

Press India on media crackdown

CPJ urges US ahead of Modi visit

REUTERS, Washington

The Committee to Protect Journalists yesterday called on the US government to urge India to end a media crackdown and release six detained journalists.

A statement from CPJ President Jodie Ginsberg ahead of a state visit to Washington next week by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said there had been an increasing crackdown on India's media since he came to power in 2014.

"Journalists critical of the government and the BJP party have been jailed, harassed, and surveilled in retaliation for their work," Ginsberg said.

"India is the world's largest democracy, and it needs to live up to that by ensuring a free and independent media – and we expect the United States to make this a core element of discussions."



Cyclone affected people wade through water as Cyclone Biparjoy rises sea level in a coastal area in Sujawal of Pakistan's Sindh province yesterday. Authorities in India and neighbouring Pakistan evacuated more than 180,000 people from vulnerable coastal areas in the path of Cyclone Biparjoy, which made landfall last night.

PHOTO: AFP

INDONESIA POLLS Court rejects ballot system change

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesia's constitutional court yesterday shot down a proposed change to the country's electoral system that rights advocates had decried as an attack on democracy, ahead of a vote next year.

The legal challenge stoked fears of a return to Indonesia's autocratic past and a potential delay to February's presidential and legislative polls, which could have allowed President Joko Widodo to extend his rule past the two-term limit.

The court rejected a bid by a member of the governing Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) to move the world's third-biggest democracy to a closed-ballot voting system that would have only allowed party leaders to choose MPs.

Constitutional court chief justice Anwar Usman said in a hearing yesterday that he "rejects the plaintiffs' petition in its entirety".

A ruling the other way would have been binding and could not have been immediately challenged.

The closed-ballot system was used during autocratic former president Suharto's rule and kept after his downfall in the late 1990s.

Russia hits industrial facilities in Ukraine

Kyiv reports gains in southern front despite 'powerful resistance' from Russian troops

AGENCIES

Russian missiles hit two industrial facilities in the central Ukrainian city Kryvyi Rih in the early hours of yesterday, city mayor Oleksandr Vilkul said, with a drone attack also reported in Odesa.

Vilkul said three rockets hit two industrial enterprises "that had nothing to do with the military," injuring one 38-year-old man. One car was damaged with debris of missiles downed by air defenses.

"The destruction is significant," Vilkul wrote on Telegram messaging app. In the southern port city of Odesa, authorities said air defences yesterday downed all 18 Russian drones that approached the region.

Authorities in Russia-controlled Crimea also reported a drone attack, saying they had downed 9 Ukrainian drones, reports Reuters. Kyiv yesterday reported progress in its newly launched counteroffensive, despite strong resistance from Russian troops.

"There is a gradual but steady advance of the armed forces," Ukrainian Deputy Defence Minister Ganna Malyar told a briefing.

"At the same time, the enemy is putting up powerful resistance" on the southern front, she said, referring to mined fields, kamikaze drones, and intense shelling.

After months of building expectations Ukraine early this



month launched its offensive in the south and in the east, reports AFP.

Around the frontline hotspot of Bakhmut, "the enemy is pulling up additional reserves and is trying with all its might to prevent the advance of Ukrainian forces."

Still, Malyar reported an advance of more than three kilometres (1.8 miles) in the area of Bakhmut.

Ukrainian forces have recaptured seven settlements and more than 100 square kilometres of territory, said Oleksiy Gromov of the Ukrainian armed forces' general staff.

Russia claims to have repelled all Ukrainian assaults.

Meanwhile, Russia said yesterday that it would stage local

elections in September in four Ukrainian regions that it claimed to have annexed last year.

"Elections in the new territories of the Russian Federation will take place on a single voting day on September 10, 2023," Russia's election commission said.

UN nuclear chief Rafael Grossi yesterday said the situation at the Moscow-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in Ukraine was "serious", but was being stabilised.

Grossi arrived at Europe's biggest nuclear plant to assess potential safety risks after the destruction of the Kakhovka dam, which caused huge floods and exacerbated fears for the facility's safety.

COVID PARTIES Ex-UK PM Johnson lied to MPs Parliament committee rules

AFP, London

Boris Johnson deliberately lied to MPs about lockdown-breaking parties during the Covid pandemic that would have seen him face a 90-day suspension had he not quit as a lawmaker, a parliament committee ruled yesterday.

The Privileges Committee, which probes breaches of House of Commons rules, concluded that Johnson was guilty of "repeated contempts (of parliament) and... seeking to undermine the parliamentary process".

"The contempt was all the more serious because it was committed by the prime minister, the most senior member of the government," they stated in a damning 106-page report.

