

NEWS IN brief

Japan, China to resume security talks

AFP, Tokyo

Japan and China plan to resume security talks as early as April after a four-year hiatus amid simmering tensions over territorial disputes, a report said yesterday. A meeting planned for Tokyo, which would be the first since January 2011 in Beijing, will likely focus on maritime issues, Kyodo News reported, citing unnamed diplomatic sources.

'Man-eating' tiger shot dead in India

AFP, New Delhi

Armed forest guards have shot dead a man-eating tiger in southern India after the animal attacked and killed a farmer and a tea plantation worker, an official said yesterday. More than half of the world's rapidly dwindling wild tiger population lives in India with a recent census reporting a 30 percent jump in their numbers in the last four years to 2,226.

Obama names new US Secret Service head

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama on Wednesday named acting director Joseph Clancy as the permanent head of the US Secret Service, ignoring calls for an outsider to be appointed following a string of White House breaches. White House spokesman Josh Earnest said "based on his long track record with the agency," Clancy had "a lot of credibility built up inside the agency."

Two cyclones roar towards Australia

AFP, Sydney

Two cyclones were roaring towards Australia yesterday with residents scrambling for shelter. Tropical Cyclone Lam, a category three storm, was hit the sparsely populated Northern Territory of Mililingimbi and Gapuwiyak early today. Of more concern was Tropical Cyclone Marcia further south, which was reclassified from a category two to four within hours and a warning that it could strengthen to five by the time it comes ashore in heavily populated southeast Queensland.

JD(U) main opposition in Bihar: Speaker

PTI, Patna

Ahead of Indian state Bihar's Chief Minister Jitan Ram Manjhi's floor test, Assembly Speaker Uday Narayan Chaudhary yesterday granted the status of principal Opposition party to JD(U) in place of BJP, which slammed the move as "arbitrary". Manjhi after being expelled by party President Sharad Yadav has been declared as unattached member in the Legislative Assembly. He has to prove his majority in the House tomorrow.

US, Taliban deny Qatar talks report

AFP, Kandahar

The US and the Taliban central spokesman yesterday denied plans to hold peace talks in Qatar, contradicting earlier claims by militant leaders that contacts would resume in the Gulf state within weeks.

The denials came after multiple commanders said five former members of the Taliban supreme council would soon restart contacts with US officials in Qatar to try to get peace talks on track after more than 13 years of war in Afghanistan.

"The United States currently has no meetings with the Taliban scheduled in Doha," National Security Council spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan said.

The Taliban's central command also sought to distance itself from the announcement, saying its conditions for full-blown talks were a long way from being met.

"We do not have any plans for negotiations with anyone in Qatar. Regarding the negotiations, there is no new changes in the policy of Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in a statement.

There have been several attempts at starting dialogue in recent years between the Taliban, Kabul and the United States -- the Afghan government's chief supporter -- but with little success.

The Taliban opened an office in Qatar in June 2013 as the first move towards a possible peace deal, but it shut a month later after enraging the then-Afghan president Hamid Karzai by styling it as the unofficial embassy for a government-in-exile.

The election last year of President Ashraf Ghani, who pledged to make peace talks a priority, as well as supportive signals from Pakistan, which long held significant influence with the Taliban, has boosted hopes for possible dialogue.

"Five former members of the supreme council of the Afghan Taliban, headed by Tayyab Agha, will hold talks with the US," a senior Taliban cadre based in Pakistan told AFP.

India okays \$8b plan to build 7 warships

Kalyani group announces defence venture with Israel

AFP, New Delhi

India has cleared an \$8 billion plan to build seven warships as part of a twin push to ramp up local production and counter an increasing assertive China, a defence ministry official said yesterday.

Meanwhile, India's Kalyani industrial group announced on Thursday a "substantial" joint venture with Israel to make missiles and other weapons, after Prime Minister Narendra Modi eased rules on foreign ownership in defence.

Kalyani and Israel's Rafael Advanced Defence Systems will make advanced missile systems and other technologies at a facility near the southern Indian city of Hyderabad.

Kalyani managing director B.N. Kalyani said his company would hold 51 percent of the venture, in one



of the first such tieups since the cap was lifted on foreign investment in the sector last year.

"The joint venture will ... manufacture (remote) weapons systems and advanced armour solutions for Indian and subsequently global customers of Rafael," Kalyani told reporters in Bangalore.

Kalyani did not disclose the size of the venture, but said it would be "substantial".

India, which has long been the world's largest buyer of defence equipment, is in the midst of a multi-billion-dollar upgrade of its ageing military hardware.

At the opening of the air show on Wednesday, Modi vowed to end India's status as the world's number one defence importer, saying he wanted 70 percent of hardware to be manufactured domestically by the turn of the decade.

Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon met with Modi in New Delhi on Thursday after attending the show's opening, where he said Israel was willing to work in joint production and development with India.

"This visit gives us an opportunity to enhance and improve our relationship," Yaalon said at a public lecture after the meeting.

"The cabinet committee on security has cleared the proposal to build seven stealth frigates at domestic shipyards," a source in the defence ministry told AFP of the meeting on Monday.

Four warships will be constructed at Mazagon Docks in Mumbai and the other three at Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers in Kolkata.

The frigates will be equipped with stealth technology, making it harder to detect by enemy radars or other tracking systems.

HIMALAYAN DAMS JD(U) slams Indian govt

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's Janata Dal (United) yesterday attacked the government for allegedly suggesting construction of new dams in the Himalayas and "finishing" the river Ganges under the garb of rejuvenating it.

