

MH370 search goes underwater

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

The underwater search for the black boxes of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 has begun as the window for detecting the locator beacon's transmission grows closer to expiring, according to the head of Australia's search co-ordination centre.

The missing plane is believed to be lost in the Indian ocean, claiming the lives of all 239 passengers on board, according to Malaysian authorities. While Malaysia bears responsibility for the investigation and recovery of the flight, Australia has been designated an "accredited representative" of the search after prime minister Tony Abbott and the Malaysian prime minister, Najib Razak, met on Thursday to discuss the search.

The head of the Australian co-ordination centre, former defence force chief Angus Houston, yesterday said that the Australian customs vessel Ocean Shield had deployed an underwater detection vehicle to search for the plane's black boxes.

"The towed pinger has been deployed today from the Ocean Shield. The search is currently ongoing," he said. Houston added that the underwater search area has been narrowed to an area of 240 sq kmm, and said that time was running out to detect the beacon.

"The area of highest probability as to where the aircraft might have entered the water is the area where the underwater search will commence," he said. "On best advice the locator beacon will last about a month before it ceases its transmissions. We're now getting pretty close to the time when it might expire."

The overall search mission will scour an area of 217,000 sq kms - 1,700km northwest of Perth. There are ten military aircraft, four civil jets and nine ships involved in the search effort and weather conditions are "fair".

Houston also rejected suggestions that the visual search could be discontinued in favour of a purely underwater operation, and said there was still a "great possibility" of finding floating objects.

US evaluating role in ME peace talks

AFP, Jerusalem

Washington yesterday said it was reviewing its push for a Middle East peace agreement as a spiral of tit-for-tat moves by Israel and the Palestinians brought hard-won talks close to collapse.

US Secretary of State John Kerry, who has invested more than a year of intensive shuttle diplomacy in the talks process, said there were "limits" to the time Washington could devote to it.

"This is not open-ended," Kerry said on a visit to Morocco, adding that it was "reality check" time and he would evaluate with President Barack Obama what Washington does next.

"There are limits to the amount of time and effort that the United States can spend if the parties themselves are unwilling to take constructive steps," he said.

The US top diplomat spoke to both Israeli and Palestinian leaders on Thursday in a desperate bid to bring the two sides back from the brink.

But Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas rejected Kerry's appeals to withdraw the applications he signed on Tuesday to adhere to 15 international treaties, a Palestinian official said on Thursday.

And Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ignored appeals to refrain from "unhelpful" tit-for-tat moves and asked officials to draw up a range of tough reprisals, Israeli media reported.

Kerry said Washington currently had an "enormous amount on the plate," highlighting negotiations with the Russians over Ukraine, negotiations with Iran on its nuclear programme and the conflict in Syria, as other US priorities.



Garcia Marquez hospitalised

AFP, Mexico City

Colombia's Nobel Prize-winning writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez was being treated at a Mexico City hospital Thursday for a lung infection but he was doing well, his son and officials said.

The health ministry said the 87-year-old author of "One Hundred Years of Solitude" has been in a hospital since Monday due to dehydration as well as lung and urinary tract infections.

"He had a small infection a few days ago and we preferred to take him to the hospital because he is older," Garcia Barcha, his son, told reporters.

"It was never an emergency," he said, adding that his father was conscious.

Winner of the 1982 Nobel literature prize, Garcia Marquez pioneered the storytelling genre known as magical realism, writing epic stories of love, family and dictatorship in Latin America.

LOK SABHA POLLS 2014

India set to veer right

AFP, New Delhi

Indian voters, worried about jobs and angry about corruption, look set to turf out the ruling Congress party in the world's biggest election starting tomorrow in favour of the opposition Hindu nationalists under hardliner Narendra Modi.

After 10 years of leftist rule by Congress and the Gandhi family dynasty, surveys show the young and increasingly aspirational electorate yearning for change, frustrated about the country's direction and irked by higher food prices.

Modi, a hawkish three-times chief minister from western Gujarat state, is the son of a tea seller who has risen through the ranks of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to become the leading prime ministerial candidate.

Though tainted by religious riots and often viewed with hostility by Muslims, the right-winger has marketed himself as an economic reformer intent on rebooting the economy and creating jobs.

Pre-election polls -- fallible in the past and famously wrong when Congress won in 2004 -- show the BJP likely to emerge as the biggest party in the next 543-member parliament.

But it is forecast to fall short of a majority,



meaning another coalition will need to be stitched together comprising India's numerous regional parties led by often populist and mercurial personalities.

Despite a decade of economic growth that has averaged 7.6 percent per year, a sharp slowdown since 2012 has badly hurt the Congress, leading to crashes in the rupee, the investment rate and jobs growth.

Modi has made industrialisation and infrastructure key priorities in a country with millions of new young people joining the workforce each year, mostly with little prospect of employment in the formal sector.

