

Japan PM seeks new start with cabinet revamp

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday dumped arch-conservatives and embraced critical voices in a cabinet revamp he hopes will stem a decline in public support after a series of scandals and missteps.

Political blueblood Abe, in office since late December 2012, has pushed a nationalist agenda alongside a massive policy effort to end years of on-off deflation and rejuvenate the world's third-largest economy.

But he has seen public support rates plummet in the past few months over an array of political troubles, including allegations of favouritism to a friend in a business deal -- which Abe strongly denies.

Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) suffered a drubbing in local Tokyo elections last month, which analysts and newspapers blamed on



Iran's President Hassan Rouhani receives the presidential mandate from Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei during an endorsement ceremony, in Tehran, Iran, yesterday.

Trump's rating sinks to new low: survey

AGENCIES

A higher number of voters than ever are now dissatisfied with Donald Trump's performance in the White House, according to a new poll.

A survey from Quinnipiac University discovered that only a third of American voters think Trump is doing a good job, while 61 per cent do not.

Quinnipiac found these figures represented the highest disapproval and lowest approval since his Inauguration, and down 7 per cent since his 40 per cent approval rating in June.

The President was swamped with negative approval ratings on key issues like foreign policy, the economy, immigration, health care and terrorism.

The poll, carried out between 27 July and 1 August, follows another blow to Republicans as their second attempt to repeal Obamacare was voted down

US breaching nuke deal

Says Iran after new US sanctions; Rouhani vows to fight 'isolation'

Iran yesterday said that new US sanctions were a violation of its nuclear deal with world powers, piling pressure on President Hassan Rouhani as he starts his second term.

Rouhani vowed to keep up his efforts to end Iran's isolation as he was sworn in by the Islamic republic's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei following his reelection in May.

But the ceremony came less than 24 hours after US President Donald Trump confirmed fresh sanctions against Iran.

Tehran says the new measures violate its 2015 deal with world powers that eased sanctions in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme, an agreement which Trump has repeatedly threatened to tear up.

"We believe that the nuclear deal has been violated and we will react appropriately," deputy foreign minister Abbas Araghchi said on state television.

"We will certainly not fall into the trap of US policy and Trump, and our reaction will be very carefully considered."

The mounting crisis creates a difficult situation for Rouhani, a 68-year-old moderate who won a second four-year term largely thanks to his efforts to repair relations with the West.

"We will never accept isolation," Rouhani said as he was sworn in in front of top political and military officials.

"The nuclear deal is a sign of Iran's goodwill on the international stage."

Khamenei took a tougher line, saying Iran must not fall for Washington's "tricks".

"The enemy's hostility has made us more resistant," the supreme leader said.

Iranian officials say they have prepared a 16-point document for how they will respond to the new sanctions, without giving details.

The new parliament will also vote on a bill boosting financial support to the Revolutionary Guards and the country's missile programme, which are targeted by the sanctions.

For Rouhani, who had hoped his second term would focus on rebuilding the stagnant economy, "it's unfortunate timing", said Ellie Geranmayeh, an Iran analyst with the European Council on Foreign Relations.

"What will be absolutely critical is how the Europeans position themselves," she said.

Britain, France and Germany -- who signed the deal alongside Russia, China and the United States -- remain firm backers of the agreement and are eagerly seeking to rebuild trade ties with Iran despite logistical problems caused by US sanctions.

But the Europeans do oppose Iran's recent missile tests, with the French foreign ministry stating Thursday that they "contradict" UN Resolution 2231 which oversees the nuclear deal, and "constitute a potential threat to stability and security in the region".

Everyone agrees that Iran has stuck to its central commitments regarding its nuclear programme -- including, reluctantly, the Trump administration.

CURBS ON LEGAL IMMIGRATION IN US

Trump backs move

President Donald Trump on Wednesday threw his weight behind efforts to give English-speakers priority for US residency cards and halving the number of legal migrants admitted to the country.

Trump backed proposals that would reform the process of obtaining a US "green card" by introducing a points-based system favoring skilled anglophone workers.

Around one million immigrants are granted permanent residency each year, but the draft legislation -- presented at the White House by Trump and two senators who crafted it -- aims to cut that number by around 50 per cent.

It would also put a cap on the number of refugees able to gain permanent residency at 50,000 a year.

Trump hailed what he described as "the most significant reform to our immigration system in half a century."

