

NEWSIN brief

Army chopper crashes in Indonesia; 13 killed

AFP, Jakarta

Thirteen people died yesterday when an Indonesian army helicopter carrying construction workers to build a military outpost crashed in the jungles of Borneo and burst into flames, an official said.

Eight of those who died were civilian construction workers, while five others were crew members, who were military personnel, he added.

Pakistan names new US ambassador

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan appointed a new ambassador to the United States on Friday, at a time of tense relations between the two countries over drone strikes in the country's tribal belt.

Senior diplomat Jalil Abbas Jilani -- 58 and most recently foreign secretary -- has been named to the role, according to a statement by Pakistan's ministry of foreign affairs, filling a position that has been vacant for several months.

BSP to contest polls alone: Mayawati

TNN, Lucknow

BSP chief Mayawati yesterday ruled out any pre-poll or post-poll alliance with BJP or Congress or the Third Front taking shape on the initiative of the SP and the Left parties.

She said that the BSP is better positioned in comparison to rivals for the next Lok Sabha elections and expressed confidence that her party will win maximum seats in Uttar Pradesh and will be do better in other states in the country.

11 killed as blast hits top Somalia hotel

AFP, Mogadishu

Around 11 people were killed and dozens more injured Friday in a car bomb attack against a top hotel in Somalia's capital Mogadishu, police said. They blamed Shebab militants for the attack.

Police and security forces immediately sealed off the area around the Maka al Mukarama hotel, situated along a busy Mogadishu street and popular with politicians and the elite.

Cairo clashes kill 2

AFP, Cairo

A child and another person died Friday in clashes between supporters and opponents of Egypt's ousted president in Cairo, state news agency MENA said, as Mohamed Morsi's backers protested in several cities.

Protesters with firearms wounded three others there before police intervened to separate the two sides, arresting arrested several people, the interior ministry said.

NSA leaks: Guardian editor faces grilling

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

The editor of the Guardian is to be questioned by MPs about his newspaper's publication of intelligence files leaked by the American whistleblower Edward Snowden.

Alan Rusbridger is to appear before the House of Commons home affairs select committee next month following warnings from British security chiefs that the revelations were damaging national security.

"Alan has been invited to give evidence to the home affairs select committee and looks forward to appearing next month," a Guardian spokeswoman said.

The heads MI6, MI5 and GCHQ claim terrorist groups are changing their operations as a result of the leaks.

The exposure of surveillance methods had left al-Qaeda "rubbing their hands with glee", the MI6 chief, Sir John Sawers, said when the trio made an unprecedented public appearance together before another parliamentary committee.

The GCHQ boss, Sir Iain Lobban, told the intelligence and security committee that since the whistleblower's revelations had been made public GCHQ had monitored terrorist groups discussing in "specific terms" how to avoid communications systems they now considered to be vulnerable.

He said the leaks could help dangerous criminals and even paedophiles avoid detection and had put operations at risk.

Rusbridger has defended the newspaper's role, saying it has provoked a debate about the extent of intelligence activities, which MPs had failed to do.



Alan Rusbridger



US Secretary of State John Kerry (2nd L) speaks with European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton (C) and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (3rdR) during a meeting yesterday, on the third day of talks on Iran's nuclear programme at the Intercontinental Hotel in Geneva Switzerland. Inset, John Kerry separately meets with Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov.

PHOTO: AFP

Progress reported but deal illusive in Geneva

AFP, Geneva

World powers and Iran held a third day of crunch talks on Tehran's nuclear programme yesterday with top diplomats saying progress was being made but there was no certainty of a deal.

The hoped-for agreement -- seen as a first step ahead of further talks on a final deal -- could see Tehran freeze its nuclear efforts for as long as six months in exchange for some relief from the sanctions that have battered its economy.

But Iranian news agencies yesterday quoted Tehran's Deputy Foreign Minister and lead negotiator Abbas Araqchi as saying, "The negotiations will not go on tomorrow. Either they end tonight or there is another round... there are still questions that require more negotiations."