"There is no precedent for a prime minister having been found to have deliberately misled the House. He misled the House on an issue of the greatest importance to the House and to the public, and did so repeatedly."

The seven-member committee has powers to recommend sanctions on rule-breakers that have to be voted on by MPs.

Sudan war death toll surges past 2,000

AFP, Khartoum

Sudan's devastating war raged on into a third month yesterday as the reported death toll topped 2,000 and after a provincial governor was killed in the remote Darfur region.

The army headed by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan has since April 15 fought the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) commanded by his former deputy Mohamed Hamdan Daglo.

The fighting has driven 2.2 million people from their homes, including 528,000 who have fled to neighbouring countries, says the International Organization for Migration.

"In our worst expectations, we didn't see this war dragging on for this long," said one Sudanese citizen, Mohamad al-Hassan Othman, who has fled his home in Khartoum.

Everything in "our life has changed," he told AFP. "We don't know whether we'll be back home or need to start a new life."

The death toll has risen above 2,000, according to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project's latest figures which cover fighting until June 9.

In long-troubled West Darfur, the violence claimed the life of Governor Khamis Abdullah Abakar, hours after he made remarks critical of the paramilitaries in a telephone interview with a Saudi TV channel.

The United Nations said "compelling eyewitness accounts attribute this act to Arab militias and the RSF", while the Darfur Lawyers Association condemned the act of "barbarism, brutality and cruelty".

Greece scours shipwreck site Hundreds of migrants feared drowned in hold

REUTERS, Kalamata

Rescuers scoured seas off Greece yesterday following a shipwreck that killed at least 79 migrants, as hopes dwindled of finding survivors and fears grew that hundreds more might have drowned trapped inside the overloaded vessel's hold.

Reports suggested between 400 and 750 people had packed the fishing boat that capsized and sank early on Wednesday morning in deep waters about 50 miles (80 km) from the southern coastal town of Pylos.

Greek authorities said 104 survivors had been brought ashore.

As it began to flounder late on Tuesday night, people on the vessel's crowded outer deck repeatedly turned down attempted assistance from a Greek coast guard boat that was shadowing it, saying they wanted to reach Italy, according to Greek authorities.

"When you are faced with such a situation... you need to be very careful in your actions," coast guard spokesperson Nikos Alexiou told state broadcaster ERT.

"You cannot carry out a violent diversion on such a vessel with so many people on board... without any sort of cooperation."

As Greece declared three days of mourning, authorities said it was unclear how many had been aboard.

They were investigating an account from a European rescue support charity that there could have been 750 people on the 20- to 30-metre-long (65- to 100-foot) boat.



PAPUA NEW GUINEA BASES US military wins 'unimpeded' access

AFP, Port Moresby

The US military can develop and operate out of bases in Papua New Guinea, according to a landmark security pact underpinning Washington's efforts to outflank China in the Pacific.

The full text of the deal was tabled in Papua New Guinea's parliament on Wednesday evening and obtained by AFP, shedding light on details that have been closely guarded since the pact was inked in May.

With Papua New Guinea's agreement, the United States will be able to station troops and vessels at six key ports and airports, including Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island and facilities in the capital Port Moresby.

Washington would have "unimpeded access" to the sites to "pre-position equipment, supplies and materiel", and have "exclusive use" of some zones, where development and "construction activities" could be carried out.

The agreement opens the door to Washington establishing a new military footprint at a strategically prized deep water port, at a time of growing rivalry with Beijing.

Perched at the southwest edge of the Pacific Ocean, Lombrum has in the past been used as a garrison for British, German, Japanese, Australian and US troops.

During World War II it was one of the largest US bases in the Pacific, with 200 ships at anchor, including six battleships and 20 aircraft carriers that were used to retake the Philippines from Japan.

China had sought its own foothold at Lombrum in recent years, before being pipped at the post by Australia and the United States, who in 2018 agreed to jointly develop the facility with Papua New Guinea.



Smoke bellows from a street after a standoff between mob and security forces at Sekhon in Imphal East during ongoing ethnic violence in India's north-eastern Manipur state yesterday. Some people have been injured, the police said, adding a few houses have been set on fire too.

PHOTO: AFP

HARASSMENT

Indian police charge BJP lawmaker

REUTERS, New Delhi

Indian police yesterday filed charges of sexual harassment and criminal intimidation against the chief of wrestling federation, a powerful member of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), following complaints by female wrestlers.

Public Prosecutor Atul Srivastav read out the charges against Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, a member of parliament from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party, at a court hearing in the capital New Delhi.

If convicted he faces up to three years in jail. In an interview on Wednesday to local media, Singh rejected all allegations against him.

After the reading out of the charges, an aide to Singh said the lawmaker "will continue to cooperate with police and will respect the court's decision."