

NEWS IN brief

Nepal bans PUBG

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal has banned the hugely popular but brutal online game "PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds" over concerns about its impact on children, officials said yesterday. In the multi-player game, commonly known as PUBG, players parachute onto an island and scavenge for weapons and equipment to kill others and survive. The last player or team standing wins. Nepal's telecommunication authority issued a circular to all internet service providers on Thursday to block PUBG on instruction from the Kathmandu district court.

Dalai Lama leaves Delhi hospital

AP, New Delhi

The Dalai Lama left a New Delhi hospital yesterday after three days of treatment for a chest infection, but the 83-year-old will need several days of rest before returning to his Himalayan base, his spokesman said. "He has recovered from the chest infection he had suffered from and will be taking several days of rest in Delhi before returning to Dharamsala," he added. The Tibetan spiritual leader was admitted to the Max hospital in the Indian capital on Tuesday.

War crimes judges reject Afghan probe

AP, The Hague

Judges at the International Criminal Court yesterday turned down a request to open a war crimes probe in Afghanistan, a week after Washington revoked the court's chief prosecutor's visa over the case. "The judges decided that an investigation into the situation in Afghanistan at this stage would not serve the interests of justice," the Hague-based court said in statement.



Algerian protesters surround members of the security forces as they chant slogans during an anti-government demonstration in the capital Algiers, yesterday. Algerian protesters kept up the pressure on interim government after the announcement of presidential elections to succeed ousted leader Abdelaziz Bouteflika fearing a ploy by the ruling system to stay in power.

PHOTO: AFP

INDIAN ELECTION PHASE-1

Turnout trend same as in 2014: EC

Congress to go solo in Delhi

TNN, HINDUSTAN TIMES

The first phase of polling for Lok Sabha elections saw long lines of voters in several places but concluded on Thursday with turnouts across 20 states more or less matching the voting percentages recorded in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, according to the Election Commission.

While a preliminary look seems to indicate a drop in polling figures compared with 2014, EC said the numbers are likely to be revised upwards since the initial estimates were only up to 5:00pm.

Tripura and West Bengal topped the charts at 81.8% and 80% respectively. Polling was still on till late at Thursday night in Andhra Pradesh.

The EC, which said damaging of EVMs had been reported in earlier polls, told reporters that legal action would be taken against persons involved in such actions.

While there were complaints of EVM snags and glitches, especially in Andhra Pradesh with CM N Chandrababu Naidu complaining to the EC, the commission said data on replacement of EVMs and VVPATs showed an improvement over previous elections. A poll officer deployed in Tirap, Arunachal Pradesh, died of a heart attack, the EC said.

Meanwhile, Congress yesterday announced that it will contest all seven Lok Sabha seats of Delhi alone. Party in-charge for Delhi PC Chacko blamed the Aam Aadmi Party's leadership for the failure of not having an alliance against the BJP in the national capital. "Even today, we are ready for an alliance with the Aam Aadmi Party with seat sharing arrangement of three seats to the Congress and four to them," Chacko told a press conference in New Delhi.

Taliban announce spring offensive

AP, Kabul

The Taliban yesterday announced their annual spring offensive, which comes as the US and Afghan politicians try to negotiate a peace settlement with the Islamist militants.

Operation Fath -- meaning "victory" in Arabic -- will be conducted across Afghanistan with the aim of "eradicating occupation" and "cleansing our Muslim homeland from invasion and corruption", the Taliban said in a statement. The spring offensive traditionally marks the start of the so-called fighting season, though the announcement is largely symbolic as in recent winters the Taliban have continued fighting Afghan and US forces.

"Our Jihadi obligation has not yet ended," the Taliban said. "Even as large parts of our homeland have been freed from the enemy, yet the foreign occupying forces continue exercising military and political influence in our Islamic country."

Qais Mangal, a spokesman for the Afghan Ministry of Defence, dismissed the Taliban's spring offensive as "mere propaganda."

After suffering horrific bloodshed in 2018, Kabul has in recent weeks enjoyed something of a lull in violence.

The administration of President Ashraf Ghani recently declared its own spring offensive, Operation Khalid, and the Taliban used that announcement as a justification for launching a new push.

'Not greedy for power'

Military promises civilian govt after Bashir toppled, warns against unrest

REUTERS, Khartoum

Sudan's ruling military council yesterday promised the country would have a new civilian government, a day after the armed forces overthrew President Omar al-Bashir, but the proposal was immediately rejected by the main protest group.

