

NEWSIN brief

Blast hits Indian post in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

A bomb that exploded outside an Indian diplomatic post in southern Nepal caused damage and drew attention for being a rare attack on a foreign mission. The homemade device went off late Monday at Biratnagar, 200 kilometres southeast of Kathmandu and close to the Indian border. Police suspect involvement of a Maoist splinter group which had called a strike in the area.

No new EU sanctions on Iran for now

AFP, Luxembourg

EU foreign ministers on Monday discussed how they could persuade the US not to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal, but stopped short of imposing new sanctions on Tehran. Britain, France and Germany used a meeting of the EU's 28 foreign ministers to try to build support for expanding sanctions against Iran to punish it for its role in the conflict in Syria.

Myanmar pardons 8,500 prisoners

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's president yesterday announced pardons for more than 8,500 prisoners, including three dozen jailed in political cases, as part of an annual amnesty marking the country's traditional new year. President Win Myint, who took office last month, said the pardons were granted on humanitarian grounds during the Buddhist new year festival known as Thingyan.

Japan to trial urine test to spot cancer

AFP, Tokyo

A Japanese firm is poised to carry out what it hailed as the world's first experiment to test for cancer using urine samples, which would greatly facilitate screening for the deadly disease. Engineering and IT conglomerate Hitachi developed the basic technology to detect breast or colon cancer from urine samples two years ago.



Members of the European Parliament sit with signs that read, 'Hands off Syria' following last week's US-led air strikes on suspected chemical sites in the Syrian capital following an alleged chemical attack in a Syrian town, in the eastern French city of Strasbourg yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

GLOBAL CYBER ATTACKS

US, Britain point finger at Russia

REUTERS, London

The US and Britain on Monday accused Russia of launching cyber attacks on computer routers, firewalls and other networking equipment used by government agencies, businesses and critical infrastructure operators around the globe.

Washington and London issued a joint alert saying the campaign by Russian government-backed hackers was intended to advance spying, intellectual property theft and other "malicious" activities and could be escalated to launch offensive attacks.

It followed a series of warnings by Western governments that Moscow is behind a string of cyber attacks. The United States, Britain and other nations in February accused Russia of releasing the "NotPetya" virus, which in 2017 crippled parts of Ukraine's infrastructure and damaged computers across the globe, costing companies billions of dollars.

The Kremlin yesterday dismissed as "groundless" warnings from Britain and the US that Russian state-sponsored hackers were threatening their crucial computer networks.

"We don't know what these new accusations are based on," said President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov.

Meanwhile, Trump has delayed imposing additional sanctions on Russia and is unlikely to approve them unless Moscow carries out a new cyber attack or some other provocation, a senior administration official said on Monday.

US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley said on Sunday that Washington was preparing new sanctions on Russia over its support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

"The ambassador got out ahead of things this time," the official, who deals with the issue, said.

ALLEGED CHEMICAL GAS ATTACK IN SYRIA

Doubts grow over probe

Russia accused of erasing evidence as OPCW enters Douma

AGENCIES

International investigators yesterday entered a Syrian town hit by an alleged chemical attack, after days of delay and warnings by Western powers that crucial evidence had likely been removed.

The suspected gas attack on April 7 on Douma, near Damascus, reportedly left more than 40 people dead and was blamed by Western powers on the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

In response, the United States, France and Britain conducted unprecedented missile strikes on Syrian military installations, but Paris yesterday admitted they were a matter of "honour" that had solved nothing.

"Experts from the chemical weapons committee enter the town of Douma," state news agency SANA wrote, referring to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

The inspectors arrived in Damascus on the day of the Western strikes but had not been allowed to enter Douma. France and the United States

appeared to question the purpose of such a mission, warning that any incriminating evidence had likely been removed by now.

"It is highly likely that evidence and essential elements disappear from the site, which is completely controlled by the Russian and Syrian armies," the French foreign ministry said.