Araqchi's comments came amid hopes that world powers and Iran will manage to seal a breakthrough in the decade-long dispute after US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian, British, French and German counterparts all rushed to Geneva on Friday to lend weight to the negotiations.

Meanwhile, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani yesterday urged world powers not to miss an "exceptional opportunity" to reach an agreement.

"I hope that the P5+1 group make the most out of this exceptional opportunity that the Iranian nation has offered to the international community, so that we can reach a positive result within a reasonable timeframe," he was quoted as saying by official IRNA news agency.

The International Atomic Energy Agency confirmed on Friday that its chief Yukiya Amano has accepted an invitation to visit Iran, raising hopes for a long-stalled probe into Tehran's suspected past bomb-making efforts.

All the western officials at Geneva have expressed caution, warning major obstacles remain to be overcome.

While British Foreign Secretary William Hague yesterday told journalists that the "negotiations have made very good progress", it was still "too early" to be sure a deal could be reached.

France in particular was considered to have concerns about the deal. Its Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius told France Inter radio before the talks, "There is an initial draft that we do not accept... I have no certainty that we can finish up" at this stage.

If some sort of agreement is reached, it would be a breakthrough after a decade of negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 group including China.

IRAN NUKE TALKS

Syria opposition meets in Turkey

AFP, Istanbul

Syria's splintered opposition coalition yesterday insisted it would not go to peace talks in Geneva unless pressure was brought to bear on Damascus to abide by the outcome.

"We have always said that we are fully committed to Geneva. But we are worried that if we go there the Assad regime is not serious about the implementation of Geneva," said coalition spokesman Khaled Saleh.

He was speaking as the opposition battling to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad met in Istanbul to decide whether to attend a peace conference that world powers want to hold in Geneva.

The meeting involving the main umbrella group, the National Coalition, and due to run into today took place as rebels retook a strategic base in northern Syria.

The National Coalition -- which depends on foreign backing -- has long been plagued by regional rivalries and suffers from a lack of credibility in the eyes of both its allies and the various rebel groups fighting on the ground.



Maldivian former president and presidential candidate Mohamed Nasheed casts his vote at a local polling station in Male, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Duck!

Falling satellite may hit you today

AFP, Paris

Fragments from a science satellite are likely to crash to Earth late today or early tomorrow after the one-tonne probe breaks up at the end of its mission, the European Space Agency (ESA) said on Friday.

In a statement, the agency said when and where the pieces would land was still unclear.

Experts have previously said the statistical risk to humans is remote. The chances of a human being hit were about 65,000 times lower than getting struck by lightning, they added.

According to ESA, most of the 5.3-metre-long (17.2-foot) spacecraft will burn up. Several dozen fragments totalling around 200 kilos will survive contact with the atmosphere, it said.

Nasheed leads Maldives vote, faces run-off

AFP, Male

Opposition leader Mohamed Nasheed topped yesterday's bitterly-fought presidential elections, but failed to secure a clear majority needed to avoid a tricky run-off, official results showed.

Nasheed's Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) immediately pressed for a quick second round of voting today as previously scheduled as his main challenger Abdulla Yameen asked for a postponement. Yameen told reporters that he was not ready to face a run-off Sunday and wanted at least 48 hours to prepare.

The MDP urged the international community to mount pressure on Maldivian authorities to stick to the ballot timetable and ensure an elected president is sworn in by the constitutional deadline of tomorrow.

Chief Elections Commissioner Fuwad Thowfeek had announced the run-off for today. However, it was not immediately clear if he could go ahead as a previous election was scuttled because Yameen and yesterday's loser Qasim Ibrahim refused to approve voter lists, a legal requirement in the Maldives.

The Commonwealth warned the Maldives against putting off the run-off. The 53-member bloc's special envoy to the Maldives, Don McKinnon, said yesterday's presidential ballot was a "good election".

Nasheed received just under 46 percent of the popular vote and faces Yameen, the half brother of former autocrat, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who garnered 31 percent of the vote.

The MDP argues that unless an election is held today, the country could head for a constitutional crisis without a leader, but the Supreme Court Saturday ruled that outgoing President Mohamed Waheed can remain as a caretaker.

