

S Korea's Park indicted for bribery

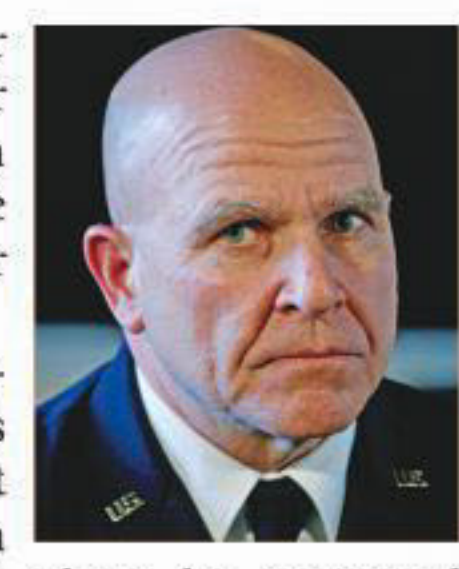
Ousted South Korean President Park Geun-Hye was yesterday charged with bribery involving millions of dollars over the massive corruption and influence-peddling scandal that brought her down. Park, whose impeachment was confirmed by Seoul's top court last month, is at the centre of a sprawling graft investigation, which has also implicated top businessmen and brought millions of people onto the streets. The former leader, already detained at a centre near Seoul, also faces charges of abusing her powers and leaking state secrets, Seoul prosecutors probing the scandal said in a statement. "We have formally charged Park... with multiple offences including abuse of power, coercion, bribery and leaking state secrets," they said after



Women hold slogans calling for the release of Palestinian prisoners during a rally supporting those detained in Israeli jails after hundreds of them launched a hunger strike, in the West Bank town of Hebron yesterday. More than 1,000 Palestinians in Israeli jails launched a hunger strike following a call from Palestinian leader and prominent prisoner Marwan Barghouti.

Trump adviser hints at harder line on Pak

US national security adviser Lieutenant General HR McMaster arrived in Islamabad yesterday on an unannounced visit, a day after he hinted the US could take a tougher stance on Pakistan. It was the first visit by a top member of President Donald Trump's administration to the militancy-hit South Asian country, and came after a stop in neighbouring Afghanistan where he suggested Washington may take a stronger line on Islamabad, for years seen as an unreliable US ally. Before his visit to Islamabad, McMaster in an interview to Afghan television channel ToloNews appeared to take a "tougher line" on Pakistan, which has been accused of using the Taliban as a proxy force and giving its leaders sanctuary. "As all of us have hoped for many, many years — we have hoped that Pakistani leaders will understand that it is in their interest to go after these groups less selectively than they have in the past," McMaster said in the interview. "The best way to pursue their interests in Afghanistan and elsewhere is through the use of diplomacy, and not through the use of proxies that engage in violence," McMaster said. In Pakistan, McMaster's gave no interviews and the official statement on his visit was more diplomatically couched. "General McMaster expressed appreciation for Pakistan's democratic and economic development, and stressed the need to confront terrorism in all its forms," the US Embassy said in a statement.



Opposition disputes poll win

Int'l monitors say campaign was held on an 'unlevel playing field' with restrictions, late procedural changes

Turkey's opposition yesterday called for the annulment of a referendum giving President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sweeping new powers, as international monitors voiced concern over the campaign and vote count. With political tensions once again escalating in Turkey after a result that opponents fear will hand Erdogan one-man rule, German Chancellor Angela Merkel called for dialogue to seek calm. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters yesterday that the results of Turkish referendum, in which a majority voted to grant President Tayyip Erdogan more powers, should be respected, reported Reuters. The vote was a domestic Turkish matter, he said. The referendum was seen as crucial not just for shaping the political system of Turkey but also the future strategic direction of a nation that has been a Nato member since 1952 and an EU hopeful for half a century. The 'Yes' camp won 51.41 percent in Sunday's referendum and 'No' 48.59, according to near-complete results released by the election authorities. But the opposition immediately cried foul over alleged violations, claiming that a clean vote would have made a

difference of several percentage points and handed them victory. The main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) said they would challenge the results from most of the ballot boxes due to alleged violations. The opposition was particularly incensed by a decision by the YSK to allow voting papers without official stamps to be counted, which they said opened the way for fraud, reported AFP. The referendum has no "democratic legitimacy", HDP spokesman and MP Osman Baydemir told reporters in Ankara. The opposition had already complained of an unfair campaign that saw the 'Yes' backers swamp the airwaves and use up billboards across the country in a saturation advertising campaign. The referendum campaign was conducted on an "unlevel playing field" and the vote count itself was marred by the late procedural changes that removed key safeguards, international observers said. "The legal framework... remained inadequate for the holding of a genuinely democratic referendum," the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) monitors said in a joint statement.

