

NEWS IN brief

Blast kills 4 Pak soldiers in border region: PM

AFP, Islamabad

Four Pakistani soldiers have been killed by an improvised explosive device in a tribal region along the Afghan border, Prime Minister Imran Khan said yesterday. Dawn cited the military's media wing as saying four other soldiers were wounded when the blast targeted a military vehicle in North Waziristan on Friday. The report did not say who was behind the bombing.

Sudan forces arrest protest leaders

AFP, Khartoum

Sudanese security forces have arrested two prominent rebels and an opposition leader, a day after they met the Ethiopian premier during his reconciliation mission to Khartoum, their aides said yesterday. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who has emerged as a key regional leader, met representatives of both sides on Friday in a bid to revive talks between Sudan's ruling generals and protest leaders after a deadly crackdown left dozens of people dead in the capital this week. Among the arrestees are opposition politician Mohamed Esmat and a leader of the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N), Ismail Jalab. Sudanese security forces gave no reasons for the arrests.

No new talks planned on Venezuela crisis

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela's opposition leader Juan Guaido said Friday that Norway's effort to mediate in the standoff with the government of President Nicolas Maduro had stalled and no new talks were planned. Representatives of Guaido and Maduro met face-to-face in Oslo last week as part of talks mediated by Norway aimed at resolving the country's political deadlock, which began in January when Guaido proclaimed himself interim president.



Prince William and his wife Catherine, Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, Vice Admiral Timothy Laurence, Prince Charles, Princess Beatrice of York, Princess Anne, Queen Elizabeth II, Princess Eugenie, Prince Andrew, Prince Harry and his wife Meghan stand with other members of the Royal Family on the balcony of Buckingham Palace to watch a fly-past of aircraft by the Royal Air Force on the occasion of Trooping the Colour, in London yesterday. Since 1748, the Trooping of the Colour has marked the official birthday of the British Sovereign.

PHOTO: AFP

ROW OVER FAILURE TO PREVENT EASTER TERROR ATTACKS IN SRI LANKA

Sirisena vows to block probe

Sacks intelligence chief, orders officials not to testify before inquiry

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president has sacked the national intelligence chief and will not cooperate with a parliamentary investigation into security lapses before the Easter suicide bombings, officials said yesterday.

Maithripala Sirisena summoned an emergency cabinet meeting on Friday night to oppose a parliamentary select committee probe into the April 21 attacks that killed 258 people, including 45 foreigners, and wounded nearly 500.

Chief of National Intelligence Sisira Mendis was sacked after testifying to the inquiry last week that the attacks could have been averted.

He also said the president had failed to hold regular security meetings to assess the threat from Islamic radicals who carried out the bombings on three hotels and three churches.

Sirisena's office did not give a reason for the sacking. Halfway through the testimony, the live telecast

of the proceedings was stopped on the president's orders, official sources said.

A ministerial source told AFP Sirisena has refused to allow any police, military or intelligence personnel to testify before the committee.

The source added that the heated cabinet meeting ended "inconclusively" without taking a



decision on whether to suspend the parliament probe.

Sirisena's office did not comment on the meeting, but said the president had told senior police officers on Friday that he will not allow any serving officer to testify.

Sirisena's defence secretary and

police chief have suggested that the president, who is also defence minister, did not follow proper protocols in dealing with intelligence warnings about the Easter Sunday bombings.

Sirisena has repeatedly denied he was aware of an impending threat.

A local jihadist organisation and the Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the attacks. The country has been under a state of emergency since the bombings.

Sirisena said last week that he met with the national police chief and his top brass 13 days before the attacks but no officer raised warnings passed on by India and based on information from a detained jihadist.

The crisis erupted ahead of a visit to Sri Lanka by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi today.

The Sri Lankan government has admitted there were intelligence failures before the attacks. Sirisena suspended police chief Pujith Jayasundara and dismissed his top defence official Hemasiri Fernando after the bombings.

NDA may win India upper house majority next year

REUTERS, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling alliance could achieve a crucial majority in the upper house of parliament next year if some small regional parties join the bloc that recently won a massive mandate in the lower house, according to a projection by an independent research firm.

Dominating both houses is essential to pass controversial legislation that Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) party has promised to its Hindu nationalist base, such as granting citizenship to non-Muslim immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The prediction by PRS Legislative Research, which tracks the functioning of India's parliament, shows that the BJP alone could secure 83 seats in the upper house by next year - 10 more than it currently holds.

The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) could control 107 seats, seven more than its current tally and just 15 short of a majority in the 243-member chamber, PRS said.

Most members of the upper house are elected by lawmakers from state assemblies, while a dozen are nominated by the federal

government. All of them enjoy a full-term lasting six years, with a third of the house retiring after every second year.

