

NEWSIN brief

Netanyahu visits Putin over Syria concerns

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met Russian leader Vladimir Putin in Moscow yesterday as Israel frets over a Russian military buildup in Syria. Netanyahu was accompanied by his army and intelligence chiefs in a rare step for an overseas visit that Israel said would focus on Russia's manoeuvring in the war-torn nation.

Pope travels to Castro brothers' home region

Pope Francis headed to Holguin in eastern Cuba yesterday, a cradle of Catholic faith on the island and also the home region of communist leaders Fidel and Raul Castro. Holguin is known for a cross that has overlooked the city from a hilltop since a Franciscan monk hauled it up there in 1790 -- though the original wooden version succumbed to old age and the 1950 replacement was destroyed by lightning.

India calls envoy for talks over Nepal protest

Worried over the continuing violence in Nepal and the impact of Kathmandu's decision to adopt the Constitution despite India's advice, the Ministry of External Affairs yesterday called Indian Ambassador Ranjit Rae to Delhi for consultations. "He is here for a day's consultation, and departs tomorrow forenoon," a senior official confirmed to The Hindu.

Singapore jails nurse for 'seditious' posts

A Singapore court yesterday sentenced a Filipino nurse to four months in prison for posting inflammatory comments on Facebook against Singaporeans and lying to police investigators. Ello Ed Mundsel Bello, 29, a former employee of government-run Tan Tock Seng Hospital, had posted comments insulting Singaporeans and calling for the takeover of the city-state by his countrymen.

Coalition strikes kill 30 in north Yemen

At least 30 people were killed in air strikes by a Saudi-led alliance on a Houthi-held security compound in northern Yemen yesterday, medical sources and officials said, in an escalating campaign that has claimed increasing civilian lives. Gulf Arab forces and supporters of exiled President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi appear to be making scant progress in a ground offensive against Houthi forces who control the capital Sanaa.



Clockwise from left: Migrants are stopped by the police during their walk towards Greek border on a motorway near Istanbul yesterday. Turkish volunteers living in Berlin give away water bottles and snacks to migrants queuing at the compound outside the Berlin Office of Health and Social Affairs for their registration. Volunteers clean up a train station in Tovarnik, Croatia.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Plea for 'united Europe' on migration

Hungarian army given sweeping powers against refugees

AGENCIES

Hungary's prime minister has called for a "united European stance" on migration at the start of a week of intense diplomatic activity.

Viktor Orban urged consensus, saying migrants were "breaking the doors" and "millions" could reach Europe. Germany and France want migrants shared out more evenly across the EU. EU interior ministers are to meet today, with leaders convening for an extraordinary summit the following day.

The head of EU border protection agency Frontex yesterday urged more support from member states, warning that "the speed and dynamics of the refugee influx continues to be exceptionally high".

"What I can say with certainty is that we need more personnel support from countries -- people we can deploy on the spot, and we need them now," said Fabrice Leggeri.

Meanwhile, Hungary's parliament approved with a two-thirds majority yesterday giving the army and police sweeping new powers to prevent

illegal migrants crossing the border, including giving troops the right to use weapons.

Eastern European ministers gathering today will once again voice their opposition to compulsory migrant quotas, as countries creaking under the strain of a steady stream of refugees

DEVELOPMENTS

Germany urges Europe to pick up refugees from crisis regions

Finland experiences its biggest influx of refugees

Poland can take in more refugees than quota

struggle to agree on common action.

The talks in Prague between the foreign ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Latvia with their counterpart from Luxembourg, which holds the EU presidency, will try to address the deep divide between European countries over how to share out some 120,000 refugees.

EU ministers are considering a watered down plan to relocate 120,000 refugees throughout the bloc, which drops binding quotas and leaves Hungary out of the scheme, sources said yesterday.

Germany's interior minister yesterday urged Europe to pick up refugees directly from crisis regions, to help them bypass traffickers who charge huge sums for dangerous journeys to the continent, reports AFP.

Finland is experiencing its biggest influx of refugees since the Russian Revolution with hundreds of migrants arriving each day via Sweden, but their presence is angering some in the recession-hit country.

