

NEWS IN brief

Lanka opposition gets Buddhist backing

Sri Lanka's main opposition candidate yesterday won important backing from a top Buddhist monk campaigning to scrap the executive presidency and return the country to a parliamentary democracy. Rajapakse called the election two years ahead of schedule in an apparent attempt to seek a fresh mandate before his party's popularity tumbles further, after dropping over 21 percent in September local elections.

Thai cops charged with royal defamation

Two high-ranking Thai police officers have been arrested for royal defamation, an official said yesterday, a rare charge against senior public servants as lese majeste cases mount following a May coup. Central Investigation Bureau chief Pongpat Chayapun and his deputy Kowit Vongrongrot have been charged under the strict lese majeste law, which can put offenders up to 15 years behind bars.

Controversy clouds Bahrain polls

Controversy clouded Bahrain's first election since Sunni authorities crushed protests led by the Gulf monarchy's Shia majority, with the opposition mocking government boasts of more than 50 percent turnout. The official electoral commission put turnout at 51.5 percent, but the Shia opposition, which has dismissed the polls as a "farce", said only 30 percent of eligible voters had cast their ballot on Saturday.

Up to 300 Swedes fighting with ISIS

As many as 300 Swedes could have joined the Islamic State insurgency, whose brutal tactics in Iraq and Syria have shocked the world, Sweden's intelligence chief said Saturday. Sweden announced late October that it would pass a law banning citizens from taking part in foreign armed conflicts.

India tea workers kill owner in pay row

Workers at a tea plantation in eastern India yesterday killed the owner during negotiations over a pay dispute. Police say the owner of Sonali tea estate in West Bengal had come to pacify angry workers who had reportedly not been paid for two or three months. He died after being beaten up and stabbed by a crowd.



Relatives of the Maguindanao massacre, journalists and students participate in a candle lighting ceremony at the Edsa Shrine monument in Manila yesterday, to commemorate the 5th year of the country's worst political massacre that left 58 dead.

Nuclear deal not in sight

Iran eyes for talks extension as 'moment of truth' nears

The United States and Iran sought Sunday to bridge gaps in negotiations on the eve of a deadline for a nuclear deal, as Iran signalled it was open to extending the talks by up to a year.

US Secretary of State John Kerry went into a fifth round of talks in Vienna with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif ahead of Monday's deadline.

The two key players in the protracted on-off negotiations have been trying since Thursday to secure a deal that would curb Iran's disputed nuclear activities in exchange for broad relief from punishing international sanctions.

It could end a 12-year standoff that has even raised the prospect of Israeli military strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. Kerry spoke to Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by phone on Saturday.

"We're working hard," Kerry said Saturday in Vienna. "And we hope we're making careful progress, but we have big gaps, we still have some serious gaps, which we're working to close." German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, also in the Austrian capital, called the weekend of talks a "moment of truth".

An Iranian source told AFP that Tehran is open to having the nuclear negotiations extended by six months or a year if no real progress towards an agreement is achieved later Sunday.

Such an extension would be under the terms of an interim accord reached in Geneva a year ago that traded a temporary freeze on some aspects of Iran's nuclear activities for limited sanctions relief, the source said.

The five permanent members of the UN Security Council -- Britain, China, France, Russia and United States plus Germany -- the so-called P5+1 -- have been locked in talks with Iran since February to turn the interim Geneva accord into a lasting agreement.

Such a deal is aimed at easing fears that Tehran will develop nuclear weapons under the guise of its civilian activities.

The Islamic Republic hotly denies it wants to build the bomb and insists its programme is entirely peaceful.

A European source at the talks said there had been "no significant progress" and that "the chances of getting a deal are pretty reduced".

"In order to get a deal the Iranians will have to budge in a rather substantial manner," he said.

Many experts believe that the deadline may be extended as happened with an earlier cut-off point on July 20, but officials insist that this is not on the table -- yet.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, a key player in the talks, is expected in Vienna late yesterday, RIA Novosti state news agency reported, citing a diplomat.



Russia not isolated over Ukraine

Says Putin; eyes re-election bid in 2018

AGENCIES

President Vladimir Putin blamed the West for worsening relations with Russia since the Ukraine crisis and said Moscow would not allow itself to become internationally isolated behind another 'Iron Curtain'.

In an interview published by state news agency TASS yesterday, Putin also said Western sanctions against Moscow, combined with the slide in the rouble and oil price falls would have no "catastrophic consequences" on Russia's economy.

