

NEWSIN brief

N Korea to return US war remains soon

AFP, Seoul

North Korea will soon return the remains of some of the US soldiers killed in the Korean War, the South's Yonhap news agency reported yesterday, starting a process agreed by leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump. Repatriating the remains of US soldiers who perished during the 1950-53 Korean War was part of an agreement signed by Kim and Trump.

Taliban attack on Afghan convoy kills 5

AFP, Kabul

A suicide bomber blew himself up near an Afghan intelligence convoy yesterday, killing at least five people and wounding six, police said, in the latest deadly attack in the city. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack on the National Directorate of Security (NDS).

Myanmar landslide: 8 bodies recovered

REUTERS, Yangon

Authorities in northern Myanmar recovered eight bodies yesterday after a landslide that engulfed 27 small-scale jade miners, an official said. A search was continuing for others trapped or washed away when muddy earth slid from a cliff in Kachin state on Monday.

New Ebola virus found in S Leone

AFP, Freetown

A new Ebola virus has been found in bats in Sierra Leone, two years after the end of an outbreak that killed over 11,000 across West Africa, the government said yesterday. It is not yet known whether the new Bomboko species of the virus -- which researchers say could be transmitted to humans -- can develop into the deadly Ebola disease.



A woman (C) is dragged away by plain-clothed security after talking with journalists at the scene of an explosion outside the US embassy compound in Beijing yesterday. A 26-year-old Chinese man set off a small explosive device outside the US embassy in Beijing, injuring his hand in the blast before he was taken into custody, police said.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Paschimbanga will be 'Bangla' soon

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

The Paschimbanga Bidhan Shabha yesterday unanimously passed a resolution to use Bangla in three languages as the name of the state.

Earlier on August 29, 2016 the state Bidhan Shabha proposed three changes. Those were "Bangla" in Bengali, "Bangal" in Hindi and Bengal in English. But the central cabinet rejected it and asked the Bidhan Shabha to adopt only one name. In this regard the central cabinet also give some advice.

After months of exchanges of between centre and state, the state government finally decided in principle to finalise one name for all languages. In continuation the bill for amending the name was placed in the Paschimbanga Bidhan Shabha yesterday noon. The name was passed unanimously.

The name "Bangla" will now be sent to the centre. After the central government approves the new name President Ramnath Kovind will approve it.

The state name is Paschimbanga in Bangla language but in English it is written West Bengal.

When written alphabetically the name West Bengal gets its position in the lower in international arena and the representatives of Paschimbanga are called later in evaluation of development works. So when the matter was brought to the notice of chief minister Mamata Banerjee in 2011 announced the change of the state name to West Bengal to Paschimbanga.

Seeing the positive attitude of the central government, Paschimbanga ruling party Trinamool Congress thinks finally this time the new name of the state is going to be Bangla.

Most of the top govt officials are corrupt

Malaysia's new prime minister tells CNN

CNN ONLINE

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who staged a stunning election upset earlier this year to return to power aged 92, said he inherited a government lousy with corruption and with few trustworthy officials.

"From outside we saw the damage, but we never expected the damage to be so extensive," he told CNN at his offices in Putrajaya, south of the capital Kuala Lumpur. "Most of the top echelons in the government are corrupt."

Mahathir's predecessor and former protege Najib Razak has been charged with multiple counts of corruption for allegedly embezzling millions in public money from Malaysia's 1MDB fund.

"I have to work with some of those people who are suspect," Mahathir said. "It's a very difficult job, if you don't work with people you trust, you don't know whether what you want them to do will be done or not."

Credited with turning Malaysia into a

major trading and economic force in Southeast Asia, Mahathir left politics in 2003, but he returned with a vengeance this year, determined to oust Najib, who he blasted as corrupt and dictatorial.

To do so, he teamed up with former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who Mahathir himself once jailed, to lead a coalition of opposition parties which succeeded in toppling Najib in a landslide.

Now Mahathir is back at the seat of power: literally, his staff said he uses the same desk as during his previous premiership.

"If the condition for us working together is my serving as Prime Minister for two years or three years, for me that is not important," Mahathir said.

"I will abide by the wishes of the people."

Referring to Beijing's increasingly assertive behavior in the South China Sea -- which it claims almost all of as its territory, including islands claimed by Malaysia -- he added "we cannot go to war with them."



