

MARTIAL LAW IN THAILAND

Rivals hold crisis talks

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's military hosted ground-breaking talks yesterday between warring political rivals after imposing martial law to prevent the deeply divided kingdom degenerating into another "Ukraine or Egypt".

The opposing camps and other top officials met for more than two hours under heavy guard in Bangkok in what one headline supporter of the elected government called a good atmosphere -- a rare glimmer of detente in the long-running political conflict.

The crisis broadly pits a Bangkok-based royalist elite and its backers against the billionaire family of former premier Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted by the military in 2006 but still enjoys strong support in northern Thailand.

There was no breakthrough at the talks chaired by army leader General Prayut Chan-O-Cha, who invoked martial law Tuesday, and another meeting was called for today.

The meeting included representatives of the government, the ruling and opposition parties and of the election commission and Senate, as well as the heads of the pro- and anti-government protest camps.

But observers warned that the military's efforts to end the crisis through martial law risked inflaming tensions unless the outcome is accepted by all sides.

"The next few days are crucial because if the army is going to play a broker role, it has to do so quickly," said Thitinan Pongsudhirak, political analyst at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University.

"We will see some resistance to martial law -- martial law will be tested -- so the longer it waits, the worse it will be for the military."

Caretaker Prime Minister Niwattumrong Boonsongpaisan, who replaced Yingluck Shinawatra after a controversial court ruling ousted her this month, has called for fresh elections on August 3.



Prayut Chan-O-Cha

UKRAINE CRISIS US sends in another warship in the region

AFP, Kiev

The United States is sending another warship to the Black Sea to reassure its allies over Russia's actions in Ukraine, where the country holds a crucial presidential election at the weekend.

Washington and Nato also said Tuesday there was no sign of a Russian withdrawal of troops from the edge of Ukraine, despite Moscow's announcement of a pullout and suggestions from Kiev that there was no longer any visible military activity in the border zone.

The US and its allies have warned the Kremlin of further sanctions over the crisis in Ukraine, where a bloody pro-Moscow insurgency in the east is threatening to tear the ex-Soviet nation apart.

In a key step demanded by the West to ease tensions, Russia said its troops were packing up and moving back from the Ukrainian border. Washington and Nato have so far said they have seen no sign of any pullback, although Ukraine's border guard service said Tuesday there was no visible Russian troop activity within 10 kilometres



China warns US, others over Asian security

Signs '\$400b' gas deal with Russia amid rising tensions

AFP, Shanghai

Chinese President Xi Jinping issued a veiled warning to the United States yesterday, saying countries should not build up military alliances in Asia, even as Beijing feuds with several neighbours.

Speaking at an Asian regional security forum in Shanghai, Xi said a rising China would seek "peaceful" means to resolve territorial disputes.

Beijing has sought to counter Washington's foreign policy "pivot" to Asia, but it has also irritated Vietnam, Japan and the Philippines -- the latter two US allies -- with what those countries say are aggressive moves in separate maritime rows.

"To beef up an entrenched or military alliance targeted at a third party is not conducive to maintaining common security," Xi said, without naming names.

Washington's traditional allies in the Asia-Pacific region include Japan, where it has military bases and whose

security it guarantees by treaty, and Australia.

China's official Xinhua news agency on Tuesday urged countries from outside Asia not to raise tensions.

In Asia, relations between China and Vietnam have worsened after Beijing sent a deep-water oil drilling rig into contested waters in the South China Sea earlier this month. The move sparked violent protests in Vietnam in which at least four Chinese were killed.

China and Japan have a long-running feud over disputed islands in the East China Sea, while the Philippines accuses China of reclaiming land on a disputed reef within its exclusive economic zone under a United Nations convention.

Several countries have overlapping claims in the South China Sea, which is home to key shipping lanes and thought to contain vast energy reserves.

On Tuesday, Xi and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin launched naval exercises off Shanghai, and

yesterday they oversaw the signing of a huge and long-awaited gas deal between their two countries.

Under the 30-year contract between China's CNPC and Russia's Gazprom -- reportedly worth as much as \$400 billion -- 38 billion cubic metres of gas could eventually be sent annually from Russia to energy-hungry China.

Russia has been seeking more Asian markets, and its gas supplies to Europe via Ukraine are currently under threat because of unpaid bills by Kiev.

European Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso yesterday told Putin in a letter it was "imperative" that negotiations over payments by Ukraine continued, and that supplies were maintained during the talks.

The perceived motive for the deal is that Russia needs a second market for its gas, so it can face up to European sanctions. Given that the pipeline won't start pumping gas into Chinese factories until 2018 at the earliest, its economic effect on the European crisis will be limited.

Charles 'compares Putin to Hitler'

AFP, London

Prince Charles was mired in controversy yesterday after he reportedly compared the actions of Russian President Vladimir Putin in Ukraine to those of Adolf Hitler.

The heir to the throne made the apparently unguarded comment during a trip to a museum in Canada, in conversation with a Polish-born woman who had fled the Nazis as a child.

"I had finished showing him the exhibit and talked with him about my own family background and how I came to Canada," Marienne Ferguson told Britain's Daily Mail newspaper.

