

NEWS IN brief

S'pore passes fake news law despite criticism

AFP, Singapore
Singapore's parliament Wednesday passed laws to combat "fake news" that will allow authorities to order the removal of online content despite fierce criticism from tech giants and rights groups. They give government ministers powers to order social media sites like Facebook and Twitter to put warnings next to posts authorities deem to be false, and in extreme cases get them taken down.

Lanka Catholic schools to reopen after attacks

AFP, Colombo
Sri Lanka's Catholic Church yesterday announced it will reopen its schools next week for the first time since Easter Sunday bombings killed 258 people. Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith said the schools would open Tuesday after remaining shut following fears of a repeat of the April 21 attacks on three churches and three luxury hotels.

Myanmar prison riot leaves 4 dead

AFP, Yangon
Four prisoners were killed during a riot at a northern Myanmar jail, officials said yesterday, coming on the heels of an amnesty which saw more than 6,000 inmates released -- including high-profile Reuters reporters Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo. The unrest at Sagaing region's Shwe Bo prison began on Wednesday evening, said chief minister Myint Naing.

BITS OF HISTORY (MAY 09)

- 1926:** Americans Richard E. Byrd and Floyd Bennett became the first people to fly over the North Pole.
- 2002:** A radio-controlled landmine exploded in Kaspisk in the southern Russian republic of Dagestan killing 42 people and wounding 150 during a Victory Day parade.
- 2004:** Chechnya's Moscow-backed president, Akhmad Kadyrov, was killed when a bomb blast tore through a packed stadium in Grozny.

Suu Kyi tries to save face

Say observers after relentless diplomatic pressure, global outrage forced her govt to release two Reuters journos

AFP, Yangon
After relentless diplomatic pressure and global outrage, fallen democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi finally decided that a pardon for two Myanmar journalists jailed for reporting on a Rohingya massacre was the only way to resolve an issue that has dogged her government for nearly 18 months.
Observers say the unexpected release of the two Reuters reporters was a political decision timed to save face for the country's civilian leader, after a vigorous international campaign that saw Amal Clooney join their legal team, Time magazine put the pair on their cover, and journalism awards



and honours pile up -- including the prestigious Pulitzer Prize.
A presidential pardon freed Wa Lone, 33, and Kyaw Soe Oo, 29, from prison on Tuesday to a media frenzy and messages of congratulations from the White House to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.
The pair spent more than 500 days behind bars under colonial-era state secrets convictions after probing the extrajudicial killing of 10 Rohingya Muslims during a military crackdown.
Global attention on the reporters and the damage already done to the country's reputation were "potentially costly" to the government, said independent analyst Richard Horsey.
Nobel Laureate Suu Kyi provoked outcry when she refused to intervene, insisting "rule of law" must be followed.
The abrupt decision to release the pair this week was made because

Myanmar's leaders had "taken into consideration the long-term interest of (the) country", said government spokesman Zaw Htay. Political timing was also a factor, observers say.
Myanmar is due to go to the polls next year, retired Thai diplomat Kobsak Chutikul said. Behind the international condemnation, backroom diplomacy appears to have played a key role in convincing Suu Kyi to pardon the reporters. One man waiting among the crowds outside the gates of Yangon's notorious Insein Prison was British health expert Lord Ara Darzi.
A close confidant of Suu Kyi, he has regularly visited the country over the past two years in an advisory role on a Rakhine state commission.
"From what I hear, he finally found the opportunity to convince Suu Kyi this was an albatross hanging round their necks," said Kobsak, who served alongside Darzi on another Myanmar government commission.
Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo were freed in third amnesty in just over a week that saw a total of 23,000 prisoners released.

Myanmar is due to go to polls next year. So, political timing was a factor for the release.

The damage already done to the country's reputation were costly to govt: analyst

Indian social activists hold placards as they take part in a protest rally against Supreme Court chief justice Ranjan Gogoi, demanding the reopening of a sexual harassment case against him, in New Delhi yesterday. Inset, an activist hold a placard that reads: "SUPREME COURT OF INJUSTICE" during the rally.



