

Modi bandwagon runs into Jammu & Kashmir

BJP shares power with PDP in India's only Muslim-majority state

AFP, Jammu

India's ruling Hindu nationalist party was sworn into government in the country's only Muslim-majority state yesterday for the first time after an historic power-sharing deal with a bitter regional rival.

Narendra Modi hailed the partnership between his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) as a chance to fulfil the aspirations of a region which has endured a sporadic revolt against Indian rule since 1989.

After weeks of intensive negotiations, the parties forged a coalition following inconclusive elections two months ago for the restive Himalayan region's state assembly.

Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, the Muslim head of the PDP, was sworn in as the region's chief minister, along with his cabinet whose members are split roughly equally between the two parties.

In a symbolic gesture, the 79-year-old Sayeed enthusiastically embraced Hindu nationalist Modi, who was on stage to witness the ceremony, held amid tight security in the region's winter capital of Jammu.

Modi and Sayeed, whose parties are staunchly opposed on a range of critical issues in the region, last week finally agreed on a common agenda to jointly rule the state.

Unveiled on Sunday, the 16-page agenda says the government will maintain a constitutional provision which allows Kashmir to make its own laws and guarantees autonomy from New Delhi.

The BJP has long been committed to its abolition,

while the PDP is steadfastly in favour of keeping it. The new government will also keep in place a



Narinder Modi (2R) hugs Mufti Mohammed Sayeed (R) after Sayeed took oath as Jammu and Kashmir chief minister in Jammu, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

draconian law that gives Indian forces sweeping search and shoot-on-sight powers in Kashmir, which is seen by critics as a cover for rights abuses.

The swearing-in ceremony comes after December elections that saw the BJP capture 25 seats mainly in the Hindu-dominated Jammu region, while the PDP took 28, mostly in the Kashmir valley where Muslim separatist sentiment has traditionally been strongest.

Analysts warned that the coming together of two ideologically different parties could fuel discontent among Hindus in Jammu as well as Muslims in the Kashmir valley.

Venezuela detains US citizens

Announces moves against US

REUTERS, Caracas

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro said on Saturday his government had detained US citizens, including a pilot, on suspicion of espionage, in a move likely to strain already tense relations between Washington and Caracas.

Maduro also said his government would order a reduction in the number of US embassy staff in Caracas and prohibit some US officials from entering Venezuela in retaliation for a similar US measure last year. Venezuela would also require US citizens to obtain visas before visiting, he told a rally.

The Venezuelan president has renewed accusations in recent weeks that the US is seeking to topple him. Maduro's political opponents at home call this a smokescreen aimed at distracting from an increasingly severe economic crisis in the oil-exporting nation.

Netanyahu takes off on 'fateful' US mission

AFP, Ben Gurion Airport

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday headed to Washington on what he said was a "historic" mission to try and stop a nuclear deal with Iran, an AFP correspondent said.

The controversial 48-hour visit will see the Israeli leader addressing a joint session of the US Congress in a bid to garner last-minute support to halt an emerging world deal with Iran over its nuclear programme, in a move which has infuriated the White House.

Netanyahu will address AIPAC on Monday before heading to Capitol Hill on Tuesday after which he will fly home.

"I'm going to Washington on a fateful, even historic, mission," he told reporters on the tarmac at Ben Gurion airport near Tel Aviv shortly before his plane took off.

"I feel deep and sincere concern for the security of Israel's citizens and for the fate of the state and of all our people," he said. "I will do everything in my power to ensure our future."

In his remarks, Netanyahu made a veiled allusion to the controversy stoked by his visit, noting the upcoming Jewish holiday of Purim, which starts at sundown on Wednesday and remembers the biblical story of how the Jews were saved from the ancient Persians.

In the story, Queen Esther, the young Jewish wife of the Persian king, risks her life by appearing before him unannounced in order to expose the imminent threat to the Jewish people.

Israel believes Iran and world powers are likely to reach a deal that eases international sanctions on Tehran without applying sufficiently stringent safeguards to stop it developing nuclear weapons.

Netanyahu's trip comes just four weeks before a March 31 deadline for a political framework, with negotiators intending to pin down the final technical details by June 30.



