

NEWSIN brief

World powers, Iran eye final nuke deal

AFP, Vienna

Iran and world powers yesterday held a new round of nuclear talks hoping to move to the next level and start drafting a historic but highly ambitious final deal next month. Iran and the five UN Security Council permanent members plus Germany want to transform a temporary accord struck in November into a permanent agreement

UK queen welcomes Irish president

CNN ONLINE

Queen Elizabeth II welcomed the Irish president to Britain yesterday for the first time since the republic became independent, in a historic state visit consolidating ties between the once hostile neighbours. The four-day trip by President Michael D. Higgins follows the queen's groundbreaking visit to Ireland in 2011, which helped put British-Irish

Philippines SC okays birth control law

AFP, Manila

Millions of poor people in the Philippines will have access to free contraceptives for the first time after the nation's top court yesterday approved a deeply controversial birth control law defying its powerful Catholic church. The legislation requires government health centres to supply free condoms and birth control pills, as well as mandating that sex education be taught in schools.

Maduro agrees to negotiate

AFP, Caracas

President Nicolas Maduro has agreed to meet with a Venezuelan opposition delegation yesterday, after a fresh push from top diplomats from across South America. But a leading opposition coalition has not said if it will take part. 39 people have died in clashes between forces and protesters angered by soaring crime, high inflation in



A man is comforted by a rescue worker and others following a reported air strike by government forces in which a fellow rescue worker was killed in the northern city of Aleppo, yesterday. More than 140,000 people have been killed in Syria since the start of a March 2011 uprising against the Assad family's 40-year rule. PHOTO: AFP

Russia behind east Ukraine unrest: US

AFP, Donetsk

The United States yesterday accused Russia of sending its agents to stoke a flaring secession crisis in eastern Ukraine that Moscow itself conceded could spill over into civil war.

"Everything that we've seen in the last 48 hours, from Russian provocateurs and agents operating in eastern Ukraine, tells us that they've been sent there determined to create chaos," Kerry told US lawmakers.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague backed up that message by noting the flareup bore "all the hallmarks of a Russian strategy to destabilise Ukraine".

His accusation came after Moscow yesterday warned Kiev that any use of force in Ukraine's east, where pro-Kremlin militants have seized government buildings in several cities, could tip the country into civil war.

The blunt US charge came as Ukraine's embattled leaders waged an uphill battle to keep their culturally splintered nation of 46 million together after the February ouster of a pro-Kremlin president and subsequent loss of Crimea to Russia.

Ukraine mounted a counter-offensive yesterday by vowing to treat the separatists as "terrorists" and making 70 arrests in a nighttime security sweep aimed at proving the Kremlin's involvement in the secessionist movement.

An urgent deployment of forces saw Kiev also regain control of an administra-

tion office in Kharkiv and the security service headquarters of Donetsk, where pro-Russians have declared to create a sovereign "people's republic" and pledged an independence referendum before May 11.

And Nato chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen reaffirmed on a visit to Paris that Moscow -- its forces now massed along Ukraine's eastern frontier -- would be making an "historic mistake" if it were to intervene in Ukraine any further.

Yet the sharply barbed rhetoric has not yet led to a complete breakdown in diplomatic relations similar to the one that had endangered global security in the nuclear-charged decades of the Cold War.

Kerry said he intended to meet Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov "in Europe next week" to discuss preparations for possible four-way talks with Ukraine and EU diplomats.

The West's anxiety stems in part from Russian President Vladimir Putin's vow to use "all means necessary" to protect his compatriots in Ukraine.

The Russian foreign ministry put still more pressure on Kiev yesterday by accusing it of making "military preparations (in eastern regions) that are fraught with the risk of unleashing a civil war."

Russia has also put tough conditions on Washington's four-way talks idea by stressing that negotiations should also include representatives of Ukraine's southern and eastern regions -- a condition implicitly unacceptable to Kiev.

