

NEWSIN brief

18 killed in Taliban attack in Afghanistan

AFP, Herat
Taliban fighters have stormed several security posts providing protection to Afghanistan's historic minaret of Jam, cutting access to the Unesco World Heritage Site and killing 18 security forces, officials said yesterday. Abdul Hai Khatebi, the provincial governor spokesman, said 15 pro-government militias and three policemen had been killed in the attacks, which started Monday.

Venezuela talks resume in Oslo

AFP, Oslo
Talks between Venezuela's government and opposition on ending months of crisis were under way in Norway, sources said Tuesday, but Washington insisted that the only item for discussion should be President Nicolas Maduro's removal. Maduro, while describing the opposition as "extremist" and working on behalf of the United States, promised to make an effort to resolve the crisis.

Israel tightens Gaza fishing curbs

AFP, Jerusalem
Israel yesterday announced it had tightened restrictions on Palestinian fishing off the blockaded Gaza Strip after more balloons fitted with firebombs were floated from the enclave into its territory. The zone it allows Gaza fishermen was reduced to a maximum of 10 nautical miles from 15, COGAT, the Israeli defence ministry unit that oversees such regulations, said.

BITS OF HISTORY (MAY 29)

- 1953: New Zealander Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tensing Norgay reached the summit of Mount Everest, the first men to scale the world's highest mountain.
- 1999: The US space shuttle Discovery became the first spacecraft to dock with the International Space Station.



This picture taken yesterday shows smoke plumes rising following reported Syrian government forces' bombardment on the town of Khan Sheikhun in the southern countryside of the jihadist-held Idlib province. Inset: An injured man is pulled out from a collapsed building, in a location said to be Sfuhen, Idlib province, Syria. The latest air strikes on the jihadist enclaves in Idlib province killed at least 13 civilians yesterday, a war monitor said. PHOTO: AFP



Jaitley opts out of Modi's cabinet

REUTERS, New Delhi
Jaitley, India's finance minister, has asked Prime Minister Narendra Modi not to give him a ministerial position in the new government due to ongoing health problems. Jaitley's absence will leave Modi without one of his most important lieutenants as he begins his second five-year term in power following the Bharatiya Janata Party's landslide election victory earlier this month. Jaitley said in a letter to Modi, issued to the media yesterday, that he had faced serious health challenges in the last 18 months and needed to recuperate. "I should be allowed a reasonable time for myself, my treatment and my health, and, therefore not be a part of any responsibility, for the present, in the new government," Jaitley said in the letter. A spokesman of prime minister's office declined to comment on Jaitley's letter to Modi. Aside from holding one of the most important positions in government, Jaitley, a 66-year-old lawyer-turned politician, was also the cabinet's main communicator with the media, one of the ruling party's most articulate voices in parliament, and was a strong campaigner in the recent election despite his poor health. A diabetic, Jaitley's health issues became worse after he had a kidney transplant in May last year. He skipped presenting an interim budget in February as he was in hospital in the United States receiving cancer treatment. Last week, Reuters reported that he was unlikely to continue in his current role. Finance ministry officials said Jaitley had been largely working from home for the past three weeks while undergoing treatment. Senior government officials said replacing Jaitley would be difficult, as few BJP leaders possessed appropriate experience for the finance portfolio.

WB govt won't survive till 2021

Predicts BJP national secretary; Naveen Patnaik takes oath as Odisha CM

NDTV ONLINE
Mamata Banerjee's government in Bengal will not complete its full term till 2021, a BJP leader predicts after the national election, in which his party has registered significant gains at the cost of the state's ruling Trinamool Congress.

BJP national secretary Rahul Sinha says that assembly elections in Bengal may be held "within six months or one year".

Bengal was an important contributor to the BJP's landslide victory in the national election. The ruling party scooped 18 of Bengal's 42 Lok Sabha seats, up from just two in 2014, and the Trinamool dropped from 34 to 22.

The BJP is already planning for the 2021 assembly polls, having increased its vote share from nearly 17 per cent to over 40 per cent.

"I think Vidhan Sabha (assembly) elections will be held within 6 months to 1 year in West Bengal.

The current government will not be able to continue till 2021. There is lot of dissatisfaction in the Trinamool Congress (TMC). The TMC government is being run by police and CID (Criminal Investigation



Department) pressure," said Rahul Sinha.

On Tuesday, two Trinamool Congress legislators and more than 50 councillors joined the BJP. Yesterday, one MLA joined changed sides.

The Trinamool Congress, devastated by the turn of events, admits to a "minor crisis" in the party but says it will bounce back in 2021.

Meanwhile, Biju Janata Dal (BJD) president Naveen Patnaik was sworn in as chief minister of Odisha for the fifth consecutive term in Bhubaneswar yesterday. The BJD fought the elections without any alliance partner and won 112 of the 146 Assembly seats for which elections were held simultaneously with the Lok Sabha polls.

