

# NEWSIN brief

## US opposed to Koreans' plan for no-fly zone

REUTERS, Seoul

The United States opposes a plan by South and North Korea to set up a no-fly zone over their heavily fortified border, the latest sign of a rift between Seoul and its top ally. Washington and Seoul publicly insist they are on the same page about dealing with Pyongyang. But behind the scenes, there are growing signs of disagreement.

## Indonesia copters drop disinfectant on Palu

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian authorities yesterday used helicopters to drop disinfectant on parts of the earthquake-and-tsunami-ravaged city of Palu, where thousands of decomposing bodies are still buried beneath once-thriving neighbourhoods. The magnitude 7.5 quake and a tsunami razed swathes of the city on Sulawesi island on September 28.

## 116 Pak cops suspended over 2014 incident

PTI, Lahore

Punjab province authorities suspended at least 116 police officials, including top officers, in connection with the killing of demonstrators during a public protest here in 2014. The incident occurred at Model Town area of Lahore where at least 14 people were killed and 100 others injured when the police opened fire to disperse protesting workers.

## Freed Vietnamese dissident arrives in US

AFP, Chicago

A dissident Vietnamese blogger known by her pen name 'Mother Mushroom' has arrived in the United States after her surprise release from prison, telling a large crowd of supporters she will "never keep silent" in her fight for democracy in the one-party state.



Cars are piled up in a street after being swept away by torrential rains in the city of Mohamedia near the Tunisian capital Tunis yesterday. *Inset*, people walk in a mud-covered street in Mohamedia. Flash flooding has killed at least five people while a further two are unaccounted for, the interior ministry said.

PHOTO: AFP



# Boycott 'foreign plot' of elections

## Afghan Taliban issue fresh call

REUTERS, Kabul

The Taliban yesterday issued a fresh call for Afghans to boycott this week's parliamentary elections, denouncing the vote as a foreign-imposed process that went against both Islam and Afghan culture.

The statement was the third such call and followed a similar message on Wednesday telling teachers not to participate as election workers in polling stations, many of which are located in schools.

It said the elections "have no Islamic or Afghan essence but are a foreign plot to prolong occupation" and said it was the duty of every Afghan and Muslim to oppose them.

"Consequently, preachers and prayer leaders must inform their constituency, while tribal leaders and influential figures must prevent participation by the public," the statement said.

The elections for the lower house of parliament are due to take place on Saturday but preparations have been dogged by chaotic organisation and allegations of widespread fraud as well as worries that polling stations will be attacked.

Thousands of police and soldiers have been deployed across the country to ensure security but already nine candidates have been assassinated and hundreds of people have been killed and wounded in election-related attacks.

Although the Taliban say they will not deliberately target civilians, security officials say attacks are likely on Saturday morning to deter voters from going to polling stations.

The Taliban's strong opposition to the vote comes against a backdrop of contacts with US officials over possible talks to end the 17-year war in Afghanistan, with both sides attempting to secure the upper hand before any formal negotiations begin.

# Yameen may flee Maldives

## Claims opposition, seeks to bar the outgoing president from leaving country over corruption allegations

AGENCIES

Opposition in the Maldives asked the police to bar President Abdulla Yameen from leaving the country hours after he announced plans to step down in the face of a likely defeat in a court case challenging his election loss.

Yameen, who presided over a five-year crackdown targeting opposition, media and rights activists, "must not be allowed to leave the country" without facing justice over allegations of corruption, opposition lawyer Hassan Latheef told reporters in the capital Male late on Wednesday.

"We are receiving credible reports Yameen may leave the country at any minute," Latheef said outside police headquarters, urging the police to "stop Yameen's departure given ongoing investigations into allegations of corruption".

The police could not be reached for comment immediately, reported Aljazeera Online.

Ibrahim Muaz Ali, spokesperson for Yameen, dismissed the opposition's claim, saying the president "will never flee and was ready to cooperate with any investigation", according to newspaper Mihaaru.

Yameen, 59, lost the September 23 election by a margin of 16 percent to opposition candidate Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in an outcome hailed as a victory for democracy in the

Indian Ocean archipelago.

A stunned Yameen conceded defeat a day after the election, saying he accepted the "people's verdict". Days later, at a ruling party conference, he was visibly distraught as he asked voters repeatedly: "What were you thinking? How did you assess me?"

The next week, he was angry as he urged supporters across the country to protest against the election outcome.

