

Myanmar to join
US-Asean drills

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's navy will join maritime drills with the US in Southeast Asia next week, a spokesman said yesterday, in a rare show of military cooperation despite Washington slapping sanctions on top army brass over the Rohingya crisis. There are growing calls to further isolate the military, expand sanctions and prosecute senior leadership for genocide against the stateless minority. The drills come at a time of stepped-up US engagement in the region and tensions between China and several Southeast Asian nations over rival claims in the South China Sea.

At least 23 killed in
fire at Mexico bar

AFP, Washington

At least 23 people were killed after a fire broke out in a bar in southern Mexico Tuesday night, NBC News reported, with authorities investigating a possible arson attack. Thirteen others were left seriously injured following the blaze in the southern port city of Coatzacoalcas, NBC said. Citing reports, The Los Angeles Times said Molotov cocktails had been thrown into the bar. An investigation is ongoing, authorities said.

Japan to get US anti-
ballistic missiles

AFP, Washington

Washington approved the \$3.3 billion sale of anti-ballistic missiles to Japan Tuesday, following close behind a series of new ballistic missile tests by North Korea that could threaten the US ally. Japan will buy up to 73 of the Raytheon-made SM-3 Block IIA missiles, which are designed to be fired by the ship-board Aegis system to intercept incoming ballistic missiles, the Pentagon said. The Pentagon also approved new arms sales to Hungary, South Korea, Lithuania and Denmark, worth together another \$943 million.



Smoke rises from forest fires in Altamira, Para state, Brazil. Inset, View of a burnt area of forest in Altamira, Para state, Brazil. Photos were taken on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Fires 'tipping
point' for
Amazon

AFP, Yokohama

The fires tearing through the Amazon represent a "tipping point" for the health of the rainforest, the head of a top global forestry management body said yesterday, urging the world to do more to save the trees.

The situation in the Amazon is "very urgent," stressed Gerhard Dieterle, executive director of the International Tropical Timber Organisation, an intergovernmental agency group that promotes sustainable forestry use.

"If tropical dense forests are affected by forest fires, they need many, many years to regroup. It will alter the climate, the local climate, the national climate and the regional climate. It will also have an influence on the global climate," said the forestry expert.

"Many experts fear it may be a tipping point" for the rainforest, as the latest figures show a total of more than 82,000 fires blazing in Brazil.

Some of the blazes are down to natural causes, Dieterle said, but they are mostly started deliberately by farmers clearing land for agriculture.

'Defiance rising' in Kashmir

Govt source says hundreds injured in 500 protests since August 5

AFP, Srinagar

At least 500 incidents of protest have broken out in Indian Kashmir since New Delhi stripped the region of its autonomy and imposed a military clampdown more than three weeks ago, a senior government source told AFP yesterday.

The Himalayan valley is under a strict lockdown, imposed hours before India's decision to bring Kashmir under its direct rule. Movement is restricted and phone and internet services have been cut.

The lockdown, as well as the deployment of tens of thousands of extra troops to reinforce the 500,000 based in Kashmir, was ordered amid fears of unrest in a region where an armed rebellion against Indian rule has been waged since 1989.

But protests have broken out, including in the main city of Srinagar, with police using pellet guns and tear gas to disperse the crowds.

A senior government source told AFP at least 500 protests and incidents of stone throwing have occurred since August 5, with more than half taking place in Srinagar.

Nearly 100 civilians have been injured so far, with a further 300 police and more than 100 paramilitary troopers hurt, the official added.

"The number of protests could be much higher and bigger without the blockade in force," the official told AFP, adding that "anger and public defiance is constantly rising".

"Efforts for easing the conditions are made all the time but nothing seems to be working for now. There is nervousness spreading in the security establishment."

Meanwhile, residents are refusing to resume their normal lives in an act of defiance, an AFP reporter in Srinagar said.

While authorities have re-opened schools, students have stayed away.

Told to keep open all day or "don't open at all", some shops have remained shut.

At least 4,000 people have been detained across the valley, security and government sources told AFP last week, including businessmen, academics, activists and local politicians, with a few released since then.

A separate senior government official told AFP Wednesday that at least 1,350 protesters -- described by police as "stone-pelters" -- have been arrested since August 5.

The detentions came as the Supreme Court yesterday gave the government one week to respond to a legal challenge calling for the communications blackout to be ended to allow for media reporting.

The court also said several petitions challenging the removal of the constitutional clause on Kashmir's autonomy would be heard in October.

Italy inches closer to new
govt as parties haggle

REUTERS, Rome

Tense talks aimed at forming a new Italian government inched forward yesterday as two major political parties, struggling to bury years of hostility and avoid snap elections, agreed to re-install Giuseppe Conte as prime minister.

The anti-establishment 5-Star Movement and the opposition centre-left Democratic Party (PD) entered formal coalition talks after a ruling alliance between 5-Star and the right-wing League party collapsed this month after prolonged infighting.

The talks, which remain tense and could still break down, had been at risk of collapse over who should be named prime minister but the PD confirmed yesterday that it had dropped its opposition to Conte, removing one big barrier to a deal.

The PD's leader also secured the backing of the party's executive yesterday to forge an alliance with 5-Star, despite a history of bitter relations between the two political

rivals.

"We decided to agree to Conte as prime minister because that was what 5-Star wanted," PD boss Nicola Zingaretti said.

Both sides have yet to agree on other top government posts or reveal a common policy agenda, with only hours remaining before an effective Wednesday evening deadline for a deal.

