

NEWS IN
brief

Comedian sets course for Ukraine presidency

AFP, Kiev

Comedian Volodymyr Zelensky is favourite to become Ukraine's president after results yesterday showed him dominating a first-round vote despite many initially dismissing his candidacy as a joke. A crowded field of 39 candidates has now shrunk to just two, with Zelensky and Poroshenko set to go head-to-head in a second round run-off on April 21.

Four terrorists killed in J&K encounter

TOI, New Delhi

Four terrorists of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) were killed yesterday in an encounter with security forces in Lassipora area of Pulwama district in Jammu and Kashmir. Police said that three Army personnel and one cop sustained injuries. "They have been hospitalised and are in a stable condition. It was a clean operation," they said.

20 killed after bus in Peru catches fire

REUTERS, Lima

At least 20 people were killed and eight injured when the double-decker bus they were travelling in caught on fire in the Peruvian capital Lima on Sunday, firefighters said. Witnesses said the fire started in the bus's motor at the rear of the vehicle and quickly spread to its interior. Firefighters found that the bus lacked fire extinguishers and safety equipment.

BITS OF HISTORY (APRIL 1)

1924: A German court sentenced Adolf Hitler to five years in jail for high treason after his abortive 1923 putsch; he was released on December 20.

1999: In the first redrawing of Canada's provincial borders in 50 years, a vast new Arctic territory called Nunavut was created.

2001: Former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic was arrested in Belgrade after a stand-off. He pleaded not guilty to charges of abuse of power and criminal conspiracy.



Nepali villagers search for belongings in the debris of damaged homes at Bhaluhi Bhabaliya village in Nepal's southern Bara district near Birgunj yesterday, the morning after a rare spring storm. Inset, soldiers carry out belongings from a damaged home in Bara district. At least 30 people have been killed and more than 600 injured as the violent thunderstorm swept southern part of the country. PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP



WHITE HOUSE SECURITY CLEARANCES

Whistleblower leaks 'grave breaches'

AFP, Washington

Some 25 White House officials including top advisors of President Donald Trump were given security clearances despite staff recommendations against it, a whistleblower has told Congress.

House Oversight Committee Chairman Elijah E. Cummings said in a letter yesterday that White House security official Tricia Newbold detailed to his panel "grave breaches of national security at the highest levels of the Trump Administration."

None of the 25 were named, but in his letter, addressed to White House counsel Pat Cipollone, Cummings requested information relating to clearances for National Security Advisor John Bolton, former national security advisor Michael Flynn, Trump daughter Ivanka Trump and son-in-law Jared Kushner, and several other top security officials.

He also said he would subpoena Carl Kline, Newbold's former superior at the White House Personnel Security Office, to testify to the committee on the clearances, along with other officials.

Newbold told the committee that the Personnel Security Office recommended against security clearances -- which allow access to top secret materials -- for the 25, Cummings said.

But the 18-year veteran of the White House said they were overruled by higher-ups.

"I would not be doing a service to myself, my country, or my children if I sat back knowing that the issues that we have could impact national security," Newbold told the committee, according to Cummings' letter.

Newbold's dispute with Kline over the clearances issue became public earlier this year when she was suspended from her job and reportedly filed a formal whistleblower complaint.

'Congress insulted Hindus'

Modi launches broadside against opposition at campaign rally

AGENCIES

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, apparently attacking Rahul Gandhi over his decision to contest from a second seat, Kerala's Wayanad, in this month's national election, said yesterday that the Congress was "afraid" of fielding candidates from constituencies dominated by majority population because it had insulted Hindus by using the term "Hindu terror".

"The Congress had branded 'peace-loving Hindus' as terrorists and knew it would be punished by the community, PM Modi said at a rally in Maharashtra, offering his theory of why Rahul Gandhi had decided to contest a second seat apart from Amethi in Uttar Pradesh.

"The Congress insulted Hindus. People have decided to punish it in the election. Leaders of that party are now scared of contesting from constituencies dominated by majority (Hindu) population. That is why they are forced to take refuge in places where the majority is in a minority," PM Modi said, launching the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance's campaign for the April-May national election in Wardha.

"Congress used the term 'Hindu terror'...it labelled

peace-loving Hindus as terrorists...is there a single incident of Hindu terrorism? The people will never forgive the Congress for this insult," Modi said.

He also accused the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party of questioning the valour of soldiers and insulting them after the Pulwama terror attack and the subsequent air strike by the Indian Air Force targeting a terror camp in Pakistan's Balakot.

