NEWS IN brief

Yemen cholera kills 115

AFP, *Sanaa*

A cholera outbreak in war-torn Yemen has killed 115 people and left 8,500 ill as hospitals struggle to cope with an influx of patients, Red Cross said yesterday. This is the second outbreak of cholera in less than a year in Yemen, the Arab world's poorest country.

Quake kills 2 in Iran

AFP, *Tehran*

A 5.7 magnitude earthquake near Iran's border with Turkmenistan killed two people, injured hundreds and caused widespread damage, state media reported yesterday. The quake struck at 1800 GMT Saturday in and around the city of Bojnurd, North Khorasan province. It left more than 370 people injured and damaged as many as 40 percent of houses in the area, it said.

480 migrants rescued from Mediterranean

AFP, *Rome*

Over 480 asylum seekers and refugees were rescued in the Mediterranean on Saturday as they attempted the perilous crossing from north Africa, with seven bodies also recovered, Italy's coastguard said yesterday. More than 45,000 people have been rescued and brought to Italy so far this year, sources said.

2 killed in J&K clash

AFP, *Srinagar*

Two militants were killed in a shootout with security forces in Indian Kashmir yesterday, the army and police said. Acting on a tip-off, government forces surrounded a thickly forested area near the northern town of Handwara, triggering the clash.

Chinese President Xi Jinping poses for a group photo with other delegates and guests at the welcoming banquet for the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, yesterday. China yesterday touted its new Silk Road as "a project of the century" at the summit highlighting its growing leadership on globalisation.

PHOTO: AFP

150 nations, 200,000 victims

Says Europol, warns of more chaos; manhunt on for hackers

AFP, *London*

The unprecedented global cyberattack has hit more than 200,000 victims in scores of countries, Europol said yesterday, warning that the situation could escalate when people return to work.

An international manhunt was well under way for the plotters behind what was being described as the world's biggest-ever computer ransom assault.

The indiscriminate attack, which began Friday, struck banks, hospitals and government agencies in more than 150 countries, exploiting known vulnerabilities in old Microsoft computer operating systems.

US package delivery giant FedEx, European car factories, Spanish telecoms giant Telefonica, Britain's health service and Germany's Deutsche Bahn rail network were among those hit.

Europol executive director Rob Wainwright said the situation could worsen today as workers return to their offices after the weekend and log on.

"We've never seen anything like this," the head of the European Union's policing agency told Britain's ITV television, calling its reach "unprecedented".

"The latest count is over 200,000 victims in at least 150 countries. Many of those victims will be businesses, including large corporations.

Images appear on victims' screens demanding payment of $300 in the virtual currency Bitcoin, saying:

WORLDWIDE CYBERATTACK

"Ooops, your files have been encrypted!"

Payment is demanded within three days or the price is doubled, and if none is received within seven days the locked files will be deleted, according to the screen message.

Experts and governments alike warn against ceding to the demands and Wainwright said few victims so far have been paying up.

The culprits used a digital code believed to have been developed by the US National Security Agency -- and subsequently leaked as part of a document dump, according to researchers at the Moscow-based computer security firm Kaspersky Lab.

A hacking group called Shadow Brokers released the malware in April, claiming to have discovered the flaw from the NSA, Kaspersky said.

Russia's interior ministry said some of its computers had been hit, while the country's banking system was also attacked.

French carmaker Renault was forced to stop production at sites in France, Slovenia and Romania, while FedEx said it was "implementing remediation steps as quickly as possible".

The researcher warned yesterday that hackers could upgrade the virus to remove the kill switch.

Meanwhile G7 finance ministers meeting in Italy vowed to unite against cyber crime, as it represented a growing threat to their economies and should be tackled as a priority.

CHINA'S NEW SILK ROAD

Train routes, sea ports

China yesterday opened its Silk Road summit to showcase its ambitious plans to revive ancient trade routes from Asia to Europe and Africa. President Xi Jinping hailed the initiative for a massive network of rail and maritime links -- dubbed One Belt, One Road (OBOR) -- as "a project of the century" in his address to delegates at the two-day conference in Beijing. OBOR spans some 65 countries representing 60 percent of the global population and around a third of global GDP. The China Development Bank alone has earmarked $890 billion for some 900 projects. Here are some of them:

TRAINS ROUTE: The China-Europe Railway Express includes 51 rail links connecting 27 Chinese and 28 European cities, with freight trains that offer shorter transport time than sea routes.

