

Lanka court stops state land grab from Tamils

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's top court yesterday halted a government move to acquire land in northern regions still reeling from the consequences 16 years after the end of a decades-long civil war.

Sri Lanka's north bore the brunt of the conflict in the 37-year-long Tamil separatist war, which was brought to a bloody conclusion in May 2009.

Many among the Tamil minority lost their land title deeds during the years of displacement, and the area was also hit by the 2004 Asian tsunami.

The Supreme Court order concerning nearly 6,000 acres (2,428 hectares) of land came a day after UN human rights chief Volker Turk ended a three-day visit, during which he urged the authorities to return private lands still occupied by troops.

NORTH PAKISTAN

Nine dead as floodwaters sweep away children

REUTERS, Peshawar

At least nine people died when floodwaters swept away children in a river in northern Pakistan and relatives jumped into the water to try to save them yesterday, officials said.

The family was having a picnic breakfast by the Swat River and the children were in the water taking photos when the sudden flood hit, district administrator Shehzad Mahboob said.

Relatives rushed in but were also caught up in the deluge which had been swollen by monsoon rains, he added.

It was still too early to say how many children and how many adults had died, Mahboob told Reuters. Nine bodies have been recovered so far, he said. Four members of the family were rescued alive and another four are still missing.

The family group were tourists from Pakistan visiting the Swat Valley, local mayor Shahid Ali Khan said. Locals and more than 80 rescue workers were searching for survivors, rescue official Shah Fahad said.

The Provincial Disaster Management Authority later issued an alert saying there were high flood levels and warning people to take precautions.

Heatwave across Med sparks health, fire warnings

AFP, Paris

Southern European countries yesterday braced for a punishing weekend heatwave, with temperatures predicted to hit up to 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) and beyond, prompting health warnings for residents and tourists plus fears of wildfires.

The searing heat spreading across the Mediterranean from the Iberian peninsula to the Balkans and Greece comes as climate scientists warn that galloping human-induced climate change is causing more extreme weather, including longer and more intense heatwaves.

Tens of millions of people have already been sweltering in what the National Weather Service called an "extremely dangerous" heatwave across the eastern United States, including in New York and Washington, straining the power grid as people cranked up air conditioning.

Across the Atlantic in Spain, emergency medical staff readied to deal with an expected surge in heatstroke cases, particularly among vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly and people with chronic illnesses.

In neighbouring Portugal, the national meteorological agency IPMA said the heatwave would hit from today, with temperatures passing 40C in the south of the country as well as in the central Tagus and the Douro valleys in the north.

Sunday will be even hotter, the agency added, and two-thirds of the country has already been put on orange alert. Temperatures are expected to hit 42C in the capital, Lisbon. The risk of fire is at its highest inland in the northern half of Portugal, as well as on the Algarve coast popular with holidaymakers in the south.



A man with crutches walks through rubble following Israeli strikes in Jabalia, in the northern Gaza Strip, yesterday. Medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF) called for a controversial Israel- and US-backed relief effort in Gaza to be halted, branding it "slaughter masquerading as humanitarian aid".

PHOTO: AFP

NATO SUMMIT IN THE HAGUE

Trump, Europe at odds over Putin's ambitions

REUTERS, The Hague

For US President Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin is a man looking for an off-ramp to his bloody three-year assault on Ukraine.

But according to NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, the Russian leader may be just getting started. If the alliance does not invest in its defense capabilities, Rutte warned the annual NATO summit on Tuesday, Russia could attack an alliance country within three years.

By most measures, this year's NATO summit in The Hague was a success.

Member states largely agreed to a US demand to boost defense spending to 5 percent of gross domestic product. Trump, who once derided the alliance as a "rip-off," said his view had changed, while a budding romance blossomed between him and Rutte, who compared the US president to a stern "daddy" managing his geopolitical underlings.

But the summit, which ended on Wednesday, also highlighted the widening gap between how the US and Europe see the military ambitions of Russia, the

bloc's main foil.

That is despite some lawmakers in Trump's own Republican Party hardening their rhetoric in recent weeks, arguing that while the president's ambition to negotiate an end to Russia's war in Ukraine is laudable, it is now clear that Putin is not serious about coming to the table.

In a Wednesday

US, Nato allies disagree on Putin's ultimate aims

Rubio says Russia wants Ukrainian territories; Rutte warns of attack on Europe

Lack of Russia strategy a blot on otherwise successful summit

press conference, Trump conceded that it was "possible" Putin had territorial ambitions beyond Ukraine. But he insisted that the Russian leader - buffeted by manpower and materiel losses - wanted the war to end quickly.

"I know one thing; He'd like to settle," Trump said. "He'd like to get out of this thing. It's a mess for him."

Secretary of State Marco Rubio echoed Trump's view in a sideline interview with Politico, saying the US was holding off on expanding its sanctions against Moscow, in part to keep talks going.

