

NEWS IN brief

Sonia Gandhi leaves hospital

PTI, New Delhi

Congress president Sonia Gandhi was discharged from a hospital in Delhi yesterday after recovering from a respiratory tract infection.

Gandhi was admitted to the hospital on Thursday evening with lower respiratory tract infection and some breathing difficulty.

Global arms treaty to enter into force today

AFP, United Nations

A treaty laying down international rules for the \$85 billion dollar global arms trade goes into force today with campaigners vowing to make sure it is strictly implemented.

The United States has signed the treaty, but has yet to ratify it. China and Russia have yet to sign on. A total of 130 countries have signed the treaty and 60 have ratified it, including Israel which joined the movement just this month.

Blasts kill 27 in Nigeria

REUTERS, Abuja/maiduguri

Two bomb attacks at a bus station and a market in north Nigeria on Monday killed at least 27 people and wounded around 60, officials said.

Record anti-Islam rally held in Germany

BBC ONLINE

A record 17,500 people have turned out for the latest "anti-Islamisation" rally in the German city of Dresden, according to police estimates.

Thai polls in Feb 2016 at earliest: minister

REUTERS, Bangkok

A general election to return Thailand to democracy after a military coup in May will be held in February 2016 at the earliest, a deputy prime minister said yesterday.

Ukraine sheds neutral status

Kieve takes big step toward Nato; furious Moscow vows response

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine yesterday took a historic step toward Nato in a parliamentary vote that stoked Russia's anger ahead of talks on ending the ex-Soviet state's separatist war.

Lawmakers in the government-controlled chamber overwhelmingly adopted a bill dropping Ukraine's non-aligned status -- a classification assumed by states that refuse to join military alliances and thus play no part in wars.

President Petro Poroshenko had vowed to put Ukraine under Western military protection after winning an election called in the wake of the February ouster in Kiev of a Moscow-backed president.

"European and Euro-Atlantic integrations -- that is Ukraine's single course," Poroshenko tweeted moments after the 303-8 vote.

Ukraine assumed de facto neutrality under strong Russian pressure in 2010. It had sought Nato membership in the early post-Soviet era but -- its once-mighty army in ruins and riven by corruption -- was never viewed as a serious candidate.

Last winter's revolution in Kiev upset Russian President Vladimir Putin's plans to enlist Ukraine in a new bloc he was forging in order to counterbalance Nato and the European Union.

And Moscow had set Kiev's exclusion from all military unions as a condition for any deal on ending the pro-Russian uprising that has killed 4,700 in the eastern Ukrainian rubsteln in the past eight months.

Putin's view of Nato as modern Russia's biggest threat has only been reinforced by this year's dramatic spike in East-West tensions over Ukraine.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei



Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk (R) gestures as he speaks with Ukrainian Finance Minister Natalia Jaresko during a parliament session in Kiev, yesterday.

Russian sanctions law that US President Barack Obama signed on Friday "will both have very negative consequences."

"And our country will have to respond to them," he wrote in a Facebook post.

Perhaps the most immediate threat will be to delicate peace talks this week in the Belarussian capital Minsk that Poroshenko and Putin agreed on Monday.

The deal for Kiev and rebel negotiators to meet in the presence of Russian and European envoys today and Friday was struck during a joint call with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande -- the West's top mediators on Ukraine.

The last two rounds of Minsk consultations in September produced a truce and the outlines of a broader peace agreement that gave the two separatist regions partial self-rule for three years within a united Ukraine.

But the deals were followed by more fighting that killed at least 1,300 people. The insurgents' decision to stage their own leadership polls in violation of the Minsk rules effectively ended political talks between the two sides.

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Lavrov demanded that Kiev "put an end to confrontation" and stop adopting "absolutely counterproductive" measures that only stoked tensions between the two sides.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said even more bluntly that "in essence, an application for Nato membership will turn Ukraine into a potential military opponent for Russia."

