

NEWS IN brief

11 killed as boat capsizes in Niger

AFP, Niamey

Eleven people drowned yesterday when their boat capsized on a river in central Niger, the governor of the region told AFP. The accident happened near the town of Maradi, said governor Zakari Oumarou of the Maradi region near the border with Nigeria. "Three or four passengers" of the boat were also reported missing, a local source added.

8 killed as truck crashes into Indian wedding

ANI, Lakhisarai

A joyous wedding ceremony in Bihar turned into a tragedy yesterday when a speeding truck crashed into the venue trampling over a dozen guests. While 8 died on the spot, six have been admitted to a nearby hospital for treatment. The incident occurred at 2:00 am when the guests were dancing and enjoying the celebrations in Halsi area. After the tragedy, the truck driver parked the vehicle on the side of the road and ran away from the spot.

Prosecutors seek life in prison for El Chapo

AFP, New York

US prosecutors on Wednesday called for "ruthless" drug lord Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman to be jailed for life plus 30 years for trafficking hundreds of tonnes of drugs to America. El Chapo is to be sentenced on the morning of July 17. According to the prosecution, the 62-year-old former Sinaloa cartel boss was responsible for the importation or attempted importation of at least 1.2 million kilograms (2.6 million pounds) of cocaine, over 49,000 kilograms of marijuana, more than 200 kilograms of heroin, as well as "quantities" of methamphetamine.



Residents and rescue workers gather near the site after a passenger train collided with a cargo train in Sadiqabad, Pakistan, yesterday. At least 11 people were killed and nearly 80 injured when two trains collided in central Pakistan, officials said. Prime Minister Imran Khan issued a statement of condolence in which he blamed the infrastructure of Pakistan's colonial-era railway network which has fallen into disrepair due to chronic under-investment and poor maintenance.

Iran tried to seize tanker: Britain

Tehran denies; Trump threatens to up sanctions soon

AGENCIES

Three Iranian vessels tried to block a BP-operated tanker passing through the Strait of Hormuz but backed off when confronted by a Royal Navy warship, the UK government said yesterday.

Britain urged Iran to "de-escalate the situation in the region" after the British Heritage, a Suezmax oil tanker operated by BP under an Isle of Man flag, was approached. "HMS Montrose was forced to position herself between the Iranian vessels and British Heritage and issue verbal warnings to the Iranian vessels, which then turned away," a British government spokesman said in a statement.

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif however dismissed as "worthless" UK allegations that Iran had sought to block the British Heritage, the semi-official Fars news agency said.

The incident followed President Donald Trump's warning he would soon "substantially" increase US sanctions on Iran as part of a drive to curb Iran's nuclear program and force Tehran to change its regional behaviour.

The United States blames Iran for a series of attacks on shipping in the world's most important oil artery since mid-May, accusations Tehran rejects but which have raised fears the long-time foes could slip into direct military conflict.

The growing confrontation between Iran and the West took another twist last week when British Royal Marines seized an Iranian tanker, the Grace 1, off Gibraltar on suspicion that it was breaking EU sanctions by taking oil to Syria.

A senior military commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards yesterday said Britain and the United States would regret detaining the vessel, just days after the armed forces chief of staff said the action would not go unanswered.

Major cities face 'unknown' climate conditions by 2050

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION, Kuala Lumpur

A fifth of the world's major cities will face "unknown" climate conditions by 2050, researchers warned on Wednesday, as rising temperatures heighten the risks of drought and flooding.

Climate scientists at the Crowther Lab, a research group based at ETH Zurich, a science and technology university, analysed 520 cities across the world, including all capitals and most urban centres with a population of more than 1 million.

The study showed that 22% of the cities will experience unprecedented climate conditions by 2050, such as more intense dry and monsoon seasons, said Jean Francis-Bastin, the lead author of the report.

Almost 70% of the world's population is expected to be living in urban areas by 2050, according to the United Nations.

In Europe, cities will warm by an average of about 2.5 degrees Celsius across the year, but summers and winters could be 3.5C and

4.7C warmer, respectively, Francis-Bastin said. Globally, temperatures are likely to be 2.4C warmer on average - enough to kill nearly every coral reef and soar past targets set out in the Paris Agreement.

Cities in tropical regions will see more severe flooding and droughts, researchers said.

The study may help cities modify their planning to combat specific climate risks, Francis-Bastin said.

Meanwhile, more than 7,000 colleges, universities, technical schools and community colleges from around the world declared a climate emergency in a joint letter which was set to be delivered to the United Nations on Wednesday.

Networks of schools pledged to increase sustainability curriculum and campus outreach, boost climate change research and skill-building opportunities for students and reach carbon neutrality by 2050, some as soon as 2030.