The Hungarian government placed advertisements in the Lebanese press yesterday warning of "the strongest possible action" against anyone attempting to cross its borders illegally.

Poland's foreign minister yesterday said Warsaw was able to take in more refugees than its share of over 9,000 under the European Union quota plan but would like to see the bloc's borders sealed.

EU welcomes Tsipras victory

Says no 'time to lose' on Greek reforms

AFP, Brussels

European Commission head Jean-Claude Juncker yesterday congratulated Alexis Tsipras on his left-wing party's reelection victory and said Greece has "no time to lose" in implementing the reforms agreed as part of its bailout.

"On behalf of the European Commission, I would like to congratulate you on the electoral results of last night," Juncker said in a letter to Tsipras, released to journalists.

"I am confident that this provides the basis for your new government to be formed swiftly and to use the democratic mandate to move forward" on implementing the three-year bailout deal agreed in August.

Juncker warned Tsipras of "the urgent need to operationalise the management of the refugee crisis," in which Greece is on the frontlines, with tens of thousands of migrants flowing inside its borders.

Juncker said that Tsipras could count on the "commission and me personally, to stand by Greece and support the new government in its efforts."

"There is a lot of work ahead and no time to lose," he added.

Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council which is hosting the summit, also congratulated Tsipras.

"I hope that the elections will now provide for the political stability necessary to face all the challenges at hand," Tusk wrote in a letter to Tsipras.

Earlier a commission spokesman said Greece's creditors -- the EU, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund -- were expected to meet in the next few weeks to conduct a review aimed at releasing new funds under the bailout deal.

New Aussie PM defends reshuffle

Calls for more women MPs in parliament

AFP, Canberra

New Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull yesterday defended his major cabinet shake-up and said if the percentage of women in parliament had been higher he could have appointed more to key roles.

One week after deposing Tony Abbott in a swift, internal Liberal Party coup, Turnbull pleaded the case for renewal in his first television interview as leader after clearing out a raft of senior conservatives and appointing many of his own moderate supporters.

He upped the number of women in cabinet from two to five in a move seen as a significant change in style and tone for the unpopular government, with Marise Payne notably becoming the country's first female defence minister.



The New South Wales senator had held the low profile post of human services minister. "Leaders have to make sure that there is renewal," Turnbull told Channel Nine.

"And that's why you have seen so many new faces in the cabinet, so many more women, so many more younger people."

Turnbull said he thought having two women cabinet ministers out of 19, as Abbott did, was "not enough".

"It would be good if it were more but as you know the percentage of women in the parliament itself is not as high as it should be," he said.

Turnbull on Sunday removed treasurer Joe Hockey, defence minister Kevin Andrews, employment minister Eric Abetz, industry minister Ian Macfarlane and popular small business minister Bruce Bilson.



Myanmar pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi greets her supporters as she passes in front of the Union Solidarity and Development Party office during her campaign in Kawhmu township outside Yangon yesterday. Suu Kyi urged supporters to check their names on voter lists as her opposition party raised the alarm over "chaos" in electoral rolls just weeks before historic polls.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Support for Japan's Abe sags: poll

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese public support for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has dropped in the days since his ruling coalition rammed through legislation allowing the nation's troops to fight abroad, opinion polls showed yesterday.

A weekend poll taken by the top-selling, centre-right newspaper Yomiuri Shimbun showed that public support for the Abe government dropped four points to 41 percent compared with a similar survey taken in mid-August.

Its disapproval rating rose six points to 51 percent, the Yomiuri said.

More ISIS defectors speaking out: report

AFP, London

A growing number of "disillusioned" Islamic State fighters are defecting from the jihadist group and could be used by governments to deter potential recruits, a report published yesterday said.

At least 58 people have left the group and publicly spoken about their defection since January 2014, according to the report by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) at King's College London.

The study said that 17 fighters were reported to have defected in June, July and August alone, adding that they represent only a "small fraction" of former fighters, with many too scared to come forward.

The ICSR called on governments to make it easier for defectors to speak out, without the threat of prosecution, as a deterrent to others.

Those who told their stories overwhelmingly said they were disaffected by the killing of fellow Sunni Muslims, including innocent civilians, and the group's failure to confront the regime of President Bashar Al-Assad.