Medvedev warned that Ukraine's rejection of neutrality and a new

Pakistan was warned about school attack

AGENCIES

Government departments in Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province were warned of an imminent attack on the Army Public School months before the carnage unfolded in Peshawar on December 16.

The Home Ministry of the province stated that the Taliban commander Khaksar in Orakazi along with two other terrorists, Bilal and Obaidullah, planned to carry out attacks at educational institutions under the Army, Geo News reported, citing alert number 802 of the written warning issued on August 28.

Bilal and Obaidullah, with their accomplices, had also conducted reconnaissance of the targets. The warning stated that the intention of terrorists was revenge and they wanted to kill as many children of Army officers as possible.

The written warning had called for security measures to be made in advance to avoid any untoward incident.

Meanwhile, officials said yesterday the leader of the banned Pakistani militant group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) was set to walk free from jail, even as the government considers "radical changes" to tackle militancy after the school massacre.

Malik Ishaq is expected to be released tomorrow after the Punjab provincial government withdrew a request to extend his detention under public order laws.

Meanwhile, Pakistan government on Monday failed to file a plea challenging the bail to Zaki-ur Rehman Lakhvi, the key planner of the 2008 Mumbai attack.

Escape from Jihadists' hell

Yazidi girls are killing themselves to escape rape

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Captured Yazidi girls in Iraq are killing themselves to escape rape and torture at the hands of Isis militants holding them prisoner.

Hundreds of women and children were captured during the group's bloody sweep through northern Iraq earlier this year and have since been trafficked as sex slaves, forced into marriage and imprisoned.

Victims who managed to escape told Amnesty International that many Yazidi girls killed themselves after losing hope of being saved.

A 20-year-old survivor, called Luna, said she was held with 20 girls as young as 10 in the Isis-controlled city of Mosul when they were told to dress up.

"One day we were given clothes that looked like dance costumes and were told to bathe and wear those clothes," she added. "Jilan killed herself in the bathroom. She cut her wrists and hanged herself. She was very beautiful."

"I think she knew that she was going to be taken away by a man and that is why she killed herself."

Another woman, 27-year-old Wafa, said she and her sister attempted suicide while imprisoned in Mosul after the man



holding them gave them the choice of marrying him and his brother or being sold as slaves.

Relatives of girls who managed to escape fear that the trauma will never leave them, reporting panic attacks and depression.

Amnesty interviewed 42 women and girls for its report, "Escape from Hell", which has been released yesterday.

It chronicles the torture, rape and sexual violence suffered by women from the Yazidi minority. Women who converted to Islam were forced to marry Isis militants and those maintaining their faith have been trafficked as sex slaves, abused and imprisoned.

Videos have emerged online of horrifying "slave auctions" of girls in Mosul and Isis members have boasted of the abductions, justifying them by calling Yazidis "apostates".

Thousands of people from the religious minority, who are viciously targeted by the Sunni extremist group because they are considered heretics, were driven from their homes in Sinjar by the Isis advance in August.

Hundreds were killed in raids on towns and more died of thirst or starvation after fleeing up the remote Mount Sinjar.

Singer Joe Cocker dies

AFP, New York

Legendary singer Joe Cocker, whose intense, gritty voice won him wide acclaim that spanned both rock and blues, has died at age 70, his agent said Monday.

Cocker, who started off playing to small audiences in pubs in his native England, won fame when he jolted the 1969 Woodstock festival with his high-powered version of the Beatles' "With a Little Help From My Friends" -- one of rock's most successful covers.

His agent Barrie Marshall said Cocker, who died after battling lung cancer, was "simply unique". Sir Paul McCartney said he was a lovely guy who "brought so much to the world".



Cocker -- who on stage would flail his arms so wildly that uninitiated crowds wondered if he had neurological problems -- said in a 1971 movie about him, "Mad Dogs and Englishmen," that music served as his release and mused that he could have been a murderer if he had not been a singer.

