

NEWS IN brief



Brits reject May's Brexit plan: poll

REUTERS, London
Prime Minister Theresa May's plans to leave the European Union are overwhelmingly opposed by the British public and more than a third of voters would support a new right-wing political party committed to quitting the bloc, according to a new poll. Only 16 percent of voters say May is handling Brexit well, compared to 34 percent who say that Johnson would do a better job, according to the poll conducted by YouGov for The Sunday Times newspaper.

Dozens hurt in Nepal healthcare protest

AFP, Kathmandu
Dozens of protesters in Nepal have been injured in clashes with police at a demonstration in support of a hunger-striking doctor seeking better healthcare in the impoverished Himalayan country. Thousands took to the streets on Saturday in solidarity with Dr Govinda KC, who has been on a hunger strike for nearly a month demanding reforms in the medical sector and education. Activists yesterday said they planned more protests following the clashes.

Japan heatwave kills over a dozen

AFP, Tokyo
Japan's severe heatwave killed at least 15 people and sent more than 12,000 to hospital in the first two weeks of July, official figures show as the temperature neared 40 degrees C in many cities yesterday. Weather reports say the scorching condition may persist for some more days.



FORMER CRICKETERS TURN TO SUPPORT IMRAN KHAN

AFP, Islamabad
Former Pakistani cricket stars have come out in support of cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan as the country prepares to go to the polls on Wednesday. "It was in your leadership skip @Imrankskip that we became world champions in 1992. It is in your leadership that we can again become a great democratic country," tweeted Wasim Akram. "No one can doubt your honesty and that's what is required in our country...An honest LEADER," tweeted former captain Waqar Younis. BehindYouSkipper became one of the country's top trending hashtags as celebrities and former cricketers came to Khan's support.

PML-N CANDIDATE GETS LIFE TERM

AFP, Islamabad
A candidate for the party of Pakistan's ousted former prime minister Nawaz Sharif has been jailed for life by an anti-narcotics court, just days before a general election. Hanif Abbasi, seen as a strong candidate for the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) in Wednesday's poll, was sentenced in a rare late-night session Saturday. The six-year-old case was related to the supply of ephedrine to a drug smuggler. Critics have long accused Pakistan's powerful military, including its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, of meddling in politics and judicial affairs, a charge it denies.

'Mother of all wars'

Rouhani warns Trump over conflict with Iran, suggests peace possible

REUTERS, Dubai

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani yesterday cautioned US President Donald Trump about pursuing hostile policies against Tehran, saying "America should know... war with Iran is the mother of all wars," but he did not rule out peace between the two countries, either.

Iran faces increased US pressure and looming sanctions after Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from a 2015 international deal over Iran's nuclear programme.

Addressing a gathering of Iranian diplomats, Rouhani said: "Mr Trump, don't play with the lion's tail, this would only lead to regret," the state new agency IRNA reported.

"America should know that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace, and war with Iran is the mother of all wars," Rouhani said, leaving open the possibility of peace between the two countries which have been at odds since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

"You are not in a position to incite the Iranian nation against Iran's security and interests," Rouhani said, in an

apparent reference to reported efforts by Washington to destabilise Iran's Islamic government.

In Washington, US officials familiar with the matter told Reuters that the Trump administration has launched an offensive of speeches and online communications meant to foment unrest and help pressure Iran to end its nuclear programme and its support of

has a dominant position in the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, a major oil shipping waterway. "Anyone who understands the rudiments of politics doesn't say 'we will stop Iran's oil exports'...we have been the guarantor of the regional waterway's security throughout history," Rouhani said, cited by the semi-official ISNA news agency.

Rouhani's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Saturday backed Rouhani's suggestion that Iran may block Gulf oil exports if its own exports are halted.

Rouhani's apparent threat earlier this month to disrupt oil shipments from neighbouring countries came in reaction to efforts by Washington to force all countries to stop buying Iranian oil.

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CONTROVERSIAL CITIZENSHIP VERIFICATION DRIVE IN ASSAM

'No reason for panic or fear'

Says India as many Muslims fear being left off citizen list

REUTERS, New Delhi

India yesterday said people whose names are missing from a list of citizens to be issued by a border state this month will not be detained, amid concerns that Muslims will be targeted under the guise of detecting illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

"There is no reason for panic or fear. We will ensure that every individual gets justice and is treated in a humane manner. All individuals will have sufficient opportunity for all remedies available under the law," Rajnath Singh, India's interior minister, said in a statement.

"Any person who is not satisfied with the outcome of claims and objections can appeal in the Foreigner's Tribunal. Thus, there is no question of anyone being put in a detention centre after the publication of NRC (national register of citizens)."

