

PANAMA PAPERS CASE

Pak court assesses PM's wealth claims

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's Supreme Court yesterday began hearings that will decide the fate of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who is fighting for his job as he contests the damning conclusions of a corruption investigation into his family's wealth.

The Supreme Court could put Sharif on trial on corruption charges or disqualify him from office, but few expect the judges to dismiss the case after an investigation team submitted a 254-page report into his family wealth last week.

Sharif has denied any wrongdoing.

The investigators alleged his family's wealth was beyond its means, and accused his children, including his daughter and presumed heir Maryam, of signing forged documents to obscure ownership of posh London flats.

Speaking outside the Supreme Court, Information Minister Maryam Aurangzeb said Sharif's family lawyers had challenged the legality of the investigators' findings, including allegations falsified evidence was submitted.

"The JIT has gone beyond the mandate it was assigned," she said, referring to the Joint Investigation Team, made up of finance and law enforcement officials including military intelligence officers.

"The language the JIT has used shows its malafide."

Sharif's troubles have shone a spotlight on two issues that have bedevilled Pakistan since its creation in 1947 - corruption and the struggle for power between civilian politicians and the powerful military.

Sharif, 67, the son of an industrialist serving his third term as prime minister, has had a fractious relationship with the army.



Israeli security forces detain a Palestinian woman during a demonstration outside the Lions Gate, a main entrance to Al-Aqsa mosque compound, due to newly-implemented security measures by Israeli authorities which include metal detectors and cameras, in Jerusalem's Old City yesterday. Israel reopened the ultra-sensitive holy site, after it was closed following an attack by Arab Israeli men in which two Israeli policemen were killed.

Full talks start in Brussels

AFP, Brussels

Britain and the EU vowed to get to the "heart of the matter" as they launched fresh Brexit talks in Brussels yesterday, even as bitter infighting gripped the British government.

Brexit minister David Davis met EU negotiator Michel Barnier for a second round of talks ahead of Britain's historic withdrawal from the bloc, scheduled for March 2019.

But in London there was fresh turmoil as weakened Prime Minister Theresa May prepared to urge her warring ministers to end damaging leaks against each other over Brexit.

"Now it's time to get down to work and make this a successful negotiation," Davis told reporters as Barnier welcomed him to the headquarters of the European Commission.

During four days of talks the two sides hoped to make progress on key issues surrounding Britain's withdrawal, including citizens' rights and its exit bill, so that negotiations can move on to discuss a future trade deal later this year.

"For us it's incredibly important we now make good progress, that we negotiate through this and identify the differences so we can deal with them and identify the similarities so that we can reinforce them," added Davis.

Barnier, who has repeatedly called on Britain to set out a full divorce strategy, said they needed to "examine and compare our respective positions in order to make good progress."

"We'll now delve into the heart of the matter," Barnier, a former French foreign minister and European

BREXIT NEGOTIATIONS
Britain, EU vow to get to the 'heart of the matter'
Rights of expatriates, British bill on agenda



Conservative Party lost its majority, leaving the EU wondering whether she can actually formulate a coherent Brexit policy.

Over the weekend British newspapers were full of reports of a civil war within her cabinet, with finance minister Philip Hammond in particular being targeted over allegations he was trying to derail Brexit.

May herself was set to call them to order today, her spokesman said.

"Cabinet must be able to hold discussions of government policy in private and the Prime Minister will be reminding her colleagues of that at the Cabinet meeting tomorrow," the spokesman said.

India votes for president

BJP-backed candidate Kovind favourite; counting of votes, result will be announced on Thursday

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's parliament began voting yesterday for a new president in an election likely to be won by a candidate backed by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), tightening its grip over top political positions.

Ram Nath Kovind's ascent to the highest public office would be the first by a leader who started out with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or National Volunteers Association, a Hindu nationalist mentor of the BJP and its affiliates.

The president's role is largely ceremonial but as the custodian of the constitution, the president has played an important role in times of uncertainty, such as when a general election is inconclusive and a decision has to be made about which party is best placed to form a government.

Kovind, 72, who is from the low-caste Dalit community, is facing Meira Kumar, a former parliament speaker and a fellow-Dalit backed by the opposition Congress party.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, among the first to cast his vote in parliament, said

he looked forward to working with Kovind.

"My government will offer full cooperation to him," he told members of parliament from the ruling coalition.

