

NEWS IN brief

China won't allow N Korea war

Xi tells his South Korean counterpart as Beijing, Seoul eye warmer ties strained over THAAD deployment

Migrants stranded on rocks off Turkey

AFP, Istanbul
Turkish coast guards were trying to rescue dozens of migrants yesterday stranded on rocks off western Turkey when their Greece-bound vessel hit trouble. The inflatable boat, carrying 68 migrants, started to sink in the waters of the Aegean off Dikili, the official Anadolu news agency reported.

China dissident's widow sends desperate letter

AFP, Beijing
Friends of the late Chinese democracy advocate and Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo voiced concern about his widow's health yesterday after she sent a letter showing signs of deep depression. Poet Liu Xia, 56, has been under police watch without charges since her husband was awarded Nobel Peace Prize in 2010.

Sweden to raise earliest retirement age to 64

AFP, Stockholm
Sweden said yesterday it would raise the earliest retirement age from 61 to 64 in order to secure future pensions, following a broad cross-party agreement. The increase in the retirement age will be carried out in stages, and completed in 2026.

Norway first country to switch off FM radio

AFP, Oslo
Norway on Wednesday completed its transition to digital radio, becoming the first country in the world to shut down national broadcasts of its FM radio network despite some grumblings. The move has however been met with some criticism linked to technical incidents. In addition, radio users have complained about the cost of having to buy new receivers or adapters, usually priced around 100 to 200 euros (\$117 to \$235).

REUTERS, Beijing
War must not be allowed to break out on the Korean peninsula and the issue must be resolved through talks, Chinese President Xi Jinping said yesterday, while UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned of the danger of "sleepwalking" into conflict.

Xi made his comments to visiting South Korean President Moon Jae-in just days after US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson offered to begin direct talks with North Korea without pre-conditions.

But the White House said on Wednesday that no negotiations could be held with North Korea until it improved its behaviour. The White House has declined to say whether President Donald Trump, who has taken a tougher rhetorical line toward North Korea, approved Tillerson's overture.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Tillerson's offer of direct contacts with North Korea was "a very good signal", while warning that a US strike on the North would have catastrophic consequences.

North Korea tested its most advanced intercontinental ballistic missile on Nov 29, which it said could put all of the United States within range, in defiance of international pressure and UN sanctions.

While South Korea and China share the goal of getting North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons and stop testing increasingly sophisticated long-range missiles, the two have not seen eye-to-eye on how to achieve this.

Meeting in Beijing's Great Hall of the People, Xi

told Moon that the goal of denuclearising the Korean peninsula must be stuck to, and that war and chaos cannot be allowed to happen, state media said.

"The peninsula issue must in the end be resolved via dialogue and consultation," Xi was cited as saying.



China and South Korea have an important shared interest in maintaining peace and stability, and China is willing to work with South Korea to prevent war and promote talks, Xi added.

China will support North and South Korea to improve relations as this was good for easing tension, he said.

Xi's warm tone followed nearly a year of tense

relations between the two countries. China has been furious about the deployment of the US-made Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-missile system in South Korea, saying its powerful radar can see far into China and will do nothing to ease tension with North Korea.

China calls for issue to be resolved through talks

UN chief warns against risk of 'sleepwalking' into conflict

Putin: US strike on North could have serious result

White House says North Korea must improve behaviour before talks

China and South Korea agreed in late October that they would normalise exchanges and move past the dispute over THAAD, which froze trade and business exchanges, and Moon has been keen to put the dispute behind them.

Xi reiterated China's position on THAAD and said he hoped South Korea would continue to "appropriately handle" the issue.

Guterres, speaking to reporters in Tokyo after meeting Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, said Security Council resolutions on North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes must be fully implemented by Pyongyang and other countries.

"It is very clear that the Security Council resolutions must be fully implemented, first of all by North Korea, but by all other countries whose role is crucial to ... achieve the result we all aim at, which is the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula," Guterres said.

He added that Security Council unity was also vital "to allow for the possibility of diplomatic engagement" that would allow denuclearisation to take place.

"The worst possible thing that could happen is for us all to sleepwalk into a war that might have very dramatic circumstances," Guterres said.

He said he expected a meeting of the UN Security Council today would deliver a strong expression of unity and the need for diplomacy to resolve the issue. Japan says now is the time to keep up maximum pressure on North Korea, not start talks on its missile and nuclear programmes.

China and Russia, however, have welcomed Tillerson's overture.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said a strike on North Korea by the United States would have catastrophic consequences and that he hoped to work with Washington eventually to resolve the crisis on the Korean peninsula.



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi shows his ink-marked finger after casting his vote outside a polling station during the last phase of Gujarat state assembly election in Ahmedabad, India, yesterday. Inset, an elderly woman is carried in a blanket after casting her vote at a polling station in Ahmedabad.



Suu Kyi's Dublin award revoked

AFP, London

Dublin councillors on Wednesday voted to revoke an award given to Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi to protest her handling of violence against Rohingya Muslims in her country, Irish media reported.

The vast majority of councillors backed the move to revoke the Freedom of the City of Dublin award, with 59 votes in favour, two against and one abstention, broadcaster RTE said.

The decision comes after more than 620,000 of Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim minority fled across the border to Bangladesh, escaping a crackdown by the army which the refugees have said involved murder, rape and arson.

Suu Kyi has faced international criticism for her apparent failure to defend the Rohingya minority; a dramatic fall from grace for the Nobel Peace laureate who spent years under house arrest in Myanmar.