The council, which is now running Sudan under Defence Minister Mohammed Ahmed Awad Ibn Auf, said it expects a pre-election transition period it announced on Thursday to last two years at most or much less if chaos can be avoided.

The council also announced that it would not extradite Bashir to face allegations of genocide at the international war crimes court. Instead he may go on trial in Sudan.

Yesterday's announcement of a civilian government by the head of the military council's political committee, General Omar Zain al-Abideen, appeared aimed at reassuring angry demonstrators who took to the streets to warn against imposing army rule after Bashir's overthrow.

But the main protest group rejected the proposal, saying the military council was "not capable of creating change". In a statement, the Sudanese Professionals

SUDAN CRISIS

Bashir will not be extradited: military rulers

Demonstrators camp outside defence ministry

Association restated its demand for power to be handed immediately to "a transitional civilian government".

Abideen pledged that the military council would not interfere with a civilian government. However he said the defence and interior ministries would be under the council's control.

The military council is headed by Ibn Auf, who was Bashir's vice president and defence minister and is among a handful of Sudanese commanders sanctioned by Washington for his role during the atrocities committed in the Darfur conflict.

Abideen said the military council had no solutions to Sudan's crisis and these would

come from the protesters, adding that it plans to hold a dialogue with them.

"We are the protectors of the demands of the people," he said. "We are not greedy for power."

The council said it did not invite Bashir's National Congress Party to join the dialogue because "it is responsible for what happened".

It pledged to work with the new government to solve Sudan's massive economic problems but warned protesters that the army would not tolerate unrest.

Earlier yesterday, thousands of demonstrators camped outside the defence ministry to push for a civilian government, defying a curfew and calling for mass Friday prayers.

Bashir, 75, had faced 16 weeks of demonstrations sparked by rising food costs, high unemployment and growing repression during his three decades of autocratic rule.

World powers, including the United States and Britain, said they supported a peaceful and democratic transition sooner than two years. China said it would continue to seek cooperation with Sudan regardless of the political situation.

Fighting shakes Libya's Tripoli

Death toll rises to 75

REUTERS, Tripoli

Gunfire and blasts echoed through Libya's capital yesterday as eastern forces fought troops of the internationally recognised government in southern Tripoli suburbs, forcing thousands of civilians to flee their homes.

The Libyan National Army (LNA) of Khalifa Haftar advanced on the coastal city a week ago in the latest conflict of a cycle of anarchy since the 2011 overthrow of dictator Muammar Gaddafi.

But armed groups, GNA, which is loyal to Prime Minister Fayeaz al-Serraj have so far kept them at bay, with fierce fighting round a disused former airport about 11 km (7 miles) from the centre.

A week of battles has killed 75 people - mainly fighters but also 17 civilians - and wounded another 323, according to latest UN tallies. Some 9,500 people have also been forced out of their homes.

As the sound of fighting echoed round their city, residents sought to maintain some normality yesterday.

Some families were having breakfast in cafes next to the fish market where people were stocking up for the weekend.



Pope Francis kneels to kiss the feet of South Sudan's President Salva Kiir Mayardit at the Pope's Santa Marta residence in the Vatican. Pope Francis on April 11 knelt and kissed the feet of leaders of South Sudan at the end of a two-day retreat to help them solidify a peace agreement.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

I know nothing about WikiLeaks: Trump

US President Donald Trump said on Thursday he did not have an opinion about the arrest of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who faces the prospect of extradition to the United States over the publishing of secret official information. "I know nothing about WikiLeaks. It's not my thing. ... I don't really have any opinion," Trump said to reporters before a meeting with South Korean leader Moon Jae-in. On the campaign trail during the 2016 presidential election, Trump repeatedly praised WikiLeaks. Shortly before the election, Trump said, "I love WikiLeaks," after it released a cache of hacked Democratic Party emails that harmed the candidacy of his opponent, Hillary Clinton.

'Mikhail Gorbachev' to contest in Indonesia polls

Mikhail Gorbachev is running for office in Indonesian elections next week, but it's not the octogenarian ex-Soviet leader who helped bring an end to the Cold War. The 32-year-old -- full name Mikhail Gorbachev Dom -- is vying for a seat in parliament, one of more than 245,000 candidates contesting the Southeast Asian nation's biggest-ever polls on April 17. How the Indonesian Gorbachev got his name was slightly less earth shattering. "My parents were certain that they were going to have a girl so when I was born they panicked because they didn't have a boy's name ready," the Jakarta resident told AFP. So he went nameless for a week until the couple spotted the elder Gorbachev's name in a newspaper. "My father thought it was a cool name and he was an influential leader of the Soviet Union so they thought let's give our son that name," he said.



