

NEWS IN brief

Seven killed in Indian military chopper crash

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian military helicopter crashed in a disputed area near the border with China yesterday, killing all seven troops on board, the army said. The Russian-made Mi-17 V5 helicopter crashed in the mountainous district of Tawang near the border with Tibet when it crashed. An investigation is launched to know the cause of the accident.

16 killed as train hits bus in Russia

AFP, Moscow

At least 16 people were killed yesterday when a train slammed into a bus that had broken down on a level crossing east of Moscow, authorities said. The accident occurred before dawn on Friday near the town of Pokrov, some 110 kilometres east of the Russian capital. All of those killed were on the bus, which was carrying 58 people, 56 of them Uzbek nationals.

School guard burns 6 kids to death in Brazil

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

A mentally ill Brazilian nursery school guard burned six small children and a teacher to death after spraying them with alcohol and setting them alight Thursday in an attack which has horrified the nation. Dozens of people were also hurt in the blaze while the guard died after succumbing to his own burn injuries.

13 dead after Chinese boat, HK tanker collide

AFP, Tokyo

The Japanese coastguard yesterday said it had discovered a dozen bodies inside a Chinese fishing boat that capsized after a collision with a Hong Kong oil tanker off Japan's western coast the previous day. The Chinese vessel, the 290-ton "Lurong Yuanyu 378", had 16 Chinese-national crew members in total.



Smoke rises from buildings following a reported strike on a rebel-held area of the Jobar district, east of the Syrian capital, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Violence at worst level since Aleppo

ICRC reports fighting across Syria

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

The worst fighting since the battle for eastern Aleppo last year is raging in several regions of Syria, causing hundreds of civilian casualties, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has said.

Up to 10 hospitals have been reportedly damaged in the past 10 days, cutting off hundreds of thousands of people from access to healthcare, the aid agency said in a statement on Thursday, voicing alarm at the situation from Raqa to Idlib and eastern Ghouta.

"For the past two weeks, we have seen an increasingly worrying spike in military operations that correlates with high levels of civilian casualties," Marianne Gasser, head of the ICRC's delegation in Syria, said.

"My colleagues report harrowing stories, like a family of 13 who fled Deir Az Zor only to lose 10 of its members to air strikes and explosive devices along the way."

In a separate development on Thursday, two Russian submarines fired 10 "Kalibr" cruise missiles from the Mediterranean Sea at rebel targets in Deir Az Zor province to support the Syrian army, Russian news agencies cited the defence ministry in Moscow as saying.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based monitoring group, recorded the killing of 185 people, including 45 children and 46 women between September 29 and October 4 in several attacks, which it attributed to both the Russian and Syrian governments. On Thursday, it said Russian air strikes killed 14 people fleeing across a river on rafts in eastern Syria.

Too little, too late?

Spain apologises for violence during independence referendum

AGENCIES

Spain yesterday apologised for a violent police crackdown on Catalonia's independence referendum, in a conciliatory gesture as both sides looked for a way out of the nation's worst political crisis since it became a democracy four decades ago.

Spain's representative in northeast Catalonia, which accounts for a fifth of the national economy, made the apology just as Catalonia's secessionist leader appeared to inch away from a plan to declare independence as early as Monday.

"When I see these images, and more so when I know people have been hit, pushed and even one person who was hospitalised, I can't help but regret it and apologise on behalf of the officers that intervened," Enric Millo said in a television interview.

Meanwhile, Spain's government also urged Catalonia to hold a regional election to settle the political crisis sparked by Catalan separatist leaders' drive for independence, reported AFP.

"It would be good to start mending this fracture... through regional elections," government spokesman Ignacio Mendez de Vigo told a news conference.

Spanish police used batons and rubber bullets to stop people voting in Sunday's referendum, which Madrid had banned as unconstitutional. The scenes brought worldwide condemnation, reported Reuters.

Moments earlier, a Catalan parliament spokeswoman said the regional government's leader, Carles Puigdemont, had asked to address lawmakers on Tuesday, in timing that appeared at odds with earlier plans to move an independence motion on Monday.

Puigdemont wanted to speak on the "political situation". The softer tone contrasted with remarks earlier yesterday from Catalonia's head of foreign affairs who told BBC radio it would go ahead with an independence debate in the regional parliament.

CATALONIA CRISIS

Madrid urges Catalan election to settle crisis

Catalan leader to address lawmakers on Tuesday



Meanwhile, Catalonia's police chief and two prominent separatist leaders avoided being remanded in custody at a court hearing yesterday over sedition accusations linked to the region's independence bid.

