

NEWSIN brief

Putin, Trump could meet briefly at G20

AFP, Moscow
The Kremlin said yesterday that Russian President Vladimir Putin and US counterpart Donald Trump could meet briefly at the G20 in Japan next week. The leaders will not hold a full-scale meeting at the Group of 20 summit in Osaka starting June 28, however, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists.

Russia frees editor after outcry

AFP, Saint Petersburg
A Russian court yesterday released a newspaper editor and former lawmaker, who had been held on extortion charges, after an outcry from supporters and international organisations. Igor Rudnikov, founder and editor of Novye Kolesa in the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, had been in detention since November 2017, accused of extorting \$50,000 from a senior investigator.

Jihadist rocket fire kills 12 civilians in Syria

AFP, Damascus
Rocket fire has killed 12 civilians in a regime-held village in northwestern Syria, state news agency SANA has said blaming former Al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham for the attack. SANA said 15 people were also wounded late Sunday in the attack on Al-Wadihi village south of Aleppo city.



Teenagers are pictured in a cage during a demonstration by an international delegation of global labor leaders, civil society and students to condemn the US President Donald Trump administration's policy of child detention and migrant family separation in front of the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland yesterday.

Brain disease kills 97 Indian children

'Heat curfew' imposed in Bihar as death toll rises to 78

AFP, Patna
The Indian state of Bihar grappled yesterday with twin crises, with a brain virus potentially linked to lychees killing almost 100 children and extreme heat leaving 78 people dead.
The heatwave -- India's second-longest on record -- prompted authorities in part of the northern state, one of the country's poorest, to impose curfew-like restrictions.
Daytime temperatures across large parts of India have hovered above 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) for the past 32 days, just one short of a record 33-day period in 1988.
Temperatures touched 50.3 degrees Celsius in the town of Churu in the northern desert state of Rajasthan recently just below India's record of 51 degrees.
Bihar, home to almost 100 million people, has seen temperatures hovering around 45 degrees for several days. Severe heat there has killed 78 people -- most of them aged above 50 -- across three districts since Saturday afternoon, local official Sandeep Kumar told AFP.
More than 130 others were undergoing emergency treatment for heatstroke in various hospitals.
Bihar has also been struggling with an outbreak of Acute Encephalitis Syndrome (AES), a viral infection, since the start of this month.
Eighty children have now died in the state's biggest government-run hospital -- the Sri Krishna Medical College and Hospital (SKMCH), in the city of Muzaffarpur -- and 17 others at a private facility, health official Ashok Kumar Singh said. Most of the victims had suffered a sudden loss of glucose in their blood, Singh told AFP.

US mulls military options

Says Pompeo, pushes for int'l response to secure Gulf energy supplies

AGENCIES
Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Sunday that the United States is "considering a full range of options" regarding rising tensions with Iran, including military options, but emphasised that President Donald Trump has said that he does not want to go to war.
"The United States is considering a full range of options. We have briefed the President a couple of times, we'll continue to keep him updated. We are confident that we can take a set of actions that can restore deterrence which is our mission set," Pompeo said in an interview on CBS "Face the Nation."
When asked if a military response was included in that set of actions, Pompeo responded, "Of course."
"The President will consider everything we need to do to make sure, right? But what's the President said? We don't want Iran to get a nuclear weapon," Pompeo added. "President Trump has said very clearly, he doesn't want to go to war."
Pompeo said the US was discussing a possible international response, saying he had made a number of calls to foreign officials on Saturday regarding the attacks, reported AFP.

Pompeo's comments come as tensions are rising in the waterways of the Middle East, where two tankers -- one carrying oil and the other transporting chemicals -- were attacked near the strategically important Strait of Hormuz, a vital shipping route that has been the focal point of regional tensions for decades. Roughly 30% of the world's sea-borne crude oil passes through the strategic choke point, making it a flashpoint for political and economic friction.

Iran has categorically denied the attacks, reported CNN. Tehran said yesterday it will surpass from June 27 its uranium stockpile limit set under the nuclear deal with world powers, turning up the pressure after the US walked away from the landmark pact last year, reported AFP.

"Today the countdown to pass the 300 kilogrammes reserve of enriched uranium has started and in 10 days' time... we will pass this limit," Iran's atomic energy organisation spokesman Behrouz Kamalvandi told a new conference broadcast live on state television.
European states yesterday urged caution in attributing blame for last week's tanker attacks in the Gulf, pointedly refusing to fall in line with Washington's assessment that Iran was behind the incidents.

