

Musharraf's party to contest local polls

AFP, Karachi
Pakistan's former military ruler Pervez Musharraf, who is facing criminal proceedings, yesterday announced that his party All Pakistan Muslim League (APML) would contest local government elections.

Syria exiled opposition snubs Moscow talks

AFP, Beirut
Syria's exiled opposition announced Saturday that it had declined an invitation from Russia to attend peace talks in Moscow with representatives of President Bashar al-Assad's government.

Sri Lanka arrests 54 Indian fishermen

TNN, Rameswaram
Sri Lankan navy on Saturday evening apprehended 54 Tamil Nadu fishermen and their ten boats. Indian marine police sources said the fishermen had been apprehended while they were fishing between Katchatheevu and Neduntheevu in the Sri Lankan waters.

Fire breaks out at India's parliament

AFP, New Delhi
A blaze which erupted yesterday at India's national parliament brought firefighters rushing to the historic building in the centre of New Delhi. The fire broke out at 2.21pm and was contained about 20 minutes later, officials said. No one was injured in the incident.



Independent Afghan civil society activist women weep and lie on the grave of Afghan woman Farkhunda, 27, who was lynched by an angry mob, at the cemetery in central Kabul, yesterday. Hundreds of people on March 22, attended the burial of an Afghan woman who was beaten to death and set on fire by a mob for allegedly burning a copy of the Koran.

PHOTO: AFP

IRAN NUCLEAR TALKS West promises 'no bad deal'

BBC ONLINE
Western powers negotiating an agreement with Iran on its nuclear activity will not accept "a bad deal", UK Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond has said. Ministers from France, Germany, and the UK along with the US Secretary of State met in London amid increased urgency to reach agreement by the end of March. Six world powers want to ensure that Iran cannot develop nuclear weapons - something it denies doing. Speaking after Saturday's talks in London, Hammond said: "We will not do a bad deal that does not meet our red lines." An official statement from the meeting said: "We agreed that substantial progress had been made (with Iran) in key areas although there are still important issues on which no agreement has yet been possible. Now is the time for Iran, in particular, to take difficult decisions." Earlier, Iran's president spoke positively about reaching agreement. "There is nothing that cannot be resolved," although some differences still remain, Iranian state media quoted President Hassan Rouhani as saying. The four powers, along with China and Russia, make up the so-called P5+1 which is negotiating with Iran to scale back sensitive nuclear activities in return for an easing of international economic sanctions. Both Iran and the Western powers have set themselves deadlines of 31 March for a political framework agreement and 30 June for a final deal. But in a reminder of more hardline attitudes within the Iranian leadership, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned on Saturday against submitting to foreign demands in order to achieve economic growth. More talks are scheduled to resume next week.

Yemen on edge of civil war

President calls 'urgent UN intervention' as Shia militia tighten grip

AFP, Aden

Shia militia in Yemen seized the airport in a key central city yesterday as deteriorating security prompted Washington to evacuate personnel and the UN Security Council to call an emergency session.

The Security Council was to meet later yesterday after President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi called for "urgent intervention" amid mounting unrest, including suicide bombings claimed by the Islamic State group that killed 142 people in the capital Sanaa on Friday.

Impoverished but strategic Yemen has descended into chaos in recent months, with the Shia militia, known as Huthis, seizing control of Sanaa and forcing Hadi to flee to the main southern city of Aden.

The Arabian Peninsula country is increasingly divided between a north controlled by the Huthis, who are

allegedly backed by Iran, and a south dominated by Hadi's allies.

The Huthis and their allies yesterday seized the airport in Taz, which is just 180 kilometres north of Aden on the road to Sanaa and seen as a strategic entry point to Hadi's refuge.

The forces allied with the Huthis included members of the former central security force, a unit seen as loyal to ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Saleh was forced from power in early 2012 after a year-long popular uprising and has been accused of working with the Huthis to restore his influence.

Security sources said Huthi militiamen were also patrolling parts of Taz and had set up checkpoints in Raheda, some 80 kilometres south of the city on the road to Aden.

