

## News

in brief

## China blasts India

**BEIJING:** China lashed out at India for hosting the Dalai Lama near their disputed border, warning yesterday that the Tibetan spiritual leader's visit has touched on the political foundation of the Asian giants' relationship. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang said bilateral ties will suffer after Indian officials hosted the 81-year-old monk last week in disputed territory and "indulged in provocative political statements." The comments were the latest salvo in a weeklong war-of-words between the two nuclear-armed neighbors over the Dalai Lama's visit, which has raised thorny territorial issues. Beijing considers the India-based Dalai Lama a dangerous separatist seeking Tibet's independence and frequently objects when governments host him on his travels. His visit to a remote monastery has been galling for Beijing because it took place in Arunachal Pradesh state, which China also claims. China appeared to be particularly incensed by remarks by the state's Chief Minister Pema Khandu, who said that India shared a border with Tibet rather than China and that Beijing had no business dictating India's domestic affairs.

## Turkish denies spying

**ZURICH:** Turkey's ambassador to Switzerland has denied that his embassy spied on expatriate Turks, distancing his staff from a criminal investigation by Swiss prosecutors into suspected espionage. The probe has drawn Switzerland into a dispute between Ankara and several European nations as Turkey seeks to drum up support in its diaspora in the run-up to a referendum on Sunday on expanding the powers of President Tayyip Erdogan. "It is certain that no such activities were conducted within the realm of our embassy," Ambassador İlhan Saygılı was quoted as telling broadcaster SRF's Rundschauf program in an interview to be aired yesterday night. Saygılı said that his deputy in Bern had been removed from office but did not confirm media reports that the diplomat and his family had sought asylum in neutral Switzerland. "If he is absolutely not guilty then he could have gone to Turkey and proven his innocence," the ambassador was quoted as saying, without specifying any accusation against his number two.



**CARACAS:** A young woman who was overcome by tear gas shot by riot police is carried away by fellow demonstrators when opposition activists clashed with riot police in Caracas. —AFP

## Venezuela student killed

**CARACAS:** A 19-year-old student died Tuesday after he was shot during clashes between Venezuelan police and demonstrators, prosecutors said, the second death in a week at violent protests against President Nicolas Maduro. Daniel Queliz was shot in the neck as police broke up protesters who want to remove Maduro from office over a spiraling economic and political crisis. He died early Tuesday in the northern city of Valencia, the state prosecution service said. It said 40 people will be charged for "acts of violence" in Monday's unrest. Maduro is fighting efforts to oust him as Venezuela, once a booming oil exporter, flounders through severe shortages and the world's highest rate of inflation. Monday saw the fifth day of clashes this month in the South American country, home to the world's largest oil reserves. Riot police in Caracas and other cities fired tear gas and water cannon at stone-throwing demonstrators, whose leaders vowed to keep up pressure on Maduro.

## Israel welcomes apology

**JERUSALEM:** A senior member of Israel's government welcomed yesterday White House spokesman Sean Spicer's apology for saying Adolf Hitler did not use chemical weapons, comments that overlooked the killing of millions of Jews in Nazi gas chambers. "Since he apologized and retracted his remarks, as far as (I) am concerned, the matter is over," Intelligence and Transport Minister Israel Katz said in a statement, citing the "tremendous importance of historical truth and remembrance" of the victims of the Holocaust. Spicer made the assertion at a daily news briefing, during a discussion about the April 4 chemical weapons attack in Syria that killed 87 people. Washington has blamed the attack on the government of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. "You had someone as despicable as Hitler who didn't even sink to using chemical weapons," Spicer said when asked about Russia's alliance with the Syrian government.

## Navalny calls for rally

**MOSCOW:** Russia's top opposition leader Alexei Navalny yesterday called fresh protests after rallying the biggest anti-Kremlin demonstrations in years and drawing a harsh response from the authorities. Navalny—who was released Monday after serving 15 days in jail over last month's protests—urged citizens to rally on the country's June 12 Russia Day holiday for a new round of anti-corruption demonstrations. "Let's go out on the streets on June 12 with our former slogans and under the national flag," Navalny wrote in an internet post. "We have two months for preparations. We will attract more towns and gather more people."