Members of both houses of parliament and state assemblies voted yesterday and ballots will be counted on Thursday. The BJP commands the most votes in parliament and in the states.

Some presidents, such as outgoing President Pranab Mukherjee, have tried to act as conscience-keepers, using their constitutional authority as the head of state to defend India's founding principles as a secular, diverse democracy.

Modi's rivals say minority Muslims have feared for their wellbeing and have been targeted by fringe Hindu groups since he took office in 2014.

Sonia Gandhi, the head of the Congress party, appealed to members of parliament to vote for Kumar to protect India's secular values.

"We cannot and must not let India be hostage to those who wish to impose upon it a narrow-minded, divisive and communal vision," she said.



Kovind



Meira Kumar



Thai king given full control of crown property

REUTERS, Bangkok

Thailand has amended a royal property law to formally give King Maha Vajiralongkorn full control of the agency which manages the multi-billion dollar holdings of the monarchy.

The newly amended Crown Property Act, announced in a palace statement on Sunday, replaces three laws dating back to as early as 1936, and is the first amendment to legislation concerning crown property in decades.

It is the latest change to give greater authority to the king, who has shown himself increasingly assertive since ascending the throne in December following the death in October of his father, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who ruled for seven decades.

The exact size of the Crown Property Bureau is not made public, but recent estimates have run to more than \$30 billion through its holdings in real estate and other investments.

The amendment places the management of crown property under the direct supervision of the king. It states that the bureau's properties, in addition to the king's private properties, will be managed "at His Majesty's discretion".

It also states that the monarch can assign the Crown Property Bureau, any individual or agency to manage the properties and assets.



Tintori, wife of Venezuela's opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez, hugs Colombia's former president Andres Pastrana next to Costa Rica's former president Miguel Angel Rodriguez after an unofficial plebiscite against President Nicolas Maduro in Caracas on Sunday night. Opposition yesterday mulled on how to escalate protests and block a new congress it fears may enshrine Socialist Party hegemony.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Mandela ambulance caught fire: his doctor

AFP, Johannesburg

An ambulance carrying South Africa's first democratically elected president Nelson Mandela caught fire as it was rushing him to hospital, his doctor revealed in a book published yesterday.

The incident is one of several bizarre episodes contained in the book chronicling Mandela's final years by Vejay Ramlakan, who was South Africa's surgeon general and the former president's physician until his death in 2013.

Ramlakan was accompanying Mandela from his Johannesburg home to a specialist heart hospital in Pretoria in June 2013 when smoke began billowing from the ambulance carrying the former liberation leader.

"A pall of black smoke enveloped the ambulance as it slowed to a halt in the fast lane of the freeway," Ramlakan wrote.

"I lifted my focus from the section of road in the headlights to glance ahead and saw what appeared to be a vehicle on fire.... This was awful. Madiba in an ambulance on fire," added Ramlakan, using Mandela's clan name.

Despite the fears of Mandela's medical team, their patient was unharmed and after 30 minutes was transferred to a backup ambulance to complete the journey.

Afghan civilian deaths hit new high: UN

AFP, Kabul

The people of war-torn Afghanistan continue to bear the brunt of the grinding conflict with civilian deaths at their worst since records began, the United Nations said yesterday.

In the first half of the year, 1,662 civilians were killed and more than 3,500 injured with deaths in the capital Kabul accounting for nearly 20 percent of the toll, according to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) report.

The majority of the victims were killed by anti-government forces -- including the resurgent Taliban and in attacks claimed by the Islamic State, the report said, underscoring spiralling insecurity in the country nearly 16 years after the US invasion.

Time for pressure

Says Japan as South Korea offers to hold rare military talks with N Korea to avoid hostile acts

AFP, United Nations

Japan yesterday downplayed South Korea's offer to hold military talks with North Korea, saying the priority should be piling pressure on Pyongyang through sanctions.

"This is not a time for dialogue. This is a time for pressure," Japan's foreign ministry spokesman Norio Maruyama told reporters in New York where Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida was attending a UN meeting on development.

"This is a time to raise pressure in order to conduct a serious dialogue," said Maruyama.

South Korea's defence ministry proposed a meeting to be held Friday at the border truce village of Panmunjom to ease tensions after Pyongyang tested its first intercontinental ballistic missile.