Fighting largely over by end of year: Assad

REUTERS, Moscow

President Bashar al-Assad has forecast that much of the fighting in the Syrian civil war will be over by the end of the year, a former Russian prime minister was quoted on Monday as saying.

"This is what he told me:

'This year the active phase of military action in Syria will be ended. After that we will have to shift to what we have been doing all the time - fighting terrorists'," Itar-Tass news agency quoted Sergei Stepashin as saying.

Stepashin, an ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin and former head of Russia's FSB security service, portrayed Assad as secure, in control and in "excellent athletic shape" after a meeting in Damascus last week.

suggested Assad to win a presidential election this year where he is contesting.

"There is not a shadow of a doubt that he knows what he's doing," RIA quoted Stepashin as saying.

Russia has been Assad's most powerful supporter during the three-year-old conflict that activists say has killed more than 150,000 people in Syria, blocking Western and Arab efforts to drive him from power.

UN raises alarm over Rohingya 'persecution'

AGENCIES

Acute shortages of water and medical treatment in western Myanmar following attacks on humanitarian groups are the latest hardships imposed on Rohingya Muslims that "could amount to crimes against humanity", a UN expert said Monday.

The United Nations' human rights envoy to the country, Tomas Ojea Quintana, said a wave of attacks against aid organisations had choked off health, water and food supplies, increasing the vulnerability of the Rohingyas.

"Recent developments in Rakhine State are the latest in a long history of discrimination and persecution against the Rohingya community which could amount to crimes against humanity," he said in a statement reported AFP.

More than 170 aid workers were pulled out of the state as a result of last month's unrest -- the first time they have been forced to leave en masse -- and there are fears that the entire relief infrastructure has been severely damaged.

The exodus has deepened an already dire health situation for hundreds of thousands reliant on international medical relief, with some 140,000 in the camps, as well as more than 700,000 vulnerable people in isolated villages severely affected.

Rakhine has been almost completely segregated on religious lines after long-standing animosity between Buddhists and Muslims erupted into bloodshed in 2012, leaving dozens dead in clashes.

Tensions have been heightened by Myanmar's first census in three decades, which has stoked anger among Buddhists that it might lead to official recognition for the Rohingya, a Muslim minority viewed by the authorities as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

Quintana said the government's decision not to allow Rohingyas to register their ethnicity in the census meant that the population tally was not in accordance with international standards.

British Foreign Minister Hugo Swire tweeted Monday that he had summoned the Myanmar ambassador "to register our deep concern about humanitarian access and conduct of census in Rakhine".

Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine are subject to a web of restrictions on everything from movement and employment to marriage and in some areas family size.

Lanka won't cooperate with UN war probe

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka on Monday rejected calls for cooperation with a UN investigation into war crimes and vowed it will not subject itself to the jurisdiction of the world's highest rights body.

Foreign Minister Gamini Lakshman Peiris said Sri Lanka will not allow United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay to launch an investigation mandated under a US-initiated resolution adopted last month.

"We will not submit ourselves to this process," Peiris told a press conference in Colombo.

"Sri Lanka will not participate in this inquiry."

Peiris's remarks came a week after UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon asked Colombo to engage "constructively" and cooperate with the UNHRC to implement a resolution calling for an international inquiry into atrocities by both sides.

President Mahinda Rajapakse told AFP soon after the motion that he rejected it. Rights groups have said that up to 40,000 ethnic Tamil civilians were killed by Lankan forces in the last phase of its long running civil war, a charge Colombo has repeatedly denied.

MH370: Elusive 'pings' keep search in limbo

AFP, Perth

Ships listening for underwater signals from Flight MH370 have logged no more "pings" and will spend several more days trying to pinpoint a crash site before a mini-sub is launched to scour the seabed, searchers say.

A month to the day since the Boeing 777 vanished with 239 people on board, time is running out to detect further signals as the batteries in beacons on the jet's black box data recorders reach their expiry date.

