

NEWSIN brief

Three injured in new US school shooting

AFP, Los Angeles

Three teenagers were shot and injured Friday outside a high school in the US state of Oregon, in a suspected gang-related incident. Investigators launched a manhunt and caught the attacker yesterday. The three victims -- two males and one female -- were transported from the scene at Rosemary Anderson High School in north Portland.

Yemen troops kill Saudi-bound Qaeda suspects

AFP, Sanaa

Yemeni troops yesterday shot dead five al-Qaeda suspects disguised as women who fired at a soldier during a checkpoint inspection of their Saudi-bound bus, officials said.

Huge storm hits US West Coast, 2 dead

AFP, Los Angeles

The US West Coast's most ferocious storm in years triggered rockslides and power outages in southern California on Friday, a day after claiming two lives in the Northwest.

Pak cops foil terror attack, kill 4 militants

AFP, Multan

Pakistan police foiled a major terror attack yesterday in central Punjab province killing at least four suspected Taliban militants. Heavy weapons and explosives were recovered from the militants.

Kerry seeks to avert UN showdown

AFP, Bogota

US Secretary of State John Kerry said Friday he hoped to head off an end-of-year showdown at the United Nations over Palestinian statehood in meetings next week in Europe. "There are a lot of different folks pushing in different directions out there, and the question is can we all pull in the same direction," Kerry told reporters during a visit to Colombia.



LANDSLIDE IN INDONESIA

A rescue team search for victims after a landslide hits Jemblung village in Banjarnegara, Central Java province, yesterday. Torrential downpours triggered the landslide, killing at least 17 people and leaving nearly 100 others missing, with persistent rain hampering rescue efforts, officials said yesterday.

PHOTO:
AFP

Pranab undergoes heart procedure

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Indian President Pranab Mukherjee yesterday underwent a heart procedure as doctors at the Army's Research and Referral hospital installed a coronary stent in his artery to remove a blockage.

Mukherjee, 79, was taken to the hospital in the morning after he complained of stomach problems and related ailments.

Doctors at the hospital put him under observation for a day for various tests during which they detected a blockage in one of the arteries, hospital sources said.

The doctors immediately conducted angioplasty and installed a stent, a small mesh tube that's used to treat narrow or weak arteries.

Coronary angioplasty is a procedure used to open blocked or narrowed coronary (heart) arteries. The procedure improves blood flow to the heart muscle.

Contacted, Press Secretary Venu Rajamony said, "The president is under care at the hospital and we expect him to be back by Monday."

Will react if US imposes new sanctions: Russia

Moscow furious as US Senate okays military aid for Ukraine

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday responded angrily to news that US senators had passed a bill calling for fresh sanctions against Moscow and the supply of lethal military aid to Ukraine.

"Undoubtedly, we will not be able to leave this without a response," deputy foreign minister Sergei Ryabkov told Interfax news agency ahead of a meeting between the Russian and US foreign ministers.

The Senate bill -- dubbed the Ukraine Freedom Support Act -- must still be approved by the White House, which has so far been reluctant to provide direct military assistance to Ukraine for fear of being drawn into a proxy war with Russia.

Ryabkov blamed "anti-Russian moods" in the United States for the bill

UKRAINE CRISIS
Kiev hails Senate move as historic
Kerry to meet Lavrov in Rome today
Conflict toll tops 4,600: UN

passed on Friday, which calls for additional sanctions against Russia and the delivery of up to \$350 million (280 million euros) worth of US military hardware to Ukraine.

The eight-month conflict between government forces and pro-Russian separatists has left at least 4,634 dead and 10,243 wounded, while displacing more than 1.1 million people, according to new figures released by the United Nations.

It also threatens fresh sanctions against Russia, whose economy is

crumbling under previous rounds of Western sanctions and a collapse in oil prices.

Kiev lawmakers have hailed the bill as a "historic decision". They have long been pressing the West to provide military support to their beleaguered army, but have so far received only non-lethal equipment.

US Secretary of State John Kerry is set to meet Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Rome against the backdrop of the hardening US stance. Ryabkov said that "the main focus at their 17th meeting this year would be on the Middle East."

