

NEWSIN
brief

VOA protests Pak move
to block its content

AFP, Islamabad

US public radio Voice of America (VOA) yesterday called for Pakistan to lift a block on two of its websites, in Urdu and Pashto, as concerns grow over freedom of speech in the country. "In the interest of press freedom, VOA calls upon those responsible for blocking our content to immediately remove these constraints," said Amanda Bennett, the director of VOA.

N Korea food production
down in 2018: FAO

AFP, Seoul

Food production has fallen this year in isolated, nuclear-armed North Korea, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization. Rice and maize are the North's main staples, but rice output was expected to be below average because of erratic rains and low irrigation supplies, the FAO said in its quarterly Crop Prospects and Food Situation report.

Meditating monk killed
by leopard in India

AFP, New Delhi

A Buddhist monk has been killed by a leopard while meditating in a protected forest for the big cats, the fifth such attack in the area this month, Indian police said yesterday. Rahul Walke Bodhi was seated beneath a tree in Ramdegi forest in western India for morning prayers on Tuesday when the leopard pounced.

Ghana Gandhi statue
removed after protest

AFP, Accra

A statue of Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi has been removed from Ghana's most prestigious university after complaints that he was racist against black Africans. India's former president Pranab Mukherjee unveiled the statue to the global peace icon at the University of Ghana in Accra two years ago as a symbol of ties between the two nations.

Congo fire destroys
voting machines

REUTERS, Kinshasa

A fire overnight at a warehouse in Congo's capital destroyed thousands of voting machines and ballot boxes that were due to be used in the country's long-delayed December 23 presidential election, authorities said yesterday. The blaze had destroyed 8,000 of 10,368 voting machines due to be used in the capital Kinshasa, Congo election commission said.

Floods kill 13 in
central Vietnam

AFP, Hanoi

Floods caused by heavy downpours have killed 13 people in central Vietnam, officials said yesterday, as farmers scrambled to save crops and livestock ahead of more bad weather forecast for this week. Torrential rains have lashed six provinces in the centre of the country

S'pore editor faces
defamation charges

AFP, Singapore

The editor of a Singaporean website was yesterday charged with defamation for publishing a letter alleging corruption among the city-state's leaders, with rights groups criticising the "heavy-handed" response from authorities.

Singapore has long been criticised for restricting free speech and other political rights, as well as slapping critics with financially ruinous libel suits.

The affluent financial hub is regularly ranked among the world's least corrupt countries and its leaders are sensitive about accusations of graft.

Terry Xu was charged in court with defaming government ministers after his independent media website, The Online Citizen, published a letter stating there was "corruption at the highest echelons" of Singapore's government, according to court documents.

Police seized computers and other devices used to operate the website from Xu's residence after receiving a complaint.

The website ceased publication temporarily but is now up and running again. Xu faces a maximum jail term of two years and a fine, or both.

The letter's author, Daniel De Costa Augustin, was also charged with defamation and breaking computer crime laws for allegedly sending the piece from another person's email account without their consent.



Central American migrants travelling in a caravan, hesitate as others climb the Mexico-US border fence in an attempt to cross to San Diego County, in Playas de Tijuana, Baja California state, Mexico on Wednesday. Thousands of Central American migrants have trekked for over a month in the hopes of reaching the United States.

PHOTO:
AFP

Major blow to Sirisena

Top court rules President's dissolution of parliament illegal

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Supreme Court yesterday ruled that President Maithripala Sirisena's sacking of parliament last month was illegal, clearing the way for potential impeachment proceedings against him.

The ruling is a major blow to Sirisena, seven weeks into a major political crisis in the Indian Ocean island nation that has sparked alarm abroad and concerns about its finances.

The seven-judge bench unanimously decided that Sirisena violated the constitution when he dissolved parliament last month and called a snap election nearly two years ahead of schedule.

Delivering the landmark judgement to a packed courtroom, Chief Justice Nalin Perera said the judges agreed that Sirisena violated the constitution when he dissolved the legislature prematurely.

Sacked prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's party has said it would await the outcome of yesterday's decision before deciding whether to open impeachment proceedings.

Abraham Sumanthiran, one of the lawyers who argued in favour of rejecting to president's order, said the top court had reached a decision "that will no doubt go down in history as one of the most important".

