

NEWS IN brief

BJP becomes largest party in Rajya Sabha

TNN, New Delhi
BJP has become the largest party in the India upper house of the Parliament, Rajya Sabha, overtaking Congress by one seat. BJP has 58 seats of its own and Congress is followed by Samajwadi Party (18), AIADMK (13), Trinamool Congress (12) and JD(U) (10). This does not signal BJP-NDA gaining a majority but the ruling coalition is close.

First Hindu in Pak govt in over two decades

TNN, Islamabad
Pakistan's new Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi formed his cabinet on Friday, filling it with his toppled predecessor Nawaz Sharif's aides and allies. It also included the first Hindu in a Pakistani government in more than 20 years, Darshan Lal. He would head coordination between four Pakistani provinces, a government official said.

Brazil launch anti-crime operations in Rio slums

AFP, Rio De Janeiro
Heavily armed Brazilian army troops and police yesterday launched a pre-dawn crackdown on gangs operating out of slums across Rio de Janeiro, following a steep rise in crime. Their main goal was to stop gangs behind a surge in brazen robberies of commercial trucks, sources said.

8 still missing at Russia diamond mine tragedy

AFP, Moscow
Rescuers yesterday helped an injured worker out of a flooded Russian diamond mine but the search continued for eight other still missing in the disaster, mine owners Alosa said. Rescue efforts were continuing for eight other miners reported missing since Friday's flooding at the Mir mine in Russia's vast Sakha region some 4,160 kilometres east of Moscow.



Activists of the Indian Youth Congress (IYC) stand on police barricades while shouting slogans against Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi outside the headquarters of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in New Delhi, yesterday. India's main opposition Congress Party staged angry nationwide protests yesterday, blaming supporters of Modi for pelting stones at the car of its leader Rahul Gandhi.

RUSSIA 'COLLUSION'

Russia probe team asks WH for records

AFP, Washington
Investigators probing President Donald Trump's team for possible connections to Russia have asked the White House to hand over records for what is believed to be the first time, the New York Times said Friday.

Members of the sweeping federal investigation led by special counsel Robert Mueller requested the White House submit documents linked to Trump's former national security adviser Michael Flynn, according to the paper, citing authorities close to the investigation.

The document request while not a formal subpoena, was the latest signal that the probe is gathering pace.

The news came one day after reports revealed that Mueller -- a former FBI director -- has impaneled a grand jury to investigate Russia's interference in the 2016 presidential election.

Flynn -- who was ousted mere weeks after being named Trump's national security adviser over mischaracterizing contacts with Russian officials -- is at the center of the Russia controversy plaguing the White House.

Asked for comment on the story presidential lawyer Ty Cobb said the White House would not discuss "specific communications" with Mueller but would "continue to fully cooperate with the Special Counsel."

Trump has repeatedly denied allegations of collusion, saying he is the victim of a political "witch hunt" and "fake news."

Investigators had also questioned witnesses over whether Flynn received secret payments from the Turkish government at the end of the 2016 presidential campaign -- suggesting the probe's scope has widened to examine Flynn's financial dealings.

US media has reported that Mueller is also said to be investigating Trump's financial records unrelated to Russia or the election.

Trump has publicly warned Mueller that his financial dealings should be out of bounds and investigating them would cross a red line.

TENSION OVER NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME South opens door to talks

AFP, Manila
South Korea's foreign minister said Saturday she was open to rare discussions with her North Korean counterpart at a security forum in the Philippines in a bid to rein in Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programme.

The diplomatic olive branch came as the isolated regime faces increasing global pressure following its second intercontinental ballistic missile test on July 28, with the United Nations Security Council set to vote this weekend on new sanctions.

"If there is an opportunity that naturally occurs, we should talk," Kang Kyung-Wha told reporters as she landed in Manila yesterday, according to South Korea's Yonhap news agency.

