

NEWSIN brief

Suicide bomber kills 8 at Afghan election rally

REUTERS, Kabul
A suspected suicide bomb attack at an election rally in southern Afghanistan yesterday killed at least eight people and wounded 10 others, officials said. The attack took place in Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital of Helmand, a southern province bordering Pakistan that has seen some of the fiercest fighting of the Taliban insurgency.

Duterte says cancer tests negative

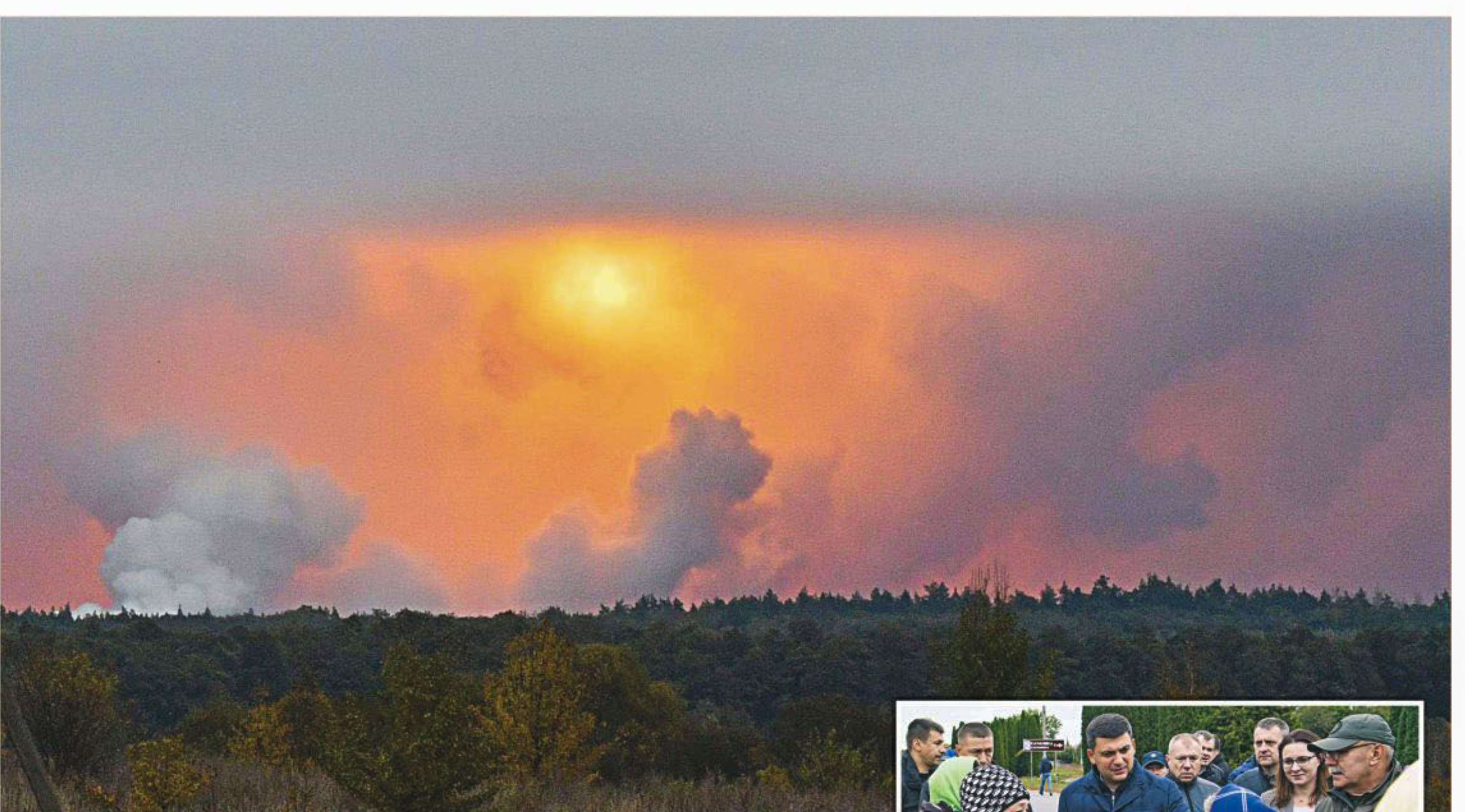
AFP, Manila
Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said yesterday that recent cancer tests came back negative, just days after sparking speculation when he revealed doctors were checking him for the disease. Duterte, 73, has regularly prompted theorising about his health by discussing his ailments in public since taking power in 2016.