PRS's projection shows that to get to the 122 seats needed for a majority, the NDA would need the support of regional parties from eastern and southern India. Some of the key parties have supported the NDA in the past.

Modi and the BJP already have an iron grip over the lower house after they won a general election last month with a landslide mandate, improving on his massive win in 2014.

During his first term, though, the government's legislative agenda was often thwarted by opposition parties who hold sway in the upper house, known as the Rajya Sabha.

A senior BJP leader, who declined to be named, told Reuters the party is looking to stitch up a two-thirds majority in both houses.

That would allow it to pass constitutional amendments such as ending the decades-old special rights for the people of Jammu and Kashmir, the country's only Muslim-majority state, parts of which are also claimed by neighbouring Pakistan.

Bhutan decriminalizes homosexuality

Bhutan's LGBT community celebrated yesterday after the tiny Himalayan kingdom's parliament became the world's latest to decriminalise homosexuality. The lower house overwhelmingly voted late Friday to repeal two sections of the 2004 criminal code which made "unnatural sex" illegal. The law had never been used, but Finance Minister Namgay Tshering, who submitted the recommendation to repeal sections 213 and 214 of the penal code, said they had become "a stain" on the country's reputation. Namgay Tshering said the sections had become redundant since Bhutan became a constitutional monarchy in 2008. "There is a high degree of acceptability of the LGBT community in our society," he said. The minister added that he was optimistic that the code sections would be definitively scrapped when the upper house in the country of 750,000 people votes on Monday. Once the bill is passed by the National Council, the upper chamber, it will be sent for royal assent.

Reporter's arrest sparks outrage in Russia

A Russian investigative journalist facing drugs charges in a case supporters have denounced as a frame-up was taken to hospital yesterday after complaining of being beaten in police custody. Ivan Golunov, a Moscow-based reporter for Meduza independent news site has been charged with attempted dealing in designer drug mephedrone and cocaine. Rights groups Amnesty said there was evidence that the authorities were fabricating drugs charges to shut up their critics. A paramedic who examined him told Interfax news agency that he had numerous grazes to his chest, injuries to his ribs and a suspected head injury while police have denied he was beaten. Golunov's detention has prompted widespread outrage and supporters and journalists have held protests outside the police headquarters.



US gives Turkey to July 31 to cancel Russia missile deal

The United States on Friday gave Turkey until the end of July to abandon its purchase of a major Russian missile defense system, which Washington considers incompatible with Ankara's participation in the F-35 fighter jet program. If by July 31 Turkey does not renounce the S-400 system, Turkish pilots training in the United States on the F-35 will be expelled, and agreements with Turkish firms subcontracted for manufacturing the F-35 stealth warplane will be cancelled, Ellen Lord, undersecretary of defense for acquisition and sustainment, told reporters. Acting US Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan said he had sent a letter to his Turkish counterpart Hulusi Akar informing him of Washington's decision.

SOURCE: AFP

Leaders meet as EU haggles over top jobs

AFP, Brussels

Half a dozen European leaders met behind closed doors Friday to haggle over Brussels' top jobs as rival camps in the new EU parliament cobble together a centrist majority.

Last month's continent-wide election saw pro-EU parties of the centre-right and centre-left hold the line against a populist surge, but it left their own ranks more divided than before.

The conservative EPP group remains the biggest single voting bloc in Strasbourg, but it will need the backing of the socialist S&D, the liberal ALDE and perhaps the Greens if it is to form a working majority.

At stake is the most powerful post in Brussels -- the successor to Jean-Claude Juncker as president of the European Commission, the EU's executive arm.

The EPP candidate is Bavarian MEP Manfred Weber, who has the backing of Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel but has no executive experience and is opposed by the liberals and France's President Emmanuel Macron.

To win the office, a candidate must first be nominated by a qualified majority of the European Council -- that is 21 national leaders from states representing between them 65 percent of the EU's some 500 million people.

Then he or she must be approved by a majority of the European Parliament, or 376 of the 751 MEPs.

European Council president Donald Tusk is coordinating the leaders' search for a nominee before their next summit on June 20 and 21, but early signs suggest the negotiations will be long and arduous.

The EPP stands behind Weber, insisting the Commission presidency is theirs by right, while the left clings to that hope that Holland's Frans Timmermans might squeak through.

US trying to control 'whole world'

Says Putin, warns trade wars, conflicts may eventually lead to war

REUTERS, St Petersburg

Aggressive US tactics such as a campaign against Chinese telecoms firm Huawei will lead to trade wars - and possibly real wars - Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Friday, in a show of solidarity with China alongside its leader Xi Jinping.

