

NEWSIN brief

Afghan conflict could be deadlier than Syria

AFP, Kabul

The Afghan conflict could overtake Syria as the deadliest conflict in the world this year, analysts say, as violence surges 17 years after the US-led invasion. The grim assessment contrasts sharply with the consistently upbeat public view of the conflict from Nato's Resolute Support mission in Kabul, and underscores the growing sense of hopelessness in the war-torn country.

Arrest warrant issued against Andhra CM

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

A court in western Indian state of Maharashtra has issued an arrest warrant against Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Nara Chandrababu Naidu and 15 others in an eight-year-old case related to an agitation staged by them over a project across the Godavari river. The court ordered police to produce them before the court by September 21. In 2010, Naidu and others staged the agitation in Maharashtra near the project site, Babli barrage, on the ground that it would affect the people downstream.



Ranjan Gogoi will be India's next CJ

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Justice Ranjan Gogoi will be the new Chief Justice of India's Supreme Court. He will assume the office on October 3 after the retirement of the current Chief Justice Justice Dipak Misra. Hailing from Assam, Justice Gogoi will be the first Chief Justice of India from a north eastern state. He has also been dealing with the issue of National Register of Citizens in Assam.



Palestinian protesters watch as tear gas canisters fired by Israeli forces come through black smoke of burning tyres during a demonstration along the Israeli fence east of Gaza City yesterday. Inset, Israeli forces are confronted by a Palestinian protester as he demonstrates against the blocking of the road leading to the Palestinian Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar in West Bank.

PHOTO: AFP

Korea peace hopes rise

Seoul, Pyongyang open joint liaison office on North's side of border

AGENCIES

North and South Korea opened a liaison office on the North's side of their heavily militarised border yesterday, setting up a permanent channel of communication as part of a flurry of efforts to end their decades old rivalry.

Steps by North and South Korea to improve their relations are running parallel to a bid by the United States and its allies to press North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes.

The opening of the joint liaison office at Kaesong, just inside the North Korean side of the border, comes days before North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in are due to hold their third meeting this year.

"The two sides are now able to take a large step toward peace, prosperity and unification of the Korean peninsula by quickly and frankly discussing issues arising from inter-Korean relations," said Ri Son Gwon, the head of North Korea's delegation at the opening ceremony.

The two Koreas previously communicated by fax and special telephone lines, which were often severed when their relations took a turn for the worse.

Now they will now be able to "directly discuss issues 24

hours, 365 days", South Korea's Unification Minister Cho Myoung-gyon said at the ceremony.

The office will be staffed by up to 20 people each from the two sides with the South Koreans on the second floor and the North Koreans on the fourth floor of the four-story building, reported Reuters.

Vice minister-level officials will head their teams at the office and will attend weekly meetings, the South Korean Unification Ministry said.

The office is at the site of the Kaesong industrial complex, where for about a decade, South Korean companies ran production lines staffed by North Korean workers at the industrial park.

Meanwhile, the US on Thursday imposed sanctions on a China-based tech firm, its North Korean CEO and a Russian subsidiary, accusing them of moving illicit funding to North Korea in violation of US sanctions.

The new sanctions target China-based Yanbian Silverstar Network Technology Co, its North Korean chief executive Jong Song Hwa, and a Russian-based sister company, Volasys Silver Star, the US Treasury Department said in a statement.

Despite a recent diplomatic thaw with the nuclear-armed North, South Korea launched its first ever missile-capable attack submarine yesterday, reported AFP.

Kim and Moon to meet for third time next week

Communication now open 24 hrs: minister

US sanctions North Korea tech firms

Thailand eases ban on political activities

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand partially eased its ban on political activities, the ruling junta announced yesterday, allowing political parties to recruit new members for the first time in four years as the countdown begins for a much-anticipated national poll.

After the military staged a coup in 2014 to oust then-Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, a ban was imposed throughout the country on all political activities.

The junta has repeatedly postponed elections, but King Maha Vajiralongkorn this week endorsed two bills that cleared bureaucratic hurdles to a much-anticipated poll.

An election is required to take place by May. Senior military leaders have floated a February 24 election date.

'Unbelievable'

US Ambassador to the UN Haley slams Suu Kyi for defending jailing of Reuters journos

REUTERS, Hanoi/United Nations

Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi's defence of jailing of Reuters journalists has prompted a sharp rebuke from the United States.