He has also promised to tackle endemic corruption after a string of scandals in the second term of the Congress-led government.

"Overall, they (voters) certainly think things will improve under Modi," Sanjay Kumar, director of Delhi-based think tank the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, told AFP.

India under Modi, an unabashed nationalist, would likely result in a more muscular foreign

policy at a time when the country is emerging as a defender of the developing world on issues from climate change to global trade.

But many observers worry about his domestic impact on one of the world's most diverse countries, home to large religious minorities who live under a secular constitution.

Modi's main opponent is Rahul Gandhi, the 43-year-old fourth-generation scion of the Gandhi political bloodline, who is leading the Congress into national polls for the first time.

With no record in cabinet and years of staying out of the spotlight, the former management consultant has much to prove. Some polls predict the worst-ever result for Congress, which is still run by his mother Sonia.

"The UPA (Congress-led coalition) government has performed remarkably well... and don't get misguided by tall promises," he told supporters on Tuesday.

Among the populist regional chiefs set to play a role in any future coalition is a former film star, a communist-fighting spinster and a low-caste icon famed for building elephant statues.

The Aam Aadmi (Common Man) Party, only 18 months old and led by a corruption-fighting former tax inspector, is an unpredictable element in this year's polls with its ambitions to win 100 seats.

Vote for Congress, urges Delhi Imam Kejriwal punched in Delhi

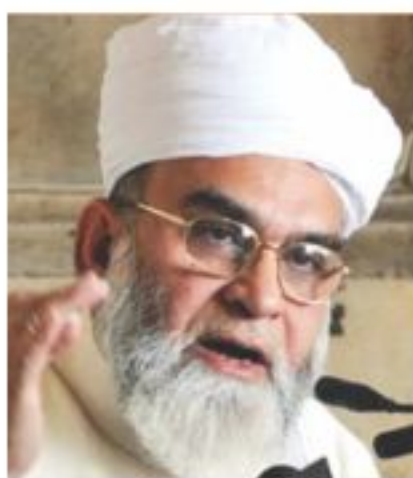
TNN, New Delhi

Shahi Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid Syed Ahmed Bukhari yesterday declared his support to Congress saying it will "strengthen" secularism and termed communalism as "bigger threat" to the country than corruption.

Bukhari appealed to Muslims to support Congress and ensure that secular votes are not divided, days after his meeting with Congress president Sonia Gandhi sparked a row.

He also announced supporting Trinamool Congress in West Bengal and Congress ally RJD in Bihar.

"For the coming Lok Sabha elections, I announce support for the Congress. We



have to fight unitedly against communal forces," he said at a press conference here.

Bukhari said though the Muslim community has grievances against Congress, still a decision to support the party was taken as the "country cannot be allowed to go to the communal forces".

"The nation faces danger from communal forces. We should ensure secular votes are not divided," the Imam said.

The announcement by Bukhari came three days after his meeting with Sonia Gandhi that raised hackles of BJP, which accused her of communalising politics and said it was case of violation of the model code of conduct.

TNN, New Delhi

AAP leader Arvind Kejriwal was attacked yesterday during his roadshow in south Delhi's Dakshinapuri area.

When Kejriwal was shaking hands with his supporters, the person punched Kejriwal on his back and even tried to slap him.

The former Delhi chief minister blamed BJP for the assault. "Some people are ready to go to any extent to become Prime Minister. Let them do whatever they are doing. Our religion teaches us non-violence. If we raise our hands, this movement will come to an end," Kejriwal said.

He appealed for calm and urged supporters not to react to the attack.

"Let them attack us, we will not retaliate. Some people will do anything to become PM," Kejriwal said after the attack.

AAP workers thrashed the attacker and handed him over to the police.

The identity of the assailant is not yet known.



Afghan men load donkeys with election materials in the rugged mountains of the Panjshir valley, yesterday. Afghan officials dispatched donkey convoys into mountains laden with ballot boxes and voting papers, taking material for elections to the most remote communities. Afghans will vote today to elect a new president for only the third time since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. PHOTO: AFP

Do not follow Crimea model

US warns China over territorial disputes

REUTERS, Washington

China should not doubt the US commitment to defend its Asian allies and the prospect of economic retaliation should also discourage Beijing from using force to pursue territorial claims in Asia in the way Russia has in Crimea, a senior US official said on Thursday.

Daniel Russel, President Barack Obama's diplomatic point man for East Asia, said it was difficult to determine what China's intentions might be, but Russia's annexation of Crimea had heightened concerns among US allies in the region about the possibility of China using force to pursue its claims.

"The net effect is to put more pressure on China to demonstrate that it remains committed to the peaceful resolution of the problems," Russel, the US assistant secretary of state for East Asia, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Russel said the retaliatory sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States, the European Union and others should have a "chilling effect on anyone in China who might contemplate the Crimea annexation as a model."

