

NEWS IN brief

Obama to meet India's Modi June 7

AFP, Washington
US President Barack Obama will meet with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the White House on June 7, press secretary Josh Earnest announced yesterday. Modi had previously been invited to address a joint meeting of the US Congress on June 8. "The visit will highlight the deepening of the US-India relationship in key areas since the president's visit to New Delhi in January 2015," Earnest said.

Zika strain found in Africa for first time

AFP, Geneva
The Zika virus strain linked to surging cases of neurological disorders and birth defects in Latin America has for the first time been found in Africa, the World Health Organization said yesterday. The UN health agency announced that the Zika virus strain circulating in Cape Verde had been shown to be the same as the one behind an explosion of cases in the Americas.

Murder convict scaled Buckingham Palace wall

AFP, London
A man who scaled the walls of Buckingham Palace and got into the garden is a convicted murderer, a court heard yesterday, as he was jailed for four months. Dennis Hennessy, 41, repeatedly asked "is Ma'am in?" in an apparent reference to Queen Elizabeth II after being arrested by police on Wednesday night. After climbing the wall, he spent around 10 minutes walking in the palace gardens.

N Korea urges South to accept talks offer

AFP, Seoul
North Korea urged South Korea yesterday to accept leader Kim Jong-Un's proposal for military talks and to ease tensions that surged after the North's fourth nuclear test in January. Kim had offered the military dialogue during a marathon speech to the recently concluded congress of North Korea's ruling Workers' Party -- the first event of its kind for more than 35 years.

Germany seeks jail for ex-Auschwitz guard

AFP, Berlin
German prosecutors yesterday sought six years' imprisonment for a 94-year-old former SS guard on trial for complicity in 170,000 murders at Auschwitz. Reinhold Hanning stands accused of having watched over the selection of which prisoners were fit for labour, and which should be sent to the gas chambers. Hanning in April broke his silence on his time at Auschwitz 70 years after the war, telling victims "I am sorry".



Relatives of the victims of the missing EgyptAir flight MS804 hold an absentee funeral prayer in a mosque nearby Cairo airport, in Egypt yesterday. Egypt's military found wreckage from the plane that crashed in the Mediterranean as investigators tried to unravel the mystery of why it swerved suddenly and plummeted into the sea.

PHOTO: REUTERS

'Catastrophic event' downed EgyptAir

Say US officials, analysts

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US officials and analysts believe a "catastrophic event" downed EgyptAir flight MS804, although the cause remains uncertain.

An anonymous intelligence source said the plane's flight path and high speed of its descent suggested it "fell like a rock". "All indications are that a catastrophic event took down the aircraft" as it passed over the Mediterranean Sea, they told CBS News, but it was unclear whether a mechanical failure, terror attack or other deliberate act was to blame. Egyptian officials said suspected wreckage from the Airbus A320 was found alongside passengers' belongings yesterday morning.

It was being taken to Cairo for analysis and could provide vital clues into the plane's final moments. American reconnaissance satellites did not detect evidence of a large explosion on board, officials said, but the infrared data does not rule out the use of a smaller bomb. As seen with Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, the penetration of a small part of an aircraft's outer body can cause mid-air break-up and fatal decompression in the cabin. John Goglia, a former US National Transportation Safety Board member, said early indications point more to a bomb than to a structural or mechanical failure, citing the lack of a distress call and sudden movements before the plane disappeared from radar. "Given the fact that (the pilot) made those abrupt turns without broadcasting any maydays would indicate to me



that something catastrophic like a device happened," he added.

The analyst said a mechanical failure "still has to be considered, but at this point I would put that down pretty low". A structural failure, like a piece of the plane's aluminium skin ripping away from metal fatigue, was possible but unlikely, he added. Officials said the US had not ruled out any possible causes for the crash, including mechanical failure, terrorism or a deliberate act by the pilot or crew. The White House has offered its "deepest condolences" over the disaster, which claimed the lives of all 66 people on board. "At this time we do not yet know definitively what caused the disappearance of Flight 804," Press Secretary Josh Earnest said in a statement. "The United States stands ready to provide our full support and resources to the Governments of Egypt and France as they investigate this incident." Investigators will be hoping for the swift recovery of the plane's flight recorders, or "black boxes", to access sound recordings from the cockpit and detailed data.

Record 51C heat hits India

AFP, New Delhi
Temperatures have soared to a scorching 51 degrees Celsius in one Indian city, meteorologists said yesterday, with the ferocious heat setting a new national record.

