

NEWS IN brief

Nigeria's leader urged to take medical leave

AFP, Lagos
Nigerian civil society activists called on President Muhammadu Buhari to take long-term medical leave yesterday, adding to mounting pressure on the 74-year-old over his health. The ailing head of state spent two months in London earlier this year, officially on vacation and to have routine medical tests for an undisclosed illness.

China tightens rules on online news

REUTERS, Beijing
China yesterday issued tighter rules for online news portals and network providers, the latest step in President Xi Jinping's push to secure the internet and maintain strict party control over content. Xi has made China's "cyber sovereignty" a top priority in his sweeping campaign to bolster security. He has also reassessed the ruling Communist Party's role in limiting and guiding online discussion.



Thai king takes control of five palace agencies

AFP, Bangkok
Thailand's new king was granted control over five state agencies that oversee royal affairs and security yesterday, the latest move by an increasingly assertive monarch to consolidate power. The five agencies transferred to King Maha Vajiralongkorn's control include two major administrative departments - the Royal Household Bureau and the Office of His Majesty's Principal Private Secretary - plus three palace security bodies.



Members of Hindu Sena, a right wing Hindu group, burn posters of Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Pakistan's army chief Lieutenant General Qamar Javed Bajwa during a protest in New Delhi, India, yesterday, against the killing of two Indian soldiers who were patrolling the de facto border in the disputed Kashmir region on Monday.

ROHINGYA ABUSES

Suu Kyi rejects UN Myanmar probe

AFP, Brussels
Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday rejected a decision by the UN's rights council to investigate allegations of crimes by Myanmar's security forces against minority Rohingya Muslims. The UN body agreed in March to dispatch a fact-finding mission to the Southeast Asian country over claims of murder, rape and torture in Rakhine state. "We do not agree with it," Suu Kyi, Myanmar's de facto leader, told a press conference with EU diplomatic chief Federica Mogherini during a visit to Brussels, when asked about the probe. "We have disassociated ourselves from the resolution because we do not think that the resolution is in keeping with what is actually happening on the ground." Nobel laureate Suu Kyi said that the country would be "happy to accept" recommendations that were "in keeping with the real needs of the region." "But those recommendations which will divide further the two communities in Rakhine we will not accept, because it will not help to resolve the problems that are arising all the time." "I am not sure quite what you mean by saying that we have not been concerned at all with regards to the allegations of atrocities that have taken place in the Rakhine," Suu Kyi said. "We have been investigating them and have been taking action." Rights groups say hundreds of the stateless group were killed in a months-long army crackdown following deadly attacks on Myanmar border police posts.

KILLING AND MUTILATION OF INDIAN SOLDIERS

India, Pak wage war of words

New Delhi vows 'unequivocal' response; Islamabad denies barbaric act

AGENCIES
India yesterday warned Pakistan of an "unequivocal" response to the killing and mutilation of two soldiers yesterday along the Line of Control in Kashmir. Pakistan, which has denied the barbaric act, said in response that India "should look inwards" to determine how the soldiers were killed, sought "actionable evidence" of India's claims, and warned "any disadvantage shall be appropriately responded at a place and time of own choosing." The Indian army said Pakistani forces fired rockets and mortar bombs at two Indian posts on the Line of Control dividing Muslim-majority Kashmir between the two countries, in the Krishna Ghati sector. The recriminations were exchanged between top commanders of India and Pakistan - the Director General of Military Operations, Lieutenant General AK Bhatt, spoke on a hotline to his counterpart across the border hours after Delhi warned that the army

will exact revenge for the atrocities committed on Prem Sagar and Naib Subedar Paramjit Singh on Monday. Both men were part of a team patrolling the Line of Control or de facto border in the Poonch sector last morning when two posts were assaulted with rockets and mortar bombs. Past accusations that Pakistani forces have mutilated dead Indian soldiers have outraged the Indian public and intensified the dispute between the two nuclear-armed neighbours over the Himalayan region. The soldiers - one from the Border Security Force and the other from the army - were honoured as heroes yesterday morning before their bodies were transported to their families in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. Prem Sagar's daughter said "We want 50 heads to avenge him." India says a team of Pakistani soldiers and terrorists sneaked past the Line of Control and entered Indian territory under the cover of heavy fire from the Pakistani army.

