

NEWS IN brief

Nepal to stay 'secular'

PTI, Kathmandu
A proposal to declare Nepal a Hindu state was overwhelmingly rejected by the constituent assembly on Monday which reaffirmed that the Hindu-majority nation will remain secular.

China 'building third airstrip in S China Sea'

REUTERS, Washington
China appears to be carrying out preparatory work for a third airstrip in contested territory in the South China Sea, a US expert said on Monday, citing satellite photographs taken last week.

Turnbull sworn in as new Aussie PM

BBC ONLINE
Malcolm Turnbull was sworn in as Australia's new prime minister yesterday, after Tony Abbott was ousted by his party in a leadership challenge.



Clashes rock Al-Aqsa mosque for third day

AFP, Jerusalem
Palestinians and Israeli security forces clashed in Jerusalem's flashpoint Al-Aqsa mosque compound and the surrounding Old City for a third straight day yesterday despite international calls for calm.

Flash flood kills 8 in US state of Utah

AFP, Washington
Eight people were killed and five were listed as missing after flash floods struck a town in the western state of Utah overnight Monday, state officials said early yesterday.

Anger as Hungary seals borders

Germany, Austria urge crisis summit; UN, rights groups slam refugee treatment

AFP, Horgos
Serbia yesterday urged Hungary to reopen its razor-wire border fence erected to stop a record wave of migrants, as Germany's Angela Merkel called for an EU summit on the refugee crisis after a EU ministers meet failed to provide a deal.



A soldier guards migrants detained after crossing the border from Serbia near Astohatolom, Hungary yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

REFUGEE CRISIS IN EUROPE

22 killed as boat capsizes in Aegean Sea
Over 500,000 refugees crossed into EU so far this year: report

Viktor Orban has tried to stop the migrant flow via Balkans countries with the hastily-erected fence along its Serbian border, completed yesterday, and announced plans for a similar barrier on its frontier with Romania.

fence with prison terms of up to three years.

The controversial measures are part of Orban's strategy to stem the flow of migrants -- more than 200,000 of whom have entered his country so far this year -- travelling from Greece and transiting through the western Balkans and Hungary, most of them headed on via Austria to Germany.

But the Hungarian fences sparked fears in Serbia of an unmanageable number of migrants. Hungary's moves have been sharply criticised, with the UN refugee agency saying it could be in violation of the 1951

Refugee Convention.

Romania also criticised the fence planned along its own border as "out of step with the spirit of Europe".

Human rights group Amnesty International charged that "meeting those fleeing conflict and persecution with razor wire, troops and draconian new laws, Hungary is showing the ugly face of Europe's shambolic response to the growing refugee crisis".

In Berlin, Merkel and her Austrian counterpart Werner Faymann called for European solidarity to end the chaos and proposed a special EU summit next week.

EU officials later announced a meeting of interior ministers for September 22.

Berlin's move to bring back border controls on last Sunday has sparked a domino effect, with Austria and Slovakia also reimposing identity checks. With Poland and the Netherlands also considering similar measures, there are fears the Schengen system could collapse, even though its rules do allow states to impose temporary controls for security reasons.

New figures from the EU's Frontex border agency meanwhile showed more than half a million people had arrived in the year to August 31 -- almost double last year's total.

1 in 50 Syrian refugees are ISIS jihadists!

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One in 50 Syrian refugees entering Europe could be member of Isis, a Lebanese government minister has claimed.

Elias Bou Saab, the country's education minister, suggested as many as two per cent of refugees from Syria may be jihadis sent by the so-called Islamic State.

Saab said he had no firm information on terrorist infiltration of refugees, but said his "gut feeling" told him it was happening.

Asked if ISIS could be sending militants under the guise of being refugees, Mr Saab said: "Yes, they bring some people, the smugglers. They organise groups and send them out."

Groups were arriving from Syria which looked different to usual refugees, he said: "They are all dressed with something unified, uniform, vests".

Saab made the comments while travelling with Prime Minister David Cameron on a visit to Lebanon and Jordan.

Saab's comments follow warnings from Pope Francis and UKIP leader Nigel Farage that ISIS fighters could enter Europe hidden among the large numbers of refugees and migrants.

