

NEWSIN brief

Hong Kong stages huge democracy rally

AFP, Hong Kong

Hundreds of thousands of protesters staged a pro-democracy march in rain-soaked Hong Kong yesterday that organisers say could be the largest since the city was handed back to China. The scale of the turnout reflects surging discontent over Beijing's rule in the semi-autonomous city. It comes after nearly 800,000 people voted in an informal referendum to demand a free electoral mechanism that allows voters to nominate candidates.

Indian court grants bail to rape-charge editor

AFP, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court yesterday granted bail to Tarun Tejpal, the founder and editor of Tehelka magazine, charged with raping a colleague on condition that he does not tamper with evidence or threaten witnesses. Tejpal, 51, has been charged with a series of offences including sexual harassment, outraging modesty and rape of his junior colleague during a magazine-sponsored event last year in the western

Turkish PM to stand for presidency

AFP, Ankara

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is to stand for the presidency in August elections, his party announced yesterday, paving the way for him to extend his dominance of the country's politics for at least another five years. The announcement -- which put an end to months of speculation -- was made at a glitzy ceremony at Ankara's Chamber of Commerce attended by some 4,000 AKP party members as well as the premier and his wife Emine.



Sarkozy 'held for questioning'

REUTERS, Nanterre

Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy was held for questioning on Tuesday over suspicions he used his influence to secure leaked details of an inquiry into alleged irregularities in his 2007 election campaign.

It was the first time a former French head of state has been held in police custody and is the latest blow to Sarkozy's hopes of a come-back after his 2012 election defeat by Socialist rival Francois Hollande. The conservative politician denies all wrongdoing in a string of investigations involving him.

Sarkozy arrived early yesterday to be quizzed by investigators at their offices in Nanterre, west of Paris, after his lawyer was also held for questioning on Monday.

Asked about the matter, government spokesman Stephane Le Foll said "Sarkozy was 'subject to justice like everyone else.'" Under French law, influence-peddling can be punished by up to 5 years in prison and a fine of \$682,000. Sarkozy lost presidential immunity from legal prosecution a month after he left office in June 2012.

The current questioning relates to suspicions he used his influence to get information on an investigation into funding irregularities in his victorious 2007 election campaign. Sarkozy can be held in custody for up to 48 hours.



Protesters hold placards and shout anti Abe government slogans during a rally in front of the prime minister's official residence in Tokyo, yesterday. Inset an anti-war protester.

PHOTO: AFP



Japan sheds it's pacifist stance

AFP, Tokyo

Japan yesterday loosened the bonds on its powerful military, proclaiming the right to go into battle in defence of allies, in a highly controversial shift in the nation's pacifist stance.

After months of political horsetrading and browbeating of opponents, conservative Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said his cabinet had formally endorsed a reinterpretation of rules that have banned the use of armed force except in very narrowly-defined circumstances.

"There is a misunderstanding that Japan will be involved in war in an effort to defend a foreign country. But this is impossible. It will be strictly a defensive measure to defend our people," Abe told a press conference.

"There is no change in the general principle that we cannot send troops overseas," Abe told the televised news conference.

Abe has faced down widespread public opposition to the move, which climaxed at the weekend when a middle-aged man attempted suicide by setting himself on fire.

Supporters say the reinterpretation is necessary because of the worsening security situation in East Asia, where an ever more confident China is pushing its territorial claims and an erratic North Korea is threatening stability.

Under the new definition, Japanese troops will be able to come to the aid of allies -- primarily the US -- if they come under attack from a common enemy, even if Japan is not the object of the attack.

China has warned against the move, saying it opens the door to remilitarisation of a country that is not sufficiently penitent for its actions in World War II.

The move has received backing from Washington, which has long encouraged Japan to take on more of a role in a very lopsided defence treaty.

Iraq turmoil deepens

Parliament fails to find common ground amid caliphate threat

AGENCIES

Sunnis and Kurds abandoned the first meeting of Iraq's new parliament yesterday after Shias failed to name a prime minister to replace Nuri al-Maliki, wrecking hopes that a unity government would be swiftly built to save Iraq from collapse.

