

Russia, China sign

\$270b oil deal

AFP, Saint-petersburg

Russian oil giant Rosneft and Chinese state firm CNPC yesterday signed a \$270 billion deal to supply China with oil over 25 years, an agreement hailed by Russian President Vladimir Putin as marking a new era of energy cooperation.

The agreement was signed by Rosneft chief executive Igor Sechin and CNPC head Zhou Jiping in the presence of Putin and visiting Chinese Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli at the annual Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum.

Greek coalition splits over TV row

AFP, Athens

Greece's coalition government lost its smallest partner yesterday after emergency talks failed to break a deadlock caused by the dramatic closure of state broadcaster ERT last week.

The pullout of Democratic Left, which has 14 deputies in the 300-seat parliament, leaves the conservatives and socialists with a combined strength of 153 MPs, just enough to keep control of the chamber.

Mandela improving: Mbeki

AFP, Johannesburg

Anti-apartheid icon Nelson Mandela is improving in hospital as he fights a recurrent lung infection and is not 'going to die tomorrow,' former South African president Thabo Mbeki has said.

The 94-year-old who became South Africa's first black president was spending his 14th day in hospital where he has been listed in serious condition.

Israel chief rabbi under house arrest

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yona Metzger has been put under house arrest after a marathon grilling by detectives on suspicion of bribery, theft and breach of trust, police said yesterday.

Metzger has been the subject of months of covert investigations involving three other suspects, according to police. Israel has two chief rabbis, the Ashkenazi and Sephardi, whose responsibilities include the country's rabbinical courts and regulating the food supervision industry.

Mt Etna wins World Heritage status



AFP, Phnom Penh

Italy's Mount Etna, one of the world's most "active and iconic" volcanoes, was granted World Heritage status by UNESCO yesterday.

The tallest active volcano on the European continent at 3,300 meters, Mount Etna has been written about for 2,700 years and has "one of the world's longest documented records of historical volcanism," according to UNESCO.

The volcano, in the east of Sicily, is one of the most-studied in the world and "continues to influence volcanology, geophysics and other earth science disciplines", UNESCO added.

Situated near Catania, Sicily's second city, the volcano was created by a series of eruptions beneath the sea off the ancient coastline of Sicily some 500,000 years ago. There are still periodic eruptions at the central crater.

UNESCO is currently holding a 10-day annual meeting in Phnom Penh at which is considering whether to add 31 sites to the 962-strong World Heritage List of sites of "outstanding universal value".



BRAZIL'S TROPICAL SPRING

People march in downtown Rio de Janeiro on Thursday, during a protest what is now called the 'Tropical Spring' against corruption and price hikes. Brazilians took to the streets again on a new day of mass nationwide protests yesterday demanding better public services and bemoaning massive spending to stage the World Cup.

● PHOTO: AFP



US-Russia talks on Syria next week: UN

Rebels say they received 'game changer' arms

AGENCIES

Senior US and Russian officials will meet the international mediator on Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, in Geneva on Tuesday to discuss a peace conference, a UN spokeswoman said yesterday.

"Any talk, any discussion is a positive sign," UN spokeswoman Corinne Mamal-Vanian told a news briefing in the Swiss city, where a previous round of talks was held on June 5.

However, an international peace conference aimed at ending the conflict in Syria, first muted in June or July, is unlikely to take place before August after G8 leaders clashed with Russia over the nature of a transitional government.

Meanwhile, a spokesman for the Free Syrian Army yesterday told AFP that Syrian rebels had recently received new weapons that could "change the course of the battle" against the Syrian regime.

"We've received quantities of new types of weapons, including some that we asked for

and that we believe will change the course of the battle on the ground," FSA political and media coordinator Louay Muqdad said.

"We have begun distributing them on the front lines, they will be in the hands of professional officers and FSA fighters," he said.

He did not specify what weapons had been received or when they had arrived, but added that a new shipment was expecting in coming days.

The apparent influx of weapons comes after the United States said it would provide rebel forces with "military support".

"The weapons will be used for one objective, which is to fight the regime of (President) Bashar al-Assad," Muqdad insisted.

"They will be collected after the fall of the regime, we have made this commitment to the friends and brotherly countries" who supplied the weapons, he said.

On Thursday, Muqdad said rebels needed short-range ground-to-air missiles, surface-to-air missiles known as MANPADS, anti-tank missiles, mortars and ammunition.