The call came despite announcements from a wide range of countries congratulating Solih on the result, including the United States, India, and the United Kingdom, as well as from Yameen's allies, China and Saudi Arabia, who financed his expansive infrastructure drive over the past five years.

Meanwhile, a Maldivian court overturned the 19-month jail term of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom yesterday, a month after the former president's estranged half-brother and jailer suffered a shock election drubbing.

Gayoom, 80, ruled the largely Muslim island nation for 30 straight years until he was defeated at the country's first multi-party elections in 2008, reported AFP.

He was arrested in February and accused of participating in an alleged coup during a crackdown on rivals of strongman President Abdulla Yameen, in charges his family and observers said were politically-motivated.

Yameen's spokesperson says he will never flee



Maldivian court frees ex-leader Gayoom

## REPORTS ON SIRISENA'S ASSASSINATION PLOT

# Lanka leader calls Modi, denies blaming RAW

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Sri Lanka's President Maithripala Sirisena on Wednesday spoke to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on telephone and rejected reports in a section of the media about him alluding to the involvement of India and its external intelligence agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) in an alleged plot to assassinate the President and a former defence secretary of Sri Lanka.

"The President of Sri Lanka stated that he categorically rejected the reports in sections of media about him alluding to the involvement of India in any manner whatsoever in an alleged plot to assassinate the President and a former Defence Secretary of Sri Lanka," a statement issued by the Indian PM's office said late on Wednesday night.

Sirisena termed the media reports as "mischievous and malafide, utterly baseless and false" and said they "seemed intended

to create misunderstanding between the two leaders as well as damage the cordial relations between the two friendly neighbours," according to the statement.

The reports in a section of the media had cited unnamed sources as saying that Sirisena had in a cabinet meeting in Colombo on Tuesday alluded to the RAW plotting his assassination.

Sirisena's phone call to Modi and his denial came a day ahead of the two-day visit by Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinge to India that began yesterday. Wickramasinge will hold talks with Modi and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj.

The Lankan President apprised the Indian Prime Minister "of the urgent steps taken by him personally and the government of Sri Lanka to publicly reject these reports and in this context, he also recalled his meeting with the High Commissioner of India to Sri Lanka on Wednesday morning."



## INDIA'S #METOO COMPLAINANTS

# Lawsuits could stall movement

## Experts say defamation sometimes used as a tool to halt opponents

REUTERS, New Delhi

Defamation lawsuits filed by two Indian public figures accused of sexual harassment have sparked warnings from women's rights activists and legal experts that prolonged court battles could put the brakes on the country's nascent #MeToo movement.

The movement, that began in the United States just over a year ago in response to accusations of sexual assault and harassment in the entertainment industry, gained traction in India in the past two weeks after a Bollywood actress complained about inappropriate behaviour on film sets and complaints of improper conduct roiled India's biggest comedy group.

Since then, more than a dozen men in politics, media, entertainment and the arts have been accused of a range of offences, with several prominent figures either resigning or being suspended as a result.

Two of those accused, former junior foreign minister M J Akbar and veteran actor Alok Nath, this week launched criminal defamation suits against their accusers. Lawyers and women's groups said that could act as a deterrent to more victims coming forward.

Unlike in many countries, where defamation is a civil



offence, Indian law also has provisions which classify it as a criminal offence punishable with a jail term of up to two years.

Cases typically drag on for years in India's overstretched legal system. Legal experts say defamation lawsuits, in particular, are sometimes used as a tool to stall opponents, especially against those who won't have the wherewithal to respond effectively to such cases.

"Criminal defamation is usually an arm twisting tactic and works as a deterrent because nobody wants to be potentially embroiled in court for years or face a jail term," said Samudra Sarangi, a partner at Indian law firm Panag & Babu which represents clients in defamation lawsuits.

Modi is yet to publicly speak on the matter and calls to three spokespersons of his Bharatiya Janata Party were unanswered yesterday. On Monday, Akbar filed the defamation suit against one of his accusers, journalist Priya Ramani, at a Delhi district court. Indian journalist Sucheta Dalal called for crowd-funding Ramani's legal costs in a Twitter post that received more than 3,000 likes, although an official fundraising campaign is yet to be set up.

## INDIA TEMPLE ROW Hardliners block temple to women

AFP, Sabarimala Temple

Hindu hardliners blocked intersections, threatened drivers, threw stones at buses and ordered a 12-hour strike yesterday to successfully bar women from one of India's holiest temples for a second day.

The Lord Ayyappa temple at Sabarimala in the southern state of Kerala was meant to allow women of all ages -- and not just those under 10 and over 50 as before -- from Wednesday following an order by India's highest court last month.