In Arunachal Pradesh, senior BJP leader Pema Khandu took oath as the chief minister yesterday.

Chief Ministers of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura and Meghalaya attended the function.

The BJP led by Khandu won 41 seats in the 60-member Assembly, in the elections held simultaneously with the Lok Sabha elections on April 11 in the Northeastern state bordering China.

Iran 'almost certainly' behind ship attacks off UAE: Bolton

AFP, Abu Dhabi
US National Security Advisor John Bolton yesterday accused Iran of "almost certainly" being behind sabotage attacks on oil tankers off the UAE coast this month, as he visited Abu Dhabi amid soaring tensions between Washington and Tehran.

The accusation, which follows a US military buildup in the Gulf, came on the eve of emergency Arab and Gulf summits called by Iran's regional arch-rival Saudi Arabia to discuss the standoff.

Bolton said that additional US forces in the region were sent as a "deterrent" and that Washington's response will be prudent.

The four ships, including two Saudi tankers, were attacked by "naval mines almost certainly from Iran", Bolton told a press conference in the UAE capital.

"There's no doubt in anybody's mind in Washington who's responsible for this," Bolton said in a clear reference to Iran.

US experts are part of a five-nation team that is investigating the May 12 attacks

that damaged the four vessels in the Sea of Oman off the UAE emirate of Fujairah.

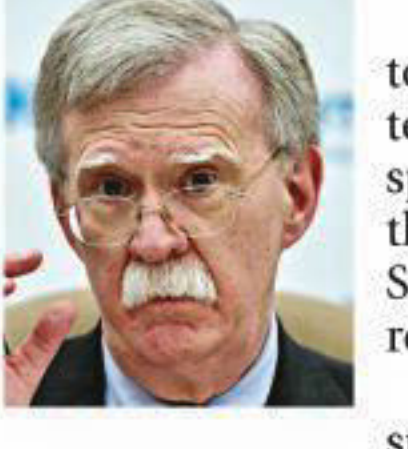
Washington has reimposed tough sanctions against Tehran and ordered the deployment of 1,500 more troops to the Middle East.

Tehran called the attacks on the ships "alarming and regrettable", and warned of "adventurism" by foreign players to disrupt maritime security.

Fujairah, where the attacks took place, is a key oil export terminal on the Sea of Oman that spares tankers the need to enter the Gulf through the strategic Strait of Hormuz, which Iran has repeatedly threatened to close.

Almost a third of the world's oil supplies pass through the narrow strait between Iran and Oman which is the sole shipping lane into and out of the Gulf.

Tensions between the United States and Iran have escalated since President Donald Trump withdrew from a 2015 multinational nuclear pact with Iran and reimposed sanctions, notably targeting Tehran's key oil exports.



EU leaders clash over top Brussels jobs

AFP, Brussels

European leaders launched a summer of wrangling over their union's political direction on Tuesday with a clash over nominations for Brussels' top job.

After dinner in Brussels, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel left saying she stood by her centre-right group's candidate to lead the European Commission for the next five years.

"We stand by our lead candidate, the EPP candidate, that is Manfred Weber. Others stand by their candidate, which is obvious," Merkel told reporters.

But President Emmanuel Macron of France said the shifting political balance in the European Parliament after last week's election had broken the "prison" of the candidacy process.

"The key is that the people in the most sensitive posts share in our project and are as charismatic, inventive and competent as possible," he said.

France -- backed by progressive allies like Spanish premier Pedro Sanchez -- wants a candidate who could support the programme of a broader alliance of liberal, social democratic Green and centre-right MEPs.

The president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, will now go away and try to draw up a list of nominees for top EU roles that a majority of leaders could get behind at a June 21 summit.

If they fail find consensus, the debate will drag on, as it did in 2014, when it took several summits to agree on all the top jobs.

Alongside the Commission role, the leaders also have to choose a new Council president, a foreign policy chief, a speaker for the European Parliament and a central bank director.



Arrest warrant issued for 'Buddhist Bin Laden'

Myanmar police issued an arrest warrant Tuesday evening for an ultra-nationalist monk known as the "Buddhist Bin Laden" for his vitriol against Islam and particularly the Rohingya Muslim community. Wirathu has long been the face of the country's Buddhist nationalist movement, notorious for espousing hate against the Rohingya minority. Police didn't provide specific details about the reasons behind the warrant. Wirathu's monastery is in Mandalay but his whereabouts Tuesday or when he might be detained were unknown. In 2013 the hardliner appeared on the cover of "Time" magazine as "The Face of Buddhist Terror". He has called for boycotts of Muslim-owned businesses and restrictions of marriages between Buddhists and Muslims.

