

NEWSIN

brief

Malaysia smog at 16-year high

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's government yesterday declared a state of emergency in two southern districts choked by smog from forest fires in Indonesia as air pollution levels reached 16-year-highs. Environment minister G. Palanivel said the air pollutant index (API) hit 750 in the town of Muar -- a 16-year high for Malaysia -- yesterday morning, with two other towns also reaching hazardous levels.

More sites join World Heritage list

AFP, Phnom Penh

A dozen Renaissance villas built by Italy's powerful Medici family and monuments from North Korea's medieval city of Kaesong were granted World Heritage status by UNESCO yesterday. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization committee session also listed twelve monuments -- including tombs, fortress walls and a 700-year-old school -- at Kaesong as World Heritage sites.

S Lanka scraps press code amid protests

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president has scrapped a contentious code of conduct for journalists after editors and rights groups condemned it as a further blow to press freedom, government and media sources said yesterday. The new code drawn up by the information ministry sought to prohibit "material against the integrity of the Executive, Judiciary and Legislature". It also warned against the publication of content that "offends against expectations of the public, morality of the country or tend to lower the standards of public taste and morality".

Three quarters of Brazilians back protests

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Three quarters of Brazilians back the wave of nationwide protests against poor public services and corruption that have swept across the country in recent days, a poll said Saturday. According to the Epoca magazine poll, 77 percent cited the high cost of using public transport as the key reason for their dissatisfaction. Forty-seven percent said they were fed up with politicians. On the ground, despite conciliatory remarks by President Dilma Rousseff, fresh protests rocked Brazil Saturday.

Pak Taliban kill 9 foreign tourists

AFP, Islamabad

Gunmen dressed as police killed nine foreign tourists in an unprecedented attack claimed by the Taliban at a remote camp in the Pakistani Himalayas, embarrassing the new government just weeks after it took office. The attackers struck at the foot of one of the world's highest mountains, killing Chinese and Ukrainian climbers in an area of the far-flung north not previously associated with violence or Islamist militancy. The Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility, saying it had set up a new faction to kill foreigners to avenge US drone strikes after its second in command was killed in the north-western tribal belt on the Afghan border. The deaths call into question the future in Pakistan of foreign mountaineering and trekking expeditions, which provide the last vestige of international tourism in a country on the frontline of al-Qaeda and Taliban violence. Officials said nine foreigners, including five Ukrainians and a number of Chinese were killed. One Pakistani also died and one Chinese survivor has been recovered. The climbers were staying at a base camp for Nanga Parbat, which at 8,126 metres, is the second highest mountain in Pakistan and the ninth highest in the world.



A stranded Indian pilgrim is transported across a river using a rope rescue system by Indo-Tibetan Border Police personnel in Govind Ghat yesterday. Bad weather hampered rescue operations yesterday in northern India where up to 1,000 people are feared to have died in landslides and flash floods that have left pilgrims and tourists stranded without food or water.

PHOTO: AFP

China, US trade barbs over hacking charges

AFP, Washington

China and the United States traded hacking charges yesterday as Washington accused Beijing of stealing US intellectual property and the Chinese authorities expressed concern over US cyberattacks. The back-and-forth between the United States and China over cyber spying followed new claims by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden that the US spy agency was snooping on Chinese targets. Snowden told Hong Kong's Sunday Morning Post that US spies had hacked the prestigious Tsinghua University in Beijing -- home to one of six "network backbones" that route all of mainland China's Internet traffic -- and the Hong Kong headquarters of Pacnet, which operates one of the Asia-Pacific region's largest fiber-optic networks. Snowden also said the US spy agency was hacking Chinese mobile phone companies to gather data from millions of text messages.