Sirisena triggered the unprecedented political crisis on

October 26 when he fired Wickremesinghe and appointed the contentious former strongman Mahinda Rajapakse in his place.

Sirisena then dissolved parliament on November 9 despite provisions that he could not dissolve the legislature until it completes four and a half years out of its five-year term which ends in August 2020.

Four days later after parliament was sacked, the Supreme Court issued an interim ruling suspending Sirisena's decree and restoring parliament, which almost immediately passed a no-confidence motion against Rajapakse.

Wickremesinghe's party and their allies command a majority in the 225-member assembly.

On Wednesday, the legislature voted overwhelmingly to demand the reinstatement of Wickremesinghe as the power struggle headed for a government shut down within weeks.

Members of Wickremesinghe's party and their allies voted 117-0 asking Sirisena to restore the status quo prior to October 26 when he dismissed his former ally.

It was not immediately clear if Wednesday's resolution would be accepted by Sirisena who has vowed he will not give the job back to Wickremesinghe.

Courts have also prevented Rajapakse and his disputed cabinet exercising the powers they claim until they can prove their legitimacy. A hearing by the Court of Appeal on

LANKA POLITICAL CRISIS

Sirisena now faces risk
of impeachment

Sacked PM's party and
their allies command
majority in assembly



A woman holds a portrait picture of a relative, one of the 189 people killed in a Lion Air plane crash, during a rally calling for Lion Air to put safety over profit and for Indonesian President Joko Widodo to ensure all remains were recovered, in Jakarta, Indonesia yesterday.

PHOTO:
REUTERS

No interaction

Modi, Rahul didn't speak while attending
Parliament attack anniv event in Delhi

NDTV ONLINE

Two days after the Congress wrested three heartland states from the BJP, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Congress President Rahul Gandhi were a short distance from each other at a function in Parliament yesterday but did not speak.

The two leaders were in Parliament for a tribute organised for the martyrs of the 2001 Parliament attack.

PM Modi was seen exchanging greetings with his predecessor and Congress leader Manmohan Singh.

Union minister Vijay Goel and Minister of State for Social Justice Minister Ramdas Athawale shook

hands with the Congress president.

Rajya Sabha Chairman M Venkaiah Naidu, Lok Sabha Speaker Sumitra Mahajan, BJP veteran L K Advani and UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi were also present at the event.

They showered petals on portraits of the martyrs killed in the attack 17 years ago on this day.

On December 13, 2001, five heavily armed



gunmen stormed the Parliament complex and opened fire. Five Delhi police personnel, a woman constable of the Central Reserve Police Force, two members of the Parliament Watch and Ward Staff, a gardener and a cameraman lost their lives in the attack.

The Congress won the elections in Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, all ruled by the BJP. The votes were counted on Tuesday.

The elections were seen as a dry run for national polls due to be held before May 2019 when Modi will run for a second term in office.

It also strengthened 48-year-old Gandhi -- scion of the Gandhi-Nehru dynasty -- with Congress having lost more than a dozen states to the BJP since Modi took office in 2014.

The results could also help his party cobble together a grand alliance of smaller parties to take on the BJP next year, with Gandhi at its head.

Analysts have linked the BJP's apparent dwindling support to growing rural distress and unemployment.

STATE POLLS SETBACKS

BJP aware it
must tackle
problems

REUTERS, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling party officials were gathering yesterday for talks on a general election due by May, with their deliberations overshadowed by the party's defeat at the polls in three heartland rural states.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) said the gathering, to be chaired by the party's president, Amit Shah, is a regular quarterly meeting but the losses in its stronghold states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, confirmed this week, are likely to dominate discussions.

Disgruntled voters blamed the slow pace of job creation and weak farm prices for the Hindu nationalist party's defeat in the states, two of which it ruled for three straight terms.

"We realise that rural distress and employment generation are the key issues and we are working on them," said BJP spokesman Gopal Krishna Agarwal, who will attend the meeting that starts in the afternoon and could be addressed by Modi.

"They will have to be tackled, and we will take suggestions from wherever needed."

Senior BJP minister Nitin Gadkari told the ET Now business channel yesterday that the agriculture sector may have been neglected under their government.

