

NEWSIN brief

Palestinian president leaves hospital

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas left hospital yesterday after eight days of treatment for pneumonia that led to intense speculation over the 83-year-old's condition and who will eventually replace him. Dressed in a suit as usual and walking without assistance, Abbas gave a short statement on being discharged, saying he planned to be back at work in his office as normal today.

20 killed in suspected jihadist attack in Mali

AFP, Bamako

Around 20 people including civilians were killed in a suspected jihadist attack in northeastern Mali near the border with Niger, sources said. The deaths came after more than 100 people including many civilians died in recent months as a result of attacks by rival armed groups in the region.

George HW Bush hospitalised again

AFP, Washington

A little more than three weeks after he was released from hospital, former US president George H W Bush was re-admitted on Sunday with low blood pressure and fatigue, his spokesman said. The 41st president will likely remain at Southern Maine Health Care, in the state of Maine, under observation for a few days, McGrath wrote.

No world World Cup for Hamas inmates!

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan has said he is seeking to ban Hamas prisoners who are members of Hamas from watching the upcoming World Cup. "I have no intention of letting Hamas members who are detainees in our prisons enjoy the World Cup while we have Israeli hostages and soldiers in the Gaza Strip," Erdan said.

No talks with Pakistan till it shuns terrorism

Says Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj

PTI, New Delhi

There cannot be any comprehensive dialogue with Pakistan till it shuns terrorism, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj said yesterday, asserting talks were not appropriate while people are dying on the border.

"We are always ready for talks with Pakistan but with a caveat that terror and talks cannot go together... There cannot be A comprehensive dialogue till Pakistan shuns terror," the minister said while addressing a press conference at the completion of four years in power of the Narendra Modi-led government.

"When people are dying on the border, talk of dialogue is not appropriate," she added.

She was replying to a question on whether India-Pakistan talks can take place after the general elections there.

However, she admitted that the NSAs

of India and Pakistan met to hold "talks on terror".

The minister also hit out at Pakistan over its "Gilgit Baltistan Order 2018" relating to administrative control over Gilgit-Baltistan, saying Pakistan always "distorts history".

Pakistan's Cabinet on May 21 approved Gilgit-Baltistan Order 2018 which was also endorsed by the assembly of the region. The order is being seen as Islamabad's efforts towards incorporating the disputed region as its fifth province.

India yesterday summoned Pakistan's Deputy High Commissioner Syed Haider Shah in New Delhi and lodged a strong protest over Islamabad's latest move.

Pakistan yesterday termed India's claim over Jammu and Kashmir as "spurious" and said it contradicts everything from history to the situation on the ground.



Indian leftist activists with the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI) attack a plainclothes policeman (R) during a protest against the central government over high fuel prices, in Kolkata, yesterday. Protests across India were called in response to the increased cost of petrol and diesel, as high global crude oil prices were passed onto consumers.

PHOTO: AFP

SANCTIONS ON IRAN, VENEZUELA

India to ignore US

AFP, New Delhi

India will keep trading with Iran and Venezuela despite the threat of fallout from US sanctions against the two countries, Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj said yesterday.

Swaraj, asked at a news conference whether US action against Iran and Venezuela would damage India, said the country would not make foreign policy "under pressure".

US President Donald Trump this month withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal and ordered the reimposition of sanctions suspended under the 2015 accord.

Washington has also tightened sanctions against Venezuela over the controversial re-election of President Nicolas Maduro.

Both countries are key oil suppliers to India and the United States has warned that foreign companies which deal with Iran could themselves be punished.

But Swaraj said New Delhi did not believe in "reactionary" policies and would not be dictated to by other countries.

"We don't make our foreign policy under pressure from other countries," she told a news conference.

"We believe in UN sanctions but not in country-specific sanctions."

Swaraj's comments came just before a meeting with her Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif in New Delhi.

Bilateral trade between India and Iran amounted to \$12.9 billion in 2016-17. India imported \$10.5 billion worth of goods, mainly crude oil, and exported commodities worth \$2.4 billion.