For an update of the NRC to be made public on July 30, all residents of Assam state in the northeast have had to show documents proving they or their families lived in the country before March 24, 1971,

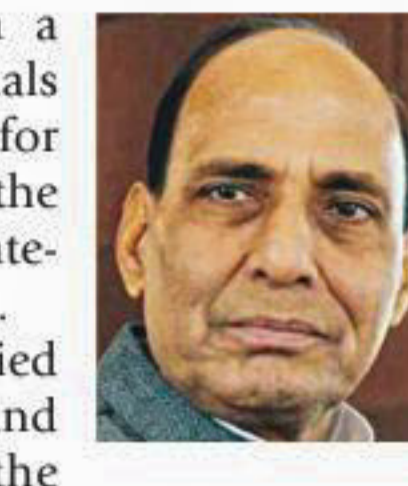
to be recognised as Indian citizens. The exercise has created panic among many Muslims in Assam because Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist party, which came to power in the state for the first time in 2016, vowed during the election campaign to act against illegal Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh.

Rights activists say the drive is also targeting Muslims who are Indian citizens, a charge the government denies.

Citizenship and illegal migration are volatile issues in tea-growing and oil-rich Assam, home to more than 32 million people, about a third of whom are Muslims.

Hundreds of people were killed in the 1980s in a violent protest by a native Assamese group.

Hundreds of thousands of people fled to India from Muslim-majority Bangladesh after it declared independence from Pakistan in 1971, setting off a nine-month civil war. Most of them settled in Assam and the neighbouring state of West Bengal, where there are similar demands to send back illegal Muslim immigrants.



Afghan VP Dostum escapes killing plot

Suicide attack at Kabul airport kills 14

REUTERS, Kabul

Afghan Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum narrowly escaped a suicide bomb attack at Kabul airport as he returned home yesterday from more than a year in exile in Turkey over allegations of torturing and abusing a political rival.

Dostum, who left Afghanistan last year after heavy pressure from Western donors including the United States, had exited the airport in a motorcade only minutes before the explosion, which police said killed at least 14 people and wounded more than 50.

He was unharmed in the blast claimed by Islamic State group. A little over a mile from where the attack took place, cheering supporters who had been waiting for hours gave him a red carpet reception at a rally at his office compound.

However, the incident underlined the increasingly volatile and unstable political climate in Kabul ahead of parliamentary elections in October that are seen as a dry run for more important presidential elections early next year.

Dostum's return followed more than two weeks of sometimes violent demonstrations by supporters demanding the release of one of his militia commanders who was arrested following a dispute with officers in the regular security forces.

Once referred to as a "quintessential warlord" by the US State Department, Dostum has long been accused of serious human rights abuses. Shortly after the US-led campaign in 2001, he was accused of killing Taliban prisoners by leaving them locked in airless cargo containers. He has denied the accusations.



Afghan security forces stand near bodies of victims following a suicide attack in Kabul, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Radicals find place in 'mainstream'

REUTERS, Lahore

Pakistani cleric Hafiz Saeed is one of the United States' most-wanted terrorist suspects, accused over the 2008 Mumbai attacks that killed 166 people. At home, his charities are banned, as is a new Islamist political party launched by his followers.

None of that has stopped Saeed from hitting the campaign trail for Pakistan's July 25 general election, denouncing the outgoing government as "traitors" and whipping up support for the more than 200 candidates he backs.

"The politics of the American servants is coming to an end!" Saeed thundered at a rally this month in the eastern city of Lahore, where supporters showered him with rose petals.

The main race in Wednesday's vote is between the party of now-jailed former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the party of former cricket star Imran Khan, perceived as the favourite of the powerful military.

But a bumper crop of ultra-Islamist groups are also contesting the poll, with the potential to reshape the political landscape of the nuclear-armed Muslim country of 208 million people with anti-Western rhetoric and calls for ever-stricter interpretation

of sharia, or Islamic law. The proliferation of religious parties appears to be a fulfilment of a proposal made by Pakistan's military to "mainstream" armed Islamists and other extremists into politics, though the parties and the army deny any links.

"The ostensible attempt to mainstream the religious right-wing is not making these parties take relatively moderate positions," said Saroop Ijaz, a lawyer for Human Rights Watch. "But rather, it's radicalising the mainstream."

Religious parties - some new, others established - are fielding more than 1,500 candidates for national and provincial assemblies, compared with a few hundred in 2013.

While Pakistan has always had Islamist parties, the new entries are notable for their alleged links to militants and their rhetorical attacks on mainstream politicians' piety or patriotism. Pakistan's three main parties all stress devotion to Islam, but the new religious parties portray them - especially the PML-N - as leading Pakistan down a Western-inspired path away from the country's Islamic values.

One new party, Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan, campaigns under the rallying cry "death to blasphemers" and is fielding 566 candidates. In May, a man police identified

as a Labaik supporter shot and wounded then-Interior Minister Ahsan Iqbal as he left a meeting. He told interrogators Iqbal had to die because he was a blasphemer.

While Tehreek-e-Labaik is a legally registered party, other movements fielding candidates are officially banned in Pakistan but have bypassed the legal restrictions.

ELECTION IN PAKISTAN

Pakistan's military promised Islamist to 'mainstream' them

Ultra-religious parties combined fielding some 1,500 candidates

Experts say their involvement radicalizing politics

Pakistan's Election Commission this year rejected Saeed's Islamic charity's application to register a political party, the Milli Muslim League, but the group later registered candidates under the name of an existing party, Allahu Akbar Tehreek, which now campaigns with Saeed's image on its posters.

