

NEWS IN brief

Modi to meet Xi in Kyrgyzstan

Chinese President Xi Jinping will attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit this week at Kyrgyzstan where he would also meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the first meeting between the two leaders after the BJP's massive victory in the general elections. The SCO summit is due to be held on June 13-14 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

Pope appeals for dialogue in Sudan

Pope Francis yesterday appealed for peace in Sudan following a bloody crackdown by security forces on pro-democracy protesters in Khartoum last week. "The news coming from Sudan is giving rise to pain and concern. We pray for these people, so that the violence ceases and the common good is sought in the dialogue," the pope said in his weekly address to crowds in St Peter's Square.

Hundreds held as Kazakhs vote

Police in Kazakhstan arrested hundreds of opposition protesters yesterday at polls to elect the country's first new president in 30 years following the departure of historic leader Nursultan Nazarbayev. His hand-picked successor Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, 66 was a shoo-in to win the vote contested by six other candidates. Tokayev's rivals in the polls that opened at 0100 GMT included one low-key opposition figure, but none is widely known in Muslim-majority Kazakhstan.



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (R) and Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena walk under an umbrella as they attend a welcoming ceremony for Modi at the Presidential Secretariat in Colombo, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Hunt: EU willing to renegotiate

AFP, London

British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt, a contender to replace Theresa May as prime minister, yesterday said that German Chancellor Angela Merkel had indicated the EU was willing to renegotiate the Brexit divorce deal.

Hunt, one of nearly a dozen Conservatives vying to succeed May after she resigned as party leader Friday, said he spoke with Merkel at this week's D-Day commemorations and was convinced changing May's agreement was possible. "She said that of course with a new British prime minister we would want to look at any solutions you have," he told Sky News.

"I'm absolutely clear that if we take the right approach to this, the Europeans would be willing to negotiate on the package."

Hunt did not specify if he was referring to the legally-binding withdrawal agreement which the EU has repeatedly insisted cannot be re-opened, or to the accompanying political declaration on future relations.

Brussels has said the declaration could be revisited if Britain makes a substantive change in its positions, for example on a customs union or access to the single market.

May agreed the package with the EU last year but saw it rejected three times by British lawmakers, forcing her to delay Brexit twice -- the latest extension being to October 31.

A controversial provision in the agreement for the Irish border, known as the backstop, has proved the key stumbling block. It would prevent the return of border checks between the British province of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland if the sides fail to agree a free trade pact after an initial transition period.

Hunt claimed Merkel had signalled EU leaders may now be open to a technological solution to the thorny issue -- something Brussels has previously ruled out as unrealistic.

Modi calls for global conference on terrorism

Visits bombed Sri Lanka church, vows support after attacks

AGENCIES

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has called for a global conference to tackle the threat of terrorism in the region and around the world.

During a speech on his first foreign visit since winning re-election, he told the Maldivian parliament in Male that "terrorism is not just a threat for a country, but to the entire civilisation".

"The international community has actively arranged for global convention and many conferences on the threat of climate change. Why not on the issue of terrorism?" Modi said on Saturday.

He called for a global conference "so that there can be meaningful and result-oriented discussions for plugging the loopholes that terrorists

and their supporters exploit".

"In the neighbourhood, Maldives is priority," Modi said in his speech.

Yesterday, during his hours-long stop in Sri Lanka on his way back home from Maldives, the Indian PM honoured those killed by Islamist militants in Sri Lanka's Easter bombings, vowing support for the island nation as Delhi seeks to counter the rise of China in the region.

"India never forgets her friends when they are in need," Modi, the first foreign leader to visit Sri Lanka since the attacks, tweeted after touching down.

Modi later prayed and placed flowers at St Anthony's Shrine, a Catholic church in Colombo that was bombed on April 21 along with two other churches and four hotels.

"I am confident Sri Lanka will rise

again. Cowardly acts of terror cannot defeat the spirit of Sri Lanka," Modi later tweeted.

On Thursday, Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale said India would continue to provide support to Sri Lanka in the fight against extremist groups.

