

NEWS IN brief

Attack on Afghanistan training centre kills 2

AFP, Kabul
An hours-long militant attack on a midwife training centre in eastern Afghanistan yesterday killed at least two people and wounded five, police said. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the latest attack, but most of the recent assaults in the city have been carried out by the Islamic State group.

Zimbabwe readies for post-Mugabe polls

AFP, Harare
Zimbabwe goes to the polls tomorrow in its first election since authoritarian leader Robert Mugabe was ousted last year, with allegations mounting of voter fraud and predictions of a disputed result. President Emmerson Mnangagwa faces opposition leader Nelson Chamisa in the landmark vote.

Catalan ex-leader back in Belgium

AFP, Brussels
Catalonia's deposed president Carles Puigdemont yesterday vowed to "defend the just cause of the Catalan people" as he held a news conference on his return to Belgium. Puigdemont was able to travel from Germany to Belgium, where he has a home, as he no longer risks extradition to Spain after a court dropped a European arrest warrant for him.

Disaster-hit Japan braces for typhoon

AFP, Tokyo
A powerful typhoon hurtled towards Japan yesterday, prompting local authorities to issue early evacuation orders, with western areas recently devastated by floods and landslides in the storm's crosshairs. Typhoon Jongdari, packing winds of up to 180 kilometres an hour, is forecast to make landfall on the country's main island on Saturday night or early today.



Don't 'walk away' on AIDS

Plays Bill Clinton
AFP, Amsterdam
Bill Clinton pleaded with the world Friday not to abandon the campaign to rein in the HIV virus which still kills nearly a million people every year and infects twice as many. The world must "hold the line" until a vaccine or cure is found, or face "catastrophic" consequences, the US ex-president told the 22nd International AIDS Conference in Amsterdam.

"There can be no Brexit in the fight against AIDS," said the founder of the Clinton HIV/AIDS Initiative, referring to Britain's decision to leave the European Union.

He cited UN data showing that 1.8 million people were newly infected in 2017 with the immune system-wrecking virus that causes AIDS. The year saw 940,000 deaths.

Decades of research have yet to yield a cure or vaccine for HIV, which has infected almost 80 million people and killed 35.4 million since the early 1980s.

"I am pleading with you," Clinton told the final day of the conference which saw some 15,000 delegates -- researchers, activists, and people living with HIV -- rub shoulders with celebrity activists Charliz Theron, Elton John, Prince Harry, and Conchita.

"It is something you can't walk away from," the statesman insisted.



BLOOD MOON

People watch a full moon rising behind the Temple of Poseidon in Cape Sounion, near Athens, Greece, on Friday. *Inset*, This combination of 14 pictures shows the moon during a total lunar eclipse. The longest "blood moon" eclipse this century dazzled skygazers across the globe Friday, coinciding with Mars' closest approach in 15 years in a thrilling celestial spectacle. For about half the world, the moon was partly or fully in Earth's shadow from 1714 to 2328 GMT. At the same time, Mars hovered near the moon in the night sky, easily visible to the naked eye.



Britons back vote on Brexit

REUTERS, London

The proportion of voters who favour a referendum on the final terms of any Brexit deal has overtaken those who do not for the first time, while Prime Minister Theresa May's approval ratings have plunged, according to opinion polls.

With just over eight months left until Britain is due to leave the European Union, there is little clarity about how trade will flow as May, who is grappling with a rebellion in her party, struggles to strike a deal with the bloc.

May has stepped up planning for a so-called "no-deal" Brexit that would see the world's fifth largest economy crash out of the EU on March 29, 2019, a step that could spook financial markets and dislocate trade flows across Europe and beyond.

When voters were asked in a YouGov poll whether there should be a referendum on the final terms of any Brexit deal, 42 per cent said there should be a fresh vote while 40 per cent said there should not. The rest did not know.

The poll of 1,653 adults in the United Kingdom was conducted on Wednesday and Thursday this week, The Times said.

Britain and the EU are working towards sealing an agreement on their future ties by October, but the process is mired in disagreement. EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier rejected key elements of Britain's new trade proposals on Thursday.

Even if May can strike a deal with the EU, it is unclear whether she could get it approved by the British parliament.

A separate poll showed May's approval ratings had plunged: less than one in three voters were satisfied with the job she is doing as prime minister, with an even sharper fall in satisfaction with her among Conservatives.

The July poll showed 30 per cent were satisfied with her leadership, down from 35 per cent in June. The same measure among Conservative voters showed a fall to 55 per cent from 68 per cent.

