

US okays 24 Seahawk choppers sale to India

AGENCIES, Washington

The US has approved the sale of 24 multi-role MH-60 'Roméo' Seahawk helicopters to India at an estimated cost of \$2.4 billion, the state department has said.

India has been in need of these formidable anti-submarine hunter helicopters for more than a decade now.

Designed for hunting submarines as well as knocking out ships and conducting search-and-rescue operations at sea, the Lockheed Martin-built helicopters would replenish India's aging fleet of British-made Sea King helicopters.

The Trump administration on Tuesday notified the Congress that it has approved sale of 24 MH-60R multi-mission helicopters, which will provide the Indian defence forces the capability to perform anti-surface and anti-submarine warfare missions.

In its notification, the state department told the Congress that this proposed sale will support the foreign policy and national security of the US by helping to strengthen the US-Indian strategic relationship.

The sale will improve the security of a major defensive partner which continues to be an important force for political stability, peace, and economic progress in the Indo-Pacific and South Asia region, it said.

India has been alarmed by China's growing interest in the Indian Ocean. In a strategy dubbed by Indian and US observers as the "string of pearls," China has made use of a growing number of naval bases in the Indian Ocean, most notably the Gwadar port it is developing in India's rival Pakistan.

Indian naval planners have responded with a doctrine to ensure freedom of movement throughout the Indian Ocean, stretching from the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca.



Supporters of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) react as they hold cut-outs of Prime Minister Narendra Modi during an election campaign rally addressed by Modi in Kolkata, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Trump: Xi 'king' of China

US President Donald Trump said he called Chinese President Xi Jinping a "king" during a state visit to Beijing in 2017 and that the Communist Party leader appeared to appreciate the remark. Speaking Tuesday at the National Republican Congressional Committee spring dinner in Washington, Trump said Xi had denied he was a king but the US leader insisted. "He said, 'But I am not king, I am president.' I said 'No, you're president for life, and therefore you're king,'" Trump told his audience, prompting laughter. Trump made his visit to China in November 2017, just months before the country's rubber-stamp legislature, the National People's Congress, removed the two-term limit on the Chinese presidency in March 2018.



Corbyn photo used for target practice!

The British Army yesterday said it is investigating after a video emerged showing soldiers on a shooting range firing at a picture of opposition Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. The 26 seconds of footage shared on social media, reportedly recorded in Afghanistan, shows four army personnel shooting at an image of the veteran left-wing leader. A Labour Party spokesperson said: "This behaviour is alarming and unacceptable. We have confidence in the Ministry of Defence to investigate and act on this incident." Britain's Press Association said the incident is believed to have taken place in the past few days and involved soldiers from the army's 3rd Battalion Parachute Regiment. Corbyn, 69, a leftist stalwart, is a reviled figure among many British Conservatives and right-wingers who label him a Marxist.



Brunei introduces new harsh sharia laws

Brunei yesterday introduced harsh new sharia laws, including death by stoning for adultery and gay sex, despite a storm of global criticism. The tough penal code in the tiny country on tropical Borneo island - ruled by the all-powerful Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah - fully came into force following years of delays. The laws include amputation of hands and feet for thieves. Rape and robbery are also punishable by death under the code and many of the new laws, such as capital punishment for insulting the Prophet Mohammed, apply to non-Muslims as well as Muslims. The decision to push ahead with the punishments has sparked alarm around the world, with the United Nations labelling them "cruel and inhumane" and celebrities, led by actor George Clooney and pop star Elton John, calling for Brunei-owned hotels to be boycotted. SOURCE: AFP, CNN

May in Brexit gamble

UK PM reaches out to Labour leader to break deadlock

REUTERS, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May was set to seek a Brexit compromise with opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn yesterday, a gamble that could see a European Union divorce deal finally clear parliament but also tear her party apart.

The United Kingdom was supposed to leave the EU last Friday, but, three years after Britons narrowly voted for Brexit in a referendum, it is still unclear how, when or even whether it will exit the bloc.

After her EU withdrawal deal was rejected three times by lawmakers, with parliament and her Conservative Party hopelessly divided over Brexit, May said she would talk to the Labour Party leader in a bid to overcome what is now a national crisis.

However, by approaching Corbyn, a veteran socialist loathed by many of May's Conservatives and mocked by May herself as unfit to govern, she risks further inflaming divisions in her party. One minister quit on Wednesday.

May and Corbyn will meet at 1330 GMT but may struggle to find a compromise position that can satisfy their own

parties.