PHOTO: AFP



Indian SC dismisses claim Rahul Gandhi is secret Brit

India's top court yesterday threw out a petition seeking to bar Rahul Gandhi from contesting the ongoing general election over claims he is secretly British. The 48-year-old scion of India's Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty is the main challenger to Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is seeking a second term in office after storming to power in 2014. Opponents of Gandhi accuse him of lying about his nationality and allege that he holds British citizenship, citing annual returns filed by a now-defunct British company in which he was once a director. India does not allow dual nationality and only Indian citizens can contest elections. The Supreme Court called the petition frivolous and an attempt to start a "roving inquiry" into the long-standing claims against Gandhi. "Just because a paper notes his citizenship as British, does he become a British citizen?" a bench headed by chief justice Ranjan Gogoi said. Gandhi, whose mother Sonia is Italian-born and whose father was assassinated former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, has always denied holding foreign citizenship.



Ex-Pak PM returns to jail after medical treatment

Pakistani former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif returned to prison on Wednesday to complete a sentence for corruption after being released on bail for six weeks to receive medical treatment, officials said. Sharif, who is serving a seven-year sentence imposed last year for failing to disclose the source of income that allowed him to acquire the Al-Azizia Steel Mills in Saudi Arabia, was released on bail in March. He returned to the District Jail in Lahore in the early hours, accompanied by thousands of cheering supporters, several hours after he was due back. Shahbaz Gill, spokesman for the Punjab chief magistrate, said Nawaz arrived at the jail after its gates had closed for the night but was allowed in to avoid inflaming tensions. Thousands of supporters of Sharif's PML-N party joined their leader from his house and stopped his car at several points along the route, showering his car with flowers and chanting in support. Three-time premier Sharif, who was disqualified from holding political office for life, has been suffering from a heart condition and kidney problems.

Stop bugging him: Duterte brushes off finger-sized pest

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte seemed unfazed when a finger-sized cockroach scrambled onto his shoulder as he spoke at a campaign rally on Wednesday night. Duterte, 74, was endorsing Senate candidates at the event in central Bohol province when the insect ran up his left shoulder, video footage showed. A female aide hurried forward to flick the bug off, but it ran down the front of the president's shirt. Alerted by his anxious aide, Duterte swatted the roach away. He then stomped on the floor and joked that the insect may have been planted by the main opposition Liberal party. "It's Liberal! That's for sure," Duterte said to laughter from the crowd. Duterte then continued with the rest of his two-hour speech.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

'Your slap will be a blessing'

Modi retorts after Mamata Banerjee's attack

NDTV ONLINE
Two days after Mamata Banerjee said she wanted to give him a "tight slap of democracy", Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered his response while campaigning in Bengal. At a rally in Purulia yesterday, Modi said coming from "Didi", he would consider a slap a blessing.
He also doubled down on his "tolabaazi" or extortion allegation that had provoked Mamata Banerjee's comments.
"I am told Didi has said she wants to slap me. Didi, oh Didi. I call you Didi, I respect you. Your slap will be a blessing for me," said the PM.
"I will accept it, but I will also say this - if you had the guts to slap your colleagues, who stole money from the poor via chit funds, you would not be so scared," he remarked, keeping up his relentless attack on the Trinamool chief on chit fund scandals and "tolabaazi" or extortionist tax.

Responding to the PM, Mamata said. "I have never said I will slap the PM. I had said slap of democracy, try to understand the language."
Meanwhile, Mamata threw an unusual challenge for him while campaigning in Bankura yesterday.
An hour before she spoke at her poll rally there, Modi had earlier accused the Bengal Chief Minister of establishing "mafia" in coal mines and depriving mine workers of their remuneration.
Mamata retorted that if he could prove the allegation against even one candidate then she would withdraw her candidates from all 42 Lok Sabha seats in Bengal.
Coal, she added, comes under is the central government and BJP leaders were agents of coal transactions. "I have a pen drive. If I make it public, documents of coal mafias and cow smuggling would be out," warned Mamata.