If the meeting goes ahead, it would be the

GAS ATTACKS ON CIVILIANS

EU puts sanctions on Syrian scientists

REUTERS, Brussels

The European Union imposed sanctions on 16 Syrian scientists and military officials yesterday for their suspected involvement in a chemical attack in northern Syria in April which killed scores of civilians.

Western intelligence agencies accuse the government of Bashar al-Assad of carrying out the attack, arguing that rebels in the area would not have had the capabilities. The international chemical weapons watchdog said in June the nerve agent sarin was used.

Syrian officials have repeatedly denied using banned toxins. The measures, agreed upon by EU foreign ministers at a meeting in Brussels, target eight Syrian scientists and eight top military officials.

Britain's Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said they showed Europe's resolve "in dealing with those who are responsible for chemical weapons attacks."

This takes the number of people placed under EU sanctions related to the Syrian conflict to 255, the Council of EU governments in a statement. Existing EU sanctions are also in place on 67 companies linked to Assad's government.

Washington issued sanctions in the same month of the attack in the town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province, placing restrictions on hundreds of employees and scientists at a Syrian government agency believed to have developed chemical weapons.



first official inter-Korea talks since December 2015.

The offer came as the United States is locked in difficult negotiations with China at the United Nations on a new sanctions resolution in response to the ICBM test.

The tougher measures could include an oil embargo, a ban on North Korean guest workers, banning North Korean ships from all ports and stronger trade restrictions.

Japan supports new sanctions but also maintains that Russia and China must do more to fully implement the current set of measures targeting their economic ties with North Korea.

In the first six months of this year, trade between China and North Korea increased 10.5 percent to \$2.5 billion, compared to the same period last year, according to official figures from Beijing.

FIGHT AGAINST IS

Duterte offers self-rule in Muslim region

AFP, Manila

President Rodrigo Duterte offered self-rule to the Philippines' Muslim minority yesterday in an attempt to defeat Islamist militants who seized a southern city in the gravest challenge to his year-old rule.

Duterte hopes the promise of autonomy will persuade Filipino Muslims to reject the Islamic State group, whose followers still control parts of Marawi after nearly two months of fighting that had left more than 500 people dead.

Duterte vowed to shepherd through Congress a "Bangsamoro Basic Law" bill jointly written and submitted to him yesterday by government officials and the country's largest Muslim guerrilla group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

"This moment is a significant step forward in our quest to end centuries of hatred, mistrust and injustice that cost and affected the lives of millions of Filipinos," he said in a speech to MILF leaders and government officials.

Both sides said that giving the mainly Catholic nation's large and largely impoverished Islamic minority a better choice was crucial to heading off the lure of violent extremism.

"These misguided people have filled the vacuum created by our failure to enact the basic law, and feed into the frustration of our people," MILF chairman Murad Ebrahim told the same gathering, referring to the Marawi gunmen.

Muslims since the 1970s had waged a decades-old insurgency that claimed more than 100,000 lives in the Mindanao region that includes Marawi.

The MILF signed a peace treaty with Duterte's predecessor Benigno Aquino in 2014 but Congress refused to pass the self-rule bill -- a key provision of the accord.

NEWSIN brief

Baghdadi certainly alive: Kurd official

REUTERS, Sulaimania

A top Kurdish counter-terrorism official said yesterday he was 99 percent sure that Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was alive and located south of the Syrian city of Raqqa, despite reports that he had been killed. "Baghdadi is definitely alive. He is not dead," Lahur Talabany told Reuters.

Jordanian jailed for killing US trainers

AFP, Amman

A Jordanian court yesterday sentenced a soldier to life imprisonment over the killing of three American military trainers outside an army base last year. The military court in Amman found Maarik al-Tawaiha guilty of shooting the trainers.

Eight killed in Nigeria suicide bombing

AFP, Maiduguri

Eight people were killed yesterday when a female suicide bomber detonated her explosives at a mosque in northeast Nigeria. The blast happened at about 5:30 am in the London Ciki area of Maiduguri, which has been at the epicentre of Boko Haram violence since 2009.

Indian soldier, girl, die in Kashmir clash

AFP, Srinagar

An Indian soldier and a young girl were killed yesterday during a skirmish at the de facto border in Kashmir. Colonel Rajesh Kalia said a soldier died when a mortar fired from Pakistan-controlled territory landed on a bunker, sparking fierce retaliatory fire.