The Pope told Portuguese radio station Radio Renascença: "The truth is that just 400 kilometres from Sicily there is an incredibly cruel terrorist group. So there is a danger of infiltration, this is true."

Putin pledges Syria military aid

BBC ONLINE

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday pledged continued military support for Syria's Bashar al-Assad despite growing concerns over Moscow's role in the war.

Putin urged other countries to join Russia in sending "military-technical assistance".

He said the influx of refugees to Europe would have been "even bigger" without Russian support for Syria's government.

The US and its Western allies oppose President Assad, and say that backing him risks prolonging the conflict.

But Moscow has been a key ally of Assad during the bloody civil war, which began in 2011.

It says military equipment is being sent to Syria to help the government combat the so-called Islamic State.

President Putin yesterday said: "We support the government of Syria... in countering the terrorist aggression."

"We provide and will continue to provide it with the necessary military technical assistance. And we urge other countries to join us."

Speaking at defence summit in Tajikistan, Putin also said the situation in Syria would have been "worse than in Libya" had Russia not been supporting its leadership.

Putin's comments come after the US expressed concern at Russia's recent movements near Syria's coastal city of Latakia.

Pentagon spokesman Jeff Davis said on Monday that a steady flow of people and equipment suggested that Moscow was planning to establish a "forward air operating base" there.

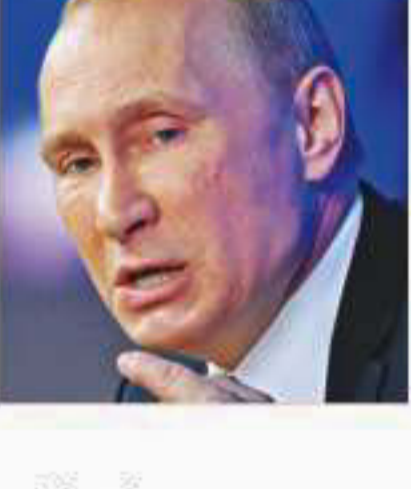
US officials also fear that the stepped-up Russian support will strengthen the Syrian government at a time when it has been losing on the battlefield and will complicate efforts to find a political solution, the BBC's Barbara Plett Usher in New York reports.

Russia has denied building up their presence in Syria, although Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said last week that Russia would send more help to Syria if requested.

Last week, officials in Washington quoted by Reuters said Moscow had sent more aircraft and two tank landing ships to Russia's naval base in the Syrian coastal city of Tartus.

They also said a small number of naval infantry forces had been deployed.

The war between President Assad's regime and various rebel groups has so far killed at least 240,000 people and displaced millions.



North Korea restarts plutonium reactor

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday confirmed the restarting of a nuclear reactor seen as its main source of weapons-grade plutonium, raising the second red flag in 24 hours over its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes.

The confirmation, by the head of the North's Atomic Energy Institute (AEI), came hard on the heels of suggestions by the chief of the national space agency of a possible satellite rocket launch next month.

Analysts said the two statements were clearly coordinated and partially aimed at raising tensions to place North Korea firmly on the agenda of an expected US-China summit later this month.

In an interview with the North's official KCNA news agency, the director of the AEI said all facilities at the Yongbyon nuclear complex -- including a five-megawatt reactor -- had "started normal operations".

North Korea mothballed the Yongbyon reactor in 2007 under a six-nation aid-for-disarmament accord, but began renovating it after its last nuclear test in 2013.

When fully operational, the reactor is capable of producing around six kilos (13 pounds) of plutonium a year -- enough for one nuclear bomb, experts say.

South Korea, the United States and Japan all warned yesterday that any fresh launch would violate UN resolutions banning the North from using ballistic missile technology.

RELIGIOUS TENSIONS

Int'l powers raise alarm ahead of Myanmar polls

AFP, Yangon

The United States, Japan and other major powers yesterday raised fears that rising religious tensions in Myanmar could spark "division and conflict" as campaigning begins for historic elections.

Myanmar goes to the polls on November 8 in what many hope will be its freest vote in generations after decades of army rule, with Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party widely tipped to make huge gains.

But religious tensions are spiking in the Buddhist-majority country, which has seen sporadic outbursts of often deadly religious unrest in recent years, with minority Muslims facing increasing political exclusion as the influence of nationalist monks grows.