Nasheed, who was ousted as president nearly two years ago in what he called a coup, sought to win an outright majority, but just managed to retain the same level of support he had at the now annulled September 7 polls.

C'WEALTH SUMMIT Manmohan will not go to Sri Lanka

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will not attend a Commonwealth summit in Sri Lanka amid mounting pressure on him to boycott the event, a foreign ministry official said yesterday.

Instead, External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid will head the Indian delegation at The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to be held during November 15-17.

The decision on level of Indian representation and Manmohan skipping the meet will be communicated to the Lankan government by today, sources said. However, no official announcement was issued regarding the decision.

Political parties in Tamil Nadu and several other outfits have opposed India's participation at any level in the CHOGM alleging that the Sri Lankan government had committed gross violation of human rights and had no plans to devolve powers to the ethnic Tamils.

New Taliban chief pushes Pak military for action

AFP, Islamabad

The Pakistani Taliban's appointment of a new hardline leader opposed to peace talks and with a long history of attacks against the military could push the army into launching a fresh offensive, analysts said.

The election of Maulana Fazlullah, notorious for leading the militants' brutal two-year rule in Pakistan's northwestern Swat valley, is like a "red rag to a bull", one analyst said.

Fazlullah, nicknamed Mullah Radio for his fiery sermons over the airwaves denouncing polio vaccination campaigns and female education, is renowned as an uncompromising commander.

On Thursday, the militants dismissed the idea of peace talks with the government as a "waste of time", and said they would never negotiate until sharia law was imposed across the country.

Defence analyst Talat Masood, a retired general, said the TTP's choice of Fazlullah, "leaves no margin for negotiation."

In September, political parties backed the government's proposal for talks to try to end the TTP's six-year insurgency, which has killed thousands.

Fazlullah's men responded by killing two senior army officers, including a major general, in a roadside bomb -- a galling blow to the pride of the military, which remains the most powerful institution in Pakistan.

Fazlullah rubbed salt in the wounds by issuing a video message to claim the attack and to reveal the intended target was General Ashfaq Kayani, the army's supreme commander.

In 2009 a major military operation ended Fazlullah's rule in Swat. Later that year another offensive cleared militant hideouts in South Waziristan, one of the seven tribal areas along the Afghan border seen as a haven for Taliban and al-Qaeda militants.

A senior security source told AFP a military operation would "become inevitable" if, as seems likely, dialogue does not proceed, and warned of worsening relations with Kabul.

Indian SC stays controversial CBI ruling

TNN, New Delhi

The Indian Supreme Court yesterday stayed the Gauhati high court's verdict that declared the CBI 'unconstitutional'.

The Centre had earlier yesterday challenged before the Supreme Court the Gauhati high court order and sought a stay on it contending that the verdict will adversely impact thousands of criminal cases pending across the country.

The Centre also contended that the high court has erred in holding that the constitution of CBI was illegal, that the resolution constituting it needed presidential assent and that it could not be treated as a police force.

A division bench of Gauhati high court had on November 6 quashed the April 1, 1963 Resolution constituting CBI under the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act, 1946 and declared all its actions unconstitutional.

In its appeal, the government sought an urgent hearing against the high court order saying it "directly impacts about nine thousand trials currently underway and about one thousand investigations which are being undertaken by the CBI."

ODDLY enough

Chinese man walks in iron shoes weighing 405 kilograms

STAR DESK

Heavy footwear is usually considered uncomfortable, but for Zhang Fuxing weight is definitely not a problem. The 51-year-old from Tangshan, China, spends every morning walking in a pair of iron shoes weighing 405 kilograms.

For over seven years, Zhang has spent his morning exercising on a pair of impossible shoes made of heavy iron blocks.

It seems impossible that a person could even lift their feet off the ground wearing such weights, but Zhang says he usually manages to walk around a dozen meters in 20 minutes, every morning.

At first, the self designed shoes weighed only 70 kilograms, but as his workout intensified he kept adding more weight. Now his shoes are 40-cm-high and weigh a whopping 405 kg, about seven times his own body weight.

He keeps the unusual shoes in his courtyard and says they are so heavy he isn't even worried they might be stolen.

