

NEWSIN brief

Russia set to re-elect Putin

Russia is set to elect Vladimir Putin today to a historic fourth Kremlin term, as the country faces increasing isolation over a spy poisoning in Britain and a fresh round of US sanctions.

Small plane crash in Philippines kills 10

Ten people were killed when a small plane crashed into a house just outside the Philippine capital yesterday, police and aviation officials said.

14 migrants die as boat capsizes off Greece

At least 14 migrants, including four children, died when a boat carrying 21 people capsized overnight in the Aegean Sea, Greek police said yesterday.

Car ramming kills 2 Israeli soldiers

Israeli forces have arrested a brother and an uncle of a Palestinian accused of killing two soldiers in a West Bank car ramming late on Friday, the army said.

Thousands flee death

Air strikes, fighting kill dozens more in Eastern Ghouta and Afrin regions

AFP, Arbin

Thousands of terrified Syrian civilians fled for their lives yesterday, as they sought to escape two raging offensives in a rebel bastion outside Damascus and a northwestern Kurdish enclave.

Syria's civil war this week entered its eighth year with world powers unable to stem a complex conflict that has killed more than 250,000 people and displaced at least half the country's population.

Tens of thousands have taken to the roads, as Russia-backed regime fighters advance against rebels in Eastern Ghouta outside the capital and Turkey-led forces press an assault in the Kurdish enclave of Afrin.



Civilians evacuate from the town of Jisreen in the southern Eastern Ghouta yesterday.

Air strikes killed at least 36 civilians in the town of Zamalka in Eastern Ghouta yesterday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group reported.

The fresh bombardment came as around 20,000 people streamed out of the last rebel bastion on the capital's doorstep yesterday morning, the Britain-based war monitor said.

An AFP reporter in the nearby town of Arbin heard intense bombardment.

Regime forces have retaken 70 percent of Eastern Ghouta since February 18, carving it up into three shrinking pockets held by

different rebels.

The regime assault has killed more than 1,396 civilians in the enclave, according to the Observatory. More than 50,000 civilians have poured out of Eastern Ghouta since Thursday, fleeing air strikes and advancing troops.

Since 2013, Eastern Ghouta's estimated 400,000 residents had lived under government siege, facing severe food and medicine shortages.

The rebel groups left in Syria's Eastern Ghouta said on Friday they would be willing to negotiate with regime backer Russia on a

ceasefire for their one-time stronghold.

In a joint statement, Islamist factions Jaish al-Islam, Faylaq al-Rahman, and Ahrar al-Sham said the United Nations should host such talks in Geneva.

Such talks would aim to implement UN Security Council resolution 2401, in which world powers last month demanded a 30-day ceasefire.

In northwestern Syria meanwhile, more than 200,000 civilians have escaped their homes in the Kurdish-majority city of Afrin in less than three days, the Observatory said.

Yesterday, a Turkish air strike killed 11 civilians in the city as they were preparing to leave, it said. The monitor says more than 280 civilians have been killed since the Afrin battle began.

Turkey and its Syrian Arab rebel allies have waged a nearly two-month offensive on the Afrin enclave, which is held by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG).

On Friday evening, a Turkish bombing raid struck the city's main hospital, killing 16 civilians, a monitor said. Turkey's military denied hitting the hospital.

Turkey says the YPG is a "terrorist" offshoot of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been waging an insurgency inside Turkey since 1984.

WAR IN SYRIA

Air strikes on Ghouta kill 36 more civilians, death toll hits 1396; 50,000 flee violence in 3 days

More than 200,000 flee Afrin in three days; Turkey air strike kills 11 more

Syria rebels open to UN-backed talks with Russia on Ghouta



Laos' Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith, Indonesia's President Joko Widodo, Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen, Brunei's Prime Minister and Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, Thailand's Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, Philippines' Secretary of Foreign Affairs Alan Peter Cayetano, Myanmar's State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak pose for a photo at the one-off summit of 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) in Sydney, Australia, yesterday.

