

NEWSIN brief

Anti-Muslim crimes spike in London

AFP, London

Anti-Muslim crimes in the British capital have increased fivefold since the London Bridge terror attack, London Mayor Sadiq Khan said yesterday. "Provisional statistics for 6 June show a 40 percent increase in racist incidents, compared to the daily average this year," the mayor's office said in a statement.

5 militants, army major killed in northeast India

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian army major and five suspected militants were killed in a gunfight in a remote northeastern Indian state close to the border with Myanmar, police said yesterday. The gunfight broke out late Tuesday after troops raided a militant hideout in the forests of Mon district in Nagaland state.

Curfew in force after farmer killings in India

AFP, New Delhi

A round-the-clock curfew was in force yesterday in a central Indian district where five farmers were killed in clashes with police during protests to demand loan waivers and higher prices for their crops. Mobile internet was cut off and thousands of police in riot gear patrolled the streets of the Mandsaur district of Madhya Pradesh.

S Korea to freeze new THAAD deployment

AFP, Seoul

South Korea will suspend any further deployment of a controversial US missile defence system until an environmental impact assessment ordered by new President Moon Jae-In is finished, his office said yesterday. Seoul agreed last year to deploy the powerful missile intercept system to guard against threats from North Korea.



(From left, clockwise) A police helicopter flies outside the mausoleum of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Tehran; Iran lawmakers and security forces in parliament during the attack; and security forces run to take position during the attack in Tehran. Gunmen and suicide bombers stormed Iran's parliament and the shrine of its revolutionary leader, killing 12 people in the first attacks in the country claimed by the Islamic State group.



PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

Not seeking 'regime change'

Gulf rivals say Qatar must change policies of supporting terror groups

AGENCIES

A senior Emirati official yesterday insisted that Gulf Arab states were not seeking regime change in Doha, as tensions built in a bitter feud between Qatar and its neighbours.

Speaking to AFP in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates' state minister for foreign affairs Anwar Gargash accused Qatar of being "the main champion of extremism and terrorism in the region".

But he also said measures taken against Qatar this week by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other Arab nations were not aimed at seeking new leadership in Doha.

"This is not about regime change -- this is about change of policy, change of approach," Gargash said.

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and Bahrain announced on Monday they were cutting diplomatic ties and closing air, sea and land links with Qatar, giving Qataris within their borders two weeks to leave.

The four countries have suspended all flights to and from Qatar, pulled their ambassadors from Doha and ordered Qatari diplomats to leave.

Riyadh and its allies accuse Qatar of supporting extremist groups and of

serving the interests of regional arch-rival Iran, claims Doha has strongly rejected.

The dispute has sparked the worst diplomatic crisis in the Arab world in years and raised fears it will cause further instability in an already-volatile region.

Kuwait is leading efforts to find a mediated solution. Its Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al-Sabah held talks with Saudi King Salman on Tuesday

DEVELOPMENTS

Turkey throws support behind Qatar in rift with Gulf Arabs

UAE turns screw on Qatar, threatens sympathisers with jail

Moscow says 'zero' proof Russian hackers involved in crisis

but there were no immediate signs of progress.

The United States, France and Russia have called for dialogue while Turkey has defended Qatar and said it would further "develop" ties with Doha.

US President Donald Trump waded into the dispute on Tuesday, but seemed to only muddy the waters. After first appearing to back the Saudi-

led measures against Qatar on Twitter, he shifted gears and called for unity among Gulf Arab states.

German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel accused the US president of fanning conflict in the Middle East and risking a "new spiral in arms sales" with his remarks.

"Such a 'Trumpification' of relations in a region already susceptible to crises is particularly dangerous," Gabriel said in an interview scheduled to appear yesterday.

Qatar has said it is open to talks to end the crisis but has also accused its neighbours of impinging on its sovereignty.

The UAE meanwhile warned that anyone showing sympathy with Qatar could face 15 years jail time or fines.

Meanwhile, Moscow yesterday dismissed allegations that Russian hackers helped spark the diplomatic crisis around Qatar, after CNN reported that US officials believed they planted a false news story.

