

NEWSIN brief

Former S Korean leader indicted for corruption

AP, Seoul

Former President Lee Myung-bak was indicted on bribery, embezzlement and other charges yesterday, becoming the latest South Korean leader arrested or entangled in scandals at the close of their terms or after leaving office. Lee's indictment came three days after his successor Park Geun-hye was sentenced to 24 years in prison for a separate corruption scandal.

Russia condemns Israel's fire in Gaza

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday condemned "unacceptable" and "indiscriminate" fire by the Israeli army in clashes that have left some 30 Palestinians dead in the Gaza strip. The border fence between the Palestinian enclave and Israel has become the backdrop of mass Gaza demonstrations that has led to deadly clashes.

Maoist attack kills two jawns in Chhattisgarh

TNN, Raipur

Two District Reserve Guard (DRG) jawans were killed and five injured in an IED blast triggered by Maoists when they were travelling from Kutru to Jangla in Bijapur district, India yesterday. The Maoist attack took place five days before Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to visit the insurgency-hit Bijapur district in Bastar.

Pope hits out at critics of pro-migrant policy

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis issued a warning to Catholics who criticise his calls to welcome migrants with open arms, in a much-awaited text published yesterday. The Argentine pontiff has put the plight of people fleeing war, persecution and poverty at the heart of his five-year papacy, putting him at odds with a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment in many parts of the world.

Ready to discuss nukes

North Korea tells US for the first time as Trump, Kim set to meet in unprecedented summit planned for May

REUTERS, Washington

North Korea has told the United States for the first time that it is prepared to discuss the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula when North Korean leader Kim Jong Un meets President Donald Trump, a US official said on Sunday.

US and North Korean officials have held secret contacts recently in which Pyongyang directly confirmed its willingness to hold the unprecedented summit, the official told Reuters, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The communications, still at a preliminary stage, have involved State Department officials talking to North Korea apparently through its United Nations mission, and intelligence officers from both sides using a separate backchannel, the official said.

Until now, the United States had relied mostly on ally South Korea's assurance of Kim's intentions.

South Korean envoys visited Washington last month to convey Kim's invitation to meet. Trump, who has exchanged bellicose threats with Kim in the past year, surprised the world by quickly agreeing to meet Kim to discuss the crisis over Pyongyang's development of nuclear weapons capable of hitting the United States.

But North Korea has not broken its public silence on the summit, which US officials say is being planned for May. There was no immediate word on the possible venue for the talks, which would be the first ever between a sitting US president and North Korean leader.

The US official declined to say exactly when the US-North Korea communications had taken place but said the two sides had held multiple direct contacts.

"The US has confirmed that Kim Jong Un is willing to discuss the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," said a second US official. South Korea's presidential Blue House welcomed the communication between North Korea and the United States, with one official saying the development was "positive".

"We are aware contact between North Korea and the United States is going well," said another Blue House official on condition of anonymity.

"We don't know, however, up to what extent information is being shared between the two."

Questions remain about how North Korea would define denuclearization, which Washington sees as Pyongyang abandoning its nuclear weapons program.



Facebook to warn 87m users in CA data scandal

PTI, New York

Under fire globally for allowing data breach, social media giant Facebook will start alerting the 87 million users, including 562,455 in India, whose data may have been compromised as the UK-based Cambridge Analytica (CA) pilfered them through an app.

Facebook members will find out from 17:00 BST yesterday whether they are among the 87 million users.

The US-based company will send a detailed message at the top of users' news feed, offering information on apps they use and the information they have shared with those apps.

It will also tell people if their information may have been improperly shared with Cambridge Analytica, the data mining firm accused of harvesting personal information of millions of Facebook users illegally to influence polls in several countries.

"As part of this process we will also tell people if their information may have been improperly shared with Cambridge Analytica," the company said last week.

Facebook users will also have the opportunity to use the link to delete apps and prevent them from collecting more information, CNN reported.

Also, all 2.2 billion Facebook users will receive a link to see what apps they use and what information they have shared with those apps.

Facebook says most of the affected users (more than 70 million) are in the US, though there are over a million each in the Philippines, Indonesia and the UK.

