

NEWSIN brief

Sarkozy hit by new phone tap leaks

AFP, Paris



The corruption scandal surrounding former French president Nicolas Sarkozy deepened further yesterday with fresh leaks of telephone conversations purporting to show he offered to get a judge a plum job in return for favours. Sarkozy, who was charged two weeks ago with corruption and influence peddling in a case related to his campaign to win the presidency in 2007, claims he is the victim of a "grotesque" set-up. He accuses his enemies of using the justice system to undermine a possible political comeback. But according to extracts from tapped calls published by the French daily Le Monde yesterday, the ex-president appears to lobby for a job for the judge in Monaco in return for his help on one of six bribery and funding scandals in which Sarkozy is embroiled.

Quake triggers minor tsunami in Japan

AFP, Tokyo

A minor tsunami of 20 centimetres hit large swathes of northeastern Japan early yesterday, including in a city near the crippled Fukushima nuclear plant, after a strong 6.8 magnitude earthquake struck off the country's Pacific coast. There were no immediate reports of damage following the quake and tsunami, however, with authorities lifting all advisories roughly two hours later.

Blast kills eight Afghan civilians

AFP, Kabul

A roadside bomb killed eight civilians travelling in a vehicle in a volatile district of southern Afghanistan yesterday, officials said, days after the UN reported a surge in civilian casualties in the country. They were going from Panjwayi district to Kandahar city when the bomb hit their vehicle on a main road. An interior ministry statement confirmed the blast and said the victims belonged to one family.

Buildings collapse in Mumbai; 3 killed

THE HINDU ONLINE

Three people were killed in two different incidents in Mumbai following incessant rainfall over the last two days in Mumbai. Since Friday, in total 15 cases of wall collapse, 71 cases of tree fall and 16 cases of short circuit have been reported across the city.



Handout picture released by Cuban official website www.cubadebate.cu showing former Cuban President Fidel Castro (R) talking with Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) in Havana on Friday. Putin visited Russia's Cold War ally Cuba on Friday, launching a tour that will see him cozy up to Latin America amid newly frayed relations with the West.

PHOTO: AFP

Jets pound separatists in revenge of troops killing

Govt claims more than 500 separatists killed; civilians flee

REUTERS, Kiev

Ukrainian war planes bombarded separatists along a broad front yesterday, inflicting huge losses, Kiev said, after President Petro Poroshenko said "scores and hundreds" would be made to pay for a deadly missile attack on Ukrainian forces.

Panicked Ukrainians flooded highways and packed trains leading out of the main remaining rebel stronghold of Donetsk yesterday after Ukraine's new Western-backed leader immediately vowed to hunt down the guilty militias.

"The rebels will pay for the life of every one of our servicemen with tens and hundred of their own," President Petro Poroshenko told an emergency security meeting.

In exchanges marking a sharp escalation in the three-month conflict, jets struck at the "epicentre" of the battle against rebels near the border with Russia, a military spokesman said.

The planes targeted positions from where separatists,

using high-powered Grad missiles, bombarded an army motorised brigade on Friday, killing 23 servicemen.

Warplanes also struck at targets near Donetsk, the east's main town where rebels have dug in, destroying a powerful fighter base near Dzerzhinsk, Andriy Lysenko, a spokesman for the "anti-terrorist operation" said.

UKRAINE CRISIS

"According to preliminary assessment, Ukrainian pilots ... killed about 500 (rebel) fighters and damaged two armoured transporters," Lysenko told journalists.

In an earlier air attack on a base near Perevalsk, north of Donetsk, two tanks, 10 armoured vehicles and "about 500" rebel fighters were destroyed, he said.

Rebel representatives, quoted by Russian news agencies, denied they suffered big losses and said the Ukrainians were using outdated intelligence on where separatist forces were deployed.

The increasing violence will bring a new sense of urgency to diplomatic attempts to end the worst crisis between Russia and the West since the Cold War.



PHOTO: AFP

Participants run in front of Fuente Ymbro bulls during the sixth bull run of the San Fermin Festival in Pamplona, northern Spain, yesterday.

Iran threatens to walk away from nuke talks

AFP, Vienna

Iran's chief negotiator in nuclear talks in Vienna yesterday warned that Tehran is ready to walk away if "excessive" Western demands cause a failure, eight days before a deadline for a deal.

Abbas Araqchi said however that he hoped that the attendance from Sunday of foreign ministers including US Secretary of State John Kerry would help overcome "deep differences" that remain.

"If we see that the excessive demands (of Western powers) persisting and that a deal is impossible, this is not a drama, we will continue with our nuclear programme," Araqchi said.

"The presence of ministers will have a positive influence," he told Iran state television from the Austrian capital. "There are questions that ministers need to take decisions on."

Iran's talks with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany are aimed at a grand bargain reducing in scope Iran's nuclear activities in return for sanctions relief.

