NEWS_{IN} brief Deadly MERS virus

strikes in US

AFP, Washington

The first case of MERS, a dangerous respiratory virus that originated in the Middle East and has a high death rate, has been confirmed in the United States, officials said Friday. The person infected with Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV) is a health care provider who had traveled to Riyadh for work, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said. There is no cure for MERS-CoV, no medicine for treating it and no vaccine to prevent it.

Somalia capital blast kills 7

AFP, Mogadishu

At least seven people were killed yesterday in a huge explosion believed to be from a roadside bomb in the centre of the Somali capital Mogadishu, police said. The bomb went off near the busy KM4 junction in central Mogadishu, close to the Turkish embassy -- although it was not clear if the attack had a precise target. There was no immediate claim of responsibility, although the al-Qaeda-linked Shebab have said they were behind a series of similar attacks in recent weeks.

South Korea ferry disaster toll hits 236

Eight more bodies were recovered yesterday from the ferry that sank off South Korea last month, reports said, amid concern that some of the missing may never be found. Seventeen days after the 6,825-tonne Sewol capsized and sank, 236 people have been confirmed dead with 66 still unaccounted for, according to Yonhap news agency.

Australian PM cancels Indonesia trip

AFP, Sydney

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott yesterday cancelled a trip to Indonesia amid reports that an asylum seeker turnback operation was underway that could renew tensions between the neighbours. It would have been Abbott's first trip to Indonesia since damaging revelations in November that Australian spies attempted in 2009 to tap the phones of Yudhoyono, his wife and other members of his inner circle.





Afghan rescuers search desperately for survivors trapped under the mud in Argo district of Badakhshan province yesterday after a massive landslide on May 2 buried a village. Insets (left), A woman reacts after loosing everything she had. Rescuers searched in vain for survivors (right) amid warnings that more earth could sweep down the hillside. According to Reuters, more than 2100 people died in the tragedy. (Story on page 16)



ELECTION IN EGYPT Campaign opens amid violence

AFP, Cairo

Campaigning opened in Egypt yesterday for a presidential election likely to be won by the ex-army chief who deposed an elected Islamist leader, after deadly bombings underscored tensions gripping the country.

The May 26-27 presidential poll, meant to restore elected rule following the military overthrow of Mohamed Morsi last June, is widely expected to place former army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in power.

His only rival, leftist Hamdeen Sabbahi, has emerged as an opposition figure claiming to represent the ideals of the 2011 uprising that overthrew veteran strongman Hosni Mubarak.

The government has meanwhile waged a massive crackdown on Morsi's supporters, with an estimated 1,400 people, mostly Islamists, killed in street clashes and thousands more jailed.

Yesterday, a Cairo court sentenced 102 Morsi supporters to 10 years in prison for protest violence.

The crackdown has extended to secular activist groups that supported Morsi's overthrow but have since turned against the army-installed government as it clamps down on dissent.

Last week, another court sentenced 683 people to deathfor deadly riots in

Moscow says polls idea 'absurd' as dozens killed

AFP, Slavyansk

Seven European OSCE inspectors were freed yesterday in a flashpoint town in east Ukraine, where surrounded pro-Moscow rebels are battling a fierce military assault amid a soaring national death toll.

The unexpected release was a bolt of good news in Ukraine's startling descent into chaos, after a bloody day in which more than 50 people died -- most of them in a horrific inferno in the southern city of Odessa.

But the international crisis over Ukraine deepened, with Russia saying it would now be "absurd" for the ex-Soviet republic to hold a planned May 25

presidential election. That opened the risk of sweeping US sanctions against Russia after

President Barack Obama warned of punishment if perceived Moscow meddling scuppered the poll. Meanwhile, on the outskirts of Slavyansk,

where the OSCE team was held, AFP journalists witnessed a ferocious firefight between Kalashnikov-armed insurgents and soldiers outflanking their checkpoint.

One man was shot dead and lay in the road, while a fatally wounded driver gasped for breath at the wheel of his car, said the journalists, who were briefly pinned down between both sides. Armoured vehicles fired occasional heavy-calibre rounds at the outnumbered insurgents.

At least nine people died the day before around Slavyansk, when the military tightened its noose on the town but lost two helicopter gunships to shoulder-launched missiles in the process. All of Ukraine was reeling yesterday at

news of 42 deaths the day before in the southern city of Odessa, where pro-Russian and pro-Kiev militants clashed savagely and repeatedly.