"The defectors' voices are strong and clear: 'IS is not protecting Muslims. It is killing them,'" the report said.



One defector, identified as Ebrahim B., from Germany, claimed to speak for two dozen of his comrades who travelled to Syria to fight Assad only to be disappointed by the reality on the ground.

"Muslims are fighting Muslims. Assad's forgotten about. The whole jihad was turned upside down," the report cited him as saying.

IS leaders consider the Free Syrian Army, Ahrar al-Sham, and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra as enemies and have engaged in "vicious battles" with all of them, according to the report.

But many defectors argued that fighting other Sunni groups was "wrong, counterproductive and religiously illegitimate", it said, adding that this "was not the kind of jihad they had come to Syria and Iraq to fight."

The defectors mentioned in the report were permanent residents of 17 countries, including nine from Western Europe and Australia.

Dozens of defectors have fled to Turkey while others have reportedly been executed as "spies" or "traitors" by IS, which considers defection as apostasy.

PALESTINIAN LEADERSHIP New uncertainty looms over Abbas succession

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

With more than two decades of trying to secure an independent Palestinian state through negotiations at a hopeless dead end, the ageing Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas now hopes to begin scaling down his responsibilities, with a view towards an orderly succession of power.

But after a decade in which Abbas failed to groom a deputy or successor, in keeping with a tradition of one-man rule in the Arab world and in order to cast himself as indispensable, analysts in the West Bank and Gaza do not expect the transition to be smooth. Indeed, the sense in the Palestinian Authority's de facto capital, Ramallah, is that the lack of any one outstanding candidate to

succeed Abbas, and infighting within his Fatah movement, promise to make the process tortuous, chaotic, dangerous and perhaps unworkable.

Nabil Shaath, a long-time adviser to Abbas and a former foreign minister who now serves as Fatah's foreign relations commissioner, told The Independent: "He thinks it's about time he reduces his load but he is responsible enough not to leave things behind in a way that disturbs matters. Shaath stressed that Abbas, 80, was not contemplating, for now, relinquishing his most powerful post, the presidency of the Palestinian Authority, but does want to give up his positions as head of the PLO executive committee and of Fatah, the ruling party, provided this can be done in a smooth way.

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Boko Haram blasts kill 54 in Nigeria

AFP, Maiduguri

At least 54 people were killed in a series of blasts in the northeast Nigerian city of Maiduguri, police said yesterday, the latest attacks by Boko Haram militants on "soft" civilian targets.

The attacks targeted the Ajilari Cross evening market area and neighbouring Gomari, hitting worshippers at a mosque and football fans watching a televised match.

The army and rescuers said the explosions were caused by homemade devices but one local and the police said a female suicide bomber also blew herself up.

"Fifty-four persons died while 90 others were injured," Borno state police spokesman Victor Isuku told reporters.

"Those injured are being treated at Umaru Shehu General hospital and the (Borno) State Specialist hospital respectively."

Locals however, put the death toll at least 21. The blasts -- the latest to hit the city in the six-year insurgency -- came after Nigeria's army claimed the rebels were in disarray.

But Boko Haram's shadowy leader Abubakar Shekau denied the group was a spent force, describing the military claims as "lies" in an audio recording published via social media on Saturday.

Samples taken at Iran military site

Says UN nuke watchdog

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday said it recently collected samples at a military site where illicit nuclear work is alleged to have occurred and handed them to UN monitors who were not present.

The disclosure is likely to anger critics of the nuclear deal Iran struck with world powers in July, who have poured scorn on measures put in place to verify that the Islamic republic's atomic programme is peaceful.

It also drew a quick reaction from the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), whose chief said that "the integrity of the sampling process and the authenticity of the samples" was not compromised.

The samples, on which no details were given, were taken under "established procedures", IAEA director general Yukiya Amano said, noting that "significant progress" was being made in its long-running probe that Iran had sought to develop nuclear weapons in the past.

The site at Parchin has been at the centre of international scepticism of Iran's activities, specifically that as late as 2003 it carried out work there aimed at building an atomic bomb.