DEVELOPMENTS

Damascus retracts report on new missile attacks

France moves to strip Assad of his Legion d'Honneur

The US ambassador to the OPCW, Ken Ward, had claimed Monday that the Russians had already visited the site and "may have tampered with it".

Russia rejected the accusations and called on Western countries to "stop manipulating public opinion" on the issue.

In an impassioned defence to the

European Parliament on Tuesday, France's President Emmanuel Macron admitted that Saturday's strikes had been a more political than military decision.

The French leader was also set to strip Syrian President Bashar al-Assad of a prestigious award he was granted by former president Jacques Chirac in 2001.

"The Elysee confirms that a disciplinary procedure for withdrawing the Legion d'Honneur (Legion of Honour) is under way," Macron's office said.

The war of words continued to spiral between the Russian-backed Syria regime and the West but a military escalation looked to have been averted despite both sides trading threats after the strikes.

Yet, a report on state news agency SANA that Syrian air defences had shot down missiles over Homs province overnight raised fears that further action had indeed been taken.

Later yesterday, however, SANA retracted the report, stressing there had been "no external attack" on Syria.

FB confirms it collects data beyond its users

AFP, San Francisco

Facebook, embattled in a scandal over the mishandling of user data, confirmed Monday that it also collected information from people beyond their social network use.

During heated hearings in Congress last week, CEO Mark Zuckerberg had already explained that Facebook collects data beyond what users share on their profiles.

"When you visit a site or app that uses our services, we receive information even if you're logged out or don't have a Facebook account," product management director David Baser said in a post on the social network's blog.

"This is because other apps and sites don't know who is using Facebook," he added, noting Facebook was also following up with Congress on a few dozen questions Zuckerberg was unable to answer at the time of the hearings.

Baser said "many" websites and apps use Facebook services to target content and ads, including via the social network's Like and Share buttons, when people use their Facebook account to log into another website or app and Facebook ads and measurement tools. But he stressed the practice was widespread, with companies such as Google and Twitter also doing the same.

"There are three main ways in which Facebook uses the information we get from other websites and apps: providing our services to these sites or apps; improving safety and security on Facebook; and enhancing our own products and services."

"I want to be clear: We don't sell people's data. Period."

Zuckerberg says Facebook "failed" to protect people's information following the use by Cambridge Analytica of data scraped from 87 million Facebook users to target political ads ahead of the 2016 US presidential election.



POST-WAR MIGRANTS

May says sorry to Caribbean countries

AFP, London

Prime Minister Theresa May personally apologised to Caribbean leaders yesterday after her government threatened to deport people who emigrated to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s.

At a meeting in Downing Street, May told representatives of the 12 Caribbean members of the Commonwealth that she took the treatment of the so-called Windrush generation "very seriously".

"I want to apologise to you today. Because we are genuinely sorry for any anxiety that has been caused," she told the hastily-convened gathering.

The government has faced outrage for its treatment of people who came to Britain between 1948, when the ship Windrush brought over the first group of West Indian immigrants, and the early 1970s.

They and their parents were invited to help rebuild Britain after World War II and with many of them legally British -- they were born while their home countries were still colonies -- they were given indefinite leave to remain.

But those who failed to get their papers in order are now being treated as illegal, which limits their access to work and healthcare and puts them at risk of deportation.

The row, which one MP called a "national shame", has been hugely embarrassing for the government as it coincides with this week's meeting of the 53 Commonwealth heads of government in London.

MYSTERIOUS ILLNESS IN CUBA

Canada to pull out diplomats' families

AFP, Ottawa

Canada announced Monday it was sending home the families of its diplomats in Cuba, after a year-long investigation into a mysterious illness afflicting Canadian and US officials failed to reveal a cause.

The number of Canadian envoys and family members with symptoms, meanwhile, has risen from eight to 10, a senior official told a media briefing. Twenty-seven had been tested.

"The cause (of their symptoms) remains unknown but could be human-made," the government concluded.

"Regular embassy operations will continue," it said.