His duet with Jennifer Warnes, Up Where We Belong - from An Officer And A Gentleman - hit number one and went on to win both a Grammy and an Academy Award in 1983. He was made an OBE in 2011.

Cocker, who recorded 23 studio albums and 40 albums, lived in Colorado, in the US.

'US shot down MH370'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A former airline boss and writer claims the US shot down Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 because the military feared it had been taken over by hackers and was about to be used in a 9/11-style attack.

Marc Dugain, who headed Proteus Airlines and is an established author, speculated that the Americans may have targeted the aircraft because they feared a September 11-style attack on a military base in the Indian Ocean.

In an article for French magazine Paris Match, he claimed that the Boeing 777 crashed nowhere near where international search teams have been combing the ocean for wreckage, but near an American military base in the British territory of Diego Garcia.

"It's an extremely powerful military base. It's surprising that the Americans have lost all trace of this aircraft. Without getting into conspiracy theories, it is a possibility that the Americans stopped this plane," he told France Inter, according to a translation by The Local.

Dugain asked how "in our technological world" a 63 metre-long object could disappear without a trace, suggesting there must have been a deliberate effort to hide evidence.

The head of Emirates, the world's largest international airline, is among those who have echoed Mr Dugain's questions about the availability of evidence.

Sir Tim Clark revealed his doubts in October, saying his is electronic engineers believe that even with communication systems switched off, the plane would still be traceable, if lost.



Mystery of MH370

BJP gains big in J&K

AFP, Srinagar

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist party made significant gains in the restive Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir yesterday, extending its grip on the country after a landslide general election victory in May.

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) more than doubled its seats in the 87-member state parliament and was for the first time in with a real chance of being part of the next coalition government.

With 25 seats, the BJP is now the second largest force in the state parliament after the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), 28 -- a feat unthinkable just a year ago.

That is still well short of its stated goal of wresting power on its own in the disputed Himalayan region, where rebel groups have been fighting Indian rule since 1989.

The PDP, part of a coalition that ruled the state during a period of relative peace between 2002 and 2008, is likely to form the next government in coalition with other groups.

Both the BJP and the PDP benefited from widespread public discontent over the state's ruling National Conference party's handling of devastating September floods that killed over 200 people in Kashmir.

The BJP were the biggest winners in the insurgency-racked and impoverished central state of Jharkhand, which also held elections, bagging 37 of 81 seats.

Party president Amit Shah hailed a "year of unprecedented poll success for the BJP", which ousted the former ruling Congress party earlier this year.

He said the party was keeping its options open in Kashmir. PDP president Mehbooba Mufti said her party "will deliberate on what would be the best combination for accommodating people's aspirations".

Analysts said it may be difficult for her

INDIAN STATE POLLS



party to partner with the BJP.

All BJP's gains in the month-long staggered polls came in the mainly Hindu Jammu area. The PDP dominated in the overwhelmingly Muslim Kashmir Valley, where the Hindu nationalists failed to win a single seat.

The Congress party, which was a coalition partner in the outgoing state government led by chief minister Omar Abdullah, won 12 seats, while the National Conference took 15.

SARADHA SCAM I have proof against Mamata: Kunal Ghosh

TNN, Kolkata

Suspended Trinamool Congress MP Kunal Ghosh on Monday told a city sessions court that he had documentary evidence against West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee and party's national secretary Mukul Roy in the Saradha case and wanted to hand it over to CBI.

Ghosh urged the court to pass directives in this regard. "If anyone has derived the most benefit from Saradha Media, then it is the chief minister," Ghosh said in the court, repeating what he had told journalists earlier.

"Mamata Banerjee and Mukul Roy are also involved... I have specific information, I can provide this if I am questioned by CBI," he said in the court of metropolitan magistrate Arvind Mishra.

According to sources, Kunal has already handed over a video clip, gathered through a "sting operation" in 2011, to "one of the central investigating agencies".