In some of his strongest words on the subject, Putin accused Washington of "unbridled economic egoism". He singled out US efforts to thwart a Russian gas pipeline to Europe and a US campaign to persuade countries to bar Huawei, the world's biggest telecoms equipment maker, from supplying network gear.

His broadside, at an economic forum in St Petersburg on the same platform as Xi, was a clear show of unity with China at a time when Beijing is locked in a trade war with Washington and Moscow's own ties with the West are at a post-Cold War low.

"States which previously promoted free trade with honest and open competition have started speaking the language of trade wars and sanctions, of open economic raiding using arm-twisting and scare tactics,

of eliminating competitors using so-called non-market methods," said Putin.

"Look for example at the situation around Huawei which they are trying not to just squeeze out, but to unceremoniously push out of the global market. It's already being called the first technological war of



the emerging digital era in some circles."

The world risked slipping into an era when "general international rules will be exchanged for the laws of administrative and legal mechanisms ... which is how the United States is unfortunately behaving, spreading its jurisdiction over the whole

world," added Putin.

"...It's a path to endless conflicts, trade wars and maybe not just trade wars. Figuratively speaking, it's a path to battles without rules that pit everyone against everyone else."

Putin also complained about the U.S. dollar, calling it an instrument of pressure whose role in the financial system should be reconsidered.

China's Xi struck a more conciliatory tone, calling for world powers to protect the global multilateral trade system. Speaking through an interpreter, he said it was "hard to imagine a complete break" between the United States and China.

"We are not interested in this, and our American partners are not interested in this. President Trump is my friend and I am convinced he is also not interested in this," Xi said.

Russia has long complained about Western sanctions imposed on it over disputes including its behaviour in Ukraine. Moscow casts the restrictions as an attempt to contain its growth.

US sanctions show talks offer 'hollow'

Says Iran after US targets petrochemicals group

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday said that new US sanctions on its petrochemical industry show the hollowness of President Donald Trump's claims to be open to fresh negotiations with Tehran.

"Only one week was needed for the US president's claim that he was ready to negotiate with Iran to be proven hollow," foreign ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi said. His statement came after the US Treasury announced new sanctions on Friday against Iran's largest and most profitable petrochemicals group PGPIC.

Trump said Thursday he would be willing to reopen talks as long as Iran agreed to give up nuclear weapons. But Tehran ruled out talks until the United States is ready to "return to normal."

Mousavi called the new sanctions another instance of "economic terrorism" and a continuation of US "enmity" against Iran. "America's maximum pressure policy is a failed policy tried numerous times before by the country's previous presidents. This a wrong path and the US government can be sure that it will not achieve any of the goals set for this policy," Mousavi added.

Washington began reimposing unilateral sanctions on Iran after Trump abandoned a landmark 2015 nuclear deal in May last year. It reimposed a first set in August followed by a second in November. On April 8, it designated Iran's Revolutionary Guards a "foreign terrorist organisation", paving the way for sanctions against their sources of funding.

The PGPIC group holds 40 percent of Iran's petrochemical production capacity and is responsible for 50 percent of its petrochemical exports, Treasury said.



A member of the Bathini Goud family administers 'fish medicine' to a patient at the exhibition grounds in Hyderabad yesterday. The medicine, which has been offered by the family of the southern Indian city to patients since 1840 as a cure for asthma and other breathing disorders, is administered on the auspicious day of 'Mrigasira Karti' which falls in June with the onset of the annual monsoon. The treatment, which is based on a secret herb formula, draws thousands of people from all over the country.

PHOTO: AFP

Modi gets Maldives' highest honour

NDTV ONLINE

Prime Minister Narendra Modi was conferred with the Maldives' highest honour "Rule of Nishan Izzuddeen" yesterday during his two-day state visit to the country.

The prestigious award was presented to Modi by President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih during a ceremony in Male.

"The Most Honourable Order of the Distinguished Rule of Nishan Izzuddeen" is the Maldives' highest honour accorded to foreign dignitaries, Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid said on Twitter.

The two-day state visit of Modi is aimed at further cementing ties with the Indian Ocean archipelago.

Earlier, Modi and Solih held delegation-level talks as the two countries signed a slew of agreements to strengthen bilateral ties in a number of key areas including defence.

While PM Modi visited the Maldives in November 2018 to attend President Solih's swearing-in, this visit is the first by an Indian prime minister at a bilateral level in eight years.

The relations between India and the Maldives deteriorated after the then President Abdulla Yameen imposed emergency on February 5 last year. Some decisions by Yameen including imposition of restrictions on work visas for Indians and signing of a new Free Trade Agreement with Beijing also did not go down well with New Delhi. However, ties were back on track under Solih's presidency.