Such a deal is meant to quash for good concerns about the Islamic republic getting the bomb after more than a decade of failed diplomacy, threats of war and atomic

expansion by Iran.

Iran denies wanting nuclear weapons. The deadline for an accord is July 20, when an interim accord struck by foreign ministers expires, although this can be put back if both sides agree.

On Friday, William Burns, Washington's pointman in secret 2013 talks with Iran that helped produce the November deal, said that the differences between the two sides remain "quite significant".

"I would say that there is a lot of ground that has to be covered if we're going to get to a comprehensive agreement," Burns told Indian channel NDTV according to a State Department transcript.

"We need to continue to work at it and we're determined to do that," he said.

Kerry was expected late Saturday or early Sunday in Vienna where he will be joined by his British, French and German counterparts William Hague, Laurent Fabius and Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

Hague said on Saturday that the Western ministers would also discuss how to achieve a ceasefire in Gaza. Kerry and Steinmeier were also to talk about a US-German spat over spying.

Virtual Neruda 'walks' streets of Chile again

AFP, Santiago

Forty years after his death, Pablo Neruda once again was writing and reciting love poems and he walked through Santiago's streets to the admiring gazes of Chileans — virtually, that is.

The Nobel Prize-winning poet was briefly visible Friday writing verses in the window of his former home in Santiago, which is now a museum. Then his projected figure set off, traveling across the facades of buildings and homes as he appeared to slowly stroll the capital's streets like he used to do when he was alive.

The urban project was part of an initiative by the Pablo Neruda Foundation on the 110th anniversary of his birth, July 12, 1904.

A moving projector sent the black-and-white image of Chile's great poet against the front of buildings, giving the impression of him walking along the main avenues of Santiago, said Andrea Gana, creative director of Delight Lab, the company behind the virtual Neruda.

The virtual poet was to stroll down streets near the museum and on Santiago's main Alameda avenue for four hours. The images of Neruda walking were taken from old films in the foundation's archives.



Only unity can save Iraq: UN

Maliki sacks Kurdish FM

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraqi soldiers backed by Shia militias fought Sunni rebels for control of a military base northeast of Baghdad yesterday as a UN envoy warned of chaos if divided lawmakers do not make progress today towards naming a government.

Bickering lawmakers in Baghdad are under pressure from the United States, the United Nations and Iraq's own Shia clerics to form a new government swiftly to deal with the Sunni insurgency, which seized territory in the north and west last month, and has held it in the face of ground and air attacks.

Few doubt an inclusive government is needed to hold Iraq together, but there is no consensus on who should lead it.

The national parliament elected in April met for the first time on July 1 but failed to agree on nominations for the top three government posts.

The UN special envoy to Iraq, Nickolay Mladenov, said the country could plunge into chaos if parliament fails to move forward on a government in a next session now set for today.

Most of Iraq's Sunnis and Kurds demand Maliki leave office, and Shias are divided, but he shows no sign of quitting.

In a possible portent of growing factional conflict, Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari, a Kurd and the face of Iraqi diplomacy for a more than a decade, was removed from Iraq's government, officials said Friday.

Zebari's ouster occurred as Kurds in Iraq's government launched a boycott followed comments made Thursday by al-Maliki, who purportedly linked ISIS extremists and Baathists to the Kurdish Regional Government in Irbil.

US pursues talks to help solve Afghan poll crisis

AGENCIES

US Secretary of State John Kerry yesterday held a second day of talks in Afghanistan to try to end a row over the result of the presidential poll.

Kerry is meeting candidates Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, who accuse each other of electoral fraud, at the US compound in the capital, Kabul.

Ghani, the winner of preliminary results in the second round, has backed an "extensive audit" of votes.

Afghanistan's current President Hamid Karzai, who came to office after the US-led overthrow of the Taliban, is stepping down after more than 10 years.

US officials said they were hoping for a breakthrough soon after the first day of negotiations remained inconclusive.

The US Secretary of State, who arrived in Kabul on Friday in a hastily arranged visit, earlier welcomed Ghani's backing of an audit.

"No-one is declaring victory at this time. The results have yet to be finalised and so those questions have to be resolved and I'm very appreciative that Dr Ghani respects that," Kerry told journalists ahead of starting the talks.

The US has been concerned at reports that Abdullah, who preliminary results suggest lost the election, is planning a "parallel government".

Results announced by Afghanistan's election officials give Ghani 56.44% of votes in the 14 June run-off, with Abdullah gaining 43.45%.

The results were markedly different from those achieved in the first round of voting, held in April. In that round, Abdullah fell just short of an outright majority, with 44.9%, with Ghani second at 31.5%.

Votes are already being re-checked at more than 7,000 polling stations - nearly a third of the total number. Correspondents say recounts could significantly alter the final result, due on 22 July.

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