More than 7000 schools and universities declare 'climate emergency'

GENDER-NEUTRAL LAW AGAINST SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN INDIA

Cabinet okays death penalty

Adopts more stringent penal provisions, widens abuse definition

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

The Indian cabinet has cleared amendments to an existing gender-neutral law against sexual abuse of children introducing the provision of death penalty in cases of aggravated sexual offences and more stringent penal provisions aimed at clamping down on child pornography.

The 14 amendments to the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POSCO) Act 2012 was okayed at a meeting of the cabinet chaired by the country's Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi on Wednesday evening.

The amendments will make punishment more stringent for committing sexual crimes against children including death penalty and also provide for levy of fines and imprisonment to curb child pornography," Information and Broadcasting Minister Prakash Javadekar told reporters.

The amendments, first cleared by the Cabinet in 2018, were introduced as a Bill in the Lok Sabha in February but could

not be passed because of the announcement of parliamentary elections, reports our New Delhi correspondent.

Among others, the amendments seek to award the death penalty in cases of aggravated penetrative sexual assault of children, making it gender neutral. The amendments also bring in a section to penalise the possession of child pornography with up to three years in jail.

The amendments also include introduction of some new sections which aim at making punishments for crimes against children, including digital offences, more stringent. These include amendments to Sections 4, 5 and 6 of the POSCO Act to increase the punishment from seven to 10 years, from 10 to 20 years and from 20 to life imprisonment and death.

The amendments also penalise the transmission of pornographic material to children and proposes a synchronising of this with the Information Technology Act.

An official statement termed the amendments as a "historic decision" to protect the children from sexual offences.



Majority of US veterans against Afghan war: poll

A majority of US military veterans say the nearly 18-year war in Afghanistan was "not worth fighting," according to poll results released on Wednesday. The survey results come as the US and the Taliban engage in talks on bringing to a close the conflict which Washington launched in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. "Majorities of both veterans (58 percent) and the public (59 percent) say the war in Afghanistan was not worth fighting. About four-in-ten or fewer say it was worth fighting," according to the Pew Research Center.

Netanyahu vows to retain every West Bank settlement

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pledged Wednesday not to dismantle even the remotest Jewish settlement in the West Bank, in a message to settlers ahead of September's general election. Israeli media had speculated that after US President Donald Trump handed Netanyahu valuable political prizes by recognising Jerusalem as Israel's capital and its annexation of the Golan Heights, Trump might expect concessions in return when he finally unveils his long-awaited proposals for Israeli-Palestinian peace. "We shall not allow the dismantling of any settlement in any peace plan," Netanyahu told an audience at the settlement of Revava in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.



Endangered rhino numbers soar by 1,000% in Tanzania

The number of endangered rhinos in Tanzania has risen by 1,000 per cent after a government crackdown on organised gangs guilty of industrial-scale poaching, officials claim. And elephant populations have risen by nearly half in five years, thanks to a blitz on illegal ivory hunters, the president's office said. Four years ago the country, which has been described as "ground zero" of the poaching crisis, had just 15 rhinos, but a statement said the figure now was 167. Tanzania's President John Magufuli took a hard line on wildlife crime when he took office in 2015, urging security forces to arrest all those involved trafficking. The black rhinoceros is listed as critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, after poaching pushed it to the brink of extinction.

SOURCE: AFP

WHITE HOUSE 'SUMMIT'

Trump escalates war on social media

AFP, Washington

Escalating his attacks on Silicon Valley, President Donald Trump yesterday hinted at new regulations on social media as he gathered critics of major online platforms at a White House "summit." Trump invited conservative activists who have been curbed or banned on social media to press his argument that big social networks are discriminating against conservatives, notwithstanding his large online following.

"A big subject today at the White House Social Media Summit will be the tremendous dishonesty, bias, discrimination and suppression practiced by certain companies. We will not let them get away with it much longer," Trump tweeted.

The comments stoked fears that the White House may seek to eliminate the legal framework that protects online services from liability over harmful content posted by others but hosted on their platforms.

Digital rights activists and others warned that removing the protection -- codified as Section 230 of a 1996 law -- could undermine free speech protections and harm the internet ecosystem.

"The government shouldn't require -- or coerce -- intermediaries to remove constitutionally protected speech that the government cannot prohibit directly," said a letter signed by 27 civic and digital rights organizations and 50 legal scholars.

The letter said such demands would violate the US constitution's First Amendment on free expression.

"Also, imposing broad liability for user speech incentivizes services to err on the side of taking down speech, resulting in overbroad censorship -- or even avoid offering speech forums altogether," it added.

Japan's probe makes history

Collects sub-surface material of distant asteroid

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's Hayabusa2 probe made a "perfect" touchdown yesterday on a distant asteroid, collecting samples from beneath the surface in an unprecedented mission that could shed light on the origins of the solar system.

"We've collected a part of the solar system's history," project manager Yuichi Tsuda said at a jubilant press conference hours after the successful landing was confirmed.

