

NEWS IN brief

Elephant poaching in Africa down

REUTERS, Oslo
The illegal killing of African elephants for their ivory seems to have fallen from record peaks but poaching of the animal is still far too high, an international report said yesterday. More patrols in wildlife parks, better forensic techniques for tracking the origin of tusks, and a crackdown on corruption by China, the main market for ivory, were among factors helping to limit the slaughter.

Freddie Gray: Cops given clean cheat

AFP, Washington
US prosecutors yesterday dropped all remaining charges against police in the death of Freddie Gray, an African American whose fatal injury in custody provoked riots in Baltimore, ending the high-profile case without any convictions. "We do not believe that Freddie Gray killed himself," said state prosecutor Marilyn Mosby.

Hacked to death over 22-cent debt!

AFP, New Delhi
An axe-wielding shopkeeper hacked a couple to death in northern India yesterday after they failed to pay a debt of 22 US cents, police said. The middle-aged couple from the lowest Dalit caste in Uttar Pradesh state were on their way to work early yesterday when the grocery store owner asked them to pay their 15-rupee (22-cent) debt.

Legendary MAD cartoonist Jack Davis dies

BBC ONLINE
Cartoonist Jack Davis, the "long-time legendary" artist on the US magazine Mad, has died at the age of 91. Davis, who also created posters for films such as The Long Goodbye and Bananas, was one of the founding artists on the publication in 1952. He contributed to the magazine for several decades, drawing many portraits of its mascot Alfred E Neuman.

Hunt launched for Sanjeevani Booti

AFP, New Delhi
A northern Indian state of Uttarakhand will soon begin a multi-million dollar search in the Himalayas for a mythical plant believed to hold life-saving properties, a local minister said yesterday. The state will spend 250 million rupees of state money hunting the herb Sanjeevani Booti, which is credited in the ancient Hindu text Ramayana with restoring life to the brother of a god.



PHOTO: REUTERS
Army personnel assist flood victims in Kapilvastu, Nepal. Inset, a man transports his family past homes submerged in flood waters in Batahidia on the Brahmaputra River in South Kamrup, southwest of Guwahati, India. Floods and landslides in Nepal and India have killed more than 90 people in recent days, with at least two million residents forced to flee their homes, officials said yesterday.



El Nino weather pattern is over

Says UN met agency
AFP, Geneva
The latest El Nino weather phenomenon, which was one of the most powerful on record, has ended but could be replaced by its stormy sister La Nina in the coming months, the UN meteorological agency said yesterday. "Atmospheric indicators that had shown strong El Nino patterns early in 2016 returned to near-average in June and July," the World Meteorological Organization said.

El Nino affects rainfall patterns and causes both drought and flooding. As it recedes the Pacific cooling trend known as La Nina typically begins, often causing increased rainfall, storms and snow across the globe. "A La Nina event may develop in the third quarter of this year, but it is likely to be weak," the WMO said. The first six months of this year were the hottest on record, setting 2016 to be the hottest year despite the likely development of a La Nina pattern.

China, Russia to hold joint naval drills in September

REUTERS, Beijing
China and Russia will hold "routine" naval exercises in the South China Sea in September, China's Defence Ministry said yesterday, adding that the drills were aimed at strengthening their cooperation and were not aimed at any other country.

The exercises come at a time of heightened tension in the contested waters after an arbitration court in the Hague ruled this month that China did not have historic rights to the South China Sea and criticised its environmental destruction there.

China rejected the ruling and refused to participate in the case. "This is a routine exercise between the two armed forces, aimed at strengthening the developing China-Russia strategic cooperative partnership," China's defense ministry spokesman Yang Yujun told a regular monthly news conference.

"The exercise is not directed against third parties." China and Russia are veto-wielding members of the UN Security Council, and have held similar views on many major issues such as the crisis in Syria, putting them at odds with the United States and Western Europe.



TENSIONS IN S CHINA SEA
Last year, they held joint military drills in the Sea of Japan and the Mediterranean. China claims most of the South China Sea, through which more than \$5 trillion of trade moves annually.

Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam have rival claims. China has repeatedly blamed the United States for stoking tension in the region through its military patrols, and of taking sides in the dispute.

The United States has sought to assert its right to freedom of navigation in the South China Sea with its patrols and denies taking sides in the territorial disputes.

Russia has been a strong backer of China's stance on the arbitration case, that was brought by the Philippines.

Yang said China and Russia were comprehensive strategic partners and had already held many exercises this year.

"These drills deepen mutual trust and expand cooperation, raise the ability to jointly deal with security threats, and benefit the maintenance of regional and global peace and stability," he said.