There was confusion over the timing of the meeting, however, with the US state department saying it was scheduled for Monday, while the Russian embassy press office in Rome told AFP the meeting would be today.

US Senate approves anti-ISIS spending

Jihadists behead four men for blasphemy in Syria

AGENCIES

The US Senate has approved a new annual defence bill expanding the military campaign against Islamic State (ISIS).

The bill approves a general Pentagon budget of \$496bn (£316bn) plus \$64bn for US wars abroad. The measure also authorises the training and equipping of moderate Syrian rebel fighters for two years.

The bill had already been passed by the House of Representatives and has now been sent to President Barack Obama to sign into law.

ISIS controls large areas of Syria and Iraq, imposing a rigid version of Sunni Islam and persecuting or killing non-believers.

The US-led coalition has launched more than 600 air strikes against ISIS militant targets in Iraq since the campaign began on 8 August.

The US, with Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, has also carried out almost 500 attacks on IS

in neighbouring Syria since 23 September.

Until now, US operations against ISIS had been funded from the existing Pentagon budget.

The new bill, which was passed by 89 votes to 11, approves \$3.4bn for the direct deployment of US forces against ISIS, and a further \$1.6bn for training Iraqi Kurdish forces for two years.

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) had been the subject of cross-party talks for several months. The bill rejected President Obama's request to approve the closure of the US military prison in Guantanamo Bay.

Meanwhile, ISIS's self-declared police force in western Syria decapitated four men after accusing them of blasphemy, a rights group monitoring the Syrian conflict said yesterday. The men were beheaded in the countryside east of the city of Homs by the militant group's "Islamic Police", the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

THAI ROYALS in trouble

Crown prince divorces wife amid anxiety over monarchy's future

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's crown prince has divorced his wife, in a dramatic fall from grace for a senior princess at a time of heightened anxiety over the health of the country's revered but ailing monarch.

A statement published by the palace in the early hours of yesterday in the Royal Gazette said Princess Srirasmi had relinquished her royal status, a move that ends her 13-year marriage to Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn.

The rare public airing of palace intrigue comes after a string of the princess's relatives were arrested in a high-profile corruption scandal that has sent shockwaves through Thailand's elite.

"The king has granted permission to announce that Princess Srirasmi, the wife of Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, has informed in a written document that she has resigned from her royal status," the palace said in a short statement, signalling an end to the marriage.

Analysts said the 62-year-old crown prince's split from his wife will deepen fears for the monarchy's future as Thailand's 87-year-old King Bhumibol Adulyadej enters the twilight of his reign.

In May, Thailand's military seized power after months of violent street protests saying it needed to do so to protect the monarchy and restore order to the politically divided nation.

The king -- the world's longest-serving monarch, who is revered by many Thais as a semi-divine figure -- has been largely confined to hospital this year and pulled out of plans to hold a public audience earlier this month during his birthday celebrations.

Srirasmi married the crown prince in 2001 and had been expected to become queen. The couple have a nine-year-old son who was thought to be Prince Vajiralongkorn's most likely heir.

"This announcement will add a greater sense of uncertainty and anxiety among Thais over the future of their monarchy -- not just with the current generation, but with later generations too," Pavin Chachavalponpun, a Thai expert at Japan's Kyoto University, told AFP.

Thailand has been awash with rumours of Srirasmi's fate for weeks after a slew of her relatives were caught up in a widening police corruption scandal.



ICC prosecutor halts Darfur war crimes probe

AFP, United Nations

International Criminal Court prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said Friday she has suspended investigations into alleged war crimes in Sudan's Darfur, criticising the UN Security Council for inaction over the conflict-hit region.

"I am left with no choice but to hibernate investigative activities in Darfur as I shift resources to other urgent cases," Bensouda told the Security Council.

She rebuked the UN body for failing to push for the arrest of President Omar al-Bashir for alleged crimes committed in Darfur.



Several hundred activists of pro animal rights group "Igualdad Animal" (Animal Equity) hold dead animals and photos of animals as the organisation celebrates the International Animals Rights Day at Puerta del Sol Square in Madrid, yesterday.

