

NEWS IN brief

W Bengal Nun rape case: 2 more detained
 TNN, Kolkata

The CID and the Nadia district police have not made any headway with the Ranaghat nun rape case, except for detaining two more persons. Since Sunday the police detained 10 people in total. Sources claimed that one of the detainees resemble of one accused captured by the CCTV camera. But no arrests have been made so far.

Myanmar ferry sinking death toll rises to 52
 AFP, Yangon

More than 50 people have been confirmed killed in a ferry accident off western Myanmar after rescue teams recovered more bodies from rough waters, police said yesterday, as hopes faded of finding any survivors. The "Aung Takon 3" sank late Friday after leaving the coastal town of Kyaukphyu on its way to Sittwe in western Rakhine state.

Yemen PM says Huthi to end his house arrest
 AFP, Sanaa

Yemeni Prime Minister Khalid Bahah said that he was poised to leave the capital Sanaa yesterday after Shiite militia agreed to free him from two months of house arrest. Bahah said on his Facebook page that other captive members of his government, which offered its resignation in January, would also be released in a "good-will gesture" by the Huthi militia.

Nigeria ready for free, fair, credible elections
 AFP, Abuja

The head of Nigeria's electoral body said yesterday it was ready to conduct presidential and parliamentary elections in less than two weeks' time, after the vote was delayed by security concerns. Attahiru Jega told a meeting in the capital Abuja that his Independent National Electoral Commission had done "everything humanly possible" for a free, fair, credible and peaceful vote on March 28.

ENI upgrades size of Indonesia gas find
 AFP, Rome

Italian energy group Eni yesterday raised its estimate of the natural gas contained in a deep water well off Indonesia by 20 billion cubic metres (bcm), a 55 percent increase on initial projections. The company said the completion of post-drilling studies on the Merakes-1 well in the East Sepinggan Block off East Kalimantan in Borneo had led them to upgrade the forecast of its reserves from 36 bcm to 56 bcm (1.3 trillion cubic feet to 2.0 tcf).

Israeli politicians in last effort to woo voters
 AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli politicians made their final pitches for votes yesterday on the eve of an election that will decide the fate of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after six years in office. With polling stations due to open at 0500 GMT today, Israel's political elite fanned out to pin down wavering voters ahead of an election which experts agree is likely to be a referendum on the Netanyahu years.

Pakistan suspends all prisoner exchange agreements
 AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has suspended all prisoner exchange agreements with other countries after it discovered that prisoners repatriated from Britain were set free by corrupt officials without completing their sentences, the interior minister said yesterday. Authorities have arrested an interior ministry official and a police officer after investigating a complaint by British authorities.

Russia was preparing to use nuclear weapons

Says Putin and; EU warns of Russian military buildup in Crimea

AGENCIES

Vladimir Putin has said Russia was so fearful of attack at the height of the Ukraine crisis that it was preparing to arm its nuclear weapons, in extraordinary claims aired on state TV on Sunday night.

Amid ongoing Russian media speculation that the President was watching the Crimea documentary from his sickbed, Putin's full interview with Rossiya One provided new insight into his country's involvement in the annexation of the Black Sea peninsula.

In the documentary, which marks a year since the referendum that saw Russia take control of Crimea, Putin described the Ukrainian revolution to oust Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 as an armed coup "masterminded by our American friends".

He said Washington tried to "trick" the world into thinking the regime change was "supported mostly by the Europeans", according to a translation of the interview on Russia Today.

But he instead accused the US of



orchestrating the crisis, saying: "They helped training the nationalists, their armed groups, in Western Ukraine, in Poland and to some extent in Lithuania. They facilitated the armed coup."

And on Russia's willingness to arm nuclear weapons if necessary, Putin said: "We were ready to do this ... (Crimea) is our historical territory. Russian people live there. They were in danger. We cannot abandon them."

Meanwhile, the EU warned yesterday of a continued Russian military build-up in Crimea as it condemned Moscow's "illegal annexation" of the peninsula from Ukraine one year ago.

Diplomatic chief Federica Mogherini said the 28-nation bloc was also deeply concerned at the deterioration of human rights, demanding free access for outside monitors to investigate the situation.

"The EU reaffirms its deep concern at the continuous military build-up and deterioration of the human rights situation in the Crimean peninsula, including the denial of free speech and the persecution of persons belonging to minorities," said a statement by Mogherini approved by the EU's foreign ministers.

The European Union, which has hit Russia with tough economic sanctions over its intervention in Ukraine, "does not recognise and continues to condemn this act of violation of international law," the statement said.