Agarwal said the party already had a strategy for the upcoming general election, which must be held by May, and it would hold another big gathering next month.

INDIA GENERAL ELECTIONS 2019

Small parties see
big chance

REUTERS, New Delhi

After suffering an electoral thrashing at the hands of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist party in 2014, India's small regional and caste-based parties are back in the reckoning months ahead of the next general election.

Losses for Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) announced in three key states on Tuesday - blamed mainly on rural anger at weak farm prices and sluggish job creation - have opened the door for new and old alliances between the main opposition Congress and smaller parties bitterly opposed to Modi.

Most political strategists still expect the BJP to cling on to national power, albeit with a smaller majority, in an election due by May next year. But they also acknowledge this week's results in three big heartland states have opened up the outside possibility that Congress could stitch together enough support from smaller parties to form the next government.

"At the central level, Prime Minister Modi maintains overwhelming popularity over his competitors, and anecdotal evidence suggests BJP has more boots on the ground than other parties to mobilise during its re-election campaign," Nomura said in a research note. "However, we do expect talks of a grand (opposition) coalition to raise political uncertainty into the 2019 general elections."

A Congress-led coalition involving multiple smaller parties could find it difficult to govern, and make economic reforms particularly contentious. That is because almost all of the smaller parties have their own local or community-based agendas that may not fit with many national policies.

One of the smaller parties, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) said on Wednesday it would support Congress in forming governments in the big states of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, where it fell just short of a majority.

"We fought these state elections mainly to dethrone the BJP. Unfortunately we were not able to do that on our own," BSP President Mayawati, who goes by only one name, told reporters.

On Monday, a day before the state election results were announced, Congress led a meeting of nearly two dozen opposition parties who pledged to oust the BJP government and "confront and defeat the forces that are subverting our constitution and making a mockery of our democracy".

One of the leaders who attended was Mamata Banerjee, the left-of-centre firebrand who is head of the All India Trinamool Congress party based in the big eastern state of West Bengal.

"The mahagathbandhan (grand-coalition) is a work in progress, it is going to be a reality," Congress spokesman Sanjay Jha said.

Main opposition
Congress biggest winner
in state polls

Small party BSP to back
Congress to form govt
in two states

Congress hopes to form
mega alliance to
beat Modi

'ME TOO' ALLEGATIONS

Akbar, Tejpal suspended
from Editors Guild of India

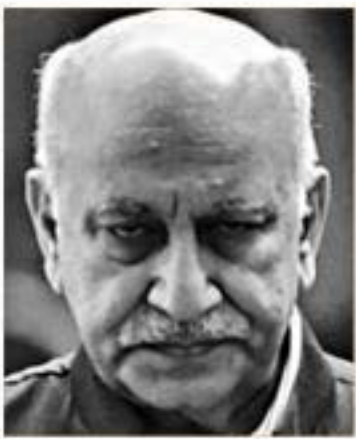
NDTV ONLINE

The Editors Guild of India (EGI) on Wednesday decided to suspend journalist-turned-politician MJ Akbar until a defamation case he filed against a woman journalist comes to a conclusion.

"A majority of our executive committee members suggested that the membership of Mr Akbar be suspended," a statement issued by the media body read.

Akbar (67), who had resigned as a junior minister in the Union ministry after the allegations against him gathered steam, was a prominent figure in the country's media circles. He was first called out by former colleague Priya Ramani, against whom he filed a defamation case.

The EGI also took a similar decision against former Tehelka editor Tarun Tejpal, who has been jailed for rape.



Incidentally, the EGI had last month released an updated list of members that included the names of both Akbar and Tejpal in spite of the charges levelled against them. Also on the list was senior journalist Gautam Adhikari, who was accused of sexual harassment during the recent #MeToo movement.

At least 20 women journalists have levelled sexual misconduct charges against Akbar. He resigned from the post of Minister of State for External Affairs on October 17, citing the angst he was facing due to the allegations.

Tejpal was accused of rape by one of his junior colleagues on November 7, 2013. He had allegedly targeted the complainant in the elevator of Panaji's Grand Hyatt hotel, where Tehelka was holding its annual Think Fest. A Goa trial court charged Tejpal with rape, sexual harassment and wrongful restraint -- to which he pleaded not guilty.