Mumbai apt. block collapses; 10 killed

AFP, Mumbai

An apartment block collapsed in Mumbai's outskirts yesterday, killing at least 10 people in the latest deadly incident to fuel concerns about the quality of construction in the booming Indian city.

Rescue workers were using hand-held wire cutters and excavators to search through the rubble for survivors after the building on Mumbai's outskirts collapsed while many of its residents were sleeping, officials said.

Police said a probe was under way into the cause of what was the third building collapse in recent months in the Mumbai area, including one in April that killed 74 people.

Talk shows similar to pornography!

TNN, Burdwan/kolkata

Unable to handle the rebuff from activists over a rape allegation, chief minister Mamata Banerjee launched an unprecedented attack on intellectuals on Thursday, saying TV talk shows were fielded by "rogue" channels and a section of the panelists were "associated with pornography".

Mamata's remark linking talk-show guests with pornography came at an election meeting in Burdwan's Galsi, soon after eminent citizens held a rally in Kolkata against the government for "failing the women of the state".

The CM did not name anyone, but said that the talk shows thrived on "enthusiastic discourse on sexual crimes" and were an insult to women. "There are two three rogue channels that don't have credentials. They have been running talk shows on rapes that are difficult to watch with children. They have panelists who take pleasure in discussing rape. Ora samajsebi noi, ora takasebi (they don't work for the society but only for money)," she said.

Criticism of the CM was swift and scathing. Union minister of state Deepa Das Munshi said Mamata should "see a psychiatrist". CPM leader Manab Mukherjee described her comment as the "real face of Mamata Banerjee".



Attack kills 15 at Pak Shia mosque

MQM lawmaker shot dead in Karachi

AFP, Peshawar

A suicide attack yesterday killed 15 people and wounded more than 25 others at a Shia Muslim mosque and religious seminary on the edge of Pakistan's northwestern city of Peshawar, officials said.

The bomber struck in the largely Shia area of Gulshan Colony on the outskirts of the city, which abuts Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked strongholds in the northwestern tribal belt on the Afghan border.

"It was a suicide attack in which 15 people were killed and more than 25 others were wounded," senior police official Shafiqullah told AFP at the scene.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility, but attacks waged by Sunni Muslim extremists against Pakistan's minority Shia community are on the rise.

In Pakistan's business capital of Karachi, gunmen shot dead a provincial lawmaker, his son and a passer-by outside a mosque.

Sajid Qureshi, a member of the secular Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), in his early 50s, and his 25-year-old son were targeted after Friday prayers in the congested Nazim Abad neighbourhood.



A backhoe crushes elephant tusks at the wildlife bureau compound in Manila yesterday. The Philippines began destroying five tonnes of elephant tusks yesterday in a landmark event aimed at shedding its image as one of the world's worst hotspots for illegal African ivory trading.

PHOTO: AFP

Suu Kyi's presidential hopes face barriers

REUTERS, Yangon

Her adoring compatriots believe democracy champion Aung San Suu Kyi is destined to become Myanmar's next president. But don't bet on it.

A year ago, the Nobel Peace Prize winner was feted at home and abroad and flush from her National League for Democracy (NLD) party's landslide wins in April 2012 by-elections, which swept her into parliament.

Even a military-drafted constitution designed to exclude her from the highest office seemed a surmountable hurdle.

Now the journey from political prisoner to president appears much less certain, even as her ambition is clearer than ever.

"I want to be president and I'm quite frank about it," she told journalists at the World Economic Forum in the capital Naypyitaw on June 6.

But to emerge as president after a 2015 general election, Suu Kyi, 68, must overcome challenges that would daunt a less formidable political survivor.

She must convince a military-dominated parliament to amend the constitution. Even if she can do that, and the constitution can be amended in time, she could then face a voter backlash over her position on a violent and widening rift between her nation's Buddhists and minority Muslims.

Her rare public expressions of support for Muslims put her in a politically fraught position in the Buddhist-majority country.

Some people wonder if the violence is being exploited by conservative opponents to chip away at her support.

Suu Kyi's most difficult problem is the constitution. It bars anyone married to a foreigner or who has children who are foreign citizens. Suu Kyi and her husband, the late British academic Michael Aris, had two children who are British.

Any constitutional amendment would require 75 percent support in parliament - no easy task when the constitution also reserves a quarter of seats for the military. If passed by parliament, an amendment must win more than half the vote in a referendum. Some analysts say there just isn't enough time to do all that before the 2015 election.