Hadi, backed by Western and Gulf states as Yemen's legitimate ruler, has struggled to reassert his authority since escaping house arrest in Sanaa last

month and fleeing to Aden.

In a letter to the Security Council, he said the Huthis and their allies "not only threaten peace in Yemen but regional and international peace and security".

Yemen has long been a key US ally in the fight against Islamic extremism, allowing Washington to carry out drone strikes on AQAP on its territory.

But in statement on Saturday, Washington said it was evacuating its remaining personnel.

"Due to the deteriorating security situation in Yemen, the US government has temporarily relocated its remaining personnel out of Yemen," State Department spokesman Jeff Rathke said.

Washington would "continue to actively monitor terrorist threats emanating from Yemen and have capabilities postured in the area to address them", Rathke said.

We believed him first time

Obama doesn't buy Netanyahu flip on Palestinian statehood

AGENCIES

It doesn't matter how many times Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu now says he still wants a two-state solution with the Palestinians. The White House is refusing to take him at his word.

"We take him at his word when he said that it wouldn't happen during his prime ministership, and so that's why we've got to evaluate what other options are available to make sure that we don't see a chaotic situation in the region," President Barack Obama said in an interview with The Huffington Post published Saturday.

In a fresh rebuke to Benjamin Netanyahu, Obama said the Israeli leader's pre-election disavowal of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict makes it "hard to find a path" toward serious negotiations to resolve the issue.

Obama also scolded Netanyahu over his remarks about Arab Israelis voting, making clear that the deep rift in relations between

Israel and the United States, its most important ally, is not ending anytime soon.

"I did indicate to him that we continue to believe that a two-state solution is the only way for the long-term security of Israel, if it wants to stay both a Jewish state and democratic," Obama said, in his first public comments on the issue.

"And I indicated to him that given his statements prior to the election, it is going to be hard to find a path where people are seriously believing that negotiations are possible."

The worst crisis in decades in US-Israeli relations was worsened by Netanyahu's declaration just before Tuesday's election that there would be no Palestinian state on his watch. Netanyahu sought on Thursday to backtrack from that.

The White House had said after Obama's call on Thursday that the president had told Netanyahu Washington would "reassess" its options on US-Israel relations and Middle East diplomacy.



UN WATER DEVELOPMENT REPORT World may face 40pc shortfall in 15 yrs

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The UN has urged world leaders to rethink water policies or face a 40 per cent shortfall in just 15 years.

A combination of low underwater reserves and erratic rainfall patterns caused by climate change, has brought the problem to the fore according to a report which stresses how water resources are essential to achieving global sustainability.

These factors are compounded by the fact that the world's population is growing, and expected to reach 9 billion in 2050.

The UN's annual World Water Development report predicts that as reserves dwindle, global water demand will increase 55 per cent by 2050. If current usage does not change, the world will have only 60% of the water it needs in 2030, it said.

If this became a reality, the consequences would be catastrophic. Crops could fail, ecosystems could break down, industries could collapse, disease and poverty could worsen, and violent conflicts over access to water could become more frequent.

"Unless the balance between demand and finite supplies is restored, the world will face an increasingly severe global water deficit," the document released two days before World Water Day reads.

It goes on to note that more efficient use could guarantee enough supply in the future.

The report urges politicians and communities to rethink water policies, and consider making a greater effort to conserve water.

A wastewater system similar to that used in Singapore - developed due to the fact the small island is densely populated - could be adopted, the report suggested.

In many nations water use is unregulated and often wasteful, while the pollution of water can be ignored and unpunished.

In India, for example, at least 80 per cent of the country's population drinks groundwater to avoid bacteria-infested surface waters.

The report went on the caution leaders not to reply on economic growth to solve the problem that around 748 million people worldwide have poor access to clean drinking water.

India, China to hold talks on border row

AFP, New Delhi

Senior Indian and Chinese envoys will this week hold talks aimed at resolving a bitter border dispute, the first such discussions since Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power.

China's special representative Yang Jiechi was to start his three-day visit to New Delhi yesterday. He will hold talks with Indian national security adviser Ajit Doval, the Indian foreign ministry said in a statement yesterday.