Kim invites Pope to North Korea

REUTERS, Seoul
North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has invited Pope Francis to visit Pyongyang in a gesture designed to highlight peace efforts on the Korean peninsula, South Korea said yesterday. North Korea and the Vatican have no formal diplomatic relations. South Korean President Moon Jae-in will deliver Kim's invitation when he meets Francis next week during a trip to Europe.

Nine killed in India steel plant blast

TNN, Raipur
At least nine people were dead and 14 injured in a pipeline blast that took place at the Bhilai steel plant (BSP). The explosion at the plant of the state-owned Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) took place at around 11:30 am. Condition of five injured is stated to be very critical and fire tenders were still trying to douse the flames.



A fire ball is seen in the sky from the village Zudaika, some 8 km from the epicenter of a series of explosions at an ammunition depot in Ukraine's northern Chernihiv region, north of Ukraine yesterday. *Inset*, Ukrainian Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman talks with local residents in the village of Parafivka, located near the scene of explosions. More than 12,000 people were evacuated after ammunition began exploding, authorities said. PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS



Shahbaz arrested at Imran's behest

Says ousted Pak PM Nawaz Sharif
DAWN ONLINE

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) central executive committee in an 'emergency meeting' on Monday night decided to launch a protest movement against what it termed political victimisation of opponents by the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf-led coalition government.



While resuming his political activity weeks after his release from jail, ousted prime minister and PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif chaired the CEC meeting and directed the party's parliamentary group (comprising senior members of both houses of parliament) to establish contacts with all opposition parties immediately to have them onboard for launch of a joint struggle.

The PML-N had earlier said Nawaz wouldn't resume political activities till the Chehlum of his wife who died last month, but the 'sudden and unexpected' arrest of party president Shahbaz Sharif compelled him to get into action and deal with the challenges the party has been facing.

While presiding over the CEC meeting at PML-N's Model Town secretariat, Nawaz alleged that Shahbaz had been arrested by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) at the behest of Prime Minister Imran Khan.

The committee passed several resolutions condemning the arrest of its leadership days before the Oct 14 by-elections, huge increase in gas and electricity tariff that resulted in inflation, threatening tone used by the PTI leadership against its political opponents, and PTI's intention to review China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects.

#MeToo scars Modi govt

Female journos in India accuse junior foreign minister of sexual harassment; Sushma ducks question

AFP, New Delhi
India's belated #MeToo movement snowballed yesterday after several female journalists accused a minister in Narendra Modi's government of sexual harassment and a producer alleged she was raped by a veteran Bollywood actor.

Women journalists took to Twitter to allege how M J Akbar, a well-known former editor and now a junior foreign minister, conducted job interviews in fancy hotel rooms and made sexual advances when they were starting out in the media.

Priya Ramani, the first journalist to go public with the allegations, identified Akbar as the unnamed editor whose inappropriate behaviour she had written about in an article last year.

Ramani said she was 23 when Akbar called her to a Mumbai hotel room for a job interview around 20 years ago.

Akbar was "an expert on obscene phone calls, texts, inappropriate compliments and not taking no for an answer," she said in the article which she reposted on Twitter on Monday.

"You know how to pinch, pat, rub, grab and assault. Speaking up against you still carries a heavy price that many young women cannot afford to pay."

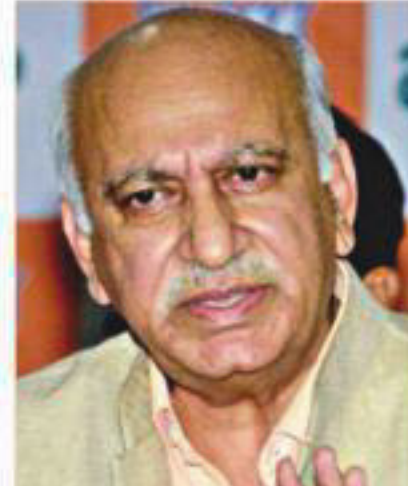
India's foreign ministry was yet to respond to a request for comment from AFP and Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj ignored reporters when asked whether she would investigate the claims.

