NEWS_{IN} brief

Russia approves new US envoy

AFP, Moscow

Moscow said yesterday it has approved the candidacy of the former US ambassador to Kiev as Washington's new envoy to Russia at a time of sharply heightened tensions over Ukraine. If he is approved by the US Senate, career diplomat John Tefft will succeed Michael McFaul, who quit his post in February after just two years

Firing inside Indian court kills 2

AGENCIES

At least two people were killed and three others injured yesterday in a blast which was followed by firing inside a court in Uttar Pradesh's Faizabad, reports said.

According to NDTV news channel, former UP legislator Sonu Singh's brother Monu and others were attacked inside the court. It said the assailant was also

Greek civil servants strike over austerity

AFP, Athens

Greek civil servants launched a 24-hour strike yesterday to protest layoffs and grinding austerity policies that have slashed public services in the debt-ridden country.

Central Athens was closed to traffic at midday as more than 1,000 strikers prepared to march on parliament. It is the latest in a series of strikes to protest the planned layoffs of some 11,000 civil servants by the end of the year, in addition to 14,000 already laid off from the 650,000-

Merkel to attend **World Cup final in Rio**

AFP, Berlin

"President Joachim Gauck will travel with Chancellor Angela Merkel to Rio de Janeiro from July 12 to 14' and watch the final match together, his office said yesterday.

After Germany's historic 7-1 thrashing of hosts Brazil in the semifinal yesterday, they will face either Argentina or the Netherlands for the championship on Sunday. A record 32.6 million people watched the

Afghan casualties jump 24%: UN

Civilian casualties in

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan soared by 24 percent in the first half of 2014, according to UN figures released yesterday, revealing worsening nationwide violence amid political turmoil. In the first six months of this year, UNAMA documented 4,853 civilian casualties. The toll included 1,564 deaths and 3,289 injuries, with ground engagements causing two out of every five civilian





Iraqi premier Nuri al-Maliki

Kurdish region of harbouring

jihadists, further ratcheting

up tension despite calls for

a Sunni militant offensive.

jihadist-led offensive that

and soon overran swathes

of five provinces north and

west of Baghdad, has dis-

placed hundreds of thou-

heaped pressure on Maliki

as he bids for a third term.

efforts to retain his post by

turning on Kurdish leaders

"Honestly, we cannot be

appeared to damage his

whose support he needs.

cannot be silent over Arbil

Daash, and the Baath, and

operations," Maliki said in

his weekly televised address.

being a headquarters for

al-Qaeda and terrorist

silent over this and we

The incumbent yesterday

sands of people and

started exactly a month ago

Iraq's leaders to unite against

The crisis triggered by a

Wednesday accused the

country's autonomous





Palestinian women mourn during a funeral in the northern Gaza Strip town of Beit Hanun, yesterday. Top right, A ball of fire is seen following an Israeli air strike in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip and a Palestinian woman carries her daughter past rubble from a home which police said was destroyed in an Israeli air strike. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday vowed to ramp up an Israeli campaign against Gaza militants that has so far cost 43 Palestinian lives. PHOTO: AFP



Modi Tightens grip on BJP

Amit Shah elected new party chief

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's closest confidant Amit Shah was appointed the new President of ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party yesterday.

The appointment of 49-year-old Shah, one of the youngest presidents of the party who succeeds Rajnath Singh, gives Modi, who singlehandedly steered BJP to an emphatic victory in parliamentary elections less than two months ago, complete control over both the party and the government.

Rajnath Singh, who is currently India's Home Minister, is stepping down as BJP chief as the party's constitution does not allow a leader to hold two posts.

Shah's appointment as BJP chief was approved at a meeting of BJP parliamentary board, the party's highest decision-making forum yesterday afternoon and caps a meteoric and rapid rise for the party's key election strategist who is credited with crafting the party's unprecedented victory general elections in politically key state of Uttar Pradesh which sends the highest number of members -- 80 -- to Lok Sabha.

After Modi as Prime Minister, Shah's becoming the party president marks a generational change in BJP where veterans like Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Lal Krishna Advani and M M Joshi, have called the shots since its inception in 1977.

