

NEWSIN brief

Berlusconi's awaits court verdict

Italy's top court begins crucial hearings for former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi yesterday that could end the billionaire tycoon's parliamentary career and risk upsetting the country's fragile coalition.

TMC sweeps panchayat polls

West Bengal's ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC), led by Mamata Banerjee, swept the panchayat elections in the state yesterday.

Mandela 'improving'

Nelson Mandela continues to show signs of improvement after two months of hospital treatment, the South African presidency said yesterday, but gave no details of his condition after reported scares.

Swiss train crash kills 1, injures 35

Two trains collided head-on Monday in western Switzerland, killing one of the drivers and injuring 35 passengers, at least five of them seriously, police said.

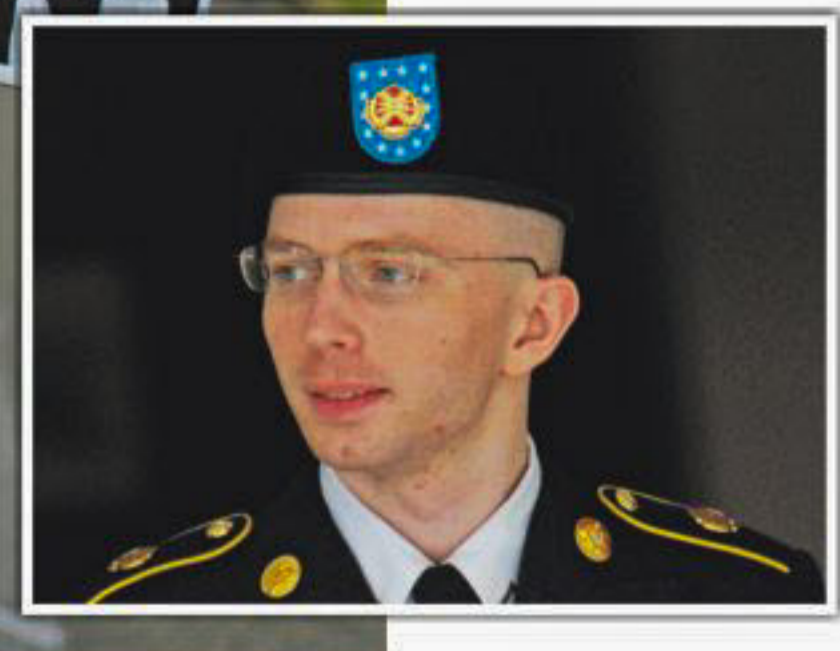
Senate confirms new FBI director

The US Senate on Monday confirmed President Barack Obama's pick to head the FBI at a time of heightened scrutiny of US intelligence operations.



Supporters of US Army Private First Class Bradley Manning protest his detention by marching around the perimeter and blocking the gates of Fort McNair on the final day of closing arguments in his military trial in Washington, DC on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP



Whistleblower or traitor?

US judge to rule in Manning trial

Bradley Manning, the US soldier who risks life in prison for leaking a massive trove of secret US government files to WikiLeaks, is expected to learn the verdict in his trial yesterday.

Lind will decide whether Manning was a traitor who committed espionage against his country or a whistleblower who hoped to shine a spotlight on what he felt was US government misconduct.

Manning was serving as an intelligence analyst in Iraq when he sent WikiLeaks a vast cache of secret diplomatic cables and classified military reports from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The 25-year-old has admitted giving the anti-secrecy website some 700,000 documents, pleading guilty to 10 lesser charges, including espionage and computer fraud, which could carry a prison sentence of up to 20 years.

But Manning has denied other charges, including the most serious one -- that he knowingly helped enemies of the United States, most notably Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda.

If convicted of "aiding the enemy," he could spend the rest of his life in jail. But even without it, the other charges could add up to 154 years imprisonment.

To find Manning guilty of "aiding the enemy," the judge must be convinced beyond reasonable doubt that the soldier knew the documents he leaked could end up in the hands of Al-Qaeda.

In closing arguments, defense attorney David Coombs said Manning was no traitor but a "young, naive and good-intentioned" citizen who wanted to encourage public debate about US foreign policy.

Manning's supporters argue a conviction would be a huge blow for press freedoms in the United States and would deter future whistleblowers from exposing government wrongdoing.

His attorneys have argued that Manning was disillusioned by the horrors of war, and leaked the documents out of a desire to alert the US public that it was being misled by its government.