A planned 418-kilometre (260-mile) rail line between the Asian giant and Laos attempts to be the first overseas route that connects with the vast rail system in China. Once finished, it will be the longest and fastest in the southeastern Asian country. Another 873-kilometre high-speed railway project between China and Thailand will link the Chinese border to Thailand's ports. It will transform southwestern Yunnan province into a trading hub that exports China's goods to southeast Asian markets.

In Africa, OBOR will include a 471-kilometre railway between Nairobi and Mombasa on the Indian Ocean coast. Passenger trains will zoom at 120 kilometres per hour, while freights will run at 80 kilometres per hour and carry 25 million tonnes of cargo per year.

SEA PORTS: Three state-owned Chinese enterprises bought Turkey's third largest port, Kumport, which is considered an important joint between the "belt" and the "road".

In Pakistan, a controversial trade route was inaugurated in November to link southwestern Gwadar port, on the Arabian Sea, with Kashgar, a city in China's northwestern Xinjiang province. The port will provide China with safer and more direct access to the oil-rich Middle East than the waterway trade route it currently uses through the narrow Malacca Straits. A new international airport will also be built in Gwadar. Central to the project in Pakistan is the renovation of a 487-kilometre road that is part of China's only land passage to the Middle East.

INDUSTRIAL PARKS: China and Malaysia are building an industrial park in Kuantan, Malaysia for steel, aluminium and palm oil processing. In eastern Europe, a China-Belarus industrial park for high-tech businesses broke ground in Minsk in July 2014, the largest one built by the Asian country overseas.

SOURCE: AFP

French outgoing president Francois Hollande (R) is escorted by his successor Emmanuel Macron as he leaves the Elysee presidential Palace at the end of their handover ceremony and prior to Macron's formal inauguration as French President in Paris, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Nepal votes in first local election in 20 years

50,000 contest in 283 municipalities in first phase

AFP, *Kathmandu*

Nepal held local level polls yesterday, the first since 1997 and a key step in the country's rocky transition to democracy over a decade since the end of the civil war.

Around a third of registered voters across three provinces were eligible to cast their vote, with the rest of the country due to vote in a month's time.

The vote has been split into two phases because of unrest in the southern plains bordering India, where the minority Madhesi ethnic group is refusing to take part until an amendment to the constitution is passed.

Local representatives were last elected in 1997 and their five-year terms expired at the height of the brutal Maoist insurgency.

The 10-year war ended in 2006 and the country began a fraught transition from a Hindu monarchy to a secular federal republic, which has seen it cycle through nine governments.

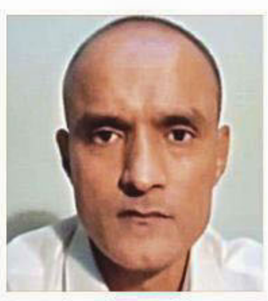
The long gap between polls has left an institutional void at the local level, which has seen graft become a way of life in Nepal, hampering the delivery of basic services as well as the recovery from a devastating 2015 earthquake.

"It is difficult to expect much from our politicians -- they have always been selfish and not worked for the people -- but I hope that with this election things will change," housewife Shova Maharjan, 41, told AFP after casting her vote in the capital.

Polls opened at 7:00 am (0115 GMT) and closed at 5:00 pm, with each voter casting their ballot for seven local representatives: mayor, deputy mayor, ward chairman and four ward committee members.

Nearly 50,000 candidates were standing for election across 283 local municipalities in the first phase, with many registered as independents or with a number of small reformist parties hoping to grab some votes from the traditional political heavyweights.

There were sporadic reports of violence yesterday with one person killed when police opened fire on a group attempting to raid a polling station in Dolakha district.



INDIAN 'SPY' KILLING

India,Pakistan at ICJ after 18 years

PTI, *New Delhi*

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) was last a battleground for India and Pakistan nearly 18 years ago when Islamabad sought its intervention over the shooting down of its naval aircraft.

Today, the ICJ, which is the UN's principal judicial organ, is holding a public hearing at the Great Hall of Justice housed in the Peace Palace at The Hague in Netherlands where the two countries will be asked to present their case over the contentious Jadhav issue.

India on May 8 moved a petition before the UN body to seek justice for Kulbhushan Jadhav, 46, alleging violation of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations by Pakistan after its 16 requests for consular access to the former naval officer was consistently denied.

A Pakistani military court gave death sentence to Jadhav last month for alleged espionage and subversive activities. Pakistan has also not responded to the request for visas applied by Jadhav's family. Jadhav was arrested on March 3 last year.

