

NEWS IN brief

Pak ex-PM's graft trial adjourned

PTI, Islamabad
Pakistan's ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday appeared before an anti-graft court which adjourned till November 7 the hearing of corruption cases against him, his daughter and son-in-law spiralling from the Panama Papers scandal. Sharif, 67, and some of his family members are facing charges relating to their ownership of properties in London.

ICC prosecutors seek to open Afghan probe

REUTERS, The Hague
The prosecutor of the International Criminal Court yesterday said she would seek approval to open a formal investigation into allegations of war crimes in Afghanistan. Fatou Bensouda said in a statement that there is "reasonable basis to believe" war crimes and crimes against humanity were committed.

Twitter employee takes down Trump account

REUTERS, Washington
US President Donald Trump's @realDonaldTrump Twitter account was deactivated by a Twitter Inc employee who was leaving the company on Thursday and was down for 11 minutes before it was restored, the social media company said. The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

New species of orangutan found

AFP, Jakarta
A new species of orangutan has been discovered in the remote jungles of Indonesia, immediately becoming the world's most endangered great ape, researchers said Thursday. "It's the first declaration of a new great ape species in about 100 years," said Ian Singleton, co-author of the study and director of Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Programme.



Iraqi forces and members of the Hashed al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation units) advance towards the city of al-Qaim, in Iraq's western Anbar province near the Syrian border as they fight against remnant pockets of Islamic State group jihadists yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Twin Iraq, Syria attacks as IS loses last city

AFP, Deir Ezzor
Syrian troops yesterday retook the last major city where the Islamic State group had a presence as Iraqi forces punched into the jihadists' last urban bastion across the border.

The simultaneous assaults on Deir Ezzor in eastern Syria and Al-Qaim in western Iraq dealt fresh blows to IS in its former heartland, leaving Albu Kamal, on the Syrian side of the border, the last town of note under its full control.

The jihadist group that once laid claim to a self-styled "caliphate" spanning swathes of Syria and Iraq has seen its proto-state crumble in recent months under the pressure of multiple offensives.

In October, it lost its one-time de facto Syrian capital Raqa after an assault of more than four months waged by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-Arab alliance.

Yesterday, Syrian state media announced that the army, backed by Russian firepower,

had recaptured all of Deir Ezzor city, in the oil-rich east of the country.

"The army announces full control of Deir Ezzor city," state television said in a breaking news alert, citing sources on the ground.

State news agency SANA also reported that Deir Ezzor had been "fully liberated."

IS has now been driven from most of its strongholds in Deir Ezzor. Its last major position is the town of Albu Kamal, though it also holds a string of smaller towns and villages and at least one oil field, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor.

Iraqi forces entered Al-Qaim yesterday, military commanders said, unleashing a barrage of artillery fire along with Iraqi and US-led coalition airstrikes.

Troops from the army and the elite Counter Terrorism Service "have started the assault on the centre of Al-Qaim," Staff Major General Noman Abed al-Zobai, the commander of the 7th Division, told AFP from the scene.

Syrian army, backed by Russian firepower, retakes Deir al-Zour

Iraqi forces recapture Al-Qaim, which lie on the border with Syria

PNG STAND-OFF

New Zealand offers to take 150 refugees

REUTERS, Wellington

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said she would offer to take 150 refugees held by Australia when she meets counterpart Malcolm Turnbull on Sunday, promising a breather from a stand-off at a Papua New Guinea detention site.

For more than three days, about 600 men have barricaded themselves inside in a camp on Manus Island, defying efforts by Australia and Papua New Guinea to shut it, despite having no food or running water.

New Zealand yesterday became the first country to publicly offer to intercede, when Arden said she would offer to take 150 refugees from Australia's two remote Pacific detention centres at the meeting with Turnbull in Sydney.

Spain issues EU arrest order for Catalan leader

AGENCIES

A Spanish judge issued an EU arrest warrant for Catalonia's deposed separatist leader yesterday after he failed to appear for questioning over the region's independence drive, a court statement said.

