

NEWS IN
brief

EU takes action against Poland over court reform

AFP, Brussels

The European Union yesterday said it has launched legal action against Poland's right-wing government over a new law it fears will undermine the independence of the country's common courts. The legal action had been expected after Polish President Andrzej Duda signed into law a measure earlier in the week that allows the justice minister to unilaterally replace the chief justices of the common courts. The action taken by the European Commission could lead to Poland being hauled before the 28-nation bloc's highest court and eventually given a fine.

Taiwan braces for its first typhoon of the yr

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan came to a standstill yesterday with power knocked out for part of the island as it braced for its first typhoon of the year. Typhoon Nesat -- which strengthened into a moderate storm Friday -- already brought massive waves of over 15 metres to the east coast, where it is due to make landfall Saturday night. Schools and offices were closed across the island, while most train services are suspended.

Opposition newspaper staff freed in Turkey

AFP, Istanbul

Seven staff from the Turkish opposition newspaper Cumhuriyet walked free yesterday after nine months in jail, expressing hope that four colleagues still behind bars would be released soon. The staff from the newspaper, one of the few voices in the media in Turkey to oppose Erdogan, had been on trial for aiding terror groups, in accusations denounced as absurd by supporters.



Trump to sign Russia sanctions bill

REUTERS, Washington/moscow

US President Donald Trump will sign legislation that imposes sanctions on Russia, the White House said on Friday, after Moscow ordered the United States to cut hundreds of diplomatic staff and said it would seize two US diplomatic properties in retaliation for the bill.

The US Senate had voted almost unanimously on Thursday to slap new sanctions on Russia, forcing Trump to choose between a tough position on Moscow and effectively dashing his stated hopes for warmer ties with the country or to veto the bill amid investigations in possible collusion between his campaign and Russia.

By signing the bill into law, Trump cannot ease the sanctions against Russia unless he seeks congressional approval.

Moscow's retaliation, announced by the Foreign Ministry on Friday, had echoes of the Cold War. If confirmed that Russia's move would affect hundreds of staff at the US embassy, it would far outweigh the Obama administration's expulsion of 35 Russians in December.

The legislation was in part a response to conclusions by US intelligence agencies that Russia meddled in the 2016 US presidential election, and to further punish Russia for its annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Late on Friday, the White House issued a statement saying Trump would sign the bill after reviewing the final version. The statement made no reference to Russia's retaliatory measures.



Smoke billows out from Raqa following a coalition air strike. Syrian government troops entered the last Islamic State group stronghold in the country's Homs province on Friday after jihadists began withdrawing, a monitor said.

PHOTO: AFP

Qatar accuses Saudi of politicising Hajj

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Qatar has accused Saudi Arabia of politicising the Hajj, claiming Riyadh has imposed restrictions on Qatari nationals planning to travel to Mecca for the annual Muslim pilgrimage.

Qatar's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) yesterday said that Qatari citizens have been told they can only enter Saudi Arabia through two airports, and that they must travel via Doha to be allowed in.

This would be challenging for Qatars who do not live in Doha, such as those studying abroad.

The NHRC said it has filed a complaint with the UN special rapporteur on freedom of belief and religion over the restrictions, which it said were in "stark violation of international laws and agreements that guarantee the right to worship".

The restrictions are part of a boycott launched on June 5 by Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt, which saw the group sever diplomatic ties with Qatar and impose a blockade. They accuse Qatar of funding terrorism, allegations Qatar has strongly denied.

The four Arab states cut transport links with Qatar, and Saudi Arabia has closed the peninsula's only land border.

As the custodian of Islam's holiest sites in Makkah and Medina, Saudi Arabia organises the annual Hajj.

The pilgrimage is one of the five pillars of Islam, which every able-bodied Muslim who is able to afford the journey is obliged to undertake at least once in a lifetime.

Hajj is due to begin in early September.

OUTER OF PAKISTAN PRIME MINISTER

Another period of chaos waiting?

AFP, Islamabad

The ousting of Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has left a power vacuum at the top of the nuclear-armed country, yet experts say that in the long run it is unlikely to be destabilising.

Sharif's disqualification Friday by the Supreme Court over corruption allegations denies him the chance of becoming the country's first prime minister to complete a full five-year term.

Yet despite the country's history of military rule, power will likely remain within the hands of a civilian government -- and probably that of Sharif's eponymous Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz Party, analysts say.

"In a country as volatile as Pakistan, there's good reason to be concerned whenever a prime minister is dismissed," said Michael Kugelman of the DC-based Wilson Centre.

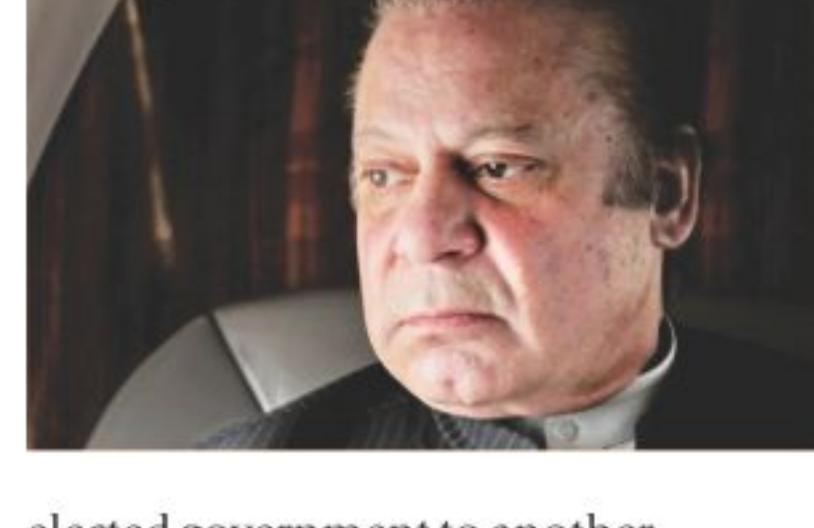
"But my sense is that everything will eventually fall into place -- a successor will be chosen and the current government will serve out its term."

