

NEWSIN brief

Asean summit opens in Myanmar

AFP, Naypyidaw

China's increasing assertiveness in maritime disputes was at the heart of Southeast Asian regional talks yesterday as diplomats amid a series of meetings also expected to highlight concerns over Myanmar's reform progress. Myanmar President Thein Sein began the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) foreign minister meetings with a plea for the regional bloc to strengthen its ability to push for "peaceful settlement of disputes and differences".

Jaswant Singh in 'critical condition'

PTI, New Delhi

Former leader of BJP and external affairs and finance minister Jaswant Singh is in a "very critical" condition and in coma at Army Research and Referral hospital where he was admitted early yesterday after a fall at his residence that left him with a head injury. "At present the condition is very critical. He is on life support systems and under constant monitoring by a team of neurosurgeons and critical care providers," a defence ministry release said.



Cops shot dead 1 in Rakhine camp

AFP, Naypyidaw

A man was shot dead after security forces in strife-torn western Myanmar opened fire as unrest broke out in a camp for displaced Muslims, authorities said yesterday. Rakhine state remains riven by deep hostilities between Buddhists and Muslims after two waves of bloodshed in 2012 that left at least 200 people dead.

Hawaii faces double hurricanes

AFP, Kihui

Strong wind and heavy rain lashed Hawaii early yesterday as a rare pair of hurricanes took aim at the holiday paradise, triggering dangerous storm surges, cutting power and downing trees. Hurricane Iselle, which was downgraded to a tropical storm, and a category three Hurricane Julio was to landfall later yesterday.

'Bandit queen' killer convicted in India

AFP, New Delhi

The main suspect in the murder of India's Phoolan Devi was found guilty yesterday, 13 years after the iconic "bandit queen" was gunned down in broad daylight. Devi, killed by Sher Singh Rana, elected to parliament for the first time in 1996 and was part of India's bandit folklore, with her life on the run in the rugged ravines of the central state of Madhya Pradesh in the early 1980s the subject of numerous films and books.



Pakistan frees Indian border guard

AFP, Sialkot

Pakistani officials yesterday released an Indian border guard arrested for allegedly violating their de-facto border in the disputed Himalayan territory of Kashmir, officials said. The guard, whom officials named as Satyashel Yadav, was swept onto the Pakistani side of the River Chenab after a patrol boat he was in capsized on Wednesday, according to a senior official from the paramilitary rangers.



WAR RETURNS

From left, clockwise, Palestinian families leave their homes in Gaza City's Shejaiya neighbourhood in fear of renewed Israeli attacks; smoke billows following an Israeli air strike in Rafah; Gazans inspect the rubble of a bombardment site; and a Palestinian man in the West Bank town of Hebron confronts Israeli soldiers during clashes following a demonstration in support of Gaza after Friday prayers.



PHOTO:
AFP

EU proposes UN mission for Gaza

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Major European powers have outlined a detailed plan for a European-backed UN mission to monitor the lifting of an Israeli and Egyptian blockade of the Gaza Strip and the dismantling of Hamas's military tunnel network and rocket arsenals, according to a copy of the plan obtained by press.

It remains unclear whether the European plan has the support of Hamas, Israel, or the United States. It does, however, include several elements the Obama administration believes are essential, including the need to ease Gazans' plight, strengthen the role of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and ensure the demilitarization of the Gaza Strip.

The plan -- described in a so-called non-paper titled "Gaza: Supporting a Sustainable Ceasefire" -- envisions the creation of a UN-mandated "monitoring and verification" mission, possibly drawing peacekeepers from the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), which has monitored a series of Israeli-Arab truces in the region since the late 1940s.

The key aim of the initiative is to help the Palestinian Authority gradually assume military, and political, control over Gaza, which has been administered by the militant group Hamas since 2007. The paper -- which was drafted by Britain, France, and Germany -- could serve as the basis for a UN Security Council resolution.

"We are strongly committed to playing a role in supporting the Egyptian ceasefire initiative, to address security concerns whilst opening up access to Gaza and supporting the return of the Palestinian Authority," the document continues. "In order to achieve a sustainable ceasefire, it will be important to address simultaneously Israeli demands in terms of security and Palestinian demands regarding the lifting of the restrictions and for both to be closely monitored through an international mechanism."

Many of the document's ideas are not new. But Europeans have been unable to implement many of these hoped-for measures after Hamas, which prevailed in legislative elections in 2006, moved militarily the following year to seize control of Gaza from Fatah, its partner in a unity government.

The initiative also calls for new European-supported "security arrangements" to ensure a lasting cease-fire and security for Gaza and Israel. The arrangements, which would be led by the Palestinian Authority, "should help to prevent a rearming of militant groups in Gaza and military violations, and provide for an effective dismantling of tunnels between Gaza and Israel."

