

China backs Sri Lanka over US rights complaint

REUTERS, Beijing

China's Foreign Minister on Tuesday offered support for Sri Lanka after the United States said it would table a UN resolution against Colombo over its human rights record.

"China opposes some countries' interference in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka under the pretext of human rights issues," Foreign Minister Wang Yi told his Sri Lankan counterpart G.L. Peiris in Beijing.

China backs the Sri Lankan government in safeguarding national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, Wang said, according to China's Foreign Ministry.

"We believe in the Sri Lankan people's wisdom and capacity to handle their own affairs," Wang added.

Sri Lanka this month rejected US criticism of its human rights record as "grossly disproportionate", after a senior US official said Washington would table a UN resolution against the country.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa's government, which finally crushed a 26-year rebellion by ethnic minority Tamil separatists in 2009, has rejected calls for an international inquiry into atrocities during the civil war.

China has increasingly tight ties with Sri Lanka, funding airports, roads, railways and ports, which has unsettled India, traditionally Sri Lanka's closest economic partner.

The island of 21 million people just off India's southern tip has become a front in the competition between the Asian giants

NEWSIN brief

Israel bars 70 patients over 'Palestine' logo

AFP, Gaza City

The Israeli authorities blocked 70 patients from Gaza needing medical treatment from entering Israel because their transfer documents were marked "State of Palestine", officials told AFP yesterday.

Until recently, official stationery has used the term "Palestinian territories". But the logo was changed in mid-December, a year after the Palestinians won recognition as a UN observer state, despite

Pakistan President to visit China

THE HINDU ONLINE

President Mamnoon Hussain will pay an official visit to China from February 18 to 20, an official statement said on Tuesday. This is his first state visit abroad after assuming office and he will hold summit-level talks with President Xi Jinping. He will also have meetings with Premier Li Keqiang and Mr. Zhang Dejiang, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National

C Africa under 'ethnic cleansing': Amnesty

AFP, Libreville

"Ethnic cleansing" is being carried out against Muslim civilians in the Central African Republic, with international peacekeepers unable to prevent it, Amnesty International said yesterday. Amnesty said it had documented at least 200 killings of Muslim civilians by Christian militia groups known as the anti-balaka, set up in the wake of the March 2013 coup by the mainly-

6.8 tremor strikes China's Xinjiang: USGS

AFP, Beijing

A strong and shallow 6.8-magnitude earthquake struck China's far western region of Xinjiang yesterday, but in an in an extremely remote and sparsely populated area, the US



US President Barack Obama and French President Francois Hollande gesture during a State Dinner arranged in honour of the latter at the White House in Washington, DC on Tuesday. Raising a toast to his guest, Obama said "Vive La France, God bless America, and long live the alliance between our great nations." Hollande is on a three-day visit to the United States.

PHOTO: AFP

Thai opposition loses bid to annul polls

Court ruling a boost for PM; election reruns to be held in April

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's opposition yesterday lost a legal bid to nullify a controversial election disrupted by anti-government protests, in a boost to Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's crisis-hit administration.

The kingdom's Constitutional Court declined to consider the petition by the Democrat Party to annul the February 2 vote and disband Yingluck's party, saying there were insufficient grounds.

"It gives a little bit of breathing space for the government but it does not resolve the deadlock," said Thitinan Pongsudhirak, director of the Institute of Security and International Studies at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University.

"The election process remains messy but it has not been derailed," he added.

The Election Commission on Tuesday set a date of April 27 for election re-runs in constituencies where voting was disrupted by protesters.

But there is still no decision on what to do about 28 constituencies that have no candidates because demonstrators blocked the registration process.

The Election Commission has said the results of the vote will not be announced until polls have

been held in all constituencies.

Yingluck will remain in a caretaker role with limited power over policy until 95 percent of the 500 seats in the lower house of parliament are filled to enable the appointment of a new government.

The premier called the polls in an attempt to assuage opposition protesters who have staged more than three months of mass street protests seeking her resignation.