Spanish prosecutors want to charge Carles Puigdemont, who is in Belgium, with rebellion, sedition and misuse of public funds. Eight of his ministers were put behind bars on Thursday pending a possible trial.

Also yesterday, Puigdemont said he was ready to run as a candidate in snap regional elections next month after his government was fired by Madrid for declaring independence.

"I'm ready to be a candidate," Puigdemont told RTBF television in Belgium, where he is currently holed up after leaving Catalonia at the weekend. "I want to send a message to our people."

He added, "I will face justice, but (only) true justice... I told my lawyers to tell the Belgian judiciary I am completely ready to cooperate." Madrid last month dissolved Catalonia's

parliament after regional lawmakers voted to declare independence from Spain off the back of a banned referendum on the issue.

New regional elections are set for December 21.

The detention of the secessionist leaders and Puigdemont's flight to Belgium have given a new boost to the secessionist camp after cracks appeared in its ranks.

Thousands of people staged pro-independence protests on Thursday night in several Catalan towns, and parties forming the current coalition Junts Pel Si (Together For Yes) are pushing to run again on a joint ticket at the election.

An opinion poll published on Tuesday showed Junts Pel Si would win the December election with 35.2 percent if the vote was held today and would likely reach a parliamentary majority if it stuck with its current pact with far-left party CUP.

Facing such a prospect, the Spanish government said yesterday it would have no option but to open talks within the law with those who held a majority.

CATALONIA CRISIS



IS group claims 'soldier' in NYC truck attack

AFP, Washington

The attacker who killed eight people in a truck rampage in New York on Tuesday was a "soldier" of the Islamic State group, the jihadists said Thursday, according to a US-based monitoring group.

"One of the soldiers of the Islamic State attacked a number of crusaders on a street in New York City," said an article in the latest issue of the group's al-Naba weekly newspaper, according to the SITE Intelligence Group.

Sayfullo Saipov, 29, an immigrant from Uzbekistan, is charged with terrorism offences after allegedly driving a rented pickup truck down a mile-long stretch of bike path in Manhattan.

The charging document says he confessed to acting in the name of IS and "felt good about what he had done," even demanding to hang an IS flag in his hospital room.

Police said he appeared to have followed very closely "the instructions" that IS put out to its followers on social media.

He was allegedly in possession of three knives, thousands of IS propaganda images and dozens of videos that showed IS fighters killing prisoners.

The picture of Saipov that has emerged is of a suspect who only radicalized after moving to the United States in 2010.

"The grace of Allah, the operation instilled fear in crusader America, prompting them to increase security measures and intensify actions against immigrants to America," IS said in the al-Naba article, according to SITE.

After a gunman shot dead 58 people last month in Las Vegas, IS claimed the killer was also one of its "soldiers" but the FBI said it found no such links with the accused, Stephen Paddock.

Trump turns on Kushner as Russia probe intensifies

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Donald Trump is reportedly turning on White House adviser Jared Kushner as the prospect of his impeachment becomes a real possibility, it has been claimed.

The US President is reported to be blaming his son-in-law for certain decisions that led to Robert Mueller being appointed to investigate claims of Russian collusion in the 2016 election campaign.

Specifically, he questioned his role in the firings of Michael Flynn and James Comey, sources told Vanity Fair.

Former Trump campaign aide Sam Nunberg told the publication Kushner was the "worst political adviser in the White House in modern history", claiming: "I'm only saying publicly what everyone says behind the scenes at Fox News, in conservative media, and the Senate and Congress."

It comes just days after Mueller issued

indictments for two of Trump's former campaign staffers, reportedly causing mass panic among Trump's inner circle.

"The walls are closing in," one senior Republican close to the White House told the New York Post. "Everyone is freaking out."

The indictments included charges against Trump's former campaign manager, Paul Manafort, and former adviser George Papadopoulos.

Nunberg said: "Here's what Manafort's indictment tells me: Mueller is going to go over every financial dealing of Jared Kushner and the Trump Organization."

