



Sri Lanka court refuses to test Sirisena's sanity

AFP, Colombo

A Sri Lanka court yesterday rejected calls to subject the president to a mental health examination after he sacked a former ally, dissolved parliament and plunged the country into crisis.

The Court of Appeal rejected a petition to force Maithripala Sirisena before a panel of psychiatrists to scrutinise his mental state in the wake of the political upheaval in the Indian Ocean island.

The turmoil began in October when Sirisena dismissed Sri Lanka's prime minister and dissolved parliament, both decisions later overturned by the country's highest court.

For more than a month, Sri Lanka drifted without a government as two rivals jostled for the prime ministership and protests rocked the capital Colombo.

The instability ended peacefully when Sirisena's controversial appointee Mahinda Rajapakse stood down, and the deposed prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe returned to power with the support of parliament.

Mental infirmity is grounds for removing a president if two-thirds of parliament agree, but no party or coalition in the legislature commands such a majority.

The two-judge bench of the appeals court said it did not have the jurisdiction to force Sirisena to be examined, and ordered the petitioner pay the state 100,000 rupees (\$540) in legal costs.

Sirisena came to power in 2015 in a coalition with Wickremesinghe. But personal differences festered and their alliance imploded in October when Sirisena kicked his former ally out of office.

Wickremesinghe refused to stand down and allow Rajapakse, a former president and divisive war-era strongman, to take his place.



Assam police personnel remove black flags from Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti activists protesting with 69 other indigenous organizations of Assam during a demonstration against the Citizenship Amendment Bill 2016 in Guwahati yesterday. The Asom Gana Parishad withdrew its support to the BJP-led coalition government in Assam over the bill.

TALIBAN ATTACK IN AFGHANISTAN

21 cops, pro-govt militias killed

REUTERS, Kabul

Taliban insurgents have stormed security posts in west Afghanistan, killing 21 police and pro-government militia members, officials said yesterday, the latest in a surge of attacks that has cast doubt on tentative steps towards talks.

The Taliban attacked the checkpoints in two different parts of Badghis province, which is on the border with Turkmenistan, late on Sunday, provincial officials said.

Abdul Aziz Bek, head of the Badghis provincial council, said 14 policemen and seven members of pro-government militias were killed, while nine were injured.

A second government official, Jamshid Shahabi, a spokesman for the Badghis provincial governor, said more than 15 Taliban militants were killed and 10 wounded in the clashes.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attacks, among the most deadly in the province in many months.

Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, a Taliban spokesman, said in statement they killed 34 members of the security forces and pro-government militias and seized many weapons and ammunition.

Leaders of the hardline Islamist group and the US officials are scheduled to meet this month to discuss the withdrawal of foreign forces and a possible ceasefire.

Officials from the warring sides have met at least three times in recent months to try to agree on a way to end the 17-year war. But in the meantime, both sides are keeping up their attacks.

The Taliban say they are fighting to topple the Western-backed government and restore strict Islamic law after their ouster in 2001.

The United States and its allies say they want to stop Afghanistan from becoming a haven for international Islamist militants plotting attacks in the West.

Second summit in the works

Says Trump as US, N Korea officials negotiate location

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump said Sunday negotiations are underway on the location of his next summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, while remaining evasive on its timing.

Trump, who held a historic summit with Kim in Singapore in June, said earlier in the week he had received a "great letter" from the North Korean leader but declined to reveal its contents.

"We are negotiating a location," he told reporters before boarding a helicopter for the presidential retreat at Camp David, Maryland, where he said he would be discussing a trade deal with China.

"It will be announced probably in the not too distant future," he said of a summit with Kim. "They do want to meet and we want to meet and we'll see what happens."

"With North Korea, we have a very good dialogue," Trump added, saying he had "indirectly spoken" with Kim.

The latest letter from Kim came after the North Korean leader warned in a New Year's speech that Pyongyang may change its approach to nuclear talks if Washington persists with sanctions.

Trump said Sunday the sanctions remain "in full force and effect" and would do so until the United States saw "very positive" results.

At the first summit between the longtime adversaries in June, Trump and Kim agreed to work toward the Korean peninsula's denuclearization but with little apparent agreement on what that means.

The United States has been pressing for North Korea to get rid of its nuclear weapons before any easing of economic pressure.

Kim, whose family has ruled North Korea with an iron fist for 70 years, wants immediate economic benefits and a formal end to the 1950-53 Korean War.

Trump has cast his first summit with Kim as a major diplomatic victory, and on Sunday repeated his claim that there would be war in Asia had they not sat down to talk.

"Anyone else but me, you would have been at war right now ... You right now would have been at a nice big fat war in Asia with North Korea if I hadn't been elected president."

But progress has stalled since the Singapore summit with the two sides disagreeing over the meaning of their vaguely-worded declaration, and the pace of US-North Korean negotiations has slowed, with meetings and visits cancelled at short notice.



Sanctions remain in full force until US sees positive results: Trump

Pyongyang may change its approach to talks if sanctions persist: Kim



Pope Francis warns of resurgent nationalism

Urges help to solve global migrant crisis

REUTERS, Vatican City

Pope Francis yesterday warned against a resurgence of nationalist and populist movements and criticised countries that try to solve the migration crisis with unilateral or isolationist actions.

The pope, speaking to diplomats in an annual speech known informally as his "state of the world" address, suggested such movements and closed-door policies were turning the clock back 100 years to the dangerous period between the world wars.