Use of encrypted messaging apps to plan terrorist attacks is the greatest threat facing intelligence agencies in modern times, Australia warned yesterday as Southeast Asian leaders vowed closer cooperation to counter extremism.

Xi gets second term

Powerful ally Wang Qishan to be his vice president

AFP, Beijing

China's rubber-stamp parliament unanimously handed President Xi Jinping a second term yesterday and elevated his right-hand man to the vice presidency, giving him a strong ally to consolidate power and handle US trade threats.

Xi's reappointment by the Communist Party-controlled legislature was a foregone conclusion, but all eyes had been on whether his former anti-corruption enforcer, Wang Qishan, would become his deputy.

The National People's Congress has widely expanded Xi's already considerable authority during its annual session, adding his name to the constitution and lifting the two five-year term limit for the presidency and vice presidency.

Xi received a standing ovation after winning all 2,970 votes for the presidency and Central Military Commission chairman. In 2013, Xi had received 2,952 votes, with one against and three abstentions, a 99.86 percent share. Only one delegate voted against Wang's appointment, with 2,969 in favour.

Xi and Wang, 69, shook hands as the legislators heaped on applause.

As part of the package of constitutional amendments, Xi and Wang for the first time took the oath of office by pledging allegiance to the constitution. Xi put his left hand on a red-covered book containing the charter, and raised his right fist to take his vow.

"I pledge loyalty to the constitution of the People's Republic of China" Xi recited, vowing to "strenuously struggle to build a rich, strong, democratic and civilised" country.

Elevating Wang allows Xi to keep a formidable ally by his side, as China's most powerful leader since Mao Zedong cements his authority and sets his sights on a possible lifelong tenure -- a move that has drawn criticism online.

Wang was at the frontline of Xi's anti-corruption crusade, heading the party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, which has punished 1.5 million officials in the

past five years, from low-level cadres to regional leaders and generals. He stepped down last year.

Known internationally in his previous role as China's pointman on trade, Wang could help Xi deal with increasingly tense relations with the United States amid fears of a looming trade war, analysts say.



'Go back to paper ballots'

India's Congress wants voting machines to be dumped

NDTV ONLINE

Electronic voting machines, first introduced in state elections two decades ago, should be dumped and India should go back to using paper ballot, the Congress said yesterday, putting its weight behind the opposition chorus against the voting machines.

In its political resolution moved at the party's two-day plenary session, the Congress spoke about the "apprehensions among political parties and the people" over the misuse of the Electronic Voting Machines, or EVMs, to manipulate the outcome contrary to the popular verdict.

"To ensure the credibility of the electoral process, the Election Commission should revert to the old practice of paper ballot as most major democracies have done," it said.

The Election Commission has consistently defended the voting machines, insisting that they were tamper proof. Beginning with the 2017 assembly elections in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh, the poll panel started using an additional device that presents a paper receipt to confirm that the vote went to candidate

selected by the candidate.

Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati had first made allegations of rigged EVMs soon after the 2017 UP election results were announced. The BJP had won 325 of UP's 403 seats along with allies, leaving very little to be shared among the rest. Ms Mayawati had to settle for 19 seats. Other opposition parties in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere soon joined her.

But the Congress isn't the first party to demand that the country go back to ballot papers.

Back in 2009 when it was the Congress that was doing well in elections, LK Advani, the BJP patriarch, had echoed concerns expressed by several state BJP units about the reliability of the machines. This demand was also rejected by the Election Commission citing a study by a technical experts led by an IIT professor.

Akhilesh Yadav, the Samajwadi Party chief had recently accused officials of using defective machines to slow down voting in polling booths of Uttar Pradesh's Gorakhpur and Phulpur where his party was expected to do well.

MALDIVES CRISIS

Mass arrests as activists defy emergency

AFP, Colombo

Maldivian authorities arrested more than 140 activists who defied a ban on rallies and demonstrated against a state of emergency imposed by President Abdulla Yameen, the opposition said yesterday.

Thousands of supporters poured into the streets of the capital island Male on Friday night and continued their protest rally till early yesterday, the joint opposition said in a statement issued in Colombo.

