

NEWSIN brief

India rejects China's J&K mediation offer AGENCIES

India has rejected China's offer to mediate and help resolve the Kashmir issue, insisting talks will only take place with Pakistan without the intervention of another nation. China had said it was willing to play a "constructive role" in improving relations between India and Pakistan, especially after the increased hostility along the Line of Control, a de facto border that divides the disputed Kashmir valley between the two nuclear-armed neighbours.

Regime air raids kill 7 near Damascus AFP, Beirut

Syrian government air strikes on two rebel-held areas near Damascus killed seven people including two children yesterday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor said. The Britain-based monitor said five of the deaths, including the children, were in strikes on Ain Terma in the Eastern Ghouta region, the largest rebel enclave around the capital. The strikes also injured at least 15 people, some of whom were in serious condition.

Five hurt in London acid attack robberies REUTERS, London

British police arrested two teenagers yesterday after five acid attacks in less than 90 minutes across east London left several people with facial burns, including one with horrific injuries. Two assailants on a moped pulled up alongside a 32-year-old man in the Hackney area of east London at 2125 GMT on Thursday and threw acid in his face before one of the pair made off with the victim's moped. In the next hour and a half, three other men across Hackney and one in the neighbouring borough of Islington had corrosive substances hurled at them, police said.



French President Emmanuel Macron, his wife Brigitte Macron, US President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump attend the traditional Bastille Day military parade on the Champs-Elysees in Paris, France, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Death toll hits 83

REUTERS, Guwahati

Floods in India's northeast have killed at least 83 people and led to the death of three rare one-horned rhinoceros at a national park that has the world's largest concentration of the species.

The floods caused by torrential rains across the hilly states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Manipur over the past two weeks, have also triggered landslides. In all more than 2 million people have been displaced, authorities say.

"Assam is the worst hit with 53 lives lost so far in floods and landslides with some 2 million people displaced," Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal told Reuters.

"Relief and rescue operations are going on a war footing."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has sent a team of federal government officials, led by junior home minister Kiren Rijiju, to assess the damage.

The overflowing Brahmaputra River has also completely marooned the Kaziranga wildlife

sanctuary in Assam, forcing animals to flee to safer areas.

A one-horned rhinoceros drowned yesterday, taking the toll of the endangered animals in the flooding to three, Assam's forest minister, Pramila Rani Brahma, told Reuters.

The Kaziranga National Park, a Unesco world heritage site, is home to an estimated 2,500 rhinos out of a world population of some 3,000.

Nearly 60 other animals, mostly deer and wild boars, have been killed in the floods, she said.

"More than 90 percent of the Kaziranga National Park is under water," Assam Forest Minister Pramila Rani Brahma told Reuters.

A total of 58 districts have been affected due to floods and landslides in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur.

The water level in the Brahmaputra is expected to keep rising until the end of this week and should then stabilise, provided there is no more heavy rain, the Central Water Commission said.

FLOODS IN NORTHEAST INDIA



No proof Baghdadi is dead: Mattis

AFP, Washington

Pentagon chief Jim Mattis said Friday he cannot confirm whether or not Islamic State chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is dead, after reports from Syria that the jihadist leader had been killed.

"If we knew, we would tell you -- right now, I can't confirm or deny it," Mattis said. "Our approach is we assume he's alive until it's proven otherwise, and right now I can't prove it otherwise."

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a longtime conflict monitor, said earlier this week it had heard from senior IS leaders in Syria's Deir Ezzor province that Baghdadi was dead.

There was no official confirmation or denial of the news on IS-run social media outlets.

"We'll go after him until he's gone," Mattis said.

There have been persistent rumors that Baghdadi has died in recent months.

Russia's army said in mid-June that it was seeking to verify whether it had killed the IS chief in a May air strike in Syria.

With a \$25 million US bounty on his head, Baghdadi has kept a low profile but was rumored to move regularly throughout IS-held territory in Iraq and Syria.

The 46-year-old Iraqi has not been seen since making his only known public appearance as "caliph" in 2014 at the Grand Mosque of Al-Nuri in Mosul, which was destroyed in the battle for Iraq's second city.



A Palestinian protester uses a slingshot to hurl stones at Israeli security forces during clashes following a weekly demonstration against the expropriation of Palestinian land by Israel in the village of Kfar Qaddum, near Nablus in the occupied West Bank, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Qatar FM upbeat on Tillerson Gulf visit

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Qatar's foreign minister says it would be unfair to describe US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's shuttle diplomacy to find a solution to the Gulf crisis as a failure, insisting that it "cannot be solved in a day".

Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani told reporters in Ankara yesterday that Qatar would continue to work with the US and Kuwait to end the standoff with its four Arab neighbors.

Urging Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt to engage in talks, he said Qatar wanted dialogue based "on mutual respect for state sovereignty and respect for international law".

The four countries severed ties with Doha on June 5, accusing it of funding "terrorism" and allying with their rival, Iran - allegations Qatar has repeatedly denied.