Trump continued to dismiss the indictments as "fake news" after their release, and attempted to shift the focus to Hillary Clinton's dealings with Russia.

However, a majority of voters said in a recent opinion poll they did not believe the Russia story was fake, and supported Mueller's investigation into the Trump campaign.



A Palestinian protester sets tires ablaze during clashes with Israeli troops, in the West Bank village of Kofr Qadom, near the West Bank city of Nablus yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Cockatoos cost Aussie broadband network

REUTERS, Sydney

Australia's government-built \$36 billion broadband network, already under attack from underwhelmed customers, has found a new and formidable enemy - cockatoos are chewing through cables across the country.

Repairing the damage wrought on the broadband system, including replacing steel-braid wires that the pesky parrots have gnawed, has already cost A\$80,000 (\$61,500), network builder NBN Co said yesterday.

The company estimates the bill could rise sharply as more damage is uncovered and more cables are rolled out in the national telecommunications infrastructure project, which is not due to be completed until around 2021.

"They are constantly sharpening their beaks and as a result will attack and tear apart anything they come across," said NBN Co project manager Chedryian Bresland in a blog post on the company's website yesterday.

"Unfortunately, they've developed a liking to our cables... these birds are unstoppable when in a swarm." Yellow-crested cockatoos are prolific in Australia and well-known for their voracious appetites for everything from fruit crops to wooden window frames.

US bomber drills over S Korea raise tensions

REUTERS, Seoul

Two US strategic bombers conducted drills over South Korea, the US Air Force said, raising tensions with North Korea just days before President Donald Trump visits the region seeking to shut down Pyongyang's nuclear program.

News of the Thursday's drills was first reported by North Korean state news agency KCNA yesterday, which said the exercises involving South Korean and Japanese fighter jets were a "surprise nuclear strike drill".

"The reality clearly shows that the gangster-like US imperialists are the very one who is aggravating the situation of the Korean peninsula and seeking to ignite a nuclear war," KCNA said.

Trump arrives in Asia on Sunday, beginning his first trip to the region as president in Japan before heading to South Korea and China, then Vietnam and the Philippines. A series of missile tests by North Korea

and its sixth and largest nuclear test, defying UN Security Council resolutions, have fueled the most critical international challenge of Trump's presidency.

China, under US pressure to do more to rein in its ally, yesterday stressed that it had been enforcing UN resolutions and reiterated its opposition to the use of force.

"Over the long term, China has made unremitting efforts to appropriately resolve the peninsula nuclear issue and promote dialogue and negotiation between all parties," Vice Foreign Minister Zheng Zuguang told reporters at a briefing in Beijing.

"You can say we've made our greatest effort."

The goal of Trump's visit will be to increase international support for efforts to deprive North Korea of resources as leverage to coerce it to give up nuclear weapons, US officials said.

North Korea says exercises a surprise nuclear strike drill

Drills come days before Trump arrives in Asia

Indian cops 'mocked' gang rape survivor

AFP, New Delhi

Four Indian police officers were suspended yesterday after it emerged they had refused to help a woman who had just been gang raped, mocked her and accused her of inventing her story.

The 19-year-old student, who cannot be named, went to police after she was repeatedly raped by four men outside a railway station in the central Indian city of Bhopal on Tuesday.

Her family later alleged police had "mocked" them and repeatedly turned them away when they tried to lodge a complaint, according to Santosh Kumar Singh, deputy inspector general of police in Bhopal.

He said the officers had accused the woman of telling a "filmi" story, using an Indian English word derived from the movie industry to imply that she was exaggerating.

"Three inspector rank officers have been suspended and one superintendent of police has been removed from his posting for dereliction of duty and misbehaviour," Singh told AFP by phone.

India has a grim record of sexual violence. Government data for 2015 shows 34,651 rapes were recorded, but campaigners say the true figure is likely to be much higher given the social stigma that still surrounds such cases.

India strengthened its laws on sexual violence after the fatal gang-rape of a Delhi student five years ago caused global outrage, but attacks remain widespread and enforcement is patchy.