CNN reported on Tuesday that US intelligence officials believe Russian hackers planted a false news story that led Saudi Arabia and several allies to sever relations with Qatar.

Trump taps new FBI chief on eve of Comey hearing

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump tapped respected lawyer Christopher Wray to be his new FBI director yesterday, on the eve of potentially explosive testimony on alleged Russian election interference by the agency's ousted chief James Comey.

The former federal prosecutor was nominated to fill the post left vacant one month ago by Comey, who is set to be grilled by lawmakers today over allegations the president sought to interfere with the FBI's Russia probe before sacking him.

Wray served as assistant attorney general in charge of the Justice Department's criminal division under president George W Bush, from 2003 to 2005, working closely with the FBI. He will have limited power to influence the agency's Russia investigation, which was placed in the hands of an independent prosecutor -- former FBI director Robert Mueller -- following Comey's dismissal.

Trump's announcement was timed a day ahead of Comey's highly-anticipated testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee on the investigation into Russian interfer-

ence in the 2016 US elections and possible collusion with Trump's campaign.

Comey is expected to dispute Trump's claim that the then-FBI chief told him multiple times that he was not under investigation, CNN reported, citing sources familiar with Comey's thinking.

But Comey will also be pressed over reports, citing private notes he wrote, that in three meetings and phone calls in January and February, Trump urged him to halt or ease up on the Russia



Christopher Wray



James Comey

probe's focus on his former national security advisor Michael Flynn. In addition, media reports say he pressured several top officials, including Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, to intervene in the investigation on Flynn's behalf.

Coats is one of three officials coming under the spotlight in hearings taking place Wednesday, along with National Security Agency head Mike Rogers and interim FBI Director Andrew McCabe.

No definitive evidence of collusion between Trump's campaign and Russia has yet come to light, and there have not been any formal accusations that Trump sought to obstruct the investigation.

'New day for Israel'

US envoy Haley vows to defend Tel Aviv at UN as panel advance plans for 1,500 settler homes in WB

AFP, Jerusalem

US ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley hailed a "new day" for Israel at the global body yesterday as she held talks with Israeli leaders in Jerusalem.

Speaking ahead of a meeting with President Reuven Rivlin, Haley vowed to defend Israel at the United Nations.

"I have never taken kindly to bullies, and the UN has bullied Israel for a very long time," she said, according to Rivlin's office. "We are not going to let that happen anymore."

"It is a new day for Israel in the United Nations," she added.

Rivlin thanked Haley for her protection of Israel, saying it marked a "new era."

"Israel is no longer alone at the UN. Israel is no longer the UN's punching bag," he said.

In an earlier meeting, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also welcomed Haley's tough stance, according to his office.

He said US President Donald Trump and Haley "have changed the discourse" at the UN.



"Thank you for all your help and standing up for Israel," he added.

Trump came to power promising to lead the most pro-Israel US government in history, and Haley has been a stout defender of the country since her appointment.

On Tuesday, Israeli authorities advanced plans for 1,500 settler homes in the occupied West Bank, including units for the first new official settlement in some 25 years, the Peace Now NGO said.

A defence ministry committee advanced the plans, the NGO that tracks settlement building in the Palestinian territory said in a statement.

The move came as Israelis and Palestinians marked the 50th anniversary of the Six-Day War, fought from June 5-10, 1967 and when Israel's occupation of the West Bank began.

Israeli authorities did not respond to requests for comment on the plans, which Peace Now said showed that "a two state solution is not on (Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's) agenda".



Armed woman police officers patrol on London Bridge in London yesterday, one of the scenes of the June 3 terror attack. Police forces around Britain were on high alert ahead of today's general election.

PHOTO: AFP

Nepal's new PM makes first cabinet picks

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's new Prime Minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba, named his first cabinet appointments yesterday and put a former Maoist guerrilla in charge of holding the final round of local elections, the first such elections in two decades.

The 70-year-old Deuba replaced Prachanda, a former rebel commander, as prime minister after a parliamentary vote on Tuesday.

He has pledged to complete the remaining phase of village and municipal assembly elections set for June 28, leading to provincial and national elections before the end of the year.

