

NEWSIN brief

UN rights body slams French 'burqa ban'

AFP, Geneva

The UN Human Rights Committee yesterday criticised France's so-called burqa ban, saying the law "violated" the rights of two women who were fined in 2012 for wearing full-face veils in public. The committee called for the women to be compensated and for a review of the 2010 law. It added that it was not convinced by France's claim that the ban was necessary for security and social reasons.

Mexico braces for Hurricane Willa

AFP, El Rosario

Mexico braced for the worst Monday as Hurricane Willa -- upgraded to a maximum Category 5 storm -- bore down on the Pacific coast, where it is expected to produce life-threatening wind and flooding. The powerful hurricane, with maximum sustained winds of 260 kilometers per hour, was on course to slam into Mexico somewhere around the resort town of Mazatlan yesterday afternoon or evening.

Torture in Palestinian jails 'systematic': HRW

AFP, Ramallah

The Palestinian security forces "systematically" abuse and torture prisoners in what could amount to crimes against humanity, Human Rights Watch said yesterday. The rival authorities of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas both used threats, arbitrary arrests and violent abuse against detainees, said the New York-based group. The PA rejected the allegations, accusing Human Rights Watch of allying with the US government. Hamas did not respond.

US to build up nuke arsenal

Says Trump after scrapping treaty with Russia; China slams US 'blackmail'

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump said the United States is ready to bolster its nuclear arsenal after announcing it is abandoning a Cold War-era nuclear treaty, as Russia warned the withdrawal could cripple global security.

Trump sparked concern globally by saying he wanted to jettison the three-decade-old Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) signed former US president Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader.

In explaining his decision, Trump told reporters in Washington that Russia had "not adhered to the spirit of that agreement or to the agreement itself".

"Until people come to their senses, we will build it up," he said, referring to the country's nuclear stockpile. "This should have been done years ago."

"It's a threat to whoever you want. And it includes China. And it includes Russia," the US president continued. "And it includes anybody else who wants to play that game. You can't do that. You can't



play that game.

"Until they get smart, there's going to be nobody that's going to be even close to us."

Russia, however, has warned abandoning the agreement would be a major blow to global security.

Moscow was ready to work with the United States to salvage the agreement, the Russian Security Council said after a meeting between its chief Nikolai Patrushev and US National Security Adviser

John Bolton.

Trump's announcement has raised global concerns, with the European Commission urging the US and Russia to pursue talks to preserve the treaty, and China calling on Washington to "think twice."

Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said a unilateral withdrawal from the treaty "will have a multitude of negative effects".

Hua yesterday warned it would

"never accept any form of blackmail".

China is not a signatory to the INF.

Bolton, who was expected to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday, was visiting Moscow in the wake of Trump's announcement Saturday that he wants to do away with the pact, which bans intermediate-range nuclear and conventional missiles.

Signed in 1987, the INF resolved a crisis over Soviet nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles targeting Western capitals.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov rejected claims that Moscow has violated the pact, instead accusing Washington of doing so, and called Bolton's upcoming meeting with Putin important.

Analysts warn the latest rift between Moscow and Washington could have lamentable consequences, dragging Russia into a new arms race.

Putin and Trump will both be in Paris, France on November 11 to attend commemorations marking 100 years since the end of World War I.

India, China ink pact

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India and China on Monday signed a bilateral pact on security cooperation as New Delhi asked Beijing not to give shelter to fugitive ULFA insurgent group leader Paresh Barua and stop thwarting efforts to designate Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed group leader Maulana Masood Azhar as a global terrorist.

China, in turn, sought India's cooperation on getting information on the movement of Uyghur insurgents in China's restive Xinjiang province and India has assured its assistance.

The agreement on security cooperation was inked after talks between Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh and visiting China's Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhi here on Monday.

Indian home ministry officials said Rajnath requested Zhao not to allow Paresh Barua, who leads the United Liberation

Front of Ahom (Independent) faction, to move into Chinese territory and procure arms. Indian officials said the agreement signed on Monday could help India apprehend Paresh Barua.