The court summons raised tensions in Spain's volatile political conflict, but despite the gravity of the accusations the court did not issue a custodial order that could have

further escalated the dispute. Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has offered all-party political talks to find a solution, opening the door to a deal giving Catalonia more autonomy. But he has ruled out independence and rejected a Catalan proposal for international mediation.

Spanish ruling-party lawmakers say Rajoy is considering invoking the constitution to dissolve the regional parliament and force fresh Catalan elections if the region's government goes ahead with an independence declaration.

KILLING AND MAIMING YEMENI CHILDREN

UN puts Saudi-led coalition in blacklist

AFP, United Nations

The Saudi Arabia-led coalition fighting in Yemen was placed on a UN blacklist on Thursday for killing and maiming children, drawing fresh calls from rights groups to step up pressure on Riyadh over the conflict.

The group was briefly included on the annual list of shame last year before a threat by Saudi Arabia to cut off its funding to UN programs forced a reversal.

In announcing the move, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres noted that the coalition had taken some measures to improve the protection of children.

"In Yemen, the actions of the coalition to restore legitimacy in Yemen objectively led to that party being listed for the killing and maiming of children," said a report released along with the list as an annex.

In 2016, the coalition was responsible for 683 child casualties and for 38 verified attacks on schools and hospitals, it said.

Yemen's government forces, pro-government militias, the Huthi rebels and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) were also cited for violations, but in a separate section of the list that said they had failed to protect children.

Guterres spoke to Saudi King Salman ahead of the release of the list, which UN officials had shared with Riyadh months earlier to avoid a repeat of the clash that followed the blacklisting by his predecessor Ban Ki-moon last year.

Ban removed the coalition from the list and publicly complained that it was unacceptable for countries to "exert undue pressure" on the United Nations to avoid scrutiny.



UK PM fights back after plot to oust her

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday said she enjoyed the "full support" of her cabinet after a former Conservative Party chairman admitted he was behind a plot by around 30 MPs to urge her to resign.

"What the country needs is calm leadership and that's what I'm providing with the full support of my cabinet," May told reporters in her constituency in Maidenhead, west of London.

Grant Shapps, identified as the ringleader of the effort to oust May after a faltering performance at the party's conference this week and cabinet infighting over Brexit, said there was growing momentum behind calls for her to step down.

Shapps said five former ministers were part of the move to oust May and some current ministers also "support it", although other senior party figures contradicted him.

"A growing number of my colleagues, we realise that the solution isn't to bury our heads in the sand and just hope things will get better," Shapps told BBC radio.

Asked about the plot, he said: "Are there cabinet members aware? Yes. Do some support it? Yes."

"It will have to be her decision. I had rather hoped that we would be able to get to the point where we could go to her privately and have this conversation," said Shapps, an MP and former minister.

He added there was increasing support among a "broad spread" of MPs for a leadership contest in the first open declaration of an organised effort to oust May since her poor performance in a June general election.

Cambodian govt moves to dissolve opposition party

Lawsuit filed against CNRP after half of its MPs fled abroad fearing Hun Sen's crackdown

AFP, Phnom Penh

Cambodia's government yesterday asked the country's top court to dissolve the main opposition party, which is hanging on by a thread after its leader was arrested on treason charges, sending scores of MPs into self-exile.

The Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) has been battered by a government crackdown that is clearing out rivals of strongman premier Hun Sen ahead of a 2018 election that could have tested his 32-year grip on power.

The government has used a mix of court cases, legal manoeuvres and threats to sideline the opposition's leadership and drive out more than half of its MPs in fear.

The exodus, prompted by the surprise arrest of the party's president Kem Sokha last month, has raised serious doubts about the

party's ability to contest next year's election.

Its future was further imperiled yesterday when lawyers from the Ministry of Interior lodged a complaint urging the Supreme Court to disband the CNRP for allegedly violating a controversial political parties law.

"There is strong and sufficient evidence for the Supreme Court to dissolve the CNRP," Ky Tech, one of the lawyers, told reporters outside the court house.

"If we keep (CNRP), it will lead to the destruction of the nation, so we must prevent it," he added.

His team accused the CNRP of breaching legislation that prohibits parties from threatening national security, taking orders from a foreign entity or conspiring with individuals whose activities are "against the interest of Cambodia", among other offences.