The legislation has only a slim chance of passing in Congress.

It brought almost immediate rejection from influential South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham, who said he favored a merit based system but said this proposal would have a "devastating" impact on his state's economy.

Critics say that the proposals would actually result in falling wages, by slashing the number of migrants creating jobs.

Trump's message is likely to resonate strongly with low-skilled white workers who have seen wages stagnate and believe their long-held cultural dominance is being eroded.

Trump has made tackling illegal immigration from Latin America a key plank of his politics. He has promised to build a "wall" on America's southern border with Mexico and tackle violent Hispanic gangs at home.



in the Senate. It also follows another reshuffle in the executive branch, with former Press Secretary Sean Spicer's replacement, Anthony Scaramucci, fired after 10 days, and the departure of former Chief of Staff Reince Priebus.

The majority of 1,125 voters across the US in the poll said Trump was not honest, did not have good leadership skills, was not intelligent and did not care about them.

More than 50 per cent of those surveyed also said Trump has "attempted to derail or obstruct the investigation into the Russian interference in the 2016 election", and two thirds believe Russia did interfere.

Trump has repeatedly called reports of collusion with the Russians a "witch hunt".



an increasing "arrogance" on the part of the prime minister and his government.

Abe, dressed in formal attire after attending a ceremony with his ministers at the Imperial Palace, said he carried out the cabinet changes to restore public confidence in his government.

He reappointed former defence minister Itsunori Onodera after close ally and fellow nationalist Tomomi Inada resigned from the post last week following a scandal at the ministry over the handling of military documents.

Taro Kono is made the new foreign minister. The US-educated 54-year-old Kono is known as an independent-minded, anti-nuclear power advocate, in sharp contrast to Abe's support for atomic energy.

Paranormal activity! Indian villages spooked by outbreak of 'braid chopping'

Police yesterday said they were investigating an outbreak of "braid chopping" that is spooking Indian villagers and has seen a woman murdered amid rumours of witchcraft.

Since July, at least 55 women across five Indian states have reported waking to find their braids mysteriously lopped off, sparking intense speculation around the assaults.

Four new cases were reported on New Delhi's outskirts on Wednesday, just days after half a dozen similar cases were reported in Gurgaon, south of the capital.

"We heard her cries, and when we rushed she was lying on the floor unconscious," said Rohit Yadav, whose 55-year-old mother Monesh Devi fell victim in July in Delhi.

"Her chopped off hair was lying next to her."

The string of unexplained attacks has occurred in largely rural areas, where superstitious beliefs sparks hysteria and allegations of witchcraft.

Some villages have held special prayer sessions to ward off evil spirits and begun patrols to protect their women.

None of the victims have been harmed in any physical way or robbed.

A 65-year-old woman murdered by a mob in Agra -- home to the Taj Mahal -- was later branded a witch and accused of using sorcery to slice braids, despite no cases being reported in the city.

Authorities in Delhi are treating the assaults as crimes but have no leads thus far, said Surinder Kumar, deputy commissioner of Delhi police, told AFP.

However they have dismissed claims of witchcraft, leaning more towards the theory that mental illness or cases of copycat attacks could be behind the bizarre events.



Yazidis visit a cemetery during a commemoration of the third anniversary of the Yazidi genocide yesterday in Sinjar region, Iraq. Yazidis marked three years since Islamic State launched what the United Nations said was a genocidal campaign against them yesterday, but their ordeal is far from over despite the ouster of the jihadist fighters.



BRAZIL CRISIS Congress throws out graft charge against Temer

Brazilian President Michel Temer yesterday hoped to turn a surprisingly easy victory in blocking his corruption trial into momentum for austerity reforms, but more turmoil could await the unpopular leader.

Temer needed a third of the lower house of Congress' support to avoid being suspended from office and put on trial in the Supreme Court.

After hours of angry, often raucous debates he got 263 votes -- more than half of the chamber. Another 21 deputies were either absent or abstained, deepening the defeat for anti-corruption prosecutors.

Accused of agreeing to take millions of dollars in bribes, Temer was the first Brazilian president to face a criminal charge while in office.

Revelations from the "Car Wash" anti-graft operation -- which has recently targeted Temer, eight of his ministers, a third of lower house lawmakers and many other senior politicians -- have prompted disgust among Brazilians.

But Temer portrayed the "clear, indisputable" rejection of his trial as amounting to a fresh mandate.