Most of the deaths -- many believed to be pro-Russians -- occurred in a trade union building set alight as each

> cocktails at the other. Acting president Oleksandr Turchynov declared two days of mourning over the loss of lives across the country.

Cside lobbed Molotov

Russia slammed the violence and blamed it on Kiev and on ultranationalists it says make up Ukraine's new Western-backed govern-

The Kremlin added that Russia had lost any influence it had over the armed separatists, and that it had received "thousands of calls" from eastern Ukraine requesting "active help".

Russian President Vladimir Putin -whom the West sees as masterminding Ukraine's insurgency despite his denials -has kept an estimated 40,000 of his troops massed on Ukraine's border for the past two months. He has said he "very much hopes" he will not have to order them to invade.

OSCE team freed Nine more Muslims killed in Assam; thousands flee

Death toll hits 32 as Indian PM condemns attacks; curfew continues

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

AGENCIES

Security forces in northeast India found the bodies of nine Muslims yesterday, raising the death toll to 32 in a spate of attacks by suspected tribal militants as a weeks-long general election re-opens ethnic divisions. The election has rekindled the question

of religious animosity across India with the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party looking set to win, but the violence in the tea-growing state of Assam stems from friction over migration. Police said six of the nine Muslims found shot dead were women and

children. Security forces rescued three children found nearby hiding in forests close to the border with Bhutan. The latest fighting in the area, a site of frequent ethnic clashes, began on Thursday with the killing of 11 Bengalispeaking Muslim villagers, followed by

more bloodshed on Friday when 12 others were slain. The victims of the attacks were Muslim migrants who have been locked for years in land disputes with indigenous Bodo tribes in the tea-growing state that bor-

ders Bhutan and Bangladesh. Media reports said Muslim villagers were targeted as a punishment for not voting for candidates backed by the rebels.

yesterday directed Assam chief minister Tarun Gogoi and Union home minister Sushilkumar Shinde to "restore normalcy" in the area, while condemning the attacks. Investigators said they arrested



A young Indian child mourns after the death of a relative in Assam yesterday.

around 20 suspects yesterday in the violence-hit districts of Baksa and its neighbour, Kokrajhar.

The attacks have prompted security forces to launch a massive hunt for the guerillas and have spurred some 5,000 people to flee from their homes, a local police officer said.

The officer added that an indefinite

curfew has also been imposed in the violence-torn districts, with police given shoot-on-sight orders and army soldiers on standby.

Assam has a history of sectarian violence and armed groups fighting for greater autonomy or secession from India.

Police suspect militants from the Bodo tribe were behind the latest attacks in a region where tension between ethnic Bodo people and Muslim settlers has simmered for years.

In 2012, clashes erupted in which dozens of people were killed and 400,000 fled their homes.

Bodo representatives say many of the Muslims in Assam are illegal immi-₽ grants from neighbouring Bangladesh

🛱 who encroach on ancestral Bodo lands. The five-week general election, has exacerbated friction over migration in

Assam. Voting in Assam has ended, with April 24 the last day of polling. Candidates including prime-

ministerial front-runner Narendra Modi of the BJP have called for tighter controls.

Modi said last week that illegal immigrants from Bangladesh in the nearby state of West Bengal should have their "bags packed" in case he came to power, accusing the state government of being too soft.



AFP, Lima

A 116-year-old Peruvian living in extreme poverty in the heart of the Andes is in the running to become the

oldest person in the world. Born December 20, 1897, Filomena Taipe Mendoza is only three months older than Japanese Misao Okawa, who is the world's oldest person according to Guinness World Records and the US-

based Gerontology Research Group. Peru's Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion says Taipe Mendoza's identity card shows the date she was born.

"My secret to longevity is a natural diet: I always ate potatoes, goat meat, sheep milk, goat cheese and beans," said the wizened Taipe Mendoza, who has never left her dirt-poor village in Huancavelica.

"Everything I cook comes from my garden. I never had canned soft drinks.

"I had a very hard life, I was very a young widow with nine dependent children and I worked hard to raise them. Only three of them are alive," the ministry quoted her as saying.

"I wish I still had teeth," she added of her one wish.

Oldest-woman!

AFP, Bangkok Thailand's opposition leader yesterday refused to commit to elections mooted for July to end an ulcerous political crisis, instead calling for prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra to resign before new polls later in the year.

The kingdom has been without a fully functioning government since December, severely hampering policy making and draining the energy of the nation's once-dynamic economy.