Transmissions picked up by Australia's Ocean Shield naval ship -- consistent with those from aircraft black boxes -- had raised hopes that a robotic submersible would soon be sent down to look for debris.

But search chief Angus Houston yesterday clarified that while the pings were an exciting development, further transmissions were needed before deploying the mini-sub.

"We need to continue that (search) for



A relative cries while praying for the victims of MH370 in Beijing yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

several days to the point at which there is absolutely no doubt that the pinger batteries will have expired," Houston said.

"Until we stop the pinger search we will not deploy the submersible."

He said no further transmissions had been detected in the remote

search area off western Australia which could help pinpoint where the jet might have crashed. It went missing en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing on March 8 and the search is now focusing on a 600-kilometre arc of the remote southern Indian Ocean.

Houston had indicated that the time was nearing for the Ocean Shield, which is crisscrossing the area to try to home in on the signals again, to launch the US-made autonomous underwater vessel Bluefin-21.

The 4.5-kilometre (nearly three-mile) depth of the ocean floor is the absolute operating limit for a Bluefin-21, which is designed for deep sea surveying and can carry video cameras.

LOK SABHA ELECTION 2014

BJP promises tough foreign policy

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party, considered the favourite to regain power at the parliamentary elections, has come out with a foreign policy statement in its manifesto that appears to be muscular towards its South Asian neighbours and promises to have a re-look at India's nuclear doctrine, including no-first-use of nuclear weapons.

The foreign policy issues figured in the speeches of BJP prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi at election meetings in Arunachal Pradesh, adjacent to China, and Assam, next door neighbour of Bangladesh.

Modi, in his meeting in Arunachal Pradesh, asked China to shed its "expansionist mindset", an apparent reference to Beijing's territorial claim over Arunachal Pradesh, part of which was occupied by the Chinese army during the 1962 war. In Assam, Modi spoke about illegal migration, without mentioning Muslims from Bangladesh, but made it clear that those who are victims of religious persecution in that country should be accommodated by India.

In sync with Modi's election speech in Assam, the BJP manifesto reflected its majoritarian bias when it said India will remain a "natural home for persecuted Hindus and they shall be welcome to seek refuge". The significance of the sentence in the manifesto is not lost when one considers it in the light of recent incidents of attacks on Hindus and their properties in Bangladesh early this year.

In an apparent reference to the Congress-led UPA's perceived leaning towards the US till 2010, when relations between the two countries began souring, the BJP manifesto said it would not be led by "big power interests" and would instead "engage proactively on our own with countries in the neigh-

bourhood and beyond".

The manifesto comes out tough when it says that if voted to power, a BJP-led government will pursue friendly relations with India's neighbours but will not hesitate to take a strong stand and action when required. Analysts say this is an apparent reference to Pakistan.

The BJP is critical of the UPA, accusing it of having "failed to establish enduring friendly and cooperative relations with India's neighbours". The government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, which also pledged good neighbourly ties, has drawn flak for being perceived as hobbled by pressures from Congress' coalition partners and letting go of major strategic initiatives with neighbours. This was best exemplified in India's failure to deliver on a Teesta water-sharing deal and the land boundary agreement with Bangladesh.

Whether the LBA can be passed in the Indian parliament remains to be seen in the event of the BJP returning to power. The party had opposed the agreement and the UPA's repeated attempts to introduce a bill to this effect in parliament.

What came out as a tougher posture is the manifesto's intention to "revise and update" India's nuclear doctrine, first formulated by the BJP-led government headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee way back in 1999, a year after it had startled the world by exploding nuclear devices and inviting hostile reactions and sanctions from Japan, the US and other Western countries.

The BJP appears to have come round to accepting the growing view in Indian strategic circles that India needs to revisit its stand on a no-first-use of nuclear weapons in the light of reports of Pakistan increasing its stockpile of atomic weapons and increasing cooperation between Pakistan and China in the nuclear sector.