During the meeting, the two sides discussed issues of mutual interest, including bilateral counter-terrorism cooperation and welcomed increased cooperation between India and China in the area of security cooperation, the statements said.

At the meeting, India raised the issue of China twice vetoing in the UN Sanctions Committee meetings proposals to declare Masood Azhar, the mastermind of a number of major terror attacks in India, as a global terrorist.

The meeting comes just a year after a two-month-long border stand-off between the India Army and the China's People's Liberation Army at Doklam on the India-Bhutan-China tri-junction.

SECURITY CO-OP

Delhi asks Beijing not to give shelter to ULFA leader Paresh Barua

China, in turn, seeks info on movements of Uighur insurgents

Rahul won't be PM candidate

Says Congress as embattled party focuses on alliance building in India ahead of crucial 2019 general election

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's main opposition Congress party has said it would not name its leader Rahul Gandhi as the prime ministerial candidate of an alliance seeking to defeat Prime Minister Narendra Modi in next year's general election.

Congress is working to build an opposition front with other parties in preparation for the vote, and spokesman Sanjay Jha said it would respect the "aspirations" of potential alliance partners though no alternative candidates will be nominated.

Jha said the party would be following the same strategy as it did in 2004 when its alliance defeated a coalition led by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) without formally naming a prime ministerial nominee.

"Defeating the BJP is our primary

goal, and therefore the Congress party is going to be very politically accommodating because we believe that regional parties' aspirations and their ambitions will have to be respected depending upon relative strengths in different



areas," he told Reuters on Monday.

Many of Congress's potential alliance parties are run by ambitious regional leaders with years of governance experience.

Echoing Jha's comments, senior

Congress leader and former finance and interior minister Palaniappan Chidambaram said the party's main focus was on forging an alliance to win the election, due by May 2019.

"We want to form a coalition, make it win and then the parties involved will decide who becomes prime minister," he told TV channel News18 Tamil Nadu.

Gandhi, 48, is a scion of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty that has ruled India for nearly four decades since its independence from Britain in 1947.

An opinion poll by TV channel Times Now predicted in August that nationally Congress would raise its seat count in the lower house of parliament next year to 78 from 44 in 2014. The BJP is projected to win 227 seats, down from 282. A party needs to win 272 seats for a simple-majority out of the 543 seats in fray.



MIGRANT CARAVAN

Central American migrants, who are part of a caravan of migrants trying to reach the United States, hitchhike on a truck along the highway as they continue their journey in Tapachula, Mexico, Monday. US President Donald Trump said US will start cutting aid to Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador as the countries failed to stop the caravan. US said more than 7,000 people were now heading toward the US, as more migrants joined the original group, including some Central Americans who were already in Mexico.

PHOTO: AFP

BREXIT GRIDLOCK

UK PM fires back at party rebels

AFP, London

Britain's beleaguered Prime minister appealed to her increasingly mutinous party on Monday to back her Brexit strategy in the face of deep divisions at home and a tough negotiating stance from the EU.

Theresa May told a raucous sessions of parliament she was not afraid of strong criticism while negotiating more agreeable terms for Britain's exit from the European Union in March.

"If doing those things means I get difficult days in Brussels, then so be it," she said over the din of jeers from the opposition as well as some members of her own party.

"The Brexit talks are not about my interests. They are about the national interest -- and the interests of the whole of our United Kingdom."

May has come under unrelenting attack in the closing stages of Brexit talks that still cannot find a suitable way to keep the border open between EU member Ireland and North Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom.

She returned from an unproductive summit in Brussels last week to a new and more intense round of rumours about an imminent leadership challenge from within her party's most staunch pro-Brexit wing.

MPs in her own party criticised her for being open to the idea of extending until 2021 the post-Brexit transition period in which the details of future trade terms are to be ironed out.

One newspaper quoted an unnamed MP saying May was entering "the killing zone".

Pak PM vows to hold peace talks with Delhi

Hopes to resume efforts after nat'l elections in India

AFP, Riyadh

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan yesterday vowed to hold peace talks with archival India following elections in the neighbouring country, after a similar offer from the former cricketer was "rebuffed".

