

NEWSIN brief

US deputy attorney general resigns

REUTERS, Washington

US Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who oversees the special counsel investigation into Russia's role in the 2016 presidential election, has verbally resigned in anticipation of being fired by President Donald Trump, Axios news site reported. Rosenstein verbally resigned to White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, the report said.

Cuba seeks 'civilised' ties with US: president

AFP, United Nations

Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel said Sunday his government wants a "civilised" relationship with the US— despite the embargo imposed on the island by the US since 1962. Speaking to the state press, Diaz-Canel said he would use his speech at the UNGA gathering to denounce the commercial, economic, and financial embargo.

Tiger population doubles in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's wild tiger population has nearly doubled over the last nine years, officials said yesterday, in a victory for the impoverished country's drive to save the endangered big cats. Wildlife groups have welcomed the news as a sign that political involvement and conservation strategies can reverse the decline of the majestic tiger.

Kenyan troops kill 10 al Shabaab fighters

REUTERS, Nairobi

Kenyan soldiers killed 10 fighters from the Somali militant group al Shabaab in a clash yesterday in eastern Kenya, the military said. Three soldiers were wounded in the morning attack launched by the army in coastal Lamu county, a Kenya Defence Forces statement said.

Russia, Israel ties at stakes

Says Kremlin after plane shot down; Putin orders to supply S-300 surface-to-air missile system to Damascus to boost air defence

AGENCIES

Moscow yesterday announced new security measures to protect its military in Syria, including supplying the Syrian army with a new S-300 air defence system and jamming radars of nearby warplanes following the downing of a Russian plane last week.

Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said that President Vladimir Putin ordered additional security measures after a Syrian Soviet-era S-200 missile shot down the Russian military plane by mistake, killing 15, in an incident last Monday that Moscow blames on Israel.

"This has pushed us to adopt adequate response measures directed at boosting the security of Russian troops" in Syria, Shoigu said in a televised statement.

"(Russia will) transfer the modern S-300 air defence system to the Syrian armed forces within two weeks."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists on a conference call that the decision to supply the weapons was "not directed at any third country". "Russia needs to increase safety of its military and it should be clear for everyone," he said.

But he also repeated Moscow's accusations that Israel was to blame for the crash: "No doubt that according to our military experts, deliberate action by Israeli pilots was the reason for the tragedy and this cannot but harm our (Russia-Israeli) ties."

The Syrian military has already been trained to use the system, which was set to be sent over in 2013, but was held up "at the request of Israel," Shoigu said.

"In regions near Syria over the Mediterranean Sea, there will be radio-electronic suppression of satellite navigation, on-board radar systems and communication systems of military aviation attacking objects on Syrian territory," he said.

SYRIA WAR

Turkey vows to impose secure zones east of Euphrates in Syria

Syria jihadists to state position on Idlib deal 'in coming days'



Moscow says Israeli F-16 planes which struck Latakia in western Syria on September 17 later used the landing Russian Il-20 surveillance plane as "cover," which resulted in the larger Il-20 being hit by a Syrian missile, reported AFP.

Israel regularly carries out strikes in Syria against Assad's government, its Lebanese ally Hezbollah and Iranian targets. An Israeli military delegation travelled to Moscow last week to share information about the incident.

Meanwhile, Erdogan said yesterday Turkey will take action east of the Euphrates river in Syria and impose secure zones as it has done in the northwest of the country, reported Reuters.

The main jihadist group in northwest Syria will announce its position on a Turkish-Russian deal over Idlib in the next few days, it said yesterday, with its acceptance or rejection vital to the success of efforts to contain the war.

India vows to stand firm on French jet deal

Opposition demands probe into allegations of wrongdoing

REUTERS, New Delhi

India has vowed to stand firm on a multi-billion dollar deal to buy warplanes from France's Dassault Aviation, as the opposition Congress party yesterday called for an inquiry into allegations of wrongdoing.