Suu Kyi, in her first public comment on the case since the two, Wa Lone, 32, and Kyaw Soe Oo, 28, were convicted last week, referred to the colonial-era law under which they were charged. She said jailing of the two journalists had nothing to do with freedom of expression and that they can appeal against their seven-year sentences.

"They were not jailed because they were journalists, they were jailed because ... the court has decided that they have broken the Official Secrets Act," she said at a conference of the World Economic Forum in Hanoi on Thursday.

US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley described Suu Kyi's remarks as "unbelievable," in what appeared to be the sharpest direct public rebuke of the Myanmar leader by a US official.

"First, in denial about the abuse the Burmese military placed on the Rohingya, now justifying the imprisonment of the two Reuters reporters who reported on the ethnic cleansing. Unbelievable," Haley wrote on Twitter on Thursday.

Speaking at a later news briefing, US State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said Washington disapproved with many of the comments Suu Kyi had made and added that the journalists should be released immediately.

"That verdict calls into question press freedom in Burma (Myanmar)," she said.

"The fact that those journalists were convicted despite testimony by police that they were ordered to frame those journalists, that in our view raises serious concerns about the judicial independence and the fair trial guarantees they are supposed to have in that country," Nauert said.

"We continue to urge the government of Burma to take action immediately to correct this injustice."

Suu Kyi made her comments in response to a question from a forum moderator who asked whether she felt comfortable about the reporters being jailed.

Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo were convicted on official secrets charges on Sept 3 in a landmark case that has raised questions about Myanmar's progress towards democracy.

The two reporters, who had pleaded not guilty, were investigating the killing of 10 villagers from the Rohingya minority by the Myanmar security forces at the time of their arrest. The military later acknowledged the killings and said it punished several soldiers.

The United Nations, human rights and press freedom groups and various governments criticised the convictions. US Vice President Mike Pence and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have called for their release.

The United States was a strong backer of Suu Kyi as she emerged in the 1980s as a pro-democracy icon who endured years of house arrest for standing up to military rule and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her struggle.

But Western criticism has mounted of Suu Kyi's failure to speak out against military treatment of the Rohingya and of her attitude to the treatment of the journalists.

Earlier on Thursday, Suu Kyi said that in hindsight, her government could have handled the Rakhine State situation better.



Pak PM woos bureaucracy

Promises to protect civil servants from political pressure

DAWN ONLINE

Prime Minister Imran Khan yesterday addressed civil servants in Islamabad, asking them to support the government through a "down cycle" over the next two years and to support its "out-of-the-box" policy reforms.

The PM, in his address, highlighted various challenges that the nation was facing.

"We don't have money to run our country; the majority of the population is young and looking for jobs; and the loans we took, instead of creating wealth so that we could repay them, have created projects that are running losses."

He also discussed statistics on out-of-school children, malnourished children, high mortality of women in labour and infant deaths.

"I'm surprised that there hasn't been outrage over this before."

"We need to get out of this debt trap and we need to change ourselves and our nation," he told the civil servants.



"If you look at history, nations make it through challenges when the people and the government become one. The army is also more effective when the nation is behind it," he said.

He added that the government must assume responsibility for people and people themselves must own the government as their own.

"Nothing is impossible; but for that, people need to change," he said. "Maybe God has created this crisis because he wants us to change. We will change when we start thinking, before spending a single rupee, of the children who are out of school," the prime minister said.

"Look at Singapore: they have exports of \$303 billion but we have exports of \$20bn."

"I give you my assurance that if you have committed any mistakes, I will stand with you and ensure that there is no undue pressure on you," he said.

PM also complained about the "degeneration" of the civil services over time due to political interference.



Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro shakes hands with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi as they meet in Beijing, China yesterday. Maduro paid tribute to Mao Zedong at the late Chinese leader's mausoleum before overseeing energy and gold mining deals as he seeks Beijing's help to bolster his crisis-hit country's economy. PHOTO: REUTERS

WAR CRIMES PROBE

Sri Lanka seeks UN reprieve

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president said yesterday that he wants the United Nations to drop its demand for state accountability over the alleged killing of some 40,000 Tamil civilians by government forces during a brutal civil war.

Maithripala Sirisena told local editors in Colombo that he will ask the UN General Assembly to allow Sri Lanka to "amicably resolve" war crime allegations against the majority Sinhalese government forces who fought a 37-year conflict against Tamil separatists.

