

18TH SAARC SUMMIT

India, Nepal sign \$1b power deal

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal and India yesterday signed a deal to build a \$1-billion hydropower plant as Indian premier Narendra Modi began a visit to the impoverished Himalayan nation.

The deal allows India's state-owned company Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam to construct a 900-megawatt hydropower project on Nepal's Arun river, with electricity expected to be generated from 2021.

The two energy-hungry countries both suffer crippling electricity shortages and blackouts.

Nepal will receive for free about 22 percent of the power generated, while the remainder will be exported to India, according to the Nepal Investment Board.

A vast network of fast-flowing rivers through the Himalayas means Nepal has huge untapped hydropower resources.

But disagreements over perceived threats to its sovereignty stalled earlier agreements to develop joint ventures with India.

Meanwhile, Beijing has intensified its engagement with India's northern neighbour, pumping billions of dollars into infrastructure projects ranging from roads to hydropower plants.

"When we trust each other, we can move forward very quickly," Modi said in Kathmandu.

"Projects that have been in limbo for 25 years are moving forward. I feel very satisfied," he said on the sidelines of a summit of South Asian leaders and ministers under way in Kathmandu.

Modi has sought to deepen ties since coming to power in May, with the two countries signing a power trade agreement last month.

India is investing billions of dollars to develop hydropower in Nepal, which currently produces just 750 megawatts -- less than two percent of its potential.

The latest deal comes after Indian infrastructure giant GMR agreed in September to build Nepal's first 900-megawatt hydropower plant. Modi, who arrived yesterday afternoon in Kathmandu for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) summit, also urged Nepal's leaders to work together and secure a deal to draft a new constitution.



RIOTS IN FERGUSON



Pictures show the violent aftermath after a grand jury a white policeman in the fatal August shooting of an unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown. The St Louis area braced for another day of protests yesterday after the verdict, sparking a night of violent and racially charged rioting. About a dozen buildings in suburban Ferguson, Missouri, burned overnight and police fired tear gas and flash-bang canisters at protesters. Sixty-one people were arrested, police said. (Story on page 16)



PHOTO: AFP

Israel accused of shoot-to-kill policy

AFP, Jerusalem

Human rights groups have accused Israel of encouraging a shoot-to-kill policy after a wave of incidents in which police shot dead Palestinians involved in, or accused of, attacking Israelis.

The alleged practice of killing suspects without trying to arrest them has caused concern after a series of deadly Palestinian attacks also resulted in the perpetrators' deaths -- and not always at the scene.

In a rare move, a Jerusalem court on Sunday indicted a border police officer after he shot and killed, apparently unprovoked, a Palestinian during a May demonstration in the occupied West Bank. For some, the charge of manslaughter in the case was not strong enough, and Public Security Minister Yitzhak Aharonovitch's comments that "a terrorist who strikes civilians should be killed" indicate no further such investigations will take place.

Amnesty International told AFP it had "strong suspicions" about a policy of "deliberate killings", even though "the authorities have the absolute duty to ensure that their forces comply with the law". Rights groups say Aharonovitch's remarks have been instrumental in formulating attitudes in the field, particularly those he made to reporters on November 5 at the scene of the second hit-and-run attack in Jerusalem in a fortnight.

Israeli rights group B'Tselem said it was "extremely disturbed" by Aharonovitch's comments, which it described as "provocative" and encouraging "execution without trial".

Flournoy tipped to replace Hagel

AP, Washington

Michele Flournoy, formerly the Pentagon's policy chief and among President Barack Obama's more hawkish advisers, could be in line to become the first woman to lead the US military after Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel's resignation.

Hagel, a former Republican senator, who has been in the job for less than two years, was chosen to oversee a shift to a peacetime military with smaller defense budgets, but found the United States at war again.

Rapid advances by Islamic State jihadists in Syria and Iraq forced the Pentagon chief into managing a complex campaign, and Obama concluded Hagel was not the man for the task.

At the White House, Obama said Hagel would stay on until the Senate confirms a successor. No timeframe for the transition was given.

