

NEWSIN brief

Afghan police shoot would-be bomber

REUTERS, Kabul
Afghan police shot dead a suicide bomber yesterday as he was apparently preparing to attack an outdoor blood donor facility in a busy area of central Kabul, officials said. As the man approached the centre, in a park in the Shar-e Naw commercial district, police opened fire, setting off the explosives in his suicide vest, Hashmat Stanekzai, spokesman for Kabul police said. Apart from the bomber, no casualties were reported and there was no claim of responsibility.

India court moves trial location in gang rape

REUTERS, New Delhi
India's Supreme Court yesterday ordered the trial of eight men accused of the rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl to be moved to another state after her family and lawyer said they faced death threats. The girl, from a nomadic Muslim community that roams the forests of Indian Kashmir, was drugged, held captive in a Hindu temple and sexually assaulted for a week before being strangled to death in January.

Trump urges CIA pick to stay on board

AFP, Washington
US President Donald Trump yesterday tweeted support for his controversial pick to head the Central Intelligence Agency, after reports she might withdraw her nomination to avoid a Senate grilling over her past involvement in torture.

Gina Haspel -- who has a long career in the CIA's clandestine service and currently serves as its deputy director -- ran the agency's "black box" interrogation cell in Thailand after the September 11 attacks.



Russian president-elect Vladimir Putin walks prior to his inauguration ceremony at the Kremlin in Moscow yesterday. Putin was sworn in as Russia's president for a fourth term, extending his almost two-decade rule by another six years at a time of high tension with his Western rivals.

PUTIN'S CHALLENGES

A look at what could happen after his fourth term ends in 2024

Vladimir Putin was inaugurated for a historic fourth term yesterday, extending his almost two-decade rule by another six years after predictably winning Russia's March presidential election. But with no successor and no political competition, what are the possible scenarios when his term ends in 2024?

FIGHT FOR INFLUENCE

Without constitutional reform, Putin will not be able to run for a fifth time -- Russian law forbids serving more than two consecutive terms. Putin, who will turn 72 in 2024, could decide to leave the Kremlin after 24 years in power, making way for a successor.

Russian politics is now dominated by fighting between rival clans of technocrats and the "siloviki" -- representatives of the security services and the army.

"There is already a fight for influence," said political analyst Nikolai Petrov. "Nobody will wait passively, each group will try to promote its interests," he added.

In a March interview to American TV channel NBC, Putin said he had been thinking of a potential successor since 2000.

"There is no harm in thinking about it but at the end of the day it will be the Russian people who decide."

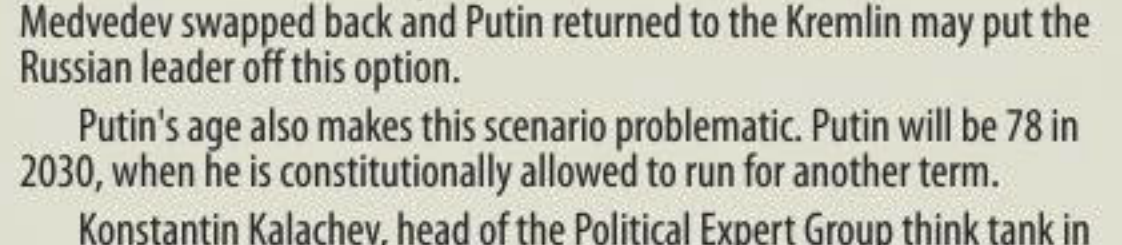
But in making sure no one can compete with him, no politician is currently popular enough to succeed the Kremlin chief. Many analysts say Putin leaving power in six years is unlikely.

ROLE SWAP

One way Putin could continue ruling Russia after 2024 is to stay in power in a different role.

The Russian strongman could revisit his 2008 move, which saw him put forward Dmitry Medvedev as president while he himself became prime minister before returning to the Kremlin in 2012.

"Putin may prepare the regime for a transfer of power. But not from Putin to another president but from Putin to Putin in some other role," said Petrov.



But memories of mass protests in Moscow when Putin and Medvedev swapped back and Putin returned to the Kremlin may put the Russian leader off this option.

Putin's age also makes this scenario problematic. Putin will be 78 in 2030, when he is constitutionally allowed to run for another term.

Konstantin Kalachev, head of the Political Expert Group think tank in Moscow, said Putin knows his successor will have to introduce unpopular economic reforms and wants to "go down in history as the man who did not lose at anything".

NEEDS PROTECTION

Putin could choose to follow China's Xi Jinping in abolishing presidential term limits, thus allowing him to remain president for life.

"I don't think he will refuse power in 2024 even if he has had enough, he is (already) visibly tired," said independent political analyst Dmitry Oreshkin.

"He can't leave because he does not believe that anyone will protect him," he added, saying that Putin has built a system in which everything depends on who is at the top.

So far, Putin has ruled out ruling Russia for life.

