

BABRI MOSQUE DEMOLITION

Five things to know

WHAT IS THE DISPUTE ABOUT? Hindus and Muslims have for decades been bitterly divided over the 16th-century Babri mosque in Ayodhya, a city in India's northern Uttar Pradesh state.

HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN A FLASHPOINT? Hindus believe a Muslim conqueror razed the Ram temple in the 1500s to make way for the mosque. The British erected a fence in the 19th century to separate places of worship so that Muslims could worship in the inner court and Hindus the outer.

WHO WAS BEHIND ITS DESTRUCTION? In 1984, a group of Hindus formed a committee to "liberate" the birthplace of Ram and build a temple -- or mandir -- at the disputed site. The movement was headed by L K Advani, a senior figure in the ruling BJP, now headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

WHEN DID TENSIONS ESCALATE? On December 6, 1992 a huge Hindu crowd converged on the mosque site to symbolically and provocatively lay the first stone of the new temple. The 200,000-strong mob broke through police cordons, first smashing three domes to rubble before reducing the rest of the historic mosque to ruins.

WHERE DOES IT STAND LEGALLY? In 2002, three High Court judges began hearings to determine who could lay claim to the contested site. An important ruling came in 2010 when a High Court ruled that Muslims and Hindus should split the site -- albeit unevenly, with Hindus granted the lion's share.



SOURCE: AFP



US 'armada' not sailing to North Korea: report

Pence vows 'overwhelming' response to Pyongyang

AGENCIES When US President Donald Trump boasted early last week that he had sent an "armada" as a warning to North Korea, the aircraft carrier strike group he spoke of was still far from the Korean peninsula, and headed in the opposite direction.

It was even farther away over the weekend, moving through the Sunda Strait and then into the Indian Ocean, as North Korea displayed what appeared to be new missiles at a parade and staged a failed missile test.

The US military's Pacific Command explained on Tuesday that the strike group first had to complete a shorter-than-initially planned period of training with Australia. But it was now "proceeding to the Western Pacific as ordered," it said.

The perceived communications mix-up has raised eyebrows among Korea experts, who wonder whether it erodes the Trump administration's credibility at a time when US rhetoric about the North's advancing nuclear and missile capabilities are raising concerns about a potential conflict.

Meanwhile, US Vice President Mike Pence yesterday vowed that the United States would counter any North Korean attack with an "overwhelming and effective" response.

Donald Trump's deputy is in the region to reassure allies fretting over Pyongyang's quickening missile programme, and its apparent readiness to carry out another banned nuclear test in its quest to develop an atomic weapon that can hit the US mainland.

Pence, whose visit started in South Korea the day after the failed launch by North Korea of what analysts said could have been a new missile, described the threat from the isolated regime as growing.

Aboard the USS Ronald Reagan, the vice president, adopting a Churchillian tone, told troops he was there as "storm clouds gather on the horizon" of Northeast Asia.

"North Korea is the most dangerous and urgent threat to peace and security in the Asia-Pacific," Pence said. But, "we will defeat any attack and meet any use of conventional or nuclear weapons with an overwhelming and effective American response."

Pence's comments come after North Korea warned the regime had no intention of dialling down its missile programme, pledging weekly tests and threatening "all-out war" if the US took any action against it.

TERRITORIAL DISPUTE

China names 'Indian areas' to assert claims

REUTERS, Beijing

China has issued standardised spellings of the names of six places in a region disputed with India, in what China's foreign ministry yesterday said was an assertion of sovereignty.

China was upset when exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, whom it considers a dangerous separatist, visited the contested stretch of land on the India-China border this month.

Arunachal Pradesh is an eastern Himalayan region administered by New Delhi but claimed by China as Southern Tibet.

Last week, China's civil affairs ministry released a list of six places in the region with what China considers to be their formal names, in Chinese, Tibetan and English.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang said the move was appropriate and reflected the names used by Chinese ethnic groups, such as the Tibetans, over a long time.

"These names also reflect, and explain from one aspect, that China's territorial claims on Southern Tibet have an obvious historical, cultural and administrative jurisdiction basis," Lu told a daily news briefing.

