



Modi meets all leaders except Pakistan PM

Vows to fight terrorism on Mumbai attack anniversary

AGENCIES

They shared the dais but leave alone a handshake, there was no exchange of courtesies between the prime ministers of India and Pakistan during the nearly three-hour Saarc Summit in Kathmandu yesterday.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif, who were sitting two seats away from each other, did not look at each other even when Sharif crossed before and after delivering his speech at the 18th meeting of the eight-member regional bloc.

Leaders of Maldives and Nepal were seated between Modi and Sharif.

Though there is no "structured" meeting scheduled between the two leaders, a brief exchange of pleasantries was expected given that they would be attending the same conference and the retreat today.

On Tuesday, Sharif had sought to put the ball in India's court for an initiative for talks, saying, "cancellation of talks was New Delhi's unilateral decision," and "ball is now India's court for talks between both the countries".

India maintained that it was for "mean-

ingful dialogue" which involves specifics.

Meanwhile, in a day when the sixth anniversary of Mumbai attack was being observed, Modi yesterday told Saarc leaders that India feels the "endless pain" of lost lives and urged the eight-nation grouping to combat terrorism unitedly.

Modi made a reference to the Mumbai carnage that claimed 166 lives in his maiden address to the 18th Saarc summit and echoed the views of Presidents of Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, which described the menace of terrorism as "fundamental challenge, both regionally and internationally".

While Sharif did talk about "dispute-free" South Asia where instead of fighting among themselves, the countries should fight against poverty and other social issues, there was no mention of terrorism in his nearly 15-minute speech.

Modi also outlined various initiatives in key sectors of health, science, visa regimes and connectivity for the Saarc region as he pitched to turn South Asia of "flowering hope into a rich field of peace and prosperity" by collective efforts which, he said, were "more urgent than in South Asia; and, nowhere else is it so modest".



Syria strikes ISIS capital; 95 killed

AFP, Beirut

Syrian regime air strikes on Islamic State group stronghold Raqa killed at least 95 people as a government delegation prepared for talks with key ally Russia yesterday on relaunching peace negotiations.

The bombing on Tuesday was the deadliest by President Bashar al-Assad's air force in Raqa since Sunni extremist ISIS fighters seized control of the city last year and declared it their capital.

More than half of the dead were civilians, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which monitors the war through a network of sources.

It was unknown how many jihadists were killed. Raqa was the first provincial capital to fall from regime control, and it was later overrun by ISIS which has used it as the capital of its self-proclaimed "caliphate" straddling Syria and neighbouring Iraq.

The government has in recent months stepped up its air strikes against ISIS-held towns in the north and east, with most of the casualties reported to have been civilians.

Raqa has also been the target of repeated air strikes by the US-led coalition fighting the jihadists.

The exiled opposition Syrian National Coalition condemned the strikes as a "brutal massacre", warning that "many seem now convinced that Assad is the major beneficiary of the US-led coalition strikes" against the jihadists.

A Syrian regime delegation headed by Foreign Minister Walid Muallem was due to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin at his Black Sea retreat of Sochi yesterday.

They were expected to discuss a possible relaunch of peace talks with the opposition, a senior Syrian official said last week.



Flournoy opts out of US defense secy job

REUTERS, Washington

Michele Flournoy, a former top US Department of Defense official widely tipped as a possible replacement for Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, has taken herself out of consideration for the job, according to multiple sources familiar with the circumstances.

Flournoy, co-founder and chief executive of the Center for a New American Security, wrote to the think tank's board of directors saying she would remain in her post and had asked President Barack Obama to remove her from consideration to head the Pentagon, the sources told Reuters on Tuesday.

One of the sources said Flournoy, whose youngest child is 13, had cited family reasons for her decision.

Flournoy would have been the first woman to head the Defense Department if she had been nominated and confirmed in the post.

Hagel announced his resignation on Monday.

Flournoy's decision leaves Ashton Carter, former deputy defense secretary, and the current deputy, Robert Work, as the top potential candidates for the job. Spokespeople for both Carter and Work declined to comment.

NEWS IN brief

Congo doctor receives top EU prize

AFP, Strasbourg

Doctor Denis Mukwege received the European Parliament's prestigious Sakharov human rights prize yesterday for his work in helping thousands of gang rape victims in the Democratic Republic of Congo. European Parliament president Martin Schulz said Mukwege "fought for the dignity of women, justice and peace in his country".