COUNTERING NATO'S GROWING THREAT Russia beefs up military on southwestern flank

REUTERS, Moscow
Russia has strengthened its southwestern flank as Nato builds up its military presence and Ukraine remains unstable, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said on Wednesday in remarks the United States called contrary to efforts to lower tensions.

Moscow has deployed more air defence systems in the southwest and has also deployed a "self-sufficient" contingent of troops in Crimea, Shoigu told a meeting at the Defence Ministry broadcast on state television.

"Since 2013 ... we have formed four divisions, nine brigades and 22 regiments," he said. "They include two missile brigades armed with Iskander missile complexes, which has allowed to boost fire power to destroy the potential adversary."

Shoigu said "terrorist" groups were also active in the North Caucasus. John Kirby, a spokesman for the US State Department, said Washington had seen the comments and "if true, we believe that this would appear to run counter to ongoing efforts to stop violence and de-escalate the

tensions in eastern Ukraine." Kirby said the United States expected Moscow to fulfill its obligations under the Minsk agreement to halt the war in eastern Ukraine and the Vienna document that attempts to provide transparency about military movements in the region.

He noted that the reports indicated the Russian buildup included troops in Crimea, which Moscow seized and later annexed.

"Crimea is and always will remain part of Ukraine. We're not going to allow ... the borders of Europe to be redrawn at the barrel of a gun," Kirby said, calling for an "immediate end to the Russian occupation there."

The Black Sea fleet has received brand-new Novorossiysk and Rostov-on-Don submarines armed with Kalibr cruise missiles. Both the Black Sea fleet and the Caspian Sea flotilla are now operating fast attack guided missile crafts armed with Kalibr cruise missiles.

Over the last three years, the southern military command has added over 4,000 units of new and modernized military hardware altogether.

US slams new Israeli settlement plans

AFP, Washington
The United States has slammed as "provocative" Israeli plans to build hundreds of new settlement homes in annexed east Jerusalem, saying they seriously undermined the prospect of peace with the Palestinians.

"We are deeply concerned by reports today that the government of Israel has published tenders for 323 units in east Jerusalem settlements," State Department spokesman John Kirby said in a statement on Wednesday.

"This follows Monday's announcement of plans for 770 units in the settlement of Gilo." "These steps by Israeli authorities are the latest examples of what appears to be a steady acceleration of settlement activity that is systematically undermining the prospects for a two-state solution," Kirby said.

"We remain troubled that Israel continues this pattern of provocative and counterproductive action, which raises serious questions about Israel's ultimate commitment to a peaceful, negotiated settlement with the Palestinians."

Palestinian leaders and the United Nations joined in condemning plans advanced this week for 770 new homes that would expand the Gilo settlement on the southern perimeter of east Jerusalem. They are part of a larger Israeli plan for around 1,200 units approved some three years ago, according to Ir Amim, an NGO that monitors Israeli settlement activity.

On Wednesday, tenders for 323 settlement homes in four areas of east Jerusalem were published, Ir Amim and Israeli NGO Peace Now said.

