

NEWS IN
brief

Blast kills 6 at Kabul military academy

At least six people were killed and six more wounded in a suicide blast outside a military academy in the Afghan capital yesterday, an official said. The attack outside the Marshal Fahim National Defense University in western Kabul took place at the road entrance to the war college at noon. No group immediately claimed responsibility.

Man sets self on fire near White House

A man set himself on fire near the White House on Wednesday, the Secret Service said, adding that the individual was receiving first aid at the scene. The incident took place shortly after noon on the Ellipse -- south of the president's residence -- near 15th Street and Constitution Avenue, the Secret Service said on Twitter revealing no motive.

21 killed in Mexico road accident

A semi-truck and a bus carrying passengers back from a pilgrimage to a Catholic shrine crashed and burst into flames Wednesday in eastern Mexico, killing at least 21 people, officials said. Thirty others were injured. Emergency officials at the scene said one of the vehicles lost its brakes going downhill and crashed into the other, causing both to erupt in flames and leaving the bus a charred frame lying on its side.

Italy, Malta rescue 165 migrants

The Italian navy rescued 90 migrants stranded in the Mediterranean yesterday, as 75 other migrants found clinging to a tuna pen were taken to Malta, officials said. IOM figures show 24,687 migrants have reached Europe so far this year.



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi greets the crowd during a swearing-in ceremony at the presidential palace in New Delhi, India, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

CHALLENGES AHEAD OF MODI

- Lacklustre economic growth
- Unemployment, notably among women
- Growing wealth inequalities
- Dire state of agriculture industry
- Pollution of air and waterways
- Red tape and protectionism

POST-POLLS INDIA

No TV debates for a month: Congress

The Congress has announced that it will not participate in television debates for a month, in the middle of a huge internal crisis following Rahul Gandhi's refusal to continue as its chief over the party's election rout. Congress leaders say the gag is meant to give the party time to sort out its mess and understand what went wrong, away from constant media speculation. Also, the party doesn't want to be seen criticising the BJP or Narendra Modi in debates, say sources. The Congress was wiped out in 18 states and union territories. On the other hand, the BJP led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi won 303 seats to win an incredible back-to-back majority.

BJP won 50% seats in Muslims districts

The BJP has managed to puncture opposition's claims that the party is anti-minority by winning more than 50% of the Lok Sabha seats in 90 'minority-concentration' districts identified in 2008 by the then UPA government. Besides a considerable minority population, these districts have both socio-economic and basic amenities indicators below the national average. Of the 79 such constituencies, the BJP has won 41 seats, a gain of seven over 2014. The Congress's share has almost halved, down from 12 in 2014 to six now. An analyst claimed that Muslims did not vote en bloc in favour of one party or candidate this time. On the other hand, 27 Muslim candidates won in the recently-concluded elections. However, none of the six Muslim candidates fielded by the BJP tasted success. Nearly 20% of the country's 130 crore people are Muslims.



BJP sold 'product' Modi well: Shashi Tharoor

Asserting that people did not vote for their economic self-interest in the Lok Sabha polls, Congress leader Shashi Tharoor says the BJP decided early that its "product" was Prime Minister Narendra Modi and marketed him very well by building the most "extraordinary personality cult." He also said the Congress may have underestimated the impact of national security as an electoral topic. He said the Congress was convinced that grave economic concerns such as unemployment levels hitting a 45-year high, significant agrarian distress and the disastrous impact of other measures like demonetisation would play a pivotal role in deciding the fate of the election. But the personality cult built by BJP overrode all those. "They decided early that their 'product' was Mr Modi and they marketed him very well," he added.

Sushma Swaraj not in Modi's cabinet

Sushma Swaraj, who was External Affairs minister in the previous Indian government, was seen taking a seat in the audience at Prime Minister Narendra Modi's oath ceremony yesterday, an indication that the veteran leader will sit out of a BJP government for the first time. The 67-year-old was one of the most popular ministers on social media and was acknowledged for her quick response to SOS and calls for assistance on Twitter. Since morning, Sushma Swaraj was being talked about as one of the top ministers in the new government. Sushma Swaraj, a nine-time parliamentarian, did not contest the election citing health reasons.

'Naked economic terrorism'

China warns there is no winner in trade war amid rising tensions

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday accused the United States of "naked economic terrorism" as Beijing ramps up the rhetoric in their trade war.

