

NEWSIN brief

Myanmar court jails satirical performers

REUTERS, Yangon

A court in Myanmar sentenced five satirical performers to a year in jail with hard labour on Wednesday for shows that criticized the army's role in politics. The five were arrested after taking part in Thangyat, a centuries-old tradition during Myanmar's new year water festival in April. It pokes fun at the flaws and foibles of the social and political system. During shows and a Facebook broadcast, they criticised the army's share of a quarter of the seats in parliament and shared pictures of a dog in a military jacket.

Kim condoles death of Moon's mother

AFP, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un sent a message of sympathy to the South's President Moon Jae-in over the death of his mother, officials said yesterday, the pair's first contact in months with inter-Korean ties at a standstill. Kang Han-ok, who was born and grew up in the North but was evacuated by US forces during the Korean War, died from a chronic illness on Tuesday. She was 92.

US agrees \$700m settlement over 1MDB

AFP, Los Angeles

The Malaysian financier at the heart of the massive 1MDB graft scandal has struck a settlement to forfeit assets worth \$700 million including a Beverly Hills hotel and a private jet, the US Justice Department said Wednesday. Jho Low will relinquish the assets under the largest ever US civil forfeiture, intended to recover cash allegedly stolen in the 1MDB scandal which helped topple Malaysia's corruption-plagued former regime.



Commuters cross a road blocked with police vehicles, during an anti-government "Azadi March" led by Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman, in Islamabad, Pakistan yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Pak capital in lockdown

Troops deployed as thousands of Islamist protesters gather in Islamabad to launch anti-govt demonstration today

AFP, Islamabad

Schools were shuttered and entry points to Islamabad sealed off yesterday as thousands of Islamist protesters aiming to unseat the government converged on the Pakistan capital.

Police and paramilitary troops used shipping containers to block several major traffic arteries between the capital and the neighbouring city of Rawalpindi ahead of the march, causing traffic jams and frustrating commuters.

"The main entry points were closed to ensure the safety of the citizens and government offices," Islamabad police spokesperson Zia Bajwa told AFP, saying a 17,000-strong force was overseeing security in the capital.

The "Azadi (Freedom) March" is led by Prime Minister Imran Khan's long-time rival Maulana Fazlur Rehman, who heads the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F), one of the country's largest Islamist parties.

The march represents the first major challenge to Prime Minister Imran Khan's government as his administration battles rising public anger over a faltering economy and

double-digit inflation.

Rehman and thousands of supporters departed Jhelum district -- some 126 kilometres (78 miles) east of the capital Islamabad -- earlier yesterday, party spokesman Abdul Jalil Jan told AFP.

A second group was due to leave from the northwestern city of Peshawar en route to the capital, where the two convoys would converge late in the evening.

JUI-F said Rehman would then oversee Friday prayers with the protesters before launching a demonstration in the capital.

The cleric insists that Khan needs to be removed from office, and a new "free and fair" election held. However, the group has remained vague about what tactics they plan to use.

Ahead of the march, social media users panned Rehman and his followers over their refusal to allow women to participate, questioning their commitment to democratic principles. "Looking at the 'Azadi March' from afar, one thing is clear to me. In the democracy that Maulana sahib is (fighting) for, women would have no place," tweeted Marvi Sirmad.

MOVE TO OUST PM

The march represents first major challenge to Imran Khan's government

Pak govt battles rising public anger over faltering economy, double-digit inflationZ



Mekong shrivels as drought, dams strangle the river

Water levels are the lowest in 30 yrs: MRC

AFP, Loei

The once-mighty Mekong river has been reduced to a thin, grubby neck of water in stretches of northern Thailand -- record lows blamed on drought and a recently completed dam far upstream.

The \$4.47 billion Thai-owned Xayaburi hydro-electric power plant went into operation this week in Laos after years of warnings over the potential impact on fish flow, sediment and water levels on a river which feeds tens of millions.

Along parts of Thailand's northeastern border at Loei, the kilometre-wide (3,300-foot) river has shrivelled to a few dozen metres, with boulders and bedrock encasing muddy pools of water.

From above, the encroaching banks of Laos and Thailand are now a thread of water apart, restricting fishing grounds to a slim channel.

Fishermen blame a combination of this year's weak monsoon and the Xayaburi dam, around 300 kilometres (185 miles) to the north.

"I don't want any more dam construction," said fisherman Sup Aunkaew, who tossed a meagre catch into his boat, adding that the fish spawning habits have been "confused" by the unseasonably low water levels.

"But we can't really oppose their plans if they want to do it."

Landlocked and impoverished Laos has set its sights on becoming "the battery of Asia", with 44 operating hydro plants and 46 more under construction many on key tributaries of the Mekong, according to monitor International Rivers.

The Mekong River Commission (MRC), a body governing regional water diplomacy, said the water levels from June to October are the lowest in nearly 30 years.

In Nong Khai, which faces the Laos' capital Vientiane, the water dropped to around one metre (3.2 feet) on Tuesday, several times shallower than average, the MCR said.

Measurements across the river "are significantly below the minimum levels for this time of year and are expected to decrease further", it said in a statement to AFP.



