

NEWS IN brief

Darjeeling strike ends after 104 days

AFP, Kolkata

A strike that shut down India's pictureque hill station of Darjeeling — causing violence and disruption to tourism — was called off yesterday after 104 days. The Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), a movement demanding the formation of a separate Indian state, said it would enter into talks with the government.

Pak court indicts FM on graft charges

AP, Islamabad

A Pakistani court in a high-profile corruption case has indicted the finance minister on graft charges after investigators found his assets did not match his reported income. Media reports said the minister was present in the courtroom yesterday when a judge read the charges against him. Dar denied allegations.

Catalans 'will vote' on October 1: minister

AFP, Barcelona

Catalans will vote in an independence referendum, regional foreign minister Raul Romeva said Tuesday, despite a crackdown by Madrid which wants to prevent a vote deemed unconstitutional by the courts. "People will go out and vote en masse, peacefully on Sunday," said Romeva.

Attack on Mexico drug rehab centre kills 14

AFP, Ciudad Juarez

At least 14 people were killed and 8 injured Tuesday night in northern Mexico when an armed group opened fire in a drug addiction rehabilitation centre, local police said. In the past decade at least half a dozen attacks have taken place in rehabilitation centres, according to authorities, generally settled with gang members settling scores with rivals hiding in the centers.



A ball of flame rises over a warehouse storing ammunition for multiple rocket launcher systems at a military base in the town of Kalynivka in Vinnytsia region, Ukraine, yesterday. *Inset*: A destroyed house is seen near the warehouse. Ukrainian authorities evacuated more than 30,000 people from the central Vinnytsia region after the incident, which prosecutors are terming as a possible act of "sabotage".

PHOTO: REUTERS

Russia destroys last chemical weapons

Putin announces move; watchdog hails 'major milestone'

AP, Moscow

President Vladimir Putin yesterday announced that Russia would destroy its last chemical weapons, hailing the move as a "historic event" and accusing the United States of not following suit.

"Today the last chemical ammunition from Russia's chemical weapon stockpile will be destroyed," Putin said in televised remarks.

"This is truly a historic event, taking into account the huge amount we inherited from Soviet times that was enough -- as experts believe -- to destroy all living things many times over," he said.

The move is a huge step towards making the modern world in one balanced and safe."

The Russian president also used the speech to needle Washington, saying the United States was not carrying out its international duties in full.

The world's global chemical weapons watchdog hailed the move as a "major milestone".

"The completion of the verified destruction of Russia's chemical weapons programme is a major milestone in the achievement of the goals of the Chemical Weapons Convention," said

Ahmet Uzumcu, head of the Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

He also praised Russian officials for "their professionalism and dedication", adding experts from the Nobel Peace Prize-winning organisation "will verify the destruction."

The last of the Russian arsenal was "destroyed at the Kizner chemical weapons destruction facility in the Udmurt Republic," the OPCW said.

Some 96 percent of all the world's declared stockpile of chemical weapons have now been destroyed, the OPCW added.

Force not preferred option

Says Trump after war of words, keeps military option open

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump warned North Korea that any US military option would be "devastating" for Pyongyang, but said the use of force was not Washington's first option to deal with the country's ballistic and nuclear weapons program.

"We are totally prepared for the second option, not a preferred option," Trump said at a White House news conference, referring to military force. "But if we take that

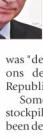
Korean lawmaker who said Pyongyang had boosted defenses on its east coast.

"While the political space is clearly very charged right now, we haven't seen a change in the posture of North Korean forces, and we watch that very closely," Dunford told a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on his reappointment to his post.

North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho on Monday accused Trump of destabilising the North and threatened that Pyongyang would shoot down US warplanes flying near the Korean Peninsula after American bombers flew close to it last Saturday. Ri was reacting to Trump's Twitter comments that Kim and they "won't come around much longer" if they acted on their threats toward the United States.

The United States has imposed sanctions on 26 people as part of its non-proliferation designations for North Korea and nine banks, including some with ties to China, the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control said on Tuesday.

The US sanctions target people in North Korea and some North Korean officials in China, Russia, Libya and Dubai, according to a list posted on the agency's website.



Palestinians get place in Interpol

AFP, Beijing

Interpol on Wednesday approved the Palestinian Authority's membership bid, a new victory in its drive for international representation despite strong Israeli opposition.

Israel lobbies hard against Palestinian efforts to join global organisations to advance their goal of statehood. It claimed victory last year when the Palestinian bid to join the global police body was suspended.

Israel approved the Palestinian application along with a bid by the Solomon Islands during its annual general assembly in Beijing.

"New member countries State of Palestine and Solomon Islands bring INTERPOL's membership to 192," it said on its Twitter account.

It did not detail the voting but candidates require the approval of a two-thirds majority of countries present at the general assembly, excluding abstentions.

The Palestine Liberation Organisation's negotiations affairs department said on Twitter that they had received more than 75 percent of the vote.

Israel's foreign ministry did not immediately comment.

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Taliban said they targeted Mattis's plane. The Islamic State's local Khorasan province affiliate also claimed responsibility, as security forces were locked in a stand-off with the attackers.

A joint news conference with President Asif Ali Zardari and the president of the opposition People's Party, Asif Ali Zardari, was held at the airport.

"We will not abandon Afghanistan to a merciless enemy trying to kill its way to power," Mattis told reporters.

October marks the 16th anniversary of the start of the war.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Ugandan opposition lawmakers fight with plain-clothes security personnel in the parliament while protesting a proposed age limit amendment bill debate to change the constitution for the extension of the president's rule, in Kampala, Uganda, yesterday.

CRIMINAL NEGLIGENCE OVER RICE SUBSIDY SCHEME

Fugitive former Thai PM gets 5 yrs' jail in absentia

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's top court yesterday sentenced ousted premier Yingluck Shinawatra in absentia to five years in prison for criminal negligence, a verdict that likely ended the political career of the leader who fled the junta-run kingdom last month.

Yingluck's administration was toppled in a 2014 coup and she was later put on trial for failing to stop corruption and losses in her government's rice subsidy scheme, which the court said cost the country billions of dollars.

She pleaded innocent and accepted a deal to stand trial for political witch-hunt but the Supreme Court in Bangkok deemed her guilty, saying she failed to stop graft and losses in the rice programme.

The verdict, which makes Yingluck's return to the kingdom increasingly unlikely, said the leader was aware of corrupt deals made by members of her administration but did nothing to stop them. The court said the policy cost Thailand nearly \$10 billion in losses.

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