The world's top two economies are at loggerheads as trade talks have apparently stalled, with US President Donald Trump hiking tariffs on \$200 billion in Chinese goods earlier this month and blacklisting telecoms giant Huawei.

"We are against the trade war, but we are not afraid of it," vice foreign minister Zhang Hanhui said at a press briefing to preview President Xi Jinping's trip to Russia next week.

"This premeditated instigation of a trade conflict is naked economic terrorism, economic chauvinism, and economic bullying," Zhang said, stressing that China opposes the systematic use of sanctions, tariffs and protectionism.

"There is no winner in a trade war," he warned.

China has hit back with its own tariff increase on \$60 billion in US products that will take effect Saturday, while state media has suggested that Beijing could



stop exports of rare earths to the United States, depriving Washington of a key resource used to make hi-tech products.

The party's mouthpiece, The People's Daily, warned in an editorial on Wednesday that rare earths could be used as a counter-measure, adding that the US shouldn't "say we didn't warn you."

China produces more than 95 percent of the world's rare earths, and the United States relies on the Asian

superpower for upwards of 80 percent of its imports.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, asked about the rare earths threat during an interview, said that Americans have already "lost and suffered for decades under the current rules" and that Trump's "singular focus is to push back" on China.

He renewed his attack on Huawei, saying there was a "deep connectivity" between the company and the Chinese

state.

Huawei has rejected the accusations and on Tuesday filed a motion for summary judgment in a US court, hoping it would swiftly win a lawsuit against US legislation that bars federal agencies from using the company's equipment.

"You have seen that for some time, the US government has tried very hard to fabricate various topics, misleading the public in the US or in other countries of the international community, in order to suppress Huawei," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang told reporters.

While Washington and Beijing spar, Xi is preparing to meet with President Vladimir Putin from June 5 to June 7 as the neighbouring giants forge closer ties.

"This trade conflict will also have a serious negative impact on the development and revival of the global economy," Zhang said.

China and Russia have broad consensus and common interests on the trade war issue, and the two countries will "certainly" strengthen their economic cooperation, Zhang said.

Mueller a 'conflicted person'

Says Trump, admits, briefly, that Russia boosted his election

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump yesterday acknowledged for the first time that Moscow helped him win the White House in 2016 -- before retracting himself to launch a fiery attack on Robert Mueller and the Russia probe.

"Russia, Russia, Russia! That's all you heard at the beginning of this Witch Hunt Hoax," Trump tweeted, in an outburst against Special Counsel Mueller's suggestion that Congress impeach him for obstructing the two-year investigation.

"And now Russia has disappeared because I had nothing to do with Russia helping me to get elected," Trump said.

Shortly afterward he sought to walk back the admission.

"Russia did not get me elected. You know who got me elected? I got me elected," he told reporters.

Trump has stridently rejected any suggestion his victory was illegitimate ever since US intelligence chiefs announced in January 2017 that Moscow interfered heavily in the election, hacking computers and manipulating social media largely to damage Hillary Clinton and boost Trump's



campaign.

His outburst came a day after Mueller -- in his first public comments on the investigation he was named to lead in May 2017 -- said it had established there "were multiple, systematic efforts to interfere in our election. designed and timed... to damage a presidential candidate."

Mueller also reiterated that the investigation found evidence of attempts to obstruct his investigation by Trump. "If we had confidence that the president clearly did not commit a crime, we would have said that," he said.

But he said he was blocked from charging the president by Justice Department regulations and indicated that it is up to Congress to launch impeachment proceedings to determine if Trump committed a crime.

Trump in response slammed Mueller as conflicted and said the investigation had produced no evidence against him.

Asked about a growing clamor in Democratic ranks for the launch of impeachment proceedings against him, Trump called it "presidential harassment." He also called impeachment a dirty 'word'.

BUDAPEST TOURIST BOAT TRAGEDY

7 South Koreans die; 21 missing

AFP, Budapest

Hungarian rescuers were hunting for survivors yesterday after one of the country's worst boat disasters that left seven South Korean tourists dead and 21 others still missing.

The Mermaid sightseeing boat capsized and sank in just seconds after colliding with a much larger passenger river cruise ship in driving rain on the Danube in the heart of Budapest on Wednesday evening.

Army boats were scouring the murky waters of the Danube as dozens of people looked on, with chances of finding survivors dimming 19 hours after the accident in the fast-moving river.