US, UK, France give China ultimatum over JeM chief

The US, France and the UK have asked China to lift its hold by 23 April on a resolution banning Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Maulana Masood Azhar by the United Nations, a news report said yesterday. China had on 14 March stalled a proposal co-sponsored by France, UK and the US to ban Azhar, who group claimed responsibility for the 14 February suicide attack on an Indian paramilitary convoy in Kashmir's Pulwama region killing 40 personnel -- igniting tensions between India and Pakistan. If China did not lift its hold by then, the US would formally introduce its resolution on banning Azhar at the UNSC bypassing the 1267 sanctions committee, the report said.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

Kim Jong Un gains more power

AP, Seoul

North Korea has replaced its long-serving head of state with a close aide to leader Kim Jong Un, promoting a man who was placed on a US sanctions list last year for alleged human rights abuses, state media said Friday.

Kim acquired a new title, and now becomes "the supreme representative of all the Korean people" -- a newly-created role that observers say makes him more like a modern national leader, on a par with other country's presidents and prime ministers.

Kim Yong Nam, the now-91-year-old who held the position of the North's head of state -- an almost entirely ceremonial role -- for almost 20 years, was replaced by Choe Ryong Hae, the state-run KCNA said.

WikiLeaks: Journalism or not?

AP, New York

After the arrest of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange in London, his lawyer was quick to characterize it as an assault against the rights of journalists all over the world who seek to uncover secrets.

But was it quite that clear? Does WikiLeaks do journalism, or is it something else?

The answer wasn't evident when the organization burst into public consciousness at the top of this decade with the release of government documents about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It seems even less so now.

Launched in 2006 as the vision of Australian computer hacker Assange, WikiLeaks produced raw data, not stories -- things like Sarah Palin's personal emails or membership rolls of neo-Nazi organizations. The thousands of memos, cables and other documents about US war efforts revealed when Assange allegedly conspired with Chelsea Manning to break into a Pentagon computer took WikiLeaks to another level. Some viewed Assange as a hero, others as a traitor.

Either way, it was a heady time. WikiLeaks was considered a new type of news organization, fueled by the power of the Internet and democratization of information.

The organization's methods can be -- and sometimes are -- seen as a threat to the journalism's traditional gatekeepers of power. But journalism has encompassed many traditions over the decades and centuries.

WikiLeaks has been an influence in two positive trends for journalism over the past decade, says Lisa Lynch, a journalism professor at Drew University

who has written about the organization. It emphasized the importance of data-driven journalism, an increasingly valuable tool. Since WikiLeaks was often willing to work with traditional outlets in how it released data, it encouraged news organizations to cooperate more in chasing stories. The 2016 "Panama Papers" investigation that revealed the offshore financial havens of political leaders showed what can



happen when journalists team up.

Despite utopian ideals, though, real life is more complicated.

Information isn't always merely information; government files can reveal wartime informants and put people's lives in danger. And information can be weaponized through decisions about what to reveal and what not to reveal. For example: Many people saw Assange's decision to publish the private emails of Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman as a sign of coziness with Russia and a contributing factor in

Donald Trump's election as president.

Add into the mix the rise of blogging and social media, which permit anyone with an internet connection to use the term "journalist" and be immediately and globally amplified, and the result is ambiguity about who is a journalist and who isn't.

In that environment, Assange, too, presents an ambiguous image.

David Boardman, dean of Temple University's communications school and chairman of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, said one key thing sets WikiLeaks apart from news organizations: the accusations that Assange acted illegally with Manning to obtain the war documents.

"I consider it something different," said Boardman, the former executive editor of The Seattle Times. "I don't consider it a journalistic organization."

Boardman considers the US government's case against Assange, as it is now outlined, as narrowly based upon his actions with Manning and thus not threatening to journalists. Others consider this a narrow reading of the case -- one fueled, perhaps, by a discomfort with Assange's methods and the idea of whether he should be considered a journalist at all.

Journalist Glenn Greenwald, himself no stranger to controversies about the release of information, tweeted Thursday: "If you're a US media star who has spent two years claiming to be so concerned about press freedoms over Trump's mean tweets about your friends, but don't raise your voice in protest over this grave attack on press freedom, take a hard look in the mirror."