

NEWS IN
brief

Scam-hit Pak finance minister on sick leave

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's finance minister Ishaq Dar has gone on indefinite medical leave amid an ongoing corruption scandal, piling more pressure on the beleaguered government ahead of elections due next year. Dar came under the radar of an inquiry sparked by the Panama Papers leak last year which centred on discrepancies between the income of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and his lavish lifestyle, particularly his family properties in London.

Italy rescues 1,100 migrants in one day

AFP, Rome

About 1,100 migrants from the Libyan coast were rescued from the sea on Wednesday, including a woman who gave birth in a rubber boat, the Italian coastguard and monitors said. They were recovered from 10 rubber boats and a small wooden boat in a rescue operation that involved a coastguard vessel, an Italian Navy ship and NGOs. Some 114,600 migrants have landed in Italy so far this year, a figure that is down 32 percent year on year.

Notorious gang 'behead man' near Washington

AFP, Washington

An ultra-violent Latino street gang named MS-13 that President Donald Trump has vowed to wipe out beheaded a man and cut out his heart before burying him in a park near the US capital, reports said Wednesday. The victim, who has not yet been identified, was stabbed more than 100 times in the attack in Wheaton, Maryland just outside Washington DC. Authorities have so far arrested Miguel Angel Lopez-Abrego, 19, and an alleged member of the gang, on first-degree murder charges. Other suspects are being sought.

PNG starts removing refugees

AFP, Sydney

Papua New Guinea police raided a shuttered Australian detention camp yesterday, removing dozens of refugees in an effort to end a stand-off that has drawn global attention to Canberra's tough asylum-seeker policies.

Hundreds of men sent to the remote camp on PNG's Manus Island have refused to leave the site for new, PNG-run centres since Australia closed it on October 31.

The detainees said they were fearful of hostility from locals outside the camp, and said the new centres were not fully operational, with a lack of security, sufficient water or electricity.

Over the past three weeks only around 200 out of approximately 600 men held in Manus have agreed to leave voluntarily for three nearby transition centres, with the others insisting they should be resettled in third countries.

Rights group Amnesty International said the refugees' safety fears were "well-founded", adding that some had previously been "attacked and seriously injured" by locals who have made clear they do not want the men on Manus".

Yesterday, police moved in and took 50 men to alternative camps, PNG Police Commissioner Gari Baki said.

"We are doing the best we can and the refugees cannot continue to be stubborn and defiant," Baki said in a statement yesterday afternoon.

MANUS REFUGEE CAMP

seekers.

"UNHCR has been given assurances that excessive force has not been used, but cannot independently confirm as staff have not been granted full access to the facility," the refugee agency said in a statement.

"UNHCR reminds Australia of its obligation to take full responsibility and provide effective protection, safety and lasting solutions for all refugees and asylum-seekers in cooperation with the Papua New Guinean authorities", it quoted an official as saying.

Baki had said earlier this week that no force would be used.



Indigenous people from several tribes protest against the new rules of demarcation of indigenous territories, in Brasilia, yesterday. The new law underway in the Brazilian National Congress increases the difficulty to map new indigenous territories and reduces several areas already demarcated.

PHOTO: AFP



A demonstrator drags a burning tyre during a day-long strike to protest against the killing of Sudip Datta Bhowmik, a local journalist, who according to local media was shot dead by a Tripura State Rifles trooper on Tuesday, in Agartala, India, yesterday. Indian police have arrested a senior army officer for the murder of the journalist shot dead while investigating allegations of financial fraud against him.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Blast kills at least eight in Afghanistan

AFP, Jalalabad

A suicide bomber struck at a crowd of people in the eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar yesterday killing at least eight, officials said, in an attack that underscored worsening security.

The bomber approached the crowd of dozens on foot in provincial capital Jalalabad as they were demonstrating in support of a local police commander who had been sacked and calling for his reinstatement, provincial spokesman Attaullah Khogyani said.

"Unfortunately, eight people were killed, all of them civilians," he said.

A further 15 people including children were also wounded in the explosion, he added.

The casualty toll was also confirmed by provincial health director Najib Kamawal, who said some of those wounded were in a serious condition.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack.

Yemen ports to reopen

Says Saudi-led coalition over humanitarian catastrophe fears

AFP, Riyadh

The Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen said Wednesday it would reopen a key Red Sea port and Sanaa airport to aid, after a more than two-week blockade following a missile attack on Riyadh.

The coalition said it would reopen Hodeida port to receive "urgent humanitarian and relief materials" and Sanaa airport to UN aircraft from midday on Thursday (0900 GMT).

It did not specify when or if it would ease a blockade on commercial traffic.

Hodeida, which is controlled by Houthi rebels backed by Saudi Arabia's arch-rival Iran, is a key conduit for much-needed food and medicine imports to Yemen.

The coalition imposed a total blockade of Yemen's ports and airports two days after the Houthi fired a missile at Saudi Arabia on November 4.