India has other interests in Iran, in particular a commitment to build the port of Chabahar on the Gulf of Oman.

The port is being touted as a way for India to establish trade routes that bypass rival Pakistan.

Media reports have speculated India could revive a rupee-rial payment arrangement with Iran to shield exporters from the heat of US sanctions.

Swaraj also said India would continue trading with Venezuela, but there was no plan to use its local cryptocurrency in oil trade.

"We cannot have any trade in cryptocurrency as it is banned by the Reserve Bank of India. We will see which medium we can use for trade," she said.

China to host Iran leader amid nuke deal crisis

AFP, Beijing

Iran's president will attend a summit with his Chinese and Russian counterparts next month, officials in Beijing said yesterday, as they try to salvage the nuclear deal thrown into upheaval by Donald Trump.

China, Russia and European powers, all of which signed the 2015 Iran nuclear accord, are scrambling to save the pact following the US president's decision to quit the agreement and reinstate sanctions.

China's President Xi Jinping will meet Iran's Hassan Rouhani on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meeting on June 9-10 in Qingdao, said Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

Russian President Vladimir Putin will also attend the summit, he added. Wang did not include the nuclear deal in a readout of the summit's formal agenda.

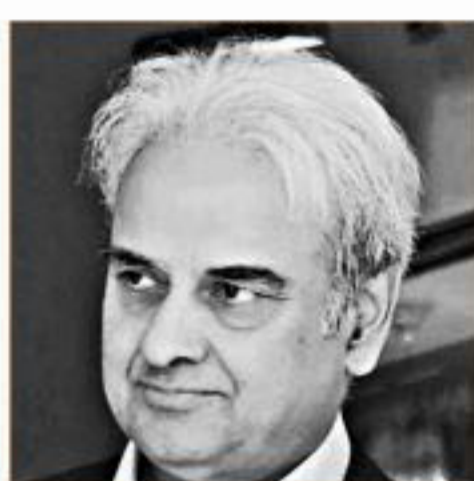
But Beijing, which is Iran's top trade partner and one of the biggest buyers of its oil, has signalled that it intends to keep working with the Islamic regime despite the US move.

Chinese businesses are expected to step up activities in Iran to fill the void left by the exit of US companies and the possible withdrawal of European rivals for fear of punitive measures enforced by the US.

Iran is currently an observer member of the SCO, though it has long sought full membership.

The regional bloc focusing on security and trade also includes four ex-Soviet Central Asian republics and two new members, Pakistan and India.

The summit will discuss a three-year action plan to "fight the three evil forces" -- terrorism, separatism and extremism -- and strengthen cooperation on tackling cybersecurity breaches and drug trafficking, Wang said.



PAKISTAN POLLS

Former CJ appointed as caretaker PM

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's ruling and opposition parties yesterday announced the appointment of a former Supreme Court chief justice as caretaker prime minister.

The selection of Nasir ul Mulk comes days after the country's president announced that general elections will be held on July 25 -- setting up what would only be Pakistan's second ever democratic transfer of power.

"Today is an important day in the democratic history of Pakistan, the name was chosen after consensus was reached," said Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi during a press conference.

Mulk famously helped pave the way for the removal of former PM Yousaf Raza Gilani after he was convicted for contempt in 2012 for refusing to ask Swiss authorities to reopen corruption cases against then president Asif Ali Zardari.

The current government's tenure will end on May 31. Power will then be handed over to a caretaker administration after the parliament is dissolved until a new government is formed following elections.

The July polls will bring to a head political tensions that have been mounting since former prime minister Nawaz Sharif was ousted by the Supreme Court on corruption charges last July and later barred from politics for life.



Buddhist monks collect alms one day before Vesak day in Magelang, yesterday. Buddhists in Indonesia mark Vesak Day on May 29 to celebrate the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha.

PHOTO: AFP

Modi invites himself over for dosa-idli

PTI, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday invited himself over for a treat of dosas and idlis at the house of a Tamil Nadu woman who is one of the beneficiaries of the 'Ujjwala Yojna', a flagship welfare scheme of his government aimed at increasing LPG cylinder coverage among poor families.