Another party, the Sunni extremist Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), is also fielding dozens of candidates under a different name, even though it is banned as the political wing of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), which has killed hundreds of minority Shia Muslims. The party denies links with LeJ.

A military spokesman declined to comment on religious parties. The army denies interfering in politics. However, the military did propose "mainstreaming" militant-linked groups into politics in a 2016 National Security meeting, military and government sources have told Reuters. The plan was pitched as a way to reduce violence and extremism.

Analysts say even with the increase in candidates, Islamists are unlikely to win more than a dozen or so seats in parliament. But that might not be the point. Pakistani author and analyst Ayesha Siddiqi, a longtime critic of the military, believes the army, tired of civilian governments challenging its grip on foreign policy and large chunks of the economy, is seeking to weaken mainstream parties.

"The military wants to alter, engineer the national discourse," Siddiqi said. "They want to build a new nationalism. They want a new identity, and that is Islamic identity."



Israel to reopen Gaza crossing if calm holds

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel will reopen its only goods crossing with the blockaded Gaza Strip if calm is maintained, a minister said yesterday, after having closed it July 9 partly over kites carrying firebombs.

UN officials meanwhile warned that the Gaza Strip was facing serious fuel shortages affecting hospitals as well as water and sanitation facilities, calling for restrictions to be lifted.

Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman said that "if today and tomorrow the situation continues as it was yesterday, then on Tuesday we will allow Kerem Shalom (goods crossing) to return to normal activity and the fishing zones will return to the same distances as before."

Lieberman, speaking at the crossing, stressed that calm also meant an end to months of kites and balloons carrying firebombs over the border fence from the Palestinian enclave. Israeli authorities say hundreds of fires have been started by the firebombs since April.

Lieberman's comments came after a ceasefire was reached following a major flare-up of violence between Palestinian militants in Gaza and Israel on Friday.

The escalation - the second in as many weeks -- followed months of tension that have raised fears that a fourth war since 2008 could erupt between Hamas and Israel. The ceasefire followed a wave of deadly Israeli air strikes across Gaza sparked by the death of an Israeli soldier shot near the border.

BELT AND ROAD INFRASTRUCTURE PUSH

China offers fresh grant to Lanka

REUTERS, Colombo

Chinese President Xi Jinping has offered Sri Lanka a fresh grant of 2 billion yuan (\$295 million), as Beijing tries to expand its influence in the tiny island country off India's southern tip.

President Maithripala Sirisena of Sri Lanka, a partner in Beijing's multi-country Belt and Road infrastructure push, made the announcement on Saturday at a ceremony to mark the start of construction of a Chinese-funded kidney hospital in his home constituency of Polonnaruwa, 230 km (142.92 miles) from capital Colombo.

"When the Chinese ambassador visited my house to fix the date for this ceremony, he said that Chinese President Xi Jinping sent me another gift," Sirisena told the gathering. "He has gifted 2 billion yuan to be utilized for any project of my wish. I'm going to hand over a proposal to the Chinese ambassador to build houses in all the electorates in the country," he added.

Reuters could not immediately contact officials from the Chinese embassy in Sri Lanka for comment. The grant offer comes at a time when a Chinese firm is facing heavy criticism for allegedly financing the last election campaign of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa here.

Israel evacuates White Helmets

Hundreds of Syrian rescuers taken to Jordan for resettlement in the West as regime set to take control of full country

REUTERS, Jerusalem/Amman

Hundreds of members of Syria's "White Helmet" civil defence group and their families fled advancing government forces and slipped over the border into Jordan overnight with the help of Israeli soldiers and Western powers, officials said.

Israel's military said on Twitter that Washington and European governments had asked it to move the White Helmets and their families out of southwest Syria as there was "an immediate threat to their lives".

The Syrian Civil Defense group has been widely hailed in the West and credited with saving thousands of lives by operating emergency rescue services in rebel-held areas during years of bombing attacks by Damascus and its allies.

The group says it is politically neutral but Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his backers have said they see the White Helmets as Western-sponsored propaganda tools and proxies of Islamist-led insurgents.

brought from Syria, over the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights frontier and into Jordan, down from a figure of 800 announced earlier by the foreign ministry in Amman.

The evacuees will be kept in a "closed" location in Jordan and resettled in Britain, Germany and Canada within three months, the source added.

Britain hailed the evacuation, saying it and other allies had requested it. German weekly magazine Bild, which broke news of the evacuation and published footage of buses used to transport the Syrians across Golan, said 50 of them would be granted asylum by Berlin.

A Canadian Foreign Ministry statement on Saturday said the White Helmets "have witnessed vicious atrocities committed by the Assad regime and its backers". It added: "We feel a deep moral responsibility to these brave and selfless people."

Israel agreed to evacuate the White Helmets "given the evident fact that Assad's rule is again taking hold in all of Syria," Israeli Minister Tzachi Hanegbi said in a radio interview.



An explosion is seen at Quneitra at the Syrian side of the Israeli Syrian border, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS