

Mid-air scare

Indian FM's flight to Mauritius goes missing for 14 minutes

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

An Indian Air Force aircraft carrying External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj to South Africa went incommunicado for fourteen minutes on June 2, sparking a mid-air security scare after the Mauritius Air Traffic Control pressed the panic button.

Contact could not be established with the Indian Air Force's Embraer 135 plane after it left the jurisdiction of Male (Maldives) Air Traffic Control and entered the Mauritius airspace on June 2, the state-owned Airports Authority of India (AAI) said in a statement on Sunday.

But instead of the waiting for the mandatory 30 minutes, the "uncertainty" phase, the first stage of an emergency situation, was activated, known as INCERFA in aviation parlance, it said.

"Mauritius ATC activated the uncertainty phase without allowing the stipulated time period of 30 minutes to lapse from the time when the aircraft last contacted ATC. This was perhaps done because the flight was carrying a VIP," the AAI said.

Since the Embraer aircraft, carrying the minister does not have a long range flying, it had stopovers at Thiruvananthapuram in India and Mauritius for refuelling.

Soon after it entered the jurisdiction of the Mauritius ATC, the incident unfolded leading to panic. However, there was a sigh of relief when the aircraft came in contact with the ATC there, the AAI said.

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs has not commented on the issue so far.

Swaraj is in South Africa to attend the meetings of two trans-continental groupings Brazil, Russia, India, China South Africa (BRICS) and India Brazil South Africa (BSA).



(Clockwise from left) Firefighters pray after Fuego volcano erupted violently in San Juan Alotenango, Guatemala on Sunday. A volunteer firefighter takes a child to a safe place after the eruption. Women react inside a shelter after narrowly escaping river of lava that flowed down the streets of their village. Story on page 12.



PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP



Jordan PM quits after austerity protests

AFP, Amman

Jordanian Prime Minister Hani Mulki resigned yesterday after he was summoned by King Abdullah II over growing protests against his government's austerity measures, a government source said.

"Prime Minister Hani Mulki submitted his resignation to the king this afternoon during a meeting at the Husseiniyeh Palace and the king accepted the resignation," the source told AFP.

The king asked Education Minister Omar al-Razzaz to form a new government, the source added.

Demonstrations have rocked the capital Amman and several other cities since Wednesday after the government adopted a draft income tax law and announced new price hikes based on recommendations by the International Monetary Fund.

Protesters had called on Mulki to step down, vowing not to "kneel" and earning support from trade unions as well as a majority of MPs opposed to the new taxation.

The premier's meeting with the king came hours after around 5,000 people rallied outside Mulki's office in Amman, on the fifth consecutive day of protests in Amman and other cities.

Jordan, a mostly desert kingdom with few resources, has seen prices of several basic goods and services like bread, fuel and electricity steadily rise over the past year.

N KOREA'S MILITARY RESHUFFLE

Move raises eyebrows ahead of nuke summit

AFP, Seoul

South Korea is monitoring developments in the North's armed forces, it said yesterday after reports Pyongyang replaced three of its top military officials ahead of a summit with the United States.

President Donald Trump is due to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un on June 12 in Singapore, with Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal high on the agenda.

Reports said the reshuffle could be aimed at eliminating resistance to the peace overtures.

The US officials believe there was some dissension in the military about Kim's approaches to South Korea and the United States.

Pyeongyang's armed forces, known as the Korean People's Army, are immensely influential in the North and a centre of power in their own right, symbolised by the way Kim is habitually flanked by generals on one side and civilians on the other when attending major ceremonial events.

Late last month the North's state media revealed that Kim Su Gil had been appointed director of the military's powerful General Political Bureau (GPB), replacing Kim Jong Gak.

According to Yonhap news agency, which cited intelligence sources, the chief of the general staff Ri Myong Su has also been replaced by his deputy, Ri Yong Gil.

Defence minister Pak Yong Sik has been succeeded by No Kwang Chol, previously first vice minister, it added.

The wholesale reshuffle would be unusual if confirmed, Seoul's unification ministry said.

"We will monitor related developments," ministry spokesman Baik Tae-hyun told reporters.

According to researchers at NK Leadership Watch, the change at the top of the GPB "represents a continuation of tightening Party control over the KPA".

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US officials believe there was dissension in military over Kim's approach to South Korea, US

Seven people killed in Kabul suicide blast

AFP, Kabul

At least seven people were killed in a suicide bombing yesterday near a gathering of top clerics in Afghanistan's capital Kabul, roughly one hour after the group proclaimed such attacks a sin, police said.

The blast in the western part of the city, near universities and a police academy, is the latest demonstration of the militants' chilling ability to carry out attacks in the heart of Kabul, which is now the deadliest place in the country for civilians.

The bomber detonated at about 11:30 am at the gates of Kabul's Polytechnic University, police and officials said. The Loya Jirga tent where thousands of clerics from across Afghanistan were meeting is on the campus.

The tent is a huge venue often used for top religious or government gatherings.

US, China tussle over Tiananmen anniversary

AFP, Beijing

China lashed out at the United States yesterday after Washington marked the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen protests by urging Beijing to disclose how many people were killed in the crackdown.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a statement to "remember the tragic loss of innocent lives" on June 4, 1989, when the Communist Party sent tanks to quash the peaceful demonstrations around Tiananmen Square in Beijing.

Open discussion of the crackdown is forbidden in China, where hundreds -- perhaps more -- died. A British diplomatic cable released last year said at least 10,000 people were killed.

Pompeo quoted the dissident Liu Xiaobo, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate who died of cancer while in custody last year, as saying: "The ghosts of June 4th have not yet been laid to rest."

The chief US diplomat added: "We join

others in the international community in urging the Chinese government to make a full public accounting of those killed, detained or missing."

He also urged China to release those jailed for trying to keep the memory of the protests alive, and stop harassing Tiananmen participants and their relatives.

The protests are branded a "counter-revolutionary rebellion" by Chinese authorities and many on the mainland remain unaware of the crackdown due to censorship.

"The Chinese government has already come to a clear conclusion regarding the political disturbances that occurred in the late 1980s," Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying told a regular press briefing.

Pompeo's statement is "groundlessly accusing the Chinese government and interfering in China's internal affairs. The Chinese side is strongly dissatisfied and resolutely opposes this," Hua said.



An anti-riot policeman stands guard in front of migrants sitting aboard a bus after being evicted by French police from a makeshift camp along the Canal de Saint-Martin at Quai de Valmy in Paris yesterday. More than 500 migrants and refugees were evacuated from the camp.

PHOTO: AFP

FB defends sharing user data with phone makers

AFP, Washington

Facebook said yesterday that it does not know of any privacy abuse by cellphone makers who years ago were able to gain access to personal data on users and their friends.

The social media leader said it "disagreed" with the conclusions of a New York Times report that found that the device makers could access information on Facebook users' friends without their explicit consent.

Facebook enabled device makers to interface with it at a time when it was building its service and they were developing new smartphone and social media technology.

But the Times said the access continued even after Facebook agreed with the Federal Trade Commission in 2011 to better protect data and only share it after obtaining consumers' express consent.

Facebook, which came under attack early this year over British political consultant Cambridge Analytica's harvesting of personal data on 87 million Facebook users and their friends, did not deny the Times story but said it "disagreed" with the issues raised.

Before now-ubiquitous apps standardized the social media experience on smartphones, some 60 device makers like Amazon, Apple, Blackberry, HTC, Microsoft and Samsung worked with Facebook to adapt interfaces for the Facebook website to their own phones, the company said.

"We controlled them tightly from the get-go," said Ime Archibong, VP of Product Partnerships, in a statement.

NEWSIN brief

Palestinian shot dead trying to breach border

AFP, Jerusalem

A Palestinian armed with an axe was shot dead trying to breach the Gaza-Israel border yesterday, the Israeli army said. An army statement said troops thwarted an "infiltration attempt" by "two terrorists who damaged the security fence and were armed with an axe." Soldiers "fired towards the terrorists, killing one of them," it added, without clarifying what happened to the second suspect.