Canadian and US authorities had initially suspected a "sonic attack" or a "mass psychosomatic incident," which led to heightened diplomatic tensions between Washington and the Caribbean island nation, but those are "now considered unlikely," the senior official said.

The symptoms included dizziness, headaches and a lack of ability to concentrate.

American doctors and officials have pointed to "a new type of a possible acquired brain injury" outlined in a February Journal of the American Medical Association article by health experts at the University of Pennsylvania, who treated the US diplomats.

Canada has accepted that theory.



Schoolgirls holding placards sit in a road during a protest against the rape of an eight-year-old girl in Kathua, near Jammu, a teenager in Unnao, Uttar Pradesh, and an eleven-year-old girl in Surat, Gujarat, in Srinagar, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Modi's reticence risks carrying stain of rape into election year

REUTERS, New Delhi

As India's rape epidemic gets worse by the year, critics have pointed fingers at Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government for not doing enough to protect the country's women.

During the past week, his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been battered by a nationwide storm over two rapes.

One involved the abduction, gang rape and murder of an eight-year-old Muslim girl by Hindus in Jammu and Kashmir state, where two BJP ministers in the provincial government were forced to resign after initially offering support for the accused rapists.

In the other case, a BJP legislator in Uttar Pradesh state stands accused of raping a teenager.

When Modi came to office in 2014, he coined the slogan "save our daughters, teach our daughters", but right now that message is ringing hollow.



for his silence.

The economy and increasing intolerance towards religious minorities are expected to be the main issues for a general election due by next year and Modi remains a frontrunner with a splintered opposition struggling to soothe the public anger.

But analysts foresaw the opposition

Congress and regional parties tapping a well of discontent over the BJP's weak response to the rapes, especially among better informed urban voters.

In Uttar Pradesh, the rape victim attempted to set fire to herself outside the state BJP chief minister's residence to get police to investigate her accusations against a BJP lawmaker, after being ignored for nine months.

According to a BJP official in Lucknow, the Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath could be asked to resign to soothe the public anger.

In Jammu and Kashmir, the communal dimension of the case could spoil BJP's ties with the mainly Muslim party that it shares power with in the state.

Laying all blame for the rape crisis at BJP is obviously unfair, but critics of the right-wing conservative party and its Hindutva or Hindu nationalist agenda accuse it of pandering to backward attitudes that suppress women.

Hannity revealed as mystery client of Trump's lawyer

REUTERS, New York

US President Donald Trump's personal lawyer was forced on Monday to reveal in a New York federal court that Fox News personality Sean Hannity, one of Trump's most ardent defenders, was also on his client list.

Michael Cohen, Trump's fiercely loyal and pugnacious lawyer, disclosed Hannity's name through one of his own lawyers at the order of the judge. Stormy Daniels, an adult-film actress who says she had a sexual encounter with Trump, watched from the public gallery.

Daniels, in a separate civil case, is fighting a 2016 non-disclosure agreement arranged by Cohen in which she got \$130,000 to stop her from discussing her claim she had sex with Trump a decade earlier, something Trump has denied.

Hannity, 56, said on Monday that he had never paid for Cohen's services or been represented by him, but had sought confidential legal advice from him. The conservative host

often uses his weeknight broadcast on Fox News to defend the president against what he sees as biased attacks by the media. Sometimes Trump praises Hannity in return.

Legal advice can be considered privileged even if given by a lawyer for free.

Cohen was in court to ask the judge to limit the ability of federal prosecutors to review documents seized from his offices and home last week as part of a criminal investigation, which stems in part from a probe into possible collusion between Trump's presidential campaign and Russia. The judge ordered prosecutors to give Cohen's lawyers a copy of the seized materials before the next hearing.

Hannity, the top-rated personality on the most watched US cable news network, told his viewers on April 9 that the raid on Cohen was part an effort by federal investigators to wrongly impeach the president. He never mentioned his association with Cohen during that broadcast.

