

NEWS IN brief

Syria conflict toll passes 240,000

More than 240,000 people, including 12,000 children, have been killed in Syria's conflict which broke out in March 2011, a monitoring group said Thursday. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said it has documented the deaths of 240,381 people. The latest toll compiled by the Britain-based group shows that 11,964 children were among 71,781 civilians killed in Syria.

French hostage freed in Yemen

Frenchwoman Isabelle Prime, freed after nearly six months of captivity in Yemen, arrived in Oman yesterday before she returns to Paris. The 30-year-old, who worked as a consultant on a World Bank-funded project in Yemen, was released late Thursday. Isabelle was seized with her translator on February 24 as they were driving to work in the capital Sanaa.

Tripura moves to abolish death penalty

The Tripura Assembly yesterday unanimously resolved to send a proposal to the Centre for abolishing death penalty and to provide imprisonment up to death in case of heinous crimes. The debate on capital punishment was sparked again recently when Yakub Memon, convicted in the 1993 Mumbai blasts case, was executed in the Nagpur Central Jail on July 30 at the end of a long legal battle.

4 killed as gunmen besiege Mali hotel

Four people including two soldiers were killed yesterday in an ongoing siege at a hotel in central Mali, where gunmen have also taken a number of hostages, a military source said. Attackers stormed the Byblos hotel in the town of Sevare early yesterday, in what military sources and local residents said appeared to be an attempt to kidnap Western hotel guests.

Myanmar flood death toll climbs to 88

The death toll from severe flooding across Myanmar has risen to 88, officials said yesterday, as rising waters swallowed more homes in low-lying regions in some of the poorest parts of the country. More than 330,000 people have been affected by torrential monsoon rains that triggered flash floods and landslides, cutting off communications as the deluge engulfed roads and destroyed bridges.



Afghan policemen stand guard near the 10 metres (30 feet) deep crater in a road caused by a powerful truck bomb in Kabul yesterday. The blast killed 15 civilians and wounded 240 others in the first major attack in the Afghan capital since the announcement of Taliban leader Mullah Omar's death.

India boycotts Pak C'wealth meet

India will boycott a Commonwealth Parliamentary Union meeting in Islamabad in September in protest against Pakistan not inviting the speaker of Jammu & Kashmir assembly, a decision that comes amid tensions over two terror attacks in Punjab and J&K.

"A meeting of speakers of all states here today unanimously decided that India will boycott the meeting of the CPU if the speaker of the Jammu & Kashmir assembly is not invited," Lok Sabha Speaker Sumitra Mahajan told reporters after the meeting.

This follows Pakistan not sending an invitation to Jammu & Kashmir speaker to the inter-parliamentary union meeting to be held from September 30 to October 8 in Islamabad while invitations have been sent to all the other speakers in India.

The decision of the speakers come against the backdrop of simmering tensions between the two countries over the recent terror attacks in Gurdaspur in Punjab and near Udhampur in J&K by terrorists, perpetrated by terrorists who had infiltrated from Pakistan.

Mahajan said this was against a rule in the CPU in which all the speakers, who are members of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), have to be extended an invitation to the CPU meeting.

"It is wrong (on the part of Pakistan). They cited an old rule of 1951-57 regarding their having raised an issue in the UN security council for not inviting Jammu & Kashmir speaker," she said adding it had lost relevance.

The Speaker said Pakistan gave this reply when India took up the matter strongly with the CPA chairperson and secretary general against leaving out Jammu & Kashmir speaker.

UN adopts resolution on Syria chemical weapons

ISIS kidnaps 230 civilians in central Syria

The UN Security council voted unanimously Friday to set up a panel to identify who is behind deadly chlorine gas attacks in Syria, which the west blames on the Damascus regime.

Russia, Syria's veto-wielding ally, endorsed the measure as did the rest of the 15-member council -- a rare display of unity over how to address the conflict.

Under discussion for months, the US-drafted resolution sets up a team of experts tasked with identifying the perpetrators of the chemical weapons attacks and paves the way for possible sanctions to punish them.

The United States, Britain and France have repeatedly accused president Bashar al-Assad's forces of carrying out chlorine gas attacks with barrel bombs dropped from helicopters. But Russia maintains there is no solid proof that Damascus is behind the attacks.

The investigative panel will be given "full access" to all locations in Syria and allowed to interview witnesses and collect materials, according to the resolution passed yesterday.

UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon is tasked with assembling the team within 20 days. The panel would present its first findings to the council 90 days after it begins its work, which would be for a duration of one year.

Meanwhile, Islamic State jihadist group abducted 230 civilians, including at least 60 Christians, in a central Syrian town known as a symbol of religious coexistence, a monitoring group said yesterday.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the civilians were taken on Thursday in the town of Al-Qaryatayn. The Assyrian Observatory for Human Rights said there were some 100 Syrian Christian families being detained in their homes by ISIS.

Russian hackers hit Pentagon email system

Hackers based in Russia penetrated the email network of the Pentagon's Joint Chiefs of Staff, leading to a two-week shutdown of the system, NBC News reported Thursday.

The Pentagon confirmed that the Joint Chiefs' email system was taken offline pending an investigation but declined to elaborate.

NBC, citing unnamed sources, said it was not clear if the attack had been sanctioned by the Russian government.

But the sources told the network that the cyberattack relied on an automated system that rapidly gathered massive amounts of data.

Myanmar peace talks end without result

Talks aimed at reaching a historic Myanmar peace agreement between the government, army and ethnic armed groups ended without resolution yesterday as negotiations stumbled on whether a deal should include all rebel groups.

With time running out to reach a ceasefire ahead of crucial November 8 elections in the former junta-run nation, negotiators said they were unable to seal an agreement.

The long-running negotiations -- aimed at ending the country's long running civil wars -- have snagged on whether to include several armed groups still locked in combat with the army.

"We could not conclude a deal today because both sides were unable to negotiate the issue," said Pu Zing Cung, of the ethnic group delegation.

He added that ethnic organisations want 17 groups included in the agreement, but the government has balked at including several of them.

CHEMICAL WEAPONS BAN GOES INTO FORCE

Meanwhile, the Chemical Weapons Convention, which bans the production, storage and use of chemical arms, has gone into force in Myanmar, the 191st country to do so, the Hague-based Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons said.

The southeast Asian country has previously faced accusations of storing and using such weapons.



IRAN NUKE DEAL Key Democrats turn against US president

Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer announced on Thursday he would vote against the Iran nuclear deal, in a blow to President Barack Obama's efforts to sell the measure.

The decision by the influential Jewish lawmaker was quickly matched by another leading Democrat, Eliot Engel, the ranking Democrat on the House foreign affairs committee.

"Advocates on both sides have strong cases for their point of view that cannot simply be dismissed," Schumer, the number three Democrat in the Senate, said in a statement.

"This has made evaluating the agreement a difficult and deliberate endeavor," he admitted, following days of speculation about his intentions.

"I have decided I must oppose the agreement and will vote yes on a motion of disapproval."

Separately, Engel said that he simply did not trust Iran to uphold its end of the agreement to curtail its nuclear program in exchange for an easing of crippling economic sanctions.

The announcements were a serious blow to Obama, who is in the midst of an intense lobbying effort to get Congress to back his landmark agreement, arguing that to torpedo it would be to risk a wider Middle East war.

MH370 MYSTERY BREAKTHROUGH France hunts for more debris

France launched a hunt for more wreckage from the ill-fated MH370 plane off Reunion island yesterday in a fresh effort to shed light on one of aviation's biggest mysteries.

The tiny French Indian Ocean territory has been under intense scrutiny since a beach cleaner found a washed-up wing part last week, which Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak later declared was the Boeing 777 that mysteriously vanished 17 months ago.

The flaperon is currently being examined by experts in France for clues as to the last moments of the Malaysia Airlines aircraft that inexplicably veered off course en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, and there are hopes that Reunion may yield more debris.

In nearby Mauritius, authorities are also searching for any possible plane parts that may have landed on their shores.

The Boeing 777 disappeared on March 8 last year, sparking the largest search operation in history, now focused on the southern Indian Ocean based on satellite data hinting at the plane's path.

Analysts call the flaperon find a clear step forward by eliminating theories that the plane might have landed somewhere, and confirming the search was roughly on the right track.



Relatives of passengers on missing Malaysia Airlines MH370 argue with police officers (R) after the relatives tried to push through a police line outside the Malaysian embassy in Beijing yesterday.



Defiant Trump grabs center stage

Bombastic, comical, provocative: Donald Trump, the billionaire leading the Republican primary race, offered the best and worst of himself Thursday as opponents strained to offer more gravitas in the first major debate of the 2016 campaign.