US-IRAN TENSIONS

Iran will reach allowed enriched uranium limit in 10 days

EU states urges caution in attributing blame



ROW OVER CHINA EXTRADITION BILL

China stands by HK leader

Freed democracy activist Joshua Wong calls for Carrie Lam to resign as mass protests continue

REUTERS, Hong Kong
China doubled down on its support for Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam yesterday after days of protests in the Chinese-ruled city over a planned extradition bill, and a source close to Lam said Beijing was unlikely to let her go even if she tried to resign.
Lam's attempts to pass a bill that would allow people in Hong Kong to be extradited to China to stand trial triggered the biggest and most violent protests in the former British colony in decades.
As the political crisis entered its second week, demonstrators and opposition politicians braved intermittent rain to gather near the government's offices and call for the bill to be killed and for her to step down.
The upheaval comes at a delicate time for Chinese President Xi Jinping, who is grappling with a deepening US trade war, an ebbing economy and regional strategic tension.

"The Chinese government, the central government, has always fully affirmed the work of chief executive Carrie Lam and the Hong Kong government," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang told a news conference.
In a coincidence of timing, Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong, the face of the city's push for full democracy, walked free from prison yesterday and vowed to join the mass protest movement.
"I will join to fight against this evil law," said Wong, 22, one of the leaders of the 2014 "Umbrella" pro-democracy protests that blocked major roads in Hong Kong for 79 days.
"I believe this is the time for her, Carrie Lam the liar, to step down."
Yesterday, protesters near the government's offices blocked roads and called for Lam to withdraw the bill, release arrested students, drop the official description of a rally on Wednesday that involved clashes with the police as a riot, and step down.

Lanka abusing UN law to make arrests

Says rights group after clampdown on media

AFP, Colombo
Media activists yesterday accused Sri Lankan police of using a UN convention on hate speech to crack down on media freedom and the country's Muslim minority.
The Free Media Movement rights group said the police Special Task Force (STF) attempted to arrest a respected journalist for his writing on anti-Muslim riots and Buddhist extremists using the UN-backed law.
The STF told a magistrate on Friday they were pursuing freelance writer Kusal Perera under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act.
"The Free Media Movement strongly condemns the attempts to pursue legal action under the provisions of the ICCPR Act and urges all responsible stakeholders to draw their attention to avoid using the law unfairly," the group said.
Police have also drawn criticism over the detention of a Muslim woman during anti-Muslim riots last month. She was wearing a T-shirt with a print of a ship's steering wheel which police mistook for the Dharma Chakra, a Buddhist symbol.
The woman was held in remand custody for three weeks before a senior police officer intervened to press for her release.
Award winning author and poet Shakthika Sathkumara has been held since April under the ICCPR act for his work hinting at homosexuality among the Buddhist clergy.
A senior police source told AFP separate investigations had been launched into the three cases.

ENCOUNTER IN J&K

Army major killed, 3 soldiers injured

HINDUSTAN TIMES ONLINE
An Army major was killed while another officer and two troopers were injured in an encounter with militants in south Kashmir yesterday, officials said.
They said the encounter took place in the Achabal area in Anantnag district of Jammu and Kashmir. The injured have been rushed to the 92 base hospital of the Army in Srinagar, they added.
Security forces launched a cordon-and-search operation in the area this morning. The search operation led to a gunfight after the militants fired on the forces, who retaliated, they added.
On Wednesday, militants killed five Indian paramilitary police in an attack on security forces deployed in a Kashmiri town.
Three paramilitaries, a local policeman and a woman bystander were wounded, and one militant was killed when the police returned fire, a senior police officer said.
The attack in Anantnag town was claimed by Al Umar Mujahideen, an Islamist militant group based in Kashmir. It was the deadliest in Indian Kashmir since February, when a suicide bomber rammed an explosive-laden car into a bus, killing 40 paramilitary police.



Indian students and doctors of GCS Medical College, Hospital and Research Centre, hold posters and shout slogans as they stage a protest during the nationwide doctors strike held after the recent assault in Kolkata on an intern doctor, in Ahmedabad yesterday. Doctors in West Bengal called off week-long strike yesterday after West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee suggested 10-point security measures for safety of doctors in hospitals.



