

Ahmadinejad to run
for Iran president

REUTERS, London

Iran's hardline ex-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad submitted his name yesterday for registration as a candidate for May's presidential election. He had previously insisted he would not stand after Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said last year that his candidacy would have a "polarising" effect on the nation.

IS suicide bombing
kills five in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

At least five people were killed yesterday when a suicide bomber on foot struck near the Afghan defense ministry in Kabul, officials said, in an attack that was claimed by the Islamic State group. Three other people were left wounded in the explosion.

Taiwan bans eating
dogs and cats

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan has banned the eating of dogs and cats, lawmakers said yesterday, as pressure grows to improve animal welfare after a spate of cruelty cases that stirred public outrage. Parliament passed legislation to outlaw the consumption, purchase or possession of dog and cat meat, with offenders facing a fine of up to \$8,170.

Graft probes target
9 Brazil ministers

AFP, Brasilia

Brazil's corruption crisis struck the heart of President Michel Temer's government Tuesday with the opening of probes into up to nine ministers and scores of lawmakers. The Supreme Court authorized probes against 108 politicians who are suspected of involvement in a massive embezzlement and bribery conspiracy that fledged state oil company Petrobras and funneled dirty money into leading political parties' election war chests.



BJP leader offers
'bounty on
Mamata's head'

PTI, Kolkata

Yogesh Varshney, a leader of BJP youth wing Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM), has announced a "bounty" of 11 lakh rupees on West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's head after the police used batons to disperse a rally raising slogans in praise of Lord Ram on Hanuman Jayanti on Tuesday.

"The Mamata government beat up people. If someone was wearing a red shirt or a red pant, they were beaten up brutally by the police. I don't understand, Mamata Banerjee organises Iftar party, she argues for the Muslims. I want to ask her, are Hindus not human? If they had any humanity, they wouldn't have beaten up people like this. If anyone brings me her severed head, I will give that person 11 lakh rupees," he said.

At Suri in Birbhum district, when processionists tried to break an iron barrier erected by the police, the law enforcers made a lathi charge.

At another place on the outskirts of Suri, thousands of people ignored a police ban to participate in a rally taken out under the aegis of an organisation observing Hanuman Jayanti.

The police on Sunday told the organisers of Bir Hanuman Jayanti that it would not allow holding of any rally or meeting on Tuesday.

The organisers on Tuesday urged the police to allow the rally after a promise that they would not carry arms. However, the police did not budge from their stand.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (R) welcomes US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson before a meeting in Moscow yesterday. Tillerson meets Lavrov as Washington confronts Moscow about its support for the Syrian regime.

PHOTO: AFP

China urges 'peaceful' outcome

Chinese newspaper warns Pyongyang not to make any mistakes

REUTERS, Beijing

Chinese President Xi Jinping called for a peaceful resolution of rising tension on the Korean peninsula in a telephone conversation with US President Donald Trump yesterday, as a US aircraft carrier strike group steamed towards the region.

Trump's call with Xi, just days after they met in the United States, came as an influential state-run Chinese newspaper warned that the Korean peninsula was the closest it has been to a "military clash" since North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006.

The communication between the leaders underscores the increasing sense of urgency as tension escalates amid concern that reclusive North Korea could soon conduct a sixth nuclear test, or more missile launches, and Trump's threat of unilateral action to solve the problem.

Trump had ordered the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier group to head to the Korean peninsula in an attempt to deter North Korea's nuclear and long-range missile ambitions, which it is developing in defiance of UN resolutions and sanctions.

Trump pressed Xi to do more to curb North Korea's nuclear programme when they held their first face-to-face

meeting in Florida last week.

He said on Twitter on Tuesday that North Korea was "looking for trouble" and the United States would "solve the problem" with or without China's help.

In their telephone call, Xi stressed that China "is committed to the target of denuclearisation on the peninsula, safeguarding peace and stability on the peninsula, and advocates resolving problems through peaceful means", Chinese state broadcaster CCTV said.

XI-TRUMP CALL ON N KOREA TENSIONS



Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang, who said Trump had initiated the call, urged everyone to lower the tension.