The Democrats boycotted the vote, saying it would not end a political crisis stretching back to a military coup in 2006 that ousted Yingluck's elder brother Thaksin Shinawatra as premier.

The protesters want Yingluck to stand down to make way for an unelected "People's Council" to enact reforms to tackle corruption and alleged vote buying before new polls are held.

The Democrats had argued that the failure to hold the entire election on the same day was an attempt to grab power unconstitutionally -- a complaint rejected by the court.

The Constitutional Court also rejected a request by Yingluck's Puea Thai Party to order an end to the opposition protests on the grounds that their action aimed to overthrow the democratic system.

Karzai won't sign US security pact

AFP, Washington

The US intelligence chief said he does not expect Afghan President Hamid Karzai to sign a security agreement with the United States that would allow American troops to stay after 2014.

Washington has repeatedly appealed to Karzai to sign the bilateral security agreement (BSA) negotiated last year but James Clapper, director of national intelligence, said he had given up hope that the Afghan president would endorse the deal.

"Well, obviously, it takes two to sign this," Clapper told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

"And it's my own view, not necessarily company policy, ...I don't believe President Karzai is going to sign it," he said.

His comments were the most explicit yet by a senior US official acknowledging the bleak prospects of Karzai backing the agreement.

Senator Carl Levin, chairman of the committee, asked Clapper if it would be better for the US government to wait for the next Afghan president to sign the deal after the country's April elections.

Clapper said that would be a policy decision and not up to him but he said such a move could "have a salutary effect."

Homs evacuations resume after pause

Syria talks in Geneva in deadlock

AFP, Damascus

Operations to evacuate civilians and deliver aid in besieged parts of Syria's Homs resumed yesterday after being suspended a day earlier, as peace talks in Geneva appeared deadlocked.

But there was still no word on the fate of hundreds of boys and men detained for questioning by authorities after they were evacuated from the city.

More than 1,000 men, women and children, among reported 3000, have been evacuated from besieged rebel-held parts of Homs since Friday, many weak and malnourished after surviving for more than 18 months on dwindling food supplies.

"There are children there, and this is very heartbreaking, that this is the first time they see a banana," Syrian Red Crescent head of operations Khaled Erksoussi told AFP.

In Geneva, meanwhile, talks were due to resume between regime and opposition delegations after a second day of meetings that left even UN-Arab League mediator Lakhdar Brahimi downbeat. "We are not making much progress," he told reporters on Tuesday after chairing a face-to-face session with both sides.

The opposition warned it would not attend a third round of talks if no progress was made. And in Damascus, Syria's National Reconciliation Minister Ali Haidar said he expected the talks, "under the current circumstances, will end in failure."

Meanwhile, Russia has accused the West of trying to derail the Syria peace talks and revert to the military scenario of regime change in the violence-torn country. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov blasted a Western-backed draft resolution in UN Security Council on the humanitarian crisis in Syria at as "absolutely one-sided and detached from reality."

Obama warns Iran sanctions violators

REUTERS, Washington

President Barack Obama issued a sharp warning to companies eyeing business deals with Iran, saying the United States would come down like a "ton of bricks" on those that violated sanctions against Tehran prompting a sharp rebuke from Tehran.

Obama, speaking at a joint news conference with French President Francois Hollande, said France and other allies were committed to enforcing existing sanctions even as they worked together on a possible a diplomatic deal over Iran's nuclear program.

Last week the Obama administration targeted a host of businesses across Europe and the Middle East for evading sanctions against Iran, the second time Washington had done so since Western powers reached an interim deal with Tehran in November.

Obama cited that actions in his warning to companies around the world.

Hollande appeared somewhat on the defensive about the issue. Earlier this month Iran welcomed a delegation of more than 100 French executives, telling them the far sighted among the group would gain in the race for businesses following an ease of economic sanctions.

Obama said the United States was exploring all options with regard to the situation there.

Meanwhile, Iran armed forces chief of staff General Hassan Firouzabadi has warned the Islamic republic's arch-foes that Iran is prepared for a "decisive battle" if attacked.



