

NEWS IN brief

Strong quake hits Thai-Lao border

A shallow 6.1-magnitude earthquake hit northwestern Laos near the Thai border early yesterday, the United States Geological Survey reported, alarming locals who felt buildings shake as far away as Bangkok. The quake hit at 6:50am, roughly three hours after a 5.7-magnitude earthquake in the same region triggered an immediate suspension to Laos' largest-capacity power plant located near its epicentre. Tremors could be felt more than 700 kilometres (435 miles) away in the Thai capital, where Pope Francis is currently on a four-day visit.

Four protesters killed in Iraq capital

Four protesters were killed and dozens wounded in overnight clashes with security forces in Iraq's capital Baghdad, security and medical sources told AFP yesterday. Anti-government demonstrators have spread from their main protest camp in Tahrir (Liberation) Square onto three bridges linking the banks of the river Tigris. Security forces have erected concrete barriers on the bridges to hold protesters back.

Malaysia arrests 700 Chinese over scam

Almost 700 Chinese nationals were arrested in Malaysia when authorities raided a building and busted a major online investment scam operation, immigration officials said yesterday. With a fairly open visa regime and relatively developed telecommunications infrastructure, Malaysia has become a hotspot for foreigners looking to set up centres to run online scams. Some suspects attacked security officials while others fled.



Sri Lanka's President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his brother and former leader Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was appointed as the new Prime Minister, greet former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and former President Maithripala Sirisena during the swearing in ceremony in Colombo, Sri Lanka yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Nepal's ailing PM reshuffles cabinet

REUTERS, Kathmandu

New ministers were inducted into Nepal's government yesterday as part of a cabinet reshuffle by ailing Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli, who is trying to strengthen his grip, improve ties with a powerful ally and minimise internal party conflict.

A government statement issued late Wednesday said Oli dropped six cabinet ministers and three junior ministers. Oli's critics said the political leader was adding loyalists to his government because political allies were questioning the 67-year-old leader's authority. He has been in poor health since a kidney transplant in India in 2007. Although local media have reported that Oli may seek further treatment soon, his office has remained silent on the issue.

Oli, a moderate Communist, led a coalition with former Maoist rebels to a shock victory in national elections about two years ago. The former Maoists have since merged with Oli's group.

In what was seen as a large concession to former Maoists, Oli agreed to allow former rebel chief Prachanda to be the executive chairman of the ruling Nepal Communist Party, a party spokesman told reporters on Wednesday.

Prachanda has been pressing Oli to let him take over as prime minister before his term expired in 2022 under a power sharing deal between the two leaders.

Independent political analysts allowing Prachanda to run the party will let Oli complete his term as prime minister.

Oli during his first term stood up against a border standoff with India, a neighbouring power with major political and economic clout in Nepal.

The dispute resulted in a months-long shortage of essential goods like fuel and medicines in 2015 and 2016. India has denied imposing a blockade.

US bill aims to destroy HK

Says Chinese FM, threatens retaliation as anti-govt protesters stay holed up on campus surrounded by cops

AFP, Hong Kong

China yesterday accused the United States of seeking to "destroy" Hong Kong and threatened retaliation after Congress passed new legislation supporting the pro-democracy movement that has thrown the city into nearly six months of turmoil.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi said the passage of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act "indulges violent criminals" that China blames for the worsening unrest and aims to "muddle or even destroy Hong Kong".

The legislation -- which now awaits President Donald Trump's signature into law -- backs universal suffrage, freedom from arbitrary arrest, and sanctions against those who contravene such principles.

It was passed by the House of Representatives on Wednesday despite warnings from China, which angrily rejects criticism of its handling of Hong Kong.

Hong Kong's months of protest began with a now-shelved bill to allow extraditions to mainland China, which revived fears that Beijing was slicing into the city's freedoms.

Millions of angry citizens have taken to the streets in giant marches, and protesters have repeatedly clashed with

police in a movement that has widened to include calls for democracy and an inquiry into alleged police brutality. Hong Kong's Beijing-appointed leaders have rebuffed the demands.