The change of guard at the top in BJP comes at a time when the party is gearing up to wrest power in key states like Maharashtra and Haryana ruled by Congress. Polls to legislatures are also due in states like Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand and Bihar within the next year.

Many in BJP had initially doubted Shah's political management skill when he was appointed as in-charge of BJP's affairs in Uttar Pradesh as he was considered a rank outsider because he spent all his political life in Gujarat and that he is new to Uttar Pradesh where the politics is highly caste-ridden.

Shah's name for the post was in doubt initially also considering the cases against him that dates back to his stint as the minister of state (home) in Gujarat when Modi was the chief minister. He faces a court case relating to in Sohrabuddin Sheikh, his wife Kausar Bi and Tulsi Prajapati fake encounter killing.

of militants China, US vow to Accuses Iraq PM end old rivalries AFP, Baghdad

AFP, Beijing

China and the United States met for high-level talks yesterday, with Chinese President Xi Jinping urging the world's two biggest economies to break old patterns of confrontation. Given their different histories and

cultures "it is natural that China and the US may have different views and even frictions on certain issues", Xi told the opening of the two-day annual talks in Beijing.

"This is what makes communication and cooperation even more necessary," he urged. This year marks 35 years since the establishment of formal US-China ties.

The sixth Strategic and Economic

Dialogue comes as tensions have risen in recent months -- racked by maritime disputes between China and its neighbours as well as US fears over cybersecurity and Chinese hacking. "Our interests are more than ever

interconnected," Xi insisted, saying the two "stand to gain from cooperation and lose from confrontation".

"If we are in confrontation it will surely spell disaster for both countries and for the world," he said, adding the Pacific powers needed to "break the old pattern of inevita-



ble confrontation".

In a statement sent to the opening of the meetings, US President Barack Obama agreed, saying: "The United States and China will not always see eye-to-eye on every issue."

That was "why we need to build our relationship around common challenges, mutual responsibilities, and shared interests, even while we candidly address our differences", Obama said. Obama, who has made the so-called

pivot to Asia a focus of his administration, will return to Beijing in November when it hosts a summit of Asia-Pacific leaders.

Kerry, who is leading Washington's team with Treasury Secretary Jack Lew, earlier sought to address Chinese concerns that the US was seeking to rein in the country, insisting "the United States does not seek to

INDONESIA ELECTION Both sides claim victory in tight race

AFP, Jakarta

vesterday in Indonesia's tightest and most divisive presidential election since the end of authoritarian rule, as unofficial tallies showed Jakarta governor Joko Widodo leading over exgeneral Prabowo Subianto. The standoff in the hotly

Both sides claimed victory

contested race to lead the world's third-biggest democracy prompted President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to call for restraint from both sides until official results are announced in two weeks' The popularity of Widodo

-- known as "Jokowi" and the first serious presidential contender without roots in the era of dictator Suharto -was clear earlier in the day, when hundreds of supporters mobbed him as he voted in central Jakarta.

As a series of unofficial tallies, which are considered reliable, started to show him with a lead of four to five percentage points, a smiling Widodo declared victory flanked by members of his party, extending his thanks to

"all the Indonesian people". But shortly afterwards Prabowo, who has admitted ordering the abduction of democracy activists before the Suharto's downfall in 1998 and was formerly married to one of the strongman's daughters, also claimed victory.

The 62-year-old, who has pushed a strongman image on the campaign trail to win votes, said survey institutes used by his campaign team showed that he and running mate Hatta Rajasa "have received the support and mandate from the people of Indonesia".

Speaking earlier in the day, he had pledged to "respect the people's decision".

However he added: "It must be really their decision and not an engineered one. If it's engineered, we must

Snowden to

stay: lawyer

AFP, Moscow

said yesterday.

extend Russia

Fugitive US intelligence

contractor Edward Snowden

has formally requested to

stay in Russia past July 31,

when his one-year asylum

status expires, his lawyer

documents to extend his

stay in Russia," Anatoly

Russia since flying in from

Hong Kong in June last year

after shaking up America's

intelligence establishment

Kucherena told AFP.