China coal mine fire kills 24

AFP, Beijing

A fire at a Chinese coal mine killed 24 workers early yesterday, state media reported, the latest fatal incident to hit the accident-prone industry. The blaze at the mine in Liaoning province also left 52 people injured. Initial investigation showed that coal dust in a shaft was ignited shortly after a weak earthquake with a magnitude of just 1.6 hit the mine, said the report.

Drone, polio attacks kill 12 in Pakistan

AFP, Quetta

Gunmen attacked a polio vaccination team yesterday, killing four health workers, while a suspected US drone strike killed 8 alleged militants in Pakistan, officials said. The attack on the health workers took place in the southwestern city of Quetta, while the drone strike targeted a militant hideout in the North Waziristan tribal region in northwest Pakistan.

Egypt reopens Gaza crossing

AFP, Cairo

Egypt reopened the Rafah border crossing with Gaza yesterday for the first time since its closure in late October after a bombing in the Sinai Peninsula, officials said. The crossing, which is the only access point to the Palestinian territory not controlled by Israel, will open for four hours on Wednesday and Thursday, a government official said.

Zimbabwe VP ousted from ruling party

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe's vice president has been ousted from the ruling party's leadership after a sustained campaign led by Robert Mugabe's wife Grace, as the battle to succeed the long-serving president heats up. Joice Mujuru came under attack after Grace Mugabe accused the vice president of fomenting factionalism in the party as factions within the party jostle for power when 90-year-old Mugabe steps down or dies.



People protest in Times Square over the Ferguson grand jury decision to not indict officer Darren Wilson in the Michael Brown case in New York City on Tuesday. Some 2,000 National Guard troops dispatched to the St Louis area helped police stave off a second night of rioting and arson, as sympathy protests spread to several US cities. Right, top, protesters in Washington DC and Los Angeles, bottom, demonstrate protesting the killing.



PHOTO: AFP

Hong Kong mops up protest camps

AFP, Hong Kong

Hundreds of Hong Kong police yesterday cleared a pro-democracy protest camp, arresting Joshua Wong and another student leader and reopening a main road blocked for almost two months.

Pushing back protesters, police with the help of workmen removed tents and other obstacles blocking the six-lane Nathan Road in Mongkok district.

It is seen as the most significant move so far in efforts to clear away protest camps at three separate locations in the city, as public sympathy with the demonstrators wanes.

Scuffles broke out earlier in the day as police wearing helmets and brandishing batons moved in to protect the workmen from the crowds that surged forward to try to stop them tearing down road barricades.

The operation went ahead a day

after nearly 150 demonstrators were arrested as authorities cleared a smaller section of the Mongkok protest camp.

Hundreds of police quickly pushed protesters back, and removed wooden and metal barricades, tents and other obstructions along a 500-metre stretch of Nathan Road.

Around two hours after the operation started, only a handful of protesters remained at the edge of the site.

The movement's student leaders Wong and Lester Shum were arrested at the scene, according to protest group Scholarism and the Hong Kong Federation of Students.

A well-known protester and member of the League of Social Democrats party, Raphael Wong, who was arrested along with the pair said on his Facebook page that they were being held at a police station.

Geometric TV owner, Veena Malik gets 26 years in jail

AFP, Islamabad

A Pakistan court on Tuesday sentenced the owner of the country's biggest media group to 26 years in prison for broadcasting a show it said was blasphemous.

The morning show broadcast live on Geo TV in May featured Pakistani starlet Veena Malik dancing with her new husband while a group of Sufi musicians sang a devotional song about the wedding of the Prophet Muhammad's daughter.

The verdict against Mir Shakil-ur-Rahman along with the host of the show and two guests was announced by an anti-terror court in the city of Gilgit, which is controlled by Pakistan but part of the Kashmir region which India also claims.

But the order is unlikely to be implemented because the Gilgit-Baltistan region is not considered a full-fledged province by Pakistan and verdicts by its courts do not apply to the rest of the country.



Veena Malik

The four people convicted were also ordered to pay a fine of 1.3 million rupees (\$13,000), sell their properties and surrender their passports, according to a copy of the court order.

No lawyer appeared on behalf of any of the accused. However the court had arranged a state lawyer to defend them.

Its broadcast set off a storm of controversy on social media, though similar routines by other channels in the past have largely gone unnoticed.

Many observers at the time suspected Pakistan's military establishment of engineering the blasphemy campaign against Geo TV. The channel was then caught up in a struggle with the all-powerful military.

