

CHINA'S COMMUNIST PARTY CONGRESS

Xi gives marathon speech

As Chinese leader Xi Jinping delivered his three-plus-hour speech at the Communist Party congress, delegates ranging from men in suits to military officers and former presidents dutifully turned every page as they read and listened to his words.

On the internet, government bureaus peppered social media with their favourite phrases from Xi's speech, while photos circulated of children watching yesterday's congress in classrooms.

The carefully orchestrated address was in keeping with the cult of personality that state media have crafted around the Chinese leader, who is expected to consolidate his already formidable power at the week-long conclave.

During his wide-ranging monologue about China's achievements and challenges ahead, Xi stood behind a glossy wooden lectern, resting both his palms on the stand and occasionally sipping from a white ceramic mug.

Jiang rises from the 'dead'

Rumoured to have died a few months ago, 91-year-old former Chinese president Jiang Zemin roused social media users yesterday by taking a prominent place at the ruling Communist Party's leadership Congress.

Proving that reports of his demise were greatly exaggerated, the former leader sat next to President Xi Jinping and stood for the national anthem as the twice-a-decade congress opened on national television in Beijing's vast Great Hall of the People.

Many Chinese internet users gushed over the elderly "Frog" - an affectionate nickname inspired by Jiang's wide grin and prominent bespectacled eyes - marvelling over the apparently still hale nonagenarian in postings sprinkled with frog emojis.

"I want to ask about his secret for longevity," said one posting on China's Twitter-like social network Weibo.



North Korea sends faint praise

North Korea issued an unusually short congratulatory message to China's Communist Party yesterday as President Xi Jinping opened its five-year congress amid strained ties between the two traditional allies.

China is North Korea's longtime ally and economic benefactor, saving the country from defeat during the 1950-53 Korean War.

But the relationship has soured in recent months over Pyongyang's growing weapons ambitions, which have seen Beijing agree to toughened United Nations sanctions.

In a three-paragraph message carried by the official KCNA news agency, the North's ruling Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) "warmly congratulated the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China and sent warm greetings to all the party members and other Chinese people".

"The Chinese people have made great progress in accomplishing the cause of building socialism... and we are greatly pleased over this," it added.



Displaced boys riding in a truck celebrate as they head back to their homes in Hawija, on the outskirts of Kirkuk, Iraq, yesterday. Kurdish Peshmerga forces have retreated to positions they held in northern Iraq in June 2014 in response to the Iraqi army advance into the region after a Kurdish independence referendum rejected by Baghdad.

HAMAS LINK

Israel raids Palestinian media firms

Israeli forces raided Palestinian media offices across the occupied West Bank overnight in what a military spokeswoman yesterday called a "large-scale operation" against incitement.

The raids on eight companies came hours after the Israeli government declared that it would not deal with an emerging Palestinian unity government that includes Hamas unless the Islamist group made radical changes.

Israeli officials said the raids targeted companies that provide services to Hamas television stations. Notices were posted saying the companies were to be closed for six months.

"Israeli army forces last night raided eight Palestinian production and media companies that provide services to Al-Aqsa and Al-Quds TV channels," the head of an Israeli defence ministry unit known as COGAT, Yoav Mordechai, wrote on Facebook, referring to Hamas channels.

"These two channels broadcast constant incitement against the state of Israel. It is no secret that these two channels inspired, several times, terrorists to go out and commit terrorist attacks against innocents."

Israeli officials provided no specific examples of the alleged incitement. At least one of the companies targeted says it provides various services to a range of local and international news media.

The Palestinian Authority said it condemned the raids "in the strongest terms".

"Occupation forces committed a blatant aggression and gross violation of all international laws when they stormed Palestinian cities and raided media offices," PA government spokesman Yusef al-Mahmoud said in a statement.

He said the measures were a "clear challenge to the international efforts, especially the American efforts, to seek an opportunity for compromise and lay the foundations for peace and security with the

Iran will shred nuclear deal if US quits it

Says Khamenei, dismisses Trump criticism

REUTERS, Ankara

Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said yesterday Tehran would stick to its 2015 nuclear accord with world powers as long as the other signatories respected it, but would "shred" the deal if Washington pulled out, state TV reported.

Khamenei spoke five days after US President Donald Trump adopted a harsh new approach to Iran by refusing to certify its compliance with the deal, reached under Trump's predecessor Barack Obama, and saying he might ultimately terminate it.