NSA chief Keith Alexander denied that accusation. Asked if the United States was "losing the cyber war to China," Alexander said: "Our nation has been significantly impacted with intellectual property, the theft of intellectual property by China and others. "That is the most significant transfer of wealth in history." Earlier Sunday, China said it was "gravely concerned" over cyberattacks by US government agencies. Foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying, according to state news agency Xinhua, said the latest reports "again proved that China is the victim of cyberattacks, and we have already lodged representations to the US side." Xinhua meanwhile called the United States the world's "biggest villain" for IT espionage, after the new allegations emerged. Alexander earlier said that Snowden betrayed the trust of Americans and defended the broad surveillance programs as necessary to prevent another terrorist attack.



An anti government protester flashes a victory sign during the clashes between protestors and riot police on Taksim square in Istanbul on Saturday. Turkish police used water cannon to disperse thousands of demonstrators who had gathered anew in Istanbul's Taksim Square, calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

PHOTO: AFP

Egyptian army issues warning to protesters

REUTERS, Cairo

Egypt's army yesterday issued a sharp warning to rival political factions that it may step in to impose order, as clashes ahead of major opposition rallies next week-end saw at least two men shot dead. The statement by the head of the armed forces was a dramatic reminder of the independent power of the military in Egypt, a year after the generals handed authority to a civilian president - Mohamed Mursi, an Islamist who won the country's first free elections following the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in 2011. In a move aimed at both sides in Egypt's polarised politics, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who is also defence minister, stressed that the army was acting to protect the "will of the people" and urged politicians to forge a new national consensus. A military source said fighting



and aggressive rhetoric and damage to property in recent days had prompted the intervention. Sisi met Mursi for what an army spokesman described as a "routine" consultation yesterday. General Sisi, who was promoted into his present post by Morsi last year, said: "There is a state of division in society and the continuation of it is a danger to the Egyptian state and there must be consensus among all. "The will of the Egyptian nation is what governs us and we protect it with honour, and we are completely responsible for protecting it," said Sisi. "We cannot permit a violation of the will of the people." While Islamists point to the legitimacy of their electoral power, opponents accuse the Brotherhood of betraying the Arab Spring revolution by seeking to entrench its power.

US revokes Snowden's passport

AFP, Washington

The United States has revoked former NSA contractor Edward Snowden's passport, a source familiar with the case said yesterday. Snowden, who is wanted on US espionage charges, flew to Moscow from Hong Kong yesterday and is seeking asylum in Ecuador, according to the foreign minister of the South American country. The source declined to provide any further details of the US move to revoke Snowden's passport. Ecuador has been sheltering WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange at its London embassy for the past year. Snowden was charged with espionage by the US authorities last week after revealing details about a vast National Security Agency program of phone and Internet surveillance.

Unidentified 'diplomats' escorting Snowden

Says WikiLeaks; Assange urges support for him

AGENCIES

Unidentified diplomats are escorting former US intelligence operative Edward Snowden in his bid to secure political asylum in Ecuador, website WikiLeaks said yesterday. "Mr Edward Snowden ... has left Hong Kong legally," WikiLeaks said in a statement. "He is bound for the Republic of Ecuador via a safe route for the purposes of asylum, and is being escorted by diplomats and legal advisors from WikiLeaks." Snowden, 30, was to head to Venezuela via Cuba after he arrived in Moscow yesterday, Russian media reported earlier. WikiLeaks, whose founder Julian Assange has spent a year holed up in Ecuador's London embassy, said Snowden's asylum request will be formally processed once he arrives at his final destination. Earlier, Julian Assange called on the world to "step forward and stand with" Edward Snowden, after the NSA whistle-



blower was charged with espionage by US federal prosecutors. In the statement, Assange accuses President Barack Obama of going back on a promise to run a transparent administration and suggests he is the true "traitor" for supposedly betraying a generation of "young, technically minded people" such as Snowden and Bradley Manning. "The US government is spying on each and every one of us, but it is Edward Snowden who is charged with espionage for tipping us off. It is getting to the point where the mark of international distinction and service to humanity is no longer the Nobel Peace Prize, but an espionage indictment from the US Department of Justice," said Assange. "The charging of Edward Snowden is intended to intimidate any country that might be considering standing up for his rights. That tactic must not be allowed to work."