"These parties spoke the language of Pakistan," he said.

The Congress announced on the weekend that Rahul Gandhi would contest from Wayanad, a move that the party calls its outreach to the southern states. The BJP, however, says the move reflects that Rahul Gandhi is not confident of his three-time constituency Amethi, so decided to contest from another seat this

time, reported NDTV online.

Modi also hit out at NCP chief Sharad Pawar, who he said, chose not to contest the Lok Sabha election after deciding to do so first.

This was because the NCP chief sensed an unfavourable situation, Modi said, taunting the latter for "shying away" from poll fight.

LOK SABHA ELECTIONS

Congress had branded 'peace-loving Hindus' as terrorists: Modi

He accused the Congress, NCP of questioning valour of soldiers after J&K attack



**'INAUTHENTIC' BEHAVIOUR
FB removes pages in India, Pakistan**

REUTERS, New Delhi

Facebook has removed 712 accounts and 390 pages in India and Pakistan because of "inauthentic behaviour" and spamming, it said yesterday, much of it linked to India's main opposition Congress party days before elections and Pakistan's military.

Facebook has faced increasing pressure from authorities around the world to ensure its platform is not abused for political gains or to spread misinformation, especially ahead of elections.

Among the most significant removals, Facebook said it took down 549 accounts and 138 pages linked to India's Congress for "coordinated inauthentic behaviour". Facebook said it also banned some accounts linked to an Indian company "associated with" a mobile app promoted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

In Pakistan, Facebook removed 57 accounts, 24 pages, seven groups and 15 Instagram accounts, also for inauthentic behaviour, as part of a network which originated in Pakistan and was linked to employees of a unit of the Pakistani military.

"We didn't find any links between the campaigns we've removed today, but they used similar tactics by creating networks of accounts to mislead others," Nathaniel Gleicher, head of cybersecurity policy at Facebook, said in a statement.



KIM JONG-NAM KILLING

Final suspect escapes death penalty

AFP, Shah Alam

A Vietnamese woman accused of assassinating the North Korean leader's half-brother is to walk free after Malaysia dropped murder charges against her yesterday, weeks after her Indonesian co-accused was also released.

The 2017 killing of Kim Jong Nam with a toxic nerve agent at Kuala Lumpur's international airport shocked the world, but Doan Thi Huong's guilty plea to the lesser charge of "causing injury" makes her the only person convicted in the case.

Malaysia allowed the two women's suspected North Korean handlers to leave in the days after the murder, amid a furious diplomatic row as Seoul accused Pyongyang of plotting the Cold War-style hit.

The pair, who claimed they were tricked into carrying out the killing, were put on trial facing a murder charge.

But last month the charge against Indonesian suspect Siti Aisyah was dropped and yesterday, prosecutors withdrew the charge against the second accused, Doan Thi Huong from Vietnam, and replaced it with a lesser one.

She pleaded guilty to "causing injury" and was handed a three year and four month jail term, with her lawyers saying she would be freed next month due to sentence reductions. The women would have been sentenced to death by hanging if convicted of murder.

Blow for Erdogan

Ruling AK Party loses control of Ankara, Istanbul for first time, promises appeals

AFP, Ankara

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling party suffered a major upset yesterday after local election results showed it lost the capital Ankara and Istanbul after a decade and half in power.

Losing the country's two major cities would be a stunning defeat for Erdogan, a former Istanbul mayor himself, whose ability to win at the ballot box has been unparalleled in Turkish history.

Erdogan campaigned hard, portraying Sunday's vote for mayors and district councils as a fight for the nation's survival, but the election became a test for his Justice and Development Party (AKP) after Turkey slipped into a recession for the first time in a decade.

The opposition CHP party candidate for Istanbul mayor, Ekrem Imamoglu, was leading by nearly 28,000 votes with most ballot boxes counted, Supreme Election

Board (YSK) chairman Sadi Guven said.

Imamoglu won almost 4.16 million votes while the AKP candidate, former premier Binali Yildirim, won 4.13 million.

Both claimed victory in the early hours following a tight race for the country's largest city after results showing them in a dead heat.

"We want to start working as soon as possible to serve people," Imamoglu told reporters yesterday.

In Ankara, opposition mayoral candidate Mansur Yavas had 50.89 percent of votes ahead of the AKP's Mehmet Ozhaseki on 47.06 percent, Anadolu state agency reported, with 99 percent of ballot boxes counted.

"Ankara has won. The loser in Ankara is Ozhaseki, dirty politics has lost," Yavas told supporters.