Morsi 'well,' has access to news

Says EU foreign policy chief

AFP, Cairo

EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton met Egypt's ousted president yesterday, saying he was "well," but the country's political crisis seemed no closer to resolution despite her efforts.

Neither the interim government nor supporters of deposed president Mohamed Morsi showed any indication that they had shifted their positions after talks with Ashton, who left Cairo on Tuesday.

And Morsi loyalists said they would continue their demonstrations throughout the day, despite stern warnings from the military and National Defence Council and the deaths of 82 people at a protest on Saturday.

Ashton became the first person to officially visit Morsi since his July 3 ouster, holding two hours of talks with him at an undisclosed location early yesterday.

"Morsi is well," she told reporters. "He has access to information in terms of TV, newspapers, so we were

able to talk about the situation and we were able to talk about the need to move forward.

"We had a friendly, open and very frank discussion," she added, declining to characterise Morsi's comments, or give details of where he is being held.

Morsi has not been seen in public since his ouster and is being held in custody on allegations related to his escape from prison during Egypt's 2011 uprising.

On her last visit on July 17, Ashton unsuccessfully requested to meet the ousted president, and this time she made meeting him a condition of her trip.

But she said her talks with Morsi and a string of government officials and opposition representatives were not intended to push the two sides to the table.

On Sunday and Monday, Ashton met army chief General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, interim president Adly Mansour and vice president Mohamed ElBaradei.



Businessman elected as Pakistan president

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday elected businessman Mamnoon Hussain as its 12th president, state TV said, to replace deeply unpopular head of state Asif Ali Zardari, whose five-year term expires in September.

Lawmakers from both houses of the national parliament and four provincial assemblies voted in the two-man race for the largely ceremonial president of the nuclear-armed state.

Within minutes of the polls closing at 3:00pm, state media handed the vote to Hussain, based on unofficial results. The final tally is expected to be announced by the evening.

Hussain, a 73-year-old businessman and close ally of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in Pakistan's financial capital Karachi had been considered certain to replace Zardari.

Zardari's opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which lost heavily in general elections in May, boycotted yesterday's ballot over complaints that the vote was

brought forward from August 6.

The only other candidate is retired Supreme Court judge Wajihuddin Ahmed, nominated by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, the third largest party in parliament and led by cricket hero Imran Khan.

Hussain's loyalty to Sharif and low profile is expected to bolster the prime minister's authority and provide a stark contrast to Zardari, considered a sharp political operator behind the scenes.

