

NEWSIN brief



Vietnam president Quang dies at 61

AFP, Hanoi

Vietnam's President Tran Dai Quang, a former police chief known as a tough politician and committed communist with little tolerance for dissent, died Friday aged 61 after a serious illness, state media reported. His death is not likely to dramatically alter politics in a country where the powerful communist government oversees almost every facet of society - although the death of a sitting leader is rare.

Vatican, China in historic deal

AFP, Vatican City

The Vatican yesterday announced an historic accord with China on the appointment of bishops in the Communist country in what could pave the way for the normalisation of ties between the Catholic Church and the world's most populous country. Beijing immediately said it hoped for better relations, while Taiwan said its ties with the Vatican were safe despite the deal with China.



Aga Khan receives highest French honour

INTERNATIONAL DESK

France has awarded Aga Khan, Imam of the world's Shia Ismaili Muslim community, with its highest honour, the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour. President Emmanuel Macron awarded him the honour in recognition of his contribution to humanity and achievements in improving the quality of life of the most vulnerable populations around the world.



US slams China for abuses on Uighurs

AFP, Washington

The United States on Friday denounced China's treatment of its Uighur Muslims in unusually strong terms, adding to a growing list of disputes in increasingly turbulent relations between the two powers.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo voiced alarm after a United Nations report described the mass internment of Uighurs under the pretext of preventing extremism in the western Xinjiang region where the minority group is concentrated.

"Hundreds of thousands and possibly millions of Uighurs are held against their will in so-called re-education camps where they're forced to endure severe political indoctrination and other awful abuses," Pompeo said in a speech on the state of religious freedom around the world.

"Their religious beliefs are decimated," Pompeo said. In a letter to Pompeo and Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, both Republican and Democratic members of Congress late last month called for sanctions on Chinese officials implicated in the internment of Uighurs.

Pompeo did not say whether the United States would take punitive measures.

Even so, the remarks were striking for their tone, with President Donald Trump's administration putting human rights on the back seat in relations with allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Hollande claim rocks India

France's ex-president says Paris had given no choice but to select Reliance as partner; opposition demands Modi's resignation

AFP, New Delhi/Paris

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi faced calls for his resignation over allegations of corruption in a military jet deal with France after former French president Francois Hollande was quoted as saying New Delhi had influenced the choice of a local partner.

Indian political parties have been gunning for Modi over the 2016 purchase of 36 Rafale planes from Dassault Aviation estimated to be worth \$8.7 billion, saying he had overpaid for the planes and had not been transparent.

In recent months, the opposition has questioned the government on the choice of billionaire Indian businessman Anil Ambani's Reliance Defence as Dassault's local partner instead of a state-run manufacturer with decades of experience.

On Friday, Hollande, who cleared the inter-governmental deal when he was in office, was quoted as saying New Delhi had put pressure on Dassault to choose Reliance.

"We had no choice. We took the interlocutor that was given to us," he was reported as telling the French news service Mediapart, fuelling a political storm in India.

Under Indian defence procurement rules, a foreign firm must invest at least 30 per cent of the contract in India to help it build up its manufac-

turing base and wean off imports.

For that, the French firm picked Reliance and not Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, the state-run giant that has been producing planes for decades, most of them Russian under licence.

"The PM personally negotiated and changed the Rafale deal behind closed doors. Thanks to

ALLEGED GRAFT AT FRENCH JET DEAL



Francois Hollande, we now know he personally delivered a deal worth billions of dollars to ...Anil Ambani," Rahul Gandhi, the president of the main opposition Congress party, said in a tweet. "The PM has betrayed India."

Modi, who stormed to power in 2014 promising to rid India of deep-seated corruption, had no "moral right" to remain in power after the revela-

tions from Hollande, senior Congress leader Anand Sharma said.

Smaller parties also joined the attack on Modi who is already under pressure to shore up his political base ahead of a series of state elections this year followed by a national election in 2019.

Modi's office did not respond to a request for comment. The defence ministry said in a tweet that neither the French nor Indian government had had a say in the matter.

Reliance did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Dassault denied the report, saying it had picked Reliance as a partner for industrial reasons.

The French foreign ministry published a statement saying French authorities were not involved in the choice of Indian industrial partners involved in the Rafale deal.

The deal with Dassault was expected to deepen strategic ties with France and the company itself has hoped it would lead to a larger order for combat jets that the Indian air force says it needs to face a perceived twin threat from China and Pakistan.

