



A Nepalese smears 'sindoor' or vermillion powder, to a boy during Sindoor Jatra festival in Bhaktapur, Nepal on April 15. Devotees mark the festival by playing traditional drums, singing, dancing and carrying chariots of various deities around town while throwing sindoor (vermillion powder), to welcome the advent of spring and the New Year. (AP)

Asia

Najib trial enters 2nd day: The corruption trial of Malaysia's former Prime Minister **Najib Razak** entered a second day Monday, with a central bank investigator taking the stand in the case involving the transfer of suspicious money into Najib's bank accounts.

One of few Southeast Asian leaders to be arraigned after losing office, Najib was solemn as he sat in the dock listening to the testimony.

Central bank investigator Azizul Adzani Mohamad Ghafar, the second witness, testified he secured documents in 2015 related to the bank accounts of Najib, SRC International and another company. SRC is a former unit of IMDB state investment fund, which US investigators say was pilfered of billions by Najib's associates.

The scandal involving IMDB helped lead to Najib's election defeat last May.

The trial is the first of several against Najib, who faces 42 graft charges in one of the country's biggest criminal proceedings.

It specifically involved seven charges related to the transfer of 42 million ringgit (\$10.2 million) from SRC into Najib's bank accounts via intermediary companies between 2011 and 2015. He was accused of using his position to receive the money for approving a government guarantee for a government loan to SRC, committed criminal breach of trust and accepting proceeds from unlawful activities.

Najib's lawyer Muhammad Shafee Abdullah told reporters after the hearing ended for the day that prosecutors must prove that the former leader was aware that the money transferred into his account was from illegal sources.

"Just because money comes into my account doesn't mean I am in full knowledge that it comes from a wrong source because many individuals are involved," Shafee said. "Prosecution needs to show that he is complicit, he is part of the conspiracy." (AP)



Najib

India

Monsoon rains 'average'

Extreme poverty falling, to end by 2031: minister

NEW DELHI, April 15, (RTRS): India's finance minister said on Monday fast economic growth and rapid urbanisation would slash the number of people in extreme poverty by 2021 and end it completely in the decade after that.

More than 21 percent of India's 1.3 billion people lived on less than \$1.90 a day in 2011, when the last census was taken, according to the World Bank.

The economy is a major issue in a staggered general election that began on Thursday and will end on May 19, with the main opposition Congress party rejecting a rosy picture Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been presenting.

Finance Minister **Arun Jaitley**, who heads the BJP's publicity department in the election, said the number of people who live in poverty would drop to below 15 percent in the next three years and to a negligible level in the 10 years after that.

"Urbanisation will increase, the size of the middle-class will grow and the economy will expand manifolds," Jaitley said in a Facebook post.

"These will add to the number of jobs, and as the experience of the past three decades have shown in the liberalised economy, every section of citizens will benefit."

Economic growth in recent years had generated enough revenue for states to work more on poverty alleviation, job creation and improving healthcare and education, he said.

But the Congress has taken issue with such assertions, in particular, pointing to leaked government data that showed unemployment rose to its highest level in at least 45 years in 2017/18.

Jaitley said economic problems could be addressed as India remained the world's fastest growing major economy.

But he said restoring peace in the insurgency-hit state of Jammu and Kashmir was the most important issue facing the country.

"The issue of Jammu and Kashmir and terror continues to remain the biggest challenge before India," he said.

"It relates to our sovereignty, integrity and security."

Modi has won public praise by taking a tough line on neighbouring Pakistan, which India accuses of backing separatist militants in Muslim-majority Kashmir. Pakistan denies that.



Jaitley

Monsoon rains average this year: India is likely to see average monsoon rains this year, the state-run weather office said on Monday, which should support agricultural production and economic growth in Asia's third-biggest economy, where half of the farmland lacks irrigation.

Monsoon rainfall is expected to be 96 percent of the long-term average, M. Rajeevan, secretary at the Ministry of Earth Sciences, told a news conference.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) defines average, or normal, rainfall as between 96 percent and 104 percent of a 50-year average of 89 centimetres for the entire four-month season beginning June.

"Overall, the country is expected to have well distributed rainfall scenario during the 2019 monsoon season, which will be beneficial to farmers in the country during the ensuing Kharif (summer-planting) season," the IMD said in its forecast.

Skymet, the country's only private weather forecasting agency, earlier this month forecast rainfall could be below normal this year.

Monsoon rains, the lifeblood for India's farm-dependent \$2.6 trillion economy, arrive on the southern tip of Kerala state around June 1 and retreat from the desert state of Rajasthan by September.

After a wet spell, sowing of summer-sown crops gets off to a strong start, boosting crop yields and output which in turn raises rural incomes and usually lifts consumer spending in India.

