

NEWSIN brief

Scotland votes to ban smacking children

Scottish lawmakers voted on Thursday to ban parents and carers from smacking children. Lawmakers voted by 84 to 29 to introduce a law that will make it a criminal offence for parents to use physical punishment against a child. Currently, parents can use "reasonable" physical force to discipline children. The law will come into force within 12 months of it being approved by Queen Elizabeth II.

Egypt lowers fuel prices after protests

Egypt lowered fuel prices yesterday, the oil ministry said, following several rounds of price hikes as part of an austerity programme that have triggered discontent. The move comes a week after rare protests broke out in Cairo and other cities across Egypt calling for the removal of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Egypt has raised fuel prices several times as part of subsidy cuts under ambitious but tough economic reforms since general-turned-president Sisi took office in 2014.

Huthi offer of truce in Yemen 'positive': KSA

Saudi Arabia gave a "positive" response yesterday to a truce offer from Huthi rebels in Yemen and called for its implementation. Since 2015, Riyadh has led a military coalition in support of Yemen's internationally recognised government against the Huthis, who are backed by Iran. On September 21, the Huthis announced they were ready to make peace with Riyadh, later repeating their offer despite continued Saudi-led coalition air strikes.

Two months of misery in Kashmir

Children as young as nine detained, protests and tear gas, allegations of torture, businesses shut and no mobiles or internet: it's now been two months of misery in the Kashmir Valley. India stripped Jammu and Kashmir of its autonomy on August 5 and said it would split the state in two, after sending in tens of thousands of troops to impose a lockdown and detaining the region's top politicians. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said the audacious move was to end "a vicious cycle of terrorism, violence, separatism and corruption" and make Kashmir a "paradise once more". Kashmir has been divided between India and Pakistan since 1947 and has been the spark for two wars between the nuclear-armed foes. Since 1989 tens of thousands of people, mostly civilians, have died in an uprising against Indian rule by militants wanting all of Kashmir to be part of Pakistan or an independent state. Evidence on the ground suggests that there locals are livid about India's latest move, with regular demonstrations, business owners refusing to open their premises and children kept out of schools. The Indian government says that most people in the Kashmir Valley, the main hotbed of resistance to Indian rule, support the move and that opposition comes only from elements backed by Pakistan. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan last week told



the UN General Assembly that India could unleash a "bloodbath" in the Muslim-majority region, warning of the risk of nuclear war. More than 4,000 people have been arrested since August 5, including 144 minors, around 1,000 of whom remain in custody, some under a law that allows suspects to be held for up to two years without charge. Besides injuries and 4 deaths, young Kashmiri men told AFP last month that soldiers tortured them. The military strongly denies this.

JAMMU LEADERS FREED, NOT KASHMIRIS India has released Jammu-based leaders detained in August ahead of local polls in the region, but it is unlikely that their counterparts in Kashmir will receive similar relief anytime soon.

The J&K administration believes that it was because of preventive action taken against politicians such as National Conference leader Omar Abdullah and Peoples Democratic Party chief Mehbooba Mufti that the government was able to prevent a "bloodbath". Dozens of political leaders, including three former chief ministers, have been in detention for nearly two months now.



Nepali Hindu devotees carry a chariot representing deities as they walk to the Shikali temple during celebrations for the Shikali Jatra festival near Khokana village on the outskirts of Kathmandu, yesterday. The Hindu villagers in Khokana celebrate the five-day Shikali Jatra festival instead of Nepal's largest festival of Dashain, which is marked nationwide.

MOB LYNCHING IN INDIA

FIR against 50 celebrities over letter to Modi

An FIR was lodged in Bihar's Muzaffarpur district against celebrities including Bollywood actress Konkana Sen, director Maniratnam, Aparna Sen, Shayam Benegal, Ramchandra Guha and 45 others, who had written an open letter to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi raising concern over the growing incidents of mob lynching, police said yesterday. The case was filed in Sadar police station on Thursday on the basis of an order by the local court. An advocate SK Ojha had filed a petition in the Chief Judicial Magistrate court, which after hearing the case ordered police to lodge an FIR against the celebrities. His petition alleged that the letter has "tarnished the image of the country" and good works of Modi. In the letter the celebrities had stated that the lynching of Muslims, Dalits and other minorities must be stopped immediately, while stressing that there was "no democracy without dissent". The letter also had said that "Jai Shri Ram" had been reduced to a "provocative war cry".