China's Global Times newspaper said in an editorial North Korea should halt any plan for nuclear and missile activities "for its own security". While widely read in China and

run by the ruling Communist Party's official People's Daily, the Global Times does not represent government policy.

The Global Times said if North Korea made another provocative move, "Chinese society" might be willing to back unprecedented sanctions, "such as restricting oil imports".

North Korean state media warned on Tuesday of a nuclear attack on the United States at any sign of American aggression.

'No doubt' Syria behind
chemical attack: Mattis

Putin says attack staged for intervention; UNSC to vote

AFP, Washington

Pentagon chief Jim Mattis said Monday there is "no doubt" the Syrian regime was behind last week's deadly chemical strike, while US officials accused Moscow of waging a misinformation campaign around the attack.

The charge that Russia is obfuscating who is responsible for the horrific events of April 4 when at least 87 civilians were killed in a rebel-held town came just as US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson touched down in Moscow to confront the Kremlin over its support for Bashar al-Assad.

In televised comments, Russian President Vladimir Putin not only repeated his defense of Assad, but suggested the Syrian leader's rebel opponents are preparing future faked attacks in order to encourage US intervention.

Putin said Moscow also wanted to see a "thorough" probe of the attack in the town

of Khan Sheikhun conducted through the UN, and slammed US accusations as reminiscent of the weapons of mass destruction claims leading up to the 2003 Iraq invasion.

A senior US official said Moscow is trying to "confuse the world," while Mattis said Washington is certain Assad is to blame.

"There is no doubt the Syrian regime is responsible for the decision to attack and for the attack itself," the new defense chief said in his first Pentagon press conference.

He reiterated warnings that further chemical weapons use will be met with fresh US action: "If they use chemical weapons, they are going to pay a very, very stiff price."

The United Nations Security Council meanwhile was set to vote yesterday on a resolution demanding the Syrian government cooperate with an investigation into the attack -- a measure Russia will likely veto, diplomats said.



1,500 Yazidi bodies
found in mass graves

CNN ONLINE

The bodies of between 1,300 and 1,500 members of the Yazidi minority have been discovered near the northern Iraqi town of Sinjar since it was retaken from ISIS in 2015, a Kurdish official told CNN Tuesday.

It's the first time an official has estimated the total number of Yazidis found in grave sites littered around Sinjar since Iraqi forces pushed the terror group out more than two years ago.

Thirty-five mass graves along with 100 individual graves have been unearthed, according to Hussein Hassoun, the spokesman of the Higher Committee to Introduce Yazidi Kurds.

"The mass graves are about 5 to 10 kilometers apart," Hassoun told CNN. Between 300 and 500 bodies were found in the past few months.

IS swept into the Sinjar area in August 2014, displacing, killing and enslaving thousands of Yazidis -- an ancient ethnic and religious minority who are descendants of Kurds and call modern-day Iraq home.

A 2016 United Nations report found that ISIS committed "genocide" against Yazidis.

IS was driven out of Sinjar in 2015, and Kurdish officials believe more mass graves will be found as more territory is seized from the terror group.

A US-led coalition has mounted an aggressive campaign to recapture ISIS-held territory in recent months. IS currently controls less than 7% of Iraqi territory, Iraq's military says -- down from nearly 40% of the country in 2014.



EFF (Economic Freedom Fighters) supporters carry a mock coffin with the picture of South African President Jacob Zuma as they gather in Pretoria, yesterday ahead of a march promoted by opposition parties calling for the ousting of the embattled President. Several opposition parties yesterday rallied to demand the departure of Zuma, who is facing pressure to step down following a controversial cabinet reshuffle.

PHOTO: AFP

Daily Mail pays Melania
damages over escort claim

AFP, London

Britain's Daily Mail newspaper apologised to US First Lady Melania Trump and agreed to pay her damages over an article that included allegations that she worked as an escort in the 1990s.

"The defendant is here today publicly to set the record straight, and to apologise to the claimant for any distress and embarrassment that the articles may have caused her," Catrin Evans, the lawyer for Associated Newspapers, publisher of the Daily Mail and MailOnline, told the High Court in London.