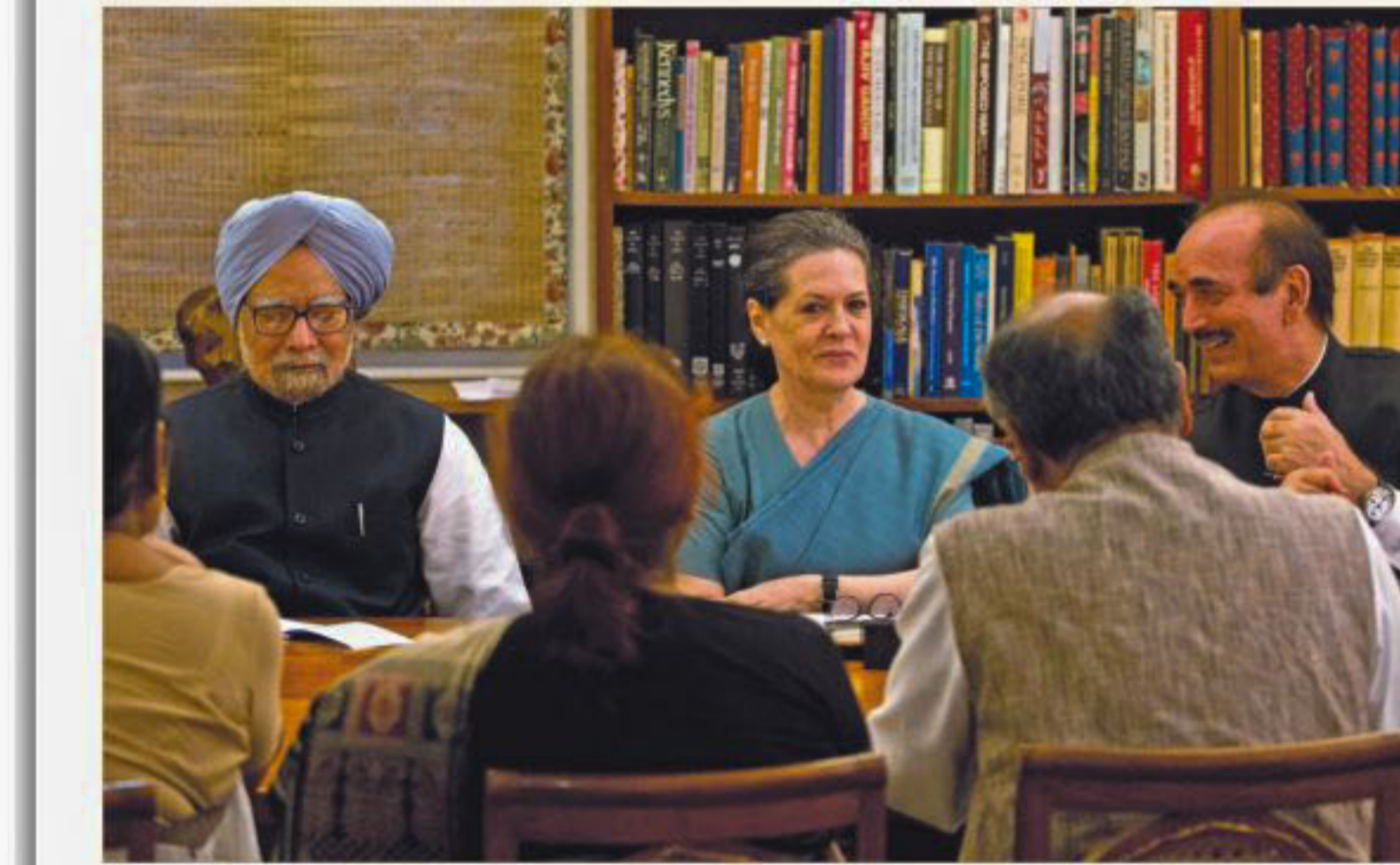
A long-serving member of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) party, he briefly served as governor of the southern province Sindh under Sharif's last premiership in 1999.

Born in India before partition of the subcontinent he and his family migrated to Karachi, along with hundreds of thousands of other Muslims from across the border.

Hussain made money in textiles and is a former president of the Karachi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI).



INDIA APPROVES 29TH STATE



Congress leaders met yesterday to take decision on forming a new state in New Delhi.

AFP, New Delhi

India's ruling Congress party yesterday approved a resolution to create a new state in the southeast amid fears the decision could spark violence in the region which includes IT hub Hyderabad.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Congress president Sonia Gandhi and other senior party leaders agreed to grant longstanding demands for the state of Telangana to be carved out of Andhra Pradesh state.

The resolution was cleared "after taking into account the chequered history of the demand for a separate state of Telangana since 1956," Maken told a news conference in New Delhi.

The Congress move must still be approved by parliament but the new state's creation has the backing of the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which has accused the government of "dilly-dallying" on the issue.

The planned state, which would be India's 29th, would be created out of an impoverished, drought-prone mainly tribal belt that supporters say has been neglected by successive Andhra Pradesh governments.

But Andhra Pradesh's wealthier regions are strongly opposed to the move.

Critics said New Delhi risked opening a "Pandora's box" of demands for statehood by other regional groups in ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse India, which also has a host of separatist movements.

In 2009, the then-home minister P. Chidambaram promised Telangana supporters that the government would finally bow to their campaign after a hunger strike by a regional leader and violent protests by students.

Andhra Pradesh, formed in 1956, is India's fifth largest state in terms of territory and sends 42 MPs to India's 543-member parliament.

INDIAN ELECTION SURVEY

Congress clear loser, BJP far from victory

AFP, New Delhi

India could end up with a Lok Sabha in which, for the first time, the single largest party has less than one-fourth of the 543 seats and no front has even a third. That is what would happen if elections were held now, according to a Times Now-CVoter opinion poll.

It projects that the NDA would win 156 seats with the BJP getting 131 of them, while the UPA would win 136 with the Congress pegged to 119.

