

NEWSIN brief

Over 2,000 died in Mediterranean: IOM

AFP, Geneva

More than 2,000 people have died so far this year trying to make the perilous journey across the Mediterranean to Europe, the International Organization for Migration said yesterday, making it the world's most dangerous migrant route. The organisation said around 188,000 people had been rescued so far this year trying to cross the sea, and warned the 200,000-mark could be crossed by the end of the week.

Malaysia graft agency gives clean chit to PM

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's anti-graft agency has said that nearly \$700 million deposited into the Prime Minister Najib Razak's personal bank accounts were from "donations" and not related to a brewing scandal. The Wall Street Journal last month reported that Malaysian government investigators had found nearly \$700 million was routed to his

Building collapse kills 12 near Mumbai

AFP, Mumbai

A dilapidated building killed 12 people when it collapsed outside Mumbai yesterday, a rescue official said, the second such accident around the Indian financial capital in a week. Rescuers pulled seven people out of the rubble alive after the three-storey structure crumbled overnight while families were sleeping inside, the official said.

Catalonia announces 'independence vote'

AFP, Barcelona

Catalonia on Monday called early regional elections for September 27, polls that will serve as a proxy vote on independence from Spain and raise tensions with the central government in Madrid. Catalan president Artur Mas signed a decree on Monday night setting the date for the vote in the wealthy northeastern region, home to 7.5 million people and accounting for a fifth of Spain's output.

3 Turkish soldiers killed in 'PKK attack'

AFP, Diyarbakir

Three soldiers were killed and another wounded yesterday in Arakoy region of Sirnak province in Turkey when a mine exploded in the latest attack on security forces blamed on militants from the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The attack came as Turkey has stepped up its strikes on the security forces in the last two weeks, as Turkish warplanes bomb its positions in northern Iraq.

Myanmar seeks int'l help

Admits response failure; 180 killed, a million displaced in India

AFP, Sittou

Myanmar yesterday formally appealed for international help in tackling massive floods with rescuers struggling to reach isolated regions, as rain-battered Asian nations counted the rising cost of this year's monsoon.

Flash floods and landslides in Myanmar have claimed at least 46 lives and affected some 215,000 people, swallowing huge tracts of land in what the United Nations has described as a "major natural disaster".

Tens of thousands of people remain cut off as officials warn that swollen rivers are now threatening to inundate low-lying southern areas of the country.

"Myanmar authorities have today formally requested international assistance," the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said in a statement, adding that the UN and other aid agencies have however been part of the response since late July.

Military helicopters and commercial airlines have helped deliver international food aid as Myanmar shows a willingness to allow foreign assistance that was unthinkable under

the paranoid former junta.

In 2008 the military regime was widely criticised for refusing foreign aid for weeks after Cyclone Nargis wrought devastation across the Irrawaddy Delta, leaving nearly 140,000 people dead or missing.

Now, with a fast-growing troop of social media users, the quasi-civilian

Relentless seasonal downpours have lashed much of South and Southeast Asia in recent weeks.

The annual monsoon is a lifeline for farmers across Asia but heavy rains and powerful cyclones can also prove deadly.

By yesterday the death toll in India from days of rain had risen to 180, the majority in West Bengal after receding waters uncovered more bodies.

Around 1.2 million people have been forced from their homes after rivers burst their banks in the wake of Cyclone Komen -- which barrelled through the Bay of Bengal late last week.

Pakistan has seen 118 people die so far, with 810,000 affected, as poorly built mud homes collapsed under heavy rains.

Scores have also died in Vietnam and Nepal.

Myanmar has designated four states and regions -- Rakhine, Chin, Sagaing and Magway -- as "natural disaster" areas and warned that flooding is spreading southwards.

Roads are damaged or inundated, phone lines are down and electricity has been cut to large areas, raising fears that tens of thousands of people -- many of whom already live in abject poverty -- are in dire need of help.

DEADLY FLOODS IN SOUTH EAST ASIA



government has already come under attack for its flood response, accused of underplaying the scale of the disaster.

"We responded immediately. But in some areas there are no resources, such as boats to rescue people," he said, adding that parts of the northern Sagaing region were seeing their "worst natural disaster in 100 years".

India, Pak trade fire along LoC

Three civilians killed

AFP, Srinagar

Three civilians were killed yesterday in heavy exchanges of fire between Indian and Pakistani troops along their border in the south of the disputed territory of Kashmir, officials from the rival sides said.

"One young man died during the shelling. We are asking residents in the area to remain confined to their homes," Danesh Rana, IGP of Indian controlled Kashmir, told AFP.