NEWS IN brief

Iran to let in Google

AFP, Tehran

Iran could allow Internet giants such as Google to operate in the Islamic republic if they respect its "cultural" rules, Fars news agency said yesterday quoting a senior official. Forty million people out of a population of around 78 million use the Internet in Iran. Authorities have regularly blocked access to networks including Facebook, YouTube and Twitter since protests against the disputed 2009 re-election of hardline president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Sierra Leone VP in Ebola quarantine

AFP, Freetown

Sierra Leone's Vice President Sam Sumana has placed himself in quarantine following the Ebola death of one of his guards, a government spokesman said Saturday, as the country reintroduced travel restrictions as the number of new cases rises again. Sumana's bodyguard, 42-year-old John Koroma, died from Ebola on Friday, medical sources said.

Good news for China wild pandas

AFP, Beijing

China's population of wild giant pandas jumped nearly 17 percent over a decade -- state media reported, citing an official survey -- with conservation measures credited as being behind the increase. The investigation by the State Forestry Administration (SFA) found that by the end of 2013 China had 1,864 giant pandas alive in the wild, marking an increase of 268 individuals, or 16.8 percent, the official Xinhua news agency reported Saturday.

Myanmar captures ninth white elephant

AP, Yangon

Myanmar says it has found a rare, white elephant in the jungles of the western Ayeayawaddy region. Forestry official Tun Tun Oo says the 7-year-old female was captured by his department on Friday, six weeks after it was initially spotted in a reserve in Patheingyi township. White elephants, actually albinos, have for centuries been revered in Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and other Asian nations.

UKRAINE CRISIS

Frontlines calm ahead of gas talks

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine's frontlines were relatively calm yesterday ahead of high-level EU-mediated gas talks between Kiev and Moscow.

Kiev's security officials said there was no fire after midnight on Ukraine's positions and no Ukrainian soldiers have been killed over the past 24 hours.

The relative quiet in eastern Ukraine has set in following a shaky European-brokered peace plan to end fighting that has killed at least 5,800 people since April.

With the relative hiatus in fighting on the ground, a gas dispute flared up in recent days after Russia's Gazprom began direct deliveries to the separatist-held areas in eastern Ukraine and demanded that Kiev pay for them.

Ukraine's national gas company Naftogas stopped pumping gas to the separatist areas last month, saying it could not deliver due to a damaged pipeline, but then adding that deliveries resumed a few hours later.



Russia's opposition supporters march in memory of murdered Kremlin critic Boris Nemtsov in central Moscow yesterday. The 55-year-old former first deputy prime minister under Boris Yeltsin was shot in the back several times just before midnight on February 27 as he walked across a bridge a stone's throw from the Kremlin walls.

ISIS using love as recruitment tool

BBC ONLINE

In a few months' time, perhaps even weeks, you might remember the story, but will you remember the names? Kadiza Sultana, 16; Shamima Begum, also 16; and Amira Abase, 15.

All three London schoolgirls said they were going out for the day and now it is thought they have left the UK, gone to Turkey and slipped across the border to join Islamic State militants in Syria.

Their names are important for everyone, because they focus our mind on them as individuals, as young girls, with a promising future ahead of them, with friends, siblings and parents.

Yet, inevitably, we are in thrall to the bigger narrative: a



troubling and growing sisterhood is being cultivated - it appears an estimated 200 to 300 European Muslim girls have made the same journey as Kadiza, Shamima and Amira.

Why? What for? The term jihadi bride is particularly egregious, but there is some truth to it.

Recently, this BBC reporter met some mothers of sons and daughters who have decided to join the self-styled caliphate. One woman, from Sweden, by way of Somalia, told the reporter about her daughter, who was lured to Syria by a man she says she was in love with.

Her mother says ISIS use love as a recruiting tool. Once girls are persuaded that a warrior is in love with them, they in turn, can be used to recruit more girls and young women.

Another mother, with an absent daughter, this one from Belgium, speaks to her daughter by text message regularly. Her child also fell in love with a man thought to be a senior figure in the militant group.

