

Nepal agrees fuel deal with China

Seeks to reduce its reliance on India

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal has secured a deal for China to supply it with fuel, as the energy-starved Himalayan nation seeks to deepen ties with Beijing and reduce its reliance on India.

The agreement was signed during a visit by Nepali Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli to Beijing, following months of frosty relations with New Delhi, traditionally the sole supplier of fuel to landlocked Nepal.

"Both sides agreed to conclude a commercial deal on the supply of petroleum products from China to Nepal", the two countries said in a joint statement released in Beijing on Wednesday, without giving further details.

Nepal's acute dependence on India was underscored by a recent months-long border blockade by demonstrators from its Madhesi minority, who were protesting against a new constitution. The slow movement of cargo at checkpoints where no protests were taking place prompted Kathmandu to accuse New Delhi, which has close links to the Madhesis, of imposing an "unofficial blockade", a charge India denied.

The blockade, which ended last month, sparked severe shortages of gas, medicines and other vital supplies and forced Nepal to turn to its only other neighbour, China for emergency fuel.

China has also agreed to build oil storage facilities for Nepal, the joint statement said. In October Nepal signed a memorandum of understanding with China National United Oil Corporation, its first ever fuel agreement with China, as the shortages led to overnight queues at gas stations.



US President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle dance tango during a state dinner hosted by Argentina's President Mauricio Macri at the Centro Cultural Kirchner as part of President Obama's two-day visit to Argentina, in Buenos Aires, on Wednesday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Debris 'almost certainly from MH370'

AFP, Sydney

Two pieces of debris found in Mozambique are "almost certainly from MH370", Australia and Malaysia said yesterday, after technical analysis provided fresh clues to the fate of the missing Malaysia Airlines aircraft.

Until the latest discoveries, only a wing part recovered from a beach on the Indian Ocean island of La Reunion, which lies east of Mozambique, had been confirmed as coming from the plane that disappeared two years ago.

"The analysis has concluded the debris is almost certainly from MH370," Transport Minister Darren Chester said, adding that investigators had found the pieces were consistent with panels from a Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777 aircraft.

"That such debris has been found on the east coast of Africa is consistent with drift modelling performed by (national science body) CSIRO and further affirms our search efforts in the southern Indian Ocean."

The two pieces are a flat grey fragment with the words "No Step" printed along one side, found on a sandbank, and a metre-long piece of metal picked up by a holidaymaker.

Malaysia's Transport Minister Liow Tiong Lai said investigators had advised that the "dimensions, materials and construction" of both parts conformed to Boeing 777 specifications, while the "paint and stenciling on both parts match those used by Malaysia Airlines (MAS)".

Australia is leading the search for MH370 in the remote Indian Ocean, where the Kuala Lumpur-Beijing flight is believed to have diverted when it disappeared on March 8, 2014 carrying 239 passengers and crew.

Another piece of debris yet to be identified as coming from the missing jet was picked up near Mossel Bay, a small town in Western Cape province, South African authorities said Tuesday. They did not reveal when it was found.

War on IS gathers steam

Syria army enters Palmyra as Iraq begins major offensive to recapture Mosul

AFP, Damascus

Syrian troops yesterday entered the ancient city of Palmyra and Iraqi forces launched an offensive against Mosul as pressure mounted on key strongholds of the Islamic State group.

US Secretary of State John Kerry was meanwhile holding talks in Moscow to push for peace efforts in Syria, from where IS has claimed attacks on the West including this week's bombings in Brussels.

Backed by Russian warplanes and allied militia on the ground, the Syrian army advanced into Palmyra yesterday after launching a desert offensive early this month, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group said.

IS overran Palmyra -- known as the "Pearl of the Desert" -- last May and it has since blown up UNESCO-listed temples and looted relics that dated back thousands of years.

"Regime forces have entered the Hayy al-Gharf neighbourhood in

the southwest of Palmyra. They are advancing very slowly because of mines planted by IS," Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP.

A Syrian military source confirmed the advance into the city,



saying the army had entered from the northwest after seizing control of part of the historic Valley of the Tombs. "The clashes, which are ongoing, are fierce," he told AFP.

