

POST-POLLS INDIA

Modi to take oath at 7:00 pm on Thursday

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who was re-elected with a thumping majority for a second term at the centre, will take oath at the Rashtrapati Bhavan on Thursday. The ceremony will take place at 7:00 pm, President Ram Nath Kovind has tweeted. Modi had met President Kovind and staked a claim to form a government at the centre last evening. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance had won a resounding majority in the Lok Sabha elections on Thursday, securing 352 seats in the 545-member lower house of parliament. Names of new ministers have been kept under wraps but President Kovind's tweet indicated that PM Modi's cabinet of ministers will join him in taking oath. The government has also not announced the guest list for the swearing-in ceremony. In 2014, leaders of the Saarc (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) were invited and attended the ceremony – the list included Nawaz Sharif, who was then Prime Minister of Pakistan.

Amethi BJP worker shot dead

A former village head in Uttar Pradesh's Amethi, who worked closely with BJP leader Smriti Irani during her Lok Sabha campaign, was shot dead early yesterday morning. Irani reached his village yesterday afternoon to attend his funeral. Surendra Singh, a BJP worker, was attacked at his home; he died later at a hospital in Lucknow where he was taken for treatment, said police. Police said an old enmity may have led to the killing but have not ruled out a political motive. "We have come to know about old enmity. We are also finding out if there was any political enmity. In initial investigation, we have got some vital clues," UP DGP Om Prakash Singh was quoted as saying by news agency PTI. Seven people have been taken into custody and they are being interrogated. Surendra Singh was the former head of Baraulia village. He quit the village head post to participate in the BJP election campaign.



CBI issues lookout notice against ex-Kolkata top cop

India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) yesterday issued a lookout notice against former Kolkata police commissioner Rajeev Kumar in connection with the multi-crore Saradha chit fund scam case to prevent him from leaving the country. All airports and immigration authorities have been alerted by the CBI. Rajeev Kumar's plea seeking extension of his protection from arrest, which ended on Friday, was dismissed by the Supreme Court. The central probe agency wants custodial interrogation of Kumar, a 1989-batch IPS officer, in connection with the Saradha scam. Kumar was heading the Special Investigation Team of West Bengal Police probing the case before CBI took over. West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee came in the defence of Kumar and started a sit-in to protest against the Centre's move.

SOURCE: HINDUSTAN TIMES, NDTV



US President Donald Trump (2nd L) and First Lady Melania Trump (L) attend a dinner with Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2nd R) and his wife Akie Abe (R) at the Inakaya restaurant in the Roppongi district of Tokyo yesterday. Inset, Abe poses for a selfie with Trump at Mobar Country Club in Mobar, Japan. Trump vowed to make the US relationship with Japan a "little bit more fair", as he kicked off a four-day visit in Tokyo.



Battle for Tripoli escalates

Haftar rules out ceasefire, dismisses UN-led talks

AGENCIES

Heavy fighting raged in the Libyan capital yesterday as eastern forces made a new push to advance inside the city controlled by the internationally recognized government.

Libyan eastern commander Khalifa Haftar has ruled out a ceasefire in the battle for Tripoli and accused the United Nations of seeking to partition Libya, according to an interview published by French newspaper Le Journal du Dimanche.

Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) began an offensive in early April to take Tripoli from fighters loyal to Prime Minister Fayez al-Seraj's Government of National Accord (GNA) which has the backing of the United Nations.

The LNA, which is allied to a parallel government in the east, has not been able to breach the southern defenses of Tripoli. The fighting has killed at least 510 people, forced 75,000 out of their homes and trapped thousands of migrants in detention centers.

"Of course, the political solution is still the goal. But to get back to politics, we must first finish with militias," Haftar told the newspaper.

Haftar also said the head of UN mission to

Libya, Ghassan Salame, was no longer impartial, reported Reuters.

"Partition of Libya is maybe what our adversaries want. This is maybe what Ghassan Salame also wants."

Even though France and other Western countries officially back the Libyan government, some have supported Haftar as they see him as a bulwark against Islamist militias in the country.

More than 75,000 people have been driven from their homes in the latest fighting and 510 have been killed, according to the World Health Organization, reported AFP.

More than 2,400 have also been wounded, while 100,000 people are feared trapped by the clashes raging on the outskirts of Tripoli.

Two Libyan journalists held by an armed group for more than three weeks have been released, the television channel they work for said Saturday.

"We congratulate the press world for the release of our two colleagues, Mohamad al-Gurj and Mohamad al-Chibani, who were kidnapped by Haftar's forces on May 2 while they were covering the assault on Tripoli," said the private channel Libya al-Ahrar, which is based in Turkey.



European voters set stage for battle for EU's soul

Nationalists mount challenge to pro-EU parties

AFP, Brussels

Europeans headed to the polls in their tens of millions yesterday as 21 countries chose their champions in a battle between the nationalist right and pro-EU forces to chart a course for the union.

Turnout by midday was higher than it had been in 2014 in some countries, notably France and Romania, and roughly stable in others, as reports began to trickle in from around the continent.

Seven EU member states had already voted, but no official results can be published until rest have taken part. The European Parliament will give a voting estimate at 1815 GMT and provisional results will begin to emerge from 2100 GMT. Eurosceptic parties opposed to the

project of ever closer union hope to capture as many as a third of the seats in the 751-member Strasbourg assembly, disrupting the pro-integration consensus.

The far-right parties of Italian deputy PM Matteo Salvini and France's Marine Le Pen will lead this charge, and anti-EU ranks will be swelled by the Brexit Party of British populist Nigel Farage.

France's President Emmanuel Macron has taken it upon himself to act as figurehead for the centrist and liberal

parties hoping to shut the nationalists out of key EU jobs and decision-making.