Flanked by nine rivals who trail him in the polls, the real estate mogul immediately set himself apart when he was the only candidate on stage to refuse to pledge that he would back the Republican nominee and not run for president as an independent if he loses the party primary.

"I will not make the pledge at this time," the improbable frontrunner said, to loud boos and jeers from a rambunctious crowd.

It was an extraordinary start to the party's quest to choose a flagbearer for the 2016 race to succeed President Barack Obama, only six months ahead of the first primary votes.

By the time the event was over Trump had called US leaders and politicians "stupid," claimed he had given money to most of the candidates on the stage as well as to top Democrat Hillary Clinton, clashed with Senator Rand Paul and moderators, and said he had no time for "political correctness."

Trump's unapologetic, off-script style offends some but has set him apart from a packed field of hopefuls furiously trying to garner the same level of attention

Despite the Trump show, candidates undercard sought to make an impression on voters -- and many aimed at Obama, Clinton and Trump.

They offered withering attacks on Obama's handling of the Islamic State group; vowed tougher immigration policy; pledged to toe the conservative line on social issues; and stressed they would shred a nuclear deal with Iran on day one of a Republican presidency.

Former Florida governor Jeb Bush acknowledged that the bar is likely higher for him in 2016, being the son and brother of two presidents. But he insisted once more that he is his own man with his own policies.

The candidates in Thursday's main debate were: Trump, Bush, Wisconsin governor Scott Walker, former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, Carson, libertarian Kentucky senator Rand Paul, Kasich, Florida senator Marco Rubio, Senator Ted Cruz and Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey.

30 years for royal insult!

BBC ONLINE

Two military courts in Thailand have sentenced a man to 30 years in prison and a woman to 28 years for insulting the monarchy.

The sentences are the harshest ever given under Thailand's lese majeste law, which prevents criticism of the king, Bhumibol Adulyadej.

The convictions relate to articles posted on Facebook.

Tour operator Pongsak Sriboonpeng, 48, was sentenced to ten years for each of the six posts he made about the monarch on social media. But the 60-year term was halved after he pleaded guilty.

In a separate case, a 29-year-old hotel worker and mother of two was sentenced to 56 years by a court in the northern city of Chiang Mai. Her sentence was also halved after a guilty plea.

Prosecutions for lese majeste in Thailand have surged since last year's military coup.

Global satellite to be named after Kalam

IANS, Bengaluru

A global satellite for earth observation and disaster risk reduction -- GlobalSat for DRR -- proposed under the UN framework is to be dedicated to A P J Abdul Kalam as a tribute to the vision of the celebrated rocket scientist and former Indian president who died July 27.

This has been stated by Milind Pimprikar, Chairman of CANEUS (CANada-Europe-US-Asia) Organization on Space Technologies for Societal Applications headquartered in Montreal, Canada.

Founded in 1999, CANEUS serves to develop a common platform for space technology solutions for natural and man-made disaster management. The 'GlobalSat for DRR' is a UN-driven global initiative on sharing space technology for disaster risk reduction, Pimprikar told IANS.

Pimprikar said the goals of UN GlobalSat are the same as those of Kalam. In his 'World Space Vision-2050' Kalam had envisaged space faring nations joining hands to find solutions to mankind's major problems such as natural disasters, energy and water scarcity, health-care education issues and weather prediction. "Therefore we now plan to dedicate the UN GlobalSat initiative as a tribute to Late Dr Abdul Kalam by renaming it 'UN Kalam GlobalSat'," Pimprikar said.

Pimprikar hoped the renaming will inspire the next generation of scientists, engineers and space explorers to foster innovation and entrepreneurship and pooling of resources to find low-cost solutions to major problems facing mankind.

Youths defy Norway massacre

AFP, Utøya

Four years after Anders Behring Breivik shot dead 69 people on Utøya island in Norway, about 1,000 Labour Party youths gathered yesterday for the first summer camp to be held there since the massacre.

The right-wing extremist killed mainly teenagers in his rampage on July 22, 2011, hunting down participants at a camp of the Labour Party's youth wing (AUF) on the tiny heart-shaped island in the middle of a lake.

Determined to reclaim possession of the site, the youngsters -- including a handful of survivors -- will hold their annual camp from Friday to Sunday.

Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who was prime minister at the time of the attack, was attending the camp and tweeted: "It's good to wake up in Utøya and to be surrounded by so many young activists." Many of the teenagers arrived on Utøya on Thursday, with many pitching their tents near the cafeteria, where Breivik killed 13 youths.

FIRST GOP DEBATE



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