Former French President Francois Hollande, who approved the deal when he was in office, triggered a political storm in India after he said the Indian government influenced the choice of a local partner in the deal.

New Delhi has denied the allegations, but opposition parties are gunning for Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the 2016 purchase of 36 Rafale planes estimated to be worth \$8.7 billion, saying he overpaid for the planes and had not been transparent.

Congress' national spokesman Sanjay Jha said they would call for a joint parliamentary committee to investigate the deal, and organise public protests.

"We will take it to the people's court through protests and demonstrations as what is involved in this massive fraud is the taxpayers money," he told Reuters.

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said on Sunday that the deal would proceed as planned.

"These jets will come to India. They will enhance the combat ability of the Indian Air Force," Jaitley told television news agency ANI, a Reuters affiliate.

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 told French news service Mediapart that New Delhi had put pressure on Dassault to choose Reliance.

"We had no choice. We took the interlocutor that was given to us," Hollande was quoted as saying.



MALDIVES ELECTION

New President Solih faces uphill tasks

REUTERS, Male

Veteran Maldives lawmaker Ibrahim Mohamed Solih overcame the detention and exile of key opposition figures to win a weekend presidential poll and unseat incumbent Abdulla Yameen, but now faces the task of holding together a disparate coalition.

The Maldives, a string of palm-fringed islands and atolls 325 miles (523 kilometres) southwest of the southern tip of India, is best known as a luxury holiday destination.

But the Muslim nation of fewer than half a million has suffered a turbulent transition to democracy since the end of three decades of authoritarian rule in 2008.

The victory of Solih, who is known as a reformer, dislodges Yameen, a hardliner who had cultivated ties with both Beijing and Saudi Arabia, and cracked down on threats to his rule, even jailing his own half-brother, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.

But Solih, who is expected to be sworn in on November 17, must now keep together a coalition that includes two fierce rivals, Gayoom and Mohamed Nasheed, both former presidents.

REFORMER AND NEGOTIATOR

The opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) nominated Solih, popularly known as "Ibu", as its presidential candidate after the Elections Commission barred Nasheed, now in exile in Sri Lanka, from standing.

Many key opposition leaders, two former presidents Gayoom and Nasheed, a vice president and scores of ministers were hit with jail terms after swift trials that drew international criticism.

Solih has been in the opposition since he first entered parliament, known as the People's Majlis, in 1994, except for a two-year spell under Nasheed, before the latter was



Ibrahim Mohamed Solih

ousted amid a police mutiny.

A close confidant of the former president and married to one of his cousins, Solih played a leading role in forming the Maldives Political Reform Movement from 2003 until 2008, which culminated in the adoption of a new constitution.

He was also part of the special parliament set up under Gayoom, who ruled the tropical islands for three decades until 2008, to write a new modern constitution for a multi-party democracy. He has led the opposition in parliament since 2011.

He led the MDP during protests in March 2015 after Nasheed's arrest for alleged terror offences, charges the opposition called politically motivated.

Friends say Solih has a calm temperament, and is likely to champion democracy and freedom of expression.

He has already said he will seek to free all political prisoners, including Gayoom. He also wants to rework or scrap deals not made in the best interests of the Maldives, as well as restore ties with India, which could, in turn, strain relations with Beijing.

Teen rescued after 49 days adrift at sea

AFP, Jakarta

An Indonesian teenager survived seven weeks adrift at sea after his tiny fishing trap lost its moorings and ended up some 2,500 kilometres (1,500 miles) away in waters near the Pacific island of Guam, his family said yesterday.

Aldi Novel Adilang's harrowing tale began in mid-July when the 18-year-old was working solo on a fishing hut anchored about 125 kilometres (77 miles) off Indonesia's Sulawesi island.

His job was to keep the vessel's lamps lit to attract fish. Its owner would reportedly come by weekly to drop off food, clean water, fuel and other supplies.

