

NEWSIN brief

Ousted Pak PM's brother takes charge of party

AFP, Islamabad

The brother of ousted Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif formally took charge of the country's ruling party yesterday. The debacle at the Senate was the latest blow to the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) following a string of court decisions targeting the party - including the removal of Nawaz from the premiership for graft in July.

Nepal's president wins second term

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's lawmakers yesterday elected President Bidya Bhandari for a second term, extending the tenure of the Himalayan nation's first female head of state for another five years. Bhandari took nearly two-thirds of the vote to retain her position as ceremonial head of state, the election commission confirmed.

Maoist rebels kill eight police in central India

AFP, New Delhi

Maoist rebels killed eight Indian paramilitary troopers after detonating an explosive beneath their vehicle during a patrol in restive Chhattisgarh state, officials said yesterday. The blast in a remote forest region also injured three others who were airlifted to state capital Raipur for treatment, a spokesman for India's central reserve police force said.

US gives Philippine air force first drones

AFP, Manila

The United States yesterday gave the Philippine air force its first surveillance drone system, as the two nations step up cooperation in the battle against jihadist militants. Washington has been boosting its backing for Philippine counter-terror efforts since Islamic State supporters seized parts of the southern city of Marawi last year, sparking a deadly five-month battle.



Syrian civilians ride their cars through Ain Dara in Syria's northern Afrin region as they flee Afrin city yesterday amid battles between Turkish-backed forces and Kurdish fighters. Inset, civilians evacuating from the town of Douma, Eastern Ghouta arrive at Wafideen camp in Damascus.

PHOTO: AFP



All-out siege looms in Afrin

Turkish forces surround Kurdish city in northern Syria as hundreds of civilians flee towards pro-regime areas

AGENCIES

Turkey said yesterday its army and allied rebels had surrounded the Kurdish city of Afrin in northern Syria, raising the prospect of another devastating siege in the country's long conflict.

With Syria's war set to enter its eighth year this week, fighting continues on several fronts, including around Afrin and in Eastern Ghouta near Damascus, where preparations were under way yesterday for the evacuation of wounded civilians.

While attention in recent weeks has focused on a ferocious regime assault on rebel-held Ghouta, in Syria's north Turkish forces and allied Syrian rebels have been advancing in their offensive against the Kurdish enclave of Afrin.

In a statement yesterday, the Turkish military said it had completed the encirclement of the city of Afrin, home to some 350,000 people and defended by a well-armed Syrian Kurdish militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG).

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitor, said Turkish forces had de facto surrounded

the area by moving to within firing range of the last road leading out of the city towards regime-controlled areas. It said the area included some 90 villages to the west of Afrin city.

The surrounding of Afrin city would be a key step in Turkey's "Olive Branch" operation, launched on

SYRIA CONFLICT

US-led group: Ankara imposes demographic change in Kurdish area

Sick and injured start leaving rebel enclave

January 20 and aimed at ousting the YPG, a key partner of the US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State group, reported AFP.

Redur Kelil, head of foreign relations for the Syrian Democratic Forces, a US-backed alliance of fighters that includes the YPG, accused the Turkish forces of carrying out "demographic change" in Kurdish territory captured

in Afrin, reported Reuters.

Hundreds of civilians were seen fleeing the city of Afrin on Monday towards areas under the control of Syrian pro-regime forces.

It remains unclear what Turkey's next move will be, with some analysts suggesting it will be content to lay siege to Afrin for some time and allow civilians to leave to avoid a high-casualty offensive.

Forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad have meanwhile been pressing an assault to retake the opposition-held enclave of Eastern Ghouta, the last major rebel stronghold near to Damascus.

The Red Crescent was preparing yesterday to evacuate more people in desperate need of medical care through a humanitarian corridor established by the regime and its ally Russia.

The rebel faction controlling Eastern Ghouta's main town of Douma, Jaish al-Islam, said a group of "critical medical cases" would be evacuated though the Wafideen checkpoint at the edge of the enclave.

Palestinian PM survives assassination attempt

Six injured in blast caused by roadside bomb

REUTERS, Gaza

Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah survived an assassination attempt in Gaza yesterday, the Palestinian Authority said after an apparent roadside bomb targeted his motorcade.

The attack on the Western-backed leader, who is spearheading the Authority's reconciliation efforts with Gaza's dominant group, Hamas, took place as the White House prepared to hold a meeting on the humanitarian situation in the enclave.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for what one Palestinian Authority security official in Gaza said was a roadside bomb. A second device failed to explode, the official said.

Six security guards had been wounded, Hamdallah said shortly after the attack.

Hamas, which condemned the attack, and the Authority said they viewed the incident as an attempt to prevent implementation of a unity agreement signed in

October that has raised hopes of improving economic conditions in the territory of two million people.

Minutes after the explosion, the 59-year-old prime minister, apparently unhurt, delivered a speech at the inauguration of an internationally-funded wastewater treatment plant and pledged to continue to pursue Palestinian unity.

He said three vehicles had been damaged in the explosion, which blew out the windows of one of them. The blast sent debris hurtling dozens of metres (yards) away and left a crater by the roadside.

The Authority said it held Hamas responsible for the attack near the northern Gaza town of Beit Hanoun, stopping short of directly accusing the group of carrying out the assault, but suggesting it had failed to provide adequate security.