MINORITY PROTESTS

Indian police detain 450 in Maharashtra

AFP, Mumbai

Almost 450 people were in custody in the Indian state of Maharashtra yesterday after clashes between thousands of protestors from the Maratha minority and police charging with batons and firing tear gas, officials said.

Like other communities in India the Marathas, who make up around 30 percent of the western state's 110 million people, want quotas or "reservations" to ensure they get jobs in the government and education.

"We have detained 447 people for their involvement in arson and stone-pelting and action will be taken against them,"

Deepak Deoraj, a spokesperson for Mumbai police, told AFP a day after the clashes on Wednesday.

Trump delays second Putin summit to next yr

Says Bolton as Pompeo faces Congress over Russia ties

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump on Wednesday delayed a second summit with Russia's Vladimir Putin, while his top diplomat insisted there was no let up against Moscow following the two leaders' controversial meeting in Helsinki.

Facing mounting calls to release the details of Trump's closed-door talks with Putin, the US administration stepped up its damage control operation, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo going before Congress to defend his boss.

The US president himself, under fire for plans to invite Putin to the White House in the fall, opted to delay until 2019 -- pushing the talks back until Robert Mueller has completed his probe into Moscow's election interference, according to National Security Advisor John Bolton.

And Pompeo went on the offensive to

stress steps Trump has taken to show resolve against the Kremlin, stepping into a white-hot spotlight during a three-hour grilling by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

The top diplomat said he would back bipartisan efforts in Congress to slap new sanctions on Russia in response to their meddling in the 2016 US election, and as a deterrent against meddling this year or in 2020.

"I personally made clear to the Russians that there will be severe consequences for interference in our democratic processes," he said in his opening statement.

But Pompeo remained frustratingly vague about perhaps the biggest question of all: what transpired in the private meeting between Trump and Putin?

Pompeo reaffirmed as official policy that the United States "rejects Russia's attempted annexation of Crimea" -- an issue on which Trump had appeared to waver.



'The door remains open'

France says Britain could cancel Brexit and stay in EU on same terms it currently enjoys

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Britain could still cancel Brexit and stay in the European Union on the same terms it currently enjoys, the French government has said.

Nathalie Loiseau, the country's European affairs minister, said yesterday France and other member states still did not want Britain to leave the bloc.

The confirmation by the national minister comes amid the looming prospect of a no deal, with the two sides apparently deadlocked on the issue of an Irish border backstop.

Senior EU figures, such as Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker and Council president Donald Tusk, have both said Brexit is still reversible.

Whether the triggering of Article 50 -- which began Britain's legal move towards the exit door -- can actually be cancelled is, however, the subject of legal dispute.

"We have always said, always, that the door would remain open and that we were

not the ones who wanted to diverge from the United Kingdom," Loiseau told BBC Radio 4's Today programme.

"It was the British people who decided to leave the European Union."

Asked whether the UK could stay in on the same terms it had now, she replied: "Sure, of course. [Like] every single member state of the European Union, we have one conviction, which is that the best possible status is being a member, the most profitable status."

The European Commission has said that if Britain leaves it would have to reapply to join the bloc in the usual way -- meaning the UK would likely not be granted its old rebate and preferential treatment it currently has.

Speaking on the same programme, Loiseau warned the British government its strategy of trying to negotiate directly with member states to get a better deal than from the Commission would not work.

Britain, bloc apparently deadlocked on the issue of Irish border backstop

No ninjas needed

AFP, Tokyo

A Japanese city has been left fighting off wannabe ninjas after a news report on local labour shortages that suggested it wanted to hire the traditional assassins went viral.

The western city of Iga was featured in a report by American radio station NPR this month about Japan's depopulation and labour shortage problems.

The report said Iga was trying to capitalise on its history as home to ninjas by building a new museum focused on the warriors, but was struggling to hire staff, including ninja performers.

In its reporting, NPR said ninja performers in Japan can earn anywhere between \$23-85,000 a year. But a number of copycat reports by other media or viral sites went with less nuanced headlines such as: "This town in Japan will pay you an \$85,000 salary to train as a ninja."