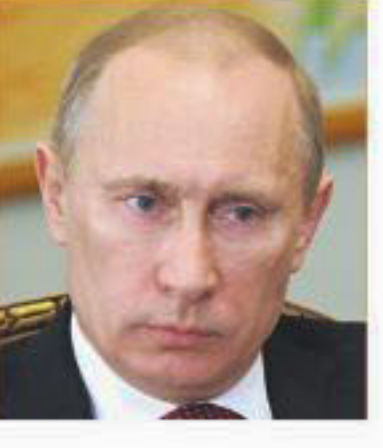
"We understand the fatality of an 'Iron Curtain' for us," Putin was quoted as saying. "We will not go down this path in any case and no one will build a wall around us. That is impossible!"

Putin is considering running for a fourth Kremlin term in 2018, which would see him stay in power until 2024, reports AFP.

"Yes, the possibility exists of my standing as a candidate again. Whether or not it will happen, I don't know yet," Putin said in the interview.

He said that although the constitution allows him to stand for another term, "that absolutely doesn't mean that I will take such a decision."

Russia's ties with the West are at their worst since the Cold War because of Ukraine, where more than 4,300 people have been killed since violence erupted in the east mid-April.



Blast in Afghan sports field kills around 50

MPs approve controversial security pact with west

AGENCIES

Around 50 people were killed and 60 others injured when a suicide blast ripped through crowds gathered to watch a volleyball game in eastern Afghanistan, as Afghan parliament yesterday overwhelmingly approved a security agreement allowing US and Nato troops to remain in the country.

"The suicide attacker was on a motorcycle, he detonated himself in the middle of a volleyball match," Attaullah Fazli, deputy governor of Paktika province, told AFP.

"A lot of people including some provincial officials and the police chief were there. About 50 people have been killed, and 60 injured, a lot of them seriously."

No one claimed responsibility of the attacks till filing this report.

The blast came hours after the lower house approved the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) and the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) bills.

The deals provide legal protection for troops serving under a new Nato mission due to begin after combat operations formally end on 31 December. The bills were passed by 152 votes to five.

The agreements still need to be ratified by the Afghan upper house.

The approval comes a day after US officials said their troops would still be able to target the Taliban in 2015.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani had signed the agreements with the US and Nato in September, after his predecessor Hamid Karzai refused.

Nato has been steadily withdrawing troops, from a level of about 50,000 in early 2014 - mostly from the US.

The total number of troops in the new Nato-led mission will be about 12,000. There will also be a separate US-led force dealing with the remnants of al-Qaeda.

It emerged on Saturday, however, that President Barack Obama has approved guidelines to allow US troops to fight the Taliban and provide air support for Afghan missions.

There was reportedly no mention of the new guidelines as the lower house approved the security deals.

