

NEWSIN brief

Lanka police arrests ruling party dissident

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan police yesterday arrested a leading dissident within President Maithripala Sirisena's party, deepening political tensions on the island after the head of state suspended parliament. Mahindananda Aluthgamage, a former sports minister, was held over 39 million rupees that were allegedly misappropriated in 2014.

Two Christians killed in Pakistan shooting

AFP, Quetta

Two Christians were killed in a drive-by shooting outside a church in southwestern Pakistan Sunday, officials said, the second such attack on the minority community in the area this month. The Islamic State group's local franchise claimed responsibility for the attack in Quetta, capital of Balochistan province.

S Korea's Park will not appeal jail term

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's disgraced former president Park Geun-hye will not appeal her 24-year prison sentence for corruption, reports said yesterday. Park, 66, who was removed from office over a massive corruption scandal last year, was convicted of multiple criminal charges including bribery and abuse of power at a trial earlier this month.

China launches website to report foreign spies

AFP, Beijing

China has stepped up its campaign against foreign espionage with a website in Mandarin and English encouraging people to report national security threats such as bids to "overthrow the socialist system". The website, www.12339.gov.cn, launched by the Ministry of National Security on Sunday, also urges anyone to report attempts by foreigners to bribe state officials.



A statue of former US president Harry Truman is tied with ropes as a supporter of the Greek Communist Party uses a grinder in an effort to bring the statue down during a demonstration against air strikes on Syria by the United States, Britain and France, in Athens, Greece yesterday. Inset, demonstrators carry signs during an anti-war protest in New York City on Sunday after President Donald Trump launched airstrikes in Syria.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEW US SANCTIONS

Moscow won't delay its response: report

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov yesterday said Moscow will not delay its response to new US sanctions, according to Russian state news agency RIA.

Ryabkov's comments came in response to remarks made by Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the UN, who said on Sunday that Washington will impose new economic sanctions on Russia for their support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Ryabkov said that Russia's lower house of parliament is considering legislation that would give the Kremlin the power to restrict US imports, RIA reported.

The deputy foreign minister also said Russian politicians were discussing US "abuse" of the dollar's status as the international currency, RIA quoted Ryabkov as saying.

Syrian government forces are suspected of using chemical weapons on rebel-held Douma on April 7 - an allegation that Syria's Assad denies.

The US, France and the UK responded to the suspected attack by launching missiles on Saturday that they said targeted Syrian chemical weapons production facilities. Russian President Vladimir Putin denounced the US-led strikes as "an act of aggression" that will only worsen the humanitarian crisis in Syria.

The US has already sanctioned Russia over its annexation of Crimea and role in the Ukraine conflict, as well as its alleged meddling in the 2016 presidential election.

The administration of US President Donald Trump is mired in controversies surrounding the Department of Justice's investigation into alleged Russian meddling and possible collusion between the Trump campaign and the Kremlin.

Russia blocks Syria probe

West accuses Moscow of tampering with evidence on chem attack ground as UK urges 'unfettered access' for OPCW inspectors

AGENCIES

Western countries yesterday accused Moscow of preventing inspectors from reaching the site of a suspected poison gas attack in Syria and said Russians or Syrians may have tampered with evidence on the ground.

The United States, Britain and France launched air strikes on Saturday against what they described as three Syrian chemical weapons targets in retaliation for a suspected gas attack that killed scores of people in the Damascus suburb of Douma on April 7.

Syria and its ally Russia deny using poison gas during their offensive this month, in which they seized the town that had been the last major rebel stronghold near the capital.

Inspectors from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) went to Syria last week to inspect the Douma site but have yet to gain access to the town, which is now under government control after the rebels withdrew.

"It is our understanding the Russians may have visited the attack site," US

Ambassador Kenneth Ward said at a meeting of the OPCW in The Hague yesterday.

"It is our concern that they may have tampered with it with the intent of thwarting the efforts of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission to conduct an effective investigation," he said. His comments at the closed-door meeting

Lavrov denies Moscow interfered with any evidence in Douma site



EU urges relaunch of Syria talks after strikes

were obtained by Reuters.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov denied that Moscow had interfered with any evidence: "I can guarantee that Russia has not tampered with the site," he told the BBC in an interview.

Earlier, Britain's delegation to the OPCW accused Russia and the Syrian government of preventing the international watchdog's inspectors from

reaching Douma.