The blasphemy case was registered on May 26 in a police station in Gilgit by a hardline Sunni cleric Himayatullah Khan, deputy chief of the anti-shia organisation Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ) formerly known as Sipah-e-Sahaba.

UN moves to protect digital privacy

AFP, United Nations

The United Nations on Tuesday adopted a resolution on protecting digital privacy that for the first time urged governments to offer redress to citizens targeted by mass surveillance.

The resolution presented by Germany and Brazil builds on a landmark text presented last year in the wake of revelations by Edward Snowden of widespread surveillance by the US and British governments.

"Where mass surveillance technology is used, a situation can easily be created where no privacy of communications on the Internet exists at all," German Ambassador Harald Braun told a UN committee.

Braun warned that without proper checks, "we risk turning into Orwellian states" where citizens are being constantly monitored.

The resolution was adopted by consensus by the General Assembly's human rights committee and now goes before the full Assembly in December.

It followed weeks of tough negotiations with Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and the United States -- members of the so-called Five Eyes intelligence alliance -- who sought to limit the resolution's scope.

Fighting rages in Ukraine

Russian military build-up in Crimea worries Nato

AFP, Kiev

Nato's top military commander warned yesterday that Russia's "militarisation" of the annexed Crimea region could be used by Moscow to exert control across the whole Black Sea region.

"We are very concerned with the militarisation of Crimea," US General Philip Breedlove told a press conference in Kiev.

"The capabilities that are being installed in Crimea will bring an effect on almost the entire Black Sea."

Breedlove jetted into Ukraine for high-level talks as fighting rumbled on between government forces and Kremlin-backed rebels in the east.

Breedlove, the commander of American forces in Europe, said that cruise and surface-to-air missiles installed on the peninsula, which Russia seized from Ukraine in March, would be "able to exert influence" over the strategic region. He said that the US-led alliance was

"watching for indications" amid fears over the possibility that Russia could move any of its nuclear arsenal to Crimea.

Russia's defence ministry said yesterday that it had deployed a batch of 14 military jets to Crimea, as part of a squadron of 30 that will be stationed on the peninsula.

Breedlove said that the alliance was providing training for Ukraine's forces that will bring them closer to "Nato tactics, techniques and procedures" but insisted that any decision on the country becoming a member was for political leaders.

Ukraine has stirred fresh Russian ire by stating it hopes to join the Western security bloc in the face of Russia's alleged backing for a separatist conflict that has cost over 4,300 lives since April. There seems little chance of Ukraine actually joining Nato anytime soon as secure borders and reforms to its ill-equipped army would usually be a prerequisite.

BORDER SECURITY India to put up smart fence to plug loopholes

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

In order to plug loopholes in porous and unfenced borders with Bangladesh and Pakistan, India will soon set up a 'smart fence' mechanism as part of an over Rs 4,500-crore modernisation plan being implemented by BSE.

The country's largest border guarding force has recently begun the trial of these sophisticated and technical smart fencing systems in a four-km stretch in Jammu and Punjab sectors where fencing with barbed wires is not possible due to difficult topography or inclement weather.

BSE, in a maiden initiative, is also undertaking an ambitious upgradation of its surveillance equipment, guns and artillery to effectively secure over 7,000-km border on the western and eastern flanks of the country.

Officials said the force is procuring a smart 'motion sensor alarm' which blips and alerts border guards in case there is a movement along the unfenced stretch of the frontier which is located in difficult terrain. A similar laser-guided gadget is being put to test to detect hidden tunnels in border areas and undulating land.

At present, about 35 percent of the border with Bangladesh and 15 percent of the border with Pakistan is unfenced.



India raises tobacco purchasing age to 25

AFP, New Delhi

Health campaigners Wednesday welcomed India's unprecedented plans to raise the age for tobacco purchases to 25 and ban unpackaged cigarette sales, calling them a major step towards stopping nearly one million tobacco-related deaths a year.

India, with a population of 1.2 billion, would have the world's highest minimum legal age for buying cigarettes if plans to increase the limit from 18 to 25 were implemented, according to campaigners.

The plans, proposed by an expert panel, were announced by health minister J P Nadda in parliament on Tuesday.

Around 900,000 people die of tobacco-related illnesses in India each year. An estimated 70 percent of cigarettes sold in India are unpackaged, equating to more than 100 billion sticks in 2012, according to market researcher Euromonitor.