Ever since coming to power a year ago following the impeachment of leftist president Dilma Rousseff, the center-right Temer has pursued austerity reforms which he says will revive Brazil after two years of deep recession.

The reforms are opposed by many ordinary Brazilians, but welcomed by the business community, which has seen Brazil fall from emerging market poster child to regional basket case.

New hope for MH370

Seabed exploration pioneer firm offers help

A US exploration company has offered to take on the search for flight MH370 which was suspended earlier this year, the firm and a Malaysian minister said Thursday, offering new hope to families of the missing.

No trace of the Boeing 777, which disappeared in March 2014 with 239 people on board, was found during a lengthy deep sea hunt in the southern Indian Ocean off western Australia, with the search called off in January.

Ocean Infinity, a seabed exploration firm which says it has the world's largest and most advanced commercial fleet of underwater vehicles for conducting searches, said it had proposed continuing the hunt.

"I can confirm that we have made an offer," a spokesman said in an emailed statement to AFP, without giving further details.

Malaysia's Deputy Transport Minister Aziz Kaprawi confirmed a company had made an approach and was only asking for payment in the event they find the plane.

He said the firm had made a "good offer", and added negotiations were ongoing with the country's Department of Civil Aviation.

"The company is demanding payment in the event the wreckage is found," he told AFP.

He added that the agreement of Australia and China would be needed for a deal to be reached. China, where most of the passengers came from, and Australia were both involved in the search.



RUSSIA-BACKED SYRIA SAFE ZONE PLAN

Rivals agree ceasefire in Homs

A ceasefire between government forces and rebels went into effect in part of central Syria yesterday after Russia struck a deal with the opposition on a safe zone.

The zone in northern parts of Homs province is the third to be established in Syria, which has been ravaged by six years of civil war that have left more than 300,000 people dead.

"From 1200 local time (0900 GMT), units of the moderate opposition and government forces will completely stop firing," Russian defence ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov said.

Konashenkov said Moscow and Syrian opposition groups had reached an agreement on the "operational details" of a "de-escalation zone" north of third city Homs at talks in Cairo on July 31.

Moscow has been behind a push to pacify Syria since the start of this year, after tipping the conflict in favour of the regime with its game-changing military intervention in 2015.

Under a plan hammered out in May between Russia, Turkey and Iran at peace talks in Kazakhstan, four "de-escalation zones" were to be established across swathes of Syria.

Last month, Moscow announced the establishment of the first two zones in southern Syria and in the rebel stronghold of Eastern Ghouta near Damascus.

The zone in Homs province is expected to cover towns around Talbiseh, Al-Houla and Rastan.

The fourth zone, in northwestern Idlib province, has yet to be established.

Mustafa Khaled, an activist in Talbiseh, told AFP that representatives of the towns were consulted on the deal.

"It is quiet. There have been no violations in the first hour of the agreement," Khaled said.

"But word in the street is that people don't trust the regime or the Russians," he added.

Al-Houla too was calm, resident Abbas Abu Osama said.

There was no official announcement from Syria's armed forces, which had issued its own declarations of the ceasefires in the south and in Eastern Ghouta last month.

According to the Russian defence ministry, Russian military police will set up two checkpoints and three observation posts along the boundaries of the Homs zone on Friday.

Rebels have agreed to "unblock" part of a road running through the safe zone between Homs and the city of Hama further north, spokesman Konashenkov said.

A "Committee for National Justice" made up of rebels and local groups would help oversee the implementation of the plan, he added.

Moscow has also deployed military police in the southern ceasefire zone, created after Russia struck a deal with the United States and Jordan last month.

Negotiations on the Idlib zone have been complicated by conflicting interests between the international powers and by the presence of large numbers of fighters of former Al-Qaeda affiliate the Fateh al-Sham Front.

Russia is planning a fresh round of talks in the Kazakh capital Astana in late August to thrash out more details of its peace plan.

Both Russia and a US-led coalition have been carrying out bombing campaigns against areas of Syria still controlled by the Islamic State group that have exacted a mounting civilian toll.

Separate raids by Russia and the coalition left at least 40 civilians dead on Wednesday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Coalition strikes on IS's embattled bastion of Raqa left 26 civilians dead, the Britain-based watchdog said.

Russian raids on an IS-controlled town in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor left 15 civilians, including five children dead, it added.