In the June 23, 2016 referendum, 17.4 million votes, or 51.9 per cent of the votes cast, backed leaving the EU while 16.1 million votes, or 48.1 per cent of votes cast, backed staying. Many opinion polls were wrong about the result.

May has repeatedly said Brexit will happen and has ruled out a rerun of the 2016 referendum, although French President Emmanuel Macron and billionaire investor George Soros have suggested that Britain could still change its mind.

Two years on from the referendum, the YouGov poll showed that the views of most voters on whether to leave had not changed.

In the event of a referendum on Britain's EU membership tomorrow, 45 per cent said that they would vote to remain, while 42 per cent would vote to leave, with four per cent saying that they would not vote and nine per cent saying they did not know, The Times said.

Poll shows 42pc want referendum on Brexit deal
Exit talks in difficulty after EU rejects British plan

PM May's approval rating plunges after month of political chaos



US criticises pre-electoral process 'flaws'

AFP, Washington

The United States said Friday it was concerned about "flaws" in Pakistan's pre-electoral process, but said it was nonetheless ready to work with the new government.

In a statement, the US State Department acknowledged Wednesday's election results, which saw cricket star Imran Khan win the vote in an outcome rejected by Pakistan's main parties.

However, spokeswoman Heather Nauert said: "The United States shares concerns about flaws in the pre-voting electoral process, as expressed by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan."

Those flaws included "constraints placed on freedoms of expression and association during the campaign period that were at odds with Pakistani authorities' stated goal of a fully fair and transparent election," she added.

Nauert said Washington agreed with the European Union's observation that "positive changes to the legal framework for elections in Pakistan" were eclipsed by "restrictions on freedom of expression and unequal campaign opportunities."

The US also expressed "deep reservations over the participation of terrorist-affiliated individuals in the elections," but praised Pakistani voters "for fully rejecting these candidates."

Meanwhile, two international election observation missions — one from the European Union and the other from the Commonwealth — on Friday observed that the army troops deployed at polling stations did not take over the polling process and only assisted the presiding officers in the general elections.

PAKISTAN GENERAL ELECTION 2018

SEVEN THINGS TO KNOW

1. PTI RODE A WAVE OF SUPPORT ACROSS COUNTRY

Khan's PTI will almost certainly form the next government, even though it is just short of the 137 seats needed to take an outright majority on its own. With smaller parties and independents winning at least 45 seats, it should not be difficult for the PTI to form alliances and elect Khan as prime minister. The PTI's victory was built on the back of two major wins. First, it was able to wrest much of southern and northern Punjab from the outgoing PML-N, breaking the party's vote bank in its political heartland. Second, it was able to hold on to most of its seats in the northwestern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), which has historically always voted out its incumbent party.

2. WAS THE VOTE FREE AND FAIR?

The outgoing PML-N and other parties that underperformed, unsurprisingly, say it was not, but the Election Commission of Pakistan is standing by the results. FAFEN, an independent Pakistani election observer network, noted in at least 35 constituencies, the winning margin was less than the number of votes rejected by electoral officials, often a red flag for possible manipulation. The number was similar in 2013. The EU's observer mission in Pakistan said while there were positive changes to Pakistan's legal framework for elections, the polls were "overshadowed by restrictions on freedom of expression and unequal campaign opportunities."

3. KARACHI VOTES FOR CHANGE

For the last 35 years, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), an ethnic Muhajir party, has ruled Pakistan's largest city, Karachi, with an iron fist. Since late 2013, however, a paramilitary operation has targeted the party's alleged criminal enterprises, jailing dozens of workers and leaders. The operation finally led to the factionalisation of the



party, with chief Altaf Hussain, who lives in exile in London, unable to maintain control. As a result, 2018 saw an open fight for the city of Karachi for the first time in decades, and the results were clear: the PTI swept 14 of the city's 21 seats, beating major MQM leaders along the way. It even managed to beat PPP chief Bilawal Bhutto Zardari in his party's historical stronghold of the Lyari neighbourhood.

4. MIXED BAG FOR PAKISTAN'S FAR-RIGHT PARTIES

This election was a mixed bag for Pakistan's far-right parties, with the newly emerged Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) firmly establishing itself as the dominant headline Bareilly Sunni Muslim party, but others failing to make an impact. The Ahle Sunnat Wal Jammah, an alleged political front for the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi armed group, and the Milli Muslim League, the alleged political front for the Lashkar-e-Taiba armed group, both fared badly at both the provincial and national levels, however.

