

NEWS IN BRIEF

Kiwis set to choose their new flag
BBC ONLINE

New Zealanders have begun voting in the second stage of a referendum on whether to change their national flag. They have until 24 March to send in a postal ballot choosing between the current flag and an alternative called Silver Fern, which won a previous vote. PM John Key says the current one looks too similar to Australia's and it is time to remove the Union Flag.

50,000 died in S Sudan war in 2 years: UN
REUTERS, United Nations

At least 50,000 people have been killed in South Sudan's two-year civil war, a senior United Nations official said on Wednesday, a five-fold increase in the death toll given by humanitarian agencies in the early months of the conflict. A political dispute between President Salva Kiir and his former deputy, Riek Machar, sparked the war in December 2013, which has reopened ethnic fault lines between Kiir's Dinka and Machar's Nuer people.

7 burnt to death over 'witchcraft' in Malawi
INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A gang reportedly burned seven men to death for allegedly possessing human bones intended for use in witchcraft. The incensed mob in the Nsanje district of Malawi are said to have attacked the suspects then set them on fire using petrol. The region has seen a big increase in the trade of body parts, and those from albinos in particular are thought to possess special powers which can bring good luck.



Kashmiri Muslim villagers shout slogans during the funeral of a suspected militant in Charsoo village in south Kashmir, yesterday. Inset, Women wail during the funeral. Three suspected militants were killed Wednesday in a gunbattle with Indian security forces.



PHOTO: REUTERS

SOUTH CHINA SEA ROW US plans naval drills with India, Japan

REUTERS, New Delhi
India, the United States and Japan will hold naval exercises in waters off the northern Philippines near the South China Sea this year, the US military said on Wednesday, a move likely to further raise tensions with China.

The announcement comes a day after the United States warned China against militarisation of the South China Sea, where Beijing is locked in a territorial dispute with several countries, saying there would be consequences.

Admiral Harry B Harris, head of the US Pacific Command, said the naval exercise will be held in the northern Philippine Sea and that Japan will take part. Freedom of the seas was a fundamental right of all nations, he told a security conference in New Delhi, adding some thinly veiled criticism of Beijing.

"While some countries seek to bully smaller nations through intimidation and coercion, I note with admiration India's example of peaceful resolution of disputes with your neighbours in the waters of the Indian Ocean," he said.

Asked about the drills, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said: "We hope the cooperation of relevant countries will benefit regional peace and security, and not harm the interests of third parties".

Last year, India and the United States expanded their annual naval drills in the Bay of Bengal to include Japan after a gap of eight years.

Tensions in the South China Sea have risen recently, with the United States and others protesting against Beijing's land reclamations in the Spratly islands, along with the deployment of missiles and fighter jets in the Paracel Islands.

India most secular country

Says Rajnath Singh, Modi slams opposition over parliament disruptions

AGENCIES

India's Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh yesterday said India is the most secular country in the world despite its diversity and the fact that people of all faiths live here.

"If there is any secular country in the world, it is India," the Home minister told the Rajya Sabha while responding to a calling attention motion on alleged inflammatory speeches by Union ministers and elected representatives in violation of the Constitution and oath of office.

"India is the only country in the world where people of all faiths live," he said, adding that "not only this, all major sects of all religions, including Islam and Christianity, are found here, which is not the case with any other country".

The minister also called upon all political parties to join hands in protecting India's unity and integrity, reports IANS.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday reached out to the opposition, saying he needs their support for "improvement" in his government, even as he attacked the Congress over disruptions in Parliament while skipping the raging issues like JNU and Dalit student's



suicide, reports PTI.

"This government also needs improvement which cannot happen without your help. I am new, you are experienced. I need the benefit of your experience. Governments will come and go. Let us work shoulder to shoulder," Modi said while replying to a

debate on Motion of Thanks to the President's address which was approved later in Lok Sabha.

Slamming the Congress for disrupting parliament and stalling bills, he said the main opposition party was doing so because of "inferiority complex" of its top leaders. He also invoked the statements made by Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and first President Rajendra Prasad by reading out their statements against stalling of legislative business.

He deplored the 'tu tu, mai mai' (blame game) attitude by political parties for "scoring points", saying the officialdom rejoices over this and nation suffers.

He said a democratic country like India cannot be left at the mercy of the bureaucracy as he sought to underline the importance of the Legislature, saying even a single MP of any party should be treated like "Prime Minister".

Delhi govt probe clears JNU students of sedition charges

Finds no evidence; Kanhaiya Kumar released from jail

NDTV ONLINE

There is no evidence that Kanhaiya Kumar, the president of the students' union at Delhi's prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), raised anti-national slogans at an event on February 9 to mark the anniversary of the hanging of Parliament attack convict Afzal Guru, the Delhi government report says. No witness had been found to such utterances by the student either, said the report.

In video footage, Umar Khalid is heard urging "Kashmiris keep fighting, we are with you". The report said his views on Kashmir and Afzal are well-known.

Two more students, Anirban Bhattacharya and Ashutosh, "possibly" raised slogans in support of Afzal Guru, the police said quoting security staff of JNU or Jawaharlal Nehru University.

The Delhi government inquiry also calls for an investigation into "outsiders of Kashmir descent" seen in the video, their faces covered, shouting anti-India slogans.

Meanwhile, Kanhaiya Kumar, who is accused of sedition, was released from Tihar jail this evening amid high security and celebrations by supporters in New Delhi.

The Delhi High Court had granted him interim bail for six months late last evening, imposing conditions that include an undertaking that he will not take part in any unlawful or 'anti-national' activities. His lawyers reached Tihar Jail in the evening and handed over the release order to jail officials.