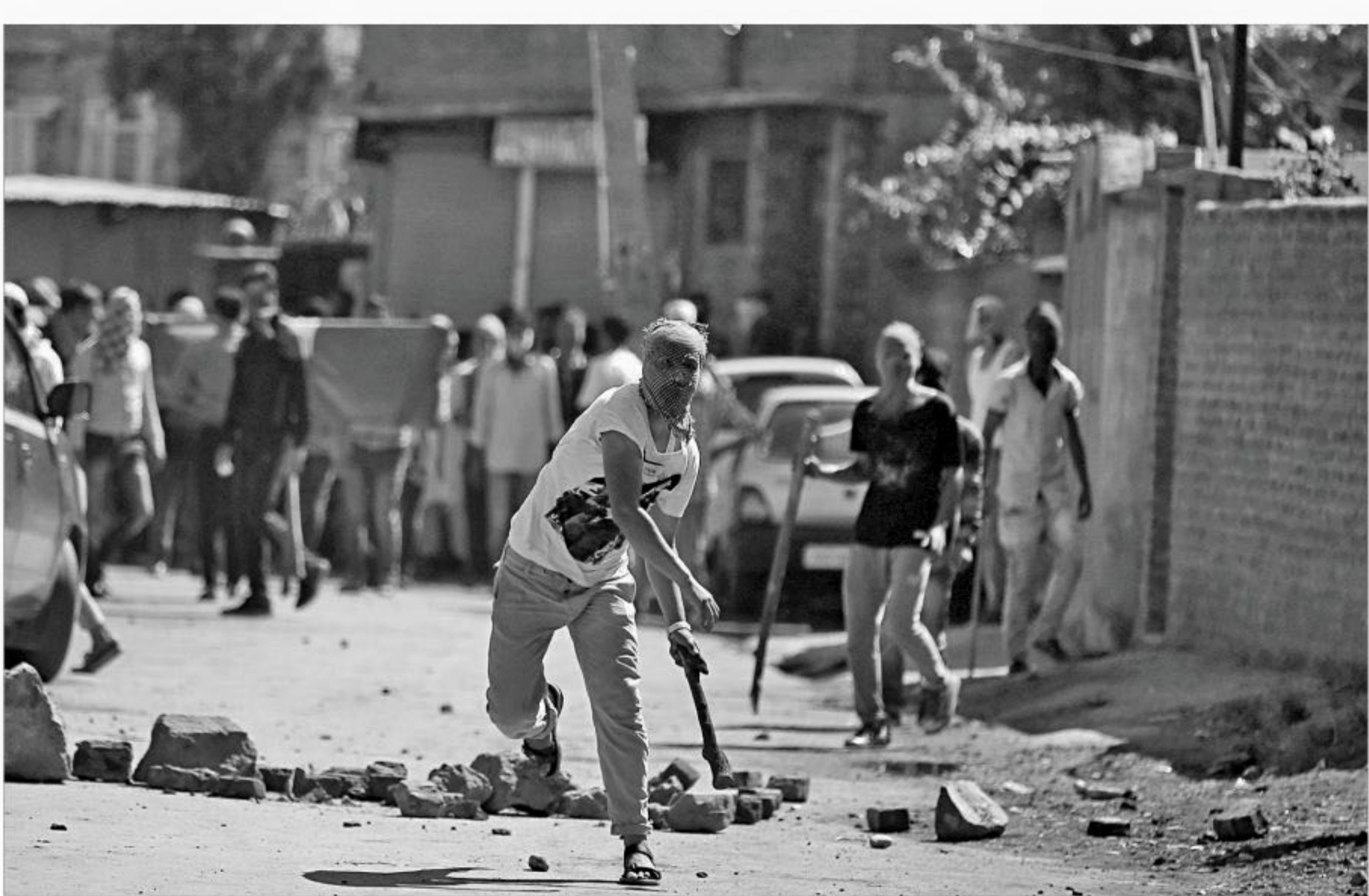


PHOTO: REUTERS
A demonstrator hurls a stone towards Indian police during a protest in Srinagar against the recent killings in Kashmir yesterday. Indian Kashmir has been tense following the death of popular rebel commander Burhan Wani in a gunfight with security forces on July 8 and at least 49 people have been killed in clashes as the valley faces its worst unrest since 2010.

India to raise issue of Pak terror support

PTI, New Delhi
Pakistan's sustained support to cross-border terrorism will be raised by India's Home Minister Rajnath Singh during his two-day visit to Islamabad to attend the Saarc ministerial conference beginning August 3.

Rajnath, who will attend the Saarc Home Interior/Home Ministers conference, is expected to bluntly ask Pakistan to stop sponsoring acts of terror in India, official sources said.

This will be the first visit to Pakistan by any senior Indian leader after the Pathankot attack on January 2, which created tension between the two countries.

The home minister may provide documentary proof of the involvement of Pakistan's state and non-state

Guns cheaper than phones in Pak town

AFP, Darra Adamkhel
Gunfire echoes through a dusty northwest tribal town, the soundtrack to Pakistan's biggest arms black market, where Kalashnikovs welded from scrap metal are cheaper than smartphones and sold on an industrial scale.

Darra Adamkhel, a town surrounded by hills some 35 kilometres south of the city of Peshawar, was a hub of criminal activity for decades. People smugglers and drug runners were common and everything from stolen cars to fake university degrees could be procured.

This generations-old trade in the illicit boomed in the 1980s: The mujahideen began buying weapons there for Afghanistan's battle against the Soviets, over the porous border.

Later, the town became a stronghold of the Pakistani Taliban. Now Darra is clean of all but the arms, yet the gunsmiths in the bazaar say the region's improved security and authorities' growing intolerance for illegal weaponry are withering an industry that sustained them