The meetings starting Monday -- the 18th round of boundary talks -- are part of a push to make progress on the long-festering row between the regional rivals before Modi's expected visit to China in May.



Anti-war protesters march as they demonstrate against US Government policies, in Hollywood, California on Saturday. The demonstration was held to mark the anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq and to protest the "endless US war in the Middle East," according to a release from the ANSWER Coalition, an anti-war group.

Pope Francis's 'half-miracle' in Naples

AFP, Naples

It was a miracle! Or maybe not. The dried blood of Naples' patron saint Januarius half-liquefied Saturday during a ceremony when Pope Francis held and kissed the relic while on a visit to the southern Italian city.

Archbishop of Naples Crescenzio Sepe showed the glass vial to the congregation in the city's cathedral and declared: "The blood has half liquefied, which shows that Saint Januarius loves our pope and Naples."

Francis, known for his plain speaking, quipped that he and his fellow visitors to the city's cathedral had failed to win the saint's full affection.

"The bishop just announced that the blood half-liquefied. We can see the saint only half loves us."

"We must all spread the word, so that he loves us more!" he added.



Each year thousands of Roman Catholic faithful go to the three special services at Naples Cathedral where the dried blood of the fourth-century martyr is said to turn to liquid.

The showing of the vial is eagerly awaited because, according to tradition, whenever the blood has failed to liquefy a catastrophe has occurred. In 1527 and 1528 non-liquefaction was followed by the plague. In 1559 famine came and in 1833 cholera raged through the city. In 1944 during World War II non-liquefaction was preceded by bombing raids by Allied aircraft.

Prepare for nuke strikes

Russia warns Denmark over joining Nato shield

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Russia has threatened to target Denmark's warships with nuclear weapons if the Scandinavian nation becomes a member of Nato's missile defence shield.

In comments which have been met with anger in Copenhagen, the Russian ambassador to Denmark said a move towards better integration with the Western alliance would make it a "threat to Russia", and that it would have to accept the consequences.

Mikhail Vanin told the Jyllands-Posten newspaper: "I do not think that the Danes fully understand the consequences if Denmark joins the US-led missile defence shield. If that happens, Danish warships become targets for Russian nuclear missiles."

According to a translation by the Copenhagen Post, Vanin added that while such a move would be "Denmark's decision", "relations with Russia will be damaged" and it would "lose both money and security". The threat comes amid a backdrop of

heightened tension across eastern Europe, as last night David Cameron and other EU leaders agreed to extend sanctions against Russia until the terms of a Ukraine ceasefire agreement are met.

And Martin Lidegaard, the Danish foreign minister, denounced the Russian diplomat's use of threats.

"This is obviously unacceptable," he said. "Russia knows very well that Nato's missile defence system is defensive. We disagree with Russia on many important things, but it is important that the tone between us remains as positive as possible."

In the Baltics, fears of an attack ordered by Vladimir Putin have escalated to the point where Lithuania - which doesn't even have a land border with mainland Russia - has introduced military conscription.

Between Lithuania and Russia lies Belarus -headed by pro-Russian President Aleksander Lukashenko. It supports Russian bases, which have been bolstering their numbers in recent weeks.

'UKRAINE ARMS DEALS' Sri Lanka probes ex-envoy's role

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka is investigating its former ambassador to Russia following a media report that he helped arm pro-Moscow separatists in Ukraine, the foreign minister said yesterday.

The Colombo-based Sunday Times said the Ukrainian government has lodged a formal complaint with Colombo detailing former ambassador Udayanga Weeratunga's alleged arms dealings with the rebels.

"We will conduct a full investigation into this matter," Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera told the newspaper. Samaraweera confirmed his comments in a text message to AFP but did not give details. The government recalled Weeratunga soon after President Maithripala Sirisena came to power in January elections.

Weeratunga, a close relative of defeated former long-time president Mahinda Rajapakse, operated a restaurant in the Ukrainian capital Kiev before he was appointed Sri Lanka's ambassador to Moscow nine years ago, the paper added.

Weeratunga has not spoken about the allegations and could not be contacted on Sunday for comment.

The Sunday Times did not give details of Weeratunga's alleged involvement in weapons sales.