Veronica Hartfield widow of Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department Officer Charleston Hartfield, their son Ayzayah Hartfield, attend a vigil for Charleston at Police Memorial Park in Las Vegas, Nevada on Thursday. Charleston Hartfield was killed when a gunman opened fire on the crowd killing at least 58 people and injuring more than 450. PHOTO: AFP

No Violence

Liberian women hold mass fast for peaceful polls

AFP, Monrovia

Dressed in identical printed skirts, a hundred Liberian women knelt in prayer after another long day in three weeks of fasting, appealing once more that their country be spared of violence.

Ahead of elections next Tuesday, women of all ages are gathering from dawn to sunset on a roadside close to the party headquarters of several presidential candidates.

Their daily injunction for peace echoes the female activism that helped end Liberia's civil wars, which ran back-to-back from 1989 to 2003. The success of their non-violent protests propelled the bloodied West African state into the world headlines and earned a Nobel Peace Prize for one of its leaders.

The women's peace movement led sit-ins and prayers demanding peace talks and reconciliation during the civil war, and its founder Leymah Gbowee went on to jointly win the 2011 Nobel Prize for her work.

"We foresee electoral violence," said one woman, eyeing an armoured police vehicle passing by.

"During the war we were praying and fasting and the war ended," recalls Jassah Ganyan, an elderly lady resting under the tarpaulin roof. "We don't want more war."

NRA urges new rules to curb 'rapid fire' tools

US gun lobby agrees to examine 'bump stocks'

REUTERS, Las Vegas

The US gun lobby, which has seldom embraced new firearms-control measures, expressed a willingness to support a restriction on the rifle accessory that enabled a Las Vegas gunman to strafe a crowd with bursts of sustained gunfire as if from an automatic weapon.

The gunman Stephen Paddock, police said, fitted 12 of his weapons with so-called bump-stock devices that allow semi-automatic rifles to operate as if they were fully automatic machine guns, which are otherwise outlawed in the United States.

Authorities said his ability to fire hundreds of rounds per minute for 10 minutes from a 32nd-floor hotel suite was a major factor in the high casualty count of 58 people killed and hundreds wounded. Paddock, 64, killed himself before police stormed his suite.

The influential National Rifle Association

(NRA), which staunchly opposed moves to tighten gun control laws after the Orlando massacre and others, said on Thursday bump stocks, which remain legal, "should be subject to additional regulations."

Analysts say, by recommending that an executive branch agency conduct a review of the legality of bump stock devices, the extremely influential gun rights lobby is seeking to direct efforts towards administrative, not legislative, solutions.

If Congress were to start drafting new laws, the process may be more difficult for the NRA to control given that Democrats are urging new legislation after the massacre.

Investigators remained puzzled at what drove Paddock, a well-off retiree and avid gambler, to assemble an arsenal of nearly 50 firearms before opening fire on a country music festival attended by 20,000 people.

LAS VEGAS MASSACRE



Japan reporter died after 159 hrs of overtime

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's public broadcaster yesterday apologised to the parents of a young reporter who died of heart failure after logging 159 hours of overtime in a month.

NHK reporter Miwa Sado, 31, who had been covering political news in Tokyo, was found dead in her bed in July 2013, reportedly clutching her mobile phone.

A government inquest a year after her death ruled that it was linked to excessive overtime. She had taken two days off in the month before she died.

The case has again highlighted the Japanese problem of "karoshi" -- meaning death from overwork. According to a government report on death from overwork released on Friday, there were 191 "karoshi" cases in the year ending March 2017.

Tropical storm Nate kills 22 in C America

AFP, San José

Tropical Storm Nate has killed at least 22 people in Central America with torrential rains that forced thousands from their homes, uprooted trees, knocked out bridges and turned roads into rivers, officials said yesterday.

Forecasters predicted it will strengthen into a hurricane headed for Mexico and the United States.

The country hardest hit by the storm that began Wednesday was Nicaragua, with 11 dead and seven missing, Vice President Rosario Murillo told state media.

Officials in Costa Rica said eight people died including a three-year-old girl after they were hit by falling trees and mudslides, and two young Nicaraguan farm workers. At least 17 people were missing.

Costa Rica declared a national emergency as it struggled with mudslides, washed out roads and overflowing rivers.

Schools, universities, government offices and banks across the Central American nation were closed.

Three other people were killed in Honduras. The United States is recovering from two major hurricanes: Hurricane Harvey that tore through Texas in August, and Hurricane Irma in September.

Another powerful storm, Hurricane Maria, ripped through the Caribbean in late September, wreaking destruction on several islands, including Dominica and Puerto Rico.