Northern Phalodi wilted as the mercury reached a new high, equivalent to 123.8 Fahrenheit, beating a 60-year-old record. "Yesterday (Thursday) was the hottest temperature ever recorded in the country... 51 degrees in Phalodi," said B P Yadav, a director of the India Meteorological Department (IMD).

Hundreds of people die every year from the heat in India, with May and June usually the hottest months. The latest record high came as the IMD issued warnings of "severe heat wave" conditions across large parts of India's north and west, including the capital Delhi, where temperatures hit 47 degrees Celsius earlier this week.

Zoo animals in the capital were treated to cold baths and given electrolytes to prevent dehydration. Demand for electricity in the city of 25 million people surged to a record high on Thursday as sweltering residents turned on their air conditioners. Police officers on the beat were given oral rehydration solution and special "cooling scarves" containing water-absorbent crystals to keep their body temperature down, local papers reported. The capital's hospitals have seen a spike in cases of heatstroke, while authorities in many states have ordered schools to break for summer earlier than normal due to the heatwave.

Nato to hold talks with Russia before summit

AGENCIES
Nato said yesterday it will hold formal talks with Russia before a landmark July summit in Warsaw endorses the alliance's biggest military build-up since the end of the Cold War, to counter a more assertive Russia.

In April, the Nato Russia Council (NRC) held its first meeting since June 2014 but the talks ended in "profound disagreements" over Ukraine and other issues, although alliance chief Jens Stoltenberg said at the time it was a useful exchange. Pressed by some of Nato's 28 member states to try again, Stoltenberg said yesterday that alliance foreign ministers had agreed to explore if another NRC was possible.

"We have agreed on the message of dialogue and defence... based on that, there was broad agreement yesterday that Nato should convene a new meeting of the NRC before our next summit in July," he told reporters alongside European Union foreign affairs head Federica Mogherini. "We will now start to look at the modalities and practical arrangements," he added as Nato foreign ministers met for a second day in Brussels.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov chided Stoltenberg for making the announcement so publicly without consulting Russia first, reports AFP.

"Why would he say such a thing?" Lavrov said according to an Interfax report. "The Russia-Nato Council works on the basis of consensus. If they wanted to discuss it, let them discuss it with us and not go straight for the microphone." Meanwhile, Kremlin yesterday condemned Nato's membership invitation to Montenegro, saying the step risked fuelling geopolitical tensions in Europe, reports Reuters. "In general, our stance is that Nato's further expansion is a negative process," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told a conference call with reporters.

MILITARY BUILD-UP IN EUROPE



Turkish Foreign Minister speaks with John Kerry during a meeting at Nato headquarters yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu met with US Secretary of State John Kerry at Nato headquarters in Brussels yesterday. Davutoglu said the meeting was "productive" and that Turkey and the US were "in good communication".

Meanwhile, Kremlin yesterday condemned Nato's membership invitation to Montenegro, saying the step risked fuelling geopolitical tensions in Europe, reports Reuters. "In general, our stance is that Nato's further expansion is a negative process," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told a conference call with reporters.



Sri Lankan volunteers carry food parcels and drinking water through floodwaters in the suburb of Kaduwela in Colombo yesterday. Desperate Sri Lankans clambered onto rubber dinghies and makeshift rafts to flee their homes in the flooded capital Colombo. The heaviest rains in a quarter of a century have pounded the island since last weekend, sparking huge landslides that have buried victims in up to 50 feet of mud.

PHOTO: AFP

Turkish MPs back bill lifting immunity

AFP, Ankara
Turkey's parliament yesterday adopted a highly controversial bill that would lift immunity for dozens of pro-Kurdish and other MPs and could see them evicted from parliament, sparking fresh domestic and international concern.

The bill was backed by 376 MPs in the 550-seat legislature, meaning it will become law directly without being put to a referendum, parliament speaker Ismail Kahraman said. Only 140 voted against the measure. Under current law, Turkish lawmakers have the right to full immunity from prosecution.

The bill -- which still needs President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's approval before becoming law -- would lift the immunity of 138 deputies from all parties who face potential prosecution. The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) says the bill is aimed at expelling its members from parliament. HDP lawmakers are vulnerable to prosecution on allegations of links or even verbal support for the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has waged a three-decade insurgency in the southeast. The PKK is considered a terrorist group by Ankara and its Western allies. Following the collapse of a two-year ceasefire in summer 2015, Turkey has been waging an intensive offensive against its militants and the renewed conflict has claimed hundreds of lives.