"In the garb of Ganga Rejuvenation programme, the government is planning to finish the Ganga in the Himalayas itself," said JD(U) President Sharad Yadav.

He said "haphazard construction activities are leading to massive deforestation and blasting, tunnel formation, mining crushing will disrupt the delicate balance of Himalayan ecology."

Pointing to an affidavit filed in the Supreme Court, Yadav said the government had also mentioned the main reasons for the massive disaster in the Himalayas in June 2013 were because of the hydro power projects, which have caused ecological imbalances.

"I do not agree with the contention of the government here and therefore I have written to the prime minister in this regard," Yadav said.



Residents who fled from conflict areas near the Myanmar and Chinese border gather at a temporary refugee camp at a monastery in Lashio, northern Myanmar, yesterday.

QATAR MIGRANT WORKERS Major pay reforms to be introduced

AFP, Doha

Qatar said yesterday it would introduce a major labour law reform to ensure thousands of workers building venues for the 2022 World Cup are paid on time, after complaints by rights groups.

The changes by the future hosts of football's biggest tournament, approved by Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, will see workers get paid at least once a month and in some cases every fortnight.

The move, which will apply to all workers, could head off some criticism of Qatar following mounting international pressure to improve conditions for migrant labourers working on projects for the World Cup.

The announcement comes with the international spotlight set to fall on Qatar again as FIFA officials visit Doha early next week to finalise a date for the controversial tournament.

Under the proposal, wages will be paid through direct bank transfers which should, in theory, make it easier to track those employers that do not comply with the new law.

It is not yet clear when the reforms will be introduced but employers will have six months to implement them.

If they do not, they could face up to one month in prison as well as a fine of up to 6,000 Qatari riyals (\$1,650).

Non-payment of migrant workers, especially those in the construction sector, has become a sensitive issue for Qatar.

Last November, Amnesty International accused the government in Doha of not doing enough on the issue of non-payment despite intense scrutiny after Qatar was awarded the World Cup. A lack of progress on the issue was highlighted earlier this year by New York-based Human Rights Watch.

MYANMAR-REBEL CLASHES Ceasefire urged to evacuate civilians

AFP, Lashio

Aid workers called yesterday for a ceasefire to allow the evacuation of people trapped around a town at the centre of fierce fighting between Myanmar's army and ethnic rebels, after the deaths of two more civilians in an area cloaked in a state of emergency.

Tens of thousands of civilians have already fled the remote and rugged Kokang area of northeastern Shan State over the last 10 days, with at least 30,000 crossing the border into China.

Local aid groups have officially suspended rescue convoys to and around the flashpoint town of Laukkai, where a series of surprise attacks by ethnic Kokang rebels last week sparked the flare up of violence.

The decision follows an attack on a convoy led by the Myanmar Red Cross that wounded two aid workers on Tuesday. Officials say the roads leading

to the area may have been mined by the rebels.

"We still do not know exactly how many people are still trapped in the Laukkai region... but we evacuated around 30 people from there on Wednesday," a Myanmar Red Cross member told AFP in the Shan town of Lashio, some 140 kilometres south of Laukkai.

"We are asking both sides to keep a ceasefire for a few days, so we can help to evacuate people. Currently, even our Red Cross logo cannot help to protect people. It's really sad."

Over recent days fighting has clustered just south of Laukkai -- after the town was effectively emptied by the outbreak of conflict last week, which saw nearly 50 Myanmar soldiers killed in a rebel assault.

The army regained the town after helicopter and jet air strikes were followed by bloody street gun battles, which state media said killed dozens of rebels.

Harvest of death

93 Indian farmers commits suicide in 45 days

TNN, Aurangabad

Forty-five days, 93 suicides. 2015 has started quite ominously for farmers in the perennially parched Marathwada region in Maharashtra and activists blamed the fickle weather and the delay in release of government compensation for this.

Last year, the region had reported 569 farmers' suicides as against 207 in 2013.

A committee of each taluka comprising the tehsildar, police officer, taluka agriculture officer, sarpanch and a panchayat samiti member probes a suicide case to confirm if the death was due to debt burden.

A farmer committing suicide is eligible for compensation only if he possesses land and is debt-ridden. Moreover, he should have taken loan only from either nationalized or co-operative banks and registered money-lenders. There has to be follow up from the banks concerned for the repayment of the loan.



Indian 'monkey son' to inherit family property

AFP, Lucknow

A wealthy Indian couple has made a pet monkey their sole heir, saying their lives became more prosperous after they adopted the animal and they want to ensure he is looked after.

Brajesh Srivastava and his wife Shabista have no children, but they view their pet monkey Chunmun as a son and have set up a trust to ensure the animal is looked after if it outlives them.

"People might say we are mad, they might even ridicule us. But we know how valuable Chunmun is to us," Shabista, 45, told AFP.

The couple, who were cast out after marrying against their family's wishes, say they were poor when they adopted their monkey in 2004 but have since prospered.

They own the house where they live in Uttar Pradesh state in northern India, and they also have land and savings.

Shabista is a successful lawyer and her 48-year-old husband owns several businesses including a cable TV network and a flour mill -- all named after Chunmun.

The monkey has his own air-conditioned room in the couple's house, which he shares with his 'wife' -- a female simian named Bitti who the couple has also taken in.

The two monkeys like to eat Chinese food and drink tea and mango juice according to Shabista, who even hosts an annual "wedding anniversary" party for the pair, inviting hundreds of friends to celebrate.

At 10, Chunmun may well outlive the couple -- monkeys can live for between 35 and 40 years.

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