The man was hit when a mortar bomb fired from the Pakistani side of the border landed near his house in the Pargwal sector, 340 kilometres south of Indian Kashmir's main city of Srinagar, Rana said.

The Pakistan foreign ministry accused Indian troops of "unprovoked firing" and targeting villages across the border that killed two civilians aged 14 and 22 and injured seven.

A ceasefire agreement signed by the South Asian rivals in 2003 has largely held but each regularly accuses the other of violating it. India's says Pakistan has violated the ceasefire over 1,000 times since the agreement, while Pakistan regularly registers complaints of violations by India to a UN mission which monitors the border.

Congress protests suspension of MPs

Accuses BJP-led govt of murdering democracy

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi and Vice President Rahul Gandhi yesterday led a protest by their party lawmakers against the suspension of 25 MPs for disrupting proceedings in the House.

The mother-son duo launched a blistering attack on the BJP-led government, accusing it of "murdering" democracy.

Wearing black arm bands, raising black flags and shouting slogans against the government, senior Congress leaders, including former PM Manmohan Singh, joined the demonstration in front of Mahatma Gandhi's statue inside the Parliament House.

Addressing the demonstrators, Sonia said, "The way our lawmakers were suspended was anti-democratic: It is the duty of the government to run Parliament: This is nothing but murder of democracy."

Rahul Gandhi said there would be no let-up in Congress' protests that have disrupted Parliament, till its demand for the resignation of three top BJP leaders, including External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, is met.

Congress has demanded the resignation of Swaraj for allegedly having helped controversial former cricket magnate Lalit Modi, a charge she denied.

Congress-led Opposition has not let Parliament function for a single day in the ongoing monsoon session which began late last month pressing for resignation of the three.

Lok Speaker Sumitra Mahajan's suspension of 25 Congress MPs came after repeated warnings to them not to carry placards to the House.

Congress will be boycotting the Lok Sabha for five days that its members have been suspended. Congress, which has 44 members in the Lok Sabha, has found support from other parties like Aam Aadmi Party, Janata Dal (United),



Congress President Sonia Gandhi shout slogans during a sit-in protest in New Delhi yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

South China Sea tensions flare at Asia security talks

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Southeast Asian diplomats yesterday said that China's controversial island-building drive is raising regional tensions, with the Philippines slamming its "unilateral and aggressive activities".

The US and some Southeast Asian states have watched with growing alarm as Beijing expands tiny reefs in the South China Sea, topping some with military posts to reinforce its disputed claims over the strategic waters and fanning fears of future conflict.

The flashpoint issue has taken centre stage at the annual security forum hosted by the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) that began yesterday.

But China has insisted it will not discuss the dispute during the meetings.

That prompted a sharp rebuke from the Philippines, which along with Vietnam has been involved in the most direct territorial confrontations with China.

"As we speak, we see no let-up on the unilateral and aggressive activities of our

northern neighbour in the South China Sea," Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario told fellow Asean foreign ministers at an afternoon meeting, according to a transcript of his remarks obtained by AFP.

He also hit out at what he described as "massive reclamation activities" and construction by Beijing in the disputed sea which had "undermined peace, security and stability".

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said on Monday that such gatherings are not "the appropriate place for discussing specific bilateral disputes," and that doing so would "heighten confrontation."

He reiterated China's position that it would not bow to pressure on its land reclamation.

Beijing claims control over nearly all of the South China Sea, a key shipping route thought to hold rich oil and gas reserves. Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei -- all Asean members -- also have various claims, as does Taiwan, many of which overlap.



Nepalese activists take part in a protest demanding equal citizenship rights in the new constitution in Kathmandu yesterday. Nepal's parliament is proposing to bar all single parents from passing on their citizenship to their children in a new national constitution, sparking outrage among rights activists. PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan hangs 'teen' convict

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan yesterday executed a man convicted of killing a child, brushing aside a storm of protests from rights groups that his confession had been extracted by torture and he was a minor at the time of the crime.

Shafqat Hussain was hanged shortly before dawn at a jail in Karachi for killing a seven-year-old boy in the city in 2004, his brother and a prison official told AFP.

The case raised grave international concern, drawing protests from the United Nations, as his lawyers and family said he was only 15 at the time of the killing and was tortured into making a false confession.

In Muzaffarabad, the main town of the Pakistani administered part of Kashmir, his family was distraught.

"Why did they hang my innocent brother, only because we were poor?" said his sister Sumaira Bibi, beating her chest and weeping. His mother Makhni Begum, looked glassy-eyed, stunned by the news of the

execution after seeing her son reprieved from the gallows four times since January.