The inspectors aim to collect samples, interview witnesses and document evidence to determine whether banned toxic munitions were used, although they are not permitted to assign blame for the attack.

"Unfettered access is essential," the British delegation said in a statement. "Russia and Syria must cooperate."

Moscow blamed the delay on the Western air strikes. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the British accusation that Russia was to blame for holding up the inspections was "groundless".

"We called for an objective investigation. This was at the very beginning after this information [of the attack] appeared. Therefore allegations of this towards Russia are groundless," Peskov said.

Meanwhile, EU foreign ministers yesterday backed "all efforts" to stop Syria using chemical weapons, after weekend strikes by Britain, France and the US, but called for renewed efforts to find a political solution to the seven-year war, reported AFP.

Govt failed in 'darkest hour'

Retired Indian bureaucrats write open letter to PM Modi over rape incidents in Kashmir, UP

NDTV ONLINE

As thousands of people hit the streets across the country to express outrage over the rapes in Kathua and Unnao, a group of 49 retired civil servants wrote an open letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, holding him responsible for what they called a "terrifying state of affairs".

The letter criticized in strongest terms what they dubbed the government's failure "in performing the most basic of the responsibilities given to it by the people".

Expressing concern over the "decline in the secular, democratic, and liberal values enshrined in our constitution", the scathing letter said: "The bestiality and the barbarity involved in the rape and murder of an eight year-old child shows the depths of depravity that we have sunk into. In post-Independence India, this is our darkest hour and we find the response of our Government, the leaders of our political parties inadequate and feeble".

The letter did not spare the serving bureaucrats either, saying they "seem to have failed in their duty".



The rape and murder of the 8-year-old in Jammu and Kashmir's Kathua shocked the country after a police chargesheet exposed the horrifying details of the case.

The child, belonging to a nomadic community, was kidnapped on January 10. Over the next week, she was drugged, starved, repeatedly gangraped and then murdered. It has been alleged that the crime was committed to warn off the Muslim nomadic community away from the areas belonging to Hindus.

Last Sunday, a 16-year-old from Unnao, Uttar Pradesh, tried to commit suicide outside Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's house. She claimed she had been raped by BJP lawmaker Kuldeep Singh Sengar and his brother and tried to end her life only after she failed to

get justice. Yesterday, her father, who had been mercilessly thrashed - allegedly by the lawmakers' brother -- for his refusal to withdraw the case, died.

Calling the two points "a moment of existential crisis, a turning point", the letter suggested that the government's response will determine if the nation will overcome the crisis.

Japan PM's woes deepen

Abe tipped to resign in June as suspected cronyism scandals push his support to record lows

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's political crisis deepened yesterday after polls showed that suspected cronyism scandals have pushed his support to record lows and a popular predecessor said Abe would probably resign in June.

In another headache for the conservative premier, the finance ministry's top bureaucrat has come under fire after a weekly magazine reported he had sexually harassed several female journalists. The bureaucrat yesterday denied the accusations and said he would file a lawsuit against the magazine's publisher.

Abe's sliding ratings raise doubts about whether he can win a third three-year term as ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leader in a September vote, that he needs to win to stay in office, or whether he might resign before the party vote.

Speculation has even emerged that Abe, who surged back to power for a second term as prime minister in December 2012, promising to reboot a stale economy and bolster Japan's

defences, could call a snap general election as he did last October when his ratings were in a similar slump.

A survey by broadcaster Nippon TV released on Sunday showed Abe's support had sunk to 26.7 percent, the lowest since he took office in December 2012. An Asahi newspaper poll yesterday put his support at 31 percent.

The latest signs of trouble for Abe come ahead of a summit this week with US President Donald Trump, where the difficult topics of North Korea's nuclear and missile threats and trade will be on the agenda.

"The situation is getting dangerous. Won't Mr Abe resign around the time parliament's session ends?" former premier Junichiro Koizumi, a one-time Abe mentor, said in an interview published by the online edition of the weekly magazine Aera.

The session ends on June 20. Koizumi - a critic - said that if Abe hung on, it could hurt LDP candidates in an upper house election next year.



Rohingya refugees look for their belongings in New Delhi yesterday, following a fire that broke out at their camp that left around 200 people homeless. No casualties were reported after the fire ripped through the camp early Sunday morning.

PHOTO: AFP

Maldives rejects UN body's call to let Nasheed fight election

REUTERS, Geneva

The Maldives yesterday rejected a demand by a UN human rights watchdog that former president Mohamed Nasheed be allowed to stand for office, including in a presidential election later this year.

