

NEWS IN brief

Sonia Gandhi turns 73, wishes pour in

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Concerned over growing incidents of crime against women in various parts of India, Congress President Sonia Gandhi yesterday spent a quiet 73rd birthday sans celebrations. However, birthday greetings came in for Sonia from all corners of the country, including from Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Congress leaders. Sonia's children Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, as well as several other top leaders did not wish Gandhi on social media as they would normally do, respecting her decision not to celebrate her birthday.

Finland picks youngest-ever prime minister

AFP, Helsinki

Finland's Social Democrats elected a 34-year-old former transport minister to the post of prime minister on Sunday, making her the youngest head of government in the country's history. Sanna Marin narrowly won Sunday's vote to replace outgoing leader Antti Rinne, who resigned on Tuesday after losing the confidence of the coalition partner Centre Party over his handling of a postal strike. "We have a lot of work to do to rebuild trust," Marin told reporters on Sunday night.

French strike chaos deepens

AFP, Paris

France's transport chaos deepened yesterday on the fifth day of a nationwide strike over pension reforms, ramping up tensions at the start of a crucial week in President Emmanuel Macron's battle with trade unions. With only two of the Paris metro's 16 lines running as normal and suburban trains also heavily disrupted, many commuters slipped behind the wheel to try to get to work in torrential rain, causing major gridlock.



Smoke from the volcanic eruption of Whakaari, also known as White Island, is pictured from a boat in New Zealand yesterday. Inset, White Island Tour operators rescuing people minutes after the volcano erupted. Five people were killed, 18 were injured and several more were left stranded after the island volcano popular with tourists erupted unexpectedly.

PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP



INDIA RAPE-MURDER CASE

Victim's relatives to get guns and guards

AFP, Lucknow

Indian police yesterday deployed round-the-clock protection and promised a weapons licence to the family of an alleged rape victim who died after being set on fire on the way to testify in court.

The woman told police in her dying testimony that two of her alleged rapists repeatedly pushed her to withdraw the court case before attacking her last week with three other men in Uttar Pradesh state.

"We have deputed personal security officers for the brother and sister of the victim, apart from deploying police force in the village," Uttar Pradesh's Unnao district police chief Vikrant Vir told AFP.

The family's request for an arms licence would be given priority processing, Vir added.

All five men have been arrested and charged with murder, with two of them still facing rape charges.

The special provisions for the 23-year-old's brother and sister came as public anger grows about perceived police inaction in preventing and pursuing sexual assault cases across the country.

India has long battled a high number of violent crimes against women, particularly sexual assault, with more than 33,000 rapes reported in 2017.

Victims and their families often complain of harassment from alleged perpetrators demanding that they withdraw their cases or agree to out-of-court settlements as court action drag on for years.

The conviction rate in rape cases is 32 percent. The brutal death of the young woman, whose name was not released for legal reasons, was the latest in a string of cases in which alleged sexual attack victims have been murdered.

Kim risks losing 'everything' All people 'graduated'

Warns Trump after N Korea claims major weapons test

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump warned Sunday that North Korea's Kim Jong Un had "everything" to lose through hostility towards the United States, after Pyongyang said it had carried out a major new weapons test.

"Kim Jong Un is too smart and has far too much to lose, everything actually, if he acts in a hostile way," Trump tweeted in response to the unspecified test at the Sohae space launch centre.

The announcement of Saturday's test came just hours after Trump said he would be "surprised" by any hostile action from the North, emphasising his "very good relationship" with Kim.

North Korea yesterday slammed Trump for "bluffing" and called him "an old man bereft of patience" as Pyongyang ramps up pressure on Washington over stalled nuclear talks.

"Our action is for his surprise. So, if he does not get astonished, we will be irritated," Kim Yong Chol, who served as the North's counterpart to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo until the collapse of the Hanoi meeting, said in a statement carried by the official KCNA news agency.

Trump and Kim engaged in months of mutual insults and threats of devastation in 2017, sending tensions soaring before a diplomatic rapprochement the following year.

The pair have met three times since June 2018 but with little progress towards denuclearization. Pyongyang has set Washington a December 31 deadline to make new concessions to kickstart stalled talks.

"North Korea, under the leadership of Kim Jong Un, has tremendous economic potential, but it must denuclearise as promised," Trump tweeted.

"Nato, China, Russia, Japan, and the entire world is unified on this issue!"

Writing that Kim had "signed a strong Denuclearization Agreement" at their June 2018 summit in Singapore, Trump warned: "He does not want to void his special relationship with the President of the United States or interfere with the US Presidential Election in November."