"We have already filed

Snowden has been in



A Bosnian man cries as he touches a truck carrying the remains of victims of the Srebrenica 1995 massacre, which killed around 8,000 men and boys, in Srebrenica, yesterday. Bosnia will bury 175 victims of the massacre tomorrow, on the 19th anniversary of Europe's worst atrocity since World War II. The massacre took place just a few months before the end of Bosnia's 1992-1995 war, which claimed some 100,000 lives in total. PHOTO: AFP

Kiev tightens grip on rebels

AFP, Donetsk

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko was to face renewed European pressure yesterday to talk to pro-Russian rebels on a truce as Kiev tightened its grip around jittery rebel stronghold Donetsk.

French President Francois Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel were expected to push the Western-backed leader on a ceasefire in three-way telephone talks but Kiev has until now shrugged off calls to halt an offensive that has reclaimed a string of key

Ukraine's military says it controls all routes in and out of the cities and a spokesman for Kiev's National Security and Defence Council warned a plan was in place that would give the rebels an

rebel towns.

"unpleasant surprise." Nearly 500 lives have been lost since Poroshenko came to office in May.

Love that hurts so much

Asylum-seeker mothers 'attempt suicide' to get kids to Australia

AFP, Sydney

A dozen mothers in an asylum-seeker camp have reportedly attempted suicide so their children can be settled in Australia, piling pressure on Prime Minister Tony Abbott who said yesterday he would not be morally blackmailed.

after being told they would be taken from a detention centre on Christmas Island to Papua New Guinea or Nauru. Any boatpeople who arrived in Australia after July 19, 2013 cannot be resettled in the

The Sydney Morning Herald said the

women tried to kill themselves this week

eventually judged to be genuine refugees. They are instead sent to detention facilities or for resettlement on islands in the Pacific.

country, regardless of whether they are

The Australian Human Rights Commission told AFP it was aware of "seven women who have either attempted suicide, threatened suicide or self-harmed on Christmas Island" in the last two days.

"In recent weeks we are aware of 13 asylum-seekers who fall into those categories," a spokeswoman added.

The damaging claims come as Australia



faces growing pressure over its controversial immigration policies, with High Court action under way over the fate of 153 Sri Lankans

They are currently detained on a Customs boat as lawyers argue that any transfer back to Colombo would be illegal, with concerns about the way they were screened.

being held in custody on the high seas.

Germany probing new US spy case

AFP, Berlin

German authorities said yesterday they were investigating an alleged foreign spy as reports said the suspect was the second within days believed to be working for US intelligence.

The latest case comes hot on the heels of an arrest last week of an unidentified employee of Germany's foreign intelligence agency, the BND.

If confirmed, it would further strain transatlantic relations, which have taken a bruising since last year with the NSA surveillance scandal revealed by Edward Snowden. Die Welt daily said that

the suspect was a German army officer. The German defence ministry, when asked about the case by AFP, said that "an investigation is ongoing" within the ministry, without elaborating.

New UN envoy to Syria named

Italian-Swedish diplomat Staffan de Mistura, who has served previously in Afghanistan and Iraq, is to become the new UN envoy to Syria, diplomats said Wednesday.

He is to replace Lakhdar Brahimi who resigned at the end of May after two rounds of peace talks yielded no concrete results and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was re-elected in June.

confirmed to members of the UN Security Council but has not yet been announced officially by the United Nations.

His nomination was been

One diplomat said de Mistura would represent the United Nations and "have an Arab deputy."

OPPOSITION ELECTS NEW LEADER

Meanwhile, the main exiled Syrian opposition group yesterday elected Saudi-based businessman Hadi el-Bahra as its new president in a bid to end internal divisions and breathe fresh life into its flagging struggle to oust Assad.

The Syrian National Coalition, the main exiled opposition group seeking the overthrow of Assad, will be hoping el-Bahra enjoys greater success than his predecessor Ahmad Jarba in keeping up the pressure on the regime.

More than 162,000 people have been killed since Syria's conflict erupted in March 2011.

Staffan de Mistura

with a series of leaks on mass surveillance in the United States and around the world.

He could not travel on from Sheremetyevo however after his passport was revoked, and was holed up in its transit zone for weeks before Moscow granted him a one-year refugee status.