The poll estimated that the 'Third Front', which includes the Left, Samajwadi Party, RJD, TDP, BJD and some other regional parties, would win 129 seats and the 'Fourth Front' including the BSP, Trinamool Congress, AIADMK and others, would win 122. In short, the elections are projected to end up as a fairly even four-way split, though some of these formations like the Third and Fourth Fronts are not really firmly established yet.

The survey also showed BJP candidate Narendra Modi was the preferred prime minister, with 37.7 percent of those polled opting for the controversial Hindu hardliner, compared to 17.6 percent for Congress heir apparent Rahul Gandhi.

Congress Prime Minister Manmohan Singh received 6.2 per cent and Congress party president Sonia Gandhi 3.9 per cent, it said.

BIG LOSSES FOR UPA

Table with 4 columns: Alliance/Party, 2009, Jul 2013, Change. Rows include UPA, Congress, NDA, BJP, Possible Third Front, Possible Fourth Front.

Musharraf to be charged over Bhutto murder

AFP, Islamabad

Prosecutors at a Pakistani court will next week charge former military ruler Pervez Musharraf with criminal conspiracy and the murder of opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, lawyers said yesterday.

Musharraf, once the most powerful man in the nuclear-armed country, has been under house arrest since April. He appeared before the anti-terrorism court in person yesterday.

Indicting a former army chief would be an unprecedented move in a country ruled for more than half of its life by the military.

It would be seen by many as a far more serious challenge to the armed forces' power than his house arrest was.

Bhutto, twice elected prime minister of Pakistan, was assassinated in a gun and bomb attack in December 2007 after campaigning in the garrison city of Rawalpindi.

Musharraf's lawyer Ahmed Raza Kasuri told AFP the retired general would plead not guilty and the court had ordered that his bank accounts and assets be unfrozen.

MIDDLE EAST PEACE TALKS

Israel media question Netanyahu motives

AFP, Jerusalem

As senior Israeli and Palestinian envoys resumed long-stalled peace talks in Washington, Israeli media questioned the motives of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in taking to the negotiating table.

Israeli and Palestinian officials were meeting in Washington yesterday for a second day of direct talks -- their first in three years. The State Department said they would continue for at least nine months.

Israel's chief negotiator, Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, stressed the talks were resuming "not just in response to US pressure but because it's in the interest of both parties."

But commentators questioned Netanyahu's motives and what concessions he would be willing to make after his government approved the contentious release of long-serving Palestinian prisoners.



However, Hanan Cristal of public television disagreed that Netanyahu was putting in the minimum necessary effort. Cristal warned that when it came to bigger issues, such as giving up Israeli settlements in the West Bank, opposition in cabinet could be too great.

Hardline ministers have openly opposed the creation of a Palestinian state and have pledged to continue building Jewish settlements on occupied Palestinian land. The rightwing nationalist Jewish Home party, part of the ruling coalition, as well as some of Netanyahu's own Likud, voted against freeing the Palestinian prisoners, some of whom are jailed on terror charges.

But Netanyahu's ace, argued Cristal, was public opinion.

A poll published Friday suggested a majority of Israelis would likely support a peace deal, which would go to a referendum if one were reached.

Taliban free 248 in Pak jail break

AFP, Peshawar

Dozens of heavily armed Taliban fighters freed nearly 250 prisoners, including hardcore militants, during a sophisticated overnight attack on a Pakistani jail that killed 13 people, officials said yesterday.

Armed with guns, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades and bombs, the Taliban bombarded the prison in the town of Dera Ismail Khan before escaping with scores of inmates after a three-hour shootout.

The attack by well-trained gunmen, disguised in police uniforms, will heighten concerns about the ability of the Taliban to operate with impunity in parts of the nuclear-armed state.

At least 248 prisoners escaped, of whom six were later re-arrested, senior government official Mushtaq Jadoon told ARY television, describing about 30 of them as "hardcore militants".

He said the militants had also taken away six women, including one female constable and five female inmates.

The Central Prison in Dera Ismail Khan can hold up to 5,000 inmates and around 300 were being held in connection with attacks on security forces and sectarian killings.

But it was not clear how many were present during the assault, which began late Monday and ended early yesterday.

The city in northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province is close to Pakistan's semi-autonomous tribal belt bordering Afghanistan where Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked insurgents are most active.

ODDLY enough Robot bartender! STAR DESK Some bars use intriguing names just to attract clients, but the Robots Bar & Lounge in Ilmenau, Germany really lives up to its name.