Syria's antiquities chief Maamoun Abdelkarim hailed the

"imminent" recapture of Palmyra, vowing to rebuild monuments the jihadists destroyed.

Across the border, Iraqi forces announced the start of an offensive to retake the second city of Mosul, IS's main hub in Iraq.

It said four villages had been taken between the town of Qayyarah, which is held by IS, and Makhmur, where US-backed Iraqi forces have been massing in recent weeks.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi issued a statement congratulating the fighters for "launching the operation to retake Nineveh and achieving their first success with the recapture of some villages."

In Moscow, Kerry was to see if President Vladimir Putin could be convinced to support an end to Assad's rule in Syria, as the regime and opposition hold negotiations in Geneva.

He met his counterpart Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and was later to head to the Kremlin for rare talks with Putin. "I know that many people are very hopeful, Sergei," Kerry said in brief remarks before the talks. Tuesday's bombings in Brussels "underscore the urgency" of fighting IS and other extremist organisations, he added.

N Korea claims new missile breakthrough

South Korea on high alert

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea successfully tested a solid-fuel engine that boosted the power of its ballistic rockets, state media reported yesterday, as South Korea's president ordered the military to be ready to respond to the North's "reckless provocation".

Pyeongyang's claim indicates it is continuing to develop an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) at a rapid pace in defiance of UN sanctions, and amid assessment by the South's officials that it could conduct a new nuclear test at any time.

The Rodong Sinnum, the North's ruling party newspaper, carried photos of leader Kim Jong Un on site as a rocket engine laid horizontally on the ground emitted a fiery blast. A two-page report detailed the testing of the engine's structure and thrust.

"He noted with great pleasure that the successful test... helped boost the power of ballistic rockets capable of mercilessly striking hostile forces," KCNA news agency said.

The North said last week it had conducted a successful simulated test of atmospheric re-entry of a ballistic missile, and would soon test ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

On Wednesday, the North repeated the threat to attack the South's presidential office, saying its large-caliber multiple rocket launch systems are on alert to strike the Blue House and its special operations unit is ready to go into action.

The isolated state has in recent weeks stepped up bellicose rhetoric, threatening pre-emptive nuclear strikes against Washington and Seoul, as well as making claims of advancement in its weapons technology.



Pope more popular than world leaders

BBC ONLINE

Pope Francis is more popular than any political world leader, an opinion poll has suggested. The poll by WIN/Gallup International indicates that Roman Catholics and Jews have the most favourable opinion of the Pope.

More than half of the world's protestants and even the majority of atheists and agnostics view him favourably. About 1,000 people were questioned in 64 countries.

BBC religious affairs correspondent Caroline Wyatt says that, three years into his papacy, Francis has enjoyed enormous goodwill and won the hearts and minds not just of Roman Catholics but also of people from other religions and the non-religious.

Those taking part in the poll were asked: "Irrespective of your own religion, do you have a very favourable, somewhat favourable, somewhat unfavourable or very unfavourable opinion of Pope Francis?"

The Pope was most popular with Roman Catholics, of whom 85% said they had a favourable opinion of him, and among Jews questioned the figure was 65%. Among the 64 countries polled, Portugal and the Philippines were most enthusiastic, with 94% and 93% thinking favourably of the Pope respectively.

Video shows wounded Palestinian shot in head

AFP, Jerusalem

An Israeli soldier was detained yesterday after allegedly shooting a wounded Palestinian assailant in the head and killing him as he lay on the ground, with a video of the incident spreading widely online.

The video showed the Palestinian, who along with another man had allegedly stabbed a soldier in the West Bank city of Hebron yesterday, lying on the ground after being shot.

The soldier then appears to shoot him again in the head without provocation. An army spokeswoman called the incident a "grave breach of (military) values," adding that an investigation had begun and "the soldier involved has been detained".

She said the investigation began before the video surfaced online. Palestinian health minister Jawad Awwad called it a "war crime," saying that even prior to the shooting medics on site were not treating the wounded man.