The UN Human Rights Committee, a panel of independent experts overseeing states' compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, said Nasheed's conviction on terrorism charges was based on vague laws, contained serious flaws and violated his right to a fair trial.

"Political rights can be suspended or restricted only in exceptional circumstances and under certain conditions. And judicial proceedings that violate the right to fair trial can render the resulting restriction of political rights arbitrary," committee member Sarah Cleveland said in a statement.

Nasheed was sentenced to 13 years in jail but went into exile during a medical trip to Britain. He was disqualified from running in presidential elections for 16 years.

The committee said it wanted information from the Maldives within 180 days about measures taken to take its views into account, and said those measures should be disseminated broadly in the official languages of the Maldives.

But the government swiftly rejected the Committee's report.

"The Government of the Maldives... wholeheartedly refutes that any of these rights have been violated in the case of the former President Nasheed. The Government accepts the conviction of Nasheed as lawful and final," it said in a statement.

Drought wiped out Indus civilisation

TNN, Kharagpur

The Indus Valley civilisation was wiped out 4,350 years ago by a 900-year-long drought, scientists at the Indian Institute of Technology in Kharagpur (IIT-Kgp) have found. Evidence gathered during their study also put to rest the widely accepted theory that the said drought lasted for only about 200 years.

The study will be published in the prestigious Quaternary International Journal by Elsevier this month.

Researchers from the geology and geophysics department have been studying the monsoon's variability for the past 5,000 years and have found that the rains played truant in the northwest Himalayas for 900 long years, drying up the source of water that fed the rivers along which the civilisation thrived. This eventually drove the otherwise hardy inhabitants towards the east and south, where rain conditions were better.

The IIT-Kgp team mapped a 5,000-year monsoon variability in the Tso Moriri Lake in Leh-Ladakh — which too was fed by the same glacial source — and identified periods that had continuous spells of good monsoon as well as phases when it was weak or nil.

Xi sends warning to US, Taiwan with live-fire drills

CNN ONLINE

Chinese President Xi Jinping has sent a clear message of Beijing's disapproval over growing ties between the United States and Taiwan by ordering live-fire drills in the Taiwan Strait.

The drills, to be held coming Wednesday, will mark the first time the Chinese Navy has held drills with live ammunition in the strait since September 2015, in the lead-up to the self-ruled island's presidential election.

Prior to those elections, relations between the two were at a high point after Xi met with then-President Ma Ying-jeou, the first such meeting in history between leaders of the two governments.

But since then, tensions between China and the island it views as a breakaway province have become strained under Ma's successor, President Tsai Ing-wen.

The new Trump administration has sought

closer ties to President Tsai's government, angering Beijing by signing two deals in the past month to tighten ties with the island, including a travel act which will allow more official visits between the US and Taipei.

"(China) wants to highlight that the Chinese navy is ever ready and secondly, it is a signal to the government in Taipei you better not go further," Collin Koh, research fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies' Maritime Security Program, told CNN.

The planned live-fire exercises follow a massive show of force by the PLA Navy on April 10 and 11, which conducted the country's largest military drills ever in the South China Sea.

Chinese President Xi personally reviewed the troops himself from the deck of the Chinese destroyer Changsha on Thursday, speaking to the troops about the need for the navy to become "world-class."



Saudi boss forced maid to drink bleach

Says Philippines foreign ministry

AFP, Manila

A Philippine domestic worker has been hospitalised in Saudi Arabia after her employer allegedly forced her to drink household bleach, Manila's foreign ministry said yesterday.

Domestic worker Agnes Mancilla underwent emergency abdominal surgery after she was taken, unconscious, to a hospital in Saudi's southwestern Jizan city on April 2, the ministry said.

"We are working closely with authorities in Jizan to make sure that justice will be given to Agnes Mancilla," the ministry said in a statement.

The victim is in "serious but stable condition" in hospital and Saudi police have arrested her female employer, who has not been named, it added.

Mancilla had worked in Saudi Arabia since 2016 "but was repeatedly physically abused by her lady employer" who also failed to pay her salary, the statement said, citing Edgar Badajos, the Philippine consul in the Saudi city of Jeddah.

The report is the latest incident of alleged mistreatment of Filipino workers in the Middle East.

In February, allegations of abuse of domestic workers caused a diplomatic flap between the Philippines and Kuwait.