'PANAMA PAPERS' LEAKS

SC verdict can oust Pak PM

REUTERS, Islamabad/Karachi

A looming Supreme Court decision that could disqualify Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif over corruption allegations had the country on edge yesterday, as a drawn-out investigation related to the "Panama Papers" leaks neared a conclusion.

Disqualifying Sharif would leave his party in power, but it would cause intense turmoil at a time when Pakistan is experiencing modest growth and improved security after years of violence, and the civilian government and powerful military have appeared to come to uneasy terms.

Sharif has denied any wrongdoing, but the Supreme Court agreed to investigate his family's offshore wealth late last year after opposition leader Imran Khan threatened street protests.

The Supreme Court could take a range of steps. It could clear the prime minister, or order a further judicial commission of inquiry or even declare him ineligible to hold office, as it did in 2012 with then-Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani over a contempt of court case.

Pakistani stocks fell 1.5 percent in early trade after the news overnight that a decision would be announced today afternoon.

Both the government and opposition expressed confidence yesterday.

The case stems from documents leaked from the Panama-based Mossack Fonseca law firm appeared to show that Sharif's daughter and two sons owned offshore holding companies registered in the British Virgin Islands and used them to buy properties in London.

Sharif told parliament last year that his family wealth was acquired legally in the decades before he entered politics and that no money was siphoned off-shore.

Khan, however, has argued that the prime minister's lawyers have changed stories on the source of the offshore money several times and that it is up to Sharif to prove the offshore companies were not used for money laundering.

Corruption is endemic in Pakistan, which ranks a dismal 116th out of 176 in Transparency International's annual index of the world's most graft-ridden countries.



NEWS IN brief

India bans use of red beacon by VIPs

AFP, New Delhi

India said yesterday it will ban ministers and senior officials from using red beacons on their cars to cut through traffic, a long-standing privilege that has caused resentment and accusations of elitism.



US gunman kills 3 'in race attack'

AFP, Los Angeles

A man arrested for a shooting spree in the central California city of Fresno on Tuesday in which three white men were killed saw himself as part of an ongoing race war, according to family and police. The suspect, a 39-year-old African-American named Kori Ali Muhammad, shouted "Allahu Akbar" as he was being taken into custody.

Christian governor loses Jakarta run-off

AFP, Jakarta

Jakarta's Christian governor yesterday lost heavily to a Muslim candidate in an election run-off, private polls indicated, after a divisive battle that has damaged Indonesia's reputation as a bastion of tolerant Islam.

US Pentagon chief meets Saudi king

AFP, Riyadh

US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis met Saudi King Salman yesterday, beginning a series of talks to reinvigorate the Riyadh-Washington alliance in the face of common adversary Iran. Mattis arrived in the kingdom on Tuesday afternoon to listen to Saudi leaders and learn "what are their priorities", an American defence official said earlier.

Trump pushes ' Hire American' policy

Orders review of H-1B visa programme

CNN ONLINE

President Donald Trump signed an executive order Tuesday directing federal agencies to implement the "Buy American, Hire American" rhetoric of his campaign.

"The buy and hire American order I'm about to sign will protect workers and students like you," Trump told a crowd of technical students and manufacturing employees at the headquarters of Snap-On Tools, a Wisconsin-based manufacturer. "It's America first, you better believe it. It's time. It's time, right?"

The order, which Trump signed after delivering his remarks, looks to bolster protections for certain American-made goods and calls for a review of the H-1B visa program for skilled workers, with the goal of reforming the program, senior administration officials said.

Trump said the order would "aggressively promote and use American-made goods and to ensure that American labor is hired to do the job."

Lauding American "grit" and "craftsmanship," Trump once again embraced the populist rhetoric that fueled his campaign during his remarks Tuesday, decrying the World Trade Organization as "another one of our disasters" and also calling the NAFTA free trade deal a "complete and total disaster."



Syrian evacuees from Waer, the last opposition-held district of Syria's third city Homs, arrive in the city of al-Bab in the northern Aleppo province at sunset on Tuesday. Evacuations of thousands of besieged Syrians, held in government and rebel territories, resumed yesterday with tight security in place after a weekend bombing against those leaving government-held areas killed dozens, including nearly 70 children.