Khan made the announcement during a speech at a Saudi Arabian investment conference where the newly minted leader launched a charm offensive targeting potential investors as Pakistan seeks to secure funds amid a yawning balance of payment crisis.

"When I won the elections and came to power the first thing I tried to do was extend a hand of peace to India," Khan told the crowd at the Future Investment Initiative (FII) in Riyadh, saying the overture was later "rebuffed" by Delhi.

"Now what we are hoping is that we wait until the elections then again we will resume our peace talks with India," he added, referring to upcoming nationwide polls scheduled to take place by mid-May.



In September India pulled the plug on a rare meeting between its foreign minister and her Pakistani counterpart on the sidelines of a UN summit -- a move that was termed "arrogant" by Khan and unleashed a barrage of insults from both sides.

India has long accused Pakistan of backing militants in Kashmir, a Himalayan territory divided between the two countries but claimed in full by both since independence in 1947.

Delhi has stationed about 500,000 soldiers in the portion of Kashmir it controls, where separatist groups demand independence or a merger with Pakistan.

Khan's call for peace talks comes as his administration is desperately seeking funds from "friendly" countries, including Saudi Arabia, to shore up Pakistan's deteriorating finances.

During his address at the FII, Khan confirmed that Pakistan was also in talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) over a new bailout.

Gay activities behind Indonesia disaster

Says Malaysia opposition party chief

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's opposition leader yesterday said a quake-tsunami that killed thousands in neighbouring Indonesia was "punishment from Allah" for the activities of gay people, sparking a storm of criticism.

Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who heads a party which lost power in Muslim-majority Malaysia at historic elections in May, made the remarks in parliament as he warned about the growing influence of the country's gay community.

It was the latest sign of a backlash against homosexuals in Malaysia. In recent months officials -- including the prime minister -- have spoken out against gay rights and two lesbians were caned for breaking Islamic laws that forbid same-sex relations.

Ahmad Zahid, a former deputy former premier who is now facing jail after being arrested for corruption, said that "in Palu, where there was recently an earthquake and tsunami, it was said that there were more than 1,000 (people) involved in such (LGBT) activities."

"As a result, the whole area was crushed. This is punishment from Allah."

The 7.5-magnitude quake and subsequent tsunami smashed into the coastal city of Palu, on Sulawesi island, on September 28. More than 2,000 bodies have since been recovered and there are fears that 5,000 more could be buried beneath the ruins in several hit-hard neighbour-

Mars likely to have enough oxygen to support life: study

AFP, Paris

Salty water just below the surface of Mars could hold enough oxygen to support the kind of microbial life that emerged and flourished on Earth billions of years ago, researchers reported Monday.

In some locations, the amount of oxygen available could even keep alive a primitive, multicellular animal such as a sponge, they reported in the journal Nature Geosciences.

"We discovered that brines" -- water with high concentrations of salt -- "on Mars can contain enough oxygen for microbes to breathe," said lead author Vlada Stamenkovic, a theoretical physicist at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California.

"This fully revolutionises our understanding of the potential for life on Mars, today and in the past," he told AFP.

Up to now, it had been assumed that the trace amounts of oxygen on Mars were insufficient to sustain even microbial life.

"We never thought that oxygen could

play a role for life on Mars due to its rarity in the atmosphere, about 0.14 percent," Stamenkovic said.

By comparison, the life-giving gas makes up 21 percent of the air we breathe.

On Earth, aerobic -- that is, oxygen breathing -- life forms evolved together with photosynthesis, which converts CO2 into O2. The gas played a critical role in the emergence of complex life, notable after the so-called Great Oxidation Event some 2.35 billion years ago.

But our planet also harbours microbes -- at the bottom of the ocean, in boiling hot springs -- that subsist in environments deprived of oxygen.

The new study began with the discovery by Nasa's Curiosity Mars rover of manganese oxides, which are chemical compounds that can only be produced with a lot of oxygen.

Curiosity, along with Mars orbiters, also established the presence of brine deposits, with notable variations in the elements they contained.