Passed over by Obama for the job 20 months ago, Flournoy now heads a short list of candidates to direct the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and help Afghanistan fight the Taliban insurgency.

Other contenders include Ashton Carter, until last year the Pentagon's No 2-ranked official, and Robert Work, Hagel's current deputy.

Sen Jack Reed isn't interested in the job, a spokesman said Monday. Obama had mentioned Reed on Monday as he recounted a 2008 trip to

end the war in Iraq, reinvigorate the military campaign in Afghanistan and redesign US defense strategy to deal with severe budget cuts.

Always loyal to the president publicly, Flournoy often played the role of principled objector in closed-doors meetings, differing on matters such as the size and scope of the Afghan surge with Vice President Joe Biden and Tom Donilon, Obama's former national security adviser. Her suggestions were often more muscular in approach than those Obama authorized.

And when Defense Secretary Leon Panetta stepped down after Obama's re-election, she was among those mentioned for the post. Obama opted for Hagel, however. Flournoy would likely have a relatively easy confirmation in the new Republican-led Senate.

In Afghanistan, where she has been credited with helping strengthen the national army, Flournoy has urged a slower withdrawal strategy -- a policy Obama appears now to be adopting with his recent authorization of a wider US military role in the country next year.



Chuck Hagel



Michele Flournoy



Obama honours Meryl Streep with 'love'

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama said he is in love, though he was not speaking about Michelle -- but he swears she understands. "I've said it publicly: I love Meryl Streep. I love her. Her husband knows I love her. Michelle knows I love her. There's nothing either of them can do about it," he said at the Presidential Medal of Freedom awards Monday.

Obama endowed 18 people, including Streep, musician Stevie Wonder, Chilean-American author Isabel Allende, journalist Tom Brokaw and composer Stephen Sondheim, with the award, the highest civil honour in the United States.

A smiling Obama showered Streep with praise, complimenting the "Out of Africa" actress for her ability to embody the characters she plays.

"She inhabits her characters so fully and compassionately," he said of the three-time Oscar winner at the ceremony at the White House.

He also applauded her musical capabilities and her impressive ability to speak with any accent.

Streep won an Oscar in 2012 for her role as Margaret Thatcher in "The Iron Lady." She took home her first golden statue in 1980 for "Kramer vs. Kramer" and another in 1983 for "Sophie's Choice."

Obama also honoured Motown legend Wonder, whose album "Talking Book" was the first he ever bought.

The economist Robert Solow and John Dingell, the longest-serving member of US congress, were also awarded.



Police arrest a protester as they try to clear a road at a pro-democracy protest site in the Mongkok district of Hong Kong, yesterday. Hong Kong police used pepper spray and arrested 80 people yesterday as they moved to clear a city street blocked by pro-democracy demonstrators for nearly two months.

PHOTO: AFP

What hope for Iran nuke deal?

AFP, Vienna

Iran and world powers have given themselves seven more months to reach a nuclear deal, but a heightened risk of hardliners wrecking the process means they may have missed their best chance ever, analysts say.

It also remains far from certain that putting yet more time on the clock will help, when after 10 rounds of talks the two sides still remain poles apart on the fundamental issues.

US Secretary of State John Kerry admitted as much on Monday after he and foreign ministers from Iran and the other powers decided to extend their deadline for a deal to July 1, after intense days of talks in Vienna.

"These talks aren't going to suddenly get easier just because we extend them," Kerry told reporters. "They are tough. They have been tough and they are going to stay tough."

Kerry and his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif stressed that some progress has been made, with Zarif even suggesting that a deal was possible "much faster" than in seven months. They aim to have the outlines by March.

But it is clear that when it comes to the two main sticking points -- the future scale of Iran's nuclear programme and the pace of sanctions relief for Iran -- they remain perhaps as far away as ever.

So why have the officials, experts and diplomats, both, erred putting more time on the clock?

The reason is quite simple. The alternative -- a collapse of the talks and a return to the explosive situation before last November's interim deal -- is far worse. Kerry said the parties would be "fools to walk away".