The resistance has focused in recent days on the campus of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, with fiery clashes that saw police firing tear gas and rubber bullets at protesters, who shot arrows and lobbed Molotov cocktails.

The university remained under siege yesterday, with dozens of holdouts in the movement's signature black colours defying official calls to surrender.

Hundreds have fled the campus out of fear or deteriorating living conditions this week, most of them quickly arrested by police on rioting allegations.

Exhausted protesters draped in gold and silver medical blankets continued to trickle out yesterday.

But a 30-year-old masked protester who gave his name as "Mike" scoffed at surrendering, saying international and local pressure would cause authorities to make a humiliating "retreat".

"Please try! You're welcome (to storm the campus)," he told AFP, in a message to police.



Lanka court drops graft charges against Gotabaya

Allows him to make his first overseas trip

AFP, Colombo

Corruption charges against Sri Lankan president Gotabaya Rajapaksa were dropped yesterday by a court, which handed his passport back as he acquired immunity from prosecution after being elected last weekend.

Under Sri Lanka's constitution, no court proceedings can be maintained against a serving president. However, action could be taken after he leaves office.

The High Court had indicted Rajapaksa in September last year on charges of siphoning off 33 million rupees (around \$185,000) in state funds to build a memorial for his parents.

The court also released his passport which had been impounded, allowing him to make his first overseas trip as president to India next week at the invitation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Rajapaksa was being tried before a special court established by the former government to expedite high-profile corruption cases.

Rajapaksa, 70, had pleaded not guilty.

Six others were also charged along with Rajapaksa and their fate will be decided when the case is taken up for a hearing on January 9, the court said.

Official sources said Rajapaksa was also entitled to claim foreign sovereign immunity in respect to two civil cases filed against him in California for allegedly causing the death of a senior newspaper editor and torture.

He has denied responsibility for the killing of anti-establishment editor Lasantha Wickrematunge in 2009 and torturing suspects when he headed the defence ministry under brother Mahinda's presidency between 2005 and 2015.

Wickrematunge was murdered days before he was due to testify in a defamation case brought by Gotabaya Rajapaksa after his paper accused him of corruption in a deal to buy MiG jets from Ukraine.

Rajapaksa was elected president on Saturday and yesterday swore in his brother Mahinda as prime minister.



Saudi king urges Iran to abandon expansionism

Hopes for political settlement in Yemen

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia's King Salman urged arch-rival Iran on Wednesday to abandon an expansionist ideology that has "harmed" its own people, following violent street protests in the Islamic republic.

Awake of demonstrations erupted in the sanctions-hit country on Friday after an announcement that petrol prices would be raised by as much as 200 percent with immediate effect.

The European Union yesterday urged Iran to show "maximum restraint" in handling protests that left several people dead, urging an end to violence.

"We hope the Iranian regime chooses the side of wisdom and realises there is no way to overcome the international position that rejects its practises, without abandoning its expansionist and destructive thinking that

has harmed its own people," the king told the consultative Shura Council.

The region's leading Shia and Sunni powers have no diplomatic ties and are at odds over a range of issues, including the wars in Syria and Yemen.

"The kingdom has suffered from the policies and practises of the Iranian regime and its proxies," King Salman said, quoted by the foreign ministry, reiterating that Riyadh does not seek war but is "ready to defend its people".

Saudi leaders regularly accuse Iran of stirring conflicts by supporting Shia movements in the region.

Tehran denies the charges and in turn says Riyadh supports radical Islamist groups.

Separately, the Saudi foreign ministry said it welcomed a US decision this week to halt sanctions waivers for Iran's Fordow plant.

Kingdom suffered from policies of Iranian regime and its proxies: Salman

EU urges end to Iran protest violence



School teachers serve drinking water to children during the launch of "Water Bell" programme to ensure children drink sufficient water in the day, at a government-run school in Secunderabad, the twin city of Hyderabad yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

SOUTH KOREA SUMMIT

North Korea's Kim rejects invitation

AFP, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has rejected an invitation by South Korean President Moon Jae-in to a regional summit next week, Pyongyang's state media said yesterday, in a stark illustration of the dire relations between the neighbours.

