

NEWSIN  
brief

Xi invites India's Modi to visit again next year

REUTERS, Beijing

Chinese President Xi Jinping has invited Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to visit China again next year after two informal summits between the men in each other's countries, despite deep disagreement over the disputed Kashmir region. Xi and Modi met in southern India last month, following their first informal summit in China last year as the two sought to put their often deeply strained relationship back on track. But a little more than two weeks later, the two countries fell into a diplomatic dispute over Kashmir.

India SC delays ruling on Sabarimala temple ban

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's top court yesterday delayed a verdict on the lifting of a centuries-old ban on women of menstruating age entering a Hindu temple, asking more judges to consider the case involving gender discrimination and religion that has divided opinion. Upholding the right to equality of worship, a five-judge bench of the court last year ruled that the ban on women from entering the Sabarimala temple in the southern state of Kerala could not be considered an essential religious practice and should be lifted.

Tear gas grenades kill 4 Iraqi protesters

AFP, Baghdad

Four protesters were killed by tear gas canisters in Baghdad yesterday as security forces try to snuff out the largest grassroots movement to sweep Iraq in years. Iraq's political elite has come under renewed pressure in recent days from both the street and the international community to seriously address calls for sweeping reform. There has been mounting international criticism of the authorities' response to the protests, which have left 330 dead since October 1.



Protesters build a wall to block a road at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, in Hong Kong yesterday. *Inset*, A man (C) is beaten after getting in an argument during a demonstration of office workers and protesters, in Central in Hong Kong. PHOTO: AFP



HK students hunker down

Parts of city paralysed as pro-democracy protesters put up barricades on streets; train services suspended, schools closed

REUTERS, Hong Kong

Pro-democracy protesters paralysed parts of Hong Kong for a fourth day yesterday, forcing schools to close and blocking highways, as students built campus barricades and stockpiled weapons and the government dismissed rumours of a curfew.

Thousands of students hunkered down on several campuses, surrounded by piles of food, bricks, petrol bombs, arrows with heads wrapped in cladding, catapults and other homemade weapons.

Police said the Chinese University, in the New Territories, had become a "weapons factory and an arsenal" with bows and arrows and catapults.

"Their acts are another step closer to terrorism," Chief Superintendent (Public Relations) Tse Chun-chung told a briefing, referring to protests on all campuses.

He also said police would temporarily avoid directly clashing with "high-spirited rioters" to give themselves a breather and avoid injuries.

China's Global Times tabloid,

owned by the state-run People's Daily, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party, said on Twitter that the Hong Kong government was expected to announce a weekend curfew after some of the worst violence in decades in the Chinese-ruled city.

It deleted the post after a short time. The Hong Kong government said the rumours were "totally unfounded".

Hong Kong govt dismisses rumours of weekend curfew

Police would appoint 100 prison guards and looking for other reinforcements

Protesters have torched vehicles and buildings, hurled petrol bombs at police stations and trains, dropped debris from bridges on to traffic below and vandalised shopping malls and campuses, raising questions about how and when more than five months of unrest can be brought to an end.

Police said arrows were fired at officers from Hong Kong Polytechnic University in the morning.

Several universities announced there would be no classes on campuses for the rest of the year.

Baptist University, next to a People's Liberation Army base in Kowloon Tong, issued an "urgent appeal", telling students to stay away from campus.

"Your safety is so dear to our hearts and to your parents' and friends' hearts," it said. "Please stay away from harm's way."

Hundreds of protesters occupied roads in the city's business district, home to some of the world's most expensive real estate, in the middle of the day.

Anger grew over perceived police brutality as the protests intensified. Police deny being heavy handed and say they have shown restraint in the face of potentially deadly attacks.

Police said they would appoint 100 Correctional Services Department staff, who look after prisons, to reinforce the streets.

Fury in Delhi as smog engulfs children's race

AFP, New Delhi

Hundreds of children ran a charity road race through poisonous smog in New Delhi yesterday, triggering a storm of criticism about the damage to their health.

Delhi and other cities in northern India have again been blanketed by haze that hits each winter due to build-up of vehicle fumes, industrial emissions and smoke from agricultural fires in regions around the capital.

The toxic air in the capital has taken pollution levels to almost 20 times World Health Organisation safe limits -- causing authorities to close all schools until today. But despite the conditions, children as young as nine competed in a road race through the city organised by a non-profit organisation to mark International Children's Day.

