

NEWSIN brief

Taliban emerge from hiding in Afghan city

REUTERS, Herat
Taliban fighters emerged from hiding in the dead of night to launch attacks in the Afghan city of Farah, battling government forces who thought they had cleared out the insurgents following heavy clashes earlier in the week, residents and officials said. At least one suicide bomb attack was launched near the city's police headquarters.

Pak kills top militant leader in Baluchistan

REUTERS, Quetta
Pakistan's military has killed a senior member of Islamist militant group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) along with two suicide bombers in a raid in the southwestern province of Baluchistan. A military intelligence officer was killed and four other soldiers wounded during the operation targeting Salman Badeni, the Baluchistan region chief of LeJ.

Egypt's military kills 19 in Sinai operation

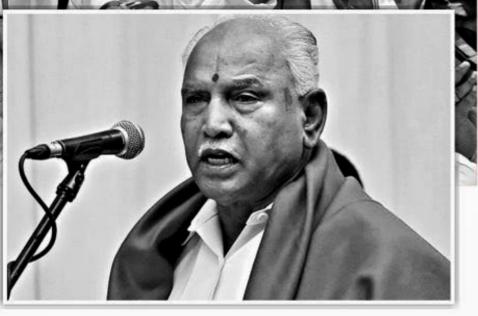
AFP, Cairo
Egypt's army said yesterday it killed 19 presumed jihadists in the Sinai peninsula during a large-scale "anti-terror" operation. Egyptian forces launched operation "Sinai 2018" in February in the peninsula where soldiers and security forces have been battling the IS.

India halts Kashmir ops for Ramadan

AFP, New Delhi
Indian military operations against rebels in the disputed Kashmir territory were suspended Wednesday in a rare gesture for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The nearly 30-day halt is the first of its kind in Indian-controlled Kashmir for nearly two decades, and follows an escalation of violence in recent months in the Muslim-majority Himalayan region.



Lawmakers from India's main opposition Congress party and the Janata Dal (Secular) protest against India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader B S Yeddyurappa's, inset, swearing-in as Chief Minister of the southern state of Karnataka, in Bengaluru yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS



CM from BJP takes oath in Karnataka

AFP, New Delhi
A leader from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party took the oath to become chief minister of a key southern Indian state yesterday after the Supreme Court rejected a last-minute bid to block the move.
Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) made huge gains in the Karnataka state election but fell short of a majority, sparking a scramble for power between the party and its arch rival Congress.
The Congress party, which lost sole control of the state in Saturday's election, tried to stop the BJP's B.S. Yeddyurappa from taking the oath as chief minister by forming a coalition with a smaller regional party.
The BJP argued that it should get the first chance to form a government as it is the largest party with 104 seats. State governor Vajubhai Rudabhai Vala gave the right-wing party 15 days to prove it has a majority.
Congress went to the Supreme Court to block the BJP, but after a rare three-hour night-time hearing that lasted until dawn, the court said the oath ceremony should go ahead.
Lawyers for Congress, which saw its number of seats cut from 122 to 78, had told the judge bench that the party had a ready majority with the smaller Janata Dal (Secular) party which has 37 seats.
Congress and Janata Dal also claim the support of two independents and have accused the BJP of trying to bribe their lawmakers to switch sides.
Janata Dal leader H.D. Kumaraswamy said the BJP had offered \$15 million each to as many as 32 lawmakers. The BJP denies the claims.

Supreme Court rejects Congress bid to block swearing in ceremony

South offers to mediate First trip in 20 years

AGENCIES

South Korea said yesterday that it intended to mediate talks after North Korea threatened to pull out of a summit with the United States aimed at the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, reported Reuters. The announcement was made by Seoul's National Security Council, according to AP.

On Wednesday, North Korea said it might not attend the June 12 summit in Singapore after a joint military exercise between the US and South Korea.

The National Security Council, chaired by security adviser Chung Eui-yong, said South Korea will "closely mediate using multiple communication channels with the US and North Korea so that the summit can proceed successfully". The security council also urged North Korea to abide by the agreements reached between South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un during their summit last month, where they agreed to denuclearise the Korean peninsula.

South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha told the parliament that North Korea and the US had differences of opinion over how to achieve denuclearisation.

An unidentified South Korean presidential official told Reuters that the South intends to more actively perform "the role of a mediator" between the US and North Korea.

Japanese newspaper Asahi quoting unidentified sources said the US was insisting that North Korea start dismantling its weapons of mass destruction and move them out of the country within six months.

North Korea's chief negotiator called the South Korean government "ignorant and incompetent" yesterday, denounced US-South Korean air combat drills and threatened to halt all talks with the South unless its demands are met.

The comments by Ri Son Gwon, chairman of North Korea's Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the country, were the latest in a string of inflammatory statements marking a drastic change in tone after months of easing tension with plans for denuclearisation and a summit scheduled with the United States.