By Wednesday, at least 115 aspiring assassins had contacted the city and its local tourism association, puzzled Iga officials said. "Iga didn't put out information about 'a lack of ninjas in Iga' or the 'annual income of ninjas', that is currently reported by some news sites on the Internet," the city said on its website.

In a statement issued in Japanese, English and three other languages, the city tried to squelch the hopes of applicants, adding: "Please be careful about fake news."

Newspaper closures leave coverage in state's hands

REUTERS, Caracas

Almost three-quarters of Venezuela's newspapers have closed during five years of recession in the once-prosperous OPEC member country, according to the national journalism association, leaving El Nacional as the last independent national daily.

Press watchdogs warn that media freedom declined over the past year, which saw President Nicolas Maduro win a fresh six-year term in May at elections boycotted by the opposition.

Venezuela slid six places in Reporters Without Borders' index of world press freedom to 143 place from 180 countries surveyed.

According to Venezuela's Press Institute IPYS, the national telecoms regulator also closed 40 radio stations in 2017 citing irregularities in their licenses.

Maduro's government says it treats all

media outlets equally and there is freedom of expression. However, it has publicly said it wants more control over the media, which in the past was openly anti-government and welcomed a brief coup in 2002 against then-President Hugo Chavez.

The closures have left coverage increasingly in the hands of state-controlled radio and television outlets and pro-government newspapers like Ultimas Noticias, covering Maduro's official activities while ignoring rising levels of malnutrition and disease.

"Only the debris of the bourgeois media is left," Maduro said in a speech in June during the country's national journalists' day.

Venezuela's Information Ministry did not respond to multiple requests for comment on the government's treatment of the media.

MEDIA INTIMIDATION IN VENEZUELA



Top US envoy meets with Taliban in Qatar

AFP, Washington

The top US envoy for South Asia has met with Taliban officials for peace talks in Qatar, the Wall Street Journal reported yesterday.

Alice Wells, the senior official for the State Department's Bureau of South and Central Asia Affairs, met with the Taliban this week to try to find a new path toward ending Afghanistan's 17-year conflict, the Journal reported, citing people familiar with the matter.

A member of the Taliban's leadership council -- the Quetta Shura -- confirmed to AFP that members of the militant group had met with US officials in Doha on Monday.

The Taliban leader did not name Wells but said "a woman" was in the US delegation.

The first round of talks was aimed at building trust between the two sides, he told AFP. The next meeting, which could happen as early as July 31, would be "more important."

An unprecedented three-day ceasefire involving Afghan security forces and the Taliban last month had raised hopes that peace was possible in the war-torn country. But fighting resumed and Western and Afghan observers in Kabul have said the United States needs to speak directly to the Taliban to keep momentum going.

The Taliban have long insisted on direct talks with the United States, which Washington has repeatedly refused,



Mourners carry the body of Palestinian Hamas militant Ahmed Albassous who was killed in Israeli tank fire the previous day, during his funeral at a mosque in Gaza City yesterday. The military wing of Gaza's rulers Hamas have vowed revenge after Israeli strikes killed three members of the group in the latest flare-up of violence.

PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians to chair Group of 77 at UN

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

The state of Palestine has been elected as presiding country of the Group of 77, the biggest bloc of developing countries at the United Nations, a move that has irked Israel.

The Group of 77 was established in 1964 by 77 countries and was designed to promote their collective economic interests, as well as to enhance their joint negotiating capacity on all major international economic issues within the UN.

Over the years, the bloc has expanded to include 135 members today, which represents 80 percent of the world's population. The bloc also speaks as one voice at the General Assembly.

Palestine will take over from the current presiding country Egypt in January 2019.

In a telephone interview with The New York Times, Palestine's UN ambassador Riyad Mansour confirmed the move, and said Palestine "will be negotiating on behalf of 135 countries."

The move is widely regarded a progressive on behalf of Palestine, which holds an observer non-member state status at the UN. However, Israel has already voiced its strong opposition.

"The goal of the Group of 77 originally was to facilitate the economic advancement of underdeveloped nations," Israel's ambassador, Danny Danon said in a statement to The New York Times.

"It is unfortunate that it will now become a platform for spreading lies and incitement. This will not promote the G-77's goals, and encourages the Palestinians to not engage in negotiations for peace."

Israel's ally, the US, raised the ire of the Palestinian Authority by recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel last December.