"We, as international partners invested in the success of this country and these elections, are concerned about the prospect of religion being used as a tool of division and conflict during the campaign season," the statement said.

It was signed by the embassies of Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Norway, Japan, Sweden, Britain and the US.

In March Myanmar revoked temporary identification documents -- a move affecting hundreds of thousands of Rohingya, who have since been stripped of voting rights after parliament banned people without full citizenship from voting.

Suu Kyi has accused opponents of "using religion" against her NLD party.

But neither her opposition or the ruling party has put forward any Muslim candidates for the polls, despite the minority making up some four percent of the population.



Lebanese activists overturn garbage containers to block the entry to the ministry of Environment demanding the resignation of the Minister in downtown Beirut, yesterday. Lebanon's cabinet approved a plan on September 10 to end a trash crisis that sparked unprecedented protests targeting the country's stagnant political class. PHOTO: AFP

Whitney Houston 'hologram' to tour next yr

A 3D moving image of the late singer Whitney Houston is being developed by a US entertainment firm. It is working with the Houston estate and hopes to tour the product in 2016.

Hologram USA has patented what it calls a "high-tech version" of a 16th century illusion called Pepper's Ghost. It can cost "millions of dollars" to develop an image of a deceased star. The company told the BBC that members of the public often enquire about being turned into a 3D moving image too.

"I'm not sure if any have pursued it... for most people the cost is prohibitive," said head of marketing Owen Phillips. The traditional Pepper's Ghost illusion involves foil and glass, to which Hologram USA has added a patented blend of computer generated images (CGI), moving parts and audio material.

In its stable of so-called "holograms" are classic acts such as Patsy Cline, Frank Sinatra and Liberace. However boring celebrities need not apply. "We look for stars with great stories," said Phillips. "There needs to be a strong narrative around the shows."

The Houston family is supporting the digital reincarnation of the late singer.

Pat Houston, Whitney's sister and president of her estate, said: "It's a great opportunity for her fans to see a reinvention of one of the most celebrated female artists in history and to continue a legacy of performances that will not be forgotten in years to come."



'Shrine blast revenge for trafficking crackdown' Says Thai police chief

REUTERS, Bangkok

The perpetrators of last month's deadly Bangkok bombing were members of a network that trafficked Uighur Muslims and launched the attack in anger with Thailand's crackdown on the trade, police said yesterday.

No group has claimed responsibility for the Aug 17 bombing at the Erawan Shrine that killed 20 people, an attack police chief Somyot Pumpanmuang ruled out as revenge for Thailand's forced repatriation in July of 109 Uighurs to China.

Thai official statements on the possible motive have been sketchy and Somyot did not say what evidence investigators were basing their latest assessment on. "It's about a human trafficking network that has been destroyed," he told reporters.

Somyot said the Bangkok bomb and the ransacking of the Thai consulate in Istanbul - which occurred the day after the deportation - were "for the same reason: illegal human migration, with an origin here and destination Turkey."

"The cause of the bombing ... Simply speaking, we destroyed their operation and they are angry," he said. The ransacking of the consulate was widely seen as a response to the deportation of the Uighurs.

Fired for being overweight!

Air India sacks 130 flight attendants

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For years, airlines have penalized luggage for weighing too much. Now at least one carrier is applying that same logic to its flight attendants.

Air India is grounding about 130 of its flight attendants -- mostly women -- because they are overweight, the company announced late last week.

The state-owned airline said the decision was based on safety concerns and recent government regulations, but critics said it was "ridiculous" and "shockingly sexist."

The mass grounding is just the latest in a 10-year-long tug-of-war between the airline and its larger flight attendants. In 2006, Air India grounded nine female flight attendants deemed "exceptionally overweight," the BBC reported. The hostesses sued, but a Delhi court backed up the carrier in 2008.

"It is incredibly upsetting that working women are being targeted," Sheila Joshi, a 51-year-old flight attendant with 27 years of experience, told the Times after the Supreme Court denied her demand to ban the weight limits. "This is not a modelling job; we are not working a catwalk."

"Now, if you are just 10 grams over, it's goodbye," said Joshi, who managed to keep her job after slimming down to less than the 140-pound maximum allowed for her 5-foot-3-inch height.