"Ignoring President Yameen's edicts banning protests, and braving police and army pepper spray and tear gas, the protests swelled to thousands strong by the early hours of Saturday morning," the statement said.

It said 141 pro-democracy supporters were arrested following what it called the biggest anti-Yameen protest to rock the Maldives since May Day 2015 when similar mass arrests were carried out.

Maldivian police confirmed the latest arrests and said 139 people, including 26 women, remained in custody yesterday morning. Two people had been released overnight.

The opposition said three members of parliament were among those arrested on Friday.

Yameen is facing increasing opposition both within and outside his tiny Indian Ocean archipelago since coming to power in November 2013 following a controversial run off election against former president Mohamed Nasheed.

Last month, Yameen extended a draconian state of emergency by another month, ignoring a growing chorus of international concern and calls for democracy to be restored in the honeymoon islands.

Yameen declared the emergency earlier in February, curtailing the powers of the judiciary and the legislature, after the country's Supreme Court ruled to quash criminal convictions against high profile opposition politicians.

BLOODSHED IN KABUL

Taliban car blast kills 2

AFP, Kabul

A car bomb explosion claimed by the Taliban in Kabul yesterday killed at least two civilians, as the militants maintain pressure on the capital amid growing calls for peace talks.

Several others were wounded in the morning rush-hour suicide blast in an industrial area of the city that the Afghan interior ministry said had intended to strike global security company G4S.

It was the fourth suicide attack in Kabul in three weeks and comes days after the top US general in Afghanistan said protecting the war-weary city was "our main effort".

It also comes as the Taliban faces growing pressure to take up Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's offer last month of peace talks to end the 16-year war.

"Around 9:10 am this morning a suicide car bomb exploded in Police District Nine of Kabul," interior ministry spokesman Najib Danish told AFP.

Two civilians were killed and three others were wounded in the attack, Danish said. The blast happened at a time when many people would have been driving to their offices on the first day of Afghanistan's working week.

Health ministry spokesman Wahid Majrooh told AFP at least four people had been wounded in the explosion.

Deputy interior ministry spokesman Nasrat Rahimi said the suicide bomber had been driving towards G4S but "detonated himself before reaching the target".

In a WhatsApp message sent to journalists Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said the bomber had targeted a convoy of "foreign troops".



Turkish-backed Syrian opposition fighters attempt to detain a young man (down, black jacket) as a woman tries to stop them, ahead of crossing to the Turkish-backed Syrian rebels side at a check point in the village of Anab yesterday, as civilians flee the city of Afrin in northern Syria.

Trump foe McCabe fired

AFP, Washington

Former FBI deputy director Andrew McCabe, who has endured a year of withering attacks from President Donald Trump, was fired by the Justice Department Friday just days before he was to retire.

"Andrew McCabe FIRED, a great day for the hard working men and women of the FBI - A great day for Democracy," Trump tweeted soon after the firing.

"Sanctimonious [ex-FBI director] James Comey was his boss and made McCabe look like a choirboy. He knew all about the lies and corruption going on at the highest levels of the FBI!" Trump wrote.

McCabe pushed back hard at the decision, saying he was the victim of a "war" by the Trump administration against both the FBI, and the special counsel probing allegations of Russian election meddling.

Announcing McCabe's ouster, the Justice

Department said an internal investigation found that he had made unauthorized disclosures to the media, and had not been fully honest "on multiple occasions" with the department's inspector general.

Details of the inspector general's probe were not made public, but it involved the FBI's handling of the 2016 investigation into Trump's election rival, Democrat Hillary Clinton.

Trump has repeatedly accused McCabe and Comey of having protected Clinton from prosecution over her misuse of a private email server while she was secretary of state, and over the

actions of the private Clinton Foundation set up by her husband, former president Bill Clinton.

Trump was also publicly upset about McCabe's defense of Comey -- whom the president fired in May 2017 in frustration at the ongoing FBI probe into alleged collusion between his election campaign and Russia.

Trump hails 'great day for democracy'

Former FBI deputy says he is a victim of Trump's 'war' against FBI, Mueller

PHOTO: AFP