If plentiful monsoon rains lift agricultural production this year, that could keep food prices under control. Subdued overall inflation could also add to pressure on India's central bank to cut interest rates.



Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad arrives for a press conference in Putrajaya, Malaysia on April 15. Malaysia's government decided to resume a China-backed rail link project after the Chinese contractor agreed to cut the construction cost by one-third. (AP)



Juncker



Rinne

Europe

EU copyright rules tougher: Google will have to pay publishers for news snippets and Facebook filter out protected content under new copyright rules aimed at ensuring fair compensation for the European Union's \$1 trillion creative industries.

EU governments on Monday backed the move launched by the European Commission two years ago to protect Europe's creative industries, which employ 11.7 million people in the bloc.

"When it comes to completing Europe's digital single market, the copyright reform is the missing piece of the puzzle," the Commission's president **Jean-Claude Juncker** said in a statement.

Under the new rules, Google and other online platforms will have to sign licensing agreements with musicians, performers, authors, news publishers and journalists to use their work.

The European Parliament gave a green light last month to a proposal that has pitted Europe's creative industry against tech companies, internet activists and consumer groups.

Wikipedia blocked out several European sites in protest last month, while the change was opposed by Finland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden.

But 19 countries, including France and Germany, endorsed the revamp, while Belgium, Estonia and Slovenia abstained.

Under the new regime Google-owned YouTube, Facebook's Instagram and other sharing platforms will have to install filters to prevent users from uploading copyrighted materials.

Google said the new rules would hurt Europe's creative and digital economies, while critics said it would hit cash-strapped smaller companies rather than the tech giants.

Poland said the overhaul was a step backwards as the filter requirement may lay the foundation for censorship.

EU lawmaker for the European Pirate Party **Julia Reda**, who had campaigned against the reforms, said critics could take their case to court but it would be slow and difficult and that the best thing would be to monitor fair implementation.

The European Magazine Media Association, the European Newspaper

Diplomacy

China conducts drills near Taiwan

US denounces 'coercion'

TAIPEI, April 15, (Agencies): Chinese bombers and warships conducted drills around Taiwan on Monday, the latest military manoeuvres near the self-ruled island that a senior US official denounced as "coercion" and a threat to stability in the region.

The United States has no formal ties with Taiwan but is bound by law to help provide the island with the means to defend itself and is its main source of arms.

China has stepped up pressure on Taiwan, whose President Tsai Ing-wen Beijing suspects of pushing for the island's formal independence, a red line for China which has never renounced the use of force to bring Taiwan under its control.

"Any attempt to influence Taiwan through threats or coercion, we believe, destabilises the region and threatens stability in the Taiwan Strait," James Moriarty, chairman of the American Institute in Taiwan, said at a ceremony to mark the last four decades of US-Taiwan relations.

China's People's Liberation Army said its warships, bombers and reconnaissance aircraft had conducted "necessary drills" around Taiwan on Monday, though it described them as routine.

China has repeatedly carried out what it calls "island encirclement patrols" in the past few years.

Taiwan scrambled jets and ships to monitor the Chinese forces, its defence ministry said, accusing Beijing of "trying to change the status quo of the Taiwan Strait."

Moriarty said "flying fighter jets and bombers around the island, presumably in connection with what we are doing this afternoon, certainly does not help at all."

"It hurts stability. It damages the cross strait relationship. It damages any attempt by China to win the hearts and minds of Taiwan people," he told reporters at the institute's new

\$256 million facility, the de facto US embassy in Taiwan.

A delegation led by former US Speaker of the House of Representatives, Paul Ryan, was in Taipei to mark 40 years since the signing of the Taiwan Relations Act, which governs US-Taiwan relations, and to reaffirm Washington's commitment.

"We couldn't ask for a better friend than Taiwan. Taiwan is a democratic success story, a reliable partner, and a force for good in the world," Ryan said. "We want the rest of the world to be more like Taiwan."

Tsai, who says she wants to maintain the status quo with China but will defend Taiwan's security and democracy, said at the ceremony that China has been ramping up military threats against Taiwan.

The visit by US officials comes just weeks after Tsai said the United States was responding positively to Taipei's requests for new arms sales to bolster its defences in the face of growing pressure from China.

Last month, Washington sent Navy and Coast Guard ships through the narrow strait separating the island from the mainland, part of an increase in the frequency of US movement through the strategic waterway to show support for Taipei.

Also:

TAIPEI: The former speaker of the US House of Representatives, **Paul Ryan**, said Monday that the US wants the rest of the world to be more like **Taiwan** - praise that will likely anger **Beijing**, which has long been sensitive to cooperation between the US and the democratically governed island that **China** claims as its own.