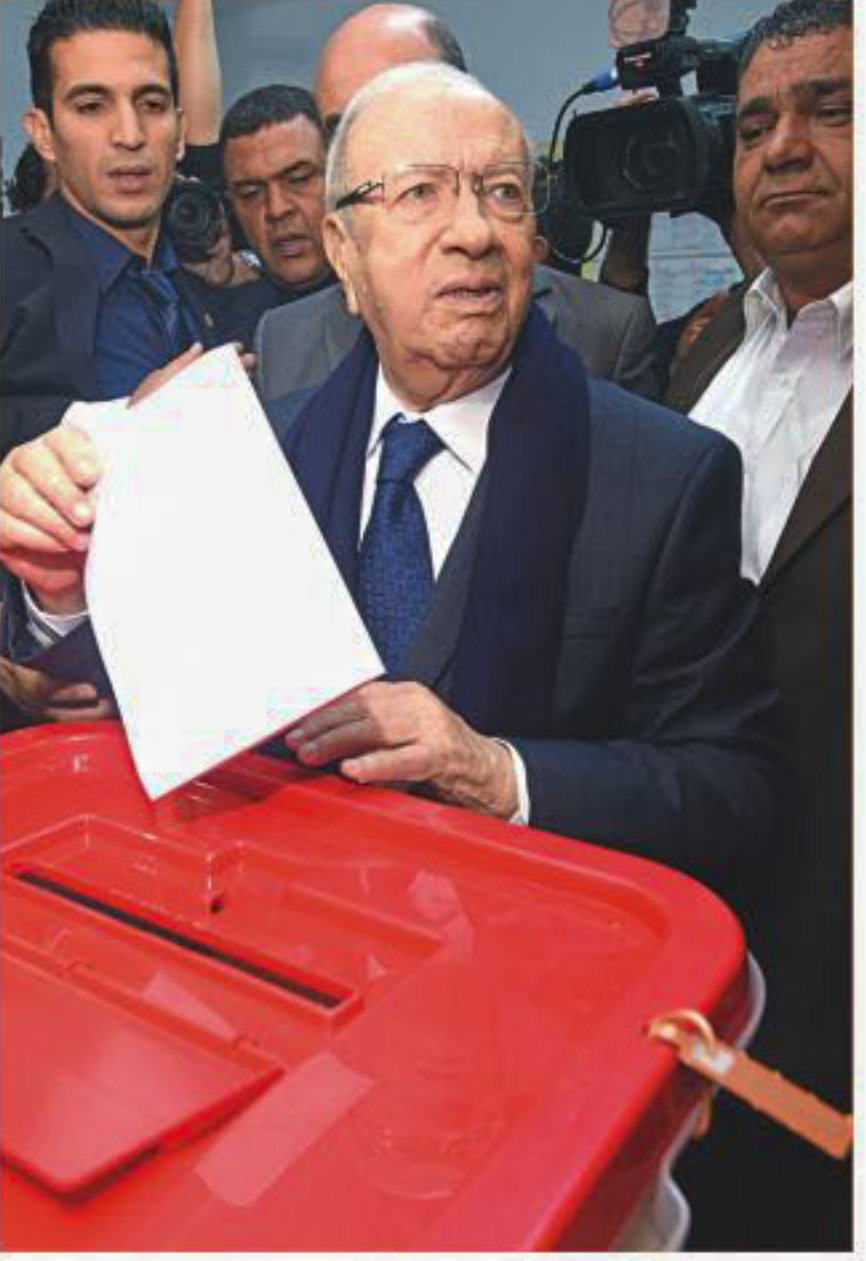
Pope canonises two Indians

NDTV ONLINE

In a ceremony which was watched closely by thousands in Kerala, a Catholic priest and a nun from the state - Father Kuriakose Chavara and Sister Euphrasia - were conferred sainthood by Pope Francis at Vatican yesterday.

Prayers and masses were offered at several churches in Kerala since early morning yesterday, and thousands of devotees thronged these churches.

Father Kuriakose Chavara was ordained as a priest in 1829. Revered as a reformist priest and credited for initiating several measures, he was beatified in 1986 along with Sister Alphonsa. Sister Euphrasia, who led a more secluded life devoted to prayers, was beatified in 2006. She was known as a 'praying mother' and a 'saint among nuns', who, according to followers, had several miracles to her credit.



Tunisian wait to cast their vote at a polling station in the center of Tunis yesterday, during Tunisia's first presidential election since the 2011 revolution. Among the 27 candidates, the favourite is Essebsi, left, an 87-year-old veteran whose anti-Islamist Nidaa Tounes party won parliamentary elections last month.



Jail me if you can

Mamata tells Modi gov't

TIMES OF INDIA ONLINE

Cornered on the Saradha scam, Mamata Banerjee came out all guns blazing at BJP on Saturday. Just 72 hours after paying courtesy visits to senior BJP leaders in Delhi, the Trinamool chief sounded the war cry against PM Narendra Modi, accusing his government of pursuing "selective vendetta" against her party.

Mamata dared the Modi government to impose president's rule in Bengal and arrest her. And in a sign of how things are in Trinamool, Mamata taunted the fence-sitters in her party to "go and join BJP".

The arrest of Trinamool Rajya Sabha MP Srinjoy Bose has proved to be a turning point in her political trajectory.

"If we are hit, we will retaliate. Let them send me to jail, I will see how big a jail they have," Mamata thundered at a party activists' meet at Netaji indoor stadium in Kolkata.

Mamata claims BJP targeted her because she went to Delhi to attend Jawaharlal Nehru's 125th birth anniversary on the invitation of Congress president Sonia Gandhi.

Sensing the vacillation among a section of her party organisers after BJP's surprising rise in Bengal, Mamata said: "There is no need to fear BJP. Keep up your good work, carry out our development agenda. Those who want to join BJP may leave the party."