## Zambia's Hichilema charged

**LUSAKA:** Zambian opposition leader Hakainde Hichilema has been arrested and charged with treason for allegedly obstructing the motorcade of President Edgar Lungu, the nation's police chief said yesterday. Hichilema, an economist and wealthy businessman, was detained on Tuesday after an incident involving the motorcade as it passed through Mongu, 500 km (300 miles) west of the capital Lusaka. "It has been established that the opposition leader disobeyed police orders to clear the way, thereby putting the life of the head of state in danger," police chief Kakoma Kanganja told reporters. "We have today jointly charged and arrested Mr Hichilema and five others with treason."

## PAKISTAN HINDU WOMEN HOPE FOR 'PROTECTION' IN NEW LAW

WOMEN LIVE IN THE SHADOW OF CONSTANT FEAR

**ISLAMABAD:** Sapna Gobia is busy preparing for her wedding in Pakistan in a few weeks. In many ways, her wedding will follow traditions passed down through generations, with the bride and groom circling a sacred fire lit by their families. But unlike the marriage of her parents, Gobia's will be formalized by a government certificate under a new Hindu marriage law. The 25-year-old will be one of millions of women from mostly-Muslim Pakistan's Hindu minority who now have the right to a certificate establishing her marital status under the Hindu Marriage Act 2017 that was signed into law on March 19.

"We - Hindu girls and married women have lived in the shadow of constant fear ... of being kidnapped, forced to abandon our faith and convert and re-married forcibly to someone not from our faith," said Gobia, a graduate in English literature from a government college in the town of Dharaki in southern Pakistan. She hopes the new marriage law will help prevent such incidents of kidnapping of Hindu minority women and their forced conversion to other faiths for bigamous, forced marriages.

"With our marriages now legally registered with government authority ... no one could be able to stop us and our husbands from proving our marital status," Gobia said. "More importantly, bigamy has now been termed an unlawful and punishable crime in the new law - that is a big relief." After partition from India in 1947, and the creation of Pakistan as a separate state for Muslims, marriages of the Hindu minority were not officially recognized, leaving Hindu women without protection under the law.

Hindus in Pakistan are now estimated to number around 3 million out of a population estimated at nearly 190 million. Discrimination and violence against religious minorities is common. "Our married daughters and sisters have been kidnapped by local non-Hindu influentials and forced to convert to Islam," said lawyer Arjun Das, chairman of Pakistan Council of Meghwar, a Hindu community, who campaigned for the marriage law. "Then they have been gotten forcibly re-married off to their influential kidnappers ... without their victims' consent."

## Kidnapped

Sixteen-year-old Anjali Kumari was kidnapped three years ago from her home in Dharaki in broad daylight - and was forcibly converted to Islam within a day. "We had to take refuge in Karachi as we faced murder threats by the kidnappers with connections to a local political group when we raised our voices and took to the streets calling for release of our daughter," Kumari's father,

"She succumbed to the pressure and eventually went away with him."

## Protection

The historic Hindu Marriage Act aims to protect families, and the women and children of the Hindu community particularly, by recognizing their marriages in law, said Zahid Hamid, federal law and justice minister. It will also allow Hindus to file for divorce and remarry. "Marriage

Representatives of the Pakistan Hindu Council and Pakistan Council of Meghwar have long struggled for a law to protect women from conversions to other faiths and forced marriages. But Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, patron-in-chief of Pakistan Hindu Council, said the new law needed strong political will to ensure its implementation and campaigns in schools and the media to raise awareness of the legislation. "It is the responsibility of the state to pro-



**ALLAHABAD:** Hindu devotees walk towards the Sangam river confluence in Allahabad. —AFP

Kundan Mal Meghwar, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"She was forcibly converted and married off ... against her free will," Mal Meghwar said. A court in the port city of Karachi ruled in 2014 that Anjali should stay in a shelter in the city where her parents could visit her. "But we were never allowed to meet our daughter, giving her the impression that we were no longer interested in saving her ... from her kidnapper," he said.

registrars will be appointed by the government in different parts of the country as provided in the law," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "The registrars will be authorized to register Hindu marriages under the act.