Johnson gets boost in race for UK PM's job

Boris Johnson got a boost in his campaign to replace British Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday when one of his former rivals and EU supporter Matt Hancock backed him saying he was almost certain to win the contest. Johnson, a former London mayor and foreign minister, is way out in front in the race to become leader of the Conservative Party and despite so far deciding to steer clear of debates with his rivals, his popularity has yet to be dented. Most of the other five hopefuls concede that Johnson, whose career has been marked by gaffes and scandals, will almost definitely make the final two in the race, when mainly pro-Brexit Conservative Party members will cast the deciding votes.

Pak removes ISI spy agency head after eight months

Pakistan on Sunday appointed a hardliner general as new chief of the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) spy agency, replacing the agency's current head, Lieutenant General Asim Munir, after only eight months on the job. Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed, a former senior ISI figure, was appointed director general of the agency, according to a statement by the military's press wing, which did not explain the re-shuffle. The army is arguably the most influential institution in Pakistan, with the military having ruled the country for nearly half of its 71-year history since independence from Britain and enjoying extensive powers even under civilian administrations.



Indian Houdini drowned as stunt goes wrong

An Indian magician who went missing after being lowered into a river while tied up with chains and ropes in a Houdini-inspired stunt is feared drowned, police said yesterday. Chanchal Lahiri, known by his stage name "Jadugar Mandrake" (Wizard Mandrake), was lowered by winch into the river in Kolkata on Sunday in a yellow and red costume. But the 40-year-old, his legs and his arms tightly bound, failed to emerge from the water, to the horror of onlookers including his family and team members. Rescue workers have been scouring the fast-flowing murky waters since Sunday but he was yet to be found, Syed Waqar Raza from the river traffic police told AFP. "We fear he drowned in the river," he said. SOURCE: REUTERS, AFP

Israel launches 'Trump Heights' on Golan

REUTERS, Beruchim
Israel approved in principle on Sunday a new community named after US President Donald Trump on a contested frontier zone with Syria -- but construction looked likely to lag given Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's political stumbles.
The "Trump Heights" project is intended to cement ties after Trump broke with other world powers to recognise Israeli sovereignty over the plateau in March.
At a special cabinet session in Beruchim, a sparse clutch of homes just 12 km (7.5 miles) from the Golan Heights armistice line with Syria, Netanyahu unveiled a sign labelled "Trump Heights" in English and Hebrew.
The sign was decorated with the Israeli and US flags and planted on a patch of synthetic grass.
Israel captured the Golan from Syria in a 1967 war and later annexed and settled it -- moves not accepted by most world powers, who deem it to be occupied Syrian territory.
Ongoing hostilities between Israel and Syria, and internal Syrian fighting that drew Iranian-backed auxiliaries to back Damascus and deploy near the Golan, helped Netanyahu make his case for Trump to recognise the Israeli claim of sovereignty.
Trump similarly delighted Israelis -- while appalling other world powers -- by recognising Jerusalem as their capital and withdrawing from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.
"Trump is a great friend of Israel," Netanyahu said.
"He has torn the mask off this hypocrisy which doesn't recognise the obvious."
"Thank you PM @Netanyahu and the State of Israel for this great honor!" Trump said on Twitter.



No ME deal without Palestinian state

Warns Arab League head

REUTERS, Cairo
The head of the Arab League yesterday warned that attempts to solve the Israel-Palestinian conflict will be in vain without the establishment of a Palestinian state on all territories occupied by Israel in the 1967 Middle East war.
Ahmed Aboul Gheit's comments appeared directed at a still unpublished peace plan that U.S. President Donald Trump has dubbed the "deal of the century". As part of the plan, a U.S.-led conference will be held next week in Bahrain on proposals for the Palestinian economy.
The Palestinian leadership is boycotting the conference, saying Trump's peace plan is likely to be heavily weighted in favour of Israel and to quash their aspirations for statehood in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.
While the precise outlines of the draft plan have yet to be revealed, Palestinian and Arab sources who have been briefed on it say it jettisons the two-state solution.
"Whatever is rejected by the Palestinian or the Arab side is unacceptable," Aboul Gheit said during an event at the Arab League.
"What is acceptable from our side as Arabs as a solution is the establishment of a Palestinian state on the June 4, 1967 borders, with Jerusalem as its capital," he added.
Based in Egypt, the Arab League is often seen as a talking shop rendered ineffective by regional rivalries, but it remains the main forum for Arab opinion on international matters.
Saudi Arabia and Egypt are its most influential members.