"Once again Macron is daring us to challenge him. Well let's take him at his word: On May 26, we'll challenge him in the voting booth," Le Pen told a rally on Friday.



EU PARLIAMENT POLLS

Iraq warns of 'danger of war' as Iranian FM visits Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi leaders have warned of the risks of war during a visit by Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, whose country is locked in a tense standoff with the United States.

Zarif's visit to neighbouring Iraq – which is caught in the middle of its two allies the US and Iran – follows a decision by Washington to deploy 1,500 additional troops to the Middle East.

Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi warned of the "danger of a war" during a meeting with Zarif on Saturday night, his office said. Abdel Mahdi pleaded for the "stability of the region and the upholding of the nuclear deal," it said, referring to a 2015 agreement between Tehran and major powers. Iraqi President Barham Saleh discussed with Zarif "the need to prevent all war or escalation," his office said.

On Saturday Zarif called the deployment of extra US troops to the region "very dangerous and a threat to international peace and security." It follows a US decision in early May to send an

aircraft carrier strike force and B-52 bombers in a show of force against what Washington's leaders believed was an imminent Iranian plan to attack US assets. Washington says the latest reinforcements are in response to a "campaign" of recent attacks including a rocket launched into the Green Zone in Baghdad, explosive devices that damaged four tankers near the entrance to the Gulf, and drone strikes by Yemeni rebels on a key Saudi oil pipeline. Iran has denied any involvement.

Washington has been seeking to tighten sanctions against Iran as relations worsen under US President Donald Trump, who last year pulled out of a nuclear agreement that predecessor Barack Obama had signed with Iran and other world powers in 2015.

In Tehran, President Hassan Rouhani floated the idea of holding a referendum over Iran's nuclear programme, Iranian media reported.

A referendum over the programme could give Iran's leaders space to manoeuvre and a chance to resolve the stand-off with the United States.



UN chief rejects Yemen president's bias accusation

Houthis attack Saudi airport by drone

AFP, Dubai

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has assured Yemen's leader that the world body will remain impartial in efforts to resolve the country's conflict, rejecting accusations that its envoy was siding with rebels.

The pledge came in a letter from Guterres to President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi, who had accused the UN special envoy to Yemen of bias.

"I would like to assure you that every effort will be made to maintain the impartial stance that is expected of the United Nations," while implementing a ceasefire agreement, Guterres said in the letter seen by AFP yesterday.

In his own letter addressed to Guterres, Hadi accused envoy Martin Griffiths of "providing the Houthi militia with guarantees to stay in Hodeida and its ports under the umbrella of the UN".

"I can no longer accept these offences by your special envoy which threaten chances to find a (lasting) solution," Hadi said.

Hodeida is the main entry point for the bulk of Yemen's imports and humanitarian aid, providing a lifeline to millions of people.

Earlier this month, the United Nations supervised the rebels' handover of the ports of Hodeida, Saleef and Ras Issa to a "coast guard", but the government said they were in fact Houthi forces in different uniforms.

The pullback is in line with a ceasefire deal for Hodeida reached in Stockholm in December.

Guterres said that he and Griffiths were prepared "to discuss the legitimate concerns of the government of Yemen referenced in your letter, which we take very seriously."

Meanwhile, Houthis launched a drone strike on military hangars in Saudi Arabia's Jizan airport near the Yemeni border, the group's Masirah TV reported yesterday.



Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido attends a rally in Barquisimeto, Venezuela on Saturday. Guaido said he would send delegates to Oslo next week for the first face-to-face meeting with representatives of President Nicolas Maduro's government as part of a mediation effort.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Race to succeed May centres on 'no deal' Brexit battle

The prospect of a "no deal" Brexit was fast becoming the central battle of the race to succeed Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday, as environment minister Michael Gove became the latest candidate to declare. May said on Friday she was quitting over her failure to deliver Brexit, potentially opening the way for a new leader who could seek a more divisive split with the European Union and lead to confrontation with the bloc or a possible parliamentary election. Setting out their pitch to the Conservative Party's largely pro-Brexit membership who will decide the outcome of the contest, four of the leadership hopefuls have said Britain must leave the EU on October 31 even if this means a no-deal Brexit. "I will fight for a fairer deal in Brussels ... if not I will be clear we will leave on WTO terms in October," former Brexit minister Dominic Raab told BBC TV.

Sri Lanka detains nearly 100 in anti-Islamist swoops

Sri Lanka's military has detained nearly 100 suspects during four days of search operations against remnants of an Islamist group blamed for the Easter attacks that killed 258, officials said yesterday. Some 3,000 military personnel were deployed in and around the capital as well as other key towns for cordon-and-search activities that began on Thursday, a military official said. In the first three days, security forces took 87 suspects into custody and they were handed over to police for further investigations, he added. "The number of people detained could be around 100 by now," a security official said adding that almost all were taken in for possessing drugs and in some cases illegal weapons. A few were also detained along with video and other propaganda material of the local jihadi group, the National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ) which has been blamed for the April 21 bombings.



US ambassador urges China to talk to the Dalai Lama

China should hold talks with Tibet's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, US Ambassador to China Terry Branstad told Chinese officials during a trip to the Himalayan region where he criticised Beijing for interfering in religious freedom. Branstad visited Tibet last week, the first such trip by a US ambassador since 2015, amid escalating trade and diplomatic tension between the two countries. His visit followed the passing of a US law in December that requires the United States to deny visas to Chinese officials in charge of implementing policies that restrict access to Tibet for foreigners, legislation that was denounced by China. Branstad met Chinese government officials and Tibetan religious and cultural figures, and "raised our long-standing concerns about lack of consistent access" to Tibet, the US Embassy in Beijing said in an emailed statement on Saturday.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS