

NEWSIN brief

Death toll in Afghan suicide attack hits 68

AFP, Jalalabad

The death toll from a suicide attack on Afghan protesters has soared to 68, officials said yesterday, as violence flares across the country ahead of elections and a key Islamic holy day. The bombing on Tuesday in the eastern province of Nangarhar also wounded another 165 people.

Cancer to kill 10m in 2018: experts

AFP, Paris

Cancer will kill nearly 10 million people this year, experts said yesterday, warning the disease's global burden continues to rise in spite of better prevention and earlier diagnosis. An estimated 18.1 million new cancer cases were predicted worldwide for 2018 -- with 9.6 million deaths, said the report.

Weary US readies for Hurricane Florence

AFP, Wrightsville Beach

People fleeing North and South Carolina clogged coastal highways early yesterday as Hurricane Florence, a monster Category 4 storm, bore down on the US east coast for a direct hit. Up to 1.7 million people have been given voluntary or mandatory evacuation orders. Florence is expected to make landfall in the Carolinas late Thursday or early Friday.

India SC extends house arrest of right activists

IANs, New Delhi

Indian Supreme Court yesterday extended the house arrest of five right activists arrested for their alleged links with the outlawed Communist Party of India (Maoist). Extending its interim order putting them under house arrest, a bench headed by Chief Justice Dipak Misra directed the hearing of the matter on September 17.



A mother tries an improvised gas mask on family members in her home in Binnish in Syria's rebel-held northern Idlib province as part of preparations for any upcoming chemical attack. Photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

UN decries 'shameful' reprisals on activists

Lists 38 nations as offenders

REUTERS, Geneva

The United Nations listed 38 "shameful" countries including China and Russia on Wednesday which it said had carried out reprisals or intimidation against people cooperating with it on human rights, through killings, torture and arbitrary arrests.

The annual report from UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres also included allegations of ill-treatment, surveillance, criminalisation, and public stigmatisation campaigns targeting victims and human rights defenders.

"The world owes it to those brave people standing up for human rights, who have responded to requests to provide information to and engage with the United Nations, to ensure their right to participate is respected," Guterres wrote.

"Punishing individuals for cooperating with the United Nations is a shameful practice that everyone must do more to stamp out."

The 38 countries included 29 countries with new cases, and 19 with ongoing or continuing cases.

The new cases were in Bahrain, Cameroon, China, Colombia, Cuba, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Hungary, India, Israel, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Mali, Morocco, Myanmar, Philippines, Russian Federation, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, South Sudan, Thailand, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Venezuela.

Governments frequently charged human rights activists with terrorism or blamed them for cooperating with foreign entities or damaging the state's reputation or security, it said.

UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Andrew Gilmour, who will present the report to the Human Rights Council next week, said in a statement that the cases in the report were the tip of the iceberg.

Rivals on war footing

REUTERS, Amman

Turkey has stepped up arms supplies to Syrian rebels to help them stave off an expected offensive by the Syrian army and its Russian and Iran-backed allies in the northwest near the Turkish frontier, rebel sources told Reuters.

Senior rebel officials said Turkey had sent more military aid to rebels in and around the Idlib region since a summit meeting with Iran and Russia last week failed to agree a deal to avert a government offensive into the area.

Turkey, which is already hosting 3.5 million Syrian refugees, is warning against such an attack, fearing it could force more Syrians over the border. President Tayyip Erdogan has warned of a humanitarian disaster and security risks for Turkey.

"They pledged complete Turkish military support for a long, protracted battle," a senior FSA commander who was privy to talks in recent days with senior Turkish officials said, requesting anonymity as he was not authorised to speak publicly.

The weapons, which have entered Syria in large quantities in recent days,

include ammunition and GRAD rockets. Turkish officials could not immediately be reached for comment.

The Turkish army has also deployed in the last week more troops and heavy weaponry to 12 positions in the Idlib region that observe a "de-escalation zone" agreed with Iran and Russia. The Turkish army has also sent troops into

LOOMING 'BLOODBATH' IN IDLIB

Russia, Syria step up raids, shelling on rebel positions

Ankara steps up arm shipments, orders rebels towards frontline

Syrian rebel-held territory further east, in an area north of Aleppo city.