"Taiwan is a democratic success story, a reliable partner and a force for good in the world," Ryan said at a celebration for the 40th anniversary of the Taiwan Relations Act, which guides US policy toward Taiwan.

Publishers' Association, the European Publishers Council, News Media Europe and independent music labels lobbying group Impala welcomed the move. (RTRS)

Man arrested on terror: Belgian authorities say they have arrested a man on suspicion that he was part of a terrorist group and might have been planning an attack.



Penitents from 'Las Manolas' take part in a Holy Week Palm Sunday procession in Zaragoza, northern Spain on April 14. (AP)

Federal prosecutors said Monday the 22-year-old Belgian man, identified as Jimmy K., is charged with "taking part in the activities of a terrorist group."

Searches were conducted in three Belgian towns in connection with the arrest but no weapons or explosives were found. No other details were provided.

State broadcaster RTBF says the man was detained early Sunday at his grandmother's house in Wavre, 30 kilometers (19 miles) southeast of the capital, Brussels. It said he had converted to Islam and become radicalized and was in the early stages of preparing an attack. RTBF did not identify the source of its information. (AP)

Social Dems seek allies: Finland's Social Democrats (SDP) embarked on Monday on the complex task of forming a governing coalition, after beating a nationalist, anti-immigration party by a hairsbreadth in the most fragmented election in the country's history.

The SDP, which finished first in Sunday's ballot with 17.7 percent, could team up with two smaller left-wing parties, its leader **Antti Rinne** said.

"At first sight they feel like the most natural partners," he told private news outlet Lannen Media, referring to the Greens and the Left Alliance, which scored 11.5 percent and 8.2 percent respectively.

But coalition talks are expected to take weeks after the first Finnish election in which no party won 20 percent, leaving a polarised parliament that reflects deep social divisions over immigration and the environment, and how to reform a creaking welfare system deeply rooted in Nordic social traditions. (RTRS)

Ardern's approval rating rises:

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who was praised at home and abroad for her handling of the Christchurch mosques shooting last month, received her highest approval rating since taking office in a widely watched poll on Monday.

The 1 NEWS Colmar Brunton political survey showed 51 percent of respondents said Ardern was their preferred prime minister, climbing seven percentage points from the last poll in February.

Its first political survey since a lone gunman killed 50 Muslim worshippers at two mosques in Christchurch on March 15.

Ratings for Ardern's rival, opposition National Party leader Simon Bridges, dropped one percentage point to five percent.

Party vote results also showed Ardern's Labour Party rising three percentage points to 48 percent while the National's rating dropping to its lowest since September 2017, at 40 percent.

"All I know is that I'm doing my job to the best of my ability," Ardern told 1News when asked about the poll result.

Since coming to power in 2017, Ardern's coalition government has faced several challenges including weak business confidence, emboldened unions and a slowing economy. Her youth and global celebrity has also given critics doubt.

But the 38-year-old leader struck all the right notes in the hours after the Christchurch attack. (RTRS)

Palu recovery falters: Six months after Palu was ripped apart by an earthquake, tsunami and liquefying soil that sucked neighborhoods into the earth and killed thousands, a second crisis is looming as recovery efforts stumble and a city that feels ignored begs for humanitarian assistance.

Thousands of people in this city on Indonesia's Sulawesi island are still living in sweltering tent cities, while construction of new permanent homes has yet to start and almost a third of temporary housing is unoccupied after aid groups and authorities failed to connect the units to essential utilities.

President Joko Widodo, who is seeking a second term in elections this week, and his deputy promised that financial assistance to those whose homes were destroyed or whose loved ones were killed would be rapidly distributed. But not a cent has been paid out.

"It's like we're forgotten," said Ade Zahra, a mother of eight living in a tent city who says it's a miracle her family survived when the quake turned their village to mud and engulfed their home.

"We've received no more assistance in the past two months, not only the government, but also humanitarian groups and volunteers who used to provide a lot," she said. (AP)

'Do more on cooperation': China urged Japan on Monday to do more to follow through on its intention of seeking cooperation with China rather than competition, warning that there was still weakness in their relationship.

China and Japan have sparred frequently about their painful history, with Beijing often accusing Tokyo of not properly atoning for Japan's invasion of China before and during World War Two.

Ties between China and Japan, the world's second and third-largest economies, have also been plagued by a long-running territorial dispute over a cluster of East China Sea islets and suspicion in China about Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's efforts to amend Japan's pacifist constitution.

But they have sought to improve relations more recently, with Abe visiting Beijing in October, when both countries pledged to forge closer ties and signed a broad range of agreements including a \$30 billion currency swap pact.

The Chinese government's top diplomat, State Councillor Wang Yi, told Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono in Beijing that the improvement in relations was in an initial phase. (RTRS)