India is pursuing what it calls a "neighbourhood first" foreign policy centred on its allies in South Asia, although there is little sign of a warming in relations with arch rival Pakistan.

His trip to the Maldives and Sri Lanka is being viewed as a statement of intent to counter the rise of China, which has been making strategic inroads in the Indian Ocean in recent years and seeking closer military ties, to the alarm of New Delhi.

EASTER SUNDAY TERROR ATTACKS

Lanka MPs clash with president over probe

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's parliament warned President Maithripala Sirisena not to scuttle a controversial investigation into security lapses before the Easter suicide bombings, the Speaker's office said yesterday.

The warning came after Sirisena said he would not cooperate with the parliamentary probe and would not allow defence or police officials to testify before the select committee (PSC).

The president called an emergency cabinet meeting on Friday night to oppose the legislature's investigation into the April 21 attacks that killed 258 people, including 45 foreigners, and wounded nearly 500.

"Any public servant summoned by the PSC is obliged to give evidence," Speaker Karu Jayasuriya said in a hard-hitting two-page response to Sirisena.

"Officials are fully aware of the serious

consequences if they fail to respond."

Officials at the Speaker's office said Jayasuriya made it clear to Sirisena that he will not call off the PSC and it will continue its public hearings.

Evidence before the parliamentary select committee, which began its publicly televised sittings since late last month, has placed the president in a poor light, suggesting that he failed to act on advance warning of the attacks.

On Saturday, Sirisena's office said he sacked his national intelligence chief Sisira Mendis who testified that the devastating attacks against three churches and three luxury hotels could have been avoided.

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 a specific warning from an Indian intelligence agency.

Europe in 'no position' to criticise Iran: Zarif

European countries are in "no position" to criticise Iran, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said yesterday ahead of a visit by his German counterpart Heiko Maas. Germany's top diplomat is due in Tehran on Monday, against a backdrop of Iranian pressure for Europe to uphold commitments made under a 2015 nuclear deal since abandoned by the United States. Iran signed the landmark accord with China, Russia, Germany, Britain, France and the United States, leading to sanctions relief in exchange for Tehran curbing its nuclear programme. But last year, US President Donald Trump walked away from the accord and Washington has since imposed sweeping sanctions on Iran. European and Western policies "have only caused damage in the region," Zarif said. Zarif said that Europeans have "a duty" to ensure that Iran's economic relations return to normal. On Friday Iran rejected an idea mooted by France to re-open nuclear talks, warning that seeking to broaden the existing agreement could lead to its collapse.

India offers cash reward for missing military plane

Indian authorities on Saturday offered a cash reward to boost a desperate hunt for a military transport plane missing for nearly a week and feared to have crashed in a remote northeastern state. The Indian Air Force and Arunachal Pradesh state government announced the 550,000 rupee (\$8,000) reward to get village chiefs to organise search parties for the AN-32 that disappeared from radars last Monday carrying 13 people. The Soviet-built air force plane went missing near the border with China and air searches, satellite surveys and efforts to pick up signals from the plane have all failed. In addition to using Indian Space Research Organization satellites and other hi-tech means, ground teams have been scouring the Mechuka jungle region for the plane. The air force said it would give 500,000 rupees and the state government offered 50,000 rupees for "credible information" leading to the discovery of the plane. The Indian military has deployed nine helicopters, fighter jets and transporters looking for the plane.



A protester holds a placard during a rally against a controversial extradition law proposal in Hong Kong yesterday. Inset, A part of the tens of thousands protesters. More than a million people turned out for a mammoth protest in Hong Kong opposing plans to allow extradition to the mainland, organisers said yesterday, the largest demonstration since the city's handover to China.

PHOTO: AFP

'DEFAMATORY CONTENT' ON UP CM

Editors Guild of India slams arrest of journo

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

The Editors Guild of India yesterday condemned the arrest of a journalist and the editor and head of a television channel over alleged objectionable content related to Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, describing the police action as an "authoritarian misuse of laws" and an effort to intimidate the media.