India's SC throws out case no one could understand

AFP, New Delhi

Anyone dealing with India's overburdened legal system knows that the wheels of justice move slowly.

But in one case, they have ground to a halt completely after SC judges said they were throwing out a lawsuit that used so much jargon it was incomprehensible.

"We will have to set it aside because one cannot understand this," the Hindustan Times daily quoted the judges as saying yesterday.

Even the lawyers representing the two sides in the row between a landlord and his tenant said they were unable to understand the original order issued by a lower court.

"We normally prepare an appeal in two days' time. However, in this case I took more than a week because the facts of the case were unclear," the landlord's lawyer, EC Agrawala, told the Hindustan Times.

The property dispute dates back to 1999 when the landlord filed a petition to evict his tenant for not paying rent.

In a nearly two-decade struggle, the landlord finally took his matter to the country's top court after the Himachal Pradesh High Court favoured the tenant.

But even that would be hard to glean from the original order.

"(The)...tenant in the demised premises stands aggrieved by the pronouncement made by the learned Executing Court upon his objections constituted theretofore... wherewithin the apposite unfoldments qua his resistance to the execution of the decree stood discountenanced by the learned Executing Court," it read.

FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL RACE

Le Pen hardens tone Stresses threats of immigration, terrorism

AFP, Paris

Far-right presidential frontrunner Marine Le Pen said yesterday that French people felt "dispossessed" in their own country as she stressed the threats of immigration and terrorism in the final days of campaigning.

The 48-year-old former lawyer has spent years trying to broaden support for her National Front party, but she has signalled a return to the core concerns of many of her supporters in recent speeches.

Speaking on BFM television yesterday, Le Pen emphasised how she would pull France out of the European Union, slash immigration, make it harder to get French nationality and crack down on suspected Islamists.

"French people have the feeling of being dispossessed of their identity, of their social security system and their sovereignty," Le Pen told the channel.

Polls show a four-way race developing ahead of the first round of the election on Sunday between Le Pen, 39-year-old centrist Emmanuel Macron, conservative Francois Fillon and far-left firebrand Jean-Luc Melenchon.

Two of them are expected to advance to a run-off vote on May 7. After a string of Islamist-inspired assaults in France since 2015, security concerns moved to the centre of the campaign.

Le Pen has proposed expelling any foreigner convicted of a crime or suspected of being radicalised. Convicted extremists with dual nationality would also be stripped of their French passports.



PROTEST AGAINST 'FATWA' Indian singer shaves head

NDTV ONLINE

Indian singer Sonu Nigam shaved his head yesterday afternoon in Mumbai, as promised in a tweet.

Addressing the press earlier, Nigam said, "Shaving hair is no challenge or negativity, it's a symbolic move - asking what are you making this country? What are these fatwas?" The 43-year-old singer was referring to a Muslim cleric's offering of a reward of Rs 10 lakhs for anyone who would shave Nigam's head and garland him with old shoes.

Nigam tweeted yesterday morning that he would have his head shaved himself, adding "keep your 10 lakhs ready mauvi."

Speaking to the press in the afternoon, he said "You have to fight the fanatics, you can't just hide and comment from Twitter." Sonu Nigam has been the focal point of a raging debate after he tweeted on Monday about being woken by the early morning azaan and called it 'gundagardi.'

UK MPs back snap polls

EU says divorce talks to start after June 8 vote

AFP, London

British lawmakers yesterday overwhelmingly backed Prime Minister Theresa May's call for a snap election, paving the way for a June vote she hopes will give her a "mandate to complete Brexit".

The House of Commons voted by 522 to 13 to hold a general election on June 8 -- plunging Britain back into political uncertainty just weeks before the start of negotiations on leaving the European Union.

May stunned the country on Tuesday when she announced her plan for an early vote, despite having repeatedly said she would wait until the next election scheduled in 2020.

In fiery exchanges in the House of Commons yesterday, May said an early election would strengthen her hand against domestic critics seeking to "frustrate the process" of Brexit, which formally began last month.



Indian rescue personnel and volunteers stand amidst wreckage and victims after a bus accident, at the bottom of a ravine near the River Tons at Chopal, some 115kms north of Shimla, yesterday. The accident killed at least 44 people, an official said.

PHOTO: AFP