Sirisena's predecessor, Mahinda Rajapakse, crushed the Tamil rebels in a no-holds-barred military campaign that ended in May 2009. A 2015 UN Human Rights Council resolution demanded Sri Lanka establish an independent war crimes investigation.

"I will also make a written request to the Human Rights Council to settle the allegations against our troops," Sirisena said. "I want to tell them to remove these charges. We can amicably resolve this issue."

The president said he expected "concessions" in implementing the 2015 Human Rights Council resolution.

While Sirisena has pledged to ensure accountability for wartime atrocities, subjecting army to scrutiny in the majority-Sinhalese country has proved controversial.

Rajapakse, who is Sinhalese, had resisted international calls for an independent probe. He has denied troops killed any civilians during the final stages of the war.

Sirisena had acknowledged there may have been excesses and had promised to set up an accountability mechanism. He is yet to deliver on the pledge however.

At least 100,000 people were killed during the separatist war between government forces and rebels from the Tamil Tigers group, with atrocities recorded by both sides.

Aiming for zero

Cities, companies ramp up climate goals

AFP, San Francisco

Zero fossil fuel energy, zero gas-guzzlers on the road, zero waste, zero CO2 emissions -- dozens of cities, regions and companies made "zero" pledges Thursday at a global climate summit in San Francisco.

The mayors, governors, and CEOs from around the world have stepped into the climate breach with concrete action as UN talks to implement the Paris climate treaty falter, and President Donald Trump dismantles US policies to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

Jointly organized by California governor Jerry Brown and former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg, the three-day gathering is a showcase for initiatives, big and small, to reduce humanity's carbon footprint.

On Thursday, dozens of states, regions and major cities committed to allowing only zero-emission cars, buses and trucks on their roads within a few decades. Tokyo, Seoul and Rotterdam, meanwhile, joined Paris, London, Barcelona and Mexico City in vowing to run only electric buses by 2025.

Entertainment and electronics giant Sony Corporation committed this week to running its global operations only with renewable energy, joining more than 140 multinationals -- three-quarters of them having pledged to do so before 2030.

MUELLER'S PROBE OF RUSSIAN ELECTION MEDDLING

Manafort to plead guilty to conspiracy charges

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump's former campaign chairman Paul Manafort was set to plead guilty to two criminal counts as part of a deal with prosecutors yesterday, court documents showed in what could be a blow to Trump in Special Counsel Robert Mueller's probe of Russian election meddling.

It was not immediately clear whether the deal would require Manafort, 69, to cooperate with Mueller's probe into Russia's role in the 2016 presidential election and whether Trump's campaign colluded with Moscow.

Details of the deal were likely to emerge in a plea agreement hearing scheduled for 11:00am in federal court. Manafort would become the most prominent former Trump campaign official to plead guilty in Mueller's investigation, which has cast a shadow over Trump's presidency.

If Manafort decides to cooperate with Mueller's probe, that would deal a setback to Trump ahead of congressional polls on Nov 6.

Another approach that Manafort would be to plead guilty without cooperating and perhaps later receive a presidential pardon. Trump has not said whether he would pardon Manafort, but the president has not publicly ruled it out.

Rudy Giuliani, the former New York City mayor who is now representing Trump in the Russia probe, told Reuters that a guilty plea would not crush Manafort's chances of receiving an eventual presidential pardon.

Manafort made millions of dollars working for pro-Russian Ukrainian politicians before taking an unpaid position with Trump's campaign for five months. He led the campaign in mid-2016 when Trump was selected as the Republican presidential nominee at the party convention.



No major offensive planned in Idlib

Says Russia; Erdogan to meet Putin on Monday on Syria

AFP, Berlin

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday said that the Syrian regime is not preparing a major offensive against the opposition-held Idlib, adding that Moscow will do everything to protect civilians.

"What is being presented at the moment as the beginning of a Russian-backed offensive by Syrian forces is not a faithful representation of the facts," said Lavrov during a German-Russian forum in Berlin.

Meanwhile, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will meet with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin on Monday, officials said, amid rising international concern over a looming Syrian government assault on a rebel-held province bordering Turkey.

Russia-backed forces of the Syrian regime have massed around the Idlib province in recent weeks, sparking fears of an imminent air and ground attack to retake the last major opposition bastion. Some three million people live in the zone now.

Recent hostilities have displaced more than 38,500 people in less than two weeks, said the UN, which has warned that a full assault on Idlib could create the century's "worst humanitarian catastrophe".