

NEWS IN brief

May to meet EU leaders before Brexit summit

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May will meet with German and French leaders Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron as she scrambles to find a Brexit breakthrough ahead of Wednesday's crucial EU summit. May will meet the two leaders today, their offices announced yesterday.

11 civilians killed in Yemen capital: UN

AFP, Sanaa

The United Nations yesterday called for an investigation into the deaths of 11 civilians including students in Yemen's capital, where rebels accused a Saudi-led coalition of carrying out a deadly air strike. Scores more civilians were wounded in Sanaa on Sunday, according to a statement released by the UN that did not specify the cause of the casualties.

Russia moves to free 'whale jail' animals

AFP, Moscow

Russian officials said yesterday they will work towards freeing all orcas and belugas from a notorious facility in the east of the country, after a visit by US-based marine mammal advocates. Nearly 100 orca and beluga whales captured for sale to aquaria have been kept in small pens for months in what the media nicknamed a "whale jail" in the Russian Far East, as the campaign to release them gathered strength and became global.

BITS OF HISTORY (APRIL 08)

1946: The League of Nations opened its final session in Geneva before being replaced by the United Nations.

2002: Israeli troops open fire on Bethlehem's Church of Nativity after a five-day stand-off with Palestinian militants inside the building.

2003: A US tank fired a shell at the Palestine Hotel in Baghdad packed with foreign journalists, killing Taras Protsyuk, a cameraman from Reuters, and Jose Couso from Spain's Tele 5.



Sudanese protesters rally in front of the military headquarters in the capital Khartoum yesterday. Sudan's army deployed around its Khartoum headquarters as thousands of protesters urged the military to join calls for leader Omar al-Bashir's, inset, resignation defied tear gas to demonstrate for a third day, witnesses said.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

US labels Iran military group as terrorists

Warns all businesses to end dealings with IRGC

AGENCIES

US President Donald Trump yesterday designated Iran's elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps a foreign terrorist organization, marking the first time Washington has formally labeled another country's military a terrorist group.

Critics have warned that the move could open US military and intelligence officials to similar actions by unfriendly governments. The United States has already blacklisted dozens of entities and people for affiliations with the IRGC, but not the organization as a whole.

"The IRGC is the Iranian government's primary means of directing and implementing its global terrorist campaign," Trump said in a statement.

The designation "makes crystal clear the risks of conducting business with, or providing support to, the IRGC," Trump said. "If you are doing business with the IRGC, you

will be bankrolling terrorism."

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, a strident critic of Iran, has pushed for the change in US policy as part of the Trump administration's tough posture toward Tehran.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo yesterday warned all banks and business of consequences to dealing with Iran's Revolutionary Guards, reported Reuters.

"Businesses and banks around the world now have a clear duty to ensure that companies with which they conduct financial transactions are not conducted with the IRGC in any material way," he told reporters, using the acronym for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Iran warned this weekend that if the US went ahead with the designation, Tehran would retaliate by designating the US military as a terrorist organization in return, reported CNN online.



Taliban kill 12 Afghan security forces

AFP, Kabul

Taliban fighters have killed 12 security forces in the last 48 hours in ongoing fighting in Afghanistan's western province of Badghis, the defence ministry said yesterday.

In the latest assault on Afghan forces -- who have faced devastating losses in recent years -- Taliban fighters last week smashed through government lines near the city of Bala Murghab, seizing several checkpoints.

"It is with great sadness we announce that during these operations, eight Afghan National Army and four police who fought with bravery and courage accepted martyrdom," the defence ministry said in a statement.

Another 10 soldiers and 24 police were wounded in the operation that killed "99 Taliban terrorists," it added.

Britain takes aim at social media bosses in world first

AFP, London

"These are world-leading proposals. No one in the world has done this before."

The proposed regulations would see social media companies accept "duty of care" obligations that require them to identify and remove "online harms".

Those that fail would be first issued warnings and then hit progressively with more punitive sanctions.

The government paper suggests that these include "the creation of new liability (civil fines or extended to criminal liability) for individual senior managers".

The most serious would see internet service providers block non-compliant websites

INTERNET REGULATION

Proposed legislation says social media firms accept 'duty of care' obligations

The most serious would see service providers block non-compliant websites

"This would only be considered as an option of last resort and deploying such an option would be a decision for the independent regulator alone," the plan says.

The regulations would only apply in Britain and should have no immediate impact on users elsewhere in the world.

But they may prompt other governments to take notice and follow suit.

Modi-led alliance closes in on majority: survey

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling alliance will be just a few seats short of a majority in parliament, bolstered by a rise in nationalist sentiment over hostilities with arch foe Pakistan, a survey showed yesterday, days before voting begins. About 900 million people are eligible to vote in the election starting on Thursday, in which Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party-led group is taking on the Congress and its allies and a clutch of regional parties. The election had become tighter because of discontent in the countryside over a weak rural economy and lack of jobs for young people. But over the last month, support for Modi's Hindu nationalist party has grown following a spike in tension with Pakistan, the polls say. The BJP and its allies are expected to win 267 of the 543 parliament seats at stake, the C-Voter polling agency said, just five short of the halfway mark required to rule.

Don't waste voting by backing Congress: BSP

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) chief Mayawati has asked Muslims to not "waste" their votes by backing the Congress party in coming parliamentary elections as the key battleground state of Uttar Pradesh and instead back the pre-poll alliance between her party, Samajwadi Party and Rashtriya Lok Dal. Muslims, Dalits and a section of Hindu Jats in western part of Uttar Pradesh comprise the core support base of BSP-SP-RJD alliance, reported our New Delhi correspondent.