It's never a mistake

Says Snowden on torture report destroyed by CIA

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Edward Snowden has responded to reports the CIA inspector general's office "mistakenly" destroyed its only copy of a comprehensive Senate 'torture report' with a stinging rebuttal: "When the CIA destroys something, it's never a mistake."

An intelligence agency was quoted by Yahoo News as saying CIA inspector general officials deleted an uploaded computer file containing the report, before "inadvertently" destroying a disk with the document on it.

The 6,700 page report detailed controversial "enhanced" interrogation methods deployed by the CIA at overseas prison sites. These included waterboarding and sleep deprivation. Another copy exists elsewhere at the CIA but the destruction of the copy at the inspector general's office was never confirmed to the public, according to Yahoo's report. The fugitive National Security Agency whistleblower responded to the allegations on Twitter, telling his millions of followers: "I worked @CIA. I wrote the Emergency Destruction Plan for Geneva. When CIA destroys something, it's never a mistake."

Snowden continues to seek asylum in Russia after being charged under the Espionage Act for leaking classified details of mass surveillance by the US Government.

Taiwan's first female leader sworn in

Beijing warns new president on independence

AFP, Taipei

Beijing warned Taiwan's new president Tsai Ing-wen against seeking independence yesterday, cautioning that peace would be "impossible" if she made any moves to formally break away. The remarks came just hours after Tsai's inauguration speech struck a conciliatory note, calling for a "positive dialogue" with China on fraught cross-strait ties in her much-anticipated address. China and Taiwan split in 1949 after the Kuomintang nationalist forces lost a civil war to the Communists, although Taiwan has never declared an official breakaway. But Beijing still sees self-ruling Taiwan as part of its territory awaiting reunification.



While Tsai has pledged to maintain the status quo with Beijing, authorities there are highly suspicious of her and her Democratic Progressive Party, which is traditionally pro-independence. "If 'independence' is pursued, it will be impossible to have peace and stability in the Taiwan Straits," the Taiwan Affairs Office said in a statement after Tsai was sworn in. "Independence is the greatest disaster for the peaceful development of peace in the Taiwan straits and the peaceful development of cross-strait relations," it said. Relations with Beijing have already cooled since Tsai won the presidency, with China putting pressure on her to back its "one China" message -- the bedrock of the thaw under outgoing leader Ma Ying-jeou.

US House passes anti-Pak measure

PTI, Washington

Ignoring objections of the White House, the Republican majority House of Representatives has approved the National Defence Authorisation Act which blocks \$450 million aid to Pakistan for failing to take action against the dreaded Haqqani network. The NDAA 2017 (HR 4909) was passed by the US House of Representative (277-147) on Wednesday night, which among others included approval of three major amendments reflecting the strong anti-Pak sentiment prevailing among the US lawmakers. As a result, as per the House version of the Bill, the Obama Administration must certify that Pakistan has met before releasing \$450 million aid. "Pakistan has shown progress in arresting and prosecuting Haqqani network senior leaders and mid-level operatives". Congressman Dana Rohrabacher's amendment adds an additional requirement that the Secretary of Defence certify to Congress that Pakistan is not using its military or any funds or equipment provided by the US to persecute minority groups seeking political or religious freedom.

Clinton declares Trump a 'threat' to democracy

AFP, Washington

Hillary Clinton on Thursday blasted her likely general election rival Donald Trump as a threat to US democracy and declared him unqualified to be president, unleashing some of her toughest criticism yet of the Republican presumptive nominee. "The threat that Donald Trump poses is so dramatic to our country, to our democracy and our economy," the former secretary of state told CNN in an interview. "I know how hard this job is, and I know that we need steadiness as well as strength and smarts in it," she added. "And I have concluded he is not qualified to be president of the United States." The statement marks a hardening of her position on Trump. On May 3, Clinton declined to answer directly when asked by MSNBC whether Trump was qualified to be

commander in chief, although Clinton said the New York billionaire "has given no indication he understands the gravity of the responsibilities" that go with the job.

Clinton's criticism Thursday was more biting, and left no doubt that the gloves are off, perhaps for the duration of the contest that culminates with the November 8 election. She pointed to Trump's recent criticism of top officials of US ally Britain; his stated willingness to meet with North Korea's reclusive dictator; his assessment that Nato is "obsolete"; and his suggestion of opening the door to more countries, such as Japan or South Korea, having nuclear weapons. Such positions are "dangerous," Clinton said, adding that the totality of Trump's alarming statements since he launched his presidential campaign, including calling for a ban on Muslims entering the United States, amounts to a worrying "pattern."