Thai opposition

urges PM to resign

Refuses to back July 20 election

Thailand has been bedevilled by an eight-year power struggle between a royalist establishment -- supported by parts of the judiciary and the military -- and the billionaire Shinawatra family, which has traditionally enjoyed strong support in poor, rural, northern portion of the country.

At least 25 people have been killed and hundreds of others wounded in political violence during six months of protests to oust Yingluck and diminish the influence of her brother Thaksin on Thai politics. Launching his proposal, Democrat Party leader Abhisit

Vejjajiva urged Yingluck and her cabinet to resign to make way for an appointed interim administration which would oversee a debate on reforms. It would then hold a referendum on the reform proposals

with elections six months later, he told reporters, without directly saying whether or not his party would participate in the July poll. Abhisit, a former prime minister, has faced criticism for

his party's boycott of polls in February called by Yingluck -which were later annulled by the courts after violent protests disrupted voting. Critics say the move further eroded Thailand's fragile democ-

racy and accuse Abhisit of paying lip-service to elections. On Wednesday Thailand set new elections for July 20, polls pro-government supporters hope could revive Yingluck's battered administration -- although they still

need to be endorsed by a royal decree.

No support to third front to form next govt: Rahul

Modi urges voter to overthrow 'mother-son govt'

AGENCIES

Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi yesterday ruled out supporting the third front in forming the next government as Narendra Modi, the BJP prime ministerial candidate urged voters to overthrow the graft-stained UPA government.

Speaking to reporters during his election campaign in Amethi, Rahul said he was confident that Congress will get the numbers to form the next government at the Centre. He added that his party will not support the third front.

The Congress vicepresident's statement comes just a day after CPI-M asserted that the Congress may be forced to support a government of secular parties at the Centre to keep the BJP out of power.

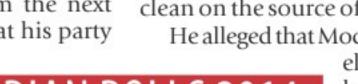
Taking a swipe at the Gandhi family, Narendra Modi yesterday said the mother and son have never gone through the

pangs of penury and asked the people of Uttarakhand to overthrow the "government of plunderers who have looted the people and stashed their money abroad."

He charged that the government of the "mother and son" (Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi) has destroyed the country and the "saddest part" is that they are "not affected or worried by this. They think

people will forget everything." He said the mother-son government at the Centre cannot feel the pain of the poor because

and never went through the pangs of penury.





Again describing himself as a "humble chaiwala" who has seen it all moving from one railway compartment to another to offer people tea, Modi said: tragic figure, who failed in his this time the poll battle is between the mother-son · ambition to curb corruption duo on the one side and a chaiwala on the other.

Attacking Modi over election expenditure, Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi earlier have the requisite political alleged that corporates were pumping money into · power to push it through. the saffron party's campaign and asked it come: clean on the source of funds.

land to one industrialist which is : wanted to do much more much more than the Rs. 30,000 : about corruption," Sen told crore that Congress gave to the : HT in an exclusive interview.

they get crores of rupees for : ruption," he said. such posters. Is it Modi's : Sen flew to West Bengal money?.... They ask us why we : give free money to poor; through MNREGA, food guar- · antee scheme. Poor does not

get free money. They work for it whereas free funds are given to Adani," he said.

Describing the elections as a fight between two ideologies, Gandhi said that while Congress wanted to take Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians along, the other side was stoking politics of "anger".

Hitting out at his opponents, Aam Aadmi Party's · services as well high growth Kumar Vishwas and BJP's Smriti Irani, Rahul said: rates. "The UPA can cer-

Without taking the names of rival candidates, he · highest rate of economic said the people who come from outside are angry at . growth India has ever they were born with a golden spoon in their mouth the relations that the Gandhi family shares with the ; achieved, almost catching people of Amethi.

Manmohan will be remembered as a sad figure

Says Amartya Sen HINDUSTAN TIMES ONLINE

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen · has said Indian Prime Minister Manmohan is a and became a victim of his : helplessness as he did not

"He (Singh) will be remembered by those who He alleged that Modigave nearly Rs. 26,000 crore of · know him well as a sad electricity and Rs. 15,000 crore of: figure, in the sense that he poorthrough MNREGA in a year. : "He did not have the politi-"Please ask BJP where do : cal power to eliminate cor-

> to vote in a rare, high-profile and vocal visit to India during which he criticised election frontrunner Narendra Modi. Sen also said Singh

deserves credit for initiating programmes to improve healthcare and education they would run away from Amethi after the elections. : tainly take credit for the · up with China," Sen said.