Akbar -- who has edited prominent Indian newspapers such as The Telegraph, Asian Age and The Sunday Guardian and is also a member of parliament -- was yet to comment.

Another journalist, who preferred to remain anonymous, said she declined a job offer after "the whole experience of an interview sitting on a bed in a hotel room followed by an invitation to come over for a drink."

Journalist Prerna Singh Bindra said Akbar "made life at work hell" when she refused his sexual overtures.

Many women in India have in recent days taken to social media to out sexual predators, emboldening others to come out with their experiences.



M J Akbar

US, UN voice alarm

Urge Riyadh to support thorough probe; Saudi Arabia agrees to let Turkish authorities search its Istanbul consulate

AGENCIES
The United Nations human rights office and the US have called on Turkey and Saudi Arabia to properly investigate the fate of prominent Saudi journalist and regime critic Jamal Khashoggi, who vanished after entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul last week.

"If reports of his death and the extraordinary circumstances leading up to are true, this is truly shocking," spokeswoman Ravina Shamdasani said during a press briefing in Geneva, Switzerland, yesterday.

Shamdasani's comments came shortly after US President Donald Trump, Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo all expressed concern regarding Khashoggi's whereabouts.

"We call on the government of Saudi Arabia to support a thorough investigation of Mr Khashoggi's disappearance and to be transparent about the results of that investigation," Pompeo said in a statement.

State Department senior officials have spoken with Saudi Arabia through diplomatic channels about the matter, the top US diplomat added. Pompeo's statement came after Trump earlier on Monday told reporters at the White House: "I am concerned. I don't like hearing about it."

MISSING SAUDI JOURNALIST CASE



Hopefully that will sort itself out.

The issue threatens to strain the close relationship Prince Mohammed has forged with the Trump administration, which until now has been willing to turn a blind eye to alleged Saudi human rights violations in Yemen, where it leads a coalition bombing Houthi rebels that has killed thousands of civilians.

Trump has instead focused on US and Saudi shared interests in ratcheting up pressure on Iran.

Khashoggi, a US resident, has written articles over the past year critical of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. On the eve of his planned marriage to a Turkish woman, he entered the consulate on October 2 and has not been seen since, reported Aljazeera Online.

"Saudi authorities said they were open to cooperation and that a search can be conducted at the consulate building," the Turkish foreign ministry spokesman Hami Aksoy said in a statement. The search will take place as part of the official investigation, which was being conducted "in an intense manner," he said without giving any date.

Turkish police were looking into two private aircraft which landed at Istanbul's Ataturk airport yesterday at different times carrying 15 people of interest in the case, as well as the possibility that Khashoggi was kidnapped and taken aboard one of the planes, local media reported.

Hillary slams Tories for backing Hungary govt

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
western Europe to do so.

"It's disheartening to watch conservatives in Brussels vote to shield Viktor Orban from censure, including British Tories," she said.

"They have come a long way since the days of Margaret Thatcher and Winston Churchill." Last month, just three Conservative MEPs voted against triggering an EU sanctions process against Orban's government after reports emerged of press freedom violations and anti-Semitism.

Orban eventually lost the vote by 448-197. Clinton went on: "Let's not be fooled by the masquerade that countries like Turkey and Hungary are still real democracies, just illiberal ones."

"Illiberal democracy is a contradiction in terms." Hungary's election was not enough to qualify it as a democracy, she said, as she called on the EU to resist alleged human rights violations.



Hillary Clinton



A woman places flowers in memory of slain Bulgarian television journalist Viktoria Marinova in the city of Rousse yesterday. Corruption-plagued EU member Bulgaria found itself under pressure to find the killer of the television journalist whose brutal murder at the weekend has shocked the country and sparked international condemnation. PHOTO: AFP

India on alert as zika virus hits Jaipur

22 tested positive
REUTERS, New Delhi

India has sent experts to try to contain an outbreak of the zika virus in the popular tourist destination of Jaipur, capital of the northern state of Rajasthan, with a close watch on pregnant women.