Thirty-five people were on board the 26-metre Mermaid when it collided with the Viking Signyn "longship" near Hungary's parliament building, most of them South Korean tourists including a six-year-old girl who remains missing.

Police said they have launched a probe into "criminal negligence" and were questioning the Ukrainian captain of the Signyn.

In Budapest, army divers joined police in the search for survivors and victims, but the operation has been complicated by high water levels and a strong current after weeks of heavy rainfall.



BREXIT IMPASSE

Call fresh polls or referendum

Demands Corbyn

AFP, London

The leader of Britain's main opposition Labour party Jeremy Corbyn -- criticised for failing to take a clear position on Brexit -- on Wednesday said the only way out of the political crisis was to hold a general election or a second "public vote on any deal agreed by parliament."

Labour has come under fire for sitting on the fence over Brexit and it remains unclear whether the party would back Leave or Remain in the next general election.

Speaking ahead of meetings with the Irish president and PM in Dublin, Corbyn said Labour would "work with anyone across party boundaries and do whatever is necessary to stop a disastrous 'No Deal' outcome."

"But faced with the threat of 'No Deal' and a prime minister with no mandate, the only way out of the Brexit crisis ripping our country apart is now to go back to the people. Let the people decide the country's future, either in a general election or through a public vote on any deal agreed by parliament."

Some rival candidates vying to take over from outgoing Prime Minister Theresa May as premier and leader of the Conservative Party including frontrunner Boris Johnson have said Britain must be prepared to leave the EU without a deal if necessary.



Assange too ill for trial

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was too ill yesterday to appear via video link from a British prison in a hearing on an extradition request from the United States, his lawyer said. The United States is seeking the extradition of Assange, 47, who was dragged from the Ecuadorian embassy in London on April 11. He faces a total of 18 US criminal counts and decades in prison if convicted. "He's in fact far from well," Assange's lawyer, Gareth Peirce told Westminster Magistrates' Court. She earlier told Reuters he was too ill to attend the hearing by video link. The next hearing on the extradition request was set for June 12. WikiLeaks said it had grave concerns about Assange's health and that he had been moved to a health ward at London's Belmarsh high-security prison.

S Africa slashes cabinet size, appoints 50% women

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa on Wednesday cut the number of cabinet ministers from 36 to 28, in a move he said would tackle the country's "bloated" government and improve efficiency. Half the new ministers are women, making South Africa one of the world's few gender-balanced governments. Ramaphosa announced the new line-up after he led the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party to victory in elections earlier this month. He took office last year after the ousting of graft-tainted Jacob Zuma, who had expanded the number of ministerial posts in an alleged attempt to strengthen his patronage network.



Israel set for fresh polls

Israeli lawmakers voted to dissolve parliament yesterday, paving the way for a new election after veteran Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu failed to form a coalition government before a midnight deadline. Netanyahu preferred a new ballot, set for Sept 17, to the alternative, under which Israeli President Reuven Rivlin could have asked another politician to try and form a ruling coalition. The election, Israel's second this year after an April 9 poll, means unprecedented upheaval even for a country used to political infighting. The turmoil arose - officially, at least - from a feud over military conscription between Netanyahu's presumed allies: ex-defence minister Avigdor Lieberman, a far-right secularist, and ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties. Those parties want young religious scholars exempted, en masse from mandatory national service. But Lieberman and many other Israelis say they should share the burden.



Two Syrian youths are stuck under the rubble of a destroyed building following a reported air strike by regime forces and their allies on Maaret al-Noman in Syria's southwestern Idlib province, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Arab, Muslim leaders gather in Makkah for Iran-focused summits

AFP, Makkah

Arab and Muslim leaders began gathering in the holy city of Makkah yesterday for three summits, as Saudi Arabia seeks to rally support against arch-rival Iran over attacks on oil installations.

On the eve of the talks, Riyadh blasted what it called Iranian "interference" in the region and demanded "firmness" over attacks on Gulf oil tankers and pipelines.

The call came just hours after US National Security Advisor John Bolton said Iran was almost certainly behind the sabotage of four ships, including two Saudi oil tankers, off the UAE coast.

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Kuwait's emir, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah, and Sudan's new military council chief General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan were among the leaders who arrived in the kingdom Thursday, Saudi state media reported.

Riyadh has called the talks to discuss the standoff with Iran and ways to isolate Tehran amid fears of a military confrontation.