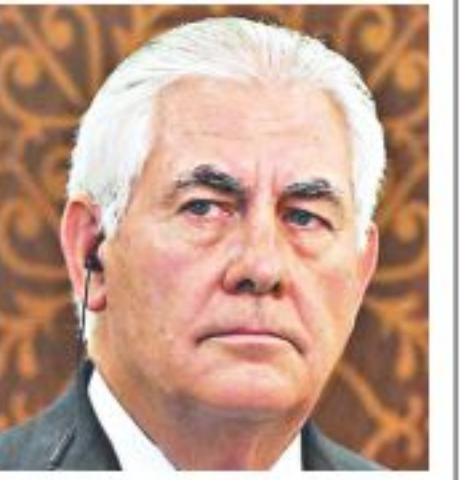
Tillerson concluded his mediation efforts Thursday, making no promise of an imminent breakthrough but voicing optimism that Qatar and its neighbours might soon be willing to talk face to face.

Sheikh Mohammed said he believed the Kuwaiti-US mediation would "bear fruit in time".

The Qatari foreign minister was in Ankara for talks with his Turkish counterpart, Mevlut Cavusoglu.

Turkey has called the four Arab states' blockade of Qatar unjust, and criticised their demands to end the sanctions, which include a requirement for Turkey's military base in Qatar to be closed.

Cavusoglu told reporters in Ankara that President Tayyip Erdogan hoped to visit the Gulf soon to discuss efforts to resolve the crisis.



Ex-Soviet agent was at Trump Jr meeting: report

REUTERS, Washington

A meeting between Donald Trump Jr and a Russian lawyer in June 2016 was also attended by a Russian-American lobbyist who was a former Soviet counter-intelligence officer, NBC News reported yesterday.

The lobbyist, Rinat Akhmetshin, confirmed he had attended the meeting, the Associated Press reported without providing further details.

NBC News, who did not identify him, said he had denied any current ties to Russian spy agencies but had served in the Soviet military before emigrating to the United States, where he holds dual citizenship.

Washington this week has been fixated on emails released by President Donald Trump's eldest son showing he met with a Russian lawyer during the 2016 presidential campaign after he was told she might have

damaging information about Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton.

The revelation of the meeting would be the most tangible evidence yet of a connection between Trump's campaign and Russia, a subject that has also prompted an investigation by a federal special counsel.

NBC said the lobbyist accompanied the lawyer, Natalia Veselnitskaya, to the meeting at Trump Tower in Manhattan attended by Donald Trump Jr as well as the president's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and former campaign adviser Paul Manafort.

Veselnitskaya acknowledged in an exclusive interview that she was accompanied by at least one other man, whom she would not identify, NBC said.

The White House had no immediate comment. NBC News said representatives for Kushner and Manafort declined to comment, but that a lawyer for Donald Trump Jr said he had spoken to the lobbyist.

RUSSIA COLLUSION



Too many US spies in Moscow: Russia

REUTERS, Moscow

Russia said yesterday that too many American spies operated in Moscow under diplomatic cover and said it might expel some of them to retaliate against the United States over Washington's expulsion of 35 Russian diplomats last year.

The warning, delivered by Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, reflects rising frustration in Moscow over the Trump administration's refusal to hand back two Russian diplomatic compounds which were seized at the same time as some of Russia's diplomats were sent home last year.

Barack Obama, US president at the time, ordered the expulsion of 35 suspected Russian spies in December, along with the seizure of the two diplomatic compounds, over what he said was the hacking of US political groups during the 2016 presidential election, something Russia has flatly denied.

President Vladimir Putin decided not to retaliate immediately at the time, saying he would wait to see what the new administration of Donald Trump would do.

Zakharova complained yesterday that US officials were not issuing visas to Russian diplomats to allow Moscow to replace the expelled employees and get its embassy back up to full strength.

"We have a way of responding," she told a news briefing. "The number of staff at the US embassy in Moscow exceeds the number of our embassy employees in Washington by a big margin. One of our options, apart from a tit-for-tat expulsion of Americans, would be to even out the numbers."

China slams criticism over Xiaobo's death

AFP, Shenyang

China yesterday lashed out at international criticism after it denied Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo's dying wish to leave the country and faced pressure to set the democracy champion's widow free.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said Beijing lodged official protests with the United States, France, Germany and the United Nations human rights office over their "irresponsible remarks" regarding Liu Xiaobo, and he took aim at his Nobel status.

"Conferring the prize to such a person goes against the purposes of this award. It's a blasphemy of the peace prize," he told reporters.

The United States and the European Union paid tribute to Liu Xiaobo as it urged President Xi Jinping's government to let his widow, the poet Liu Xia, who has been under house arrest since 2010, leave the country.



PHOTO: AFP

KNIFE ATTACK AT EGYPT TOURIST BEACH 2 foreigners killed

AFP, Cairo

Two foreign women tourists were killed yesterday and four others were wounded when an assailant stabbed them at an Egyptian beach resort in the Sinai Peninsula, officials said.

The governor of Red Sea province, where the resort of Hurghada is located, said two "foreign residents" of the city were killed in the attack, a cabinet statement said.

Egypt's official Al-Ahram newspaper reported on its website that two Ukrainian female tourists died in the stabbing and that four others were injured.

The interior ministry said in a statement that the attacker, who had swum ashore, was arrested and was being questioned.

"We don't know his motives yet, he could be crazy or perturbed -- it's too early to tell," a senior interior ministry official told AFP.

In January 2016, three tourists in Hurghada were wounded in a stabbing assault by two assailants with apparent Islamic State group (IS) sympathies.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for yesterday's stabbing.

Hurghada is one of Egypt's most popular beach resorts, especially with Ukrainians and European tourists.

Also on Friday, unknown assailants shot dead five policemen south of Cairo, in the latest of a series of attacks targeting the country's security forces.