"We can't do anything but they (executioners) will face Allah on the day of judgement," she said.

United Nations rights experts said Hussain's trial "fell short of international standards" and urged Pakistan not to hang him without investigating the torture claims, as well as his age.

Hussain was originally due to face the gallows in January but won four stays of execution as his lawyers fought to prove he was under 18 at the time of the offence and could therefore not be executed under Pakistani law.

An official probe into his age ruled he was an adult at the time of his conviction -- though the results have not been published officially.

British anti-death penalty campaign group Reprieve said the hanging represented all that is wrong with Pakistan's race to the gallows, while Amnesty International accused the government of "callous indifference" to human life.



MOVE AGAINST ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS UK announces new controversial steps

AFP, London

Britain's government promised new measures Monday to crack down on illegal immigrants by making landlords evict them, as the Calais migrants crisis continued to dominate the headlines.

Landlords in England who do not remove people with no right to remain in Britain, or do not check their immigration status before renting them a property, could be jailed for up to five years.

The move, announced by Communities Secretary Greg Clark, is set to be included in a new Immigration Bill that parliament will debate in the coming months.

Immigration is one of the most sensitive issues in British politics and Prime Minister David Cameron's centre-right government has been battling to bring the numbers down for years.

Images of migrants trying illegally to cross the Channel Tunnel from France to Britain have fuelled calls from political opponents for ministers to do more and Cameron has warned that the situation could last all summer.

In a joint editorial for this week's Sunday Telegraph, the French and British interior ministers warned that "our streets are not paved with gold" as Cameron's government seeks to dispel any perception that migrants have a soft landing in Britain.

Cameron's government has previously announced that the new Immigration Bill will also include giving police the power to seize wages earned by illegal immigrants.

YEMEN CRISIS Loyalists retake biggest airbase

AFP, Aden

Pro-government forces backed by a Saudi-led coalition retook Yemen's biggest airbase from Iran-backed rebels yesterday in a significant new gain after their recapture of second city Aden last month.

Hailing victory in the battle for Al-Anad, the defence ministry vowed there would be no let-up in the war against the Shia Huthi rebels and their allies until the authority of exiled President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi was restored over the whole country.

The Al-Anad base, 60 kilometres north of Aden, is strategically located on the main road north towards both the battle-ground third city of Ta'ez and the rebel-held capital Sana'a.

Mexico outraged over photojournalist murder

BBC ONLINE

Mexico City Mayor Miguel Angel Mancera yesterday expressed his outrage over the murder of photojournalist Ruben Espinosa and four women in the city last week.

Their bodies were found in Espinosa's flat on Friday. They all had bullet wounds to the head.

Espinosa, 31, worked for the investigative magazine Proceso. He had recently moved to Mexico City from the eastern state of Veracruz where he said he had been threatened and harassed.

Veracruz is considered one of the most dangerous Mexican states for journalists - 17 have been killed there since 2000, rights group Article 19 says.

Investigators did not give the names of the women killed alongside Espinosa, only their ages. They were 40, 32 and 18 years old. They all were associated with Espinosa.

Investigators said three of the women had been raped. All had bullet wounds to the head.

On Sunday, prosecutors said robbery may have been a motive for the crime, as belongings of the victims were missing. Proceso editor Rafael Rodriguez Castaneda said the brutality of the murders suggested it was not a simple robbery.



IRAN NUKE DEAL

US to speed up arms sales to Gulf: Kerry

AFP, Doha

Washington has agreed to speed up arms sales to Gulf states, US Secretary of State John Kerry announced Monday after talks in Doha on their concerns over the Iran nuclear deal.

At the same time, his Qatari counterpart, Khalid bin Mohammad Al-Attiyah, told a joint press conference with Kerry that the nuclear deal was "the best option among other options".

Asked what he could offer Gulf states, Kerry said the United States "agreed to expedite certain arms sales that are needed and that have taken too long in the past".

The US would also step up efforts to share intelligence and increase the number of joint military exercises with its Arab allies, Kerry said following talks with foreign ministers of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council.

He travelled to the Qatari capital for meetings with the Sunni monarchies of the GCC in a bid to calm their fears over the nuclear accord with Shiite Iran.

The GCC groups Qatar with Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Gulf countries have expressed concerns that the July 14 deal between Iran and world powers would allow greater regional interference by the Islamic republic.

Kerry added that there was also agreement to "talk about how to integrate the region's ballistic missile defences based on some of the activities of other countries".

Attiyah also called for a ban on all nuclear weapons not only in Iran but "all the Middle East".