Buried under tide of complaints: Indian EC

Ahead of a general election that starts on Thursday, the Election Commission of India (ECI) says it is swamped with hundreds of thousands of such questions and accusations of violation of election rules, known as the model code of conduct. Many are coming via ever expanding social media. "The commission will only move when there is sufficient material," said Sandeep Saxena, a deputy election commissioner. "It takes 12 hours or so to establish, only then we go for action," he told Reuters.

FB made headway against abuses

Facebook has said it has made strides in its efforts to prevent online abuses in the Indian national election but acknowledged that gaps remain in its "election integrity" efforts. During a media tour of the company's election operations centre at its Menlo Park headquarters in California on Friday, company officials touted new fact-checking efforts for suppressing misinformation. SOURCE: REUTERS



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (C), chief of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Amit Shah (2-R), India's Home Minister Rajnath Singh (2-L), India's Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj (L) and India's Finance Minister Arun Jaitley display copies of their party's election manifesto for the April/May general election, in New Delhi yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Three women hoping to upset Modi

AFP, New Delhi

India's alpha-male Prime Minister Narendra Modi faces three formidable women looking to spoil his chances of winning a new term in elections beginning next week.

Feisty and fiery Mamata Banerjee is the first female chief minister of the eastern state of West Bengal -- home to more people than Germany -- where Modi's right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) needs to do well.

The diminutive 64-year-old is one of Modi's most vociferous critics and has been working to cobble together an anti-Modi alliance.

"We can tell you one thing, that we are all together against the BJP government to save the nation," she says.

Mamata, whose Trinamool Congress party rules the roost in West Bengal, has succeeded in keeping the BJP at bay so far despite the growing popularity of Modi.

The former national railways minister known as "didi," or big sister, enjoys a mass following not least because of her humble upbringing and lowbrow style.

"Banerjee is a very important leader. She is a smuggler and a fighter to the core," Manisha Priyam, a Delhi-based political analyst, told AFP.

"If she does well in the state, she will be an important player in the formation of a government."

Known as the "Dalit Queen", Mayawati, 63, has had a colourful career as champion of lower caste Dalits. She wields considerable influence in 200-million-strong Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state and the election's biggest prize.

INDIAN ELECTION 2019

Her Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) was decimated in the 2014 polls but she has stitched up an alliance with her sworn enemy, the Samajwadi Party.

Analysts blamed her 2014 rout on her penchant for extravagance -- she once sent her private jet to pick up a pair of sandals according to leaked US cables -- and a controversy over building concrete parks full of statues of herself.

But if her party performs well this time, she

could once again play a pivotal role in coalition negotiations.

The youngest scion of the famed Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra entered the family business of politics in January after years of steering clear -- and has made a splash.

And what could be a better battleground for the charismatic younger sister of PM-hopeful Rahul Gandhi than Uttar Pradesh -- the Hindu heartland where Modi has his core support base.

Priyanka, 47, has been tasked with reviving the Congress party in the state, where it was thrashed in 2014 polls -- winning just two of the 80 parliamentary seats in contrast to BJP's 71.

She seems to have taken the challenge head-on, launching her campaign in Modi's constituency of Varanasi on a motorboat that traversed the Ganges, a river revered by Hindus.

The symbolism was not lost on analysts, saying her move was aimed at snuffing out criticism that her Congress party has been ignoring majority Hindu voters and appeasing India's 170 million Muslims.

Her fans say her common touch, as well as her appearance, are reminiscent of Indira Gandhi, her grandmother who was India's first woman prime minister -- and a divisive figure assassinated in 1984.

US Homeland Security Secretary resigns

REUTERS, Washington

US Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, who oversaw President Donald Trump's bitterly contested immigration policies during her tumultuous 16-month tenure, resigned on Sunday amid a surge in the number of migrants at the border with Mexico.

A senior administration official said Trump asked for Nielsen's resignation and she gave it.

Trump, who has recently expressed growing anger about the situation at the border, said on Twitter: "Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen will be leaving her position, and I would like to thank her for her service."

In a tweet late Sunday, Nielsen said that she would stay on until Wednesday.

"I have agreed to stay on as Secretary through Wednesday, April 10th to assist with an orderly transition and ensure that key DHS missions are not impacted," she said.

ROW OVER WEST BANK ANNEXATION

Turkey will stand with Palestinians Says Erdogan, slams Israeli PM

REUTERS, Istanbul

The Israeli occupied West Bank "absolutely" belongs to Palestinians, said President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday, lambasting Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu for his remarks on annexing Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank if re-elected.

Speaking to reporters ahead of his departure for a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the capital Moscow, Erdogan said: "West Bank is absolutely a territory of Palestinians."

The Turkish president said every action of Netanyahu is against international law and that Turkey will continue to stand by Palestinians.

On Saturday, Netanyahu vowed to annex the occupied West Bank if he won the general election, which is slated for April 9.

In an interview with Israeli television, he said: "We will ensure that we are in charge on the ground. And we will impose sovereignty over the settlements in Judea and Samaria [West Bank]."

Erdogan went on to say: "Every action of Israel since 1948 is illegal. But, of course, it has always taken these steps with a support of the US."

Historical Palestine was driven from the Palestinians in 1948 to make way for the new state of Israel.

During recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the Israeli sovereignty in Syrian Golan Heights, the US took the lead, he said, adding the US's steps did not comply with the United Nations resolutions.