

NEWSIN 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 year

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.

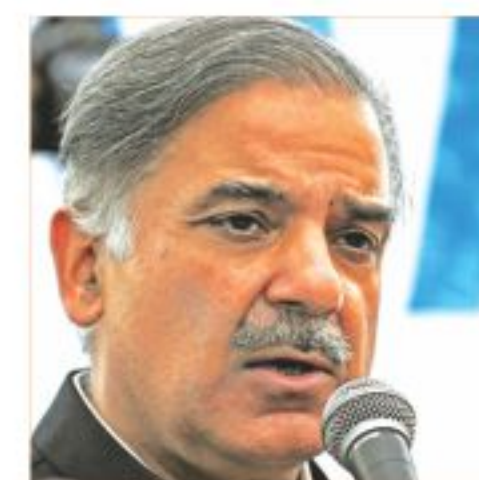
Opposition newspaper staff freed in Turkey

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.



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.



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 in 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-Security 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.

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 Qataris 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.

OUSTER 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.

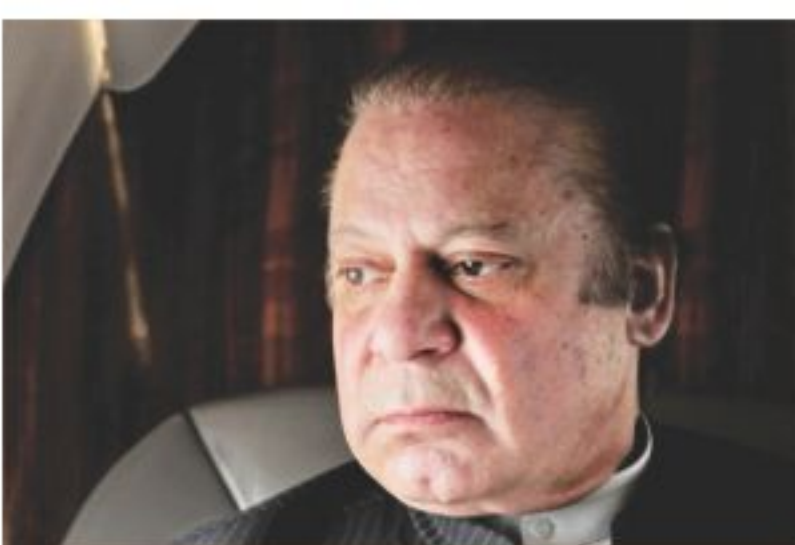
"But my sense is that everything will eventually fall into place -- a successor will be chosen and the current government will serve out its term."

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 Bakhs. "The only change is that Mr Nawaz Sharif is no longer a prime minister."

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".

But Grote stressed that while there could have been an Islamist motive, the suspect also suffered from "psychological instability".

Germany's interior minister Thomas de Maiziere also cautioned against jumping to conclusions.

Police piecing together the assault said the man had entered the supermarket and took a kitchen knife measuring around 20 cm from the shelves.

"He ripped off the packaging and then suddenly brutally attacked a 50-year-old man who later died," said deputy police chief Kathrin Hennings.

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.

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.

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.



People queue to collect drinking water from a municipal tanker at a flooded residential colony in Ahmedabad, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

AFTERMATH OF LATEST MISSILE TEST

West hardens tone on Iran

AFP, Tehran

A defiant Iran yesterday vowed to press ahead with its missile programme and condemned new US sanctions, as tensions rise after the West hardened its tone against the Islamic republic.

In the latest incident on the ground, Iran's Revolutionary Guards said the US Navy had approached their patrol vessels in the Gulf and fired flares.

"At 4 pm (1130 GMT) on Friday, the supercarrier USS Nimitz and its accompanying warship, while being monitored by the Guards' frigates, flew a helicopter near the Resalat oil and gas platform and approached the force's ships," the paramilitary force said.

"The Americans in a provocative and unprofessional move, sent a warning message to the frigates and fired flares," it said. The Guards "ignored the unconventional move by the US ships and continued their mission."

Three days earlier, a US Navy patrol ship fired warning shots at a Guards boat in the Gulf as it closed in on the American vessel, according to US officials.

On the political battlefield, Iranian

foreign ministry spokesman Bahram Ghasemi told state broadcaster IRIB that Tehran condemned new US sanctions against its missile programme, which President Donald Trump is set to sign into law, and vowed to press on.

"We will continue with full power our missile programme," he said. "We consider the action by the US as hostile, reprehensible and unacceptable,

TEHRAN RULES OUT HALT TO MISSILE TESTS

IRAN GUARDS REPORT NEW INCIDENT WITH US NAVY

and it's ultimately an effort to weaken the nuclear deal."

Ghasemi was referring to a 2015 agreement between Iran and US-led world powers that lifted some sanctions on Tehran in return for curbs on the country's nuclear programme.

Separately on Friday, Washington imposed new sanctions targeting Iran's missile programme, one day after

Tehran tested a satellite-launch rocket.

Western governments suspect Iran of trying to develop the technology for longer-range missiles with conventional or nuclear payloads, a charge denied by Tehran, which insists its space programme has purely peaceful aims.

In a joint statement, Britain, France, Germany and the US condemned Tehran's "provocative" and "destabilising" action, saying the test was in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2231 that endorsed the nuclear deal.

"We call on Iran not to conduct any further ballistic missile launches and related activities," they said.

Resolution 2231 called on Iran not to test ballistic missiles capable of carrying a nuclear warhead and an arms embargo has remained in place.

The joint US-European statement said that Iran's latest test features technology related to "ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons".

The United States has had no diplomatic ties with the Iran since 1980, and Trump has halted the direct contacts initiated by his predecessor Barack Obama.

Trump replaces chief of staff Priebus after ugly infighting

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump ousted his beleaguered chief of staff Reince Priebus on Friday, replacing him with Homeland Security Secretary and former general John Kelly after vicious White House infighting spilled into the open.

Only hours after a humiliating defeat on health care reform had underlined his tenuous control over his party in Congress, Trump announced a second shakeup of his inner circle in barely a week.

Since entering the White House six months ago, Trump has parted company with his national security advisor, deputy national security advisor, FBI director, press secretary, communications director, acting attorney general, deputy chief of staff and now chief of staff, a turnover of top officials that is unparalleled in US political history.

Priebus has been under fire for months, seeing one White House ally after another resign or leave, culminating in the departure

of press secretary Sean Spicer a week ago.

His exit appeared inevitable when Trump did not intervene as his new communications director Anthony Scaramucci publicly described Priebus as a "paranoid schizophrenic" in a foul-mouthed tirade that also saw him savage another top Trump aide.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said discussions about Priebus's departure had been taking place for weeks.

Priebus later said he resigned on Thursday, but referring to his departure admitted that he and Trump "talked all the time about this subject."

Kelly will be sworn in to his new post Monday.

The move likely signals a greater focus on law and order issues and will put further strain on relations between Trump and the Republican establishment.

Both Priebus and Spicer were part of the Republican National Committee, and the bridge that linked the party to Trump.



John Kelly



Reince Priebus



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.