TURKEY REFERENDUM

- Merkel calls for dialogue to seek calm
- Kremlin says will of Turkish people should be respected



Rescuers accuse Europe of 'letting migrants to drown'

Italian Coast Guard estimates the number of people rescued since Friday was approaching 7,000

Calm seas, desperate migrants and ruthless human traffickers all played a role in a record-breaking weekend of maritime rescues in the Mediterranean Sea between Italy and Libya. But even as the rescue vessels race against time to save lives, another battle is brewing with accusations from the European Union's border control agency Frontex against nongovernmental organizations like Doctors Without Borders and the Mobile Offshore Aid Station, or MOAS, that run so-called charity rescue ships. Frontex says the charity rescue vessels create a pull factor for migrants and traffickers; the NGOs say they are out there in the absence of an EU strategy to save lives at sea and a lack of initiative to provide a safe corridor option for migration and asylum. On Sunday evening in Italy, the Italian Coast Guard estimated the number of those rescued since Friday was approaching 7,000, though that number will surely grow

as a steady stream of rubber dinghies and rickety wooden fishing vessels were still being spotted off the coast of Libya. At least 20 cadavers, including that of an 8-year-old boy recovered during rescue operations, were also brought to Sicily and the Italian mainland with the survivors. The migrants and refugees were rescued by Italian Coast Guard boats, passing merchant ships and more than a dozen NGO charity ships that have filled the vacuum created when Italy's Mare Nostrum search and rescue program ended in 2014 because of budget concerns. The Mare Nostrum project cost Italian taxpayers €9 million (\$9.5 million) a month, according to the Italian Navy. The charity ships, which rely on donations, have estimated operating costs of around €11,000 (\$11,666) a day, charities say. European authorities and charity ships face a daunting task. Since the beginning of the year, 32,750 migrants and refugees have arrived on European shores, not including those rescued this weekend, according to UNHCR.



WAR ON ISLAMIC STATE

Mosul ops displaces half a million: UN

The six-month-old operation to retake the Iraqi city of Mosul from the Islamic State group has forced around half a million people to flee their homes, the United Nations said yesterday. Iraqi forces began the country's biggest military operation in years exactly six months ago and recaptured the east side of the city in January. But an assault launched the following month on the part of Mosul that lies west of the Tigris river has seen a sharp rise in displacement. "The sheer volume of civilians still fleeing Mosul city is staggering," Lise Grande, the UN's humanitarian coordinator in Iraq, said in a statement. "Our worst case scenario when the fighting started was that up to one million civilians may flee Mosul. Already, more than 493,000 people have left, leaving almost everything behind," she said. Iraqi forces have been making significant gains in west Mosul over the past two months but the toughest battles could yet lie ahead, with die-hard jihadists hunkering down in the treacherous streets of the Old City. The UN estimated that another half million civilians were still in IS-controlled areas of west Mosul.

RUSSIAN METRO BLAST

Bomb plotter arrested near Moscow

A suspect accused of plotting the St Petersburg bombing attack has been arrested near Moscow, Russian officials said yesterday. Russian authorities said the man was detained in the town of Odintsovo and was being questioned. He has been identified as Abror Azimov, who was born in 1990 and is from Central Asia. Russia Today posted a video of the alleged suspect being detained by multiple agents near a railway track. In the video, he is tackled to the ground and a handgun is found in his waistband.



Kashmiri students clash with Indian government forces near a college in central Srinagar's Lal Chowk yesterday. Violence erupted in Srinagar as students staged a protest after more than 60 students were injured in clashes with Indian security forces at a college in the district of Pulawama last week.

