

NEWSIN brief

US, China wrap up trade talks

AFP, Beijing

US and Chinese negotiators wrapped up "constructive" trade talks in Beijing yesterday ahead of another round next week, a top American official said as the economic superpowers aim to settle a bruising tariffs battle. US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin held negotiations with China's Vice Premier Liu He at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse after a working dinner Thursday.

Duterte critic journo freed after brief arrest

AFP, Manila

The head of a Philippine news website Rappler, known for critical reports about President Rodrigo Duterte, was freed on bail hours after she was re-arrested yesterday at a Manila airport on charges she had violated foreign ownership rules. Media watchdogs said the charges against Ressa were trumped up and aimed at intimidating those who challenge Duterte's rule, in particular his deadly crackdown on illicit drugs.

Hundreds of thousands call Bouteflika to quit

REUTERS, Algiers

Hundreds of thousands of protesters gathered in Algiers yesterday to demand the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, days after the army chief called for his removal. Dancing, freedom horns and shouting slogans, some demonstrators also called for the entire political elite to go, saying that while they were against Bouteflika, who is in power for the last 20 years, they also rejected the army's intervention in civilian political life.



Palestinian demonstrators run from tear gas fired by Israeli troops during a protest marking the Land Day in al-Mughayer village, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, yesterday. Tens of thousands of Palestinians are expected to gather today for the first anniversary of the often violent protests along the border, which Hamas has strongly backed.

PHOTO: REUTERS

India postpones Kartarpur meet

Pak regrets Delhi's decision

NDTV ONLINE

India yesterday summoned the Pakistan deputy high commissioner and conveyed objections over the presence of Khalistani separatists in the panel set up by his country on Kartarpur, sources said. In a statement, the external affairs ministry rescheduled the meeting on April 2 between India and Pakistan, to discuss the modalities of opening the Kartarpur Corridor.

"It has been conveyed that the next meeting on the modalities can be scheduled at an appropriate time after receiving Pakistan's response," the statement said.

Questioning Pakistan's "intentions", the ministry said that the presence of people like Maninder Singh Tara, a Khalistani leader and Gopal Singh Chawla, allegedly close to Laskar-e-Taiba chief Hafiz Saeed, will cause "disharmony."

The government said that the Kartarpur facility "should not be used for anti-India propaganda" and Pakistan must clearly say how it would like to bridge the "substantive gaps" between the two countries on pilgrims' movement to the shrine.

Reacting to the cancellation of the April 2 meeting, the Pakistan Foreign Office said it "regrets the Indian decision" to reschedule the meeting. "Last minute postponement without seeking views from Pakistan and especially after the productive technical meeting on March 19 is incomprehensible," the country's foreign office said on Twitter.

In the last meeting between the officials of the two countries there were "big gaps in positions", sources told NDTV. India had asked Pakistan to allow 5000 pilgrims a day and 10,000-plus on special days but Pakistan agreed to only 500-700 pilgrims per day. The latter is also opposed to pilgrims moving on foot to the shrine.

'ELECTION IRREGULARITIES' IN THAILAND

Candidates lodge complaints

AFP, Bangkok

Several anti-military candidates in Thailand lodged fresh complaints with the Election Commission yesterday over bungled tallies and alleged vote-buying following a controversial ballot that has left politics in the junta-ruled kingdom in limbo.

A military-backed party and its main rival led by an exiled billionaire have both claimed the right to lead the government in the wake of Sunday's polls, with official final tallies delayed for weeks.

Candidates from at least two parties issued complaints with the commission yesterday over alleged irregularities they claim could skew final vote counts.

A member of the anti-junta Future Forward party accused the pro-military Phalang Pracharat of currying favour among local officials by gifting them cash and gifts.

Other complaints includes voters intimidation, irregularities in vote counting.

On Thursday the commission unexpectedly released the latest popular vote tallies, before quickly taking them down and re-posting revised numbers. The tally showed more than 2.1 million invalidated votes, but election officials did not respond to questions about the ballots.

The regional election monitor ANFREL said the haphazard release of the results "reflects poorly" on the commission.

"Many voters may never see this election as a legitimate expression of the people's will," said ANFREL's programme officer Amael Vier.

The junta-backed Phalang Pracharat party, whose prime ministerial candidate is 2014 coup leader Prayut Chan-O-cha, clinched the majority of popular votes in Sunday's polls. In second place was its main

rival Pheu Thai, the party linked to self-exiled former premier Thaksin Shinawatra. With parliamentary seats yet to be confirmed, both parties have claimed the right to govern.

Pheu Thai and Future Forward formed a coalition with five other parties this week. But observers say the seven-party bloc will not likely have enough overall seats in the upper and lower houses to stunt a junta-backed alliance with the balance of power stacked in the military's favour.

The 250 seats in the upper house are all military-appointed, which means anti-junta parties need an avalanche of votes to secure enough seats overall to elect a prime minister.

The only thing that could tip the balance for the anti-junta coalition is if they are joined by the veteran Democrat Party, which so far has 33 seats, but which has not pledged allegiance to any camp.

REPORT ON ETHIOPIA JET CRASH

Anti-stall system likely activated

AFP, Washington

Investigators probing the fatal crash of a Boeing 737 Max in Ethiopia have reached a preliminary conclusion that a suspect anti-stall system activated shortly before it nose-dived to the ground, the WSJ reported yesterday citing people familiar with the matter.

The findings were based on flight recorder data and represented the strongest indication yet that the system, known as MCAS, malfunctioned in both the Ethiopian Airlines crash on March 10 and the Lion Air crash in Indonesia last year, the Wall Street Journal said.

The two crashes killed a total of 346 people.

