

NEWS IN brief

Ousted Pakistan PM's son-in-law arrested

AFP, Islamabad
The son-in-law of ousted Pakistani premier Nawaz Sharif was arrested at Islamabad airport yesterday by anti-corruption body on his return from London, officials said. Muhammad Safdar, a lawmaker married to Sharif's daughter Maryam, was arrested after he failed to appear at NAB court hearings.

Top militant leader killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian forces said they shot dead a top leader of the Kashmir militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad in a clash in the disputed territory yesterday. The Pakistani militant was known only as Khalid was trapped in a house after throwing a grenade at a police checkpoint in the northern village of Ladoora, they said.

Srebrenica commander acquitted of war crimes

AFP, Sarajevo

A Sarajevo court yesterday acquitted Naser Oric, a commander revered by many as a defender of Muslims during Bosnia's 1990s conflict but viewed as a butcher by Serbs, of war crimes charges. The ruling sparked outrage from Serbian leaders and victims' groups while it was hailed by Bosnian Muslims.

18 dead as Tunisian ship, migrant boat collide

REUTERS, Tunis

At least eight people drowned yesterday when a boat carrying dozens of mostly Tunisian migrants collided with a navy vessel off the country's southeast coast, its defence ministry said. There were between 70 and 80 people on board, IOM spokesman Flavio Di Giacomo said.



Turkish army trucks drive near the Turkey-Syria border in Reyhanli, Hataz province, Turkey yesterday. Inset, a woman and her daughter get some rest after they cross the Cilvegözü border gate, entering Turkey. Turkish army has launched a reconnaissance mission in jihadist-controlled northwestern Idlib province in a bid to create a de-escalation zone. PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP

US, Turkey curb visas as diplomatic spat grows

REUTERS, Ankara

Turkey urged the United States yesterday to review its suspension of visa services after the arrest of a US consulate employee sharply escalated tensions between the two Nato allies and drew Turkey's currency and stocks lower. Relations between Ankara and Washington have long been plagued by disputes over US support for Kurdish fighters in Syria. Turkey's calls for the extradition of a US-based cleric and the indictment of a Turkish former minister in a US court.

But last week's arrest of a Turkish employee of the US consulate in Istanbul marked a fresh low. Turkey said the employee had links to US-based Muslim cleric Fetullah Gulen, blamed by Ankara for a failed military coup in July 2016. The US embassy in Ankara denounced those charges as baseless and announced on Sunday night it was halting all non-immigrant visa services in Turkey while it reassessed Turkey's commitment to the security of its missions and staff.

Within hours Turkey announced it was taking the same measures against US citizens. Yesterday, the Turkish foreign ministry summoned a US diplomat to urge the United States to lift the visa suspension, saying it was causing "unnecessary tensions". Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul said that if Washington had serious security concerns about its missions in Turkey, steps would be taken to address them.

But if it's an issue regarding the arrest of the consulate employee, then this is a decision the Turkish judiciary has made. "Gül told A Haber television: "Trying a Turkish citizen for a crime committed in Turkey is our right."

Turkish media reported that authorities had issued a detention warrant for a second US consulate worker. Reuters could not immediately confirm the reports, which also mentioned the employee's wife and child were being questioned by police. The diplomatic spat spooked investors. The lira dropped 2.4 percent and stood at 3,7030 against the dollar after being quoted

Nato moves to counter Russia

REUTERS, Bucharest

Nato launched a new multinational force in Romania yesterday to counter Russia along its eastern flank and to check a growing Russian presence in the Black Sea following the Kremlin's 2014 seizure of Crimea. Initially a small force relying on troops from 10 Nato countries including Italy, Canada as well as Romania, the land, air and sea deployments will complement about 900 US troops already in place.

"Our purpose is peace, not war," Romanian President Klaus Iohannis told the Nato Parliamentary Assembly in Bucharest. "We are not a threat for Russia. But we need dialogue from a strong position of defence and discouragement."

Catalan leaders under int'l, domestic pressure

AFP, Barcelona

Catalan leaders came under intense domestic and international pressure yesterday to halt plans to break away from Spain after the region's president repeated his threat to declare independence and the government warned it would act to block it.

The sides dug in as the clock ticked down to an evening session today in the regional parliament where separatists here called for an independence declaration, a plan that has raised concerns for stability in the European Union.

Political leaders urged Catalan separatists to back down and ease Spain's own political crisis in decades, with the leader of the opposition Socialist, Pedro Sanchez, urging them to "stop everything" and respect the law. And France said that Catalan independence would not receive international recognition. Hundreds of thousands of Spaniards rallied

Fight to drive IS from Raqqa nears end

AFP, Kobani

US-backed fighters say they are nearing the "final week" of their assault to drive the Islamic State group from one-time Syrian bastion Raqqa, as the jihadists' self-described caliphate crumbles.

Lost Raqqa would be the only in a series of crushing defeats for the extremist group, which once controlled large swathes of territory spanning the border between Syria and Iraq. Captured by IS in 2014, the northern city was the de facto Syrian capital of the jihadists' self-styled "caliphate" until the US-backed assault by the Syrian Democratic Forces, an alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters.

The militia has captured around 90 percent of Raqqa since entering the city in June, after months of fighting on encircle it. They are now advancing on IS-held districts from two fronts in the city's north and east, said commander Rajs Felat, who heads the "Wrath of the Euphrates" campaign. "If the two fronts meet, we can say we have entered the final week of our campaign to liberate Raqqa," Felat told AFP on the western outskirts of Raqqa on Sunday. "Within three to four days, we will be able to take the decision to begin the final campaign," she added. IS said fighting was still fierce along the front line, with IS using snipers, suicide bombers and reinforced positions in tunnels to hold up the SDF advance. The jihadists still hold Raqqa's national hospital, the nearby football stadium and surrounding residential neighbourhoods, including the infamous Al-Naim roundabout, where IS staged public beheadings and crucifixions.