FIGHT FOR JUSTICE OVER ROHINGYA 'GENOCIDE'

Myanmar is facing a barrage of legal challenges from all over the world in an attempt to hold it accountable over the alleged genocide against its Rohingya Muslim population. The Gambia this week launched a case at the UN's top court while rights groups have filed a separate lawsuit in Argentina. Meanwhile investigations at the International Criminal Court (ICC) continue into the 2017 military crackdown that forced some 740,000 Rohingya to flee into Bangladesh. Here are some of the different legal challenges in the complex search for justice:

GENERALS IN THE DOCK?

The ICC in the Hague investigates war crimes and is focused on individual, not state, responsibility. The UNSC needs to refer Myanmar to the court for full proceedings to start. Myanmar has not signed up to the ICC, but last year the court launched preliminary investigations on the basis that Bangladesh -- where the Rohingya are refugees -- is a member. This could ultimately lead to arrest warrants being issued for Myanmar's generals. But the process is lengthy, requiring participation from Bangladesh and -- somewhat implausibly -- Myanmar to hand over suspects.

THE GAMBIAN GAMBIT

The UN's top court, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), is also based in The Hague and was set up after World War II to rule on disagreements between member states. It normally deals with issues of international law such as border disputes, but can also rule on alleged breaches of UN conventions. The Gambia, a tiny, mainly-Muslim state, filed a case on behalf of the 57-nation Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) accusing Myanmar of breaching the 1948 UN Genocide Convention. Leading the charge is Gambian justice minister Abubacar Tambadou, a former genocide prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. The case will likely take years -- a previous genocide case brought by Bosnia against Serbia lasted 14 years.



THE ARGENTINA OPTION

On Wednesday, a case was filed by rights groups in Argentina against members of the Myanmar military and, notably, civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The activists say Suu Kyi and her government are complicit in atrocities for failing to condemn the army's actions and helping cover them up. On board -- and a reason for the faraway location -- is heavyweight Argentine human rights lawyer Tomas Ojea, who was previously UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar. Dozens of such cases are under way around the world, many in relation to alleged atrocities in Syria with several suspected war criminals already charged and arrested.

HOW IS MYANMAR RESPONDING?

Myanmar has long denied accusations it committed ethnic cleansing or genocide. It has yet to comment on the latest cases filed at the ICJ and in Argentina, but has previously condemned such action as "interference". The country insists its own investigative committee is able to look into alleged atrocities -- even though critics dismiss the panel as toothless and biased. The Rohingya garner little empathy inside Myanmar with many people supporting the 2017 military campaign, buying the official line it was a necessary defence against militants and that the Muslim minority are not citizens.

SOURCE: AFP

BRICS leaders rail against 'bullying' protectionism

REUTERS, Brasilia

Leaders of the BRICS group of emerging economies on Wednesday criticised what they view as politically motivated protectionism at a time of a global slowdown and said their countries are doing their best to counter the trend.

At their annual summit, the leaders of China, Russia, India, Brazil and South Africa called for greater inter-BRICS trade and investment and urged the group's New Development Bank to pump more funding into infrastructure and sustainable growth.

"Protectionist and bullying counter-currents bring shocks to international trade, adding to downward pressure on the world economy," Chinese President Xi Jinping, whose country is locked in a trade war with the United States, told the summit in Brazil.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said global growth rates have been declining without interruption since the beginning of 2018 and will reach the lowest point in 10 years, citing International Monetary Fund forecasts.

"The BRICS countries are making

considerable contributions to support growth," Putin said.

"The global economy has been influenced by the wide usage of unfair competition in trade, unilateral sanctions, including those that are politically motivated, and protectionism is flourishing," Putin said.

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi said his country aims to be a \$5 trillion economy by 2024, up from 2.6 trillion in 2018. He said that BRICS targets for investment and trade must be more ambitious and welcomed suggestions to further reduce trade costs.

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro said Brazil is recovering international confidence but needs more economic reforms to create a more attractive business atmosphere for investors.

A meeting between Bolsonaro and Xi earlier in the day showcased how far relations have come since last year. Bolsonaro repeatedly bashed China in the lead up to last October's elections in Brazil, creating concerns that he could disrupt BRICS, one of the world's biggest trading partnerships.



Japan's Emperor Naruhito (C) walks towards Yukiden, where Daijosi ritual of great thanksgiving takes place, at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo yesterday. Naruhito performed an elaborate and secretive ritual dating back 1,300 years, giving thanks to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu as part of his enthronement rites. PHOTO: AFP

RAFALE JETS DEAL CASE

India SC gives clean chit to Modi govt

TNN, New Delhi

The Supreme Court yesterday dismissed the review petitions against its verdict in the Rafale deal on grounds that they lacked merit, reiterating its clean chit to the Modi government in the fighter jet agreement with French firm Dassault Aviation.

