

This screen grab taken from North Korea's KCTV yesterday shows members of North Korea's military taking part in a parade, with missiles being displayed, in Kim Il Sung Square in Pyongyang. Inset, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un speaking during the military parade.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWSIN brief

Saudi Arabia executes 4 Pakistanis for murder

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia yesterday executed four Pakistani men convicted of raping and murdering a woman and raping her teenage son, the interior ministry said. The men were also convicted of stealing jewellery and cash after entering the woman's home in Riyadh and raping and strangling her, according to a ministry statement cited by the official SPA news agency. Saudi Arabia has executed 20 people since the start of 2018, according to an AFP count.

China spying report 'lies': AU head

AFP, Beijing

The African Union's chairman yesterday dismissed during a visit to Beijing a French newspaper report alleging that China had spied on the continental body as "lies" intended to derail cooperation. The report published by Le Monde in January claimed technicians at the AU's Chinese-built headquarters in the Ethiopian capital discovered last year that the contents of their computers had been regularly copied to servers in Shanghai since 2012.

Venezuela presidential election on April 22

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela's electoral council has set April 22 as the date for a controversial presidential election, which the opposition accuses President Nicolas Maduro of using to engineer a second term for himself. The head of the National Electoral Council, Tibisay Lucena, made the announcement Wednesday after talks broke down between the government and opposition on setting a date for the polls.

No intention to meet US

Says North as US VP lands in Seoul ahead of Olympics ceremony

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea has no intention of meeting US officials during the Winter Olympics that start in South Korea today, state media said, dampening hopes the Games will help resolve a tense standoff over the North's nuclear weapons programme.

However, the North's high-ranking delegation, including the younger sister of its leader Kim Jong Un, will meet South Korean President Moon Jae-in and have lunch with him tomorrow.

It is the first time that a member of Kim's ruling dynasty has visited the South since the Korean war of 1950 to 1953. Such a high-level meeting would have been unimaginable even a few months ago, but Moon sees the Winter Olympics as a chance to make diplomatic inroads with the North.

The apparent thaw has not been reflected in Washington. US Vice President Mike Pence, who is leading the US delegation to the Olympics, has accused Pyongyang of using the games for its own ends. "We will not allow North Korean propaganda to hijack the message and imagery of the Olympic Games," he said in Japan earlier this week.

Pyongyang has ruled out a meeting with the US delegation during the Winter Games. Jo Yong Sam, department

director general of North Korea's foreign ministry, said yesterday the country had never "begged the US for dialogue" and wasn't about to start now.

"We have no intention to meet the US side during our visit to South Korea," Jo said in a terse statement reported by state-run news agency KCNA.

The US has given mixed signals about its willingness to talk. Pence appeared to leave the door open for negotiations earlier this week when he said, "I haven't requested any meeting. But we'll see what happens."

Pence, who has described North Korea as the world's most tyrannical regime, spoke with Moon yesterday ahead of the opening ceremony in the mountain resort of Pyeongchang, just 80 km from the heavily armed border with the reclusive North.

In Beijing, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told reporters all sides, not just the two Koreas, needed to work hard and dialogue between the United States and North Korea should be expanded for this to happen, Wang said.

"You can't have it that one person opens the door and another closes it," he said.

North Korea marked the founding anniversary of its army with a large military parade in Pyongyang yesterday broadcast by state media, having last month changed the date of the celebration to the eve of the Olympics.

KOREA TENSIONS

North has no plans to use Olympics ceremony as political vehicle: KCNA

Major military parade held in N Korean capital

Nepal Communist parties poised to take power

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Communist parties have secured a majority of seats in the upper house of parliament, the election commission said yesterday, paving the way for the leftist alliance to form the next government two months after historic general elections.

The alliance of the main Communist party and former Maoist rebels won a strong majority in the indirectly elected upper house, according to results announced yesterday.

The results of the national vote held late last year have not yet been confirmed, but an incomplete tally suggests the alliance also secured a majority in the directly elected lower house.

Last year's landmark elections capped Nepal's rocky 11-year transition from monarchy to federal democracy after a brutal civil war between Maoist guerrillas and the state.