New texts pile pressure on Trump

US officials pressured their Ukrainian counterparts to launch investigations that could benefit President Donald Trump's personal political agenda in exchange for a meeting between the two countries' leaders, a cache of diplomatic texts released late on Thursday showed. The exchanges were released by Democrats in the House of Representatives as part of an impeachment investigation to determine whether Trump pressed for Ukraine to probe former Vice President Joe Biden and his son, Hunter Biden, in connection with Ukrainian gas company Burisma. Biden is a leading contender for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination. His son was on the board of Burisma for a number of years. Kurt Volker, who resigned a week ago as Trump's special representative to Ukraine, provided the messages to members of the House and staff of the House Foreign Affairs, Intelligence and Oversight committees in a closed-door meeting earlier on Thursday. Democrats are focusing on a July 25 telephone call between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in which the Republican president urges Zelenskyy to investigate Burisma and the Bidens. In the hours before that call, Volker told one adviser to the Ukrainian president that a meeting between the countries' two leaders was tied to Kiev's probes into Burisma and the 2016 election. The cache also included messages from Trump's personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani, who played a major part in the administration's dealings with Kiev. In a signal of how Kiev will handle investigations being watched in Washington, Ukrainian prosecutors said they would review 15 old probes related to Burisma's founder but added that they were unaware of any evidence of wrongdoing by Biden's son. Separately, the White House plans to argue that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat, must have the full House vote to formally approve an impeachment inquiry, a source familiar with the effort said. Without a vote, White House lawyers believe Trump, who has called the impeachment probe a "hoax," can ignore lawmakers' requests, the source said, meaning the federal courts would presumably have to render a decision and potentially slow the march toward impeachment. Trump, in his own tweet, wrote that his efforts to solicit foreign nations to investigate the Bidens have "NOTHING to do with politics." He said he is only concerned about corruption.

TRUMP'S IMPEACHMENT BID

Texts show US officials tied Ukraine meeting to political probes

Ukraine reviews cases into firm linked to Biden's son

Intel official to testify as Trump says not sure if he will cooperate with Congress on impeachment

Iraq death toll hits 34

Top Shia cleric endorses protests in blow to embattled PM

Protesters clashed with anti-riot police in Iraq yesterday despite the premier's pleas for patience and an internet blackout on the fourth day of mass rallies that have left 34 dead. Many were awaiting a signal in the midday sermon of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, Iraq's highest Shia Muslim authority, that would influence the revolt in the predominantly-Shia areas. Sistani in his Friday prayer sermon called on the government to heed the demands of protesters and condemned the mounting death toll from clashes with police. The endorsement from Sistani, who is revered among Iraq's Shia majority community, prompted celebratory gunfire from protesters and piled new pressure on Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi as he battles to quell the intensifying unrest. The prime minister has appealed for patience from the young unemployed who have formed the mainstay of the protests, saying his not yet year-old government needs more time to implement reforms. But Sistani retorted that the government needed to act now "before it's too late" to address popular grievances or the protests would simply intensify. The government "must do what it can to improve public services, find work for the unemployed, end clientelism, deal with the corruption issue and send those implicated in it to prison", Sistani added, listing some of the protesters' main grievances. Protests first broke out in Baghdad on Tuesday and have since spread across the Shia-dominated south, while northern and western provinces that were ravaged in the 2014-2017 war against the Islamist State group have remained relatively quiet.



UNREST OVER UNEMPLOYMENT, GRAFT

ACCESS TO ENCRYPTED MESSAGES

US, allies push Facebook

The United States, Britain and Australia have called on Facebook to give authorities the ability to circumvent encryption used in its messaging services -- a measure opposed by the social media giant. Facebook has been dogged by several privacy scandals in recent years and has pledged to boost user protections by rolling out end-to-end encryption across all of its social media platforms. But that plan risks weakening the ability of law enforcement to detect criminal acts including terrorism and child pornography, according to a joint letter sent to Facebook. The company already encrypts WhatsApp messages from end-to-end -- meaning only the sender and recipient can read the message -- and is working to extend the technology to other apps in its family. Facebook says it is intent on introducing the service without granting oversight to law enforcement agencies.

UN sees alarming spike

3,500 killed, 9,000 hurt in 4 years

Worsening security across Afghanistan has led to 14,000 violations against children in the past four years, including nearly 3,500 killed and 9,000 injured, a UN report said. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned "the alarming level" of grave violations committed by all sides in the 18-year war and the fact that children "continue to bear the brunt of the armed conflict". Of serious concern, he said, was the nearly 12,600 children verified to have been killed or injured in 2015-2018 represented almost one-third of all civilian casualties. That was "an increase of 82 percent in child casualties compared with the previous four years", he said. Guterres wrote in his fourth report on children and armed conflict in Afghanistan the rise was traced to "an increase in child casualties resulting from ground engagements, explosive remnants of war and aerial attacks". The UN chief said he was "extremely concerned, especially by the number of children killed and injured as a result of aerial operations conducted by government and pro-government forces". According to the report, child casualties from air strikes "have significantly increased since 2015", reversing the downward trend of the four preceding years. The UN verified 1,049 child casualties from air strikes in 2015-2018, including 464 youngsters killed. That represented 40 percent of civilian casualties from aerial attacks, the report said. Guterres said armed groups were responsible for 43 percent of child casualties -- 3,450 killed and 9,149 wounded.