"It was a well planned attempt. They planted explosive devices two metres deep," Hamdallah said later in the West Bank city of Ramallah, where he is based, without pointing a finger at any group.



House ends Russia probe

Says 'no evidence' of Trump-Kremlin election collusion

REUTERS, Washington

US House Intelligence Committee Republicans said on Monday the panel had finished investigating Russia and the 2016 US election, and found no collusion between President Donald Trump's campaign and Moscow's efforts to influence the vote.

The committee Republicans said they agreed that Russia sought to influence the election by spreading propaganda and false news reports via social media. However, they disputed the findings of the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation that Moscow sought to aid Trump, who won a surprise victory over Democrat Hillary Clinton.

"We're through with interview phase. We're now in the report drafting phase," Republican Representative Mike Conaway, who has led the panel's investigation for the past year, told Reuters.

Representative Adam Schiff, the top committee Democrat, strongly disagreed, and blasted the announcement as a premature shutdown.

The House investigation, one of three main congressional probes of Russia and the 2016 investigation, and possible collusion or obstruction of justice by Trump or his aides,

has been marred for months by partisan wrangling, including the release of rival Republican and Democratic memos related to the probe. The House Intelligence Committee's chairman, Republican Representative Devin Nunes, recused himself from the investigation last year amid reports he had a secret meeting at the White House.

Nunes denied wrongdoing.

The House Republicans made their announcement even as Robert Mueller, the US special counsel for the Russia probe, seems to be stepping up his investigation. Last week, former Trump campaign aide Sam Nunberg spent six hours before a grand jury called by Mueller.

Committee Republicans disputed the findings of CIA, NSA and FBI

Democrats blasted the announcement as a premature shutdown



Yemenis gather near the scene of an explosion resulting from a suicide bombing claimed by the Islamic State (IS) group which hit UAE-trained Yemeni troops yesterday in the southern Yemeni city and government bastion of Aden. At least six people were confirmed dead in the blast.

PHOTO: AFP



Time to turn speeches into treaties

EU's Juncker tells Britain

AFP, Strasbourg

Britain must "translate speeches into treaties" and come up with a detailed plan for its post-Brexit ties with the EU, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said yesterday.

EU leaders have been pressing British Prime Minister Theresa May to clarify what she wants before they agree their position on the future economic partnership at a summit later this month.

A series of speeches by May and her senior ministers have done little to satisfy Brussels, and Juncker warned it was particularly crucial for London to clarify its plans for the sensitive issue of the Irish border.

"As the clock counts down with one year to go, it is now time to translate speeches into treaties, to turn commitments into agreements, broad suggestions and wishes on the future relationship into specific workable solutions," Juncker told the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

He said it was "especially important" that Britain comes up with concrete proposals for the border between British-ruled Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which is staying in the EU.

Both Britain and the EU have vowed to avoid the return of customs checks to the border.

ROW OVER EX-RUSSIAN SPY POISONING

Putin faces UK deadline to explain nerve attack

REUTERS, London

Britain gave President Vladimir Putin until midnight yesterday to explain how a nerve agent developed by the Soviet Union was used to strike down a former Russian double agent who passed secrets to British intelligence.

Sergei Skripal, 66, and his daughter Yulia, 33, have been in hospital in a critical condition since March 4 when they were found unconscious on a bench outside a shopping centre in the English cathedral city of Salisbury.

Prime Minister Theresa May said it was "highly likely" that Russia was to blame after Britain identified the substance as part of the highly-lethal Novichok group of nerve agents developed by the Soviet military in the 1970s and 1980s.

"Either this was a direct act by the Russian state against our country," May told parlia-

ment on Monday. "Or the Russian government lost control of this potentially catastrophically damaging nerve agent and allowed it to get into the hands of others."

Russia holds a presidential election on March 18 in which Putin, himself a former KGB spy, is expected to coast easily to a fourth term in the Kremlin. It has denied any role in the poisoning and says Britain is whipping up anti-Russian hysteria.

Russian ambassador Alexander Yakovenko, summoned to the Foreign Office, was given until the end of yesterday to explain what happened or face what May said were "much more extensive" measures against the \$1.5 trillion Russian economy.

If no satisfactory Russian response is received by midnight London time then May will outline Britain's response in parliament.



Elements in Taliban open to peace talks

Says US defense secretary in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

Elements of the Taliban are open to talks with the Afghan government, US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said yesterday as he arrived in Kabul on an unannounced visit.

Mattis flew into the war-torn city two weeks after Afghan President Ashraf Ghani unveiled a plan to open peace talks with the Taliban, Afghanistan's biggest militant group.

The insurgents have so far given no formal response to Kabul's offer for negotiations, but Mattis said some Taliban leaders have expressed an interest in the discussions.

"It may not be that the whole Taliban comes over in one fell swoop, that would be a bridge too far, but there are elements of the Taliban clearly interested in talking to the Afghan government," he told reporters aboard a military jet.

Ghani's peace plan includes eventually recognising the Taliban as a political party.

The group has said it is prepared to negotiate, but only with the United States and not with the Kabul government.

The Taliban last week described the Afghan government as "illegitimate" and its peace process efforts as "deceptive", in a statement calling for a boycott of an Islamic scholars' conference in Jakarta.

"Right now we want the Afghans to lead and to provide the substance of the reconciliation effort," Mattis said.