May turned to Labour after a hardcore eurosceptic group of Conservatives repeatedly rejected her divorce deal, saying it would leave Britain a 'vassal state'.

Labour wants to stay in a customs union with the EU, raising the likelihood of a "soft" Brexit option that keeps Britain's

EU says no more short extensions
Move makes softer Brexit more likely
Conservatives furious at leader; Labour warns of 'trap'



economy closely aligned to the world's biggest trading bloc.

Brexit Secretary Stephen Barclay said the government would accept a soft Brexit if parliament voted for it.

May said on Tuesday she would seek "as short as possible" a delay to the current Brexit date of April 12, having repeatedly said she did not want Britain to have to take part in European Parliament elections on

May 23.

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said Britain would not get any further short delays to Brexit unless its parliament ratified a deal by April 12 - the date set by EU leaders as the effective cut-off for avoiding the European Parliament elections.

"A 'no-deal' at midnight on the 12th of April is now a very likely scenario," he told the European Parliament.

Conservative divisions over Europe are decades old and have led to the demise of three prime ministers: David Cameron, John Major and Margaret Thatcher.

Labour is also far from united. Pro-EU Labour lawmaker Ben Bradshaw warned: "It is clearly a trap designed to try to get May's terrible deal through, which some people have fallen for, but Labour mustn't."

It is also unclear where May's last-ditch bid will leave her minority government. The Democratic Unionist Party, the small Northern Irish party whose support she needs to govern, said it was wary of making any deal with a man whom many in May's party have demonised.

'PANAMA PAPERS'

Tax take from probes exceeds \$1.2b: report

AFP, Frankfurt Am Main

Taxmen in 22 countries worldwide have raked in more than \$1.2 billion in fines and back taxes thanks to the 2016 "Panama Papers" leak of information about offshore dealings, media reported yesterday.

Britain has recouped some \$253 million, France \$136 million and Australia \$93 million, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) posted on its website.

German newspaper Sueddeutsche Zeitung - which received the massive leak of documents from Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca on which the investigation was based - reported Berlin has reaped \$183 million from related tax probes.

"While recouping the proceeds of hidden assets helps to fund vital government services, there is a growing sentiment that the enduring legacy of the Panama Papers will be its effect on behaviour and public attitudes," the ICIJ said.

Tax authorities have scrambled to respond to the massive tax evasion system that the leak revealed was organised through Mossack Fonseca's Panama City offices.

More than 100 media organisations participated in the investigation, which uncovered accounts in tax havens held by 140 politicians, football stars and billionaires and enjoyed a global media echo.

NEWS IN brief

Chicago elects black, gay woman as mayor

Chicago on Tuesday became the biggest US city to elect a black woman its mayor, as voters put their faith in an openly-gay political novice to tackle difficult problems of economic inequality and gun violence. Lori Lightfoot, a 56-year-old former federal prosecutor and practicing lawyer who has never before held elected office, won the Midwestern city's mayoral race in a lopsided victory.

Knife attacker kills 2 at China school

A knife-wielding man killed two people and injured two others at a primary school in central China yesterday. Two injured primary school students have been sent to hospital with no danger to their lives, the government of Ningyuan county in Hunan province said in a statement. Authorities did not state the identities or age of those killed. Police detained a 31-year-old male suspect.

Case against ex-Nazi camp guard dropped

A German court yesterday said it had dropped a case against a former Nazi concentration camp guard, finding the seriously ill 95-year-old unfit for trial. Johann Rehbogen was accused of complicity in mass murder at the Stutthof camp near what was then Danzig, now Gdansk in Poland. Rehbogen was aged 18 to 20 when he served as a guard from June 1942 to September 1944 at the camp.



People celebrate on the streets after Algeria's President Abdelaziz Bouteflika submitted his resignation, in Algiers, Algeria, on Tuesday. Bouteflika ended 20 years in power after a final nudge by the military following six weeks of protests calling for democratic reforms after almost 60 years of monolithic rule by veterans of the 1954-62 independence war against France.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Malaysia ex-PM goes on trial over 1MDB scandal

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's disgraced ex-leader Najib Razak pleaded not guilty to all charges against him as he went on trial yesterday over a multi-billion-dollar fraud, almost a year after his shock election loss.

The 65-year-old faced the first of several trials over his alleged involvement in the looting of sovereign wealth fund 1MDB, a state investment vehicle established to develop the economy of the Southeast Asian nation.

The former premier and his cronies are accused of plundering billions of dollars from the fund and spending it on everything from high-end real estate to artworks and a luxury yacht.