Besides maintaining Hindu marriage records, they will also be authorized to issue legal marriage certificates." The minister said particular efforts had been made to address the issue of bigamy in Pakistan.

vide all sorts of protections to the country's minority groups including (protecting) Hindus from all sorts of atrocities meted out to them and ensuring they enjoy the same rights as any other person in the country," Vankwani said. High court lawyer and minority rights activist, Nand Lal Lavha, said awareness among lawyers, magistrates and police was key to ensuring the new law brought justice for Hindu girls and women. —Reuters

## LIVES HALF-LIVED: THE HIDDEN COST OF CONFLICT IN KASHMIR

**MUZAFFARABAD:** Muhammad Ashraf's eyes fill with tears, overwhelmed by grief and joy all at once, as he recounts being reunited with his family 26 years after they were torn apart by insurgency in disputed Kashmir. "My son was 12 years old when we separated. Now my grandson is 16," he said of his odyssey to see his loved ones again, bittersweet for its brevity and because it lay bare how much he missed out on. In 1990 Ashraf was serving with Indian security forces far from his family's village, in Indian-held Kashmir near Pakistani territory, as a violent insurgency against New Delhi gathered pace.

By October that year, amid reports of mass detentions and widespread torture as authorities tried to crack down on militants, Ashraf's family fled in fear. Along with 20,000 other Indian Kashmiris, they crossed the de facto border and sought refuge in Pakistan's territory. Ashraf was left behind. It was a week before word even reached him that they were gone, and little did his family realise it would be more than a quarter of a century before they embraced him again. "The golden time of my life, which I should have spent with my family, is gone," he said.

Ashraf's tale highlights the plight of thousands of refugee families divided by a conflict that stretches back as far as the bloody partition of India in 1947, when the subcontinent shook off British rule. Kashmir is one of the world's most dangerous flashpoints, bitterly split between nuclear rivals India and Pakistan but claimed in full by both. They have already fought two wars over the mountainous region, with no end to the dispute in sight.

## Trapped

Ashraf found himself trapped by his career as a soldier. "I thought if I quit my post I would be considered a traitor," he said, adding he also feared repercussions for the one daughter who also remained in Indian Kashmir. He was not allowed to visit Pakistani territory, while on active duty. But when he retired in 2006 he redoubled efforts to see his family again. First Ashraf applied to use the Kashmir Bus Service, which was launched a year earlier to facilitate meetings between divided families. He tried five

times in total - all in vain. Access to the service remains largely at the whim of authorities and is routinely disrupted during periods of high tensions. He then decided to apply for a passport to allow him to cross the formal border further south in Punjab province, but the document took 10 years to procure. The reasons for the delay are unclear, but it is possible that as a former Indian soldier, authorities were not keen for him to travel to Pakistan. The passport finally arrived in 2016 - but it was too late for him to see his parents again, they both died in Pakistani-held Kashmir. His children's weddings, the births of his grandchildren all took place there too - over the long years they were without him. He also missed a lifetime with his wife, Badar Un Nisa, who is now 62. "I wept during the weddings of all my children because I missed my husband," she said. "My mother worked very hard," Ashraf's son Muhammad Asghar added. "It is very difficult for a woman to bring up her children without her husband's support."

## Near but far

When a ceasefire agreement was signed in 2003, authorities designated two spots on the Neelum River, which cuts through Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir, where relatives on either side can wave to one another across the rushing waters. Ashraf's family describe catching a glimpse of him there once, at Eid, in 2006 - 16 years in to their separation. The river is just around 80 feet wide there, but with armed soldiers watching closely on either side, all the families can do is look. For many, it only heightens the pain. Ashraf Jan, 60, who is from the same village as Muhammad Ashraf-Karen in Indian-held Kashmir - has also been separated from her family since 1990.