"The daily oppression of the Rohingya people cannot be allowed to continue and if the revoking of this honour contributes to the pressure on the Burmese (Myanmar) government to respect their fellow citizens it is to be welcomed," councillor Cieran Perry said, quoted in the Irish Independent.

The city council's decision comes a month after musician Bob Geldof returned his own freedom award at Dublin City Hall, as a protest against Suu Kyi.

"I would be a hypocrite now were I to share honours with one who has become at best an accomplice to murder, complicit in ethnic cleansing and a handmaiden to genocide," Geldof had said.

SECOND PHASE OF ASSEMBLY POLLS IN GUJARAT

Congress says EC 'biased'

TNN, New Delhi

The Congress yesterday said PM Narendra Modi violated elections' model code of conduct when he rode the streets standing in an open vehicle and waved to crowds after casting his vote in Gujarat. It also called the Election Commission (EC) "BJP's puppet".

The BJP retorted saying the Congress is petty for calling the EC "names".

Gujarat's second and final voting phase is underway, even as the Congress makes its allegations about what it calls Modi's "roadshow" yesterday. And the model code of conduct stipulates that no one is allowed to campaign for 48 hours before polling.

"PM Modi's road show after casting vote is a clear case of violation of the model code of conduct," said Congress spokesman Ashok Gehlot.

"It was a roadshow and they were waving (EC) sent a notice to Congress president Rahul Gandhi for giving interviews to television channels in the

proscribed code of conduct period.

The Congress called the EC's decision biased and said yesterday's a "sad day" as the EC has "abdicated its responsibility".

"EC it seems is working under pressure from PM and PMO. It is taking orders from BJP office and PM, its actions are shameful" said Gehlot, referring to Modi and the Prime Minister's Office.

A poll of early exit polls shows BJP set to retain Gujarat, win Himachal Pradesh

The Congress also asked why the EC didn't take action against the BJP when they released their election manifesto a day before the second phase of voting in Gujarat. In addition, the fact that Modi spoke at a business event on Wednesday, was also ignored by the EC, said the Congress.

"FICCI platform was used as a polit-

ical platform," said the Congress about Modi's address Wednesday at an event of the Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

The EC had directed Gujarat's chief electoral officer on Wednesday to file FIRs against media channels that telecast Rahul's interview across poll-bound districts in violation of the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

The BJP is set to retain Gujarat and win Himachal Pradesh, according to predictions by various exit polls yesterday.

Last month, Himachal Pradesh concluded voting on November 9 and recorded its highest turnout at 74 percent.

A poll of four exit polls - TOI OnlineCVoter, Times Now-VMR, India Today-Axis, and ABP News-CSDS - predicts 108 seats for BJP in Gujarat, which is 17 more than the half-way mark. The Congress, according to the exit polls, will show an improved performance in the state, but still not good enough to dislodge the 22-year rule of the BJP.

Press freedom shrinking in Myanmar: UN chief

REUTERS, Tokyo

The arrest of two Reuters journalists in Yangon this week was a signal that press freedom is shrinking in Myanmar and the international community must do all it can to get them released, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said yesterday.

Guterres said his main concern over Myanmar was the "dramatic violations of human rights" during a military crackdown in Rakhine State that forced more than 600,000 Rohingya Muslims to flee the country for southern Bangladesh, and the arrest of the journalists was probably related.

"It is clearly a concern in relation to the erosion of press freedom in the country," he told a news conference in Tokyo, referring to the detention of Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo,

who had been working on stories about the strife in Rakhine State.

"And probably the reason why these journalists were arrested is because they were reporting on what they have seen in relation to this massive human tragedy," he added.

Myanmar's Ministry of Information said in a statement on Wednesday that the Reuters journalists and two policemen faced charges under the British colonial-era Official Secrets Act. The 1923 law carries a maximum prison sentence of 14 years.

The reporters "illegally acquired information with the intention to share it with foreign media", the ministry said in its statement, which was accompanied by a photo of the two reporters in handcuffs.

ARREST OF TWO REUTERS JOURNALISTS



Reuters journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Mourners leave after attending the Grenfell Tower National Memorial Service at St Paul's Cathedral in London yesterday, to mark the six month anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire. Grenfell Tower fire killed 71 people, with most survivors still awaiting permanent housing.

Pakistan tightens control on foreign charities

Orders several aid groups to leave the country

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has ordered a host of international aid groups to wrap up their operations in 60 days, a global NGO said Wednesday, as officials tighten controls on foreign charities in the country.

Authorities have moved to force overseas-funded aid organisations to re-register under stricter rules that came into force two years ago, leading several to lose their licenses.

"We believe that we are one of more than 20 organisations whose registrations have been rejected," Jonathan Birchall, the lead Communications Officer for Open Society Foundations told AFP.

The organisation, which is funded by the US billionaire philanthropist George Soros and runs a raft of programmes from education to governance, had earlier issued a statement seeking clarification from the

interior ministry over the move. International charity ActionAid, which supports a range of projects from livelihoods to women's rights, has also said it is being forced to leave Pakistan.

The organisation "has been given 60 days to close all operations in the country", it said in a statement released last week, after its application to register under Pakistan's new rules for international non-governmental organisations was declined.

Pakistan officials declined to comment when contacted by AFP.

In September, the medical aid group Doctors Without Borders (MSF) said it had been ordered to close its facilities in a militancy-wracked tribal district, leaving thousands without healthcare.

While militancy and natural disasters plague parts of Pakistan, the country has shown increasing suspicion of foreign aid groups in recent years.