

NEWSIN
brief

Mamata asks CBI probe on nun's rape
AFP, Kolkata

West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee, under pressure over the rape of an elderly nun, yesterday said her government was handing over the case to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) given the "sensitivity" of Friday's attack on the nun. She also pointed to West Bengal's close proximity to Bangladesh as a reason for the shift, amid local media speculation that the robbers may have fled across the border.

Pakistan air strikes kill 34 militants
AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's military yesterday said it killed 34 militants in air strikes on a tribal region near the Afghan border as part of a major offensive against insurgents that began last year. The strikes coincided with the appointment of the country's new air chief Sohail Aman, who will take over today from his predecessor Tahir Rafiq Butt upon completion of his three-year tenure.

US first lady arrives in Japan for first time
AFP, Tokyo

Michelle Obama arrived in Japan yesterday afternoon on her first visit to the country, as part of a trip to highlight the importance of girls' education. The first lady was without her husband President Barack Obama for the tour, which will last five days and also includes a visit to Cambodia.

Srebrenica massacre: Serbia arrests seven
AFP, Belgrade

Serbian police yesterday detained seven people suspected of taking part in the 1995 Bosnian Srebrenica massacre, in the first arrests by Serbian authorities over mass killings during the atrocity. The seven were said to be members of a Bosnian Serb special wartime police unit. Around 8,000 Muslim and boys were killed during the Srebrenica massacre, considered the worst on European soil since World War II.

Singapore's founding leader 'critically ill'
AFP, Singapore

Singapore's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew is "critically ill" and his condition is worsening further while on life support in hospital, the government said yesterday. The 91-year-old, widely credited with transforming Singapore from an economic backwater into one of Asia's wealthiest economies, has been receiving treatment for severe pneumonia since February 5.

70 lashes for 'insulting man' online!
INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A Saudi Arabian court has sentenced a woman to 70 lashes after she allegedly insulted a man on the messaging service WhatsApp. The 32-year-old, who has not been named, admitted to insulting the man but also refuted the verdict, according to reports in GulfNews.com.

Two trains collide in Switzerland; 1 killed
AFP, Geneva

A German man was killed and a Portuguese man was injured when two work trains collided early yesterday while carrying out track maintenance in central Switzerland, police said. The trains collided at around 4:30 am, police in the central canton of Schwyz said in a statement.



RUSSIA MARKS FIRST CRIMEA ANNEXATION ANNIVERSARY

Flags are waving in front of the Soldier and Sailor monument yesterday as teenagers stand by it during celebrations in Sevastopol, to mark one year since Russia's President Vladimir Putin signed off on the annexation of Crimea in an epochal shift that ruptured ties with Ukraine and the West.



PHOTO: AFP

We should aim before we shoot
Obama links rise of ISIS to US's Iraq invasion

AGENCIES

Barack Obama has placed the blame for the swift rise of ISIS at George W Bush's feet by suggesting its growth was an unintended consequence of the US invasion of Iraq.

The US President made the comments as he spoke with Vice News about a number of issues currently affecting America.

ISIS began its rapid and bloody advance across Iraq last year, taking over swathes of the country and territories in Syria, later declaring a 'caliphate' across areas under its control.

The extremist group has committed a number of atrocities in these areas, including mass beatings, public executions and the kidnapping of women from minority groups who were sold into sexual slavery.

Obama said: "Two things: one is, ISIS is a direct outgrowth of al-Qaeda in Iraq that grew out of our invasion. Which is an example of unintended consequences. Which is why we should generally aim before we shoot."

"We've got a 60 country coalition. We will slowly push back Isis out of Iraq", he continued, adding: "I'm confident that will happen."

However, Obama voiced concerns about the "underlying problem of disaffected Sunnis", particularly in areas such as Libya and Yemen.

Explaining reasons people in those regions may have for joining militant groups such as Isis, Obama said: "Where a young man who is growing up has no education and no prospects for the future, is looking around, and the one way that he can get validation, power, respect is if he's a fighter. And this looks like the toughest gang around, so let me affiliate with them."

"And now you're giving me a religious rationale for doing this."

Obama's interview also touched on climate change, Iran, the economy and the debate surrounding the legalisation of cannabis - something he suggested young people should be less focused on.

"You people, I understand this is important to you, but you should be thinking about climate change, the economy, war and peace," he said.

"Maybe way at the bottom you should be thinking about marijuana."

Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch yesterday said Iraqi troops and militia looted and burned homes and destroyed villages after breaking the Islamic State group's months-long siege of a Turkmen town last August.

"Following the operations to end the Amerli siege, pro-government militias and volunteer fighters as well as Iraqi security forces raided Sunni villages and neighbourhoods around Amerli in Salaheddin and Kirkuk provinces," the New York-based group said in a report.



Syria downed US drone over 'spying' fears
AFP, Damascus

Syria's military yesterday said it downed an American drone over suspicions it was spying, in what would be its first attack on an aircraft in the US-led coalition battling jihadists.