North Korea's top diplomat, Ri Hong-jo, is also attending the regional summit, which is hosted by the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean).

aimed at establishing a peace regime". Seoul last month proposed military talks with Pyongyang but the North refused to respond. Had they gone ahead, they would have been the first official inter-Korean talks since 2015.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un has defied international pressure to accelerate his country's nuclear weapons capabilities, and boasted after the second intercontinental ballistic mis-

sile test that he could strike any target in the United States.

In response, Washington drafted the planned UN resolution to toughen sanctions against Pyongyang.

The United States also said it hoped to build unified pressure on the North at the Manila event, known as the Asean Regional Forum (ARF), which US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is attending.

In the run up to this year's gathering, Washington lobbied to have Pyongyang kicked out of the ARF. But there is limited appetite among Asian countries to shut North Korea out of one of the few diplomatic gatherings it attends.

The newly elected South Korean government of President Moon Jae-In is also more open to negotiations than the previous administration of conservative Park Geun-Hye.

Tensions on the Korean peninsula often dominate the ARF because it is one of the few annual diplomatic gatherings attended by the key stakeholders: South Korea, North Korea, the United States, Russia, China and Japan.

On Saturday Asean released a joint statement following a meeting of its own foreign ministers saying the North's missile tests "seriously threaten" global peace, but they stopped short of any moves to isolate Pyongyang.

The UN resolution proposes a ban on certain exports that could deprive Pyongyang of \$1 billion in annual revenue.

It comes after a month of negotiations with China, the North's main trading partner and ally, to shore up their support for fresh punitive measures.

UNSC toughens N Korea sanctions

AFP, United Nations
The UN Security Council yesterday unanimously adopted a US-drafted resolution that significantly strengthened sanctions on North Korea, with a ban on exports aimed at depriving Pyongyang of \$1 billion in annual revenue.

The sweeping measures were the first of that scope to be imposed on North Korea since US President Donald Trump took office and highlighted China's willingness to punish its Pyongyang ally.

The resolution bans all exports of coal, iron and iron ore, lead and lead ore, as well as fish and seafood by the cash-starved state -- stripping North Korea of a third of its export earnings estimated at \$3 billion per year.

US Ambassador Nikki Haley told the council that the stiffer measures brought the penalty imposed on North Korea "to a whole new level" and put leader Kim Jong Un "on notice."

If fully implemented by China and Russia, North Korea's main economic partners, the measures would tighten the vise around Pyongyang as it seeks to develop its military programs.

The resolution also prevents North Korea from increasing the number of workers it sends abroad whose earnings are another source of revenue for Kim's regime.

It prohibits all new joint ventures with North Korea, bans new investment in the current joint companies and adds nine North Korean officials and four entities including North Korea's main foreign exchange bank to the UN sanctions blacklist.

The United States entered into negotiations with China a month ago on the new resolution after North Korea launched its first intercontinental ballistic missile on July 4 which was followed by a second test on July 28.

Sessions vows crackdown on 'staggering' number of leaks

AFP, Washington
US Attorney General Jeff Sessions on Friday vowed to crack down on government employees who leak classified or sensitive information, after a spate of revelations in the media -- many of them unfavorable -- about the Trump administration.

President Donald Trump has repeatedly fumed about "illegal leaks" and even lashed out publicly at Sessions for taking what he called a "very weak" position on the issue.

Under pressure, and with some saying his job could be on the line, Sessions responded.

"I strongly agree with the president and condemn in the strongest terms the staggering number of leaks undermining the ability of our government to protect this country," Sessions told a press conference.

Four people have already been charged with "unlawfully disclosing" classified

material or concealing contacts with federal officers, he said.

The announcement follows a torrent of damaging revelations to the media, following six months of political intrigue and open feuding in the White House.

It comes after a leak that was unusual even by the standards of this administration -- the publication by The Washington Post of the contents of private phone calls between Trump and foreign leaders.