Pakistan extends airspace closure on Indian border

Pakistani airspace on its eastern border with India will remain closed until June 14, a civil aviation official said yesterday, the latest extension months after a standoff between the arch rivals. Pakistan closed its airspace in February after a suicide attack by a Pakistan-based militant group in Indian-controlled Kashmir led to aerial bombing missions on each other's soil and a fighter dogfight over Kashmir. Foreign carriers using Indian airspace have been forced to take costly detours because they cannot fly over Pakistan. The closure mainly affects flights from Europe to Southeast Asia. Pakistan lies in the middle of a vital aviation corridor and the airspace restrictions impact hundreds of commercial and cargo flights each day, adding flight time for passengers and fuel costs for airlines.

80 countries ready to step climate fight: UN

About 80 countries have signaled that they are willing to scale up their commitment to cut carbon emissions under the Paris agreement to combat climate change, the UN climate envoy said Tuesday. UN climate envoy Luis Alfonso de Alba told journalists that "80 is the number of countries (from) which we have already received a signal that they are willing" to enhance their plans. "But it doesn't mean that they are willing to do that to the scale we need," he added. A total of 197 parties have signed the Paris agreement, of which 186 have ratified it. The United States under Donald Trump decided to pull out of the deal, but the withdrawal will only become effective in 2020. De Alba was in Washington last week to meet with US officials ahead of a major UN climate summit in New York in September that some hope will be a turning point. SOURCE: AFP



Reuters Pulitzer winners for International Reporting Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, who were jailed for exposing Myanmar military's involvement in killings Rohingyas, pose for a picture inside Low Library at Columbia University in New York, on Tuesday. PHOTO: REUTERS

'Time' has changed

After polls, the magazine says 'Divider in Chief' Modi has 'United India'

IANS, New York

Time magazine, which published a cover story before the Lok Sabha elections calling Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi the "Divider in Chief", has carried an editorial with the headline 'Modi Has United India Like No Prime Minister in Decades'.

The article with that headline published on its website on Tuesday, asked "How has this supposedly divisive figure not only managed to keep power, but increase his levels of support?" and answered: "A key factor is that Modi has managed to transcend India's greatest fault line: the class divide."

The writer, Manoj Ladwa, credited Modi's emergence as a unifier to his origins in a backward caste -- a factor missed or deliberately omitted by Western media obsessed with what they call upper caste domination.

"Narendra Modi was born into one of India's most disadvantaged social groups," he explained. "In reaching the very top, he personifies the aspirational working classes and can self-identify with his country's poorest citizens in a way that the

Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty, who have led India for most of the 72 years since independence, simply cannot."

"Yet despite the strong and often unfair criticisms levelled at Modi's policies both throughout his first term and this marathon election, no Prime Minister has united the Indian electorate as much in close to



five decades," he said, referring to Indira Gandhi's massive 1971 victory.

The pre-election cover story by Aatish Taseer was turned into campaign fodder and acclaimed by Modi's critics as an indictment of him as a "divider" by a global media powerhouse. Time magazine has changed

hands twice in a year -- bought in March last year by Meredith, the publisher of magazines like Better Homes and Gardens, and All Recipes, it was sold in again in September to tech entrepreneur Marc Benioff, the founder of Salesforce, and his wife.

In fact, Time's flagship US edition did not bother to run the Modi story as cover, and instead gave the spot to Elizabeth Warren, a candidate for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination for president.

The Britain-born son of Indian journalist Tavleen Singh and the late Salmaan Taseer, the governor of Pakistan's Punjab, Taseer wrote in the cover story, "Not only has Modi's economic miracle failed to materialise, he has also helped create an atmosphere of poisonous religious nationalism in India."

However, in the latest story, Ladwa writes: "Through socially progressive policies, he has brought many Indians, both Hindus and religious minorities, out of poverty at a faster rate than in any previous generation." Ladwa is the founder and CEO of Britain-based media company India Inc., which publishes India Global Business.

SAVE THE CHILDREN'S GLOBAL CHILDHOOD REPORT

Children better off today than 20 yrs ago

AFP, United Nations

A report on the state of the world's children released Tuesday notes major progress in health, education and safety in dozens of countries over the past two decades.

Save the Children said in its global childhood report that conditions had improved in 173 out of 176 countries, with Singapore ranking as the country that best provides for children.

The non-governmental organization estimates that 690 million children are being robbed of their childhood because of sickness, deaths, child marriage, early pregnancy, malnutrition or no schooling, down from 970 million in 2000. Sierra Leone, Rwanda and Ethiopia were cited as countries that had significantly improved the lives of children over the past two decades.

Of the eight indicators used by Save the Children to measure progress for children, only one was on the rise -- the number of displaced children from conflict. Some 420 million children live in conflict zones -- more than double the number in 1995.

After Singapore, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Slovenia, Germany, Ireland, Italy, South Korea and Belgium were listed as the top 10 countries where children are the most protected. The Central African Republic ranked last at 176, just below Niger and Chad.