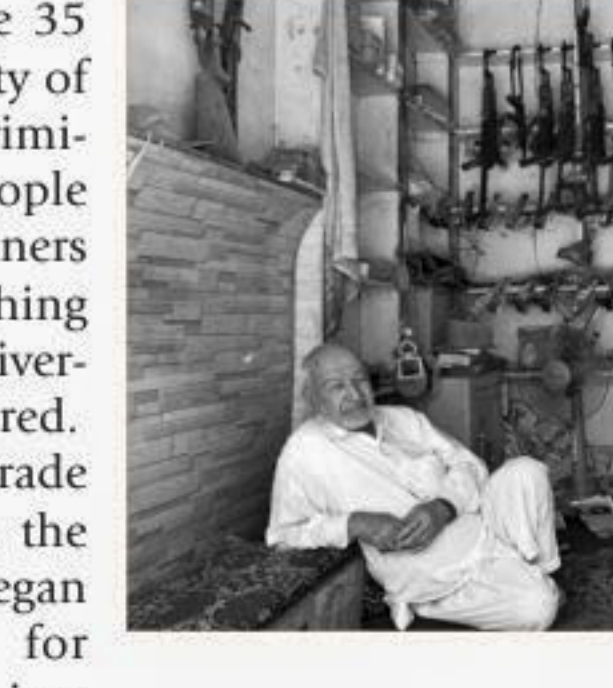
for decades. "(The) Nawaz Sharif government has established checkpoints everywhere, business is stopped," said Khitab Gul, 45.

Gul is known in Darra for his replicas of Turkish and Bulgarian-made MP5 submachine guns, one of the most popular weapons in the world, widely used by organisations such as America's FBI SWAT teams.

The MP5 can retail for thousands of dollars. Gul's version, which comes with a one-year guarantee, costs roughly 7,000 rupees, or \$67 -- and, he claims, it works perfectly.

Gul then puts on a demonstration, test-firing his MP5 in the small outer yard of his workshop -- first the single shot mode, then firing in a burst.

A Darra-made Kalashnikov, Gul says, can sell for as little as \$125, cheaper than most smartphones. "The workers here are so skilled that they can copy any weapon they are shown," he explains. "In past 10 years I have sold 10,000 guns, and had zero complaints," he claims.



Raped before UN eyes

Witnesses say peacekeepers looked on as South Sudanese soldiers raped women

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
Dozens of women and girls were raped by South Sudanese government soldiers near a United Nations' compound in the country's capital Juba, with at least one assault occurring as peacekeepers watched, according to witnesses.

Civilian leaders reported that at least two women had died from their injuries. According to multiple interviews conducted by The Daily Beast, soon after the fighting began, government soldiers began to rape civilians living in UN "protection of civilians sites" while they were traveling to collect food.

According to community leaders from one section of the UN camp that holds 15,000 people, some 100 women were raped or reported missing on a single day—July 18. Two armed soldiers dragged a woman away who was less than a few hundred metres from the UN camp's western gate, according to the Associated Press.

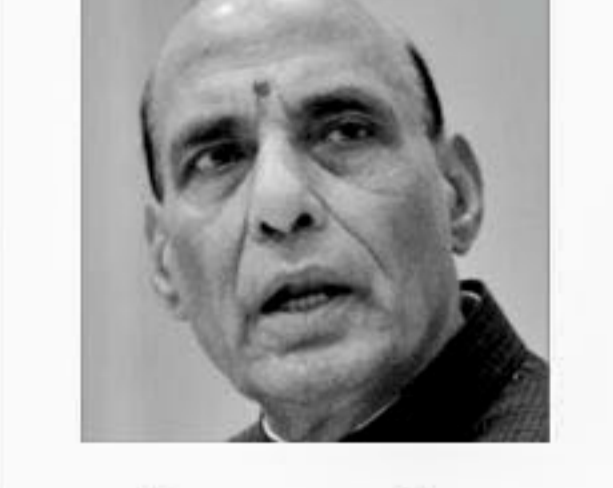
A bystander estimated that 30 peacekeepers saw the incident. "They were seeing it. Everyone was seeing it," the witness told AP. "The woman was seriously screaming, quarreling and crying also, but there was no help."

Shantal Persaud, a spokesperson for the UN Mission in South Sudan, said: "The mission takes very seriously allegations of peacekeepers not rendering aid to civilians in distress and the UNMISS force command is looking into these allegations in line with its established protocols."

The reported assaults took place a week after rival government forces clashed in Juba, killing hundreds of people and forcing opposition leader Riek Machar out of the city.

Approximately 30,000 civilians have taken shelter from the fighting in the UN base. Soldiers were allowing women from the camps to leave and search for food nearby before attacking them when they returned, according to the witnesses.

Several women spoke to the Associated Press about the attacks.



actors in terror acts in Jammu & Kashmir and other parts during separate meetings he is likely to have with his counterpart Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan and Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Describing Hizbul Mujahideen militant Burhan Wani in Kashmir as "martyr", Sharif had recently said that "Kashmir will one day become Pakistan", prompting External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj to say that his dream of the state becoming a part of his country "will not be realised even at the end of eternity". Rajnath Singh will also raise the issue of slow pace of probe into terror attack in the Pathankot airbase, which was carried out by Pakistan-based terror group Jaish-e-Mohammad.