhile, was \$1.4 billion. More than 94,000 people have been killed and some 1.6 million Syrians have fled the country since the civil war began in March 2011 after a crackdown on protests against President Bashar al-Assad's regime. The number of refugees is expected to reach at least 3.45 million by the end of this year, according to the UN appeal. Within the country, a total of 6.8 million people are forecast to need aid this year, the majority of them people who have been forced to flee their homes because of the fighting. Syria's pre-war population was 20.8 million. Syrian government forces were trying to mop up final pockets of rebel resistance north of Qusayr, the border town which they retook on Wednesday bolstered by Lebanese Hezbollah fighters.

HRW slams India's spying on online activities

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian government move to implement blanket eavesdropping of online activities, telephone calls and text messages is "chilling", Human Rights Watch said yesterday as controversy raged in the US about Internet surveillance. The Central Monitoring System was announced in parliament late last year and is a so-called "single window" allowing Indian state bodies such as the National Investigation Agency or tax authorities to monitor communications. New York-based Human Rights Watch demanded a full public debate about "the intended use of the system before proceeding" as the monitoring was created without parliamentary approval. In December 2012, the Indian government said in a statement its monitoring system would "lawfully intercept Internet and telephone services". A government spokesman declined to comment Wednesday on media reports that the government had begun rolling out the system.

Obama and Xi to meet in California

BBC ONLINE

Chinese President Xi Jinping has reached in California for summit talks with US President Barack Obama. The two-day meeting, at a private estate, is the first between the two since Xi became president in March. The informal setting is seen as a chance for the leaders of the world's largest economies to build a rapport amid a slew of high-stakes issues. Cyber espionage is expected to top the agenda, with North Korea, Asian security and trade also key topics. US lawmakers and human rights groups have also urged Obama to call for the release of 16 high-profile prisoners, including jailed Nobel peace laureate Liu Xiaobo. Xi's US stop is the fourth leg of a trip that has taken him to Trinidad and Tobago, Costa Rica and Mexico. Accompanied by his wife, folk singer Peng Liyuan, he arrived at California's Ontario International Airport on Thursday. The summit, at the sprawling Sunnylands estate in the Mojave desert, is expected to begin on yesterday afternoon local time and include a private dinner between the two leaders. Further talks will be held today. The meeting comes months earlier than expected -- Obama and Mr Xi had been expected to meet at an economic summit in Russia in September.

"I have the impression that both sides are willing to re-examine their premises, and to see whether they can achieve a relationship based on some perspective that goes beyond the moment -- in other words that goes beyond solving immediate problems," former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger told the BBC. Ahead of the summit, White House officials told reporters hacking would be raised, amid growing concern in the US over alleged intrusions from China in recent months. Last month the Washington Post reported that Chinese hackers had accessed designs for more than two dozen US weapons systems, citing a confidential Pentagon report. The US also directly accused Beijing of targeting US government computers as part of a cyber espionage campaign in a report in early May. China denies any role in state-sponsored hacking -- earlier this week its internet chief said China had "mountains of data" pointing to US-based cyber attacks. Trade issues are also expected to be a priority, as is North Korea -- which conducted its third nuclear test in February. Beijing - Pyongyang's nominal ally -- is seen as the only nation capable of bringing meaningful pressure to bear on the communist state. Other topics up for discussion may include territorial disputes in Asia and human rights in China.

Turkey PM says open to 'democratic demands'

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday said his Islamic-rooted government opposed violence and was open to "democratic demands" raised by demonstrators whose mass protests have rocked the country. "What we are against is terrorism, violence, vandalism and actions that threaten others for the sake of freedoms," Erdogan said in a televised conference in Istanbul. "I'm open-hearted to anyone with democratic demands." Appealing to activists campaigning to save an Istanbul park, a campaign that sparked the nationwide unrest, he urged



those with environmental concerns to join him. "I know what environmentalism means," the former Istanbul mayor said. "Being an environmentalist is not vandalism. Being an environmentalist is not killing people." Doctors say thousands of people have been injured as police have fired tear-gas and water cannon at stone-throwing protesters across the country. European Union Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fule told Erdogan at the same Istanbul conference that excessive police force against demonstrators "has no place" in a democracy.