Saudi issues driving licences to women

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia yesterday began issuing its first driving licences to women in decades, state media reported. "The general directorate of traffic today started replacing international driving licences recognised in the kingdom with Saudi licences, in preparation for allowing women to drive from June 24," the official Saudi Press Agency said. A ban on women driving in the kingdom has been hailed as proof of a progressive trend.

Anti-immigration party wins Slovenia elections

REUTERS, Ljubljana

An anti-immigration opposition party won Slovenia's parliamentary election on Sunday, taking 25 percent of the vote, according to preliminary results. However, the centre-right Slovenia Democratic Party (SDS) of former prime minister Janez Jansa may struggle to pull together a government as its hardline stance on immigration has left it short of potential coalition partners.

Japan FM returns salary over scandal

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's Finance Minister Taro Aso said yesterday he was returning a year's salary after his ministry scrubbed public documents related to a cronyism scandal that has dogged Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

But he ruled out resigning after it emerged ministry officials had removed hundreds of references to Abe, his wife, and Aso from documents related to the sale of state land at below-market prices.

"I am voluntarily returning 12 months of my salary as a cabinet minister, as this problem has hurt public confidence in the finance ministry and the administration as a whole," Taro Aso told reporters.

But he added, "I am not thinking about stepping down", as he announced the findings of the ministry's in-house probe.

Aso is the richest minister in Abe's cabinet because of his family's massive fortune made in the mining business. He also earns some 30 million yen (\$274,000) a year as a cabinet minister.

Aso said the ministry had penalised around 20 officials, imposing pay cuts in some cases and issuing verbal reprimands to others.

"Officially approved administrative documents should never have been altered and submitted to parliament. I find this extremely regrettable," he said.

MUELLER'S RUSSIA PROBE

Trump asserts 'absolute right' to pardon himself

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump yesterday said he had committed no wrongdoing but had "absolute" legal power to pardon himself, echoing an argument put forth by his lawyers in a memo to the US special counsel investigating alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 US election.

In the memo, reported by the New York Times on Saturday, Trump's lawyers argued the president could not have obstructed the investigation, given the powers granted to him by the US Constitution.

The 20-page letter to Special Counsel Robert Mueller in January came in response to repeated requests by the special counsel's office asking to interview Trump, according to the Times.

"As has been stated by numerous legal

scholars, I have the absolute right to PARDON myself, but why would I do that when I have done nothing wrong?" Trump wrote in a Twitter post yesterday, reiterating his claim that the Russia investigation was a "witch hunt."

"The appointment of the Special Counsel (sic) is totally UNCONSTITUTIONAL," Trump said in another post.

Russia has denied US intelligence agencies' assessment that Moscow sought to interfere with the 2016 US election to boost Donald Trump's prospects of becoming president. Trump has also said there was no collusion by his campaign.

On a Sunday, Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani had said in an interview on ABC's "This Week" program that the president probably has the power to pardon himself but does not plan to do so.



Dirty Duterte!

REUTERS, Manila

A kiss by Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte on a Filipino woman's lips while on an official visit in South Korea sparked anger and jokes yesterday, as feminists denounced what they called his "perverted way" of taunting his female critics.

Many Filipinos, however, thought it was a harmless kiss intended to be fun.

The 73-year-old Duterte, whose critics have labelled him a misogynist and say his comments are derogatory and demeaning towards women, dismissed the kiss as just a "gimmick" to entertain supporters at a meet-and-greet event in Seoul.

Social media was abuzz with photos and videos of Duterte on stage before a crowd of Filipinos on Sunday night, when he asked an unidentified audience member to kiss him in exchange for a book he was handing out.

The woman, who admitted she is married and appeared excited to see Duterte in person, agreed.

Duterte then told the cheering crowd of about 3,000: "Don't take it seriously. It's just for fun, a gimmick."

State-run Philippine News Agency identified the woman as Bea Kim and posted a brief video interview with her on its Facebook page.