"The illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol ... is also a direct challenge to international security, with grave implications for the international legal order that protects the unity and sovereignty of all states," it added.

IRAN NUCLEAR TALKS Kerry, Zarif in crunch round

AFP, Lausanne

Iran nuclear talks entered a critical week yesterday with US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Iranian counterpart racing to find an elusive breakthrough after a negotiating marathon that began in 2013.

Time is running out, with Kerry and Mohammad Javad Zarif aiming to agree the outlines of a potentially historic agreement by the end of the month. A full accord is then due by July 1.

Both men, meeting in a luxury hotel in the Swiss lakeside city of Lausanne, are also under intense pressure from domestic hardliners worried they will give too much away.

Speaking in Egypt over the weekend, Kerry sought to ease such concerns, saying that the aim is "not just to get any deal, it is to get the right deal".

"If (Iran's nuclear programme is) peaceful, let's get it done. And my hope is that in the next days, that will be possible," Kerry told CBS television.

There were, however, "important gaps," he said.

Zarif said on Sunday that "several ques-

tions need to be discussed, those where we haven't found a solution yet and also those where we have found solutions but where we need to discuss certain details."

Kerry and Zarif met for nearly five hours yesterday, together with Iran's nuclear chief Ali Akbar Salehi and US Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz and then alone.

The talks broke for Zarif to travel to Brussels to meet his British, French and German counterparts and the EU representative later yesterday but he was due to return to Lausanne for more talks.

Negotiators from the other five powers involved in the talks - Russia, China, Britain,

France and Germany -- were to be involved from today, according to Iranian officials.

EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini said in Brussels before her meeting with Zarif that the talks were "entering a crucial time".

The United States and Iran have not had diplomatic relations for 35 years but the 2013 election of President Hassan Rouhani resulted in a minor thaw and a diplomatic push to resolve the more than decade-old nuclear standoff.



A woman holds a USSR naval flag during a rally marking the one-year anniversary of Crimea voting to leave Ukraine and join the Russian state in central Sevastopol yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



Modi scraps Brussels visit

THE HINDU ONLINE

Upset by what the government perceives as a snub from the European Union, India has called off plans for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's travel to Brussels during his visit to Europe and Canada next month.

The incident could set off a bigger row as the decision comes just as a high-level delegation of EU parliamentarians, including two senior most members of the European Parliament in charge of relations with India - Geoffrey Van Orden, and Neena Gill, are in India for official meetings and to address trade ties that have been lagging in the past year.

Officials confirmed that the Ministry of External Affairs had informed the EU, headquartered in Brussels, some weeks ago that the Prime Minister would be travelling to Hannover in Germany and later to France in April, and suggested holding the EU-India summit during the visit.

However, after receiving no reply from the EU for a month, the MEA has decided to continue with the plans without Brussels on the Prime Minister's agenda. He will now continue from Europe to Canada for the second leg of his eight-day tour.

In a written response to a question from The Hindu on the issue, the EU however, said it was still working on dates for the summit.

The incident has taken on a more political tone as reports suggest that the EU's unusual behaviour reflects anger over the treatment of the two Italian marines charged with the killing of Indian fishermen off the coast of Kerala.

Awaiting 'action' after Kerry comments: Assad

AFP, Damascus

Syria's President Bashar al-Assad said yesterday he was waiting for US "actions" after Secretary of State John Kerry acknowledged talks with Damascus were necessary to end the country's conflict.

"We are still listening to the comments and we have to wait for the actions and then we'll decide," Assad told Iranian television in comments in Damascus broadcast on Syrian state television.

The comments were the first since Kerry said in an interview aired on Sunday that Washington would be willing to talk to Assad.

"Well, we have to negotiate in the end," Kerry said, when asked by CBS television if he would negotiate with the Syrian leader.

Kerry's spokeswoman later stressed that the comments indicated no change in US policy, saying "there is no future for a brutal dictator like Assad in Syria." But Syrian media touted the statement as a reversal in US policy that acknowledged Assad's "legitimacy".



ISRAELI ELECTIONS Foreign money being used to defeat me

Claims Netanyahu

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

With less than 24 hours to go until an election that he appears on course to lose, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu suggested on Sunday that there was an international conspiracy to topple him, talked up security fears over Iran and played on anti-Arab sentiment in an effort to galvanise wavering supporters.

In a sign of the increasingly high stakes before Israeli voters go to the polls today - and with serving soldiers already beginning to cast their votes - Netanyahu turned his fire on the opposition Zionist Union, which is on course to win four more seats than his own Likud party, according to a new poll. "I turn to the public out of concern that we will not be able to form the government because of the

enormous support to them from foreign associations which are giving them tens of millions of dollars," the Prime Minister told Israel Radio, referring to the Zionist Union leaders Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni.