UK, EU clash over who takes next Brexit step

AFP, Brussels

The EU and UK clashed yesterday after British Prime Minister Theresa May said the ball was in the EU's court as Brexit negotiations entered a critical fifth round.

Officials from both sides are meeting in Brussels, but chief EU negotiator Michel Barnier and British counterpart David Davis are not attending the start, underscoring low expectations for the talks.

This round of divorce discussions is the last before European leaders meet at a summit on October 19 to decide whether there is "sufficient progress" to move on to the trade talks that Britain desperately wants.

The European Commission roundly rejected May's assertion that it was up to the EU to take the initiative to advance the stalled talks, amid fears that her domestic political woes were threatening the negotiations.

"This is not exactly a ball game... but what

'Miracles' not expected before next summit: Juncker

AFP, Brussels

I can remind you of it there is a clear sequencing to these talks and there has been so far no solution found on step one, which is the divorce proceedings," the commission's chief spokesman Margaritis Schinas told a press conference.

"So the ball is entirely in the UK court for the rest to happen," he added. Even before the commission's latest intervention, the prognosis for the talks was grim, with European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker having warned that "miracles" would be needed this week to make enough progress to get a positive decision at the summit.

Brussels is particularly angling by the leadership crisis engulfing the British prime minister, facing a plot to oust her after a catastrophic, mishap-strewn speech at her Conservative party's conference.

The embattled May was set to tell the British parliament yesterday that she expects "leadership and flexibility" from the other 27 EU countries in the negotiations.



A supporter of the opposition National Super Alliance (NASA) coalition, runs from tear gas also policemen during a protest calling for the sacking of election board officials involved in August's cancelled presidential vote, in Nairobi, Kenya yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Jail with no food

Indian minister threatens parents for not sending kids to schools

PTI, Bhubaneswar

India's Uttar Pradesh minister Om Prakash Rajbhar has warned that parents who fail to send their wards to schools will be locked up in police stations without food and water.

In a video that has gone viral on social media, the 'Divyangjan' empowerment minister is reportedly seen addressing a party gathering and speaking vociferously against those who failed to send their kids to school.

The term 'divyangjan' is used to refer to physically-challenged persons. "I am going to enact a law of my choice. If wards of the poor do not go to school, their parents will be forced to sit in police stations for five days. They will neither be given food nor water," Rajbhar said at Rasmida here on Saturday.

Merkel deems migrant deal good for coalition talks

REUTERS, Berlin

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said yesterday an agreement within her conservative bloc on limiting migrants would help forge a new government coalition, but one of the key partners, the Greens, said it would not become policy.

Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU) agreed with their conservative CSU Bavarian allies on Sunday to limit to 200,000 the number of people Germany would accept per year on humanitarian grounds.

It was part of Merkel's drive to get the sister party on board so that she can start talks with the Greens and Free Democrats (FPD) on forming a "Jamnica" coalition - named for the black, green and yellow colours of the three blocs, which match the Caribbean island's flag.

It would not stop a coalition being discussed. Green co-leader Cem Ozdemir said, but stressed it would not be part of the formal coalition agreement if one is reached.

Merkel said her conservative bloc would begin exploratory talks next week on forming a coalition-first with the FDP and Greens separately on Oct. 18, and then in a three-way tie-up on Oct. 20.

Such a three-way tie-up is untested at national level but it is Merkel's only realistic option of forming a government as the centre-left Social Democrats - her previous coalition partners - insist they want to go into opposition.



Iran complying with 2015 nuclear deal

AFP, Rome

The UN atomic agency chief yesterday affirmed Iran's commitment to a 2015 nuclear deal, in a statement that came as US President Donald Trump said Tehran was not living up to the "spirit" of the agreement.

"I can state that the nuclear-related commitments undertaken by Iran under the (nuclear agreement) are being implemented," International Atomic Energy Agency chief Yukiya Amano said in prepared remarks during a conference in Rome.

An IAEA report released last month had also affirmed Iran's compliance with the programme, which froze some of Tehran's nuclear activities. Iran's stock of low-enriched uranium - used for peaceful purposes, but when further processed for a weapon - did not exceed the agreed limit of 300 kilos (661 pounds), the report said.

It added that Iran "has not pursued the construction of the Arak... reactor" - which could give it weapons-grade plutonium - and has not enriched uranium above low purity levels. The landmark deal was signed in July 2015 by Iran and five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States) plus Germany - establishing controls to prevent Tehran from developing an atomic bomb.

RUSSIA ELECTION

Putin pledges to prosecute vote violators

REUTERS, Moscow

The head of Russia's central election commission urged President Vladimir Putin yesterday to ensure all investigations into election violations detected in Russia last month were completed.

Russia voted in local elections in many regions on Sept 10 in what was widely seen as a dress rehearsal for next year's presidential vote, with Kremlin-backed candidates for regional parliaments and governorships performing strongly.

Putin is the strong favourite to win re-election in March, although he has so far declines to say if he will run.

On Sept 10, Reuters reporters observed the vote at six polling stations. In all six, they found discrepancies, of varying sizes, between the official vote tally and the number of voters the reporters counted.

"We have practically tied up many loose ends of that campaign, but small 'errors' still remain," Russian media quoted Ella Pamilova, head of the central election commission, as telling Putin at a meeting in the Kremlin.

"I really would like our prosecutor general's office and the investigative committee to bring the matter to completion in a number of cases," she said, referring to inquiries into local election violations.

She did not elaborate. "All orders will be given regarding this issue," Putin replied.