5. THE ARMY WAS IN CONTROL OF THE POLLING PROCESS

Pakistan's military deployed more than 371,000 soldiers for the 2018 elections, more than it has ever done before, and the results showed. Each of the country's 85,000 polling stations was secured by army personnel, with civilian law enforcement and, in some cases, electoral officials, relegated to a supporting role. The army says it played "no direct role" in the polling process, and it only ensured security and the sanctity of the ballot process. Opponents allege it intervened directly in vote counts.

6. WHO WERE THE MAJOR LOSERS FROM THIS ELECTION?

Depending on how you look at it, the PPP — a party that has ruled Pakistan on four occasions since the party's inception in the 1970s — either failed miserably or overperformed expectations by holding on to its base in Sindh and picking up a few seats in southern Punjab province and elsewhere. The jury is out on this one. What is clear is the religious right, represented by the Jamiat Ulema Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), and others largely failed at the polls, winning just 13 seats nationwide.

7. WILL THIS POLLS GIVE POLITICAL STABILITY?

The PTI's fairly clear mandate at the centre means the coalition-building process should be relatively straightforward, with the party also expected to lead KP's provincial government. In Sindh, the PPP is expected to form the provincial government. The key to stability, however, will lie in who leads the provincial government in Punjab, the country's most populous province. The PML-N and PTI are neck and neck in the province, with 127 and 123 seats, respectively, and both are vying to form a government. If the PML-N is successful in holding on to a province it has governed for more than a decade, it may set up a political confrontation with the PTI at the centre.

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA



The sister of Palestinian boy Majdi al-Satari, who was killed by Israeli troops during a protest at the Israel-Gaza border, mourns during his funeral in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday. There has been persistent violence between the Israeli army and Palestinian protesters along the Gaza-Israel border since late March in which at least 157 Palestinians have been killed. Troops shot dead two Palestinians during Friday's protests.

'OPPOSITION LESS' ELECTION IN CAMBODIA

Hun Sen set to extend rule

Authorities warn boycotting vote will be 'treason'

REUTERS, Phnom Penh

At the Toul Kork Primary School in the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh volunteers swept classrooms and laid out wooden desks yesterday, transforming rooms into polling booths ahead a general election Prime Minister Hun Sen is expected to easily win.

"I believe voters will come out to vote," Yos Vanthan, head of the school's election committee, told Reuters.

Hun Sen's critics have called for an election boycott, saying that without any real opposition to the government, the poll will be a sham.

Voting is not mandatory, but authorities have warned that anyone who boycotts the vote will be seen as a "traitor".

Nineteen political parties are running against Hun Sen's ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) but none are strongly critical of the prime minister or the government.

His main challenge the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), which narrowly lost the last election in 2013, was dissolved by the Supreme Court last year and many of its lawmakers banned from politics for five years.

Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge commander who eventually defected from Pol Pot's murderous regime, has been in power for more than 30 years and is the world's longest serving prime minister.

Many CNRP leaders have fled abroad and are living in self-imposed exile and its leader, Kem Sokha, was jailed in September on treason charges, leaving Hun Sen, who has ruled for 33 years, with no significant opponent.

Some Western countries and the United Nations have questioned the credibility of the election because of the lack of any significant opposition. Rights groups have criticised restrictions placed on independent media and civil society.



Kurds agree to work with Assad

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) say they have agreed to work with the Syrian government towards a "democratic, decentralised Syria", in an attempt to cement their autonomy in the war-ravaged country.

The SDF's political wing, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), issued a short statement yesterday saying they would form committees to develop negotiations and "chart a roadmap to a democratic, decentralised Syria".

There was no immediate confirmation from Damascus, but Sihanouk Dibo, a leftist Kurdish politician, said he expected the negotiations to be "long and arduous".