With extensive Turkish support, efforts have been underway to organise FSA groups north of Aleppo into a unified force known as the "National Army" numbering some 30,000 fighters. Two rebel commanders said Turkey had ordered the bulk of this force to move towards the Idlib frontlines.

On the other hand, Russian and Syrian warplanes have stepped up air strikes on southern Idlib and adjacent areas of Hama province in an apparent prelude to a ground offensive. The Syrian army is building up troops near frontlines.

UN agencies and relief organisations have warned repeatedly that any major assault could spark one of the worst humanitarian disasters of Syria's war.

UN chief Antonio Guterres on Tuesday warned the Security Council that any full-blown offensive in Idlib risks triggering a "bloodbath".

Western governments have said Damascus might again resort to the use of chemical weapons while Moscow has accused rebels of staging one as a pretext for Western intervention.

On Tuesday, Russia claimed that Syrian rebels had begun working on film footage that would be presented to the world as the aftermath of an alleged chemical attack by the Syrian army.

The Idlib area forms part of an arc of territory in the northwest representing the last big area held by the opposition. Some three million people are living in Idlib, half of them Syrians who have fled from other parts of the country.

BREXIT REBELLION

May faces fresh threat

Reports say about 50 rebels in PM's party discuss ousting her; leading Brexit supporters deny plot

AFP, London

Leading Brexit supporters yesterday denied reports they were manoeuvring to remove Prime Minister Theresa May -- while stepping up opposition to her plan to withdraw Britain from the EU.

Up to 50 of May's Conservative MPs held a meeting late Tuesday at which they reportedly openly discussed how to unseat her, amid anger over her proposal to keep close trade ties with the European Union after Brexit.

"There's a great deal of anxiety among colleagues in parliament," former Brexit minister Steve Baker, who chaired the meeting, told AFP.

He said however he personally was not part of any leadership challenge, while another MP who attended said only five or six MPs openly discussed removing May.

The meeting was held by European Research Group (ERG) of MPs, which is outlining alternatives to the prime minister's plan.

ERG leader Jacob Rees-Mogg, who did not

attend Tuesday's meeting, told reporters at an event yesterday that he wanted May to stay on.

"I have long said, and repeated again and again, that the policy needs to be changed but I am supporting the person," he said.

Former Brexit secretary David Davis, who quit the government over May's plan in July, told the same event: "We have got a very good prime minister and, like Jacob, I disagree with her on one issue -- this issue."

May has also faced strong opposition in Brussels to her plan to maintain EU rules on trade in goods when Britain leaves the bloc's single market and customs union after Brexit in March next year.

Both sides hope to reach a deal by early November on the terms of the divorce.

At yesterday's event, the ERG outlined how the Irish issue could be resolved with technology and trusted trader schemes -- and Davis expressed hope that May will change her approach.



North Korea doing a lot

Says Putin about denuclearisation, blames US for not responding

REUTERS, Vladivostok

Russian President Vladimir Putin said yesterday that North Korea was taking a lot of steps towards denuclearising the Korean Peninsula but Washington was not responding and was making endless demands for full disarmament instead.

Washington and Pyongyang have been discussing North Korea's nuclear programme since their leaders met in Singapore in June, though that summit's outcome was criticised for being short on details about how and whether North

Putin says Russia, Japan can sign peace treaty this year

Says UK nerve agent suspects aren't criminals



Korean leader Kim Jong Un was willing to give up weapons that threaten the United States.

Putin, speaking at an economic forum in the Russian port city of Vladivostok, said Pyongyang had taken positive steps and was now waiting for a response. He said it was counter-productive if one side did a lot and the other did nothing.

"If North Korea does something

towards denuclearisation it expects reciprocal steps and not endless demands for full disarmament," said Putin.

Putin said it was also important that North Korea received international guarantees about its own security and said Kim Jong Un was welcome to visit Russia at any time that was convenient for him.

During a question and answer

session at the economic forum, Putin turned to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and offered to sign a peace treaty by the end of this year to formally end World War Two hostilities between their countries.