An FIR was registered against Noida-based journalist Prashant Kanojia at Hazratganj police station in Lucknow on Friday night in which it was alleged that the accused made "objectionable comments against Adityanath and tried to malign his image."

Kanojia had shared a video on Twitter and Facebook where a woman is seen speaking to reporters of various media organisations outside the Chief Minister's office claiming that she had sent a marriage proposal to Adityanath.

The editor and the head of a Noida-based television channel, Nation Live - Ishita Singh and Anuj Shukla - were arrested by Uttar Pradesh police for the same issue, the Guild said.

'I am a genuine Indian'

Says retired 'foreigner' soldier after bailed by Gauhati HC

NDTV ONLINE

Mohammad Sanaullah, the retired Indian Army soldier who had been declared an illegal immigrant and detained in Assam, yesterday said he was disappointed by his treatment despite having served the country for 30 years.

Sanaullah - who fought terrorists in Kashmir and Manipur - was arrested and locked up at a detention centre on May 29. The 53-year-old has been accused of being a foreigner who has been living illegally in the country.

The Gauhati High Court, which ordered his release on Saturday, had also issued notices to the centre and the state government. Notices have also been issued to the Election Commission, National Register of Citizens (NRC) authorities and the investigation officer of the Assam Border Police Chandramal Das.



"As a soldier for 30 years, yes it hurts a lot. This is what I get after serving the nation. But I believe my case should be eye-opener. And justice will be delivered," he told NDTV. "I never thought they will declare me foreigner because I am genuine Indian," he added. "In the detention camp I met several people who have been declared foreigner. For years together they are there. Some are very old. (It is) very unfortunate. Many of them have similar stories like me. This is (like a) never-ending punishment. Something needs to be done for them. It's a horrible life," he said, describing the conditions of the camp in which he was held. Mohammad Sanaullah was made a Junior Commissioned Officer in 2014 and retired as an Honorary Lieutenant in 2017, after which he worked as a Sub-Inspector of the Assam Border police - which deals with detection of illegal migrants. The same unit has now accused him of being an illegal resident.



India's polls spending surges past US to record high

India's general election wasn't just the world's biggest. It was also the most expensive, with political parties, candidates and regulatory bodies spending up to \$8.6 billion, according to a new study. By comparison, the US spent an estimated \$6.5 billion in the 2016 presidential and congressional contests. The Indian estimate, based on research by the Delhi-based Centre for Media Studies (CMS), takes into account spending on both the national and state levels this year -- and means that total spending for the 2019 elections that resulted in Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi winning a second term was nearly twice as much as 2014, when Modi first won national office. The BJP alone is estimated to account for as much as 55% of the total amount spent on elections this year -- or more than \$4.5 billion. Its main national challenger, the principle opposition Congress, led by Rahul Gandhi, only managed about 15% to 20% of the total.

SOURCE: AFP

SUDAN CRISIS

Forces try to quell civil disobedience campaign

AFP, Khartoum

Sudanese police fired warning shots yesterday to disperse protesters building roadblocks in the capital, as part of a civil disobedience campaign against the ruling generals following a bloody crackdown that left dozens dead.

The campaign got underway nearly a week after the assault on demonstrators at a sit-in outside army headquarters, which followed talks breaking down between protest leaders and military rulers.

Following the call for civil disobedience, protesters set about building roadblocks in Khartoum while markets and shops were closed in several other towns and cities.

In the capital's northern Bahari district, people gathered tyres, tree trunks and rocks to build new roadblocks.

"Almost all internal roads of Bahari have roadblocks. Protesters are even stopping residents from going to work," a witness told AFP.

But riot police swiftly moved in, firing gunshots in the air and tear gas at demonstrators before clearing the makeshift barriers, he said.

The Sudanese Professionals Association, which first launched protests against longtime ruler Omar al-Bashir in December, said the civil disobedience campaign would continue until the military rulers transfer power to a civilian government.

Khartoum residents have mostly remained indoors since Monday, when men in military fatigues raided the protest camp and killed dozens of people.

Residents in Khartoum have remained on edge since the raid on the sit-in, which killed at least 115 people according to doctors close to the demonstrators.

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