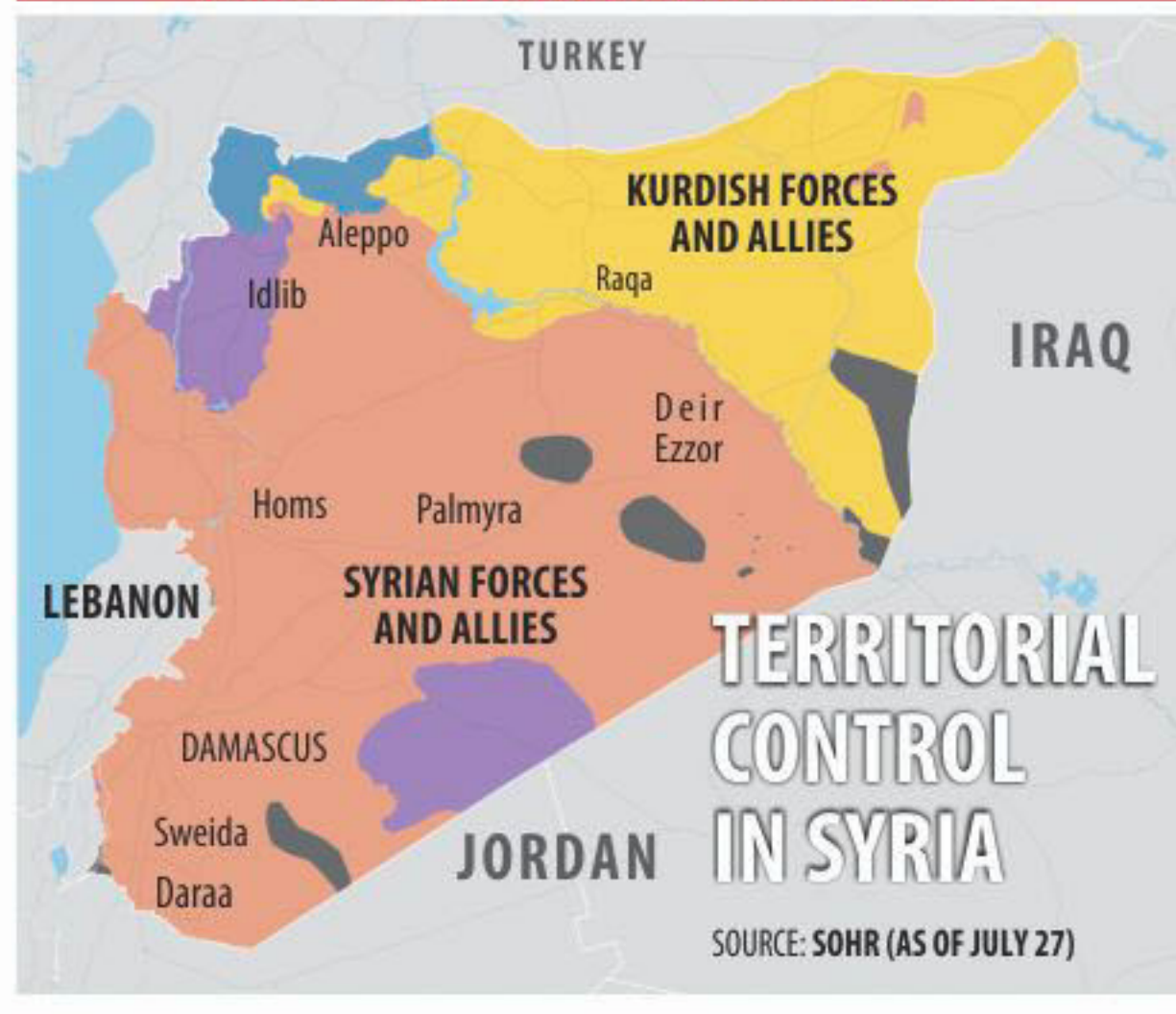
Founded in 2015, the SDF was formed to defend Syria's northeastern region from the Islamic State and other armed groups.

Using American weapons and equipment, the SDF managed to seize control of between 25-30 per cent of Syria, including areas which hold the bulk of the country's oil and gas reserves. The SDC has set up cantonal administrations in areas it controls which raise their own revenues and operate their own police and other services.

But in recent months, a military intervention by Turkey in Syria, and conflicting statements by US over its military plans, have left the Kurds extremely wary about their future.

Marwan Kaban, the head of policy analysis at the Arab Centre for Research & Policy Studies, said "fears" of being attacked again by Turkey may have prompted the Kurds to turn to Damascus, but was "unlikely" the Syrian

POST-WAR SYRIA NEGOTIATIONS



SOURCE: SOHR (AS OF JULY 27)

government would deliver them autonomy as they expected.

"It's unlikely the Syrian regime will deliver the Kurds autonomy.

"Rather, what it will probably give them is local governance according to Law 107 that was passed in 2012. This will give them [greater] powers, not decentralisation, or autonomy. The Syrian regime will never accept autonomy."