

NEWSIN brief

Pak journalist held over FB posts

AFP, Quetta

A Pakistani reporter has been detained and charged under cybercrime laws for criticising security forces on social media, officials and his family said yesterday, the latest sign of a state crack-down on free speech.

Zafarullah Achakzai, who works at Urdu daily Quadrat, had criticised the FC on his Facebook page for the deteriorating law and order situation in Balochistan, a colleague told AFP.

Indian minister mocked for urinating in public

AFP, New Delhi

A government minister was mocked on social media for urinating in public despite the prime minister's flagship public hygiene drive as pictures of the embarrassing incident were splashed over front pages yesterday. The Times of India said agriculture minister Radha Mohan Singh relieved himself against a school wall "flanked by his security guards carrying automatic weapons."

Germany legalises same-sex marriage

AFP, Berlin

Germany yesterday legalised same-sex marriage, as the nation joined many other western democracies in granting gay and lesbian couples full rights including adoption.

Le Pen charged over EU parliament scam

AFP, Paris

French far-right leader Marine Le Pen was yesterday charged over claims her party illegally claimed millions of euros from the European Parliament to pay for France-based staff, her lawyer told AFP. Rodolphe Bosselut said Le Pen, 48, had been summoned by investigating magistrates and that they had, "as envisaged, charged her", adding that she would appeal.



People hug after arriving in advance of the incoming travel ban to the US at John F Kennedy airport in New York, on Thursday. Inset, A table is setup for lawyers offering free legal advice inside the International Arrivals section at Los Angeles International Airport. The ban prevents the issuance of visas to travelers from the six countries for 90 days and places the refugee-entry program on hold for 120 days.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

ROHINGYA ABUSE PROBE Myanmar to refuse entry of UN officials

REUTERS, Yangon

Myanmar will refuse entry to members of a United Nations probe focusing on allegations of killings, rape and torture by security forces against Rohingya Muslims, an official said yesterday.

The government led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi had already said it would not cooperate with a mission set up after a Human Rights Council resolution was adopted in March.

"If they are going to send someone with regards to the fact-finding mission, then there's no reason for us to let them come," said Kyaw Zeya, permanent secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the capital, Naypyitaw.

"Our missions worldwide are advised accordingly," he said, explaining that visas to enter Myanmar would not be issued to the mission's appointees or staff.

Suu Kyi, who came to power last year amid a transition from military rule, leads Myanmar through the specially created position of "State Counsellor", but is also minister of foreign affairs.

Although she does not oversee the military, Suu Kyi has been criticised for failing to stand up for the more than 1 million stateless Rohingya Muslims in the western state of Rakhine.

She said during a trip to Sweden this month the UN mission "would have created greater hostility between the different communities". The majority in Rakhine are ethnic Rakhine Buddhists who, like many in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, see the Rohingya as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

China-US relations sour

Beijing fumes over US arms sales to Taiwan, sanctions against a Chinese bank linked to North Korea

AGENCIES

Relations between China and the United States soured yesterday as Beijing fumed over US arms sales to Taiwan and US sanctions against a Chinese bank linked to North Korea.

The sudden US actions and China's angry response mark a break from the friendlier tone that had emerged after US President Donald Trump hosted Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping at his Florida resort in April.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang said the US moves "go against the important spirit" of the meeting at Mar-a-Lago and are "inconsistent with the general direction of US-China relations".

"We hope that the US administration can correct their wrongdoings so the US-China relations can go back to the correct track of sound and steady development, so that our important cooperation in other fields will not be affected negatively," he told a regular press briefing.

Lu urged Washington to "stop their wrongful actions" after the US Treasury Department said the Bank of

Dandong would be severed from the US financial system for allegedly laundering North Korean cash.

He voiced "firm" opposition to the US administration's approval of a \$1.3 billion arms sale to Taiwan, which China considers a rebel province awaiting reunification.

And Lu pushed back against "irresponsible" remarks after the US State

was returned to the motherland, the success of 'one country, two systems' is recognized by the whole world," Xi said in a speech.

"Of course, during the implementation, we've met some new situations, new issues and new challenges. On these issues, they need to be regarded correctly and analyzed rationally... Issues are not scary. The key is to think of ways to solve these issues."

Without giving specifics, Xi said these needed to be corrected and not handled with an "emotional attitude".

But in a stark and surprising announcement, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration on Hong Kong, which laid the blueprint over how the city would be ruled after 1997, no longer had any practical significance, reported Reuters.

"The UK has no sovereignty, no power to rule and no power to supervise Hong Kong after the handover," ministry spokesman Lu Kang said.