"If we did what everybody here wants us to do - and that is come in and crush them with more sanctions - we probably lose our ability to talk to them about the ceasefire," he said.

The message from others at the summit was starkly different.

A senior Nato official told reporters in a Tuesday briefing that Putin was not in fact interested in a ceasefire - or in engaging in good-faith talks at all.

"Regardless of battlefield dynamics, we continue to doubt that Russia has any interest in meaningful negotiations," the official said.

Russia's ambitions, the senior official said, go beyond control of "certain territories at their administrative lines," as Rubio put it. Putin is instead bent on imposing his "political will" on neighboring states. Rutte put the Russian threat in existential terms.

"If we do not invest now," he said on Tuesday, "we are really at risk that the Russians might try something against Nato territory in three, five or seven years."

Armenia cops, clergy scuffle as standoff escalates

AFP, Yerevan

A scuffle broke out in Armenia yesterday between clergymen and police, part of an escalating standoff between the influential Church and the Caucasian nation's authorities.

Two sides have been at loggerheads since Catholicos Garegin II - the church's spiritual leader - began calling for Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to resign over Armenia's military defeat to Azerbaijan in 2020.

The loss of the disputed Karabakh region to Azerbaijan in 2023, Armenia's arch-foe, has divided the country and escalated the dispute.

On Wednesday, the Armenian authorities said they had foiled a coup plot involving a senior cleric who had rallied opposition to Pashinyan and more than a dozen other suspects.

The latest confrontation erupted after police arrived at the residence of the head of the Apostolic Church to arrest another senior figure, archbishop Mikael Adjapahyan.

He is accused of publicly calling for the government to be overthrown.

Masked police attempted to enter the residence of Garegin II to arrest Adjapahyan.

BORDER DISPUTE

India calls for a permanent solution with China

REUTERS, New Delhi

Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh told his Chinese counterpart that the two countries should seek a "permanent solution" to their decades-old border dispute, in a new push for a conclusive outcome.

Singh met China's Dong Jun on the sidelines of the meeting of the defence ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in Qingdao on Thursday and stressed on solving issues between the countries through a structured roadmap, India's defence ministry said in a statement yesterday.

"Singh also stressed on border management and to have a permanent solution of border demarcation by rejuvenating the established mechanism on the issue," the statement said, referring to the border talks process between the Asian giants.

New Delhi's stress on a permanent solution is considered significant as India has in the past generally used phrases such as seeking an early resolution to the dispute.

Beijing says the border dispute should not affect the larger relationship and differences should be managed properly until a mutually acceptable solution is found through dialogue.

There was no Chinese defence ministry statement yet on the meeting and its foreign ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment on India's statement.

The world's two most populous nations - both nuclear powers - share a 3,800 km (2,400 mile), largely undemarcated and disputed border in the Himalayas and have gone to war over it.

Georgia tightens screws on opposition

Jails more leaders

AFP, Tbilisi

Georgia jailed two prominent opposition figures yesterday, the latest in a string of sentences that critics condemn as a crackdown on dissent that puts nearly all opposition leaders behind bars.

Georgia has faced political unrest since the ruling Georgian Dream party claimed victory in October's parliamentary elections.

The opposition rejected the results, triggering mass protests that escalated after the government suspended negotiations on joining the European Union. Protesters accuse the ruling party of drifting toward authoritarianism and aligning the country with Moscow.

Denmark develops tool to predict ice-free Arctic summers

AFP, Copenhagen



The Danish Meteorological Institute (DMI) said yesterday it was developing a tool to predict when the Arctic will be ice-free in summer, to anticipate the consequences on the Earth's climate.

"IcyAlert is designed to provide knowledge and early warnings that society can act on," project leader Tian Tian said in a statement.

Developed by scientists in Denmark and Belgium, the system will use "artificial intelligence, advanced climate modelling and causal analysis" to predict when the Arctic will be ice-free in summer "and to assess global climate impacts".

Japan executes 'Twitter killer' who murdered nine people

AFP, Tokyo

Japan yesterday executed a man dubbed the "Twitter killer" who murdered and dismembered nine people he met online, in the nation's first enactment of the death penalty since 2022.

Takahiro Shiraishi, 34, was hanged for killing his young victims, all but one of whom were women, after contacting them on the social media platform now called X. He had targeted users who posted about taking their own life, telling them he could help them in their plans, or even die alongside them.

Justice Minister Keisuke Suzuki said Shiraishi's crimes, carried out in 2017, included "robbery, rape, murder... destruction of a corpse and abandonment of a corpse".

Japan and the United States are the only two G7 countries to still use capital punishment.



People deported from the United States disembark a repatriation flight as US Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem (not pictured) tours Department of Homeland Security operations at La Aurora International Airport in Guatemala City, Guatemala, on Thursday.

PHOTO: REUTERS