

NEWS IN brief

ICC rules 'mistrial' in Kenya Ruto case

Judges at the International Criminal Court declared a mistrial in the case of Kenyan Deputy President William Ruto, throwing out the charges he faced over post-election violence because political interference had made a fair trial impossible.

SA leader survives impeachment vote

South African President Jacob Zuma easily survived an impeachment vote yesterday over a court ruling that he had violated the country's post-apartheid constitution over spending of public funds on his private residence.

UN: Syria peace talks to resume on April 11

Syria peace talks will likely resume in Geneva on April 11, but regime negotiators will only arrive several days later after the completion of parliamentary elections in the country, the UN said yesterday.

Myanmar's Thein Sein 'becomes a monk'

The retired junta general who steered Myanmar's last five years of reforms has temporarily become a monk, according to state media, days after he ceded power to a new government led by Aung San Suu Kyi's pro-democracy party.

WORLD MEDIA REACTION

HERE IS HOW THE STORY WAS COVERED AROUND THE WORLD:

RUSSIA: The opposition newspaper, Novaya Gazeta, carried a seven-page report on details of Vladimir Putin's associates named in the leaks and dedicated a special section of its website to its findings.

SAUDI ARABIA: The King of Saudi Arabia, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, was named in the files that claimed he was linked to offshore firms in the British Virgin Islands and Luxembourg.

SYRIA: Reports on the Panama papers were conspicuously absent from the state-controlled Syrian Arab News Agency, despite two of President Assad's cousins being named in the leaks.

ICELAND: Revelations that the Prime Minister of Iceland set up a company in the British Virgin Islands with his wife was the country's dominant news story on Monday.

INDIA: Reports were largely focusing on two prominent Indian actors, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan and Amitabh Bachchan, and a real estate magnate.

FRANCE: The Le Monde newspaper ran the reports prominently, having been among the media outlets researching the database.

EGYPT: Cairo was focusing on claims about the family of former President Hosni Mubarak. Alaa Mubarak, the ousted leader's son, was linked to an offshore company called Pan World Investments Inc.

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Leak sparks outrage

Russia, China accuse hostile western forces behind leaks

AFP, Paris

World leaders and celebrities exposed in a massive leak of their secret offshore financial dealings are hitting back, saying they have done nothing wrong despite a growing international furore.

Some of the biggest names in the scandal said they were being unfairly targeted even as the scandal mushroomed and a series of countries vowed to open tax evasion investigations following the leak of 11.5 million confidential documents -- the so-called Panama Papers.

The vast stash of records from Panamanian legal firm Mossack Fonseca was obtained from an anonymous source by German daily Sueddeutsche Zeitung and shared with more than 100 media groups by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, which published their first findings Sunday after a year-long probe.

US President Barack Obama yesterday said that the revelations show tax avoidance is a global issue.

Offshore financial dealings are not illegal in themselves but may be used to hide assets from tax authorities, launder the proceeds of criminal activities or conceal misappropriated or politically inconvenient wealth.

In Beijing, there was no official reaction to ICIJ allegations that eight current or former members of the ruling party's most powerful body concealed their fortunes through offshore havens, as well as relatives of Xi Jinping, who has overseen a much-publicised anti-corruption drive.

The Kremlin suggested a US plot

after the leaks put a close friend of Putin's at the top of an offshore empire worth more than \$2 billion.

"Putin, Russia, our country, our stability and the upcoming elections are the main target, specifically to destabilise the situation," said a Kremlin spokesman, claiming many of the journalists were former officers



PANAMA PAPERS

UK PM under pressure over family wealth

France puts Panama back on tax haven blacklist; Panama mulls retaliation

Major banks set up thousands of offshore firms: report

from the US state department, the CIA and special services.

Australia, France and the Netherlands have announced investigations into revelations contained in the papers.

Meanwhile, Panama's government yesterday said it could retaliate if France makes good on its decision to put the

ICIJ: world's whistleblower

AFP, Washington

The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) is a collective of 190 journalists spanning more than 65 countries seeking to root out cross-border crime, corruption and abuse of power.

This week it distributed 11.5 million documents compiled by more than 100 newspapers that expose secret offshore financial dealings of 140 political figures, including 12 current or former heads of state along with celebrities in sports and show business.