Separately, interviewed on the CBS TV news program "Face the Nation," US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien was asked whether North Korea was preparing to restart nuclear tests.

"I hope not. That would be a mistake on the part of North Korea," O'Brien said.

"Kim Jong Un promised to denuclearize North Korea," O'Brien said. "And we expect him to live up to the promise he made at the summit in Singapore. And we hope he'll do so."



Says China, slams foreign estimates of numbers detained

REUTERS, Beijing

People held in camps in China's Xinjiang region have now "graduated" and new trainees will have the freedom to come and go, the regional governor said yesterday.

Governor Shohrat Zakir also hit out at Western criticism of the camps and said the United States had launched a smear campaign against Xinjiang.

The United Nations and human rights groups estimate that between 1 million and 2 million people, mostly ethnic Uighur Muslims, have been detained in harsh conditions as part of what Beijing calls an anti-terrorism campaign. China has repeatedly denied any mistreatment of Uighurs and says the camps provide vocational training. It describes the detainees as students.

"At present the trainees who have participated...have all graduated," Zakir told a news conference in Beijing. "With the help of the government, stable employment

has been achieved and their quality of life has been improved."

Xinjiang will continue with training based on "independent will" and "the freedom to come and go", he said.

China has not provided any official figures on how many people have been held in the camps but Zakhir said foreign estimates were "pure fabrication". He gave no details.

He also called a measure passed by the US House of Representatives that condemned China's treatment of the Uighur minority a severe violation of international law and a gross interference in China's internal affairs.

"The US is getting restless and has launched a smear campaign against Xinjiang," Zakir said. "But no force can stop Xinjiang's progress toward stability and development." Claims about the camps are hard to verify as China only allows periodic supervised visits and gives little information on their operations.



XINJIANG CAMPS

Trump impeachment drive enters crucial week

Democrats poised to move forward with charges

AFP, Washington

The impeachment proceedings against President Donald Trump in a sharply divided US Congress were set to enter a new phase yesterday when the House Judiciary Committee convenes a hearing expected to result in specific charges against the Republican leader.

Democrats accuse Trump of abusing his power by allegedly linking military aid for Ukraine and a White House meeting with President Volodymyr Zelensky to a request that Kiev investigate a potential 2020 rival, Democrat Joe Biden, and his son Hunter.

The real estate mogul president has ridiculed the inquiry as a "hoax" but Democrats believe they have, in the words of Judiciary Committee chairman Jerry Nadler, a "rock-solid case" showing that Trump put his personal political interests above those of the country.

"I think the case we have, if presented to a jury, would be a guilty verdict in about three minutes flat," Nadler, an attorney by training, told CNN on Sunday.

The congressman, a long-time foe of Trump who hails from New York, did not rule out the possibility of a vote on impeachment in the Democratic-run House of Representatives by the end of the week.

"My goal is to do it as expeditiously, but as fairly as possible," he said.

That would put the proceedings -- which began in late September with the opening of the House investigation -- on a fast track to a trial in early 2020 before the Republican-controlled Senate, where Trump is expected to prevail.

The president has repeatedly blasted the House inquiry as a partisan attack -- he tweeted Sunday that the Judiciary hearings are part of a "hoax" by the "No Due Process, Do Nothing Democrats."

And his spokeswoman Stephanie Grisham accused Democrats of "weaponizing impeachment," telling Fox News: "That's a shame -- and it's dividing this country."

Nadler was set to convene his committee at 9:00 am yesterday, to hear evidence from both Democratic and Republican lawyers from the judiciary committee.



A protester breaks a glass window of a city bus during a strike called by All Assam Chutia Students' Union (AACSU) in protest against the government's Citizenship Amendment Bill, in Guwahati yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

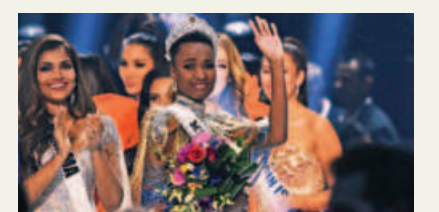
Karnataka by-polls: BJP wins 12 out of 15 seats

Karnataka's ruling BJP firmly established its majority in the assembly yesterday, winning 12 of 15 seats for which by-polls were held last week. Chief Minister BS Yediyurappa's four-month-old government -- formed after defections from the previous Congress-Janata Dal Secular coalition -- needed only seven seats for a majority but won five extra at the cost of the Congress. Conceding defeat, the Congress said voters had "accepted defectors". Two top leaders of the party have quit and more are likely to follow. By-polls were held on Thursday for 15 of 17 assembly seats left vacant by MLAs who resigned in July, causing the collapse of the Congress-JDS coalition.