Friday's poll for Channel Ten television put Likud on 20 seats, the lowest number forecast for it since Netanyahu called an early election in the hope of securing a firmer footing for his Likud-led right-of-centre coalition. Over the past few days Netanyahu has changed tactics and instead of shying away from interviews

has gone from studio to studio to attempt to get his message across.

The suggestion that there is a conspiracy against him seems a sign of desperation from Netanyahu, who only three months ago was expected to coast to victory.



Maldives resists pressure to free jailed ex-leader

AFP, Colombo

The Maldives government yesterday vowed to resist mounting foreign pressure to free former president Mohamed Nasheed after he was jailed for 13 years but admitted its justice system was below international standards.

Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon, the daughter of former strongman Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, told reporters in Sri Lanka that her government would not interfere with the decision of courts which she insisted were independent.

The United States, European Union and India have all expressed concern at last week's jailing of Nasheed for ordering the detention of a judge in 2012 when he was president.

"A free and fair trial has happened. A verdict has come," Maumoon said, adding that President Abdulla Yameen -- who is also her uncle -- "has asked the whole world to respect that".

Nasheed's Maldivian Democratic Party has urged international pressure, particularly from neighbouring India, on Yameen's regime to free him.

The decision to prosecute Nasheed, who was the honey-moon islands' first democratically-elected president, under terror laws has made his conviction particularly controversial and sparked a series of protests.

Maumoon said no compromise was possible on judiciary matters and denied allegations that criminal court judges were uneducated, corrupt and politically biased.

ARMS EXPORT China becomes world's no. three

AFP, Stockholm

China has eased ahead of Germany and France to become the world's number three arms exporter after the United States and Russia, a Stockholm-based think-tank said yesterday.

The volume of the multi-billion dollar world arms trade rose 16 percent during the period 2010 to 2014 over the previous five years, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute added in its annual report.

The figures show that "the United States has taken a firm lead" with 31 percent of global exports of conventional weapons, SIPRI said, with Russia in second place at 27 percent.

The next three arms exporters are far behind with about five percent each, and China is only slightly ahead of fourth-ranked Germany and fifth-ranked France.

'CHERNOBYL ON STEROIDS' Expert warns of risk in UK's Cumbria plant

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

An American nuclear expert has warned that Westinghouse's proposed reactor for Cumbria needs a \$100m (£68m) filter to safeguard against a leak that would turn the region into "Chernobyl on steroids".

Arnie Gunderson lifted the lid on safety violations at a nuclear firm in 1990 - he claimed to have found radioactive material in a safe - and was CNN's resident expert during the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan in 2011.

Gunderson told The Independent that he is concerned by designs for three reactors proposed for a new civil nuclear plant in Cumbria. A nuclear engineering graduate by background, Gunderson believes that the AP1000, designed by the US-based giant Westinghouse, is susceptible to leaks. The reactor has been selected for the proposed £10bn Moorside plant, a

Toshiba-GDF Suez joint venture that will power six million homes. It is going through an approval process with the Office for Nuclear Regulation.

Gunderson, who visited the Sellafield nuclear facility in Cumbria last week, warned that any leak would be like "Chernobyl on steroids", referring to the 1986 nuclear disaster that killed 28 workers within four months. He passed on some of these fears to MPs at an event in Parliament during his visit to the UK.

He said: "Evacuation of Moorside would have to be up to 50 miles. You could put a filter on the top of the AP1000 to trap the gases - that would cost about \$100m, which is small potatoes."

"If this leaks it would be a leak worse than the one at Fukushima. Historically, there have been 66 containment leaks around the world."

Security audit is not snooping

Says Jaitley in RS

THE HINDU ONLINE

Faced with accusations of an effort to turn India into a police state like Pakistan, the Government yesterday told the Rajya Sabha that the controversial pro forma for VIPs has been in place since 1958 and such a security audit cannot be billed as snooping which is done undercover.

Raising the issue at the start of proceedings, the Opposition sought to remind the Government that this was not a partisan matter as the House had similarly expressed outrage over reports of Finance Minister Arun Jaitley's telephone being



tapped during UPA rule.

Intervening, Jaitley accused the Opposition of "making a mountain of what is not even a mole-hill" and pointed out that 526 MPs had filled up such a pro forma during UPA rule. The list of those who

have been profiled in such a manner include Congress president Sonia Gandhi and former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, he added.

As for questions like foot size and eye-colour being asked in the pro forma, Jaitley sought to remind the members that a former Prime Minister's body had been identified by his shoe.