"I never changed the constitution, especially for it to benefit me and I do not have this kind of intention today," he told NBC in March.

Oreshkin said Putin does not want to be remembered for changing the constitution and that if he were to remain president for life, it would be done "more elegantly" than in China.

SOURCE: AFP

Won't retire in 2020

Says Sri Lanka president, seeks fresh term without 'murderers'

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president announced yesterday he will not retire at the end of his term despite a previous pledge, and said he will seek to form a new government excluding politicians who have committed murder.

Maithripala Sirisena told a public rally in the former war zone of Batticaloa that he had unfinished business to attend to and he no longer intends to retire in 2020 when his five-year term finishes.

"There are many who ask if I will retire in 2020," he said. "I will not retire. There is so much work to be done."

The remarks at a rally in the country's east ended speculation about the 66-year-old's political future, and could escalate a clash with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Relations between Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) have soured since both suffered humiliating losses in February's local council elections.

Speculation that Sirisena would run again had compounded problems between the parties as Wickremesinghe has signalled his intention to be a candidate at the next presidential election, due by late 2019.

The row deepened when the UNP, the senior partner in the coalition, accused Sirisena of supporting last month's failed bid to impeach the prime minister.

There was no immediate response from the UNP to Sirisena's announcement, seen as a de facto declaration of his candidacy despite a promise in his 2015 manifesto to be a one-term president.

Don't ditch Iran deal

UK foreign secy appeals to Trump as Tehran hints at staying on 2015 nuke pact even if US exits

REUTERS, London

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson has appealed to US President Donald Trump not to pull out of the Iran nuclear agreement, saying the deal had weaknesses but they could be addressed given time.

Trump has said that unless European allies rectify "flaws" in Tehran's 2015 deal with world powers by May 12 he will refuse to extend US sanctions relief for Iran.

Britain, France and Germany remain committed to the accord as is but to address US concerns they want to open talks on Iran's ballistic missile programme, its nuclear activities beyond 2025 - when key provisions of the deal start to expire - and its role in Middle East crises such as Syria and Yemen.

"It has weaknesses, certainly, but I am convinced they can be remedied," Johnson wrote in an opinion piece for the New York Times. "Indeed at this moment Britain is working alongside the Trump administration and our French and German allies to ensure that they are."

Johnson began a two-day visit to the

United States on Sunday to try to convince Trump's administration not to ditch the deal.

Johnson said he saw no advantage in losing the "handcuffs" the deal imposed on Iran's nuclear ambitions and only Tehran would benefit from exiting the deal.

"At this delicate juncture, it would be a mistake to walk away from the nuclear agreement and remove the restraints that it places on Iran," Johnson wrote.

"I believe that keeping the deal's constraints on Iran's nuclear program will also help counter Tehran's aggressive regional behaviour."

Meanwhile, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani yesterday hinted that Iran could remain in its 2015 nuclear deal with world powers even if the United States dropped out but Tehran would fiercely resist US pressure to limit its influence in the Middle East.

"We are not worried about America's cruel decisions ... We are prepared for all scenarios and no change will occur in our lives next week," Rouhani said in a speech broadcast live on state TV.



Iran-backed Hezbollah allies set to seal control

REUTERS, Beirut

Hezbollah and its political allies won just over half the seats in Lebanon's parliamentary elections, unofficial results showed, boosting an Iranian-backed movement fiercely opposed to Israel and underlining Tehran's growing regional clout.

Branded a terrorist group by the United States, the heavily armed Shia Hezbollah has grown in strength since joining the war in Syria in support of President Bashar al-Assad in 2012.

The gains for parties and politicians who support Hezbollah's possession of weapons risks complicating Western policy in Lebanon, which is banking on foreign aid and loans to revive its stagnant economy and receives US military support.

An Israeli minister said the outcome, which has yet to be confirmed by official results, showed the Lebanese state was indistinguishable from Hezbollah, signalling the risk of Israel hitting Lebanon's

government in a future war.

The unofficial tally in the first parliamentary elections in nine years indicated sharp losses for Western-backed Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri. But he was still set to emerge as the Sunni Muslim leader with the biggest bloc in the 128-seat house, making him the frontrunner to form the next government.

Iranian media appeared to gloat at Hariri's setback. The headline Tasnim news agency ran a report headlined: "Lebanese election result puts an end to Hariri's monopoly among Sunnis."

Lebanon's prime minister must be a Sunni in the country's sectarian power-sharing system.

The new government, like the outgoing one, is expected to include all the main parties. Talks over cabinet posts are expected to take time.

"Hariri is going to be further weakened in any kind of government going forward," Andrew Tabler of the Washington Institute said. "His ability to substantially tame or restrain Hezbollah ... in Lebanon is going to be very limited."



A worker hangs a road sign directing to the US embassy, in the area of the US consulate in Jerusalem yesterday. US embassy road signs went up ahead of next week's opening of the mission in accordance with President Donald Trump's recognition of the city as Israel's capital.