"I don't want to waste my time on answering the rants and whoppers of the brute (US) president," Khamenei said in a speech to students in Tehran quoted by state television.

"Trump's stupidity should not distract us from America's deceitfulness... If the US tears up the deal, we will shred it."

Trump's move put Washington at odds with other parties to the accord - Britain, France, Germany, Russia, China and the

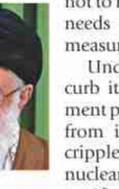
European Union - who say Washington cannot unilaterally cancel a multilateral accord enshrined by a UN resolution.

Khamenei, who has the final say on Iran's state matters, welcomed their support but said it was not sufficient.

"European states stressed their backing for the deal and condemned Trump... We welcomed this, but it is not enough to ask Trump not to rip up the agreement. Europe needs to stand against practical measures (taken) by America."

Under the deal, Iran agreed to curb its disputed uranium enrichment programme in return for relief from international sanctions that crippled its economy, and UN nuclear inspectors have repeatedly certified Tehran's compliance with the terms.

Trump accuses Iran of supporting terrorism and says the 2015 deal does not do enough to block its path to acquire nuclear weapons. Iran says it does not seek nuclear arms and in turn blames the growth of militant groups such as Islamic State on the policies of the United States and its regional allies.



Gulf crisis hurts fight against IS

Says Qatar's foreign minister

AFP, Dubai

The fight against the Islamic State group has suffered in the Gulf crisis, which has seen Doha isolated from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Qatar's foreign minister said yesterday.

The closure of Qatar's only land border and the airspace ban on Qatari planes "undermines the global efforts in countering" IS in Iraq and Syria, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani said in an interview with CNBC.

In June, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain announced a string of sanctions against Qatar, accusing Doha of supporting Islamist extremists. Qatar denies the accusations.

The wealthy Gulf emirate is home to the Al-Udeid air base, home to some 11,000 US soldiers and crucial in the fight against IS.

As part of the coalition's operations, numerous air strikes against IS targets in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan have been conducted from Al-Udeid, the largest US base in the region.

The foreign minister said Al-Udeid had also suffered under the air blockade as well as the Saudi decision to seal off Qatar's only land border -- a move that prompted Iran, along with Turkey, to step in and provide much-needed food imports.

The land border had been used for 90 percent of Qatar's food and medical supplies, with "part of it is going to the base", said Sheikh Mohammed.

Qatar's military planes which had been providing logistical support for the coalition are now "only allowed to use one path, which is toward the north -- toward Iran," he added.



A member of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) walks through a heavily damaged street leading to an Armenian church in Raqqa yesterday. The SDF fighters flushed jihadist holdouts from Raqqa's main hospital and municipal stadium, wrapping up a more than four-month offensive against what used to be the inner sanctum of IS's self-proclaimed "caliphate".

Spain asks Catalonia leader to act sensibly

Prepares to impose direct rule as deadline looms

REUTERS, Madrid

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy urged Catalonia's leader yesterday to "act sensibly" and renounce an independence bid to head off a threat by Madrid to impose direct rule, a prospect that has sent shock waves across the country.

Rajoy issued his appeal in the national parliament where he sought to win more political support for his threat to take direct control of Catalonia today unless the rebel regional government drops its plan to break away.

The move would need only a vote in Spain's upper house, where Rajoy's People's Party holds an absolute majority.

It would be the first time in Spain's four decades of democracy that direct rule has been imposed.

That prospect in the euro zone's fourth-largest economy has prompted hundreds of

Catalan firms to move their headquarters, led Madrid to cut economic growth forecasts and rattled the euro.

Regional leader Carles Puigdemont has already defied Madrid once this week, reiterating on Monday an ambiguous independence declaration he made last week and immediately suspended.

"I ask Puigdemont to act sensibly, in a balanced way, to put the interests of all citizens first," Rajoy said yesterday, mentioning both residents of the autonomous region, which produces a fifth of Spain's wealth and has its own language and culture, and the rest of the country.

Today's deadline is Puigdemont's last chance to abandon an independence declaration which Madrid has rejected as illegal. "It's not that difficult to reply to the question: has Catalonia declared independence? Because if it has, the government is obliged to act in one way, and if it has not we can talk here," Rajoy said in parliament.