But hundreds of traditionalists, throwing stones at baton-wielding police, defied the order -- blocking the path, surrounding and shouting at any woman attempting to make it to the hilltop site.

Angry young men also surrounded and smashed the car windows of female television reporters and threatened others, including an AFP reporter. Another female correspondent was kicked.

Local Hindu groups had previously declared a 12-hour shutdown of local businesses, telling drivers that their vehicles would be attacked if they took anyone towards the temple.

"Some men came to the parking lot early Thursday and warned taxi drivers against defying the shutdown call," taxi driver Praveen, in the town of Pathanamthitta, told AFP.

"They warned drivers at several nearby parking lots and hotels. Anyone who defies it will be risking damage to his vehicle," he added in an account corroborated by other drivers.

"No one will get to the temple today because all the drivers are scared for the safety of their cars," one hotel receptionist told AFP.



Britain's Prince Harry and his wife Meghan, Duchess of Sussex visit Albert Park Primary School in Melbourne yesterday. Chargrilled kangaroo was on the royal menu yesterday as Prince Harry and his pregnant wife Meghan arrived in Australia's second-largest city Melbourne, where they were greeted by thousands of screaming fans.

PHOTO: AFP

# Mattis seeks resilient US ties with China

REUTERS, Singapore

US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis told his Chinese counterpart yesterday that the world's two largest economies needed to deepen high-level ties so as to navigate tension and rein in the risk of inadvertent conflict.

Mattis saw firsthand last month how mounting Sino-US friction can undermine military contacts when Beijing up-ended plans for him to travel to China in October to meet Defense Minister Wei Fenghe.

It was retaliation for recent US sanctions, one of a growing number of flashpoints in relations between Washington and Beijing that include a bitter trade war, Taiwan and China's increasingly muscular military posture in the South China Sea.

Mattis and Wei made no remarks as they shook hands at the start of their talks on the sidelines of a regional security conference in Singapore. The meeting ended without any public statements.

Randall Schriver, a US assistant secretary of defense who helps guide Pentagon policy in Asia, said Mattis and Wei largely restated differing views on thorny security disputes but agreed on the need for durable ties.

"Both acknowledged that the meeting itself was significant and that high-level communication can help," Schriver said. "So I think it was productive in that regard."

Schriver said making military-to-military ties with China less brittle would be crucial to helping reduce the chances of a devastating conflict.

"Two nuclear-armed powers with regional, if not global, interests - we need to make sure that when we step on one another's toes, it doesn't escalate into something that would be catastrophic," Schriver told reporters traveling with Mattis.

# Bhutan votes in third general polls

AFP, Thimphu

The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, wedged between India and China, yesterday voted in a national election guaranteed to usher in a new ruling party which must boost the economy without compromising the country's fierce independent streak.

The country of 800,000 people, famed for its Gross National Happiness index, is holding only its third democratic election since the ending of the absolute monarchy in 2008.

The capital's streets were mainly empty as authorities declared a holiday for the election. Many voters looked forward to seeing a new government tackling problems including Bhutan's large foreign debt, mainly owed to India.

"We expect a new broom to sweep well," said engineer Gopal Chettri after voting in the capital Thimphu. "It is a country with a limited budget so what can you say. Whatever party wins has to cope with it."

Results of the runoff vote -- to be announced today -- could see a government formed by a party only registered in 2013.



## ALLEGED GRAFT

# Malaysia's ex-deputy PM detained

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's anti-graft agency arrested a former deputy prime minister, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, yesterday in connection with an investigation into suspected misappropriation of funds from a charity foundation, the agency said.

Ahmad Zahid leads the opposition as the president of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the once-powerful party that ruled Malaysia for 60 years before being ousted in a shock general election defeat in May.

He is the latest former high-ranking official to be arrested over suspected graft since the election.

Ex-premier Najib Razak and his wife, Rosmah Mansor, face multiple charges in connection with a multi-billion dollar scandal at state fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB).

Najib has denied wrongdoing and pleaded not guilty to 32 criminal charges involving more than 2.3 billion ringgit (\$553.6 million) allegedly siphoned from 1MDB.

Rosmah has pleaded not guilty to 17 money-laundering offences.

Ahmad Zahid was arrested following an investigation into alleged "abuse of power, breach of trust, and money laundering", the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) said in a statement.

He will be brought to a Kuala Lumpur court today to face several charges under anti-corruption and money laundering laws, the MACC said.