The floating fishing trap, known as a rompong, had no engine and was anchored to the seabed with a long rope, but heavy winds knocked it off its moorings and sent Adilang out to sea. Local media reported that the owner of Adilang's rompong had as many as 50 moored in the surrounding waters.

"His boss told my husband that he went missing," Adilang's mother Net Kahiking told AFP from her home in Sulawesi. "So we just surrendered to God and kept praying hard." The teen, who only had enough food to last several days, survived by catching fish, said Mirza Nurhidayat, the Indonesian consul general in Osaka.

Thai junta chief eyes role in politics after election

Opposition welcomes Prayuth's participation

REUTERS, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha is "interested in politics," he said yesterday, a sign that he sees a public role for himself after a general election promised next year.

May next year is the most recent deadline Prayuth's junta has set for a vote its critics hope will return Thailand to civilian rule after more than four years of military rule, although it has repeatedly pushed back the timeline.

Critics say the military aims to maintain its grip on power beyond the election and they point to a military-backed constitution that limits the authority of civilian politicians.

"I can say right now that I am interested in politics," Prayuth, who has previously sidestepped questions about his political future, told reporters yesterday.

"Because I love my country, like all Thai people," he said. He did not elaborate on his

comments.

As army chief, Prayuth, 64, led a 2014 coup that ousted a civilian government to end a prolonged period of sometimes deadly unrest.

Technically Prayuth cannot stand for election under the constitution, because he would have had to resign from his post since 2017 to do so. Prayuth said yesterday he did not intend to quit as junta chief.

However, Prayuth could return as prime minister if a political party nominated him as its frontrunner.

The constitution offers Prayuth another route.

He could be chosen as an "outside prime minister" if 500 members, or two-thirds of the House of Representatives and the Upper House Senate, voted to kickstart the process, if the winning party's candidate failed to get enough votes.

Watana Muangsook, a member of the opposition Puea Thai Party, welcomed Prayuth's participation in the next election but said he must first give up his post as junta chief.



Women clash with riot police blocking a street during a protest against Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega's government in Managua, on Sunday evening.

PHOTO: AFP

Nepal restores \$2.5b deal to Chinese firm

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal has reinstated a deal with a Chinese state-owned company to build a \$2.5 billion hydroelectric plant scrapped by the previous government, officials confirmed yesterday, as the new pro-Beijing administration seeks massive infrastructure investment.

The agreement with the China Gezhouba Group Corporation (CGGC) to construct Nepal's largest hydro plant was abruptly cancelled by the outgoing government just weeks before a general election late last year.

"The decision to scrap the agreement with the Chinese company by the previous government was taken without any grounds," information minister Gokul Baskota told AFP.

"We decided to correct that, because Nepal doesn't have the capacity to build such a big

project and funding is also challenging."

The long-mooted 1,200 megawatt Budhi-Gandaki plant would nearly double Nepal's hydropower production. The impoverished landlocked country suffers chronic energy shortages and is forced to buy electricity from neighbouring India.

Beijing has been lobbying the new Communist government in Kathmandu to restore the contract since it took office in February, Baskota said.

Nepal wants the project to be part of the One Belt, One Road Initiative (OBOR), China's massive infrastructure drive at the centre of the Asian giant's push to expand its global influence. Nepal signed up to the plan in May 2017.

Critics say the contract should have been open for international bidding and warned of the risks of Chinese loans.

HYDROPOWER PLANT

1,200MW plant would nearly double Nepal's power generation

Nepal wants the project to be part of One Belt, One Road Initiative

JUDICIAL REFORM

EU takes Poland to bloc's top court

AFP, Brussels

The European Union announced yesterday it will take Poland to the bloc's top court to stop alleged breaches of the independence of the country's supreme court.

The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, said Poland's decision to lower the age at which Supreme Court judges must retire from 70 to 65 would undermine judicial independence and breach Poland's obligations under EU law.

"The European Commission decided to refer Poland to the Court of Justice of the EU due to the violations of the principle of judicial independence created by the new Polish law on the Supreme Court," the commission said.