It said the total number of potentially impacted users in India is 0.6 percent of the global number of potentially affected people.

A Facebook spokesperson last week said privileged data of users who had downloaded the app called 'thisisyourdigitallife', developed by Dr Aleksandr Kogan, may have been compromised.

There are about 200 million Facebook users in India. Of them, "only 335 people" were directly affected through the installation of the app, while another 562,120 people were "potentially affected" as friends of those users, the spokesperson said.

All 2.2 billion FB users will receive a link to see what apps they use and what info they have shared with apps

Saudis seek French help to set up opera

AFP, Paris

Saudi Arabia is to use French expertise to set up a national opera and orchestra under an agreement signed yesterday that underlined the modernising agenda of the kingdom's crown prince as he began his official trip to Paris.

The deal will see the Paris opera company help the ultra-conservative Islamic nation produce its own classical music and shows, a further sign of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's desire to change the image of his homeland.

He has already announced the lifting of a ban on women driving, the re-opening of cinemas for the first time in over three decades and new mixed-gender concerts despite opposition from religious hardliners.

The kingdom revealed yesterday that it would enter short films at the Cannes cinema festival for the first time and send an official delegation to the celebration of often edgy and subversive silver-screen art on the Riviera this May.

Speaking with her Saudi counterpart, French Culture Minister Francoise Nyssen said she had also discussed "the importance of translating books in both directions, from Arab into French and French into Arab."

Prince Mohammed, known widely by his initials MBS, dined with President Emmanuel Macron at Paris's historic Louvre museum on Sunday night after flying in on his first trip to France as the heir to the Saudi throne.

Macron, 40, faces a diplomatic tightrope in talks with the prince as he seeks to bolster his ties with the world's top oil exporter, while also managing relations with the kingdom's arch-rival Iran.



A handout picture released by the official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) shows relatives reuniting after buses carrying the first batch of detainees whom the agency said were released by Jaish al-Islam after being held hostage in the Eastern Ghouta town of Douma, arrived in Damascus yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

India bus crash kills 26 school children

NDTV ONLINE

Twenty-six schoolchildren were killed when the school bus they were travelling in skidded and fell into a 100-feet-deep gorge in Himachal Pradesh's Kangra district, news agency ANI reported.

The bus belonging to a private school overturned as it slipped into the gorge and came to rest in the middle of the hillside, the rescuers said. The police said the bus driver could have been speeding on the narrow hill road before he lost control of the bus.

A team of the National Disaster Response Force or NDRF have reached the accident site at Kangra's Nurpur town, 220 kilometres from state capital Shimla. Some children who had been trapped inside the mangled bus have been rescued.

The students are from Wazir Ram Singh Pathania Memorial Public School. Many of them who were in the bus yesterday were in Class 5 and below, news agency IANS reported.

"I have spoken with the chief secretary... the NDRF was immediately deployed," Himachal chief minister Jai Ram Thakur said. "Rescue operation is underway with the help of locals. I have ordered for a magisterial probe," he said.

The chief minister has announced Rs 5 lakh compensation for the families of the children who met with the accident. All the injured children have been taken to a hospital in Pathankot, 90 km from the accident site.



A handout picture released yesterday shows Indonesian President Joko Widodo rides Royal Enfield motorbike during his visit at Pelabuhan Ratu beach in Sukabumi, Indonesia on Sunday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

HUNGARY ELECTIONS

Populist's victory brings headaches for Brussels

AFP, Brussels

The leading political group in the European Parliament congratulated Hungary's Viktor Orban on his reelection yesterday, but the anti-immigration populist's victory looks set to prolong the fractious relationship between Brussels and Budapest.

The European Union has clashed repeatedly with Orban's government during his first two terms as premier over a number of issues including Hungary's crack-down on foreign-funded universities and NGOs, its hardline stance on migrants and alleged misuse of funding from the bloc.

Orban has been defiant in the face of EU criticism, and some observers say the fact his Fidesz party is part of the European People's Party (EPP), the dominant force in the European Parliament, has given him cover in Brussels.