Local Red cross personnel walk past a damaged building after a 6.5-magnitude earthquake hit Kidapawan town, north Cotabato province, on the southern island of Mindanao, Philippines yesterday. At least five people were killed and nine people were injured in the earthquake.

PHOTO: AFP

Facebook a 'megaphone for hate'

*Report says dehumanising language in the social media platform
inflaming ethnic tensions in India's Assam state*

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION, Mumbai

Facebook is failing to rein in a "tsunami" of hate posts inflaming ethnic tensions in India's Assam state, campaign group Avaaz said on Wednesday, with content about "criminals", "rapists", "terrorists" and "dogs" shared almost 100,000 times.

Avaaz said the dehumanising language -- often targeting India's Bengali Muslims -- was similar to that used on Facebook about Myanmar's Rohingya before an army crackdown and ethnic violence forced 700,000 Rohingya to flee in 2017 to Bangladesh.

A Facebook spokesman said the company was proactively removing 65% of hate speech before it was reported globally, and that its content reviewers, working in at least nine Indian languages, were rigorously trained to "catch harmful content".

The United Nations warned of rising hate speech on social media in India's northeastern Assam state as the government prepared to publish a list of Indian citizens in the state that left out nearly 2 million people, many Bengali Muslims.

"Facebook is being used as a megaphone for hate, pointed directly at

vulnerable minorities in Assam, many of whom could be made stateless within months," Alaphia Zoyab, a campaigner at Avaaz, said in a statement.

To be included on the register, published in August, residents had to prove their families lived in India before March 24, 1971, when hundreds of thousands of people began fleeing conflict across the border in what is now Bangladesh.

Resentment against illegal immigrants has simmered for years in Assam, one of India's poorest states, with residents blaming outsiders, mainly Bangladeshis, for taking their jobs and land.

Avaaz, which campaigns against disinformation on social media, analysed 800 Facebook posts and comments relating to Assam and the register, and found that about 27% constituted hate speech, which it estimated had been viewed 5 million times.

It flagged 213 posts to Facebook, which removed 96 of them, including one by an elected official implying that those who rape "our mothers and sisters" are "Bangladeshi Muslims", and calls to "poison" daughters and legalise female foeticide.

Facebook has been criticised for not acting to stamp out hate speech on its platform in Myanmar.



N Korea fires two ballistic missiles

Says South Korea's military

AFP, Seoul

North Korea fired two short-range projectiles yesterday, the South's military said, with nuclear talks between Pyongyang and Washington at a deadlock.

The weapons were launched from South Pyongan province in an easterly direction over the sea, Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement.

They flew 370 kilometres at a maximum altitude of 90 kilometres, they said, adding: "We are maintaining readiness and monitoring in case of additional launches."

In Washington, a senior Trump administration official said the United States was "aware of reports" and "continuing to monitor the situation and consulting closely with our allies in Japan and South Korea."

It was the latest in a series of launches by the North but the first since October 2, when it fired a sea-launched missile in a provocative move -- a submarine-based missile capability would change the military balance. The North then walked away from working-level nuclear talks with the US in Sweden, saying it was disappointed at the lack of "new and creative" solutions offered by Washington.

Pyeongyang is under multiple sets of international sanctions over its nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programmes, which it says it needs to defend against a possible US invasion.

JADHAV'S CASE

Pak violated int'l rules

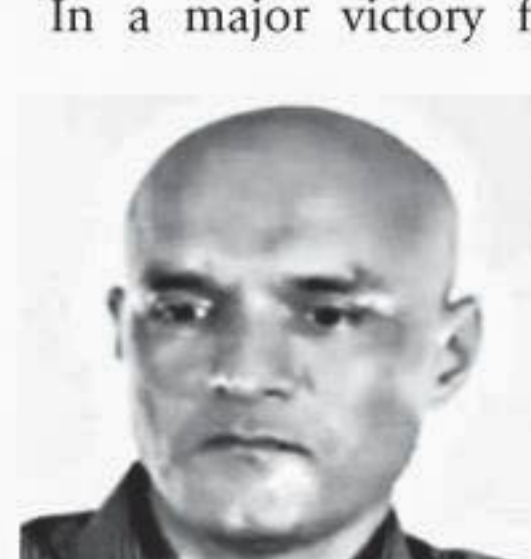
Says ICJ chief

Pr, United Nations

Pakistan violated its obligations under the Vienna Convention in the case of Indian national Kulbhushan Jadhav, International Court of Justice (ICJ) President Judge Abdulqawi Yusuf told the UN General Assembly.

Presenting the report of the International Court of Justice to the 193-member General Assembly on Wednesday, Yusuf said in its judgment of July 17 the principal judicial organ of the United Nations "found that Pakistan had violated its obligations under Article 36 of the Vienna Convention and that appropriate remedies were due in this case."

In a major victory for



India, the ICJ had ruled that Pakistan must review the death sentence awarded to Jadhav, a retired Indian Navy officer who was sentenced to death by the Pakistani military court on charges of "espionage and terrorism" after a closed trial in April 2017.

India had argued that consular access was being denied to its national in violation of the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations.

The bench led by Yusuf had ordered an "effective review and reconsideration of the conviction and sentence of Mr Kulbhushan Sudhir Jadhav."

Yusuf elaborated on several aspects of the Court's ruling in Jadhav's case.