Ri criticised the South for participating in the drills, as well as for allowing "human scum" to speak at its National Assembly, the North's KCNA news agency said in a statement.

"Unless the serious situation which led to the suspension of the north-south high-level talks is settled, it will never be easy to sit face to face again with the present regime of south Korea," the statement said.

US President Donald Trump said that the US hasn't been notified about North Korea's threat to cancel the summit. "We haven't heard anything. We will see what happens," he said, according to AP.

Indian minister holds talks in N Korea on regional issues, reiterates support for peace effort

REUTERS, New Delhi

India has sent a government minister to North Korea for the first time in nearly two decades for talks on political and regional issues, the foreign ministry said on Wednesday, following signs of a thaw on the Korean peninsula.

India established diplomatic relations with the North 45 years ago and has a small embassy there, but in recent years it halted trade and aid as the United States stepped up global pressure to isolate Pyongyang over its nuclear and missile programmes.

India's diplomatic initiative comes weeks after the two Koreas held their first summit in more than a decade and as the leaders of the United States and North Korea prepare for a first meeting next month.

Junior foreign minister V K Singh, who began the two-day visit to North Korea on Tuesday, reiterated New Delhi's support for peace initiatives on the peninsula, the Indian foreign ministry said in a statement.

Singh met the vice-president of the presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, Kim Yong Dae, Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho and Culture Minister Pak Chun Nam, among others, it said.

"The DPRK side provided an overview of some of the recent developments in the Korean Peninsula," the foreign ministry statement said, using the acronym of the North's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

On Wednesday, however, North Korea said it might reconsider next month's meeting between US President Donald Trump and its supreme leader Kim Jong Un if Washington insists it unilaterally give up its nuclear weapons.

The North's official KCNA news agency said Pyongyang had called off high-level talks with Seoul due on Wednesday.

Indian analysts said New Delhi could play a bit role in peacekeeping on the peninsula because it had kept its channels of communication open with the North.



DOUBTS OVER N KOREA-US SUMMIT



N Korea denounces US, S Korean air combat drills, threatens to halt all talks
Trump acknowledges it is unclear if summit will go ahead as planned

Trinamool looks set to sweep panchayat polls

BJP distant second; Congress pushed to margins

HINDUSTAN TIMES ONLINE

The ruling Trinamool Congress looked set to sweep the West Bengal countryside after five hours of counting of the votes in the violence marred three-tier panchayat elections which took place on May 14.

The party was heading for control of well over 80% of the gram panchayats and 90% of the panchayat samitis. It was also leading in all 20 zilla parishads. BJP was a very distant second, while the Left and Congress were pushed to the margins.

At the zilla parishad level, Trinamool was leading in 359 seats, BJP in 9, Left in 2 and Congress in 5. In Hooghly district, the Trinamool made a clean sweep of the gram panchayats winning all 207 seats.

At 1:30 pm yesterday, in South Dinajpur district, the TMC was leading in 711 gram panchayat seats, while the BJP was leading in 23. In East Midnapore, Trinamool was

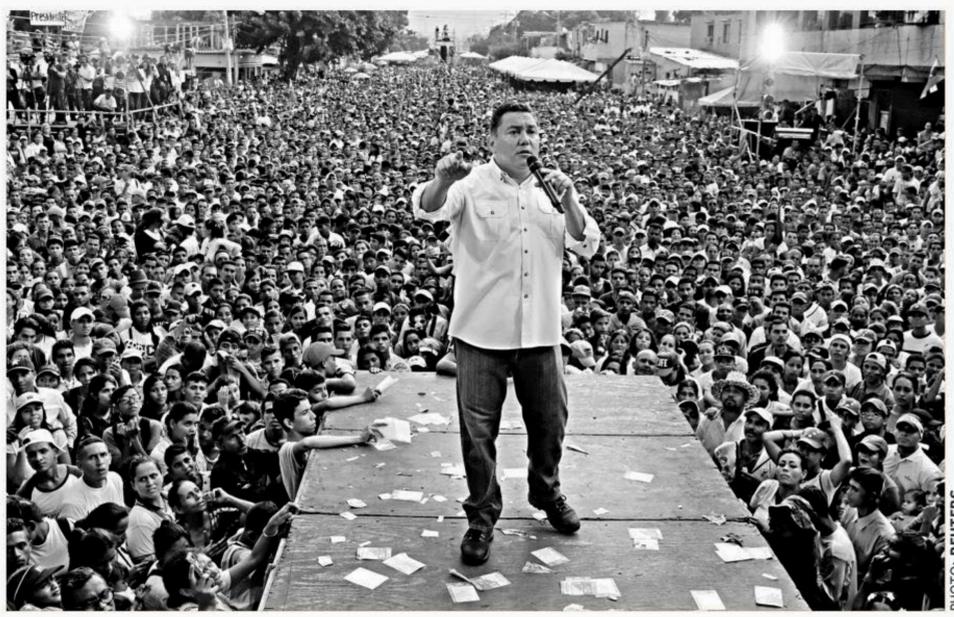
leading in 1987 seats, and BJP was in the second position with leads in 33 while the Left was third with leads in 13 seats.