SECOND PHASE OF VOTING TODAY

EIGHT CONSTITUENCIES	
Arunachal Pradesh	2
Manipur	2
Meghalaya	2
Mizoram	1
Nagaland	1



Indian Bollywood actress and Rashtriya Aam Party candidate Rakhi Sawant seeks blessings at a temple while campaigning in Mumbai, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Gloves off as BJP woos Hindu vote

AGENCIES

India's main opposition party, tipped to form the next government, appears to be returning to its Hindu nationalist roots at the start of a five-week general election, raking up divisive issues and using strong language in its election campaign.

Criss-crossing the country for months before the first phase of voting began on Monday, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its candidate for prime minister, Narendra Modi, had mainly campaigned on a ticket of better governance, economic development and job creation.

But just hours after voting started, the election commission demanded an explanation from Modi's chief aide Amit Shah, accusing him of incendiary speeches in towns of Muzaffarnagar in the state of Uttar Pradesh where dozens of people, mostly Muslims, were killed in Hindu-Muslim riots last year.

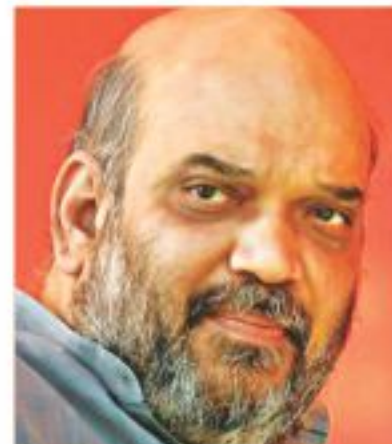
Shah, Modi's closest confidante and key political manager, was in the eye of a storm at the weekend after reportedly

telling supporters to see India's parliamentary polls as an opportunity for "revenge" against the left-leaning ruling Congress party.

Shah is also charged in 2010 with the extra-judicial killing of Muslims accused of terrorism when he was the interior minister in Gujarat. He denies the charges and is free on bail. Modi himself



Narendra Modi



Amit Shah

is also accused of failing to stop the killing of Muslims in riots in Gujarat in 2002.

The BJP has said the charges are trumped up at the behest of the Congress party and he is expected to hold a senior government position if Modi becomes prime minister.

Analysts say the decision to play on

religious sentiments may be a last-minute attempt to woo some blocs of Hindu voters.

And BJP's election promise of building a Ram Mandir at the disputed site in Ayodhya did not hold much weight even in the temple town as prominent seers dismissed it as a 'political gimmick' and accused the party of trying to create a wedge between communities.

Acharya Satyendra Das, head priest of the makeshift Ram Janmabhoomi temple, said it was "wrong" to link Ram Mandir - which was a matter of faith - with elections.

The long-awaited also manifesto includes its commitments to draft a "uniform civil code" - legislation that would withdraw the rights of India's 150 million Muslims to follow their religion-based law. It also says it would move to end the special autonomous status accorded to Jammu and Kashmir, the disputed Himalayan former princedom.

Both Modi and Rajnath Singh, the party's president, said the manifesto's release was not simply a formality but a "pledge".

BRIEF ON INDIAN POLLS

Ajay Rai to take on Modi in Varanasi

TNN, New Delhi

The Congress has declared Ajay Rai as its candidate for the Varanasi Lok Sabha seat yesterday. He will now face the BJP's prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi in the constituency.



Rai is the Congress MLA from Pindra near Varanasi and belongs to the bhumihar community. The constituency is thus set for a multipronged contest between Modi, AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal and Rai besides the nominees of the Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party.

AAP candidate pulls out from Rae Bareilly

IANS, LUCKNOW

The AAP suffered a jolt yesterday with its candidate Justice (retd.) Fakhruddin withdrawing from the electoral fray in Rae Bareilly Lok Sabha constituency where Congress president Sonia Gandhi is a candidate. Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leaders confirmed that the former Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh high court judge has recused himself from the polls. The party has now decided to field Archana Srivastava, a social worker against Sonia