It wasn't immediately clear if Lu was attacking just the idea of continued British involvement in Hong Kong, or the principles in the document itself.

US VOICES CONCERNS ABOUT BASIC FREEDOMS IN HONG KONG
XI SEES CHALLENGES IN HK AS CHINA DISMISSES ANY UK ROLE

Department voiced concerns about basic freedoms in Hong Kong, just as Xi was paying a landmark visit to the semi-autonomous city to mark 20 years since Britain returned the former colony to China.

Xi said yesterday the city's "one country, two systems" formula faces "new challenges" as pro-democracy campaigners ramped up their protests.

"In the 20 years since Hong Kong

Mosul victory in 'days'

Says Iraqi commander as pressure on IS mounts; UN voices alarm at rising threats against civilians

AFP, Mosul

Iraq will declare victory over the Islamic State group in Mosul during the "next few days," a senior commander said yesterday, as pressure also mounts on the jihadists in Syria.

IS, which declared a cross-border "caliphate" encompassing swathes of Iraq and Syria three years ago, is now facing twin offensives in Mosul and Raqa, its two most emblematic strongholds.

But while the loss of the two cities would be a major blow to IS, it would not mark the end of the threat posed by the group, which is likely to return to insurgent-style attacks that were its hallmark in years past.

"In the next few days, we will announce the final victory over Daesh," Staff Lieutenant General Abdulghani al-Assadi, a senior commander in the elite Counter-Terrorism Service, told AFP in Mosul, using an Arabic acronym for IS.

However, there has often been a gap between the declaration of victory and the actual end of fighting in a given area in the

course of Iraq's multi-year war against IS.

Iraqi forces launched the gruelling battle for Mosul on October 17, advancing to the city and retaking its eastern side before setting their sights on the smaller but more densely populated west.

The jihadists are now confined to a small area of Mosul's Old City, but its narrow streets and the presence of civilians has made the operation to retake it perilous.

Meanwhile, the UN voiced alarm yesterday at rising threats against civilians in Mosul suspected of ties to the Islamic State group.

"As Mosul is increasingly liberated from ISIL, we are seeing an alarming rise

in threats, specifically of forced evictions, against those suspected of being ISIL members or whose relatives are alleged to be involved with ISIL," said UN rights office spokesman Rupert Colville, using another acronym for IS.

He said "hundreds of families have been threatened with forced displacement and such developments are extremely worrying."



IS retakes Raqa district

Rolls back advance of US-backed fighters after intense clashes

AFP, Beirut

Islamic State group jihadists recaptured an eastern district of their Syrian bastion Raqa yesterday, a monitor said, rolling back the advance of US-backed fighters.

"IS fully retook Al-Senaa, which was the most important neighbourhood taken by the Syrian Democratic Forces," said Rami Abdel Rahman, who heads the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

"IS fighters attacked the SDF with suicide bombers and (weaponised) drones, and also used tunnels," he told AFP.

The densely built-up neighbourhood was the closest that the SDF and allied Arab fighters known as the Elite Forces had come to the city centre.

On Thursday, dozens of jihadists disguised in SDF uniforms launched an attack on Al-Senaa from the city centre, carrying out three suicide car bomb attacks and overrunning six SDF positions.

By yesterday, the SDF and its allies with-

drew from Al-Senaa to the adjacent neighbourhood of Al-Meshleb.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights also said yesterday the Islamic State group no longer has a presence in Syria's Aleppo province after withdrawing from a series of villages where regime forces were advancing.

"IS withdrew from 17 towns and villages and is now effectively outside of Aleppo province after having a presence there for four years," said Rami Abdel Rahman.

Regime forces had been advancing on a sliver of southeastern Aleppo province around a key highway linking Hama province to the southwest and Raqa province further east.

The UN refugee agency said yesterday nearly half a million displaced Syrians have returned to their homes since the beginning of the year, mainly to find family members and check on property.

The agency said it had seen "a notable trend of spontaneous returns to and within Syria in 2017."

WAR IN SYRIA
IS withdraws from Aleppo province: monitor
Nearly half a million displaced Syrians return home: UN



Chinese President Xi Jinping inspects troops at the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Hong Kong Garrison as part of events marking the 20th anniversary of the city's handover from British to Chinese rule, in Hong Kong, China, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

May narrowly wins UK confidence vote

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May narrowly won a confidence vote in parliament on Thursday, highlighting the weakness of her Conservative Party which lost its majority in a shock general election result earlier this month.

Only with support from the small ultra-conservative Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), was May's legislative programme -- known as the Queen's Speech -- approved after 323 votes in favour and 309 against in the 650-seat parliament.