"Congratulations to Viktor #Orban and

#Fideszmps on their clear victory in the #HungaryElections. I look forward to continuing working with you towards common solutions to our European challenges," Manfred Weber, the head of the EPP bloc in the parliament, wrote on Twitter yesterday.

In the run-up to Sunday's vote in Hungary, EPP President Joseph Daul tweeted a message wishing Fidesz "all the best" in the election, saying Orban would "continue to bring stability and prosperity".

The EU has launched a battery of legal action against Orban's government, taking it to the bloc's top court over a crackdown on education and foreign-backed civil society groups that critics say targets US billionaire George Soros.

The European Commission has also brought a case against Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic over their refusal to accept quotas for asylum seekers.



UN reopens talks on defining 'killer robots'

AFP, Geneva

A new round of talks on the use of so-called killer robots reopened at the United Nations yesterday, with a focus on defining the characteristics of autonomous lethal weapons.

The world body hosted the first-ever killer robot negotiations last year and agreed to move forward, even if a treaty governing the use of such weapons remains a distant prospect.

Activists say time is running out before weapons are deployed that use lethal force without a human making the final kill-order and have criticised the UN body hosting the talks -- the Convention of Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) -- for moving too slowly.

But they still praised the resumption of the UN talks. "It is a much more focused discussion now," said Richard Moyes, co-founder of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots.

Nations "are getting down to the business of describing the level of human control that is needed over (lethal weapons) systems," added Moyes, also a member of the 2017 Nobel Peace winning International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.

For Moyes, it is crucial that states agree a human using any weapons "has to know where force is going to actually be applied and when force is going to be applied".

The number of states that have called for an outright killer robot ban has mounted, while concern in the private sector and academia has grown over the threat posed by weapons that entirely rely on machine intelligence in deciding what to kill.



Duterte urges 'fast-track' sacking of top judge

AFP, Manila

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said yesterday lawmakers must "fast-track" the impeachment of the nation's top judge, further stacking the odds against her staying in office.

Supreme Court Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno is one of several high-profile critics who have found themselves in legal trouble after battling with Duterte over his deadly anti-drug crackdown.

"I'm putting you (Sereno) on notice that I am now your enemy and you have to be out of the Supreme Court," Duterte told reporters before flying to China for an economic forum.

"I held my temper before because she's a woman. This time I'm asking the congressmen and the Speaker: 'Do it now. Cut out the drama, or else I will do it for you'," he added.

A committee in the legislature's lower chamber the House of Representatives last month found "probable cause" to impeach Sereno, in a move which critics allege is part of wider efforts by Duterte to destroy foes and usher in one-man rule.

If lawmakers in the full House support the finding, Sereno would face a US-style impeachment trial in the Senate or upper house. Congress is currently in recess and is due to reconvene May 14.

The Supreme Court is set today to hear a separate petition to unseat Sereno from the country's highest tribunal.

Australia PM Turnbull faces leadership pressure

Loses 30th straight major opinion poll

AFP, Sydney

Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull marked an unwanted milestone yesterday by losing his 30th straight opinion poll -- a benchmark he used to justify deposing former Liberal leader Tony Abbott.

Abbott was toppled in a September 2015 party room coup with Turnbull memorably citing his loss of 30 consecutive Newspolls in The Australian newspaper as the key reason why he had to go.

Turnbull has been reminded about it by commentators ever since, with Abbott vocal from the backbench as the party struggles to stay ahead of the Labor opposition before elections scheduled for 2019.

"I regret making those remarks at the time, making the remarks about 30 Newspolls," Turnbull said yesterday on why

the rationale he applied to Abbott should not also apply to him.

"But what I promised to do was to provide economic leadership and traditional cabinet government and I have done both."

Turnbull insisted he still had the support of the party and his focus was not on "personalities or the politics", but reinforcing his message that were Labor to take power they would be a "high-taxing, anti-business government".

Turnbull, who is considered a moderate, has struggled to push his agenda amid backbiting from the more headline factions in his party.

Australia's politics has been turbulent in recent years, with a "revolving door" of prime ministers in charge. Four different leaders have served since 2013 as both Labor and the Liberals removed sitting prime ministers.