Founded in 1997 by US journalist Chuck Lewis and based in Washington, the ICIJ is a non-profit organization.

The ICIJ is now run by Australian journalist Gerard Ryle, who emigrated to the United States in 2011 with details of 2.5 million digital files, a treasure trove that would ultimately yield information on 120,000 offshore companies and nearly 130,000 individuals.

Modeled on the WikiLeaks whistleblowing site, ICIJ relies on respected global press organizations such as Le Monde, the South China Morning Post, the BBC, the Washington Post, Folha de Sao Paulo and the Sueddeutsche Zeitung to help it gather information.



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi shakes hands with Myanmar Foreign Minister Aung San Suu Kyi (R) after a joint press conference in Ministry of Foreign Affairs at Naypyitaw, yesterday. Suu Kyi, the country's democracy figurehead, invited China's Wang Yi for talks in the capital.

BP ordered to pay \$20b over 2010 oil spill

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

A federal judge in the US state of Louisiana has granted final approval to an estimated \$20bn settlement over the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, resolving years of litigation over what caused one of the biggest ever environmental disasters.

The settlement, first announced in July last year, includes \$5.5bn in civil Clean Water Act penalties and billions more to cover environmental damage and other claims by the five US states along the Gulf coast, including Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida and Louisiana.

The money is to be paid out over roughly 16 years for what has been called the biggest accidental marine oil spill in the history of the petroleum industry.

The US Justice Department has estimated that the settlement will cost the oil giant as much as \$20.8bn, the largest environmental settlement in US history as well as the largest ever civil settlement with a single entity.

US District Judge Carl Barbier, who

approved the settlement, had set the stage with an earlier ruling that BP had been "grossly negligent" in the offshore rig explosion which killed 11 workers and caused a 134-million-gallon spill.

In 2012, BP reached a similar settlement agreement with private attorneys for businesses and residents who claim the spill cost them money.

That deal, which did not have a cap, led to a protracted court battle over subsequent payouts to businesses.

BP has estimated that its costs related to the spill, including its initial cleanup work and the various settlements and criminal and civil penalties, will exceed \$53bn.

David Uhlmann, a University of Michigan law professor and former chief of the Justice Department's environmental crimes section, said Barbier's ruling "ends a long, sad chapter in American environmental history."

"The question that remains is whether we have learned enough from this tragedy to prevent similar environmental disasters in the future," he said.

FIRST PHASE OF ASSEMBLY POLLS High turnout in W Bengal, Assam

THE HINDU ONLINE

West Bengal recorded voter turnout of about 81 percent, while in Assam the figure went over 78 percent in the first phase of assembly elections conducted on Monday, according to the Election Commission.

No incidents of election-related violence were reported. In the 2011 assembly polls, the voter turnout in the respective assembly constituencies of West Bengal stood at 83.72 percent and 75 percent in Assam, whereas in the 2014 general elections, the figures were 83.39 and 79 percent, respectively.

On Monday, elections were held in 18 of the 294 constituencies of West Bengal, including 13 naxal-affected segments.



In Assam, 65 of the 126 constituencies went to polls. "The first phase of elections in the two States was by and large peaceful. No incidents of violence, injury or death were reported," said Deputy Election Commissioner Sandeep Saxena at a press conference in the national capital.

The overall turnout recorded in the three West Bengal districts of Paschim Medinipur, Purulia and Bankura was 80.92 percent. Six Assembly segments of Paschim Medinipur registered the highest overall turnout of 81.66 percent.

"We are not lowering our guard till all polling personnel return safely and the Electronic Voting Machines are safely deposited at recording rooms," said State Chief Electoral Officer Sunil Kumar Gupta.

Though the EC received over a dozen complaints of rigging and other irregularities, they were found to be false. Sharing details on action taken by enforcement agencies, the EC said 859 Excise Act cases had been registered in the constituencies of Assam where elections were conducted on Monday.

China declares sanctions against N Korea

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China yesterday announced a series of sanctions against North Korea. It has restricted imports of North Korean coal and sales of jet fuel under UN sanctions.

The Security Council passed a resolution in March, which expanded UN sanctions aimed at withholding funds for the North's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes. It came after Pyongyang conducted four tests in recent months.