India picked the Rafale plane to replace its ageing fleet of Russian aircraft from a field that included Lockheed Martin's F-16, Saab's Gripen, the Eurofighter Typhoon, Boeing's F/A-18E/F Super Hornet and the Russian MiG-35.

TANZANIA FERRY TRAGEDY

Death toll rises to 207

REUTERS, Ukara

Divers yesterday rescued a man from the wreck of an overcrowded Tanzanian ferry that capsized on Lake Victoria on Thursday, killing at least 207 people.

Bodies continued to float to the surface around the vessel, which initial estimates suggested was carrying more than 300 people. State broadcaster TBC said the death toll had reached 207.

Four navy divers resumed their search inside the sunken MV Nyerere early on Saturday after hearing sounds that suggested signs of life.

They pulled one man out of the overturned ship and he was rushed to hospital, a Reuters witness said. His condition was not immediately known.

On Friday, President John Magufuli ordered the arrest of those responsible for the sinking.

Dozens of relatives stood crying by the shoreline as they waited for information on their loved ones. Coffins were lined up nearby awaiting bodies being pulled from the vessel, which lay belly up in the water just metres from the shoreline.

"The ferry overturned very fast and covered us," survivor Charles Ngarima told Reuters.

Another survivor, Jennifer Idhoze, blamed the ferry had capsized because it was overloaded. "I was able to jump out of the ferry... That is how I survived," she said.

The ferry sank on Thursday evening just a few metres from the dock on Ukerewe, the lake's biggest island.



An aerial image shows the capsized ferry MV Nyerere in Lake Victoria, Tanzania. Inset, Tanzanians mourn as a rescue operation is underway yesterday, a day after the ferry capsized. PHOTO: AFP

SANCTIONS ON CHINESE MILITARY UNIT FOR BUYING RUSSIAN JETS, MISSILES

Moscow, Beijing warn US

AFP, Moscow

Moscow and Beijing lashed out Friday at Washington's new anti-Russian sanctions that also target China for the first time, warning the United States could face consequences.

Upping the ante, Beijing yesterday summoned the the US ambassador on Saturday to lodge an official protest over sanctions imposed by the United States against a Chinese military organisation for buying Russian fighter jets and missiles, state media said.

Vice Foreign Minister Zheng Zeguang summoned Ambassador Terry Branstad and "lodged solemn representations over US sanctions against (the) Chinese military," the People's Daily said in a brief report online.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov accused Washington of playing unfairly and using new measures to squeeze Moscow out of the global arms market.

Peskov said that "Washington's continued sanctions hysteresis" dealt a new blow to US-Russia ties but could not immediately say if Moscow would retaliate, or how.

On Thursday, Washington placed financial sanctions on the Equipment Development Department of the Chinese Defence Ministry, and its top administrator, for its recent purchase of Russian Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets and S-400

surface-to-air missile systems.

The latest round of anti-Russian measures was the 60th since 2011.

It was the first time a third country has been punished under the CAATSA sanctions legislation for dealing with Russia, signalling Donald Trump's readiness to risk relations with other countries over Moscow.

Beijing -- which is locked in a trade war with the United States -- on Friday urged Washington to withdraw sanctions or "bear the consequences".

"The US actions have seriously violated the basic principles of international relations and seriously damaged the relations between the two countries and the two militaries," said Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang.

"We strongly urge the US to immediately correct their mistake and withdraw their so-called sanctions, otherwise the US will have to bear the consequences."

United in their resentment of America's global influence, China and Russia have sought in recent years to tighten up their ties and this month conducted week-long joint military drills, Moscow's largest ever war games.

Arms exports are an important source of revenue for the country and last year Russia sold more than \$14 billion worth of arms overseas.

China summons US ambassador to lodge protest

'We are losing the fight against famine'

Says UN aid chief; HRW says Saudi trying to quash war crimes probe

AFP, United Nations

International aid agencies are losing the fight against famine in Yemen, where 3.5 million people may soon be added to the eight million Yemenis already facing starvation, the UN aid chief warned Friday.

A sharp drop in the value of Yemen's currency that has sent fuel prices spiraling compounded with renewed fighting has led to a worsening of what the United Nations already considers the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

"We are losing the fight against famine," Mark Lowcock, the under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs, told the Security Council.

"We are already seeing pockets of famine-like-conditions -- including cases where people are eating leaves because they have no other form of sustenance," he said.

Three quarters of Yemen's population -- or 22 million people -- are in need of humanitarian aid, including eight million who need food relief to survive, according to UN figures.

Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch said on Friday said Saudi Arabia is trying shut down a UN-backed war crimes investigation in Yemen, calling it a "blatant attempt to avoid scrutiny" of its conduct in the country.