BLASPHEMY ROW

Pak Christian Asia Bibi now in Canada

AFP, Islamabad
After 10 years of political turmoil, assassinations and violent demonstrations, Asia Bibi's exit from Pakistan was met largely with silence, as the country appeared to seek a quiet close to a turbulent chapter.
Even as the Christian woman's flight to safety in Canada made international headlines on Wednesday, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's government said nothing.
It was left to a foreign ministry spokesman to confirm her departure yesterday, with Mohammad Faisal telling journalists Bibi had left the country "at her own will" as he declined to say anything further.
The silence echoed across the country's usually rambunctious media, with most newspapers glossing over the episode and primetime television shows offering it only a passing mention.
It was a jarring contrast to the violent protests staged by hardliners against Bibi in recent years, including last October, when the Supreme Court overturned her death sentence for blasphemy. Islamists took to the streets at the time calling for mutiny in the armed forces and the assassination of the country's top judges.
"The government clearly doesn't want there to be a reaction from violent mobs," said Omar Waraich, deputy South Asia director at Amnesty International.

Thailand likely to keep junta leader as PM

Pro-army party looks to form coalition with allies

REUTERS, Bangkok
Thailand's pro-army Palang Pracharat party was yesterday looking for coalition partners from a wide field of potential allies as it seeks to keep military junta leader Prayuth Chan-ocha, who led a 2014 coup, in office as prime minister.
The party is expected to easily form the next government, since it needs only a few more votes in the elected House of Representatives to choose the prime minister under complicated new electoral rules written by the military regime.
Palang Pracharat is expected to be joined by the Democrat and Bhumjaithai parties as well as 11 other smaller parties that are not affiliated with either the pro-army camp or the Democratic Front of parties opposing the military, said Yuttaporn Issarachai, a political scientist from Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University.
"Prayuth will certainly be prime minister,"

under this scenario, he said, but he added that the government would likely be unstable, with only a slim majority in the House.
Leaders of the Democratic Front have cried foul and threatened legal action, saying both the electoral system and the Election Commission were biased toward extending the military regime.
Election officials and Palang Pracharat deny the accusation.
The Democratic Front of seven parties is led by the Pheu Thai party loyal to exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a 2006 coup.
Pro-Thaksin parties had won every election since then but each time saw its governments ousted by legal rulings and coups.
In the latest intervention, the military in 2014 toppled a government that had been led by Thaksin's sister.
It still could be weeks before a new government is formed, even though the pro-junta party is in a favourable position.



In Bhutan, PM is a doc on Saturdays

AFP, Thimphu
It's Saturday in Bhutan and Lotay Tshering has just completed urinary bladder repair surgery on a patient at the Jigme Dorji Wangchuck National Referral Hospital.
But Tshering is no ordinary doctor. During the week, he also happens to be the prime minister in the Himalayan kingdom famous for measuring citizens' Gross National Happiness.
"For me it's a de-stresser," said Tshering, who was elected prime minister of the nation of 750,000 people last year in only its third democratic election since the end of absolute monarchy in 2008.
"Some people play golf, some do archery, and I like to operate. I am just spending my weekends here," the 50-year-old said.
At the hospital, Tshering's patient, a 40-year-old man named Bumthap who underwent a five-hour bladder repair surgery, told AFP he was pleased with the results.
"Now that I have been operated on by the prime minister, who is considered one of the best doctors in the country, I feel more relieved," he said.
No one at the hospital bats an eyelid as Tshering, wearing a faded lab coat and crocs, walks through the busy corridors. Nurses and hospital attendants continue with their jobs as normal.
The Buddhist kingdom is in many ways a case apart,

benchmarking itself on happiness instead of economic growth.
The capital Thimphu has no traffic lights, the sale of tobacco is banned, and television was only allowed in 1999.
But the "Land of the Thunder Dragon" also has its problems, among them corruption, rural poverty, youth unemployment and criminal gangs.
Tshering, who trained in Bangladesh, Japan, Australia and the United States, began his political career in 2013, but his party failed to make headway in that year's election.
After losing, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck commanded him to lead a team of doctors and travel with the monarch's entourage to far-flung villages to provide free medical treatment.
Now as prime minister, he spends Saturdays treating patients referred to him and Thursday mornings offering medical advice to trainees and doctors. Sunday is family time.
"I will continue doing this until I die and I miss not being able to be here every day," he added.
And on the days when he drives his car around the capital Thimphu -- instead of using his official chauffeur -- an all-too familiar urge takes hold of him.
"Whenever I drive to work on weekdays, I wish I could turn left towards the hospital."



PHOTO: AFP
Syrians drive with their belongings along the main Damascus-Aleppo highway near the town of Saraqib in Syria's jihadist-held Idlib province yesterday as they flee possible air strikes by the regime and its allies in the area.