"The prince then said: 'And now Putin is doing just about the same as Hitler.'"

The remark made headlines around the world, and Russian media said it threatened to further "complicate" relations between



Britain and Moscow.

The future king is due to meet with Putin in France on June 6 as part of the international commemorations marking the 70th anniversary of D-Day.

The prince's office, Clarence House, said he had not intended to make a political statement. Members of the royal family by convention do not comment on political affairs, and Queen Elizabeth II is famous for keeping her own counsel.

Opposition Labour lawmaker Mike Gapes, a member of the House of Commons foreign affairs committee, said the royals "should be seen and not heard".

"If Prince Charles wants to make controversial statements on national or international issues, he should abdicate and stand for election," he said on Twitter. However, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg said the prince was "free to express himself".

Mubarak gets 3 yrs for graft

AFP, Cairo

An Egyptian court yesterday sentenced deposed president Hosni Mubarak to three years in prison on corruption charges, in one of two trials after the 2011 uprising that ended his rule.

His sons Alaa and Gamal each received four-year jail terms, and four other defendants were acquitted.

They were accused of embezzling more than one hundred million Egyptian pounds (about \$14 million, 10 million euros) earmarked for the maintenance of presidential palaces.

Mubarak had technically been a free man after a court ordered his release last year following the end of the permitted detention period, but has since remained out of sight in a military hospital. He is now likely to be returned to prison.



Boko Haram militants strike back in Nigeria

Scores killed in attacks as fear of wider violence grows

AFP, Jos

Rescue workers yesterday combed through the rubble of Nigeria's deadliest bomb attack after at least 118 people were killed in the central city of Jos, with Boko Haram blamed for the atrocity.

Emergency services picked through the burnt-out remains of vehicles and collapsed buildings in the New Abuja Market area of the city, where two car bombs exploded within 20 minutes of each other on Tuesday.

The attack was the latest affront to the Nigerian government's internationally backed security crackdown in response to the mass abduction of more than 200 schoolgirls on April 14 that has sparked global attention.

Two more attacks in villages near the girls' hometown of Chibok in northeastern Borno state were meanwhile reported, with witnesses saying that 30 people were killed on Monday and Tuesday.

In Jos, where Boko Haram have attacked before, Plateau state governor Jonah Jang's spokesman said the bombing bore the hallmarks of the Islamist extremists.

On the day of the mass abduction, Boko Haram launched a car bomb attack on a bus station in a suburb of the capital Abuja which killed 75 and are suspected of a copy-cat attack in the same location on May 1 which left 19 dead.

Rescue workers were among those who were caught up in the Jos bombings.

As they tended to the injured from the first blast, the second detonated. Improvised explosive devices were hidden in a minibus and truck, the military said.

Nigeria's President Jonathan is adamant that there will be no negotiations with Boko Haram on swapping the girls for militant fighters held in Nigerian jails but the government has maintained it is open to dialogue on wider issues.



Indian Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi and her son and Congress Party vice-president Rahul Gandhi pay tribute during a memorial ceremony for slain former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, on his 23rd death anniversary in New Delhi, yesterday. Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated during electoral campaigning, allegedly by LTTE rebel separatists, in the town of Sriperumpudur in the southern state of Tamil Nadu on May 21, 1991.

PHOTO: AFP

'Ready to Struggle'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

"It's time for struggle. We are ready for it", this was Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's message to partymen after his party's drubbing in parliamentary polls as he reached his constituency Amethi yesterday.

Rahul, the 43-year-old scion of Nehru-Gandhi family, accompanied by sister Priyanka Gandhi, reached Amethi in Uttar Pradesh state on his first visit after the party's worst defeat in Lok Sabha elections.

At a brief meeting with party workers at Congress office at Gauriganj, Rahul told reporters that "despite the fact that these are not good days for Congress in Uttar Pradesh, the people of Amethi and Rae Bareilly showed confidence in the party by supporting -- and for this I thank them."

At the meeting, when some party workers pointed to the need to review the fall in Rahul's victory margin in Amethi, Priyanka, who had spearheaded the campaign for her brother, said she would again come for this purpose after a week.

Rahul said the party will fight back if any step is taken against public interest, according to local Congress leaders present at the meeting. He also appealed to the workers "to get ready for struggle".

He also said "the party will organise the review (of poll results) meeting" very soon, according to the leaders.

Rahul had won 2009 Lok Sabha polls in Amethi by a margin of over 3.70 lakh votes which came down to 1.07 lakh in this Lok Sabha polls.

Modi reaches out to Pakistan

AGENCIES

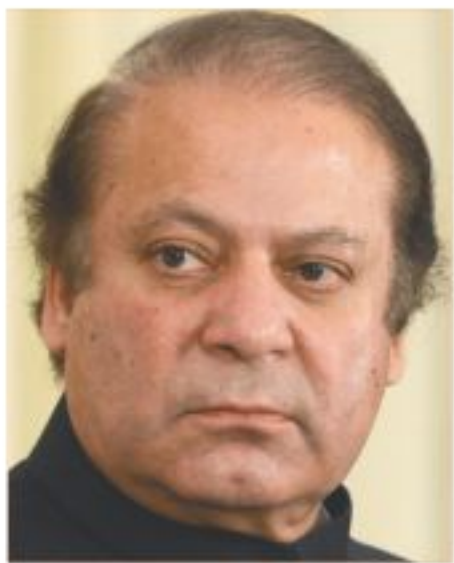
Indian prime minister-elect Narendra Modi has invited Pakistan's premier Nawaz Sharif to his swearing-in next Monday in a bold diplomatic statement that he intends to improve strained relations.