The apex court also rejected the contention that there was need to register an FIR in connection with the Rs 58,000 crore deal.

The pleas had sought re-examination of the apex court's December 14, 2018 verdict that there was no occasion to doubt the decision-making process in the procurement of 36 Rafale fighter jets.

"We find the review petitions are without any merit," a bench comprising Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi and Justices S K Kaul and K M Joseph said.

The court also closed contempt proceedings initiated against Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and said that being an important political person, Rahul must remain more careful in future.

A contempt proceeding was initiated against Rahul Gandhi for his remark "Chowkidar Chor Hai", attributing it to the Prime Minister.

The rejection of review petitions is tantamount to the apex court giving a second clean chit to the Modi government. Reading out the judgment, Justice Kaul said the judges had reached the conclusion that it is not appropriate to order a roving inquiry into the allegations.

Maintaining that the review petitions have sought a registration of an FIR in connection with Rafale fighter jets jet deal, the bench said, "We do not consider it to be a fair submission".

Fear stoked by new port, SEZ in Rakhine

Beijing poised to cement its grip on western Myanmar waters with deep-seaport and Special Economic Zone of garment and food processing factories

AFP, Kyaukphyu

Aung Gyi is forced to fish covertly under the shroud of night in western Myanmar waters as China bids to transform the strategically key region into a shipping and industrial hub, squeezing out locals who fear being left behind in the gold rush.

Myanmar has declared Rakhine state, associated by many worldwide with the military's 2017 bloody crackdown on Rohingya Muslims, open for business but locals fear they are being left out of the gold rush as new rules restrict traditional practises.

Paddies and teak forests will be flattened for a colossal Beijing-backed factory zone and deep-sea port, which will serve as its neighbouring giant's gateway to the Indian Ocean.

But the state's promise for development comes with fishing restrictions -- the waterways have been freed up for Chinese ships -- a situation that has devastated local



lives and livelihoods.

"I might be beaten or arrested" if caught fishing illegally, Aung Gyi says as he lays shrimp out to dry by his dilapidated shack in a small fishing hamlet near the town of Kyaukphyu.

"But I have no choice. Otherwise, my family would starve," the 28-year-old adds.

Brutal military operations two years ago ravaged the state's

northern fringes and triggered an exodus of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims, but central Rakhine was left largely unscathed.

While many countries and companies remain squeamish about investing in the state, China and other regional giants have no such qualms.

Billions of cubic metres of gas and millions of barrels of oil from off-shore rigs are already pumped

each year from here across the country to southern China.

Beijing is now poised to cement its grip on the area with the deep-sea port, signed off in November last year, and a colossal Special Economic Zone (SEZ) of garment and food processing factories.

Today the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port and SEZ are a prize piece in China's plethora of infrastructure projects spanning the globe under its Belt and Road initiative.

Economist and government advisor Sean Turnell says fears of the project turning into a debt-trap for Myanmar are no longer valid.

But farmer Saw Maung Nu's land is among territory earmarked to be swallowed up by the 4,200 acre site and he is scared. "If we're told to leave, where will we live?" he asks, gesturing from a hilltop to neighbouring countryside snapped up by powerful army generals and cronies eager for a windfall of Chinese cash.

4.8m unauthorised migrants in Europe Says Pew Research Center

AFP, Washington

Between 3.9 million and 4.8 million unauthorised immigrants lived in Europe in 2017, mainly recently arrived young men, numbers slightly lower from the previous year, the US-based Pew Research Center said Wednesday.

The figures "accounted for less than one percent of Europe's total population of more than 500 million," Pew said.

For the study, an unauthorised migrant was defined as a foreigners who entered the country illegally, those whose residence permit has expired, are under expulsion orders, or asylum seekers with pending decisions, Pew said.

Pew analysed data from the European Union and European Free Trade Association countries (Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Iceland).

The US researchers said the number of unauthorised migrants in Europe peaked in 2016 at between 4.1 and 5.3 million.

In 2017, 30 percent of the migrants were from the Asia-Pacific region, including Afghanistan.

The next largest group -- 23 percent of the total -- were from European countries not in the EU or the European Free Trade Association.

Another 21 percent were from North Africa and the Middle East; 17 percent from sub-Saharan Africa, and eight percent from the Americas.