At the panchayat samiti level, the Trinamool was leading in 75 seats followed by the BJP at 3 and Left at 1. In Murshidabad, Trinamoolled at 133, followed by Congress at 1, while in North Dinajpur, the Trinamool was leading in 101 seats while the BJP led in 8, the Left in 2 and the Congress in 6.

Ruling party supporters began celebrating their victory with sweets and firecrackers in different districts.

"The opposition has been blown away by Trinamool Congress gale. People have overwhelmingly voted for the ruling party," said food and supplies minister and party president of North 24 Parganas district Jyotipriyo Mullick.

But the BJP which has been trying hard to get a foothold in Bengal said the elections and the counting were farcical.



Venezuelan opposition presidential candidate and evangelical pastor Javier Bertucci speaks to supporters, during his campaign closing rally in Valencia, Venezuela on Wednesday. Opposition activists were demonstrating in Venezuela against the May 20 presidential election, urging those running against Maduro to withdraw their candidacy.

Torra sworn in as president of Catalonia

AFP, Barcelona

Quim Torra, Catalonia's new separatist leader, was sworn in yesterday in a brief ceremony without central government representatives where he avoided promising to obey the constitution and pledged instead to follow "the will of the Catalan people."

"I promise to loyally fulfil the duties of the post of regional president being faithful to the will of the Catalan people represented by the Catalan parliament," he said, using the same formula as his predecessor and mentor Carles Puigdemont.

The 55-year-old did not promise to obey the statute that regulates Catalonia's autonomy either.

He appeared flanked only by a Catalan flag, without the traditional Spanish flag and portrait of the king



NZ PM's husband fends off shark

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand's "first bloke" Clarke Gayford revealed yesterday how he fought off an angry shark with a pole while diving off Auckland.

Gayford, the partner of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, tweeted a picture of himself keeping the predator at bay while a dolphin swims in the background.

However, instead of launching a Flipper-style rescue to chase off the shark, Gayford said the dolphin was content to watch the underwater drama unfold from a distance.

"So it turns out that not only do dolphins not help, they actually quite like watching," he tweeted. "A childhood myth is ruined."

Gayford, who hosts a television fishing show, said he was helping a camera operator shoot footage for the educational show Young Ocean Explorers when the incident occurred.

He said he was "swimming safely", or keeping watch so the cameraman could concentrate on filming bottle-nosed dolphins and false killer whales off Great Barrier Island near Auckland.

50 members killed this week on border: Hamas

AFP, Gaza City

A senior member of Gaza's Hamas rulers has said that all but a dozen of the 62 Palestinians killed by Israeli fire during Gaza border protests this week were members of the Islamist group.

The remarks made on Wednesday were seized upon by Israel in an attempt to fend off harsh global criticism over the deaths and prove they were orchestrated and led by the Islamist movement Hamas.

Israeli forces killed 60 Palestinians on Monday when tens of thousands of Palestinians had gathered near the border, while smaller numbers approached the fence and sought to break through.

For more than six weeks, marchers have been demanding the right to return to their homes seized by Israel in the 1948 war surrounding the creation of the Jewish state.

Two more Palestinians were killed on Tuesday as Palestinians marked the Nakba, or "catastrophe", commemorating the more

than 700,000 Palestinians who fled or were expelled in the war.

The bloodshed continued to draw world attention as violence abated late Wednesday, on the eve of the holy Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

Sporadic cross-border fire was a reminder



of the situation's unresolved volatility, however.

Pope Francis said he was "very worried" by escalating violence in the Middle East, with Arab foreign ministers set to hold an "extraordinary" meeting yesterday to discuss the situation.

REUTERS JOURNO CASE

Myanmar cop denies planting documents

REUTERS, Yangon

A Myanmar policeman told a court on Wednesday he met two Reuters reporters on the night of their arrest in December, but denied giving them secret documents to incriminate them.

His testimony contradicted a previous witness who last week said police had "set up" the pair.

"During my meeting with Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, I didn't take anything from them and I didn't give anything to them," Police Lance Corporal Naing Lin told Judge Ye Lwin, overseeing the hearing at a court in Yangon.

"I went and met with Wa Lone because he called me and requested a meeting. I didn't call Wa Lone and ask him to come meet me," said Naing Lin, who said he met the Reuters reporters over dinner and was not accompanied by any other policeman.

A previous witness, Police Captain Moe Yan Naing, has told the court a police chief ordered Naing Lin and another policeman to give "secret" documents to Wa Lone in an operation to entrap him.

The court in Yangon has been holding hearings since January to decide whether Wa Lone 32, and his Reuters colleague Kyaw Soe Oo, 28, will be charged under the colonial-era Official Secrets Act, which carries a maximum penalty of 14 years in prison, for allegedly obtaining confidential documents.