India described the mutilation of the soldiers as a "dastardly and inhuman act" deserving of "unequivocal condemnation and response." India's Defence Minister Arun Jaitley, who also holds the finance portfolio, condemned the latest killings which he called "reprehensible and barbaric." In September, India responded to a massive attack by Pakistani terrorists on an army camp in Uri in Kashmir by sending soldiers across the Line of Control to take out staging areas for terrorists in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Delhi warned at the time that it could repeat the action. India and Pakistan have faced off for decades across the Line of Control, an old ceasefire line through the region that both countries claim in full but rule in part. In a separate incident on Monday, militants fighting Indian rule in Kashmir ambushed a van carrying cash for the state-run Jammu and Kashmir Bank, killing five policemen and two bank officials, a senior police official said.

Merkel holds talks with Putin on rare Russia visit

Trump to speak with Russian leader on Syria

AFP, Sochi
German Chancellor Angela Merkel held talks yesterday with President Vladimir Putin on Ukraine and Syria in a signal of renewed dialogue despite profound rifts on her first visit to Russia since 2015. "We cannot but use this visit to discuss bilateral relations and the most problematic points, by which I mean Ukraine and Syria and maybe some other regions," Putin told Merkel at the start of the meeting in the Black Sea resort city of Sochi. The Russian and German leaders have scaled back links as Moscow's ties with the EU plunged to a post-Cold War low over the crisis in Ukraine. Berlin has said yesterday's meeting would "above all" focus on the upcoming G20 summit in Hamburg in July and no breakthroughs were expected on major disagreements, although Putin earlier called for ties "to fully normalise." Merkel has strongly backed EU sanctions on Russia for seizing Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and supporting the pro-Kremlin sepa-



ratist insurgency in the east of the country. Moscow has responded with an embargo on agricultural products from the West. A European-brokered peace plan to end the conflict has hit a dead end. Meanwhile, US President Donald Trump was set to speak with Russia's Vladimir Putin by phone yesterday as the two leaders look to make headway on ties in the face of deep rifts over Syria and alleged hacking. Both the White House and Kremlin confirmed the leaders will hold their third call since Trump took office but did not give details on the topics of discussion.

TENSIONS IN KOREAN PENINSULA

Halt deployment of THAAD in S Korea

Demands China as US says missile defence system operational

AGENCIES
China yesterday demanded an immediate halt to a controversial US missile shield hours after Washington announced that the defence system was now operational in South Korea. Washington and Seoul agreed to the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery deployment in July in the wake of a string of North Korean missile tests. But its deployment has infuriated China, which fears it will weaken its own ballistic missile capabilities and says it supports the regional security balance. "We oppose the deployment of the THAAD system in (South Korea) and urge relevant sides to immediately stop the deployment. We will firmly take necessary measures to uphold our interests," foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said at a regular press briefing. While Beijing lashed out at the shield's deployment, the foreign ministry expressed support for US President Donald Trump's surprise comments that he would be "honored" to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un under the right conditions. "If it would be appropriate for me to meet with him I would, absolutely. I would be honored to do it," Trump said in an interview with Bloomberg.



Nepal's youngest mayoral candidate Ranju Neupane (2R), 21, files her nomination for local-level elections in Kathmandu, yesterday. Nepal is holding local-level elections for the first time in 20 years, over two phases on April 14 and May 14.