"How has having a gas cylinder been useful?" asked Modi of Rudramma, from the Krishnagiri district in western Tamil Nadu.

"Before I used to cook on wood stove, now it's much easier," replied Rudramma in Tamil, through a translator, during an interaction of the PM with the 'Ujjwala Yojna's beneficiaries.

"Did you make dosa and idls before getting a gas cylinder?" asked the PM, to which Rudramma replied saying, "it was very difficult to make them before." Now, she added, it's a lot easier to make the favourite south Indian snacks.

That's when the PM surprised Rudramma by inviting himself over for a meal of dosas.

"Will you make me some dosas when I come over?" he asked Rudramma, and she agreed with alacrity.



Suicide blasts kill three in NE Nigeria

AFP, Kano

Two female suicide bombers suspected to be Boko Haram jihadists killed at least three people in northeast Nigeria, emergency services said Monday.

The bombers detonated their explosives inside a house and near a mosque in the Mashamari area of Konduga, 35 kilometres (20 miles) southeast of the Borno State capital Maiduguri, on Sunday evening.

The attack came two weeks after five militia members were killed by a male bomber who detonated explosives concealed on him at a checkpoint outside Konduga.

Boko Haram's nine-year violence to create a hard-line Islamic state has killed 20,000 people and displaced 2.6 million from their homes in Nigeria.

India to procure arms worth Rs 6,900 crore

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

The Indian government yesterday cleared the procurement of weapons valued at over Rs 6,900 crore as New Delhi aggressively pushes for modernization of the armed forces in the face traditional rivals Pakistan and China.

The money will be used to procure Thermal Imaging (TI) Night Sights for the Rocket Launcher (RL) used by the Army and the Air Force. TI accurately targets enemy bunkers even in complete darkness.

The system will be bought from established Indian vendors in effort to boost indigenisation, the Defence Ministry said in a statement.

The clearance was given at a meeting of the Defence Acquisition Committee headed by Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman.

The Committee also accorded approval for undertaking Design and Development of the Long Range Dual Band Infrared Imaging Search and Track System (IRST) for SU-30 MKI fighter aircraft, a system which will be able to operate in day and night conditions and substantially enhance the capabilities of the aircraft.

"In the last eight months alone, the DAC has pursued modernisation of the armed forces with greater vigour and has accorded major thrust on indigenisation. Approvals for procurement of equipment valued at approx Rs 43,844 crore, have been accorded, of which, Rs 32,253 crore would be Made-in-India, through the indigenous route," statement added.

Pakistan military bars ex-spy chief from leaving country

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's military yesterday took the unprecedented step of preventing a former spy chief from leaving the country, after he ignited a storm by co-authoring a book that touches on Pakistan's alleged roles in Afghanistan and Kashmir.

Retired Lieutenant General Asad Durrani, who headed Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) from 1990 to 1992, was placed on the Exit Control List (ECL) stopping him from leaving the country, according to the military spokesman.

Durrani has been mired in controversy since last week's release of "The Spy Chronicles: RAW, ISI and the Illusion of Peace". He wrote the book with AS Dulat, who headed India's Research and Analysis Wing intelligence agency -- arch-rivals of the ISI.

It is based on a series of discussion between the two on various subjects including tense relations with India and Pakistan's alleged interference through proxies in

Afghanistan and Kashmir.

The US has long accused the ISI in particular of backing militants in Afghanistan, including the Taliban. Islamabad denies the claims.

Criticism of the military, especially its use of proxies in regional conflicts, is seen as taboo in the country. The military is the most powerful institution in Pakistan, ruling the country for roughly half its history and operating largely with impunity.

The book also suggests that the Pakistani authorities may have known about the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden -- an extraordinarily sensitive topic for the military -- and may have later handed over information to the US resulting in the 2011 raid that killed the al-Qaeda supreme.

Earlier yesterday Durrani was summoned to the Pakistani military headquarters for allegedly violating the institution's code of conduct over comments he made in the book. The military did not specify which comments had prompted the meeting.