The first phase of local polls was held on May 14.

"These are early appointments and the prime minister will expand the cabinet in consultation with coalition partners," said Deuba's aide and nephew, Bhanu Deuba.

The main appointment was Home Minister Janardan Sharma, a former guerrilla fighter, who will be in charge of overseeing all three elections the government hopes will complete a difficult transition since the monarchy was abolished in 2008.

The president's office said three members of the ethnic Madhesi minority were among the seven appointments.

Those appointments are seen as a bid to appease the Madhesi, who live on the southern plains bordering India and say a new constitution that creates new provinces will unfairly consolidate the power of the country's hill elite over them.

Among others appointed to the cabinet was Krishna Bahadur Mahara, also a Maoist, who will be a deputy prime minister in charge of the foreign ministry.

Dying is a 'happier' experience: scientists

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Dying is a more positive experience than most people imagine, psychologists have claimed.

A recent YouGov survey found 68 per cent of people in Britain fear death -- but according to the authors of new study, dying is "less sad and terrifying -- and happier -- than you think".

Researchers at the University of North Carolina analysed blogs written by terminally ill patients and last words of prisoners on death row.

The emotions expressed in the accounts were not lonely and anxious but in fact "filled with love, social connection, and meaning", they said.

The study, published in the journal Psychological Science, compared the real words of the dying to similar compositions by volunteers asked to imagine they only had a few months to live.

Assistant professor Kurt Gray and his colleagues used algorithms to scan both groups of blog posts for words associated with positive and negative emotions.

They found that as death approached, the words used by the dying became more positive in emotional tone, with an increased focus on meaningful topics such as family and religion.

China likely to build more overseas bases

Pentagon report singles out Pak as possible location

REUTERS, Washington

A Pentagon report released on Tuesday singled out Pakistan as a possible location for a future Chinese military base, as it forecast that Beijing would likely build more bases overseas after establishing a facility in the African nation of Djibouti.

The prediction came in a 97-page annual report to Congress that saw advances throughout the Chinese military in 2016, funded by robust defense spending that the Pentagon estimated exceeded \$180 billion.

That is higher than China's official defense budget figure of 954.35 billion yuan (\$140.4 billion). Chinese leaders, the US report said, appeared committed to defense spending hikes for the "foreseeable future," even as economic growth slows.

The report repeatedly cited China's construction of its first overseas naval base in Djibouti, which is already home to a key US

military base and is strategically located at the southern entrance to the Red Sea on the route to the Suez Canal.

"China most likely will seek to establish additional military bases in countries with which it has a longstanding friendly relationship and similar strategic interests, such as Pakistan," the report said.

Djibouti's position on the northwestern edge of the Indian Ocean has fueled worries in India that it would become another of China's 'string of pearls' of military alliances and assets ringing India, including Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

The report did not address India's potential reaction to a Chinese base in Pakistan.

But Pakistan, the US report noted, was already the primary market in the Asian-Pacific region for Chinese arms exports. That region accounted for \$9 billion of the more than \$20 billion in Chinese arms exports from 2011 to 2015.

WAR ON IS IN SYRIA

US-led force gains ground in Raqa

AFP, Beirut

US-backed fighters gained ground against the Islamic State group in the streets of Raqa yesterday, a day after their months-long offensive finally broke into the jihadists' Syrian bastion.

The Syrian Democratic Forces militia has spent seven months advancing on the city, with backing from the US-led coalition bombing IS in Syria and neighbouring Iraq.

Captured by the jihadists in 2014, Raqa became synonymous with IS atrocities including beheadings and public displays of bodies, and also emerged as a hub for planning attacks abroad.

On Tuesday, the SDF's Arab and Kurdish fighters finally broke into the eastern Al-Meshleb district of the city.

Early yesterday, they captured the neighbourhood and the Harqal citadel to the west of the city, the command of Operation Wrath of the Euphrates said.

The citadel sits on a hilltop roughly two kilometres (just over a mile) from the city limits.

Fighting was also raging in a military complex around two kilometres north of the city, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.