NEWS IN brief

- 12 injured in 'acid attack' in London**
AFP, London
Twelve people were injured when a corrosive substance was thrown inside a packed London nightclub yesterday, police and fire services said, amid a sharp rise in acid attacks in the British capital. A London Fire Brigade spokesman told AFP an "unknown corrosive substance" was thrown in Mangle, a club in east London, in the early hours yesterday. It was identified as "acidic substance" from testing, he said.
- Nepal convicts soldiers of killing during war**
AFP, Kathmandu
Three former Nepalese soldiers have each been sentenced in absentia to 20 years in jail for killing a teenage girl, only the second conviction for crimes committed during a decade-long civil war which ended in 2006. Fifteen-year-old Maina Sunuwar was tortured and killed after she was detained by the army in 2004 for alleged links to Maoist rebels.
- Hundreds moved after Lanka dump collapse**
AFP, Colombo
Sri Lanka has moved over 400 families to temporary shelters after tonnes of rotting garbage collapsed onto a slum on Friday, killing at least 28 people. Some 145 homes were destroyed when the 300-foot (90-metre) rubbish mountain came crashing down on Friday afternoon at Kolonnawa on the northeastern edge of Colombo. Police say many more buildings were damaged and could collapse at any time.

Ohio Facebook killer hunted by US police

Cleveland police issued an arrest warrant yesterday for a gunman they said murdered a man in a crime he broadcast live on Facebook. Officials in the Ohio city said suspect Steve Stephens, 37, shot his 74-year old victim Robert Godwin Sr at random on Easter Sunday, in cold blood. "Suspect did broadcast the killing on Facebook Live and has claimed to have committed multiple other homicides which are still NOT verified," Cleveland police said. "Suspect in this case is... armed and dangerous. If seen call 9-1-1. Do not approach." Police said Stevens may be out of the midwestern state, and asked residents of Indiana, Michigan, New York and Pennsylvania to be on alert.

Chaplin fans set a world record

Six hundred and sixty-two people on Sunday set a world record for the biggest gathering of Charlie Chaplins, each donning the black jacket, shoes, bowler hat, toothbrush moustache and cane of the comic's signature creation, the Little Tramp. The unusual rally, drawing Chaplin fans of all ages from all over Europe, took place at a museum dedicated to the artist at his former home in Corsier-sur-vevey, western Switzerland. "There have been big Charlie Chaplin gatherings in the past, but this is the first to be certified by an officer of the law," Annick Barbezat-Perrin, a spokesman for the museum, told AFP. Chaplin was born in London 128 years ago on Sunday. He died on Christmas Day, 1977, aged 88, after spending the last decades of his life in Switzerland. The Chaplin's World museum, which opened a year ago on Sunday, also said that it had had around 300,000 visitors in its first 12 months of operation, far outstripping estimates of 220,000.



Le Pen, Macron hold rival rallies

Seek to stay ahead of fast-chasing pack just days before vote

The two frontrunners in the French presidential election, far-right leader Marine Le Pen and centrist Emmanuel Macron, were staging rival rallies in Paris yesterday, seeking to stay ahead of a fast-chasing pack just days before the vote. After weeks of twists and turns, the unpredictable race has narrowed dramatically, with surveys suggesting four candidates are in contention to win one of the top two spots in the April 23 vote and progress to the run-off election a fortnight later. Scandal-hit conservative Francois Fillon and radical leftist Jean-Luc Melancon are steaming up behind the two frontrunners, and with around one in three of the French electorate still undecided, candidates are scrapping for every vote. Le Pen and Macron, who have both scored as high as 25 percent in voter surveys, stood at 22 percent in the latest IPSOS poll, while Melancon has surged to 20 percent and Fillon

FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL RACE



stands at 19. Melancon's late surge -- and the possibility he could square off against Le Pen in the May 7 decider -- has sparked alarm over the future of the EU, as both candidates advocate withdrawing from the bloc for different reasons. Outgoing President Francois Hollande weighed in on Saturday, saying Europe has "protected us against war" in the decades since World War II. "Let us preserve it instead of scapegoating it," he said at a World War I centenary event in northern France. Macron plans his biggest rally yet at the Bercy sports and concert hall, a venue with a capacity of 20,000. The location near the economy ministry serves as a reminder that the relatively inexperienced Macron held the key economy portfolio for two years under his mentor Hollande. The 39-year-old former Rothschild banker quit the Socialist government last year to form his "En Marche" ("On the Move") party and launch his bid for power as a candidate "neither of the left nor of the right". En Marche says it has planned "1,000 events a day" including 163 public rallies until the official end of campaigning at midnight on Friday. An aide to Macron said he would use the event to hit back at Le Pen's accusation he is soft on Islamists. "With Mr Macron, it would be Islamism on the move," Le Pen, 48, said on Saturday in response to revelations that one of Macron's top campaigners had criticised the Charlie Hebdo satirical weekly for publishing cartoons of the prophet Mohammed.