She describes her heartbreak at seeing her son, Ashiq Hussain, across the Neelum River. "I wanted to jump in and reach him," she said. "I was weeping on the one side of the river while my son was weeping on the other side. We were helpless," she added. Seeing them again this February was like being "re-born," she explained. But for her and Ashraf both the reunions are tinged with grief: their visas only lasted a month. —AFP



**MUZAFFARABAD:** Elderly Indian Kashmiri Muhammad Ashraf (center) is being helped by his son Muhammad Asghar (left) and a relative as he touches the grave of his mother at a graveyard on the outskirts of Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistani-administered Kashmir. —AFP



**DHAKA:** Activists from a Bangladesh Islamist group shout slogans as they take part in a protest calling for a statue referred to as a 'Greek goddess' installed at the Supreme Court to be destroyed or removed in Dhaka. —AFP

## BANGLADESH PM BACKS ISLAMISTS ON CONTROVERSIAL STATUE

**DHAKA:** Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been accused of "kowtowing" to hardline Islamists after expressing dislike for a controversial statue that religious radicals want removed from the Supreme Court. The statue of "lady justice" has ruffled feathers in the Muslim-majority nation, with hardliners staging massive protests in recent weeks against what they say is a Greek god unbecomingly Bangladesh. Protesters want the statue of the blindfolded woman holding scales, said to represent justice, destroyed and replaced with a Quran, despite Bangladesh's secular constitution.

Hasina, who had kept the furor at arms length, broke her silence late Tuesday after inviting top Islamist leaders to her residence where she described the statue as "ridiculous." "I don't like it myself. It's being called a Greek statue, but how did a Greek statue get here?" she said in comments published in online news portal bdnews24.com. Court officials have defended the statue as a symbol of justice while secular groups expressed dismay that Hasina and the secular ruling party, the Awami League, was seemingly siding with hardliners on the issue.

"The government and Awami League's kowtowing to this type of demand will be

suicidal for Bangladesh," Shahriar Kabir, secretary of Bangladesh's leading secular rights group said. In a further major concession to Islamists, Hasina also said Tuesday her government would recognize degrees from hardline madrassas, paving the way for millions of religious scholars to qualify for jobs in public and private sectors. The prime minister made the announcement after meeting Islamist leaders including the head of Hefazat-e-Islam, a fundamentalist group that has called for gender-segregated workplaces and tough blasphemy laws.

Conservative Bangladesh has experienced increasing tensions between hardliners and secularists in recent years, suffering a spate of killings of atheist bloggers, religious minorities and foreigners. Her policy shift on madrassas has shocked secular groups, who consider it further evidence of creeping Islamisation as headline elements push for Bangladeshi society to more closely reflect its Muslim traditions. It comes as Hasina prepares for an early general election later this year, more than 12 months ahead of schedule, with analysts speculating the prime minister could be trying to corner the Islamist-allied centre-right opposition. —AFP

## WAR BETTER THAN PEACE FOR UGANDA'S REBEL CHILDREN

**NAIROBI:** Children whose mothers were raped by rebels in Uganda say war was better than peace because they felt a greater sense of family cohesion and status during the conflict compared to the violence, stigma and rejection they face in peacetime, a study showed. Researchers from Canada's McGill University interviewed 60 children born to women abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebel group, which waged a brutal insurgency in Uganda for two decades until 2005, when it was forced over the border.

"The fact that children and youth identify the state of war and captivity - when violence, upheaval, starvation, deprivation and ongoing terror were at its height - as better than life during peacetime is highly disconcerting," Myriam Denov, the study's lead author and professor at

McGill's School of Social Work, said in a statement on Tuesday. The children, some of whom were fathered by LRA's messianic leader, Joseph Kony, often drew themselves and their siblings with sad faces after the war.

"In my family, they hate the three of us who were born in captivity," the researchers quoted one child as saying. "My uncle beats us and said he would kill us." The children said their families and communities perceived them as dangerous, rebel children who had brought bad spirits with them from the bush. The LRA is notorious for mutilating civilians and kidnapping children for use as fighters. Many children were forced to kill their friends and family. Dominic Ongwen, a former LRA commander who was captured and recruited as a young boy, is on trial for war crimes at the International Criminal Court. —Reuters