The elections were the first under the

country's new post-war constitution, which sets out a sweeping overhaul of the political system, devolving significant power from the centre to the seven provinces.

The final results were delayed by disagreements over how the new election rules in the constitution should be implemented.

But the alliance is on course to take a majority of seats in the lower house of parliament, elected through a mix of first-past-the-post and proportional representation.

"We hope the wait for a new prime minister will now be over," the English-language Republica newspaper said in an editorial.

The leader of the Communist CPN-UML, K.P. Sharma Oli, is tipped to be the next prime minister.

During his last term in office, relations between Nepal and its traditional ally India reached a nadir, as the Communist leader cosied up to China.

GENERAL ELECTIONS

Alliance also secures majority in lower house

K P Sharma Oli is tipped to be next prime minister

CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

ICC in Hague opens initial probe against Duterte

REUTERS, Manila

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has told the Philippines that it has begun a preliminary examination of a complaint accusing President Rodrigo Duterte of crimes against humanity, his spokesman said yesterday.

The complaint, which says Duterte is complicit in the illegal deaths of thousands of Filipinos during his war on drugs, was "a waste of the court's time and resources" and the examination would be the end of the process, presidential spokesman Harry Roque said.

About 4,000 mostly urban poor Filipinos have been killed by police in the past 19 months in a brutal crackdown that has alarmed the international community. Activists believe the death toll is far higher.

Roque said he had discussed the ICC issue for two hours the previous night with Duterte, a former prosecutor, adding that

the president more than willing to face trial. "He's sick and tried of being accused," said Roque, an international law expert.

"He wants to be in court and put the prosecutor on the stand."

The website of the ICC, which sits in the Hague in the Netherlands, carried no new information concerning the complaint against Duterte. The court's office could not immediately be reached for comment.

Since it was set up in 2002, the ICC has received more than 12,000 such complaints or communications, just nine of which have gone to trial.

Duterte has dared it to bring him to trial and said he would rot in jail to save Filipinos from crime and drugs.

His tirades against the court are notorious, and include calling it "bullshit", "hypocritical" and "useless", stemming from one of its prosecutors saying there could be grounds for an investigation into his bloody crackdown.



\$7.5M TAX EVASION CASE

Samsung chairman named as suspect

REUTERS, Seoul

Samsung Electronics' ailing chairman, Lee Kun-hee, was yesterday named by South Korean police as a suspect in an 8.2 billion won (\$7.5 million) tax evasion case that involved the use of bank accounts held by employees.

A series of scandals have dogged the family of Samsung, the country's biggest business empire.

The chairman's son Jay Y. Lee, heir to the Samsung Group, was released from detention earlier this week after an appeals court halved his sentence for bribery and corruption to 2-1/2 years and suspended it for four years.

Following a heart attack in 2014, the elder Lee, 76, has remained hospitalized in Seoul's Samsung Medical Centre and is difficult to communicate with having shown little sign of recovery. Until his imprisonment Jay Y. Lee had been regarded as the de facto head of the group.

Police said elder Lee could not be questioned due to his physical condition and Samsung declined comment.

"Samsung chairman Lee Kun-hee and a Samsung executive managed funds in 260 bank accounts under names of 72 executives, suspected of evading taxes worth 8.2 billion won," Korean National Police Agency said in a statement, planning to send the case to prosecutors.

MALDIVES POLITICAL CRISIS

Latest flashpoint in India-China rivalry

A power struggle in the Maldives, a tiny Indian Ocean nation known for scenic luxury resorts and crystal-clear blue water, is taking center stage in a wider battle for regional influence between India and China.

On Monday, President Abdulla Yameen declared a state of emergency after the Supreme Court ordered him to free political prisoners and opposition politicians he's thrown in jail. Security forces then stormed the court and arrested two judges, as well as a former leader. The remaining judges later annulled the previous ruling, the Associated Press reported Wednesday.

CHINA OUTREACH

"As India tries to establish itself as the preeminent power in the Indian Ocean region, the Maldives have become increasingly important," said Constantino Xavier, a fellow at Carnegie India in New Delhi. Yameen has "definitely accelerated his outreach to China, to fend off pressure from the west and also reduce leverage from India."