The girls, Kadiza, Shamima and Amira are still just children. And we know how impressionable they can be, how easy to manipulate. This appears to be an issue of radicalisation and grooming: a twin track of romanticising the life they will have as part of a battle sanctioned by God, alongside the actual romance they might have with a warrior in that battle.



Drinking a cup of tea can help prevent diabetes

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Drinking cups of tea can help prevent type-2 diabetes, according to a growing body of scientific research.

A new study from researchers in the US found that black tea inhibits the body from absorbing glucose sugars, too much of which can cause type-2 diabetes.

The research, which was conducted by researchers at Framingham State University in the United States, builds on work done by Japanese scientists two decades earlier.

A 1995 study from the Hokkaido Pharmaceutical University School of Pharmacy found that black tea has what scientists call "anti-hyperglycaemic effects". The study found that rats had "significantly" reduced levels of blood glucose and that black tea could both prevent and cure rats with diabetes.

Court ruling jeopardizes Egypt polls timetable

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's constitutional court yesterday ruled that parts of the law organising parliamentary elections starting March 21 violate the charter, in a decision that may force a delay.

The administrative court, which rules on state related matters, will now decide whether to formally rule on delaying the election.

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi ordered that the law be redrafted within a month and asked that "legal measures be undertaken to avoid delaying" the election, his office said.

The constitutional court said sections of the law dividing the electoral districts were unconstitutional.

Lawyers who appealed against the law had said it failed to divide districts in a way that would adequately represent the electorate.

One of the lawyers told AFP that the ruling meant the election will be delayed and the process will start from scratch.

Former constitutional court judge Tahany al-Gebaly told AFP it was not immediate clear whether the poll would be pushed back or for how long. The law may be amended in time for the election to start on schedule, but if candidates have to register again it would be delayed, she said.

The election, currently set to be held between March 21 and May 7, would be the first since army chief Sisi overthrew Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013.

After Morsi's ouster, Sisi announced plans for a new constitution, to be followed by presidential and parliamentary elections. The new charter was adopted in January 2014 and Sisi elected president in May.

The upcoming election is to be held under a complex system that is supposed to produce a representative parliament. Twenty-seven of the assembly's 567 seats are to be filled directly by the president, with the rest contested through party lists or on an individual basis.

The elections are important to Sisi as he seeks to shore up his standing in the eyes of Western governments that condemned his overthrow of Morsi.

Allow me to die

Chile girl appeals to president

BBC ONLINE

A video posted online by a 14-year-old girl asking Chile's president to allow her to die has been viewed by thousands of people.

The girl, Valentina Maureira, suffers from cystic fibrosis, an incurable genetic disorder that attacks the lungs and other organs.

President Michele Bachelet responded by visiting Valentina in hospital. Her spokesman said Valentina could not be granted her wish but the government would pay for psychiatric treatment.

Valentina's message has been viewed thousands of times on social networks,



fuelling the debate in Chile over euthanasia, which is forbidden by law.

She also said she had an older brother who died of the same illness when he was six years old so she knew what would happen to her.

Her parents are supporting her demand. "This is so tough, but I have to respect her decision because she's the one who's suffering from this illness," AP quoted her father Freddy as saying.

Saudi blogger now faces 'death penalty'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Raif Badawi, the Saudi Arabian blogger whose punishment of 1,000 lashes has prompted international condemnation, may now face the death penalty.

Badawi's wife, Ensaf Haidar, told The Independent in a series of messages that judges in Saudi Arabia's criminal court want him to undergo a re-trial for apostasy. If found guilty, he would face a death sentence.

She said the "dangerous information" had come from "official sources" inside the conservative kingdom, where Badawi has already been sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes - administered at a rate of 50 per week - for criticising the country's clerics through his liberal blog.

In 2013, a judge threw out the charge of apostasy against the 31-year-old blogger after he assured the court that he was a Muslim. The evidence against him had included the fact that he pressed the "Like" button on a Facebook page for Arab Christians.

The news that the charge may now be re-examined will come as a bitter blow to Badawi's family and supporters, who had hoped that the international pressure over his case would prompt Saudi Arabia to reduce his sentence.



Raif Badawi

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