Under the terms of the plan, European police advisors operating as part of the European Union Coordinating Office for Palestinian Police Support (EUPOL COPPS) -- which is based in the West Bank -- could be given a broader mandate to support the Palestinian Authority as it takes on an expanded security role in Gaza.

It also includes a set of specific steps to ease Gazans' hardships, including allowing the export of goods from Gaza to the West Bank and Israel, increasing the number of trucks allowed into Gaza, allowing trade by sea, and extending the fishing areas to 12 nautical miles.

Violence flares amid war fears

Kiev says 15 troops killed as sanctions war heats up

AFP, DONETSK

Fierce battles on Ukraine's porous eastern border left 15 government troops dead as fears of a possible Russian invasion swirled yesterday despite Nato urging Moscow to withdraw its troops along the frontier.

International tensions also rose as Western countries slammed a Russian food embargo imposed as revenge for sanctions slapped on Moscow over its backing for insurgents in Ukraine.

The renewed violence came after Nato chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen warned Moscow to "pull back from the brink" and as Western countries warned that Russia could be preparing to send troops across the border in the guise of a humanitarian mission.

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday met with his national security council to discuss the situation in eastern Ukraine, especially the "massive humanitarian catastrophe" in the region. Fears have mounted that Russia could be preparing to send the troops into Ukraine under the pretext of a humanitarian mission.

Ukraine's military said seven soldiers and eight border guards were killed over the past 24 hours as a bloody three-day battle with pro-Russian rebels forced several government units to retreat from the border in the southeast of the war-torn Lugansk region. Clashes were also reported in Donetsk.

Over 1,300 people have been killed and 285,000 forced to flee their homes over four months of what the Red Cross has designated a civil war in eastern Ukraine.

Local authorities have warned of an impending humanitarian disaster, as some areas have been left without power or water for days, and fuel and food were running short.

Away from the fighting, Moscow also drew condemnation for its decision to block most food imports from countries which have placed sanctions on Russia over the crisis.

In a separate set of punitive measures, Ukrainian announced a new sanctions list targeting 65 mainly Russian companies and 172 individuals accused of backing the separatists. Australian yesterday warned that Canberra was "working towards stronger sanctions".

UKRAINE CRISIS



A woman gesturs after losing her home, as her younger boy Chen Daxiong does the laundry for her by a water pond at the temporary shelter in Longtoushan township of Ludian county in Zhaotong, southwest China's Yunnan province. The death toll from an earthquake that devastated a remote region of China has hit 615.

PHOTO: AFP

Afghan poll rivals sign deal on unity govt

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's feuding presidential candidates yesterday signed a deal to form a national unity government, opening an apparent way forward in a dispute over the fraud-tainted election that threatens to revive ethnic conflict.

Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah vowed to work together whoever becomes president after an ongoing audit of all eight million votes finally declares the winner of the June 14 election.

US Secretary of State John Kerry, visiting Kabul to mediate an end to the impasse, welcomed the deal as a major advance in bringing Afghanistan back from the brink of political chaos as US-led Nato troops withdraw.

But an earlier deal brokered by Kerry last month soon frayed due to disagreements between the candidates, and attention will focus on whether all their supporters accept the latest pact.

The risk of spiralling instability has loomed large in Afghanistan since Abdullah refused to accept preliminary

results that put Ghani ahead, accusing his rival of stealing the election by massive ballot-box stuffing.

"Today [we] have taken another step forward in the interests of strengthening national unity... and also to bring hope for the better future for the people of Afghanistan," Abdullah said, standing beside Ghani and Kerry.

"We are committed to working together on the basis of our common vision for the future of our country."

The deal also said that both sides agreed that the successor to outgoing President Hamid Karzai should be inaugurated before the end of this month.

The timeline was a key demand of Kerry, who had stressed in talks with both candidates the importance of Afghanistan having a new president before a Nato summit in Britain on September 4-5.

The summit is scheduled to endorse a US-led Nato "training and advisory" mission in Afghanistan next year after all foreign combat troops withdraw by December.

Priyanka says she won't join politics

AGENCIES

Priyanka Gandhi on Friday dubbed the reports about her assuming various posts in Congress as "conjecture" and "baseless rumours", according to a PTI report.

She said, "This constant conjecture and the manner in which the issue is brought up at opportune moments is incorrect."

She further said, "I would be very grateful to all concerned if they desisted from encouraging such baseless rumours."

The Congress had said the party wants all three members of the Gandhi family to take leadership role amid growing indication about a larger role for Priyanka Gandhi in party affairs.