Relationships within the international community "are experiencing a period of difficulty, with the resurgence of nationalistic tendencies," he said, making dialogue between countries and hurting the most vulnerable members of society, including migrants.

Populist anti-immigrant parties made gains in a number of countries last year, including Italy, France, the Netherlands, Hungary, Brazil and Poland.

In the United States, a partial government shutdown entered its third week as President Donald Trump has pledged not to bend in his demand for a wall along the southern border with Mexico.

In his hour-long speech, Francis several times mentioned the League of Nations, which was set up after World War One to promote peace but failed to stop the nationalist and populist movements that helped lead to World War Two.

"The reappearance of these impulses today is progressively weakening the multi-lateral system," he told envoys from 183 countries in the speech, which touched on the situation in many countries.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel (C) sings with Carol Singers from across the country during a reception at the Chancellery in Berlin yesterday. Traditionally, children dressed as the Three Kings go from house to house after Christmas and before Epiphany to collect money for aid projects aiming to support children in need. PHOTO: AFP

HISTORIC ABDICATION

Malaysian royals to vote for new king

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

A new Malaysian king will be elected and sworn in this month, royal officials said yesterday, after Sultan Muhammad V abdicated in a historic first following his reported marriage to a Russian former beauty queen.

The king stepped aside Sunday following intense speculation about his future after reports surfaced in recent weeks that he had taken medical leave, and then wed the former Miss Moscow.

As the country reacted with shock to the news, Malaysia's Islamic royal families met at the national palace to push ahead with the task of picking a king to take over from Muhammad V, 49, who gave up the throne after just two years.

Keeper of the Ruler's Seal, Syed Danial Syed Ahmad, said after the meeting that a new king and his deputy would be elected on January 24 and installed on January 31.

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who had a tense relationship with the royals during his first stint as premier from 1981 to 2003 as he sought to curb their powers, said the government accepted Muhammad V's abdication, official news agency Bernama reported.

'Please break evil customs'

Women at centre of India temple storm speak out

CNN ONLINE

It was an extraordinary act of defiance, from two ordinary women who have since been forced into hiding.

On January 2, Bindu Ammini, a 40-year-old law lecturer, and Kanakadurga, a 39-year-old local government employee, made history when they entered India's Sabarimala Hindu temple in southern Kerala state-- the first women to do so since the country's top court scrapped a rule barring the entry of girls and women of child-bearing age.

A 4-to-1 majority of Supreme Court judges said the rule was unconstitutional, setting off what has become an increasingly fractious national debate about gender, religion and the limits of the law.

Several other women have attempted to enter the temple since the ruling. But they've been blocked by angry mobs.

Bindu Ammini and Kanakadurga's entry

was like a bolt of electricity. It invigorated those who say that issue boils down to gender equality in an open, democratic society. And it angered those who say that the courts have no business intervening in what they see as a matter of faith.

As news of their visit spread, deadly protests broke out across Kerala, with at least one man dying in the violence. Hundreds were arrested.

Facing threats from orthodox protesters, Bindu Ammini and Kanakadurga went into hiding.

"I never expected this situation. Street violence, one person killed. I never expected this," Kanakadurga tells CNN.

In an interview at one of the many safe houses they've stayed in since visiting the temple.

"I am not worried about my safety, but (the) safety of society," Bindu Ammini tells CNN.

Ammini is more direct: "My message to the women of India, is please break the system, and please break the evil customs. That is the message."



Gabon foils coup bid by army rebels

AFP, Libreville

A group of soldiers sought to take power in Gabon yesterday while the country's ailing president was abroad, but the government declared the bid had failed and the rebels had been arrested.

Soldiers burst into state radio offices at dawn and called on the public to "rise up", an appeal made as President Ali Bongo remained in Morocco after suffering a stroke last year.

Shots were heard around state broadcasting headquarters in Libreville, capital of the oil-rich West African nation, at about the same time as the message was read at 6:30 am (0530 GMT).

But within a few hours, government spokesman Guy-Bertrand Mapangou told AFP: "Calm has returned, the situation is under control."

Of the five who entered the radio station, "four have been arrested and one is on the run," according to Mapangou.

Security forces have been deployed in the capital and will remain there over the coming days in order to maintain order, he said.

The gunfire, he said, was used to control a crowd.

The elite Republican Guard was deployed around the building and armoured vehicles blocked access to the area, an AFP correspondent saw.

NEWSIN brief

US Navy ship sails in disputed S China Sea

AFP, Washington

A US Navy guided-missile destroyer yesterday sailed near disputed islands in the South China Sea where Beijing has built military installations, sparking anger in China as trade talks between the two countries kicked off.

First-family feud in S'pore flares anew

AFP, Singapore

A fragile truce in Singapore's founding family was shattered yesterday after state prosecutors alleged the wife of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's estranged brother may be guilty of professional misconduct. The allegations mark the latest flare-up in a bitter quarrel between Premier Lee, and his younger brother and sister following the death in 2015 of their father Lee Kuan Yew.

Strong quake hits off Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta

A strong 6.6-magnitude earthquake struck off the Indonesian coast early yesterday, sending residents running out of their homes, but no tsunami warning was issued. The quake hit at a depth of 60 kilometres under the Molucca Sea, some 175 kilometres north northwest of the city of Ternate.

BITS OF HISTORY (JANUARY 07)

1610: Astronomer Galileo announces discovery of Jupiter.

1999: The US Senate opened the impeachment trial of Bill Clinton, the first of a sitting president in more than 130 years.

2015: Charlie Hebdo offices attacked in Paris.