

ASEAN FM MEET Myanmar crisis tops agenda

AFP, Jakarta

Asean foreign ministers gathered in Indonesia yesterday for talks dominated by the crisis in Myanmar, with the regional bloc divided over how or whether to reengage with the country's ruling junta.

The 2-day Association of Southeast Asian Nations meeting will be followed by talks later in the week with Beijing, Washington and other powers where US diplomat Blinken will seek to push back on China's assertiveness in South China Sea.

Myanmar has been ravaged by deadly violence since a military coup deposed Aung San Suu Kyi's government more than two years ago, unleashing a bloody crackdown on dissent.

Asean has long been decried as a toothless talking shop, and it remains split over diplomatic attempts to resolve the crisis.

Thailand PM Prayuth retires from politics



REUTERS, Bangkok

Thailand's Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha yesterday announced his retirement from politics, nine years after he took power in a military coup, and promised to stay in charge only temporarily.

His announcement was widely expected after his military-backed United Thai Nation party was thumped in a May 14 election, in which it won just 36 of the 500 house seats. He will remain caretaker premier until a new government is formed.

The former army chief led a junta until an election in 2019 and was chosen by parliament to remain prime minister for four more years. Prayuth, 69, has denied that and yesterday said he had "achieved many successes".

"As prime minister have worked hard to protect the nation, religion, monarchy for the benefit of the beloved people. The result is currently bearing fruit for the public," he said in a statement.

SUDAN CONFLICT Alarm over 'war crimes' amid calls to end fighting

AFP, Gedaref

Human Rights Watch yesterday called on the International Criminal Court to investigate possible "war crimes" in Sudan's Darfur region where fighting has intensified despite calls for an end to the conflict.

The New York-based group charged that the RSF and allied Arab militias "summarily executed" at least 28 members of the Massalit ethnic minority when they ransacked and torched much of the town of Misterei in May.

Efforts to broker an end to the violence have continued, and the east African regional bloc IGAD on Monday called on the warring parties to "sign an unconditional ceasefire".

The Sudanese army nonetheless boycotted the gathering in Addis Ababa, dampening hopes for an end to conflict with RSF.



Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, centre, poses for an official family photo with the participants of the Nato Summit in Vilnius, Lithuania yesterday. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said yesterday it would be "absurd" if Nato leaders gathering for the summit did not offer his country a timeframe for membership, after the alliance head said it would send Kyiv a "positive message".

PHOTO: AFP

Global goals on fighting poverty 'in peril': UN

Report says the world is back at hunger levels not seen since 2005

AFP, United Nations

The goals the world set to ease extreme poverty, improve access to drinking water and take steps toward sustainable development for all humanity are "in peril," the United Nations has said in a report published Monday.

"Unless we act now, the 2030 Agenda could become an epitaph for a world that might have been," UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warns in a preamble to a report assessing the UN's Sustainable Development Goals for 2030.

In 2015, UN member states adopted 17 goals intended to build a better, more sustainable future for the entire globe by the end of this decade.

"But halfway to 2030, that promise is in peril," the report says, with more than half the world likely to be left behind.

The sustainable development goals are "disappearing in the rear-view mirror." Experts assessed 140 target areas established under the Sustainable Development Goals, ranging from access to health care and the fight against climate change to combating inequality and leveling access to energy, the report notes.

On more than 30 percent of the targets, either no progress has been reported or even regression has been noted since 2015, and

moderate or severe deviation from the desired trajectory has been seen in about half of them.

For example, the Covid-19 pandemic ended a downward trend in extreme poverty, defined as living on less than \$2.15 a day.

But at the current rate, 575 million people will still be living in such conditions in 2030, most of them in sub-Saharan Africa. That is down 30 percent since 2015, but far from the hoped-for



eradication, the report says.

"Shockingly, the world is back at hunger levels not seen since 2005," the report says.

Around one in three people (2.3 billion) faced moderate or severe food insecurity in 2021, and child malnutrition is still a "global concern," it notes.

"Approximately 1.1 billion people currently live in slums or slum-like conditions in cities, with two billion more expected in the next 30 years," it says.

The pandemic, which highlighted the fragility of many

advances, has had a "devastating" impact on education.

Without new measures, only one country in six will reach the goal of universal access to secondary education by 2030, and 84 million children will not attend school, the report says.

In terms of gender equality, the report highlights "too slow" progress, noting that at the current rate, it would take 286 years to close the gap in legal protection and to abolish discriminatory laws, and 300 years to end child marriage.

And developing countries, "buried under a mountain of debt," are "the hardest hit by our collective failure to invest in the Sustainable Development Goals," said Guterres, who called for reform of international financial institutions.

"We cannot persist with a morally bankrupt financial system and expect developing countries to meet targets that developed countries met with far fewer constraints," the report adds.

Against this backdrop, the UN is calling for a September 18-19 summit to adopt "a rescue plan" for the goals.

This would seek a new commitment from member states, as well as support for Guterres's proposal for a stimulus package of an additional \$500 billion per year by 2030 to finance sustainable development.

Assange's wife appeals to US president for clemency

AFP, Geneva

The wife of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who is petitioning the British government's decision to extradite him to the United States, on Monday appealed for clemency from the US president.