The Maldives has become politically volatile in recent years. Yameen, who has courted Chinese and Saudi investment since coming to power in an election in 2013, has been criticized by the State Department for jailing opposition politicians and eroding human rights protections.

Before the decision to annul the court ruling, Mohamed Nasheed, an exiled former Maldives president and opposition leader, had asked India's armed forces to back an envoy that would help enforce the order, free political prisoners and secure the safety of judges. The US has condemned the state of emergency.

NO GOOD OPTIONS

The judiciary has acted as a democratic check on Yameen, who still enjoys control over the state's security forces,



according to Dhruva Jaishankar, a foreign policy fellow at Brookings India.

"Yameen has been trying over the last few years to consolidate his political presence," Jaishankar said, adding this has involved seeking Chinese funding. "India has been tentatively backing pro-democracy forces, but is also trying not to push him into the arms of the Chinese and the Saudis."

Beijing has become more economically important to the Maldives in recent years. China sent about 300,000 tourists to the Maldives in 2017, more than any other country. Beijing has begun financing infrastructure projects, and unidentified Chinese company recently took out a 50-year lease on an island near the capital Male to build a resort.

Concerns are growing that China may eventually engage in land reclamation in the Maldives similar to what Beijing has done in the South China Sea, according to David Brewster, an academic at the Australian National University.

"It would take a miracle to be able to turn Yameen away from China while also restoring some semblance of democracy," Brewster said. "India has no good options."

SOURCE: BLOOMBERG ONLINE



Top judge faces death threat Says his lawyer

AFP, Malé

The Maldives' top judge received death threats before his arrest in a regime crackdown, his lawyer said yesterday ahead of a United Nations Security Council hearing on the island nation's political crisis.

Chief Justice Abdulla Saeed was warned he would be "cut into pieces" if he did not overturn a court order quashing convictions against high-profile political dissidents, his lawyer Hissaan Hussain said.

Saeed was arrested as President Abdulla Yameen declared a state of emergency in the honeymoon islands after refusing to obey the court order.