PHOTO:
AFP

Violence in Afghanistan Taliban attacks, blasts kill dozens

REUTERS, Kabul

The Afghan Taliban killed a Supreme Court official, a dozen mine clearers and several national and foreign soldiers but also suffered heavy losses from intensifying violence ahead of the withdrawal of most international troops in the next two weeks.

In Kabul yesterday, a bomb ripped through a bus carrying soldiers in Kabul, killing at least six of them, mangling the vehicle and sending a column of black smoke over the capital.

"A suicide bomber on foot detonated his explosives at the door of a bus carrying army soldiers," said Hashmat Stanekzai, a spokesman for Kabul police chief.

Earlier gunmen shot dead senior Supreme Court official Atiqullah Raoufi as he left his home in the city.

The Taliban, ousted from power by US-backed Afghan forces in 2001, claimed responsibility, but did not say why it had killed him. The hardline Islamist insurgents run their own courts in parts of the country and consider the official judiciary to be corrupt.

Fatalities and injuries among Afghan security forces and civilians peaked this year to the highest point since the US-led war began in 2001, as foreign forces rapidly withdrew most of their troops from the interior of mountainous nation. About 5,000 Afghan police and soldiers have been killed, and more than 1,500 civilians were killed in the first half of the year. A ramp of about 13,000 foreign soldiers will remain in Afghanistan next year, down from a peak of more than 130,000.

Mamata's anger mounts over Mitra arrest in Saradha scam

PTI, Kolkata

West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee yesterday hit the streets to protest the arrest of her minister Madan Mitra in the Saradha scam, and wondered if Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi should be arrested for the Sahara scandal as he was photographed with the Sahara group chief who is now behind bars.

"A red diary was obtained after raiding the Sahara office. It had several big names. Empty vessels make more noise. There are images of the Prime Minister with the Sahara chief (Subrata Roy). Should we arrest the Prime Minister?" Banerjee asked, as she led a demonstration protesting against the arrest of Bengal transport and sports minister Mitra.

"There are images of several CPM leaders with chit fund owners. If an image is a proof of criminal conspiracy, then the Prime Minister should be arrested for the Sahara scam," Banerjee said, in a reference to video footage of Saradha group

programmes where Mitra was seen praising purported graft mastermind Sudipto Sen.

Attacking the BJP, Banerjee said: "The BJP knows it cannot fight Trinamool politically. They are using the CBI to counter us. Common people have hit the streets today to protest against the politics of vendetta by the BJP."

In an apparent indication of the pressure the Trinamool was facing after Mitra's arrest by the CBI, Banerjee said, "Time does not wait for anyone. We have to act as per the need of the hour."

Issuing a warning to the BJP-led central government, Banerjee said: "I must tell those who are in power -- stay within your limits or you will face the music."

Trying to whip up local sentiments, Banerjee accused the BJP and the CBI of efforts to "destroy the sports infrastructure in Bengal" by targeting the iconic football clubs.

The chief minister said culture and sports in Bengal were under threat.



Indian police arrest 'jihadi tweeter'

AFP, Bangalore

Indian police yesterday arrested a 24-year-old believed to be the handler of an influential Twitter account supporting the Islamic State group, officials said.

Mehdi Masroor Biswas, who works for an Indian food conglomerate in the southern city of Bangalore, is alleged to be behind the Twitter account @ShamiWitness.

The account had 17,700 followers, including many foreigners fighting for the ISIS in Syria and Iraq, until it was shut down following a report by Britain's Channel 4 News on Thursday.

Tweets from @ShamiWitness contained jihadist propaganda as well as information for would-be recruits and messages praising fallen fighters as martyrs.

Police in Bangalore raided his house in an upscale suburb early yesterday and seized his mobile phone, laptop and other documents for evidence.

"He has confessed to the fact that he was operating Shami Witness Twitter account for the last many years," a police source said.

India's moderate population of 150 million Muslims have not often been drawn into sectarian conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere.

However, Biswas's arrest has further fuelled fears that IS militants are attempting to recruit radicalised Muslim youngsters online.