Twenty-two people in the city have tested positive, the health ministry said. There is no vaccine to the virus which can cause severe birth defects in unborn children.

Pregnant women in the area are being monitored by the National Health Mission, a body set up by the government to improve healthcare across the country.

"The situation continues to be monitored regularly," the ministry said in a statement late on Monday.

The Toronto-based International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers said it was advising pregnant travellers to postpone trips to the area, part of India's tourist "golden triangle" of Delhi, Jaipur and Agra, home to the Taj Mahal.

First discovered in 1947, the zika virus reached epidemic proportions in Brazil in 2015, when thousands of babies were born with microcephaly, a brain defect affecting speech and motor function.

It is the third such outbreak in India, with the first in the western city of Ahmedabad in January 2017 and the second in the southern state of Tamil Nadu in July 2017. Both outbreaks were "successfully contained", the government said.

The latest cases - in the middle of the country's festival season where many Indians travel, increasing the risk of transmission - come amid a spike in other mosquito-borne diseases, that kill thousands across India each year, according to the World Health Organisation.

AUSTRALIA IMMIGRATION

Migrants to be forced into rural areas

AFP, Sydney
Australia is drawing up plans to require migrants to temporarily settle in regional and rural areas to ease congestion in major cities, the government announced yesterday.

While much of the vast continent is sparsely populated, Australia is growing at an annual rate of 1.6 percent -- one of the highest among OECD countries.

Sydney, Melbourne and southeast Queensland are among the fastest-growing urban areas in the world thanks in part to overseas migration, said population minister Alan Tudge.

The resulting strain on infrastructure in Australia's eastern cities cost the economy Aus\$15 billion (US\$10.6 billion) last year, with annual forecast losses of Aus\$40 billion by 2030 if left unchecked, Tudge told an audience at the Menzies Research Centre think-tank in Melbourne.

"This (congestion) is a serious challenge for families and a serious economic challenge for the nation," he said. "We are working on measures to have more new arrivals go to the smaller states and regions and require them to be there for at least a few years."

Rescue workers step up search to beat deadline

Aid workers ordered out of Palu; death toll rises to 2,010
REUTERS, Palu

Most of the bodies have been found in the seaside city of Palu, on the west coast of Sulawesi island, 1,500 km (930 miles) northeast of the capital, Jakarta.

More than 10,000 rescue workers are scouring expanses of debris, especially in three areas obliterated by soil liquefaction in the south of the small city.

"We're not sure what will happen afterwards, so we're trying to work as fast as possible," said rescue worker Ahmad Amin, 29, referring to the deadline, as he took a break in the badly hit Balaroa neighbourhood. While Indonesian workers searched, the disaster agency ordered independent foreign aid workers to leave the quake zone. Indonesia has traditionally been reluctant to be seen as relying on outside help to cope with disasters, and the government shunned foreign aid this year when earthquakes struck the island of Lombok.

Perhaps as many as 5,000 victims of the 7.5 magnitude quake and tsunami on September 28 have yet to be found, most of them entombed in flows of mud flows that surged from the ground when the quake agitated the soil into a liquid mire.

INDONESIA QUAKE, TSUNAMI



Rescue workers in Indonesia stepped up their search for victims of an earthquake and tsunami yesterday, hoping to find as many bodies as they can before this week's deadline for their work to halt, as the official death toll rose to 2,010.

Syria grants amnesty to army deserters

REUTERS, Beirut
The Syrian government has announced an amnesty for men who deserted the army or have avoided military service, giving them several months to report for duty without facing punishment, it said yesterday.

The fear of conscription, and potential punishment for ducking it or for desertion, is frequently cited by aid groups as one of the main reasons refugees give for not wanting to return home. In a decree issued on his social media feeds, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said the amnesty covered all punishments for desertion inside or outside Syria.

Men inside Syria will have four months to take advantage of the amnesty while those outside will have six months.

Under Syrian military law, deserters can face years of prison if they leave their posts and do not report for service within a set amount of time.

Syria's conflict began in 2011 after mass protests against Assad's rule, eventually leading to half a million deaths and drawing in world and regional powers.

Many soldiers deserted, some to join the rebels and others to escape the fighting. More than half the pre-war population fled their homes. About 5 million went abroad and millions of others were displaced within Syria.