Saudi Arabia ends gender segregation in restaurants

Restaurants and cafes in Saudi Arabia are no longer required to have gender-segregated entrances, officials said, in a further easing of social restrictions in the ultra-conservative Islamic kingdom. Eateries have long required one entrance for single men and another for women and families, in a country where the once-powerful religious police zealously enforced sex segregation in public places for decades. The ministry of municipalities and rural affairs said on Twitter Sunday it was eliminating several requirements for restaurants, including the need for "an entrance for bachelors and a separate entrance for families". It was unclear whether a restriction on seating inside restaurants will also be removed.

Miss South Africa wins 2019 Miss Universe crown



Miss South Africa was crowned Miss Universe on Sunday in Atlanta after a lavish ceremony filled with glitter and heartfelt speeches about female empowerment. Zozibini Tunzi, 26, finished first ahead of the Puerto Rican and Mexican finalists in a flashy televised event, hosted by American comic turned TV personality Steve Harvey. Television personalities Vanessa Lachey and Olivia Culpo served as backstage commentators, and a panel of seven women determined the winner. Tunzi earned cheers during her closing speech, a new segment of the competition, in which she talked about wanting to empower young women to feel confident. SOURCE: TOI, AFP

Campaign enters final stretch

Opinion polls show Conservatives maintaining healthy lead

AFP, London

Britain's election campaign entered its frenetic final stretch yesterday with Prime Minister Boris Johnson trying to lock in the votes needed to draw a line under years of arguments and paralysis over European Union membership.

Johnson is hoping Thursday's poll hands his ruling Conservatives a majority, to allow him to push through his Brexit divorce deal with Brussels.

Parliament has been deadlocked since the result of the last election in 2017, which saw the Tories lose their majority and weaken their ability to implement the result of the 2016 referendum on EU membership.

The main opposition Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn is trying to upset the odds and usher in Britain's first leftist government in nine years.

The veteran socialist has promised to negotiate his own EU divorce deal and then put it up for a vote in a new referendum that could still keep Britain partially tied to Europe -- or simply cancel Brexit outright.

Opinion polls show the Conservatives maintaining a healthy lead.

But Johnson needs to win at least half of the House of Commons seats because his party has no clear partners among the smaller parties.

Some polls suggest the vote could produce another hung parliament that

UK'S 'BREXIT ELECTION'



extends Britain's political paralysis and further frustrates the business community and Brussels.

"We're taking nothing for granted," Johnson said during a visit to a fish market in the northeastern port of Grimsby.

"We're working very, very hard

across the whole country."

The northeast of England bore the brunt of some of the global changes that made UK industries uncompetitive and forced the country to open up its fishing waters to the other 27 EU states.

Grimsby is part of a so-called "red wall" that traditionally backs Labour because of its support for trade unions and emphasis on social spending.

The party's would-be finance minister John McDonnell yesterday promised to "end austerity" and shift wealth from London to the regions in the first 100 days of a Labour-led government.

"Don't be fooled by the doubters who say our plans are unachievable," McDonnell said.

He promised to "remake the government and what people expect from it."

The deep ideological divide between the two main parties has produced a fractious and highly personal campaign that appears to have done little to change the minds of voters' who opposed or supported Brexit from the start.

Sri Lanka shakes up intel agency after Easter attacks

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka has for the first time named a military officer to head the country's main intelligence agency, which was blamed for failing to prevent Islamist extremist bombings in April that killed 259 people.

The head of the State Intelligence Service (SIS) was replaced by brigadier Suresh Sallay, a former head of military intelligence, official sources said yesterday.

It is the first time that a military officer has filled the position, and the appointment comes three weeks after Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected president promising better security.

Rajapaksa effectively ran the security forces when the military crushed Tamil separatist militants in 2009 to end Sri Lanka's bloody civil war. At the time his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa was president.

A local jihad group was blamed for the coordinated Easter Sunday attacks against three luxury hotels and three churches on April 21.

A committee of parliament which investigated lapses leading to the devastating bombings found much of the responsibility lay with the then head of the SIS, Senior Deputy Inspector General Nilantha Jayawardena.

He had been warned on April 4 by a foreign intelligence agency -- identified previously by officials as from India -- of a possible attack.

"This failure by the SIS has resulted in hundreds of deaths, many more injured and immeasurable devastation to Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans, and that must not be treated lightly," the parliamentary report said.

The then president Maithripala Sirisena has long blamed police chief Pujith Jayasundara and ministry of defence secretary Hemasiri Fernando for lapses, and initiated criminal prosecutions against them.