A military source, speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity, said the drone was not immediately identified as being American but was shot down as a hostile aircraft.

The US military confirmed losing communication with a Predator drone over Syria on Tuesday and said it was looking into claims the aircraft was shot down.

If confirmed, the incident would be the first time Syrian forces have attacked a US aircraft since the international coalition began its raids against ISIS in Syria in September.

ELECTION IN ISRAEL
Bibi scoops fourth term

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday pledged to form a new governing coalition quickly after an upset election victory that was built on a shift to the right and is likely to worsen a troubled relationship with the White House.



In the final days of campaigning, Netanyahu abandoned a commitment to negotiate a Palestinian state - the basis of more than two decades of Middle East peacemaking - and promised to go on building settlements on occupied land. Such policies defy the core vision of a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict embraced by President Barack Obama and his Republican and Democratic predecessors.

With nearly all votes counted yesterday, Netanyahu's Likud had won 30 seats in the 120-member Knesset, comfortably defeating the center-left Zionist Union opposition on 24 seats. A united list of Israeli Arab parties came in third.

The result amounted to a dramatic and unexpected victory for Netanyahu - the last opinion polls published four days before the vote had shown Likud trailing the Zionist Union by four seats.

Although Netanyahu must still put together a coalition to remain in power, his victory all but guarantees that Israel's president will give him the first opportunity to form a government, putting him course to become the longest-serving leader in the country's history.

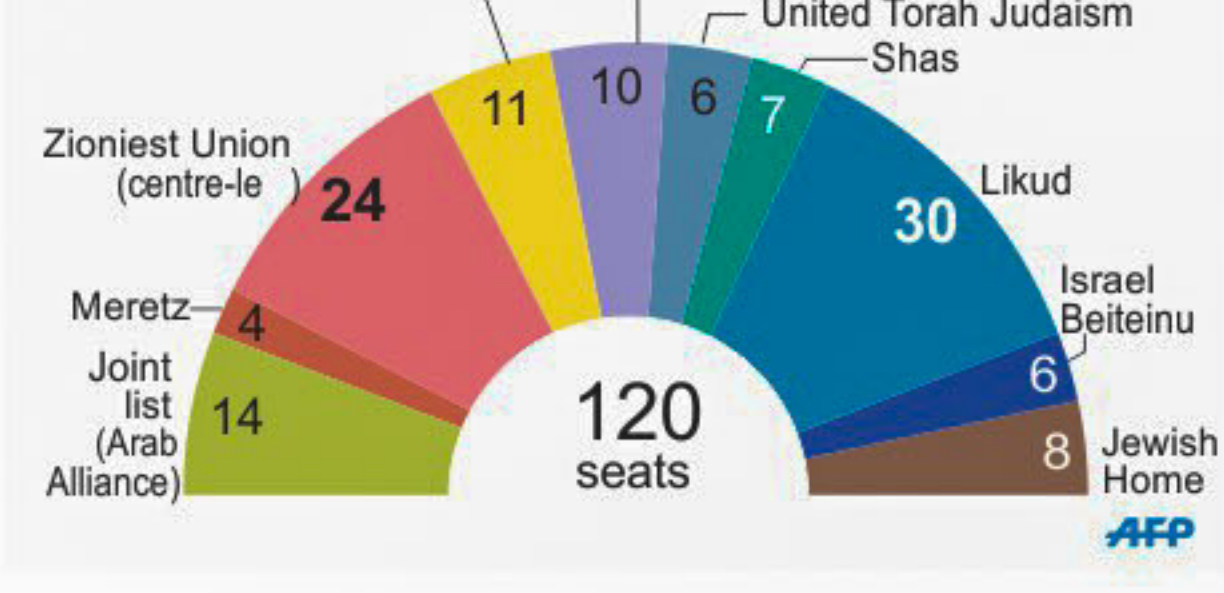
But the promises he made to woo ultranationalist voters in the final days of the campaign could have wide consequences, including deepening rifts with the United States and Europe and potentially emboldening Palestinians to take unilateral steps towards statehood in the absence of any prospect of talks.

Saeb Erekat, chief Palestinian negotiator in peace talks that collapsed last year, lamented "the success of a campaign based on settlements, racism, apartheid and the denial of the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people".

In a statement, Likud said Netanyahu intended to form a new government within weeks, with negotiations already under way with the far-right pro-settler Jewish Home party led by Naftali Bennett, the centrist Kulanu party and ultra-Orthodox groups.

Israel: Netanyahu wins legislative election

The new Knesset based on results so far



NUCLEAR TALKS IN LAUSANNE
Iran downplays deal prospects

AFP, Tehran

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif yesterday played down the chances of reaching a nuclear agreement during talks under way this week in the Swiss city of Lausanne.

Foreign ministers of the other world powers negotiating with Iran are unlikely to be required in Lausanne to approve a deal, said Zarif, who has been holding two-way talks with US Secretary of State John Kerry.