Before the November 2013 accord kicked in, Iran was enriching uranium to close to weapons-grade, the West was applying more and more sanctions and the danger of Israeli and US military action was growing.

Now, key parts of Iran's programme are frozen, meaning that, unlike before, the country is no longer creeping ever closer to potentially creating a bomb. In return, it receives around \$700 million every month as overseas assets are freed up. This will continue until July.

"If either side decides to walk away, the consequences will be catastrophic," Kelsey Davenport, analyst at the Arms Control Association, told AFP.

"As long as Iran's programme remains capped and the sanctions remain capped then both parties are better off," agreed Fitzpatrick.

"Seven months is longer than anyone expected, but the longer the better."

Kashmir votes with BJP eyeing power

PTI, Srinagar

Polling ended peacefully yesterday in 15 assembled constituencies in Jammu and Kashmir that voted in the first phase of the five-phase assembly elections, officials said.

"No major incident of violence has been reported from anywhere," a poll official told IANS in Jammu. Over 65 percent turnout was recorded.

Election commission officials, however, said the percentage was likely to change as the final figures were yet to be received. In the 2008 Assembly elections, an average of over 60 per cent polling was witnessed.

The situation across the state has been by and large peaceful so far, barring couple of stray incidents of violence in Ganderbal and Bandipora districts.

India's car diplomacy at Saarc

DNA INDIA ONLINE

Leaders of six countries at the Saarc Summit, currently on in Kathmandu, are using armoured, bulletproof cars sent to Nepal from India.

Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif refused one. Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan and Afghanistan have no issues with India's bulletproof cars.

As for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, two fully armoured bulletproof cars were airlifted to the Nepalese capital for his exclusive use.

So, what are these bulletproof cars India was gracious enough to help neighbour Nepal with? A security expert, on condition of anonymity, said they are specially outfitted BMW limousines, spacious in the inside, and fully protected from the outside.

They can not only deflect bullets from an AK-47, but are also bomb-proof, their underbellies reinforced to withstand IED explosives planted on roads, and other terrain.

Its engine generates 450 horsepower, and its 4-wheel drive, which



means it can race on any terrain at a fast clip.

But the BMW car India has chosen to outfit with armour is a Limousine, and these BMW limousines are outfitted, and retrofitted by Sandago, a Singapore-based company.

NEWS IN brief

Anti-Islamist leads Tunisia vote

AFP, Tunis

The head of Tunisia's anti-Islamist Nidaa Tounes party, Beji Caid Essebsi, leads the country's presidential election with 39.46 percent of votes, six percentage points ahead of incumbent Marzouki, results showed yesterday. Because there was no outright winner, a second round of voting will now be held, election commission said.

India mulling to curb cigarette sales

PTI, New Delhi

Indian health ministry has recommended a ban on sale of loose cigarettes and also increase in the minimum age of a person to whom tobacco products can be sold, it was announced yesterday. Health minister JP Nadda in a written reply in the Rajya Sabha said the ministry has accepted the recommendations of the committee.

Dozens killed in east DR Congo clashes

AFP, Kinshasa

About 100 people were slaughtered last week in a fresh massacre in the restive east of the Democratic Republic of Congo, blamed by the government on Ugandan rebels, lawmakers told AFP on Monday. The carnage took place on Thursday near Beni in North Kivu province, where mainly Muslim Ugandan rebels have been blamed for killing more than 200 civilians in gruesome machete attacks since October.

Pak teen killed for listening to music!

AFP, Islamabad

A teenage Pakistani girl has been shot dead by her uncle following a row over loud music, police said yesterday. The incident happened Saturday in the in Punjab province's Chakwal district. The uncle asked Rehana, the victim, to lower the volume of music and when denied he killed her after a heated conversation, police said.

Morocco flash floods kill at least 32

AFP, Rabat

The death toll from three days of what residents described as the heaviest storms to hit southern Morocco in decades has climbed to at least 32, authorities said on Monday. The storms since Saturday caused flash floods, but a weather alert was finally called off on Monday afternoon.