Although the total amount of damages was not disclosed, the Press Association news agency said it was believed to be under \$3 million (2.8 million euros).

John Kelly, Melania Trump's lawyer, said the article in the Daily Mail -- Britain's second biggest-selling newspaper -- in print and online in August last year "included false and defamatory claims".

The allegations "questioned the nature of her work as a professional model, and republished allegations that she provided services beyond simply modelling," Kelly said.

The article stated that there was no support for the allegations and provided denials from her spokesperson and from Paolo Zampolli, who ran the modelling agency where she worked.

But the allegations "strike at the heart of the claimant's personal integrity and dignity," Kelly added.

Trump's lawyers launched a lawsuit against the Daily Mail in September in New York, asking for \$150 million in damages.



Nepal proposes
charter change
ahead of polls

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government on Tuesday registered a new amendment bill to its controversial constitution in a bid to persuade all political parties to take part in long-delayed local elections which is scheduled in May.

Parties representing the Madhesi ethnic group have refused to take part in elections without an amendment to the constitution, while the largest opposition party has refused to back any charter changes.

The new bill skirts the contentious issue of redrawing federal boundaries -- the central Madhesi demand -- instead proposing to set up a commission to recommend changes to the country's proposed provinces.

Dalai Lama's visit to AR
will negatively impact ties

China warns India, accuses New Delhi of violating commitment on Tibet issue

PTI, Beijing

China yesterday warned India that the Dalai Lama's visit to Arunachal Pradesh (AR) will have "negative impact" on the settlement of the border dispute and accused New Delhi of violating its commitment on the Tibet issue.

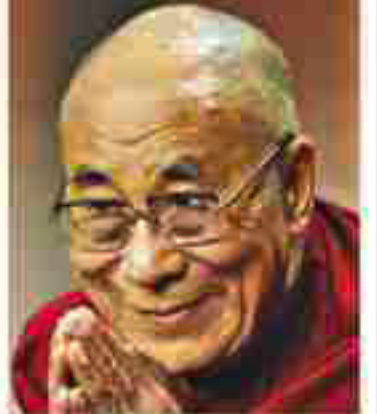
Chinese foreign ministry also said Beijing will take "further action" to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and slammed the "provocative" statements of the Tibetan spiritual leader and Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu, who had said that the state only shares its border with Tibet, and not with China.

In the strongest comments since April 4, when the Dalai Lama began his visit to Arunachal Pradesh, which China claims as Southern Tibet, foreign ministry spokesperson Lu Kang said their "provocative" statements "exceeded the scope of religious activities" as stated by India.

Lu said despite China's objection, India insisted on arranging the Dalai Lama's visit "in the disputed areas of the eastern section of the China-India boundary". He also said the "some specific Indian official" had indulged in provocative political statement but did not name Pema Khandu.

"It shows that the activity by the 14th Dalai Lama already exceeded so called scope of religious activities claimed by the Indian side," Lu said.

"What India has done is violated the solemn commitment on Tibet-related issues and it also has negative impact on proper settlement of the territorial disputes between the two side through negotiations," it said.



2018 ELECTIONS

Thai junta to
lift political
party ban

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's junta chief yesterday said he plans to lift the ban on political party gatherings before next year's elections, although he declined to put a date on polls or state when the restrictions will be lifted.

The military seized power in 2014 ushering in Thailand's most autocratic government in a generation.

Former army chief turned Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha said the coup was necessary to end a decade of political instability and root out corruption.

He has banned political parties from meeting, cracked down on public dissent and granted himself the ability to pass any law in the name of national security.

"In 2018 we will go ahead with holding elections and political parties will be able to hold meetings," Prayut told reporters.

However there are lingering questions over how much power any future civilian government will have under the new constitution -- the country's 20th since 1932.

The new charter provides for a junta-appointed upper house -- including six seats reserved for the military -- and a proportional voting system likely to reduce the influence of major parties.

The constitutional court, a frequent thorn in the side of elected governments, will be strengthened, making it easier to impeach a civilian leader.

The military has also said any future government must adhere to a "legally binding 20-year-plan" for the country that is still in the works.

The junta is also drawing up a series of yet to be published laws that will define who can form a political party.