Among the North Korean materials to be banned, some of which are fundamental to the country's revenue, is coal, iron, iron ore, gold, titanium and rare earths.

While China's restrictions allow some North Korean materials to be imported for civilian use, any trade connected to the North's missile or nuclear programmes has been prohibited. For the UN sanctions to succeed, the cooperation of China - an ally of North Korea - has been viewed as essential.

Banning the sale of jet fuel to the North has the potential to ground Pyongyang's state-owned airline, Air Koryo.

The move by China comes after the global Nuclear Security Summit held in Washington last week. There, at a meeting between Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping, the US president said both countries were "committed to the [denuclearisation] of the Korean Peninsula".

'Acting too presidential would be boring as hell'

AGENCIES

Donald Trump has said acting too presidential would be "boring as hell". The New York businessman, the frontrunner in the race to become the Republican presidential candidate in the US election, has often been criticised for his tone on the campaign trail.

But at a rally in Superior, Wisconsin, the 69-year-old said his unorthodox style was more entertaining. "I can be presidential, but if I was presidential I would only have - about 20 per cent of you would be here because it would be boring as hell, I will say," he told voters at an open airplane hangar, according to Politico.

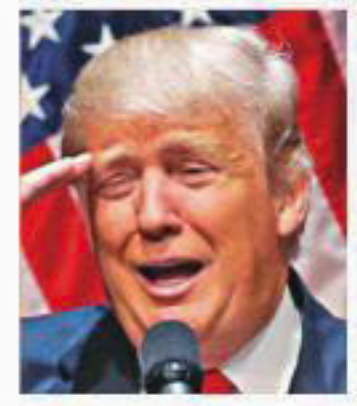
Voters in the state of Wisconsin cast ballots yesterday in US presidential primary races in which challengers to Republican Trump and Democrat Hillary Clinton seem poised to win.

The potentially pivotal contest is the first after a 10-day lull in the process that determines the parties' nominees for the November general election. Voting began at 7:00 am.

Trump's main rival Senator Ted Cruz is eyeing the Badger State as a crucial firewall against the celebrity billionaire's march to an outright nomination victory. Like Trump, Clinton risks losing Wisconsin, where she faces a surging Bernie Sanders who has won five of the last six contests, reports AFP.

But April could ultimately prove a sunny month for the former secretary of state. She leads Sanders by double digits in New York, which votes April

19, and Pennsylvania, which casts ballots a week later. Trump also leads handily in those states. Wisconsin, the birthplace of the Republican Party, is seen as Ground Zero for the anti-Trump movement. Halting him there would bolster Cruz, the 45-year-old conservative senator from Texas.



NAGORNO-KARABAKH CLASHES Azerbaijan, Armenia declare ceasefire

REUTERS, Baku/Yerevan

Azerbaijan and its breakaway region of Nagorno Karabakh said they had halted hostilities yesterday after four days of intense fighting that had prompted fears of all-out war.

Reuters was not able independently to verify whether the fighting - a resurgence of a decades-old conflict over the status of the region - had, in fact, stopped.

But an official in the breakaway region's Armenian-backed administration said the ceasefire was being observed.

The fighting has been the bloodiest in years, with Azerbaijan saying 16 of its servicemen had been killed in the previous 48 hours.

Officials in the breakaway region said 20 of their soldiers had been killed since the fighting started.

The ex-Soviet states of Azerbaijan and Armenia fought a war over the mountainous territory in the early 1990s in which thousands were killed on both sides and hundreds of thousands displaced. The war ended with a truce in 1994, although there have been sporadic flare-ups since.



This photo shows the wreckage of a government warplane after Al-Nusra front (Al-Qaeda's Syria affiliate) reportedly shot it down over the northern Syrian town of Al-Eis yesterday and captured one crew member alive, a rebel source and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

IS threatens attacks in Rome, London, Berlin

AGENCIES

The Islamic State outfit has threatened a new wave of terror attacks as deadly as the Paris massacre in London, Berlin and Rome in a latest chilling video which shows images of the UK Parliament and Eiffel Tower crashing to the ground.

The video shows footage of the Paris and Brussels attacks as well as 9/11 strikes, calling previous massacres a "cautionary message". It also shows other iconic European landmarks such as the Rome's Coliseum interplayed with footage of executions and beheadings from Syria and Iraq.