Free after 39 years in jail

Wrongly convicted of murder, 2 US men walk free after witness admits he lied

MAIL ONLINE

Two US men who faced the death penalty for a 1975 murder have walked free from prison when all the charges against them were dismissed after a witness said his testimony was 'all lies'.

Ricky Jackson and Wiley Bridgeman, 57 and 60, were convicted of murdering Harry Franks, a businessman in Cleveland, Ohio - based largely on the testimony of a 12-year-old who said he saw the murder.

The two, along with Bridgeman's brother Ronnie, were given death sentences after Eddie Vernon testified in court.

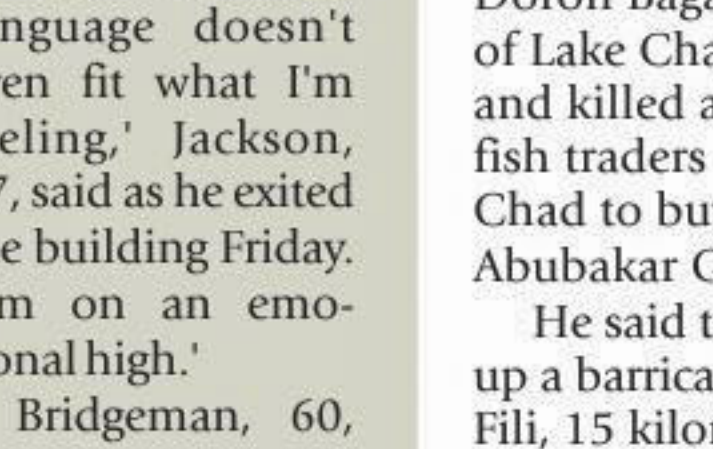
All three sentences were commuted to life in 1978 after a Supreme Court ruling, but the men were still saddled with decades behind bars. Ronnie Bridgeman was released in 2003 for separate reasons.

He was reunited with the other two inmates Friday when they walked free from Cuyahoga County Jail after prosecutors asked that the charges be dismissed.

The dramatic turnaround came after Vernon, now 52, recanted his testimony, saying that police officers coerced him into testifying and gave him details of the case.



Wiley Bridgeman



Ricky Jackson

Boko Haram kills 48 in Nigeria

AFP, Kano

Boko Haram gunmen killed 48 fish vendors in Nigeria's restive Borno State, near the border with Chad, the head of the fish traders association told AFP yesterday.

"Scores of Boko Haram fighters blocked a route linking Nigeria with Chad near the fishing village of Doron Baga on the shores of Lake Chad on Thursday and killed a group of 48 fish traders on their way to Chad to buy fish," Abubakar Gamandi said.

He said the insurgents set up a barricade at Dogon Fili, 15 kilometres from Doron Baga, and stopped a convoy of fish vendors around midday, slaughtering some of them and drowning others in the lake.

Doron Baga, 180 kilometres from Maiduguri, is the base of the Multi-National Joint Task Force, comprising troops from Nigeria, Chad and Niger fighting the Islamist group.

Israeli cabinet approves divisive nationality bill

AP, Jerusalem

Israel's Cabinet yesterday approved a contentious bill that officially defines Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people.

The bill still needs to be passed in parliament to become a law, but yesterday's vote looks to further inflame tensions with Arab Israelis and Palestinians. It could also shake up Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition government due to the fierce opposition of two of his more centrist partners.

The bill calls for recognizing Israel's Jewish character, institutionalizing Jewish law as an inspiration for legislation, and delisting Arabic as an official language. Opponents say the bill undermines Israel's democratic character, and rights groups have called it racist.

Arabs make up about 20 percent of Israel's population and strongly oppose the bill.

In Gaza, meanwhile, Palestinian health officials said a 32-year-old farmer was shot dead by Israeli troops after he approached the border. Israel's military said it fired warning shots before shooting at two suspects approaching the border, hitting one of them in his lower body. The army said it did not know the man's condition. It would be the first fatality in Gaza since a cease-fire ended last summer's war.

Israel has vowed to respond harshly after a raid on a synagogue last week in which two east Jerusalem Palestinians killed five people with guns and meat cleavers. Israel has already resumed a controversial policy of demolishing the homes of Palestinian attackers.

At the start of his Cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called for a bill that would revoke residency rights for Palestinians involved in attacks against Israelis. "It cannot be that those who harm Israel, those who call for the destruction of the state of Israel will enjoy rights like social security," Netanyahu said, adding that the measure would "complement" the house demolitions.