Brazil's Mundurucus natives scuffle with security in front of presidential palace during a demonstration opposing the construction of the Belo Monte dam in the Amazon on Thursday. Five indigenous tribes are calling for legislation under which they would have to be consulted prior to any official decision affecting them with respect to the dam's construction. The dam, which is being built at a cost of \$13 billion, is expected to flood an area of 500 square km along the Xingu River, displacing 16,000 people, according to the government.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan violates ceasefire

Says Indian army officer

AGENCIES

Pakistani troops yesterday shot and killed an Indian army officer near the countries' disputed border in the Himalayan region of Kashmir, an Indian army officer said. A junior commissioned officer (JCO) was killed when Pakistan opened heavy fire with automatic weapons and rockets on Indian posts along the LoC in Poonch sector on Friday, in the third ceasefire violation in a fortnight, he added. The firing incident came two days after Pakistan's parliament elected Nawaz Sharif as prime minister and he promised to seek good relations with neighbouring India. Sharif said after taking the reins that his government would "progressively pursue" good relations with India while actively seeking solutions to issues with India like disputed Kashmir. The dead man, named as Bachan Singh was posted in Poonch region at Saujaya, 200 kilometers southwest of Indian-administered Kashmir's summer capital of Srinagar. Pakistani troops opened heavy firing with automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) on Indian posts along the LoC in Subjain subsector of Poonch at around 1pm, the officer said.

Putin's divorce announcement takes Russia by surprise

AFP, Moscow

Russians yesterday reeled from the shock announcement by President Vladimir Putin that his 30-year marriage was over, a breakup that was long an open secret but few imagined would ever be made public. In a highly choreographed joint interview with state television after attending a ballet together, Putin's wife Lyudmila said they were having a "civilised divorce" and revealed that the pair hardly ever saw each other. Lyudmila said she was grateful to Putin for supporting her, while Putin praised the fact she had "stood guard" for the almost nine years he has served as president. "We are always going to be very close to each other. I am sure, forever," said the Russian strongman. It was an extraordinarily frank statement for any Russian politician, whose private lives are generally out of bounds. But particularly for Putin, who lives in such secrecy that he has never been officially photographed with his two adult daughters. The announcement unleashed speculation about whether Putin is seeing another



woman, a subject that has so far been taboo. Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied the 60-year-old president was planning to remarry, telling the Echo of Moscow radio station: "I can say for sure that this is more about rumours and tittle-tattle." The Moskovsky Korrespondent newspaper, owned by tycoon Alexander Lebedev, reported in 2008 that Putin was about to marry Olympic gymnast turned legislator Alina Kabayeva, 31 years his junior. The paper then denied its own story and was closed by its owner. The reason for the timing of the announcement is unclear.

Hungary braces for worst ever floods

AFP, Muehlberg

Germany's race to shore up dams on swollen rivers shifted to the north yesterday while Hungary braced for a record flood surge as other central European regions began counting the cost of the deadly flooding. Volunteers, rescuers and soldiers in northern German states feverishly piled up sandbags along the Elbe river which has already deluged vast stretches with seas of brown water from the Czech Republic to eastern Germany. Hungarians reinforced dykes along the Danube through the night ahead of an expected record flood in the capital, Budapest, in Europe's worst river flooding in over a decade that has forced mass evacuations and killed at least 12. While the Danube had already reached record levels in western Hungary early yesterday, Budapest was expected to bear the brunt after the weekend amid predictions the river would rise to more than double the level usual for the time of year. "It is now clear that we are facing the worst floods of all time," said Prime Minister Viktor Orban in a statement after spending the night in a military barracks in the deluged western city of Győr. After days of flooding in southern and eastern Germany, more than 11,000 soldiers have been deployed to help. German Chamber of Trade and Industry head Eric Schweitzer said in Friday's Rheinische Post newspaper that in some regions the damage was expected to be greater than in the 2002 floods whose economic cost had amounted to \$15 billion.

ODDLY enough

Pope never wanted the Vatican job!

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis joked about the difficulties of being head of the world's Catholics saying he never wanted the job on Friday in unscripted comments in which he also said he had turned down luxury Vatican housing because it would be "boring". "Someone who wants to be pope does not really like themselves," the pontiff said laughing, in answer to a child's query during a question-and-answer session with Jesuit school students in the Vatican. "I did not want to be pope," he said.

Hollande mixes up Japan with China

AFP, Tokyo

France's Francois Hollande was left red-faced in Tokyo yesterday after a slip of the tongue that saw him confuse his Japanese hosts with the Chinese. During a press conference Hollande, speaking in French, referred to the Algerian hostage crisis in January in which 10 Japanese nationals died, saying he had "expressed the condolences of the French people to the Chinese people." The president, who is in Japan on a three-day state visit, made no attempt to correct his mistake.