Trump will fail just like Saddam

Says Rouhani

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Donald Trump will fail in his confrontation with Iran just like Saddam Hussein, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani said.

The Iranian leader, referring to the 1980-88 war between the two Middle Eastern powers, also vowed that Tehran will not abandon its missiles despite US pressure.

"The same will happen to Trump. America will suffer the same fate as Saddam Hussein," Rouhani said on Saturday in a speech carried live by state television marking the start of the Iran-Iraq war.

"Iran will not abandon its defensive weapons ... including its missiles that make America so angry."

Rouhani's comments come a day after Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif hit out at the Trump administration for being a "real threat".

"It is true that there is a real threat to our region and to international peace and security. That threat is the Trump Administration's sense of entitlement to destabilise the world along with rogue accomplices in our region," Zarif wrote on Twitter.

"The US must start acting like a normal state."

Iran and the US have been engaged in a diplomatic tug-of-war and harsh rhetoric since Trump came to office.

During his campaign for the presidency, Trump repeatedly referred to the historic 2015 nuclear agreement as the "worst deal" ever and vowed to tear it apart.

He then withdrew the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in May 2018, killing off US involvement from his predecessor Barack Obama's greatest diplomatic feat.

Maldives election will not be free and fair

Say foreign monitors as country votes today

AFP, Colombo

The Maldives presidential election will not be free and fair because President Abdulla Yameen has used draconian laws to crack down on rivals, a foreign monitoring group said on the eve of voting.

The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) yesterday said the political environment in the tourist paradise was heavily tipped in favour of Yameen and they did not expect a fair contest.

"The ANFREL denounces recent developments... which ensure that the upcoming presidential election of September 23 cannot be considered free and fair," the group said in a statement.

It said it was recognised by the Maldivian Elections Commission and given accreditation to monitor the voting, but that its staff were denied visas to enter the country. A

number of international journalists have also been denied permission to cover the polls.

"It appears that Maldivian authorities are granting visas only to observers and monitors they perceive as friendly, while using ANFREL's name and that of other applicants in an attempt to gain international legitimacy," the organisation said.

The statement came a day after exiled former leader Mohamed Nasheed urged the international community not to accept the outcome of the election.

A relatively unknown politician, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, 54, is backed by Nasheed to try to beat Yameen who came to power following a controversial run off against Nasheed in the 2013 election.

US and EU have expressed deep concern over Yameen's actions, and rights activists have called for sanctions on the president and his aides.



Yameen

'Sorry, no cherries'

Britain fumes at 'insulting' Tusk post about PM's Brexit plan

AFP, London

British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt yesterday accused EU Council President Donald Tusk of "insulting the British people" by needling Prime Minister Theresa May in a viral social media post.

Tusk created a mini-sensation during a difficult EU summit on Brexit in Salzburg by posting a photo on Instagram of himself offering May a tray of cakes.

"A piece of cake, perhaps?" Tusk wrote alongside the picture. "Sorry, no cherries."

The comment was a biting reference to accusations by Brussels that May was "cherry-picking" the best parts of EU membership while leaving the bloc.

Her divorce proposal envisions a UK-EU free trade area for goods through a common rulebook.

But it would abandon the bloc's right to the free movement of people and see Britain adopt its own migration policy.



Theresa May

The EU wants to make sure the remaining 27 members do not follow Britain's example by trying to leave while preserving the benefits of free trade.

May's plan was rebuffed in Salzburg on Thursday and Tusk's post only added to what several British newspapers called her "humiliation".

The prime minister tried to regain her footing by delivering a tough television address on Friday demanding that Britain be treated with "respect".

That message was picked up and taken a step further by Hunt in an appearance on the BBC's Today radio

programme on Saturday. "Don't mistake British politeness for weakness," Hunt said.

Tusk issued a statement on Friday evening calling himself "a close friend of the UK and a true admirer of PM May".

French President Emmanuel Macron had earlier mocked some pro-Brexit British politicians as "liars."

How the two sides intend to move forward with the clock ticking down to the March 29 Brexit deadline remains unclear.

Pressure is mounting on May from eurosceptics in her Tory party to abandon the so-called "Chequers" proposal for a less ambitious one that would not maintain such close EU-UK ties.

The Daily Telegraph reported that ministers intended to use a cabinet meeting on Monday to call on May to develop a "Plan B" alternative to Chequers.

May continued to insist on Friday that there were only two options on the table: trying to find a compromise on her proposal or no deal at all.