AFGHAN CHILD CASUALTIES

HK leader should quit: Mahathir

Malaysia's prime minister yesterday said Hong Kong's embattled leader should resign over the city's increasingly violent pro-democracy protests and warned China would take "harsh action" to end the demonstrations. Hong Kong has been rocked by unprecedented protests for nearly four months, with millions taking to the streets angered by what they see as Beijing's authoritarian rule of the semi-autonomous city. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad -- who at 94 is the world's oldest leader -- said Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam "is in a dilemma". "She has to obey the masters, at the same time she has to ask her conscience," he told a press conference. "Her conscience says that the people of Hong Kong are right in rejecting the (extradition) law. "But on the other hand, she knows the consequence of rejecting the law." The protests were sparked by opposition to a now-scrapped law that would have allowed extraditions to mainland China but have morphed into a wider movement calling for democratic freedoms. "For the administrator (Lam), I think (the) best thing is to resign," Mahathir added. Referring to the bloody 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown in Beijing, Mahathir said eventually China sent the military in and "took action, harsh action to put an end to the demonstration. "I think in the end, that is what China will do (in Hong Kong)." Yesterday, thousands of masked protesters took to the streets of Hong Kong again as the government readied to use emergency powers to ban face coverings in a bid to end the demonstrations.



N Korea talks going ahead despite missile test: Trump

US President Donald Trump on Thursday brushed off North Korea's test of a submarine-launched ballistic missile, saying that planned nuclear talks with Pyongyang will go ahead. "They want to talk and we'll be talking to them," Trump told reporters at the White House. The launch was by far the most significant since Pyongyang first began a dialogue with Washington in 2018 over pressure to give up its nuclear weapons. Analysts said the new capability, if confirmed, marks a significant step in boosting that program. The launch came with working-level talks between Pyongyang and Washington slated to resume later this week.

Karnataka plans NRC

After Assam, Karnataka is gearing up to prepare a National Register of Citizens (NRC) list to identify the illegal immigrants living there. State Home Minister Basavaraj Bommai said on Thursday that he will seek help from the centre on this regard. Sources say that a foreigners detention centre has already been set up at Nelmangala taluk, about 35 km from Bengaluru. The opposition Congress expressed its support for the move, but said the government should ensure that Indian citizens are not inconvenienced by the NRC. The Assam NRC was released on August 31 which excluded over 19 lakh people, who now have to fight their case and prove they have been in Assam for decades.

Vaping-linked lung injury kills 18 in US

Eighteen people have died from illnesses associated with e-cigarette use since March, US health authorities said Thursday, while 1080 others have suffered probable lung injuries linked to vaping. Officials have yet to identify the cause for the outbreak, which dates back to late March, and are pursuing multiple lines of investigation. A report by clinicians in North Carolina last month pointed to the inhalation of fatty substances from aerosolized oils as causing acute lipoid pneumonia, but a new study by the Mayo Clinic published this week found patients' lungs had been exposed to noxious fumes.

IAEA: Iran taking 'step in right direction'

The UN's nuclear watchdog yesterday said Iran had taken "a step in the right direction" towards dealing with questions on its nuclear programme but cautioned that the issues have not been "completely addressed". The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) did not detail what the questions related to but said it was "discussing substance" with the Iranians. The latest developments come a week after the IAEA reported that Iran had started using advanced models of centrifuges to enrich uranium, a fresh breach of the 2015 deal. Iran has been progressively abandoning commitments under the deal in response to the US withdrawal from the pact and re-imposition of sanctions.

India admits friendly fire downed chopper in J&K



The Indian Air Force confirmed for the first time yesterday that it shot down one of its own helicopters during clashes with Pakistan in February over Kashmir, killing all six on board. "A court of inquiry was completed and it was our mistake that our missile hit our chopper," said the head of the Air Force, Air Chief Marshal Rakesh Kumar Bhadauria. The military helicopter crashed on February 27 as Indian and Pakistani aircraft engaged in dogfights over Kashmir in their most serious military skirmish in years. A day earlier Indian aircraft had bombed what New Delhi called a "terror camp" used by the Jaish-e-Mohammed militant group in the Balakot area of Pakistan. That followed a suicide bombing on February 14 claimed by Jaish-e-Mohammed that killed 40 Indian troops.