NEWS IN brief

Taj Mahal finds place in UP gov't's calendar

PTI, Lucknow

The Taj Mahal, which has been in the crosshairs of controversy, has finally found a place in the 2018 calendar brought out by the Uttar Pradesh government. The 17th century architectural marvel is included in the month of July in 2018 calendar brought out by the state information department.

Merkel scrambles to form government

AFP, Berlin

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, weakened by poor election results, started talks yesterday to forge an unlikely governing coalition from a motley crew of parties that span the political spectrum. Merkel's conservatives launched exploratory talks with the liberal and FDP.

Explosion rocks police station in Sweden

AFP, Stockholm

A powerful explosion blew out the entrance to a police station in the southern Swedish city of Helsingborg early yesterday, an attack authorities linked to their fight against organised crime. The explosion occurred just after midnight in the city centre.

Greek police height rule is sexist: EU court

AFP, Luxembourg

The EU's top court yesterday ruled that Greek police had discriminated against women by setting a minimum height requirement for police cadets regardless of sex. The Greek police academy's rule that all applicants, male or female, must be at least 1.70 metres tall unfairly disadvantaged women, the EU court said.

Kenya election chief casts doubt on fair poll

Points to internal divisions, interference by parties

AFP, Nairobi

Kenya's polls chief yesterday cast doubt on his organisation's ability to hold a credible vote next week, pointing to internal divisions and interference by both major parties.

In the latest bombshell to hit the presidential election, Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) chief Wafula Chebukati lambasted political leaders and his staff just hours after another commissioner announced her resignation after fleeing to New York.

"Let me be very clear that this is a yellow card to both sides. I will not tolerate the interference in the commission anymore," said Chebukati in a no-holds-barred statement in which he slammed the "arrogance and narcissism of our political class".

"Political leaders who are supposed to build the nation have become the greatest threat to the peace and stability of the

nation."

Kenya's are due to go to the polls on October 26 for a second time, after the Supreme Court last month overturned the result of the initial election due to "irregularities" in the counting process, and mismanagement by poll officials.

The ruling was a rare victory for veteran opposition leader Raila Odinga, who claimed the poll was rigged in favour of President Uhuru Kenyatta, and seen as a sign of Kenya's mature democracy and institutions.

However the decision has been followed by acrimony, legal battles and confusion over how to carry out a credible new election in the constitutionally mandated 60-day period. Odinga last week announced he was withdrawing from the race, arguing the move would legally force the IEBC to begin the whole process from scratch, which would allow more time for deep reforms.



Trump denies making soldier's widow cry

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump told the widow of a soldier killed during an ambush in Niger "he knew what he was signing up for," according to a lawmaker who accused him of insensitivity.

Frederica Wilson, a Democratic congresswoman from Florida, said she listened in to part of a group phone call between the president and the grieving family of Sergeant La David Johnson.

"I didn't hear the whole phone call, but I did hear him say, 'I'm sure he knew what he was signing up for, but it still hurts,'" she told CNN.

Trump denied making the comments, tweeting yesterday: "Democrat Congresswoman totally fabricated what I said to the wife of a soldier who died in action (and I have proof). Sad!"

Johnson was among four US soldiers killed earlier this month in Niger, where Islamic State fighters have established a presence.

The Miami native's body was returned home Tuesday afternoon, according to the Miami Herald. He is survived by his wife Myshia Johnson, who is pregnant with the couple's third child. After the phone call, Myshia "was crying, she broke down. And she said 'he didn't even know his name,'" added Wilson, referring to Trump.

Trump had faced criticism for not contacting the families of the soldiers killed in Niger right away.

Ancient Egypt brought down by volcanoes!

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Ancient Egypt may have fallen in part because of riots caused by climate change and volcanoes, according to a new paper.

The new study paints a picture of the ancient civilisation riven by droughts and disasters. It looked at the impact of the severe events of ancient Egypt, finding that they caused stress on its economy and ability to fight wars.

In doing so, the research threatens to completely upend our understanding of the effects of climate change on early societies, according to the researchers behind it. Around 70 percent of the world currently lives in regions that similarly rely on monsoons for their crops - and could fall victim to the same troubles.

"Ancient Egyptians depended almost exclusively on Nile summer flooding brought by the summer monsoon in east Africa to grow their crops," said Joseph Manning, lead author on the paper and the William K & Marilyn Milton Simpson professor of history and classics at Yale, in a statement. "In years influenced by volcanic eruptions, Nile flooding was generally diminished, leading to social stress that could trigger unrest and have other political and economic consequences."