The Australian publisher is the object of a US extradition request to face trial for divulging US military secrets about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"(President Joe) Biden could end this anytime. It's not in the administration's interests for Julian to be tried during an election period," said Stella Assange while speaking to the Geneva Press Club.

"The UK is... giving off the signals that it is kind of accelerating and wants Julian extradited. So Julian could very well be extradited by the end of the summer," she said. "The Biden administration would have to deal with that and I don't think that's in their interest."

Assange, 52, is being prosecuted in the United States for having published some 700,000 confidential documents related to US military and diplomatic activities, starting in 2010.

He could face decades in prison, and his supporters portray him as a martyr for press freedom.

WEST BENGAL RURAL POLLS TMC leading with over 18,000 seats

NDTV ONLINE

According to the latest declarations by the West Bengal State Election Commission, the TMC is leading in 18,332 gram panchayat seats. Its nearest rival BJP is leading in 4,592 seats out of 63,329 seats as of 5:30 pm yesterday. CPI(M) is leading in 1,894 seats. The Congress in 1,142 seats.

Other parties which included the newly formed ISF are leading in 1,721 seats, while independents which included TMC rebels won 718 seats and led in 216 seats.

Counting of votes for the three-tier panchayat polls to nearly 74,000 seats which besides the gram panchayat seats, also includes 9,730 panchayat samiti seats and 928 zilla parishad seats, began at 8:00 am yesterday peacefully amid tight security, officials said.

There are around 339 counting venues spread across 22 districts. The maximum number of counting centres is in South 24 Parganas at 28, while the minimum is in Kalimpong at four. Some northern districts are also facing inclement weather.

"Counting began at 8:00 am and is likely continue for the next two days. It will take time for the ballots to be counted and the results to be compiled," an SEC official said.

In Darjeeling hills, out of the 598 seats in Darjeeling and 281 in Kalimpong, the BGPM was leading in 21, whereas the BJP was head in one, and the independents were leading in four.

All the counting venues are manned by armed state police personnel and central forces, with prohibitory orders under Section 144 of CrPC being imposed outside the venue to avoid any untoward incidents. There are a total of 767 strong rooms across 22 districts.

ARTICLE 370 REMOVAL IN J&K India's SC to hold daily hearings on pleas from Aug 2

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court yesterday said it would begin "day-to-day" hearings from August 2 on petitions challenging Prime Minister Narendra Modi government's abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution that gave a special status on the former state of Jammu and Kashmir. A five-judge constitution bench, headed by Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud, which passed several procedural directions, fixed July 27 as the deadline for filing of written submissions by different parties. The bench said the hearing on the batch of petitions will be held on a day-to-day basis except on Mondays and Fridays, which are days for hearing miscellaneous matters in the apex court.

Indian TV channel introduces AI news anchor

TOI, New Delhi

In a significant milestone for the AI industry, Odisha TV, an Odia-based news station, has unveiled "Lisa," India's first regional AI news anchor. Lisa's introduction marks a groundbreaking moment in TV broadcasting and journalism, with the potential to revolutionize the industry. In a video shared by OTV on Twitter, Lisa confidently introduces herself, expressing her excitement for this historic occasion. The news station revealed that she would soon be hosting news updates, showcasing her capabilities as an AI news anchor. Lisa possesses the remarkable ability to speak multiple languages. OTV acknowledged the challenge of training Lisa in the Odia language and disclosed that efforts are underway to further enhance her proficiency.

HELICOPTER CRASH

Nepal retrieves bodies of 6 dead

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Authorities in Nepal retrieved the bodies of all six people killed in a helicopter crash yesterday, including five Mexican nationals, authorities said, the latest in a series of air disasters to strike the Himalayan nation.

The cause of the crash near Likhu, just northeast of the capital of Kathmandu, was not yet known, the civil aviation regulator said, adding that the government would set up a probe committee to investigate.

The helicopter was operated by Manang Air, which ferries tourists seeking a view of the country's towering peaks, including Mount Everest, the world's tallest mountain.

Rescuers have retrieved the bodies of all six, said Sita Adhikari, a regional official in the district of Solukhumbu, the site of the crash.

"The bodies have broken into pieces," Adhikari added. "More police have been sent to the location. Only then will we know details."

An airport official, Teknath Sitoula, said a Nepali pilot and the five Mexican nationals had been on board.

"The helicopter took off ... in good weather," said Raju Neupane, a spokesperson for Manang Air. "The weather was not bad. Now we can't say what caused the crash. It will have to be investigated."

The rugged mountainous nation has a history of air crashes, as many airlines fly to small airports in remote hills and near peaks shrouded in clouds and cut off from roads.

Nepal's worst air crash in 30 years killed 71 people in January, when a plane went down near the tourist city of Pokhara, leaving one body unaccounted.



Palestinian Nora Sub Laban, centre, is comforted by her son Ahmad and husband Mustafa following their eviction from their home in the Muslim Quarter in Jerusalem's old city to make way for Jewish settlers yesterday. According to Israeli anti-settlement watchdog Ir Amim, some 150 Palestinian families in Jerusalem's Old City and nearby neighbourhoods are currently threatened with eviction.

PHOTO: AFP