"We have never gathered sub-surface material from a celestial body further away than the Moon," he added. "We did it and we succeeded in a world first."

The fridge-sized probe made its second landing on the desolate asteroid Ryugu, some 300 million kilometres (185 million miles) from Earth around 10:30am (0130GMT), said Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA).

Yesterday's touchdown was intended to collect pristine materials from beneath the surface of the

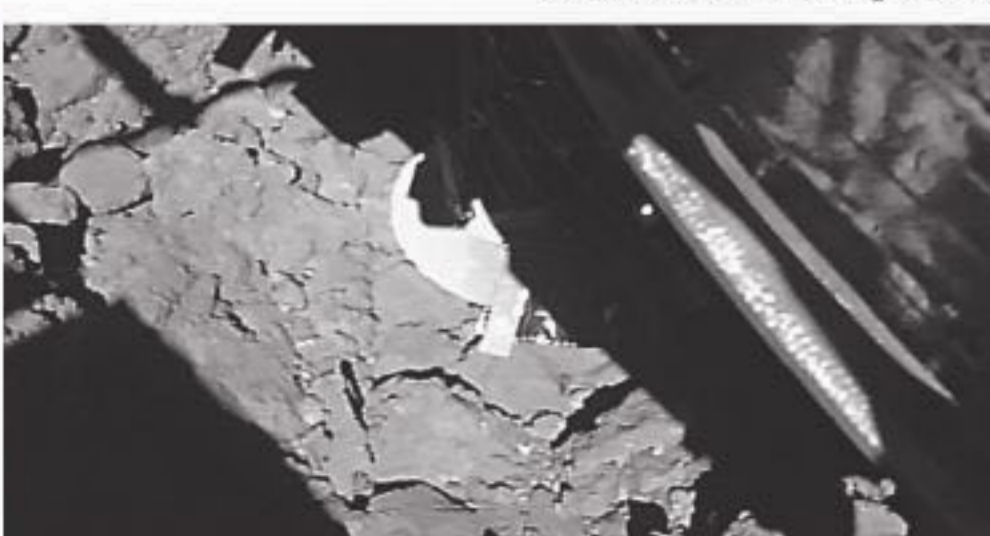
asteroid that could provide insights into what the solar system was like at its birth, some 4.6 billion years ago.

To get at those crucial materials, in April an "impactor" was fired from Hayabusa2 towards Ryugu in a risky process that created a crater on the asteroid's surface and stirred up material that had not previously been exposed to the atmosphere.

Hayabusa2's first touchdown was in February, when it landed briefly on Ryugu and fired a bullet into the surface to puff up dust for collection, before blasting back to its holding position.

The second touchdown required special preparations because any problems could mean the probe would lose the precious materials already gathered during its first landing.

Hayabusa2 is expected to leave the asteroid to return to Earth at the end of next year, with the samples set for scientific study.



Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP) leader Sonia Gandhi (2nd-L) and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi along with other party MPs stage a protest against India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government on Karnataka and Goa issue at Parliament House in New Delhi yesterday. Congress says ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and its alleged horse-trading is behind the resignations of its 16 MLAs in Karnataka and 10 MLAs in Goa. The resignations have put more pressure on Congress after a poor performance by the India's oldest party in the general election held earlier this year.

PHOTO: AFP

Clashes kill 71 fighters in Syria's rebel-held Idlib

Car bomb at rebel checkpoint in Afrin kills 13

AFP, Beirut

Regime and jihadist-led forces were locked in clashes yesterday on the edge of an opposition bastion in northwest Syria after a jihadist-led advance that killed 71 fighters overnight, a monitor said.

Russian and regime aircraft have ramped up their deadly bombardment of the Idlib region -- administered by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and home to some three million people -- since late April, despite a months-old international truce deal.

Clashes have also raged on the edges of the region, including in the north of Hama province.

Late Wednesday, HTS and allied rebels took control of Hamameyat village and hilltop, in clashes that killed 41 regime fighters and 30 fighters within the insurgents' own ranks, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

"The fighting is ongoing as regime planes and artillery pound the area," the head of the Britain-based monitor Rami Abdel Rahman said yesterday morning.

HTS spokesman Abu Khaled al-Shami said the jihadist and rebel fighters attacked after dark, taking control of the "heavily fortified" hill from fighters loyal to President Bashar al-Assad.

Naji Mustafa, a spokesman for the allied National Liberation Front rebel grouping, said: "The hill is very strategic because it overlooks... supply routes to enemy forces."

Russian air strikes killed one civilian in the town of Latmaneh and rebel artillery fire took the life of one woman in the regime-held area of Karnaz, the Observatory said.

Meanwhile, a car bomb near a checkpoint manned by Turkey-backed rebels in the northern Syrian city of Afrin killed 13 people including eight civilians yesterday, the war monitor said.