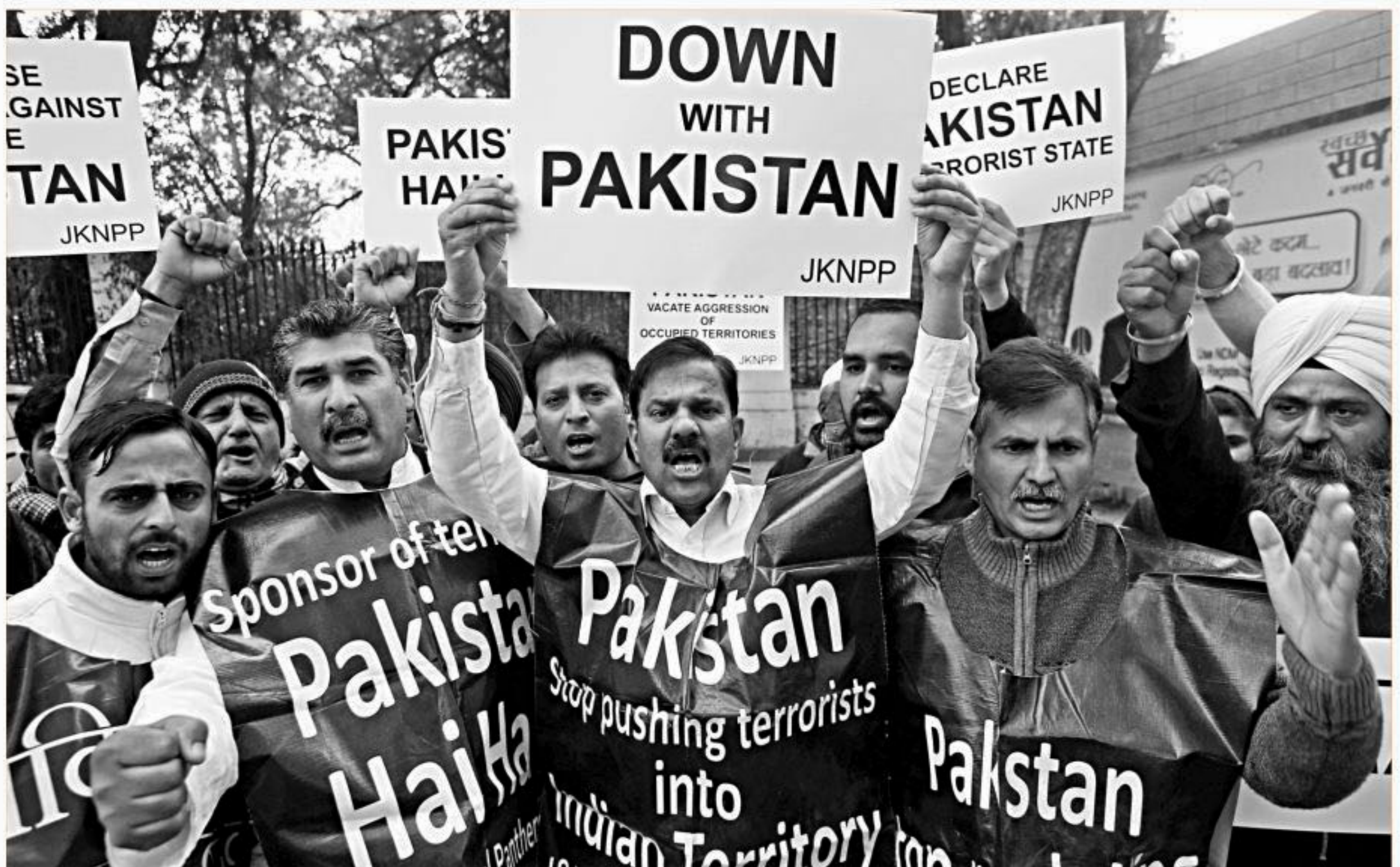
The top judge was accused of accepting bribes to impeach the regime leader, who has jailed most of his political opponents.

"The Chief Justice was forcefully dragged on the floor from his chambers by uniformed security personnel in riot gear after he told them they were in contempt of court," Hussain said. He did not say who issued the threats.

Saeed is among two top justices detained in a sweeping crackdown by Yameen, who has doubled down since the Supreme Court cleared his political rival Mohamed Nasheed, among other regime critics, of terrorism charges.

The remaining three judges restored the conviction Tuesday "in light of the concerns raised by the President", after Yameen declared the state of emergency and accused the justices of trying to overthrow him.

The international community has censured the president for imposing special emergency provisions that allow the military to detain suspects for long periods without charge.



Demonstrators shout slogans as they hold placards during a protest against what the demonstrators say was a ceasefire violation by the Pakistani troops along the Line of Control (LOC) in Rajouri district in Jammu and Kashmir, in New Delhi, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

India's SC asks govt to file protection plan

AFP, New Delhi

India's top court yesterday demanded a detailed plan for the future of the Taj Mahal, warning the state government's "ad hoc" approach jeopardised the centuries-old monument to love.

Smog has been slowly yellowing the Taj's brilliant marble and conservationists have long fought to close polluting industries near the 17th-century icon.

But years of interventions -- including using mudpacks to draw the stain from the stone -- have failed to arrest the slow decay of India's biggest attraction.

The Supreme Court has ordered the state government of Uttar Pradesh to produce a "vision document" outlining its plan for protecting the wonder of the

world within a month, the Press Trust of India reported.

In particular the court expressed concern about a "sudden flurry of activities" in the Taj Trapezium Zone -- a buffer around the monument to protect it from pollution.

"Leather industries and hotels are coming up there. Why?" the court asked, describing the government conservation plan for the Taj as ad hoc and inadequate.

The state government was also directed to notify the court of how many trees had been planted in the buffer zone before any further greenery was felled for construction works, PTI reported.

The Taj faces numerous threats, from air pollution to insects that leave green stains on the rear wall facing the heavily polluted Yamuna River.

TAJ MAHAL POLLUTION