He had been tipped to win another term in office easily last year and extend his coalition's six-decade stranglehold on power, only to be soundly defeated by his former boss, Mahathir Mohamad, who rode a wave of public anger over 1MDB to the premiership.

In the months that followed, once-

dormant investigations into the controversy were re-launched and Najib was hit with dozens of corruption charges linked to the plundering of the fund.

A small crowd of supporters was waiting for Najib as he arrived at the Kuala Lumpur court ahead of his trial, and he prayed with them for a few minutes before entering the building to shouts of "Long Live Najib".

Looking relaxed in the dock, he denied seven corruption and money-laundering charges related to the alleged theft of 42 million ringgit (\$10.3 million) from SRC International, a former 1MDB unit.

Opening the prosecution, Attorney-General Tommy Thomas told the High Court it was the "first trial in our courts against a former prime minister, who for nearly a decade occupied the most powerful office in the land and wielded near absolute power.

The judge set the next hearing for April 15, and trial dates until May 10. Najib left without commenting, to cheers from his supporters waiting outside court.



CITIZENSHIP AMENDMENT BILL

Congress won't let it pass: Rahul

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Congress president Rahul Gandhi yesterday said his party would not allow the Citizenship Amendment Bill, that seeks to give citizenship to religious minorities from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan, to be passed in parliament.

Addressing an election in Gologhat in Assam, he alleged the RSS is attacking Assam. "Your language, culture, and your history are under attack from the RSS. We won't allow the Citizenship Amendment Bill to pass."

He said the bill brought by the BJP, which was cleared by the Lok Sabha in January but blocked by the opposition parties in the Rajya Sabha, was an "attack" on the people of the north eastern states.

"We clearly said that we would not let it pass and we kept our word. BJP president Amit Shah had said that they would get it passed but we didn't let that happen. We won't let any attack take place on Assam or the northeast. We won't let the Citizenship Amendment Bill pass," he said.

Rahul's remarks came after the Congress party manifesto released by Rahul on Tuesday also promised to oppose the Citizenship Amendment Bill.

The Bill has run into fierce resistance in all the nine north eastern states, including all allies of the BJP, and there had been street protests for several weeks against the proposed legislation.



Rising Thai political star faces fresh legal woes

AFP, Bangkok

The telegenic leader of a Thai political party who rode to prominence during last month's election on a wave of millennial support stands accused of inciting unrest, he said yesterday, calling his latest legal woes "politically motivated" by the junta.

Billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit heads up the youth-oriented Future Forward Party, which came out of nowhere to amass more than six million votes in the March 24 vote, the first since a 2014 coup.

Future Forward has joined an anti-junta coalition with six other parties claiming the right to form a government in the aftermath of the disputed vote whose full results will not be ratified until May 9.

But the tycoon said on Facebook he has now been summoned to appear at a Bangkok police station on Saturday to hear incitement charges against him that carry a maximum sentence of seven years.

He wrote on the Facebook page, where he posted the summons, the move was "an old political game" that he expected to intensify after the party's strong election showing.

Speaking to reporters later Wednesday, Thanathorn hit back at the junta government, which filed the complaint.

"It is not the Future Forward Party which causes divisiveness of the people but the military who wants to hold on to power," he said.

VENEZUELA POLITICAL CRISIS

Maduro govt opens door to Guaido's prosecution

REUTERS, Caracas

Venezuela's Constituent Assembly, an all-powerful legislature controlled by the ruling Socialist Party, on Tuesday approved a measure allowing for a trial of opposition leader Juan Guaido, in what appeared to be step toward having him arrested.

Guaido, leader of the opposition-controlled National Assembly, in January invoked the country's constitution to assume the interim presidency after declaring President Nicolas Maduro's 2018 re-election a fraud.

He has been recognized by the United States and most other Western nations as Venezuela's legitimate leader, and has said he does not recognize decisions emanating from the Maduro government.

The Constituent Assembly's decree is necessary for the Supreme Court to move ahead with a trial of Guaido because as a

legislator he has parliamentary immunity that makes it more difficult for him to be tried than the average citizen.

"This formally authorizes the continuation of the trial (of Guaido)," said Constituent Assembly Chief Diosdado Cabello, who is also the Vice President of the Socialist Party.

The Supreme Court on Monday had reiterated a previous measure blocking Guaido from leaving the country, an order which he openly violated in February when he embarked on a tour of Latin American nations to bolster support for his campaign to oust Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro.

Venezuela's chief prosecutor's office has opened an investigation of Guaido, into alleged links to "incidents of violence" in January, but has not ordered his detention or officially charged him with any crime.