President Sergio Mattarella has asked them to report back to him on progress later in the day. If they fail to strike a deal, he is expected to name a caretaker government and call elections as early as October.

The focus of talks are now shifting to the role of deputy prime minister. The PD wants this job for one of its own, now that it has agreed to Conte staying on as prime minister.

Even in the event of a deal, another potentially major roadblock remains. The 5-Star announced in a blog post on Tuesday that any deal would need to be approved by an online vote of its members.

CONTROVERSIAL ASSAM NRC

US advisory body
voices concern

AFP, Washington

The head of a US government advisory board on Tuesday voiced concern over India's drive to register citizens in the northeastern state of Assam, amid fears it could disenfranchise millions, most of them Muslims.

Tony Perkins -- chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, which issues recommendations to the government but does not make policy -- said that religious pluralism was "a bedrock of Indian society."

"However, we remain concerned with the potential abuse of the National Register of Citizens in Assam and the resulting introduction of a religious requirement for citizenship, which are contrary to the ideals of religious freedom in India," he said in a statement.

India has given Assam residents until the end of the month to prove they, their parents or grandparents were in the state before 1971, when millions fled predominantly Muslim Bangladesh's war of independence.

Home Minister Amit Shah has called for the ejection of "termites" from India ahead of election triumph this year.

An aerial view shows submerged houses and buildings following heavy rains in Omachi, Saga prefecture, yesterday. Two people were confirmed dead as heavy rains pounded southwest Japan, prompting flood and landslide warnings and orders for 670,000 people to seek safety.

PHOTO: AFP



Gaza on alert after
cops killing

AFP, Gaza City

Hamas yesterday said that two overnight bombings killed three police officers in the Gaza Strip in what witnesses called suicide attacks as the Palestinian enclave was placed under a state of alert.

Witnesses told AFP that both bombings were suicide attacks by assailants on motorbikes, but there was no official confirmation.

A source familiar with the investigation said a Salafist movement in Gaza that sympathises with the Islamic State group was suspected.

An investigation was underway as authorities pledged to track down the "masterminds". New police checkpoints were set up in Gaza City.

'He did it for himself'

Biggest of the 1MDB trials opens as prosecutors accuse
Malaysia ex-PM of plundering state coffers

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's ex-prime minister Najib Razak played a pivotal role in plundering state fund 1MDB and hundreds of millions of dollars were illicitly channelled to his bank account, a prosecutor said yesterday at the opening of his biggest graft trial.

Claims that Najib and his cronies pilfered massive sums from the fund and spent it on everything from real estate to artwork contributed to the defeat of his long-ruling coalition to a reformist alliance.

After losing power last year, the former prime minister was arrested and hit with dozens of charges related to 1MDB. He is expected to face several trials.

The first started earlier this year but yesterday's is the biggest, with Najib accused of 21 counts of money-laundering and four of abuse of power, centring on allegations that he illicitly obtained 2.28 billion ringgit (\$540 million) from 1MDB, a fund established with the ostensible aim of



boosting Malaysia's economy.

"His objective was to enrich himself," the prosecutor told the packed High Court in Kuala Lumpur, as he outlined how 1MDB funds were channelled in a "circuitous route" between 2011 and 2014 to Najib.

Najib -- who was also finance minister -- put himself in "sole control" of the fund's important affairs, he said.

In August 2013, over two billion ringgit was sent to Najib's account at a Malaysian bank before it was quickly transferred out again, according to the prosecutor. The attorney-general cleared Najib of any wrongdoing, saying the money was a personal donation from the Saudi royal family, and closed down domestic investigations.

The 66-year-old Najib denies all the charges. Najib faces up to 20 years in jail for each of the abuse of power charges and five years in jail for each of the counts of money-laundering

UN warns of exodus
of Muslims from Lanka

The United Nations on Tuesday warned that if the climate of fear amongst Muslim groups in Sri Lanka is not addressed it is likely to cause an exodus of Muslims from the country. The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ahmed Shaheed said that a recurrent complaint in Sri Lanka was the role of the media and social media in fomenting hatred and disinformation, the failure of the police to protect minority communities and the inability to hold perpetrators to account. In a report at the end of a 12-day mission to Sri Lanka, the UN Special Rapporteur said that the long-standing traditions of religious harmony and co-existence in Sri Lanka must be reinforced to address the challenges of the modern context of the country.

Outcry as US State Dept site
erases 'Palestinian Territories'

Palestinian leaders are in uproar after the US State Department's website removed the territories from its list of countries and areas, following a slew of pro-Israel actions by President Donald Trump. The official website no longer has a separate entry for the Palestinian Authority. An archived version of the website from the 2009-2017 presidency of Barack Obama shows that "Palestinian Territories" were listed among countries and areas both on the opening page and in the section of the Near East bureau. A State Department official played down the shift when asked on Tuesday, but did not say if the website would again include a separate entry for the Palestinian territories.

Greta Thunberg reaches NY



Teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg has reached New York yesterday after sailing across the Atlantic for the past 15 days. She had originally been expected to dock her vessel on Tuesday but was held up in rough seas south of Nova Scotia. Thunberg has been sailing to New York to speak at the UN Climate Action Summit on September 23, and traveled on a zero-emissions sailboat to reduce the environmental impact of her journey, according to a statement from her team. She set sail on her vessel, the Malizia II, from Plymouth, UK on August 14. The Swedish teenager has become the figurehead of a burgeoning movement of youth climate activists after her weekly protests inspired student strikes in more than 100 cities worldwide.

SOURCE: AFP, ANN, CNN