Nepal moves to impeach first female CJ

AFP, Kathmandu
Nepal's first female chief justice has been suspended after the government filed a motion to impeach her, triggering protests within the fragile ruling coalition. The two main parties in the coalition accused Sushila Karki of interference after the Supreme Court last month overturned the government's choice for chief of police. "We have decided to impeach Chief Justice Sushila Karki... after she visibly started taking sides in cases," Min Biswakarma, a member of the ruling coalition who proposed the motion, told AFP on Monday. Hours later, Deputy Prime Minister Bimalendra Nidhi resigned in protest. One of the smaller coalition parties has also threatened to quit the government. Karki's supporters say she has taken a strong stance against corruption during her year-long tenure as head of the supreme court. A committee will now be established to investigate the allegations of bias, after which parliament will vote on whether to impeach her. But the process is unlikely to get that far as she is due to retire in June when she turns 65. The government had appointed Jaya Bahadur Chand as police chief, but the court ruled that the highest-ranking officer Navaraj Silwal should take the top job.

IS kills 32 at refugee camp

AFP, Beirut
At least 32 people were killed yesterday in an Islamic State group attack near a refugee camp on the Syrian side of the border with Iraq, a monitor said. The attack came as the Kurdish-Arab alliance known as the Syrian Democratic Forces presses an offensive against IS in the town of Tabqa as part of an assault on the jihadist bastion Raqa. The dawn IS attack hit a makeshift camp where some 300 families were waiting to cross into SDF-held territory in Hasakeh province, in northeastern Syria. "At least five suicide attackers blew themselves up outside and inside a camp for Iraqi refugees and displaced Syrians in Hasakeh province," said Rami Abdel Rahman, the head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group. Heavy clashes then erupted between the IS fighters and the SDF. "At least 30 people were wounded, and the death toll may rise because some people are in critical condition and others are still unaccounted for," the monitor said. Although the speech caused an online sensation over plagiarism, it appeared to be an attempt by Le Pen to reach out to supporters of Francois Fillon, who was knocked out in the April 23 first round of voting after coming third with 20 percent of the vote. Polls show Le Pen lagging centrist frontrunner Emmanuel Macron by around 20 points before next Sunday's runoff. In one part of her May 1 speech, lasting about 50 seconds, Le Pen talked about people learning French in Argentina and Poland, and on waiting lists to study at the Alliance

humanity. President Bashar al-Assad's forces are also stepping up chlorine gas attacks and have begun using surface-fired rockets filled with chlorine in fighting near Damascus, the group said in a new report. A commander of the elite Revolutionary Guards said yesterday Iran would maintain its support for the Syrian government despite the deaths of hundreds of its advisers and volunteers in the six-year civil war. Shia Iran and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah are the Syrian regime's most important military supporters after Russia in its battle against mainly Sunni rebels. "We will send advisers in all fields and offer all help at our disposal so the resistance front doesn't break," General Mohammad Pakpour told the Fars news agency. Regime forces used nerve gas in four recent attacks: HRW Iran to keep up military support for Assad: commander

WAR IN SYRIA
Regime forces used nerve gas in four recent attacks: HRW
Iran to keep up military support for Assad: commander

FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL POLLS

Le Pen in plagiarism row

REUTERS, Paris
French far-right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen came under fire on social media yesterday for lifting sections of a speech from a conservative rival, in what Le Pen aides said was a "nod-and-a-wink" to his voters. Although the speech caused an online sensation over plagiarism, it appeared to be an attempt by Le Pen to reach out to supporters of Francois Fillon, who was knocked out in the April 23 first round of voting after coming third with 20 percent of the vote. Polls show Le Pen lagging centrist frontrunner Emmanuel Macron by around 20 points before next Sunday's runoff. In one part of her May 1 speech, lasting about 50 seconds, Le Pen talked about people learning French in Argentina and Poland, and on waiting lists to study at the Alliance Francaise official French schools abroad, in a word-per-word lifting of a mid-April speech by Fillon. Le Pen added to Fillon's comment that this showed France is more than a military and industrial power, that France "must and can" become a big power again. It was the second most trending topic on Twitter in France, with the hashtag #plagiat -- plagiarism in French. Le Pen also described France's borders and ties with "Italy, our sister" - again a phrase used in Fillon's April 15 speech, and used the same quote from early 20th century French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau. In another excerpt about prospects of cooperation with France's neighbours, where the words were again the same as in Fillon's speech, Le Pen added that this would require France not being "a vassal" of Germany.