Meanwhile, US President Barack Obama deployed 200 additional troops to Baghdad to protect Washington's sprawling embassy here, as well as the airport, bringing the overall number of American soldiers and embassy security forces to 800.

And Saudi Arabia pledged \$500 million in humanitarian aid for Iraq yesterday, to be disbursed through the United Nations to those in need regardless of sect or ethnicity, state media reported.

The United States, United Nations, Iran and Iraq's own Shia clergy have pushed hard for politicians to come up with an inclusive government to save the country as Sunni insurgents bear down on Baghdad.

But with Shias failing to name a prime minister, Sunnis and Kurds refused to return from recess at the parliamentary chamber in the fortified "green zone" where they were meeting for the first time since an election in April.

Parliament is not likely to meet again for at least a week, leaving the country in a state of political

limbo and Maliki clinging to power as a caretaker, rejected by Sunnis and Kurds.

Under Iraq's governing system put in place after the fall of Saddam Hussein, the prime minister has always been a member of the Shia majority, the speaker of parliament a Sunni and the largely ceremonial president a Kurd.

Sunni parties said they would not put forward their candidate for speaker until the Shia pick a premier. The Kurds have also yet to nominate a president.

Baghdad can ill-afford further delays. Iraqi troops have been battling for three weeks against fighters led by the group formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This week it shortened its name to the Islamic State and declared its leader "caliph" - historic title of successors of the Prophet Mohammad whole ruled the whole Muslim world.

Fighting has raged in recent days in former dictator Saddam Hussein's home city, Tikrit, north of Baghdad. ISIL also controls suburbs just west of the capital and fighting has broken out to the south, leaving the city of 7 million confronting threats from three sides.

The United Nations said on Tuesday more than 2,400 Iraqis had been killed in June alone, making the month by far the deadliest since the height of sectarian

Truce ends in Ukraine

Heavy fighting reported; Moscow warns Kiev

AFP, Kramatorsk

Ukrainian tanks and fighter bombers launched a ferocious assault against pro-Russian separatist insurgents yesterday after Kiev dismissed European pressure to save a tenuous 10-day truce.

The resumption of the worst fighting in Europe in nearly two decades drew the instant wrath of Russian President Vladimir Putin and set off a new international scramble to regain some control over events in the strategic ex-Soviet state.

In an emotional late-night address, Western-backed President Petro Poroshenko told the nation that the ceasefire had been used by the militias to regroup and stock up on heavy arms from Russia. Poroshenko told that insurgents had attacked Ukrainian positions more than 100 times during the truce.

Ukrainian defence ministry spokesman Oleksiy Dmytrashivsky said a "massive artillery and air offensive" had been unleashed in the eastern rustbelt, home to seven million mostly Russian speakers.

Russia immediately expressed its "deep regret" while France's foreign minister vowed there would be no letup in Western efforts to find a lasting solution to the crisis.

Putin said Poroshenko was assuming responsibility for future casualties. The foreign ministry said Kiev would "have to answer for crimes against peaceful civilians".

Both separatist fighters and pro-Kiev leaders reported heavy exchanges of artillery fire and air bombardments across the rebel stronghold Russian border regions of Lugansk and Donetsk.

Poroshenko's decision to resume the conflict came just hours after the leaders of France and Germany joined him on a conference call to Putin --

Missing teens found dead in West Bank

Israel vows to make Hamas pay for murders

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday vowed to hunt down the Hamas militants it holds responsible for kidnapping and killing three teenagers, but was likely to carefully weigh its response to avoid triggering a regional flareup.

As further details emerged of the fate of the three youngsters whose bodies were found in the southern West Bank on Monday evening, Israel said it would not rest until it finds their killers.

But despite extensive Israeli air strikes on Gaza overnight, no one was killed, with Israel's military establishment and cabinet heavyweights backing a more measured response over isolated calls for a major operation in the territory.

The disappearance of two 16-year-olds and a 19-year-old from a roadside in the southern West Bank on June 12 and the hunt for their kidnappers had gripped the Israeli public, triggering an outpouring of public grief and anger.

Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon vowed the deaths would not go unavenged.

"Hamas is responsible for the kidnapping and murder of the youths and we know how to settle accounts with them," Yaalon said.

Israeli warplanes pounded Gaza during the night, hitting 34 targets across the enclave, the military said.

Hamas has warned that Israel would "open the gates of hell" if it carried out any reprisal operations against the Islamist movement, whose power base is in Gaza.



A ball of fire is seen following an Israel airstrike in Rafah, southern Gaza, early yesterday. Israeli warplanes launched in the early morning hours of yesterday, dozens of airstrikes on different targets in the Gaza Strip. Inset, Israelis mourns and light candles in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv on Monday to mourn the murdered teens.

PHOTO: AFP

CONTROVERSIAL RAPE REMARKS TMC coerces Pal to apologise

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Trinamool Congress MP and leading film actor Tapas Pal, whose controversial remarks against women created a furore across the country, tendered an unconditional apology yesterday following a directive from the party.

In a video aired by TV channels in Kolkata on Monday, Tapas Pal was quoted as threatening to kill CPI(M) workers and have their women raped if any Trinamool Congress worker was attacked.

"Some remarks made by me in the heat and dust of the election campaign have caused dismay and consternation. I apologise unreservedly for them," Pal said in a written apology to Trinamool Congress and the media.

"Whatever the provocation -- and there was an attempt at provocation -- those comments should never have been made," the letter said.

political colleagues, I have let down my family, including my wife and children and my parents, and my friends," said Pal, who remained incommunicado since the controversial video was aired.

"I apologise to all of them, and particularly to all women in our society and to those in the media who highlighted the issue," the two-time Lok Sabha MP from Krishnagar said.

"I have no excuses to offer. It was a gross error of judgement and deeply insensitive. It should not have happened. And I assure you it will not happen again. Once more, a humble apology," he said.

Trinamool supremo Mamata Banerjee has expressed shock and pain at the comments made by Pal, and he was asked by the party leadership to



French burqa ban upheld

AFP, Strasbourg

The European Court of Human Rights yesterday upheld France's controversial burqa ban, rejecting arguments that outlawing full-face veils breaches religious freedom.

In a case brought by a 24-year-old French woman with the support of a British legal team, the court ruled that France was justified in introducing the ban in the interests of social cohesion.

Two of the 17 judges who spent several months deliberating on the case dissented from the majority view that the ban did not breach the European Convention on Human Rights' provisions protecting the freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

The judges agreed unanimously that the woman had not been a victim of discrimination.

The university graduate, who has family in Birmingham, England, had requested anonymity for fear of reprisals in France over her action. She had argued that being obliged

NSA put BJP on Surveillance

Classified docs say US court authorised the move

PTI, Washington

America's top spy agency was authorised by a US court in 2010 to carry out surveillance on the BJP along with five other political organizations across the globe, including Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Pakistan Peoples Party, according to a classified document.

BJP figures in the list of foreign political parties along with Lebanon's Amal, the Bolivarian Continental Coordinator of Venezuela, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Egyptian National Salvation Front and the Pakistan Peoples Party for whom the National Security Agency (NSA) had sought permission to carry out surveillance, says the document made public by The Washington Post yesterday.

The document lists the 193 foreign governments as well as foreign factions and other entities that were part of a 2010 certification approved by the foreign intelligence surveillance court. The list includes India.

"These are the entities about which the NSA may conduct surveillance, for the purpose of gathering foreign intelligence," the paper said, citing documents provided to it by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden.

It said each year a new certification must be approved by the court to permit such surveillance under Section 702 of the FISA Amendments Act.

"Virtually no foreign government is off-limits for the National Security Agency, which has been authorised to intercept information 'concerning' all but four countries, according to top-secret documents," The Post reported. The four countries are Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The certification of surveillance also includes other international organisations like World Bank, IMF, the European Union and the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Without specifically responding to questions related to surveillance on India and the BJP in particular, NSA spokesperson Vaneet Vines told PTI that the agency