May's minority government had earlier announced it would change abortion rights for Northern Irish women ahead of a threatened revolt by MPs in a separate vote.

The announcement led the opposition Labour Party to withdraw an amendment to the Queen's Speech demanding the state-run National Health Service (NHS) in England stop charging women coming from the province, where abortion is illegal except when the life of the mother is in danger.

Just hours before it went to a vote, ministers wrote to MPs promising to stop the charges.

May's personal authority is deeply damaged after calling the election three years early, hoping to go into Brexit negotiations with a strengthened mandate. But instead of a landslide win she suffered a rebuff from voters which has left her exposed.



Border face-off in Sikkim

China, India each deploy 3,000 troops; Delhi warns Beijing over road construction near border

AGENCIES

The ongoing troop face-off between India and China on the Sikkim-Bhutan-Tibet tri-junction has emerged as the biggest such confrontation in the region in decades, with both sides continuing to pump in reinforcements to the remote border region.

Even as Indian Army Chief General Bipin Rawat reviewed the ground situation by visiting the headquarters of the 17 Mountain Division in Gangtok and 27 Mountain Division in Kalimpong on Thursday, sources said the two rival armies had strengthened their positions at the tri-junction by deploying around 3,000 troops each in a virtually eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation.

The Indian Army, on its part, refused to say anything. But sources said though there had been other troop standoffs at the tri-junction over the years, the latest one at the Doka La general area was clearly the most serious, reported TNN.

"Both sides are as yet not willing to budge from their positions. Flag meetings and other talks between the rival commanders

have not worked till now," a source said.

India yesterday condemned a new road that China is building on the rivals' Himalayan border, saying it raises "serious security" concerns.

Beijing made a formal protest this week, accusing Indian border guards of crossing from the northeastern state of Sikkim into its Tibetan territory to stop the road building.

India's foreign ministry said that China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops entered the area to "unilaterally" construct the road, reported AFP.

"India is deeply concerned at the recent Chinese actions and has conveyed to the Chinese government that such construction would represent a significant change of status quo with serious security implications for India," a ministry statement said.

"India cherishes peace and tranquillity in the India-China border areas. It has not come easily," it said, urging Beijing to resolve the skirmish through dialogue.

Bhutan has also lodged a formal protest to China, saying the road violated a bilateral agreement.

Islamophobic act

Say Muslim leaders as driver rams barriers outside Paris mosque

AFP, Créteil

A man drove his vehicle into barriers protecting a mosque in the Paris suburbs Thursday, forcing worshippers to dodge out of the way, police and officials said.

Muslim community leaders described the incident, which injured no one, as an "attempted attack" and an "Islamophobic act".

It came nearly two weeks after a man rammed a van into worshippers outside a mosque in London, leaving one man dead.

The 4X4 vehicle on Thursday "struck pillars and barriers in place to protect the Créteil mosque", in the southeast of the capital, before speeding off and crashing into a traffic island, police said.

The driver, who was also the owner of the vehicle, fled but was arrested "without incident" at his home shortly afterwards, police added.

A search was made of the driver's home, a source close to the investigation said, adding that the suspect had made "confused remarks in relation" to a string of jihadist attacks that have struck France, killing 239 people since 2015.

The man is a 43-year-old Armenian who will undergo psychiatric tests. According to judicial authorities, he was not under the influence of alcohol. French Interior Minister Gerard Collomb said in a statement that his "exact motives" will be determined by an investigation.



Boy, 11, gets higher IQ score than Einstein

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

An 11-year-old boy has scored higher in an IQ test than Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking.

The so-called genius benchmark is set at 140 and Arnab Sharma gained a score of 162 - the maximum possible result you can achieve on the paper.

It is a whole two points higher than German-born theoretical physicist Einstein and celebrated cosmologist Hawking.

Arnab, from Reading, passed the infamously difficult test a few weeks back with zero preparation and had never seen what a typical paper looked like before taking it.

His mark in the Mensa exam, which primarily measures verbal reasoning ability, puts him in the top one per cent of the nation in terms of IQ level.

Arnab, who is of Indian origin, insisted he was not anxious before the sitting test, saying: "I had no preparation at all for the exam but I was not nervous. My family were surprised but they were also very happy when I told them about the result."

Arnab, who attends Crossfields School on the outskirts of Reading, has been selected for Eton College and Westminster, both highly competitive and sought-after schools, with no preparation.

Mensa is one of the most exclusive clubs in the world, as the only way to join is to prove your IQ is in the top two per cent of the nation.