Russia and Japan have been in dispute for seven decades over the islands and as a result have still not formally ended their World War Two hostilities. The standoff has held back economic ties between the two near-neighbours.

Putin also said Russia knew the real identity of two men accused by British prosecutors of trying to murder former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in Britain using a deadly nerve agent.

Russia had found the two men, that they were civilians, and there was nothing special or criminal about them and that he hoped they would come forward and tell the world their own story, he said.



WIFE'S FUNERAL

Ex-Pak PM released on parole

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's jailed former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his daughter have been temporarily released on parole for the funeral of his wife, government and party sources said yesterday.

Kulsoom Nawaz died of cancer in London on Tuesday, two months after her husband and daughter returned to Pakistan and were immediately jailed for corruption.

Sharif had travelled home in a bid to rally support for his Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party days before a bitterly fought general election.

Handout pictures released by PML-N yesterday showed Sharif and his daughter Maryam aboard a plane after their release late Tuesday and arriving in the city of Lahore, where the former first lady's funeral will be held.

The pair "have initially been released for 12 hours to attend the funeral but the release can be extended by the home department", an official at Rawalpindi central jail told AFP.

Local media reported the funeral would be held tomorrow, with their parole likely to last until after the service concluded.

Sharif's wife Nawaz, 68, had been at her husband's side throughout his decades-long political career, which saw him elected prime minister of Pakistan three times.

She was diagnosed with lymphoma in August last year and had been receiving treatment at a private hospital in London for months.

Sharif was ousted from his third premiership by the Supreme Court a month before his wife's diagnosis.

Conspiracy theories claiming that Nawaz was actually healthy, and that the Sharifs were faking her illness to gain sympathy, swirled in the final weeks of Pakistan's acrimonious election campaign.

REMOVAL OF EXTREMIST CONTENTS

EU gives social media 'one-hour deadline'

AFP, Strasbourg

The European Union yesterday proposed steps to force social networks and websites to remove terrorist propaganda within an hour of receiving the order from authorities, or companies like Facebook and Twitter could face massive fines.

The legislation proposed by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker marks a toughening approach after Brussels had relied on internet firms to voluntarily remove such content.

The internet has become a major tool for extremists carrying out attacks that have killed hundreds of people in European cities in recent years.

"Europeans rightly expect their Union to keep them safe," Juncker told the European Parliament in his annual state of the union speech.

"This is why the Commission is today proposing new rules to get terrorist content off the web within one hour -- the critical window in which the greatest damage is done."

The commission proposal calls for a "legally binding one-hour deadline" for firms to remove terrorist content once national authorities order them to do so.

It defines the content as that which incites or advocates committing terror offences, promotes a terror group's activities or offers instructions for attacks.

Time for Europe has come

Juncker urges EU to go for greater role in world affairs as US retreats

REUTERS, Strasbourg

The European Union must flex its muscles as a world power, EU chief executive Jean-Claude Juncker said on Wednesday, as he spoke critically of US President Donald Trump's retreat from international engagement.

In his annual State of the Union address to the European Parliament in Strasbourg, Juncker, who is entering his final year as president of the European Commission, urged EU states to rein in angry divisions over budgets, immigration and other issues in order to capitalise on a chance to shape the world.

"Whenever Europe speaks as one, we can impose our position on others," Juncker said, arguing that a deal he struck in July with Trump to stall a transatlantic tariff war and which won plaudits for the Commission should have come as no surprise. "The geopolitical situation makes this Europe's hour: the time for European sovereignty has come," he said.

Juncker made no direct comment on Trump or US policy but aides said the geopolitical situation he spoke of was a US retreat into what Juncker described elsewhere in the

EU chief executive blasts US 'selfish unilateralism', eyes setting global trade rules

Warns against nationalistic 'poison and deceit'



Commission put forward a plan to get even tougher on illegal economic migrants whose arrival has so angered Orban and others.

As the centenary nears of the end of World War One, he recalled how Europeans were taken totally by surprise by its outbreak and urged more respect for the EU as a force for peace against nationalistic "poison and deceit".