Sources said Kunal had video footage of a meeting between the Trinamool top leadership and Rose Valley chairman Gautam Kundu and Saradha kingpin Sudipta Sen.

The court consented to Kunal's plea for deposing before CBI and asked the agency to get his statement recorded in judicial custody.

In his 91-page tell-all letter Kunal had mentioned the meeting between a senior Trinamool leader and Sudipta Sen at a tourist lodge in Delo, Kalimpong.

Kunal had also claimed that Sudipta was "advised" to invest in joint venture projects with the state government. Kunal's claims were corroborated later when Enforcement Directorate got hold of details of the deals with state government agencies clinched after the meeting.

GROUND WATER EXTRACTION Jakarta: a sinking city

REUTERS, Jakarta

The Ciliwung River flows from a volcano south of the Indonesian capital, through the heart of one of the world's most densely populated cities and almost into Jakarta Bay. Almost, because for the final mile or so of its course, the river would have to flow uphill to reach the bay.

The same is true for the rest of the half-dozen sewage-choked rivers that wind through central Jakarta. Unable to defy gravity, they've been redirected to canals that drain into the sea.

The reason these conduits are necessary is that Greater Jakarta, an agglomeration of 28 million people, sits on a swampy plain that has sunk 13 feet over the past three decades.

"Jakarta is a bowl, and the bowl is sinking," said FookChuanEng, senior water and sanitation specialist with the World Bank, who oversees a \$189 million flood mitigation project for the city.

The channels of the Ciliwung and other rivers are sinking. The entire sprawl of Jakarta's north coast and its population is sinking.

Even the 40-year-old seawall that is supposed to keep the Java Sea from inundating the Indonesian capital is sinking.

Just inside the seawall sits the MuaraBaru village, that is home to more than 100,000 people. It is now at least 6 feet below sea level, and residents like Rahmawati, a mother of two small children, gaze upward from their front stoops to view the sea.

"When there's a high tide, the ships float almost at the same height as the seawall -- we

can see the ships from here," said Rahmawati. Jakarta is sinking because of a phenomenon called subsidence. This happens when extraction of groundwater causes layers of rock and sediment to slowly pancake on top of each other.

The problem is particularly acute in Jakarta because most of its millions of residents suck water through wells that tap shallow underground aquifers. Wells also provide about a third of the needs of business and industry, according to city data. The effect is worsened by the sheer



weight of Jakarta's urban sprawl.

In many places -- from metro Houston, Texas, and cities on the US East Coast to the megacities of Southeast Asia -- the impact of subsidence, due mainly to groundwater extraction, has been greater. Manila is sinking at a rate of around 3.5 inches a year. Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, is subsiding 3 inches a year, and Bangkok around an inch.

But, no city is subsiding faster than Jakarta. As a whole, the city is sinking an average of 3 inches a year. But in some coastal areas sinking rate is as much as 11 inches a year.



TERROR THREATS Australia fears fresh attacks

France steps up security

AFP, Sydney

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott warned of another attack was likely in the aftermath of the fatal Sydney cafe seige, as France yesterday stepped up security nationwide following three successive, apparently unrelated bloody attacks, in a bid to ease growing unease in the country.

Iranian-born gunman Man Haron Monis, who had a history of extremism and violence, took 17 hostages in the city's financial heartland last week, unveiling an Islamic flag and demanding to talk to Abbott. He was killed as armed police stormed the eatery after 16 hours. Two hostages also died while several were injured.

Australia has not officially branded the Sydney seige as a terrorist attack.

In France, Prime Minister Manuel Valls yesterday said that security would be stepped up nationwide following a series of attacks.

While the motives behind the incidents -- a knife attack on police and two car rampages onto passers-by -- remain unclear, the violence has jarred nerves after repeated jihadist calls for "lone wolf" action in France over its fight against Islamic extremism.