Taliban soften stand on Qatar office after US warning

AP, Kabul

The Taliban yesterday signalled a willingness to meet demands to keep their flag lowered as the US warned on Saturday that their newly opened political office in Qatar might have to be closed as talks aimed at ending nearly 12 years of war in Afghanistan remained in limbo. US Secretary of State John Kerry, on a visit to Qatar, warned that Washington could call on the Taliban to close the office if the rebels failed to live up to their side of peace efforts. A Taliban spokesman yesterday rejected a New York Times story published on Saturday that quoted an unnamed rebel official saying the insurgents were determined to keep the

office's sign and flag that triggered fury in Kabul. The sign used the formal name of "Islamic Emirate Of Afghanistan" from the rebels' 1996-2001 government, and the white Taliban flag was seen by many Afghans as a provocative reminder of the cruelties of Taliban rule. The opening of the Qatar office was intended as a first step towards a peace deal as the US-led Nato combat mission ends next year, but the Afghan government accused the rebels of posing as a government-in-exile. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid yesterday said that the anonymous "Taliban official" quoted in the New York Times did not represent the movement's views.



Abbas accepts PM resignation

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas yesterday accepted the resignation of his prime minister Rami Hamdallah after just over two weeks on the job, plunging his government back into crisis. It was the second time within 10 weeks that a Palestinian prime minister has tendered his resignation over an internal power struggle, and Abbas now has 35 days to find a replacement, officials said. The decision was taken at a meeting between the two men in Ramallah yesterday morning, their third such meeting in 48 hours. The crisis erupted on Thursday when Hamdallah unexpectedly tendered his resignation over what government officials said was a "power struggle" resulting from Abbas's decision to install two deputies working directly under him.

A rare occasion of joy in Palestine

Gaza singer wins Arab Idol

AFP, Gaza City

Tens of thousands of jubilant Palestinians celebrated in the early hours of yesterday after a 23-year-old Gazan singer won the popular Arab Idol talent show that has captivated millions across the Middle East since March. The meteoric rise of Gaza's Mohammed Assaf to snatch the top prize in the pan-Arab singing contest sparked an unprecedented outpouring of joy across the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, unifying an often divided public. The handsome, tuxedo-clad singer immediately dedicated his win to "the Palestinian people, who have been suffering for more than 60 years from (the Israeli) occupation". Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas crowned him a national goodwill ambassador, and the UN agency for Palestinian refugees named him their UNRWA Youth Ambassador. As his name was read out, spontaneous celebrations broke out across Gaza and in the West Bank, where tens of thousands took to the streets, cheering and dancing, car radios blasting the traditional Palestinian song which propelled him to victory as people handed out sweets to passers by.

Kerry begins first India tour

Urges greater role for India on Afghanistan, climate

AFP, New Delhi

US Secretary of State John Kerry yesterday urged a greater role for India on Afghanistan and climate change as he sought to revive stuttering cooperation between the world's two largest democracies.



On his first visit to India as the top US diplomat, Kerry tried a few words in Hindi, pressed his hands in a traditional namaste greeting and quoted Mark Twain who said the diverse land was the sole country all people want to see. Kerry firmly supported an involvement in Afghanistan for India, which is desperate to avoid a return of the Taliban once US troops leave but whose aid and diplomacy are viewed with suspicion by mutual neighbour Pakistan. Kerry said that India had a "central role" in ensuring free elections due in April next year in Afghanistan. A week after a false start in US dialogue with the Taliban, Kerry acknowledged that a final settlement "may be long in coming". Kerry, who will meet the Indian leadership today, devoted most of his speech to climate change in what his aides said was a signal that the scourge will be a top priority for him as secretary of state, much as it was when he was a senator. After expressing his condolences for the victims of devastating floods in northern India, Kerry said that "it appears as if, in many ways, in many places, Mother Nature is telling us to heed the warnings".