US government experts have been analysing details gathered by their Ethiopian counterparts for the past few days, the newspaper added, and the emerging consensus was relayed at a high-level briefing of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) on Thursday.

It added that the preliminary findings are subject to revision, and Ethiopian authorities are expected to issue their own first report within days.

Embattled aviation giant Boeing pledged Wednesday to do all it can to prevent future crashes as it unveiled a fix to the flight software of its grounded 737 MAX aircraft.



Ocean heat hits record high: UN

AFP, Geneva

Ocean heat hit a record high in 2018, the United Nations said Thursday, raising urgent new concerns about the threat global warming is posing to marine life.

In its latest State of the Climate overview, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) reaffirmed that the last four years had been the hottest on record -- figures previously announced in provisional drafts of the flagship report.

But the final version of the report highlighted worrying developments in other climate indicators beyond surface temperature.

"2018 saw new records for ocean heat content in the upper 700 metres," a WMO statement said. Last year also saw new heat records for the ocean's upper 2,000 metres.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres described the latest findings as "another strong wake-up call" for governments, cities and businesses to take action.

The United Nations is hosting a major summit on September 23 that is billed as a last-chance opportunity for leaders to tackle climate change, which Guterres has described as the defining issue of our time.

The UN chief has urged world leaders to come to the summit with concrete plans, instead of speeches, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 45 percent over the next decade and to net zero by 2050.

About 93 percent of excess heat -- trapped around the Earth by greenhouse gases that come from the burning of fossil fuels -- accumulates in the world's oceans.

6 lakh older Japanese live in social isolation

AFP, Tokyo

More than 600,000 Japanese people over 40 are living in complete isolation from society, staying at home for more than six months without social interaction, the government estimated yesterday.

The phenomenon is so widespread in Japan it even has its own name -- hikikomori -- defined as someone who does not go to school or work for six months and does not interact with anyone outside their family during that time.

A government survey published on Friday estimated there were 613,000 hikikomori aged between 40 and 64, nearly three-quarters of whom were male.

"The number was bigger than we had imagined. Hikikomori isn't an issue only for younger people," a Cabinet Office official in charge of the survey told AFP.

Until recently, it was thought to be an issue mainly affecting teenagers and people in their 20s but ageing Japan is seeing a growing number of middle aged hikikomori cloistering themselves away for longer periods of time.

Around half of those included in the survey had been reclusive for more than seven years, the government said.

The figure is higher than the estimated number of hikikomori under the age of 39, thought to be around 541,000 according to a similar government survey published in 2016.

Many of the hikikomori are thought to be financially dependant on their ageing parents.



Priyanka Gandhi Vadra (C), Indian political leader and the Congress party's general secretary for Uttar Pradesh, drinks tea during a campaign stop on the outskirts of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh state, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NDA will get more seats

Modi predicts easy victory during interview with TV channel

REUTERS, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said yesterday his ruling coalition would increase its majority in India's upcoming election, despite some independent analysts suggesting it could disappear due to discontent over lack of jobs and depressed farm incomes.

Involving around 900 million voters, India's general election will be the world's largest democratic exercise, with the vote taking place in seven phases between April 11 and May 19.

Results will be announced on May 23, and in an interview with Republic Bharat television channel, Modi predicted an easy victory.

"The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its National Democratic Alliance partners will get more seats than the previous election," Modi said.

In 2014, Modi led his Hindu nationalist BJP and its allies to the biggest majority scored by any political group in nearly 30 years, as a Congress Party led government paid the price for a faltering economy.

During Modi's tenure the economy has gathered

strength, but growth has been uneven, leaving large sections of the population unhappy.

Though his approval ratings still trail Modi's, rival Rahul Gandhi has worked hard to revive Congress and forge partnerships with regional parties.

Up until a few weeks ago most opinion polls were expecting a close run race, but over the past month, Modi's BJP has benefited from nationalist fervour unleashed by a flare up in tensions with neighbouring Pakistan.

Modi dismissed Gandhi's chances this time round, predicting the opposition would have to wait another five years to mount a serious challenge.

"The 'Modi vs who' question could arise in 2024, but in 2019 the citizens have made up their mind and are not looking for anyone else."

As yet, no major survey has emerged measuring the impact on voter intentions from the upsurge in tensions with Pakistan.

During the interview, Modi again swiped Pakistan over a militant attack that killed 40 Indian paramilitary police last month in Kashmir region. The Indian prime minister said he would not enter talks with Islamabad until "the world sees that Pakistan has taken action against terrorism."

LOK SABHA POLLS

Opposition would have to wait another five years to mount challenge: Modi

Indian PM again swiped Pak over militant attack in Kashmir last month



Maduro regime blocks Guaido from office

AFP, Caracas

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's regime, bolstered by a Russian military deployment infuriating the US, on Thursday announced a ban on Washington-backed self-declared interim leader Juan Guaido holding public office.

But National Assembly legislature speaker Guaido immediately shot back that the 15-year prohibition announced on state television by Maduro's Auditor General Elvis Amoroso was invalid. "He is not auditor general.... The legitimate congress is the only one with power to designate an auditor general," he said.

The announcement also prompted a withering response from Washington, where State Department spokesman Robert Palladino described the move in a brief remark as "ridiculous."

It was the latest scuffle between Maduro and Guaido, who lay rival claims to be the legitimate leader of the oil-producing South American nation of 30 million people.

The competition has been escalated into a geopolitical struggle, drawing in the US and its allies in which support Guaido, and Russia, Cuba and China backing Maduro.

Russia has sent some hundred of its soldiers in Venezuela. Some reports said the soldiers were there to operate air defense systems bought from Russia.

Maduro, who so far has heeded US warnings to not arrest Guaido under threat of unspecified repercussions, appears nonetheless more confident since Moscow's overt protection.