The alleged stabbing and shooting came amid a wave of violence since October that

has left 200 Palestinians and 28 Israelis dead. Most of the Palestinians killed were carrying out knife, gun or car-ramming attacks, according to Israeli authorities.

But Israeli forces have also been accused of using excessive force in some cases, which they have firmly denied. In the video, the man who appears to be seriously injured is lying on the ground while Israeli medics treat the injured soldier.

It then purports to show an Israeli soldier nearby raising his rifle and shooting the Palestinian in the head. The Palestinian was identified as 21-year-old Abdul Fatah al-Sharif. The video spread widely and sparked condemnation.

Sarit Michaeli, a spokeswoman for Israeli rights group B'Tselem, which posted the video, called it an "execution".

"It is clear that the Palestinian youth who was one of the two who stabbed the soldier was lying on the ground without posing any risk to security services," she told AFP.

"The security personnel around him are not treating him in any way like he is a danger. The soldier is simply seen shooting him in the head."



A Palestinian woman speaks with an Israeli soldier at the scene of an attack in which two Palestinians wounded an Israeli soldier in a knife attack before being shot dead by troops in the city centre of the West Bank town of Hebron yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Asia most exposed to natural disasters

Study says Africans are most vulnerable, 100pc Bangladeshis are possible victims

AFP, Paris

Countries and mega-cities across Asia are highly exposed to natural hazards ranging from cyclones to earthquakes, but people in sub-Saharan Africa are more vulnerable, according to a report released Wednesday.

Nearly 1.4 billion people in South Asia -- India, Bangladesh, Pakistan -- face at least one major threat from Nature, especially flooding, severe storms boosted by rising seas, and quakes.

In the case of Bangladesh, 100 percent of its population is exposed, compared to 82 percent for India and 70 percent in Pakistan.

China, Indonesia, Japan and the Philippines are also among the nations with the largest numbers of people in harm's way. The United States, Mexico and Brazil round out the top ten.

Verisk Maplecroft.

The capacity to cope with disaster can determine whether a high-magnitude earthquake, for example, will cause hundreds of deaths, as happened in Chile in 2010, or hundreds of thou-



sands, as befell Haiti in the same year.

Nine out of ten countries ranked as most vulnerable to natural hazards in the index are in sub-Saharan Africa, and 23 of 25 are on the continent. South Sudan -- plagued by drought and war -- heads the list of the countries most defenceless

against disaster, followed by Burundi, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Chad, Niger, Sudan, Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

"The frequency and magnitude of natural hazard events cannot be controlled," the report noted.

"But the development and implementation of disaster risk reduction strategies can help minimise the humanitarian and economic impacts."

Among mega-cities, Manila -- facing a triple threat from cyclones, superstorms and earthquakes -- tops the list of urban areas with the highest number of people exposed. Tokyo and Jakarta are in second and third place, with Dongguan in southern China, Dhaka and Kolkata following close behind. Mexico City, Delhi and Sao Paulo all have huge populations exposed to major storms. "This analysis shows that governance is key to lower vulnerability," the report said. Without major reforms and political stability, "countries such as India and the Philippines are unlikely to see improvements in the near term."

New Zealand stays with Union Jack

AFP, Wellington

New Zealanders voted convincingly against a proposal to ditch Britain's Union Jack from the national flag and adopt a silver fern design, official referendum results showed yesterday.

The country's electoral commission said 56.61 percent of voters backed the existing flag, while 43.16 favoured a change.

The results are preliminary but the size of the margin means they are unlikely to change when the final tally is released next Wednesday.

The outcome will likely be viewed as a defeat for Prime Minister John Key, the main advocate for change, who described the existing banner as a colonial relic from the days of British rule.

"New Zealand has voted to retain our current flag. I encourage all NZers to use it, embrace it and, more importantly, be proud of it," he tweeted. The referendum was the culmination of an often-heated 18-month debate which touched on issues of national identity in the South Pacific nation of 4.5 million people. Key called the existing flag a colonial throwback, saying the silver fern used by the All Blacks "screams New Zealand" in the same way the maple leaf identifies Canadians.