South Korea is due to host a summit with Southeast Asian leaders in its port city of Busan from next Monday, and Moon had previously expressed hope that Kim would attend.

Kim received a personal letter from Moon on November 5, North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said, but dismissed the prospect of the leader attending the summit.

In a commentary, it accused the South of failing



to carry out agreements reached between the two Koreas and harming cross-border ties by relying on the United States.

"How can we sit face to face and solve things with such a partner entrusting everything to the outsider without any independence and self-standing attitude," the agency said.

Given the failure of past summits, a North-South meeting for "mere form's sake would be pointless", it added.

KCNA said Seoul had asked Pyongyang to send a special envoy if Kim could not attend.

Moon held three meetings with the North Korean leader last year.

Military, govt back Suu Kyi

Gambia to open its case before UN court in December

AFP, Yangon

Both Myanmar's military and its civilian government are behind the decision to Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi to defend her country against allegations of genocide at the UN's top court, an army spokesman said yesterday.

In a shock move, State Counsellor Suu Kyi's office announced Wednesday the one-time democracy icon would travel to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague to lead the defence team.

West African nation Gambia is due to open its case at the ICJ in December on behalf of the 57 member states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

The mainly Muslim nation accuses Myanmar of breaching the 1948 Genocide Convention through its bloody military crackdown in 2017 against its Rohingya Muslim community in Rakhine state.

"We're cooperating in this case and our legal experts are working together," military spokesman Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun told AFP yesterday, referring to the armed forces and civilian government.

ROHINGYA GENOCIDE CASE AT ICJ



army chief Min Aung Hlaing, with whom she has long had strained ties.

Some 740,000 Rohingya fled over the border into Bangladeshi camps as the military swept through northern Rakhine state.

Refugees brought with them accounts of widespread murder, rape and arson -- violence UN investigators branded as genocide.

Myanmar says the operations were justified to root out Rohingya militants and insists its own committees are adequate to investigate allegations of abuse.

Critics say the domestic panels have whitewashed atrocities.

The ICJ case will be the first of several international legal attempts to bring Myanmar to justice over the Rohingya crisis.

Political observer Soe Myint Aung said he did not think Suu Kyi would be heading to The Hague at the military's behest, "although she may wish they reciprocate her actions of goodwill".

SYDNEY SMOKE

Australia PM denies climate link

AFP, Sydney

Australia's Prime Minister yesterday denied his climate policies had caused unprecedented bushfires ravaging the country and insisted his government was doing enough to tackle global warming.

As dozens of new blazes scorched the countryside and the country's largest city was cloaked in hazardous smoke, conservative leader Scott Morrison defended his climate record, saying Australia was "doing our bit".

His comments came after weeks spent refusing to speak about the link between climate change and deadly fires described by the emergency services as unprecedented in number and scale for the early bushfire season.

Bundles of cash rain down during raid

REUTERS, New Delhi

There was a startling shower of crisp currency notes from the sixth floor of a building in Kolkata when the members of the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence or DRI were conducting a drive at a private office on that floor.

The incident happened when passers-by noticed someone struggling to get rid of bundles of Indian currencies through the sixth floor window of the building at the city's Bentineck Street on Wednesday, according to local media.

A video of the incident that has been circulating on social media shows a man from inside a window of the office desperately trying to clear bundles of notes with a sweeper onto the street.

Soon after, as the notes started raining down, there was chaos in the area and people rushed to get hold of their share of free cash.

DRI sources told Press Trust of India (PTI) that its sleuths had gone to the office of a private company engaged in export-import activities located on that floor to conduct search operations for alleged evasion of duty.

However, it cannot be definitely said that there was a relation between the search operations and the shower of currency notes on the street below, the sources replied when asked.

Police said investigations into the incident are underway.