The newspaper published the full transcripts Thursday of conversations the Republican billionaire leader held in January with Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

Disclosure of the transcripts rocked Washington, with lawmakers across the political spectrum strongly denouncing the leaks of presidential conversations with world leaders.



Russian President Vladimir Putin fishes in the remote Tuva region in southern Siberia. The picture taken between August 1 and 3, 2017.

'Genuinely troubling' crisis brewing Says experts as China ups ante in high-altitude standoff with India

AFP, Beijing
China has stepped up its rhetoric in an increasingly tense border row with India, hinting at the possibility of military action in a propaganda push that analysts are calling "genuinely troubling."

For more than a month, Indian and Chinese troops have been locked in a standoff on a remote but strategically important Himalayan plateau near where Tibet, India and Bhutan meet.

On Thursday, Chinese defence ministry spokesman Ren Guoqiang warned that Beijing had shown restraint but had a "bottom line."

"No country should underestimate the Chinese forces... resolve and willpower to defend national sovereignty," he said in a post on the ministry website.

sions and photographs of what it stated were Indian troops and military vehicles on China's side of the frontier.

Calling for the "immediate and unconditional" withdrawal of Indian troops, it warned Beijing would "take all necessary measures" to safeguard its interests.

The point of these statements isn't that war is imminent; rather, they're an attempt to figure out how to not go to war without losing face," Shen Dingli, vice dean of Fudan University's Institute of International Studies, told AFP.

"Neither side wants to go to war."

President Xi Jinping is set to meet Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a summit of BRICS nations in the Chinese city of Xiamen in early September and has said he hopes for greater cooperation within the bloc.



Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said Thursday that India was building roads, hoarding supplies and deploying a large number of troops in the area.

KILLING OF 'LOCAL REBELS' Thousands clash with forces in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar
Thousands of protesters clashed with government forces in Indian-administered Kashmir Saturday after three local rebels were killed in a firefight with troops, police said, with tensions already high following the death of a popular militant commander this week.

Soldiers and police special counterinsurgency forces surrounded a neighbourhood in Sopore town, 45 kilometres (28 miles) northwest of the main city of Srinagar, after "specific information" that militants were hiding in a house there, triggering a firefight.

"During the encounter three militants of LeT were eliminated," a police statement said, adding that three automatic assault rifles were recovered from the site of the clash.

As news of the deaths spread, clashes between local residents and government forces broke out in many areas.

Three protesters were injured in the northern Bandipore area, home to one of the slain militants, when soldiers fired bullets as hundreds of angry local residents came out on the streets to pelt their convoy with stones, a police officer said speaking on condition of anonymity.

In southern Kashmir valley thousands of protesters clashed with government forces who fired bullets in the air and used tear gas and stun grenades to disperse a crowd, which was chanting: "We want freedom".



Right-wing leader elected as Indian VP

AFP, New Delhi
India's lawmakers yesterday elected a veteran leader from the ruling right-wing party as the country's next vice-president, boosting Prime Minister Narendra Modi's political standing.

Venkaiah Naidu, 68, secured 516 parliamentary votes to pip rival

Gopalkrishna Gandhi -- the 72-year-old grandson of Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi -- who received 244 votes, according to polling officials.

Naidu, considered close to Modi, held the post of a federal minister before being nominated as vice president.

The vice president presides over the upper house of parliament and can take temporary charge of the largely ceremonial presidency in the event that the incumbent dies, resigns or is impeached.

Modi congratulated Naidu in a tweet and said, "I'm confident (he) will serve the nation as a diligent & dedicated Vice President, committed to the good of nation building."

The BJP and its allies enjoy a majority in the 545-member lower house of parliament but not in the upper house, weakening its ability to pass legislation.

The BJP rules 17 of India's 29 states either directly or in alliance with regional parties.

Naidu's victory means the top three constitutional offices are now held by BJP leaders following the election of the party's candidate Ram Nath Kovind as president earlier this month.