The missile was intercepted near Riyadh's King Khalid International Airport, sparking a war of words between Tehran and Riyadh, which accused Iran of "direct aggression" and supplying arms to the Houthi.



ground," UN spokesman Farhan Haq told reporters at UN headquarters in New York.

"Of course, if that were to happen that would be a very welcome and critically important development."

Aid group Save the Children welcomed the coalition's announcement but said opening the port and airport

would be "nowhere near enough to avert a potential famine in Yemen".

"Humanitarian relief only provides a small portion of the essential goods needed in Yemen -- commercial supplies are critical to feed the population and keep basic services running," it said.

UN aid chief Mark Lowcock called on November 8 for the blockade to be lifted, warning that Yemen would otherwise face "the largest famine the world has seen for decades".

The Houthi government on Tuesday announced the country's main international airport was fully functional again a week after a Saudi-led air strike destroyed the facility's navigation system.

The airport had been open to only select humanitarian flights.

Allied with Yemeni strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh, the Iran-backed Houthi rebels control the capital Sanaa along with much of northern Yemen.

In 2015, Saudi Arabia and its allies joined the Yemeni government's fight against the rebels.

More than 8,750 people have since been killed.

India outraged at release of Mumbai attack suspect

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday said it was outraged at Pakistan's release of an Islamist leader accused of organising the 2008 deadly Mumbai attacks that nearly brought the nuclear-armed nations to the brink of war.

A Pakistani court on Wednesday ordered the release of firebrand cleric Hafiz Saeed, who carries a \$10 million US bounty, after Islamabad failed to back the charges of terrorism with evidence.

Saeed, who heads the banned charity group Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), was put under house arrest in January following increased US pressure on Islamabad to rein-in militant groups.

"India, as indeed the entire international community, is outraged that a self-confessed and a UN proscribed terrorist is allowed to walk free and continue with his evil agenda," Raveesh Kumar, India's foreign ministry spokesman, told reporters at a weekly briefing in New Delhi.

"It also appears to be an attempt by the Pakistani system to mainstream proscribed terrorists," the spokesman added.

Kumar said the radical leader's release shows that Pakistan continues with its policy to

support and shield non-state actors who are involved in militant activities in the region.

Saeed was declared a global terrorist by the US and the United Nations over his alleged role in the attacks that left nearly 166 people dead, including Western nationals.

JuD, which has operated freely across Pakistan and is popular for its charity work, is considered by the US and India to be a front for Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the militant group blamed for the attacks.

US President Donald Trump in August angrily accused Islamabad of harbouring "agents of chaos" while Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has said too many extremists are finding sanctuary inside Pakistan.

New Delhi has long seethed at Pakistan's failure either to hand over or prosecute those accused of planning the attacks, while Islamabad has alleged that India failed to give it crucial evidence.

It is the third time that the cleric has been released by courts after Islamabad briefly detained him twice in the aftermath of the attacks in November 2008.

Saeed for decades has publicly espoused ending India's rule of the disputed Himalayan Kashmir region, with India accusing him of sending armed militants to the valley.



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (C) with Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe (L) as his wife Maithree Wickremesinghe (R) looks on before a meeting at Hyderabad House in New Delhi, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

PALESTINIAN RECONCILIATION NEGOTIATIONS

Little progress made in Cairo

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian leaders left the Egyptian capital Cairo yesterday after fresh unity talks that resulted in calls for elections but provided little clarity about a key transfer of power in Gaza next week.

Analysts said a three-page document agreed between the 13 largest Palestinian political parties Wednesday offered little substantive change, with no steps agreed on key points of difference.

They said questions would now be raised over the fate of an Egyptian-brokered reconciliation agreement signed last month between the two largest parties, Hamas and Fatah.

Under that deal, Islamists Hamas are supposed to hand over power in the Gaza Strip to the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority by December 1.

Significant issues remain, however,

including the future of Hamas's armed wing and punitive measures taken by Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas against Gaza.

Wednesday's statement provided few further details, though it called for Abbas to organise elections by the end of 2018 and backed the October 12 Fatah-Hamas agreement.

Hamas has controlled Gaza since seizing the coastal enclave from Fatah in 2007, and its armed wing has since fought three wars with Israel.

In a sign of dissatisfaction, a senior Hamas figure who was in Cairo said Wednesday the talks had resulted in "no practical steps" forward.

In a video published online, Salah Bardawil said Israel and the United States had put pressure on Fatah not to implement reconciliation, and it was therefore unwilling to make concessions to Hamas.

Israel and the United States have

declared they will not accept a Palestinian unity government including Hamas unless it disarms.

He later backtracked, claiming he was emotional and was not aware he was being filmed when he spoke.

Measures taken by Abbas to isolate Hamas in recent months, including reducing the subsidy for electricity supplied to Gaza, have also been sources of contention.

Sources within the delegations said Fatah was pressed to drop the sanctions as an indication of good will, but it refused.

Analysts expressed concern that hopes for unity were fading.

"They didn't solve a single issue, even the simplest," said Najeel Sharab, professor of political affairs at Azhar University in Gaza.

"The statement by Bardawil, despite his retreating from it, is a strong signal of disagreement."