Editor of Phnom Penh Post fired by new owners

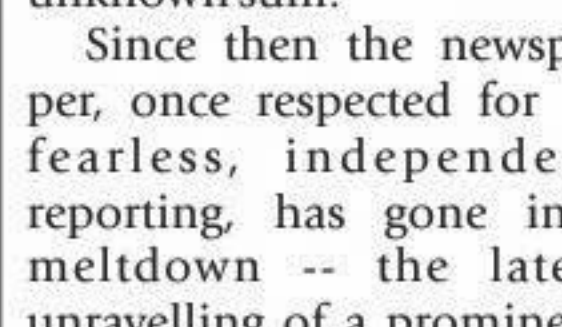
AFP, Phnom Penh

Crisis gripped Cambodia's last independent newspaper yesterday as the editor-in-chief was fired by its new owner over a front-page article on the sale, while several senior reporters resigned in protest at the apparent attack on editorial integrity.

The 26-year-old Phnom Penh Post was sold to Malaysian investor Sivakumar S Ganapathy over the weekend for an unknown sum.

Since then the newspaper, once respected for its fearless, independent reporting, has gone into meltdown -- the latest unravelling of a prominent media organisation under the watch of Cambodia's increasingly authoritarian premier Hun Sen.

Editor Kay Kimsong



said he was sacked for signing off on a piece exploring the implications of the sale.

"The new owner fired me today... because I approved today's front-page story," Kimsong told AFP.

"I have done my duty as editor-in-chief for the newspaper... but the new boss has the right to make the decision."

The story identified the new proprietor as the Malaysian investor, who is also the CEO of Kuala Lumpur-based public relations firm Asia PR, a business the report said "has previously done work" for Hun Sen.

Second Indian girl raped, set alight

AFP, New Delhi

A 17-year-old Indian girl was fighting for her life yesterday after being raped, doused in kerosene and set alight, the second such case to shake the country this week as it reels from a series of brutal sexual assaults.

The teenager was attacked on Friday -- the same day a 16-year-old was raped and burned to death, also in the eastern state of Jharkhand.

The two incidents have shone a spotlight on the treatment of rape in India, where authorities are facing renewed pressure to act on sexual crimes after the recent gang rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl.

The cases are some of the most high-profile since the 2012 rape and murder of a student on a New Delhi bus that triggered mass protests.

"The girl has suffered 70 percent first-degree burns. There is a chance that she will survive," Shailendra Barnwal, police superintendent of Pakur district, told AFP.

The victim has been moved to a private hospital with specialist facilities for "proper treatment and recovery", he said.

Clash of titans brings a gripping polls to Malaysia

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's general election this week will be an extraordinary contest, pitting a 92-year-old former authoritarian leader and a jailed reformist he fell out with 20 years ago against a prime minister who has been mired in a multi-billion-dollar scandal.

Few doubt that Prime Minister Najib Razak's Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, which has ruled Malaysia for the six decades since independence, will triumph in tomorrow's poll.

But a robust challenge from the opposition - spearheaded by nonagenarian Mahathir Mohamad, the country's longest-serving prime minister, and his one-time protege Anwar Ibrahim - has produced the most hotly contested election yet.

"Momentum is with the opposition, but we believe it is unlikely that they will pull off

a surprise victory," said the Eurasia Group consultancy, which put the odds of a win for Mahathir's Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope) at 15 percent.

However, the political risk group's Asia director, Peter Mumford, said there is a danger for the ruling coalition that it will fare worse than the 2013 election, when for the first time it lost the popular vote but still won with 133 of parliament's 222 seats.

Under Malaysia's simple majority system, the party that gets the most seats in parliament wins even if it does not secure the popular vote.

An unconvincing victory would leave Najib, 64, with reduced political clout and he could face pressure from within his party to stand aside ahead of the next election, Mumford said.



WAR IN SYRIA'S DAMASCUS

30 regime forces killed fighting IS

AFP, Beirut

More than 30 Syrian government troops have been killed in a southern district of the capital in a fierce counter-offensive by Islamic State group fighters, a monitor said yesterday.

Regime forces are seeking to end IS's years-long foothold in the Palestinian camp of Yarmuk and neighbouring district of Hajar al-Aswad, both in southern Damascus.

Last week, troops managed to sever a route linking the two areas, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor said, but IS launched a fightback at the weekend and successfully reopened it.

"Their hit-and-run operations have continued since then, killing a total of 31 regime forces, mostly in ambushes," said Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Britain-based Observatory.

The regime has since been advancing slowly, taking some positions and buildings, but there hasn't been any strategic advance since Saturday, he told AFP.

Regime troops control 60 percent of Hajar al-Aswad, while IS still holds more than 80 percent of Yarmuk.

Forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad were pounding both districts with air strikes and shelling yesterday, Abdel Rahman said.