The arrests have sparked massive protests across India, with many accusing the government of cracking down on dissent and free speech.

Two other students, Umar Khalid and Anirban Bhattacharya, also accused of



Kanhaiya Kumar

Court orders \$1m in damages to victims

REUTERS, Bogota

A Guatemalan court on Wednesday ordered two former military officers convicted of holding indigenous women as sex slaves during the nation's civil war to pay their victims just over \$1 million in compensation.

The 11 Mayan women, many in their 70s and 80s, testified during the historic trial about being raped at the Sepur Zarco military base, where they were forced to cook and clean for the soldiers.

Estelmer Reyes Giron, a lieutenant colonel, and Heriberto Valdez Asij, a civilian with links to the army, were sentenced last Friday to a total of 360 years in prison for holding the women as sex slaves at the military base as well as murder and forced disappearances dating back to the early 1980s.

The court in Guatemala City on Wednesday ordered Reyes, former commander of the base, to pay \$65,000 to each victim, and Valdez to pay \$32,000 to each victim and to the families of seven men who had disappeared.

WARTIME SEX SLAVERY IN GUATEMALA



forces had been convicted of wartime sexual slavery. Paula Barrios, a Guatemalan lawyer, said the court also ordered state authorities to build a school, health clinic and give land titles in the names of the victims and also to investigate forced disappearances.

"We are very happy with today's decision about the reparations awarded and the sentencing of these men," said Carmen, one of victims who testified at court.

"It's been a long search for the truth. It's very important for Mayan women to get justice," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation through a Q'eqchi' Mayan language interpreter.

About 200,000 people died and 45,000 others disappeared during Guatemala's civil war that lasted from 1960 to 1996.

A United Nations-backed Truth Commission set up under the 1996 peace accords concluded that the military was responsible for more than 85 percent of human rights violations during the war, many of them against Mayan Indians.

But until now, no members of Guatemala's armed

CPM chief targets Smriti Irani

Moves privilege motion against her in Rajya Sabha

PTI, New Delhi

CPM general secretary Sitarum Yechury has moved a privilege motion against Union HRD minister Smriti Irani accusing her of making "baseless allegations" against him on Hindu Goddess Durga issue.

In a letter to Rajya Sabha Chairman yesterday, Yechury sought protection from the Chair, saying he was being "innundated with phone calls and messages full of profanity, obscenity and threats to him on the basis of allegations and calumny" spread against him in the House during the proceedings on February 26.

"During the discussions on February 26, HRD minister made completely baseless allegations against me imputing motives that are completely false. These allegations suggest that I had made some comments denigrating the Hindu Goddess Durga.

"There is absolutely no reference of anything of this nature in the course of the long discussions in the House. Such totally baseless allegations have had the incendiary affect of resulting in the threats, intimidation and harassment that I continue to be subjected to," Yechury said in his letter.

The CPM leader said the "baseless and completely unfounded allegations by the minister against me on the floor of the House has led to a barrage of threatening calls to me".

Seeking Chair's intervention in the matter, Yechury said, "Considering the grievous nature of such allegations and since they were made on the floor of the House and recorded as part of the proceedings, I am seeking your intervention to ensure the protection of my rights and privi-

Sri Lanka bans landmines 7 yrs after ethnic war

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's government yesterday announced it would ban landmines and promised to destroy its stockpiles of the explosive devices, nearly seven years after its protracted civil war ended.

Deputy Foreign Minister Harsha de Silva said the cabinet had decided to sign the 1997 UN treaty which banned anti-personnel mines.

"We decided to sign the Ottawa Convention because we have no intention of going to war again," de Silva told reporters in Colombo.

"We have also agreed to destroy stockpiles of landmines," he said. He did not say what quantities of the explosives remained in the military's hands.

Sri Lanka had previously refused to become a signatory to the treaty.

Pakistan admits housing Afghan Taliban leaders

THE DAWN ONLINE

For years, Pakistan has denied that the Afghan Taliban enjoys a safe haven on its soil or that Islamabad could do anything to end their violent campaign in Afghanistan that has seen tens of thousands of Afghan civilians and international troops killed since 2002.

But in an unusually candid admission, Sartaj Aziz, Adviser to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs, says that Islamabad has considerable influence over the Taliban because its leaders live in the country.

"We have some influence over them because their leadership is in Pakistan and they get some medical facilities. Their families are here," he said. "We can use those levers to pressurise them to say, 'Come to the table'. But we can't negotiate on behalf of the Afghan government because we cannot offer them what the Afghan government can offer them."

Aziz made the comments at Washington's Council on Foreign Relations think tank on March 1. He

added that Islamabad pressured Afghan Taliban leaders to participate in the first-ever direct talks with the Afghan government on July 7, 2015.

"We have to use these levers and [have] restricted their movements, restricted their access to hospitals and other facilities, and threatened them that 'If you don't come forward and talk, we will at least expel you,'" he said of the tough message Islamabad sent to Taliban leaders, most of whom are believed to be operating out of Quetta, the capital of south-western Balochistan Province.

"[We told the Taliban leaders that] we have hosted [them] enough for 35 years, and we can't do it anymore because the whole world is blaming us just by [their] presence here," he said.

Pakistan, Afghanistan, the United States, and China last week agreed on a road map to end the Afghan war through negotiations between Kabul and the Taliban.

Taliban representatives are expected to join Afghan officials in the first round of peace talks in Pakistan during the next few weeks.



Sartaj Aziz

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