There have been media speculation that Priyanka is likely take up a formal responsibility in the party as the general secretary of the crucial Hindi state of Uttar Pradesh.

A banner which came out a couple of days ago read "Congress ka Moon, Priyanka is coming soon (The key face of Congress Priyanka is joining politics soon)".

Congress in the past has said it is up to Priyanka to take a decision whether she wants to take up a larger and more formal role.

The Gandhi family has not spoken on the issue.



US AIRSTRIKES IN IRAQ

Events threaten Obama's legacy

AP, Washington

After years of resisting the pull of more Mideast conflicts, President Barack Obama has sent the military back into action in Iraq, where he once accused his predecessor of waging a "dumb war."

US planes yesterday bombed Islamic militants who were towing artillery outside Irbil near US personnel, the Pentagon said.

The aggressive insurgency threatens to undermine Obama's legacy as the commander in chief who ended a long and unpopular war in which nearly 4,500 American troops died.

It also raises fresh questions about whether Obama's desire to end the war clouded his assessment of the risks of fully withdrawing US troops, as well as his judgment about the threat posed by the extremists.

Obama insisted the US was not moving toward a protracted conflict.

"I will not allow the United States to be dragged into fighting another war in Iraq," he said late Thursday.

The chief rationale for Obama's authorization for military strikes in Iraq was to protect American forces serving in Irbil. They include some of the forces the president sent in this summer to help train and assist Iraq's struggling security forces.

In trying to help Iraq protect civilians, Obama said the US has a responsibility to stop imminent massacres. It's an echo of the argument he used when the US joined Nato's bombing campaign in Libya in 2010.

Obama has not followed the same path in Syria's civil war, where more than 170,000 people have died.

As recently as January, Obama was dismissive of the al-Qaeda breakaway Islamic militants. In an interview with the New Yorker magazine, he said comparing the group to the terrorist network established by Osama bin Laden was like comparing a junior varsity basketball team to an NBA squad.

Obama critics have been questioning about his ability to influence world events, from Russia's provocations in Ukraine to the fighting between Israel and Hamas.

Obama long has been skeptical about the effectiveness of military action, and he made clear that US airpower would not solve Iraq's problems. "There's no American military solution to the larger crisis in Iraq," he said.

But White House opponents say the president should have pushed harder for a solution before withdrawing completely from Iraq in order to avoid the type of situation now unfolding.



Allies pledge support, but no military action

AFP, Paris

As US President Barack Obama ordered his warplanes back to Iraq to prevent a potential genocide, Western allies appeared more reticent, limiting their contribution to promises of humanitarian aid and expressions of diplomatic outrage.

Just hours after Obama pledged potential military strikes, Britain, which joined the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, moved swiftly to rule out a military intervention of its own.

Prime Minister David Cameron stressed that he "fully agreed" with Obama that "we should stand up for the values we believe in -- the right to freedom and dignity, whatever your religious beliefs."

Nevertheless, a Downing Street spokesman emphasised: "We are not planning a military intervention."

France, which opposed the 2003 invasion, vowed "support" for those fighting the militant advance in Iraq but has not specified what form that might take.

Germany, which also opposed the 2003 war, vowed to boost its humanitarian aid by \$3.9 million and pledged more help if needed. But, it also maintains silence on military action.

Hagel in India to boost ties

AFP, New Delhi

US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel met India's prime minister in Delhi yesterday, seeking to boost weapons sales to a new government eager to modernise its military.

India is the world's biggest arms importer and military trade is high on the agenda for the three-day trip, which comes ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first official visit to Washington next month.

"The US wants to be a partner in India's military modernisation, and recognises India's need to strengthen their defence-industrial base," Hagel said on his official Twitter account.

Indian officials say they are close to finalising a \$1.4 billion deal to buy at least 22 US Apache and 15 Chinook helicopters. The United States is also keen to secure greater military cooperation with India as it seeks to counter growing Chinese firepower in Asia.

During the meeting Modi and Hagel also discussed the situation in Afghanistan.

India has voiced concern about instability in Afghanistan as the United States prepares to withdraw its troops.

Modi told Hagel that a smooth transition of power in Afghanistan was essential for sustaining progress towards peace and stability, accord-

ing to the Press Trust of India news agency.

On Wednesday, the Indian cabinet agreed to increase the limit on foreign direct investment in defence to 49 percent from 26 percent, in a



move to attract international capital.

"India has made progress on its direct investment framework on percentage ownership, outside ownership in companies... And we'll talk about that," Hagel said.

New Delhi and Washington have rapidly expanded military ties in recent years despite disagreeing over issues such as the nuclear liability law.

The law says nuclear firms planning to build plants in India must pay large sums in the event of an accident.