But even if she can pull off the amendments, the reality of partisan politics could threaten Suu Kyi's presidential hopes.

Islamists gather in Cairo as tension mounts

AFP, Cairo

Tens of thousands of Egyptian Islamists gathered in a show of strength yesterday ahead of planned opposition protests against President Mohamed Morsi, highlighting tense political divisions in the Arab world's most populous state.

Islamist groups led by the powerful Muslim Brotherhood from which Morsi hails, had called the rally ahead of planned June 30 protests to demand an early presidential election.

Morsi has been in office for just one year.

They called the turnout proof that Morsi enjoyed the support of the people. Many Morsi supporters had been bused to Cairo for the event, AFP reporters said.

The Islamists accuse the opposition of being remnants of the regime of ousted president Hosni Mubarak and of seeking to sow chaos.

Morsi was elected after a military-led transition that followed Mubarak's ouster in a 2011 popular uprising.

Spyware 'planted on China blind activist

REUTERS, New York

When Chinese activist Chen Guangcheng arrived in the United States in May last year he was given a fellowship at New York University, use of a Greenwich Village apartment, and a pile of gifts from supporters, including smartphones and an iPad.

But at least two of the gadgets presented to Chen as gifts may not have been quite what they seemed: They included software intended to spy on the blind dissident, according to Jerome Cohen, an NYU professor who has been Chen's mentor, and another source familiar with the episode.

Like nearly everything surrounding Chen these days, the existence of the spyware is in dispute, and only adds to the public recriminations there have been between NYU and Chen's supporters over events surrounding the end of his fellowship.

Last weekend, Chen accused NYU of bowing to pressure from China by ending the fellowship, and his supporters have suggested that the university is wary of displeasing the Chinese authorities because of its plans for a campus in Shanghai. The allegations are vigorously denied by NYU, which says the fellowship was only ever planned to last a year.

The devices were screened by NYU technicians within a few days and were found to have been loaded with hidden spying software, said Cohen, who arranged the fellowship for Chen at NYU Law School, helping defuse a diplomatic crisis between the United States and China after Chen took refuge in the US Embassy in Beijing.

"These people supposedly were out to help him and they gave him a kind of Trojan horse that would have enabled them to monitor his communications secretly," said Cohen.

FLOOD IN INDIA
Near 600 killed; thousands still stranded

AFP, Dehradun

Rescuers recovered scores of bodies from the Ganges river in northern India yesterday, as the death toll from flash floods and landslides neared 600, with thousands of mainly pilgrims and tourists still stranded or missing.

Helicopters and thousands of soldiers have been deployed to rescue more than 35,000 people trapped, the home ministry said, almost one week after floods and landslides from torrential monsoon rains struck the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand.

Raging rivers have swept away houses, buildings and even entire villages, and destroyed bridges and narrow roads leading to pilgrimage towns in the mountainous state known as the "Land of the Gods" for its revered Hindu shrines.

"556 bodies have been noticed by the army... either floating or buried in slush," Vijay Bahuguna, state chief minister told local TV channel CNN-IBN on Friday evening.

Scores of bodies were recovered from the Ganges river earlier on Friday, with the death toll expected to rise further as flood waters recede showing the extent of the devastation and rescue workers reach more isolated areas of the state.

"This kind of disaster has never happened in Himalayan history," Bahuguna said.

Thousands of people, mainly pilgrims and tourists remain stranded or missing, as anxious relatives waited at state capital Dehradun, where military helicopters and other aircraft are assisting with rescue efforts.

ODDLY enough

Toddler survives five-storey fall

BBC ONLINE

Delivery men in Ninghai, in China's Zhejiang province, caught a young child as she fell from a building on Thursday night.

The group heard the little girl's cries from five storeys up.

The men managed to break the toddler's fall by catching her with outstretched arms. At least two of them suffered injuries.

The little girl, on the other hand, managed to escape with just a minor wound on her face.

The parents of the girl, who is named Qiqi, say they left her alone sleeping at home, but she crawled out of the window after she woke up.

Britain had an UFO desk!

AFP, London

Britain's defence ministry shut down its UFO unit four years ago after concluding that extraterrestrials likely did not exist, and in any case did not pose a threat, previously secret files released yesterday showed.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) closed its hotline in 2009 despite a trebling of reported sightings of Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs) that year, many of them near national landmarks.

In a briefing for then defence minister Bob Ainsworth, civil servant Carl Mantell said the UFO desk was using up increasing amounts of staff time but had "no valuable defence output".