Nepal gets premier but crisis far from over

AGENCIES

Sushil Koirala, a veteran Nepali Congress leader who spent 16 years in political exile in India after Nepal's royal takeover of 1960, was on Tuesday sworn in as Prime Minister, promising to steer through a long-delayed new constitution for the Himalayan nation within a year.

The silver-haired bachelor easily won a vote in the constituent assembly, which was elected last November in only the second national polls since the end of a civil war in 2006.

"We will deliver the constitution through agreement, unity and reconciliation," Koirala, who was once jailed over the hijacking of a plane in India, told reporters after the election.

"We would try to include all the parties in the process and would work to safeguard peace and democracy," said the partly Indian-educated politician, wearing his trademark black cap and glasses.

He earlier told the assembly that the impoverished nation would rely on its two giant neighbours, China to the north and India to the south, "as well as other friends to complete our responsibilities".

Since Nepal's first post-war elections in 2008, five prime ministers have served brief

terms, the country has had no leader for long periods, and the constituent assembly has been perpetually deadlocked.

And as took oath, UML, the main backer of Sushil Koirala announced that it would not join the government if it was not given the powerful home ministry and the deputy prime ministership.

As part of the weekend deal to form government, the Nepali Congress has agreed to UML's, which has 196 members in the 601-member Constituent Assembly, request to hold fresh elections for top posts including for prime minister and president after the constitution is delivered within a year.

The Maoists only agreed to be part of the new assembly in December after securing a pledge from the other parties to probe their claims that the elections were rigged.

Observers say he faces a difficult task. "Koirala has to address the concerns of more than two dozen parties within the house," Geja Sharma Wagle, a political commentator, told AFP.

"He also has to placate the opposition within his own party. People have high expectations from the government. So, Koirala will face several challenges," he

Koreas hold rare high-level talks

AFP, Seoul

North and South Korean officials held their highest level talks for years yesterday, seeking to thrash out common ground for improving ties despite a row over looming South Korea-US military drills.

The discussions in the border truce village of Panmunjom had no fixed agenda, but aimed to cover a range of "major" issues, including a planned February 20-25 reunion for family members divided by the Korean War.

A short morning dialogue was followed by three hours of discussions in the afternoon, after which the two chief delegates began a one-on-one session at 7:15pm.

It was the first such high-level sit-down between the two sides since 2007, and came a day before US Secretary of State John Kerry's arrival in Seoul for a brief visit focused on North Korea.



Married for 50yrs? Poland says that's enough for presidential honour

AFP, Warsaw

Grey-haired and grinning, two dozen couples hold champagne flutes at a Warsaw ceremony in their honour. They survived 50 years of marriage and in Poland, that is reason enough for a presidential medal.

"To qualify, you have to put in over 18,000 solid days of work. Other medals require less, so it really is a considerable feat to have spent the last half century together," Warsaw mayor Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz says at this month's event.

The tradition is regularly played out in cities across the heavily Catholic country, with a hefty average of 65,000 medals awarded each year according to the president's office.

True, marital milestones are also recognised elsewhere. In the United States, a golden anniversary will get you a greeting from the White House, while Britain sets the bar a notch higher: couples have to make it through six decades without splitting for a message from the queen. She herself qualified seven years ago.



MEDIA COERCION

Turkey editor hits out at PM

REUTERS, Istanbul

A prominent Turkish newspaper editor has openly decried government pressure on the media, saying journalists live in fear, in unusually blunt criticism of Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's leadership.

Erdogan faces one of the greatest challenges of his 11-year rule as he battles a graft scandal he sees as orchestrated to unseat him. He has reacted by purging opponents in the government and by seeking tighter controls over the Internet, according to media reports.

In an TV interview late on Monday, Fatih Altayli, editor-in-chief of the Haberturk newspaper, said government pressure had left media editors intimidated and created a climate of fear.

"The honour of journalism is being trampled on. Instructions rain down every day from various places. Can you write what you want? Everybody is afraid," Altayli told CNN Turk.

He spoke after recordings were leaked on the Internet purportedly of executives from Haberturk altering coverage, manipulating an opinion poll and sacking reporters under