The previous case related to shooting down of Pakistan's maritime reconnaissance aircraft Atlantique by the Indian Air Force (IAF) in the Kutch region on August 10, 1999, killing all 16 naval personnel on board. Pakistan claimed the plane was brought down in its air space and sought $60 million in damages from India for the incident.

A 16-judge bench of the court on June 21, 2000 voted 14-2 to dismiss Pakistan's claim.

WAR IN SYRIA

Rebel evacuation deal takes effect

AFP, *Damascus*

At least 1,500 civilians and rebels evacuated an opposition district in Damascus yesterday, state media said, bringing the government closer to cementing its control over the Syrian capital.

The evacuations from the Qabun district in northeast Damascus follow similar departures from the Barzeh and Tishrin neighbourhoods earlier this week.

An AFP correspondent inside Qabun saw around a dozen white buses carrying out residents and fighters in the morning, after a deal for the neighbourhood was announced late Saturday following heavy fighting.

At the edge of the district, two women embraced and wept as they faced the prospect of parting ways.

Suad, 22, was leaving behind her friend Mona, also 22, to follow her family to Idlib province, a rebel-held area in the northwest of the country.

"I didn't want to leave, but I have to stay with my family, and they prefer to go Idlib after my uncle left with the group from Barzeh," said Suad, wearing a white headscarf and a blue top.

Those evacuating carried small bags with them as they boarded the buses, while others who had decided to stay registered their names at a military post.

The evacuation deal came on Saturday night after government forces advanced inside the neighbourhood.

"The Syrian army yesterday managed to encircle dozens of armed elements inside Qabun neighbourhood, forcing them to surrender and hand over their weapons," a source from the pro-regime National Defence Forces militia told AFP.

Macron takes power as French president

AFP, *Paris*

Emmanuel Macron became France's youngest ever president yesterday, promising at his inauguration to restore the country's lost confidence and pledging to relaunch the flagging European Union.

Macron, a 39-year-old centrist, took the reins of power from Socialist Francois Hollande at the Elysee Palace a week after his resounding victory over far-right leader Marine Le Pen in an election that was watched worldwide.

Macron said his first priority would be "to give back to the French people the confidence that for too long has been flagging", while the second would be making France a beacon for democracy and freedom worldwide.

France's place was in the European Union "which protects us and enables us to project our values in the world," but he said the 28-member bloc needed to be "reformed and relaunched."

Macron also suggested he would press on with his ambitious but controversial agenda to reform France's rigid labour market and modernise the social security system despite the fierce resistance he is likely to meet.

"I will not reverse course on any of the commitments taken in front of the French people," he said, adding that "France is strong only if she is prosperous."

Some analysts and opponents have questioned the strength of Macron's mandate after he won just 24.01 percent in the first round of the presidential election on April 23 before his landslide victory over Le Pen in the second.

His opponents on the far-right and far-left, opposed to the EU and major economic reforms, won around 50 percent of the first-round vote.

The new president faces a host of daunting challenges including tackling stubbornly high unemployment, fighting Islamist-inspired violence and healing divisions exposed by an often vicious election campaign.

Hollande's five years in power were plagued by a sluggish economy and bloody terror attacks that killed more than 230 people and he leaves office after a single term.

India changing J&K demographic

Pakistan tells UN

PTI, *New Delhi*

Pakistan yesterday wrote to the UN again, this time claiming that India is attempting to "change Kashmir's demographic", Pakistani media reported.

India's efforts, Pakistan's letter alleged, are "to convert the Muslim majority" in Kashmir "into a minority, to pre-empt the results of a UN-administered plebiscite", according to The Express Tribune which quoted a government statement.

This letter also alleged that in Kashmir, India has issued permanent residence certificates to non-residents, alloted land to retired Indian army personnel and non-Kashmiris and established separate townships for Kashmiri pundits and "West Pakistan refugees", reported the Tribune.

The letter was written by Sartaj Aziz, Pakistan prime minister Nawaz Sharif's foreign affairs adviser.

Aziz also told the UN in his letter that the "non-implementation of the UN Security Council resolutions is leading to a grave human tragedy in the Valley", Pakistani media reported. Pakistan writes to the UN often, urging it to interfere in Kashmir.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's interior ministry yesterday said Mumbai terror attack mastermind and Jamat-ud Dawah (JuD) chief Hafiz Saeed and his four aides have been detained for "spreading terrorism in the name of jihad".

Saeed appeared before a judicial board yesterday and told it that he had been detained by the Pakistani government in order to stop him for raising voice for Kashmiris.

JuD is said to be the front for the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). The organisation has been declared as a foreign terrorist organisation' by the US in June 2014.