"I don't think their presence will be needed in this round because when the solutions are found and we approach a deal, then all the foreign ministers of the negotiating parties should come," state media quoted him as saying.

"They might come, but at this stage I wouldn't think they are needed," he repeated, referring to the top diplomats of the so-called P5+1 (Britain, China, France, Russia, the United States, and Germany).

On day three of talks with Kerry, Zarif said "there are differences and we are trying to reduce them," by Thursday evening, with political directors of the 5+1 countries starting to arrive in Lausanne on Wednesday.

"We must find solutions," he said.

"The question of an agreement comes when we have solutions written on paper, and to write the solutions we need the experts more than foreign ministers."

The minister said that the two sides had reached "very fine details in the negotiations and details always require more work".

The United States on Tuesday evaluated at 50/50 the chances of sealing a political agreement with Iran on its controversial nuclear programme by the end of March.

Iran and six world powers aim to agree the framework of a nuclear deal by March 31 and then have a full deal by July 1.

Such an agreement, they hope, will convince the world that Iran will not develop nuclear weapons under the guise of its civilian programme, a goal Tehran strenuously denies having.

Nine more executed in Pakistan
AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday hanged nine more jailed murderers, officials said, taking the number of convicts executed over the past two days to 21, as the European Union condemned the executions.

The latest round in Punjab province brings to 48 the total number of convicts hanged since Pakistan resumed capital punishment in December after Taliban militants gunned down 154 people, most of them children, at a school in the restive north-west.

The partial lifting of the moratorium, which began in 2008, only applied to those convicted of terrorism offences, but was last week extended to all capital offences.

The EU granted Pakistan the much coveted "GSP+" status in 2014, giving it access to highly favourable trade tariffs, conditional on Pakistan enacting certain commitments on human rights.

But the agreement is not due for renewal until 2016.



Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro (R) shakes hands with Cuban President Raul Castro during the ALBA Summit at the Miraflores Palace, in Caracas, on Tuesday. Leaders from leftist Latin American regional bloc ALBA gathered Tuesday for a summit in Caracas, a show of support for Venezuela in its mounting standoff with the United States.

PHOTO: AFP

MYANMAR-CHINA ROW OVER BORDER CLASHES
Ties take a deep plunge

AFP, Yangon

Bloody conflict in a remote corner of northern Myanmar has spilled violently across the border with China, risking a rift with the mighty neighbour and threatening peace efforts with an array of rebels.

Myanmar's army is battling ethnic-Chinese rebels in the Kokang region of Shan state, with aerial bombardments and close-quarter combat, just as the quasi-civilian government is grappling to end decades of border insurgencies in fresh ceasefire talks that began Tuesday.

China mobilised fighter jets after a bomb apparently from a Myanmar warplane landed in a sugar plantation in Chinese territory on Friday, killing five Chinese farm workers.

The incident marked an "astounding" breach in relations between the two long-term allies, said Yun Sun from the Stimson Center's East Asia Program.

He said it was the "worst security incident" since Beijing's embassy in Myanmar was attacked in 1967 during an anti-Chinese riot, although he believes the border unrest will remain contained for now.

Mountainous Kokang is known for its strong bonds with China - local people speak a Chinese dialect and China's yuan is the common currency and the conflict has tapped into long-standing nervousness in Myanmar about its giant northern neighbour.

Officials have also accused Yunnan provincial authorities of helping the rebels, who were previously driven out of Kokang in a bloody push by the army in 2009.

"Anti-Chinese sentiment has re-emerged strongly" in Myanmar, said Elliot Brennan, from the Institute for Security and Development Policy.

He said this was of "grave concern" to Beijing, which has to contend with public anger of its own over the deaths of the five Chinese.

China acted as an economic and political shield for Myanmar for decades, when the country was under military rule and the junta isolated by the West.

Its reward was a wealth of sometimes controversial investments - particularly in dams, mines and energy infrastructure.

But as Myanmar has begun to reform and open up it has sought to reduce that dependence, sometimes to Beijing's irritation - it called for the rights of Chinese companies to be protected after a huge dam project was suspended.

Cyanide letter sent to White House
AFP, Washington

The White House this week was sent a letter that tested positive for cyanide, US media reported yesterday, in yet another piece of bad news for the Secret Service.

There were no injuries or exposure concerns for the person at the mail-sorting facility who opened the letter, an unidentified law enforcement official told CNN.

Just hours before, the US Secret Service director admitted to Congress that his agents often drink, even as he sought funding to build a life-size mock-up of the White House to improve training.

The incident marked the latest of several missteps by the agency, which protects the president and other dignitaries, including a major security breach last September when an intruder barged into the White House wielding a knife.



Indian farmers take part in a protest rally against land reforms proposed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi which they say will harm the country's millions of farmers, in New Delhi, yesterday. The new legislation on March 10 passed parliament's lower house after opposition lawmakers stormed out during voting. It still needs upper house approval.

PHOTO: AFP