Pakistan has been roiled by military coups and instability for much of its 70-year history.

But recently there has been a surge of

optimism in the militancy-plagued developing country, which has seen a dramatic improvement in security and positive economic growth in recent years.

While the 2013 election that brought Sharif to power for a third time was also a powerful symbol of stability, representing Pakistan's first democratic transition from one



elected government to another.

Political analyst Hasan Askari said that Pakistan's parliamentary system of government remains unshaken despite the Supreme Court's ousting of a democratically-elected premier.

With Pakistan just a year away from general elections, the question is whether the country's opposition parties can capitalise on Sharif's removal.

Opposition leader Imran Khan has breathlessly pounded his party's anti-graft slogans and called for Sharif's removal as his slow downfall has played out on Pakistan's TV news channels over the last year.

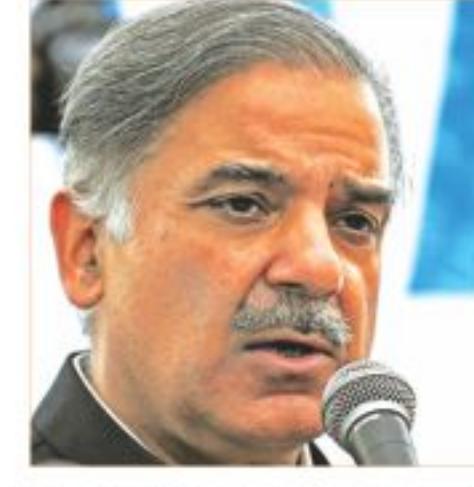
But his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, which governs one of Pakistan's four provinces, has so far failed to turn itself into a national party.

"(It is PTI) that initiated the case against the prime minister (Sharif), therefore they are going to be the major beneficiary in terms of reputation and credibility," said Askari.

But, he cautioned, the party would benefit most from early elections, while popular opinion is still on its side -- a remote prospect, with the PML-N-dominated National Assembly more likely push for elections to be held as scheduled in June 2018.

"This is a party (PML-N) that has the luxury of not facing a formidable opponent with national clout," said Kugelman.

"This decision is not a game-changer for PTI," agreed senior political analyst Rasul Bakhsh. "The only change is that Mr Nawaz Sharif is no longer a prime minister."



SHAHBAZ SHARIF

Pakistan's ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday named his brother Shahbaz as his successor. Born in Lahore in 1950, Mian Mohammad Shahbaz Sharif is the younger brother of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) chief and thrice-elected prime minister Nawaz Sharif. He is currently serving his third term as Punjab's chief minister. He is an influential businessman and jointly owns Ittefaq Group of Companies. He was also elected president of Lahore Chamber of Commerce and Industries in 1985. Shahbaz was first elected MPA to the Punjab Assembly in 1988. His son, Hamza Shahbaz Sharif, serves as an MNA. He is expected to replace his father as Punjab CM.



SHAHID KHAQAN ABBASI

Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, who is set to become Pakistan's interim prime minister, is the former federal minister for petroleum and natural resources, and a businessman who launched the country's most successful private airline. He is due to be rubber stamped by a parliamentary vote as prime minister until Sharif's younger brother Shahbaz can be elected to the national assembly and take over the leadership. Educated in the US at George Washington University, he was born in Karachi but is a member of the National Assembly from Murree. Abbasi worked in the US and Saudi Arabia as an electrical engineer before joining politics after his father, a minister in General Zia ul-Haq's government, was killed when an ammunition dump belonging to Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) exploded in Rawalpindi in 1988. Abbasi has been elected six times as a member of the National Assembly since then, and has previously served as minister for commerce and defence production.

Hamburg knife attack stokes refugee debate in Germany

AFP, Hamburg

The suspect who killed a man with a knife in a Hamburg supermarket was a known Islamist with psychological problems but his motives remain unclear, German officials said yesterday.

Identified as a 26-year-old Palestinian, he arrived in Germany in 2015, but was due to be deported as his application for asylum was rejected.

The assault risks reopening a bitter debate over refugees two months before general elections, putting pressure on Chancellor Angela Merkel over her decision to open Germany's borders in 2015 and let in more than a million asylum seekers.

In her first reaction after Friday's attack, Merkel expressed her sympathies to victims and their family members and vowed that "the violent act must be and will be clarified".

Investigators were still struggling to determine the exact motive for the assault, which left six people injured.

The suspect "was known as an Islamist but not a jihadist," said the German port city's interior minister Andy Grote, noting "there are indications of radicalisation".

Investigators were still struggling to determine the exact motive for the assault, which left six people injured.

If confirmed as an Islamist attack, it would be the first in Germany since Tunisian Anis Amri drove a truck into crowds at a Berlin Christmas market on December 19, killing 12 and injuring 48.

Witnesses told AFP the man had brandished the bloodied knife, shouting "Allahu Akbar" ("God is Greatest") as he fled the scene, but that bystanders gave chase and flung chairs to stop him.

He later wounded two more men in the supermarket before fleeing, hurting four other people along the way, before he was overpowered by courageous passers-by.

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