But in a sign of possible turmoil ahead, AKP officials said they would challenge the alleged invalidation of tens of thousands of votes in both cities.

TURKEY LOCAL POLLS



Sri Lanka's President Maithripala Sirisena inspects as the police narcotic bureau officers destroy seized cocaine under judicial supervision in Colombo yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

30 Chinese firefighters die battling forest fire

AFP, Beijing

Thirty firefighters died after they were sent to tackle a forest blaze in remote mountains in southwest China's Sichuan province at the weekend, authorities said yesterday.

Nearly 700 firefighters were deployed to battle the fire, which broke out on Saturday on steep terrain at an altitude of around 4,000 metres (13,000 feet) in Muli County, the ministry of emergency management said.

Rescuers have found the bodies of 30 firefighters earlier listed as missing, the ministry said on its official twitter-like Weibo account.

Local authorities had lost contact with 30 firefighters Sunday afternoon after a sudden change in wind direction ignited a "huge fireball", the ministry had said in an earlier statement.

Footage aired by state broadcaster CCTV showed plumes of smoke coming from the forested, mountainous region.

A separate forest fire that lasted two days in the northern province of Shanxi was brought under control on Sunday, the official Xinhua news agency said.

More than 9,000 people were evacuated from their homes due to that blaze, which did not cause any casualties.

Nearly 3,000 firefighters doused another forest fire in the outskirts of Beijing Sunday. No casualties were reported in the fire, which started Saturday and spread over 42.7 hectares (105.5 acres).

China's National Meteorological Center has warned warmer temperatures and lower precipitation compared with previous years have raised the risk of forest fires in the north of the country, Xinhua said.

In May 1987, the deadliest forest fire in recent Chinese history killed 119 in northeast Heilongjiang province, injuring 102 and leaving 51,000 homeless.

Indian rocket puts satellites in 3 orbits, in first for nation

REUTERS, New Delhi

An Indian rocket yesterday placed domestic and foreign satellites in three different orbits on a single flight, a first for the nation and a low-cost option that could burnish its reputation for pioneering affordable options in space.

The launch of a domestic intelligence satellite and 28 foreign ones came less than a week after India used an anti-satellite missile to take down one of its own satellites, demonstrating a capability only China, Russia and the United States had possessed previously.

The state-run Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) said 24 satellites from the United States, two from Lithuania and one each from Spain and Switzerland were positioned in yesterday's launch, in addition to India's EMISAT satellite.

"This particular mission is very special for ISRO," its chairman, K. Sivan, said after the launch from India's southeastern state of

Andhra Pradesh.

"This is for the first time the PSLV is carrying out three orbital missions in a single flight," he said in a speech, referring to the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle family of rockets.

Sivan, who previously told media the "three-in-one" launch would help cut costs, said the agency aimed to complete 30 more missions this year, including India's second lunar exploration programme known as the Chandrayaan-2.

Among the satellites in yesterday's launch are 20 earth-imaging satellites of Planet Labs Inc, a private satellite operator based in San Francisco.

Two of the satellites, one from Lithuania and another from Switzerland, will be used for the "Internet of Things", or connecting physical devices to the Web, the agency added.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated the agency on the launch and said his government was working on raising citizens' interest in science and their respect for scientists.



VENEZUELA POLITICAL CRISIS

Maduro announces 30 days of power rationing

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro announced 30 days of electricity rationing Sunday, after his government said it was shortening the working day and keeping schools closed due to blackouts.

Angry Venezuelans meanwhile took to the streets of Caracas to protest the power cuts and water shortages.

The measures are a stark admission by the government -- which blamed repeated power outages in March on sabotage -- that there is not enough electricity to go around, and that the power crisis is here to stay.

The blackouts have worsened already dire economic and living conditions in the country, which sits on the world's largest proven oil reserves.

Power failures come alongside a political showdown between Maduro and opposition leader Juan Guaido, who is recognized as interim president by the United States and more than 50 other countries.

Speaking on state television, Maduro said he had approved "a 30-day plan" to ration power.

He did not detail how it would work but said there would be "an emphasis on guaranteeing water service".

Maduro also acknowledged that many Venezuelans could not watch his broadcast because they had no electricity.

Crippled infrastructure, little investment in the power grid and poor maintenance have all contributed to electricity problems.

A "brain drain" of qualified personnel has also hit the industry, with about 25,000 people in the electricity sector among the 2.7 million Venezuelans who have emigrated since 2015.