A government official said invitations to the ceremony had been sent to all heads of government from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) which includes Pakistan.

The invitation signals Modi's intention to tackle India's most troubled bilateral relationship at a time when Sharif, who is himself a centre-right leader, is also keen on talks, analysts say.

Modi is seen as an uncompromising hardliner on national security issues, and his BJP party has long advocated a tough stance on Pakistan. But correspondents say this huge election victory gives him a mandate to reach out to Pakistan in a way the previous administration could not.

The hardline leader was expected to usher in a more



muscular foreign policy, insisting on the campaign trail other countries would respect India only if it showed strong political leadership.

Sharif will be under pressure to attend the swearing-in at the presidential palace in Delhi, the BBC's M Ilyas Khan in Islamabad reports. Last year he invited Manmohan Singh to his inauguration but his then Indian counterpart did not attend.

But the very fact that an invitation is being offered by Modi is being seen as a gesture of friendship - and perhaps a clever tactical move by the new Indian leader.

While Pakistan's civilian leaders and business community favour closer ties, many ordinary Pakistani revile Modi for his alleged role in 2002 religious riots. Pakistan's powerful army is also said by analysts to be wary of closer ties and could act as a brake on any peacemaking attempts.

Talat Masood, a political analyst based in Islamabad, hailed the Indian initiative as a "great gesture" that Pakistan must reciprocate even if the army thinks otherwise.

Iranians arrested for being too 'happy'!

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A group of young men and women in Iran have been arrested and forced to "confess" live on TV for creating a Tehran-based version of the Pharrell Williams' song Happy. They were freed later, Iranian sources said.

According to Iran's official Isna news agency, Police chief Hossein Sajedinia said the "vulgar" clip was an offence against "public chastity".

The video, which appeared on YouTube last month, had more than 170,000 views and its creators said it showed that Iran's young people "have moments of joy and happiness even though they live with many difficulties".

The young people featured wear wigs to cover their hair, but are still committing offences under strict Sharia law as the women are out in public not wearing the

hijab, and the video features men and women dancing together.

Though a recent campaign involving Iranian women picturing themselves "free" without head-to-toe covering made headlines recently, it faced a backlash two weeks ago when headline demonstrators displayed placards in Tehran's Fatemi Square saying: "Sir, have you no shame? Where is your wife's hijab?"

Pharrell Williams himself responded to the news on his Facebook page today, writing: "It is beyond sad that these kids were arrested for trying to spread happiness."

The Iranian journalist Golnaz Esfandiari tweeted that "thousands of Iranians have been arrested in the past 35 years for being happy [and] partying."

She wrote: "Iran [is] a country where being 'happy' is a crime."



NEWSIN brief

Pak air strikes kill 60 militants

AFP, Miranshah

Pakistani air force jets pounded Taliban targets in a restive tribal area near the Afghan border yesterday, killing at least 60 people including insurgent commanders, officials said. The strikes will come as a fresh blow to stop-start peace talks between the government and the Tehreek-e-

Crisis-hit Libya to vote next month

AFP, Tripoli

Libya will hold elections next month on June 25 to replace its disputed interim parliament, as authorities strive to contain a power struggle with armed ex-rebels and prevent a descent into civil war. Militias are blamed for growing unrest in the North African country since the 2011 Nato-backed uprising that killed dictator

16 Afghan cops killed in last 24 hours

AFP, Kabul

Insurgents have killed 16 policemen in Afghanistan in the space of one day and beheaded eight of them, officials said yesterday, as security forces prepare to guard a second-round election. No one claimed

Aussie kids among world's laziest

AFP, Sydney

Australian children are among the least active in the world, researchers say, warning that the sports-mad nation was raising a "generation of couch potatoes". A study, which compared data taken from 15,000 young Australians with that from 14 other countries, found that the most active young sters overall were in Mozambique and New Zealand followed by Mexico. Australia was grouped with Canada, Ireland and the United States just above

Taiwan subway knife attack kills 3

AFP, Taipei

A knife-wielding attacker went on a stabbing spree aboard a Taipei subway train yesterday, killing three people and wounding 25 others, police said. The man, a 21-year-old college student, was immediately arrested after the incident, the first fatal attack on the city's subway system since it began operations in 1996, police said. It was not immediately clear why the man launched the unex-

New CM of Gujarat sworn in

PTI, Ahmedabad

Anandiben Patel, Gujarat's revenue minister and a close aide of Narendra Modi, will be the new chief minister of the state. She is the first woman chief minister of Gujarat. Modi who led BJP to a spectacular victory in the Lok Sabha elections, resigned yesterday after he was appointed as prime