This was especially so given the extent of China's economic interdependence with the United States and its Asia neighbours, Russel said.

In Asia, China has competing territorial claims with Japan and South Korea, as well as with Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan in potentially energy-rich waters.

Meanwhile, Russia recalled its ambassador to Nato for consultations Thursday, two days after Nato member countries suspended cooperation with Russia over the Ukraine crisis, Russian state media reported.

AP photographer shot dead on eve of Afghan polls

AFP, Khost

An Afghan police commander yesterday shot dead a female German photographer working for the Associated Press on the eve of presidential elections, in an attack that also left a Canadian colleague wounded, the news agency and officials said.

The journalists were shot in their car in the Tanai district of Khost province, in the country's east, as they reported on distribution of ballot papers for the election to choose a successor to President Hamid Karzai.

The incident comes as Afghanistan undertakes a massive security operation to protect voters and polling officials, after the Taliban pledged to disrupt today's ballot with violence.

Anja Niedringhaus is the third journalist working for international media to be killed in Afghanistan during the election campaign, after Swedish journalist Nils Horner and Sarda Ahmad of Agence France-Presse.

"Anja Niedringhaus, 48, an internationally acclaimed German photographer, was killed instantly," AP said in a report from Kabul.

"Kathy Gannon, the reporter, was wounded twice and is in a stable condition," AP said the police commander opened



Anja Niedringhaus

fire while the two journalists were in their car, travelling with election workers delivering ballots in Khost city.

Kabul has been rocked by a string of high-profile attacks in the run-up to today's election, which will be the first democratic handover of power in Afghanistan's turbulent history.

The Taliban have pledged to attack the poll, urging their fighters to target election staff, voters and security forces.

Former World Bank economist Ashraf Ghani, Abdullah Abdullah who was runner-up in 2009, and former foreign minister Zalmay Rassoul are the leading contenders in the eight-man race.

Whoever wins the race to succeed Karzai faces a testing time maintaining stability as Afghan forces take on the fight against the resilient Taliban insurgency without the aid of Nato forces. The US-led coalition is due

PRESIDENTIAL CONTENDERS



Abdullah Ghani Rassoul

NEWSIN brief

Pak Taliban extend ceasefire by 6 days

AFP, Miranshah

The Pakistani Taliban yesterday extended a ceasefire by six days to allow the government more time to meet their demands of releasing "non-combatant" prisoners and pulling back soldiers, the militia said in a statement. The government began negotiations with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) through intermediaries in February to try to end the Islamists' bloody seven

Turkey PM slams court over Twitter ban lift

AFP, Ankara

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday criticised a Constitutional Court ruling that lifted his government's March 20 ban on Twitter. "We are of course bound by the Constitutional Court verdict, but I don't have to respect it," said the premier, a day after the US-based social media site went live again in Turkey.

CIA interrogation report to be released

AFP, Washington

The Senate Intelligence Committee voted Thursday to release key parts of its classified report on the CIA's brutal interrogation program, with President Barack Obama urging the sharply critical findings quickly be made public. The report found that the CIA misled the government and the public for years about parts of the program and overstated the significance of intelligence gleaned from detainees subjected to hard techniques at secret CIA-run "black sites" outside the US.

Russian court reduces Pussy Riot sentence

AFP, Moscow

A Russian court yesterday decided to partially grant the appeal in case of Pussy Riot punks, ruling that their 2012 cathedral stunt was not directed against a "social group" and shaving one month off their sentence. The three women, Maria Alyokhina, Yekaterina Samutsevich, and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, were convicted in 2012 after staging a protest performance in a cathedral during Vladimir Putin's presiden-

Pakistan-Afghanistan border closed

IANS, Islamabad

The Pakistan-Afghanistan border was closed yesterday ahead of the Presidential and provincial council elections in Afghanistan, an official said. The border was closed to avert any unwanted incident on the eve of the Afghan

No amnesty for serious war crimes: Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

A government-appointed panel has urged that no amnesty be offered to former Maoist rebels or security forces who committed serious abuses during Nepal's civil war, one of its members said yesterday.

More than 16,000 people died in the decade-long conflict between Maoist guerrillas and the state, which ended in 2006. At least 1,300 went missing, according to UN figures.

The government established the panel to work on legislation to set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, aimed at healing the wounds from the long civil war.

"We have recommended that there should be no amnesty for those responsible for serious crimes," said Dinesh Tripathi, an advocate and member of the panel.

"Even in other cases, the victim's consent will be mandatory in order to grant amnesty," Tripathi told AFP.

The recommendations, which will be tabled in parliament within 15 days, should lay the foundation for the commission's formation, agreed on as part of a peace pact signed between the Maoists and government in 2006. Both the security forces and rebels are accused of major rights violations including killings, rapes and torture during the civil war.