

## ELSEWHERE



## Ecuador rejects reports on expulsion of Assange

QUITO Ecuador's government said late on Friday that it rejected reports that it would imminently expel WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange from its London embassy, where he has lived in asylum for nearly seven years. However, it said it reserved the right to terminate asylum when it considers it justified. **REUTERS**

## Afghanistan protests Imran's comments

KABUL The Afghan government summoned a Pakistan diplomat to explain Prime Minister Imran Khan's latest remarks on ongoing Afghan peace talks. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the diplomat to object about remarks that it deemed "explicit interference" in Afghan affairs, tweeted the Ministry's spokesman, Sibghatullah Ahmadi. **REUTERS**

## 100 killed due to Ebola in DR Congo in 3 weeks

BUTEMBO Some 100 people have died in the Ebola epidemic in DR Congo over the past three weeks, taking the overall death toll in the latest outbreak past 700, according to Health Ministry data. The outbreak is the second worst to date, the deadliest being a 2014 epidemic in West Africa which killed more than 10,000 people. **AFP**

## 3 killed, 20 injured in Afghanistan explosions

JALALABAD Twin explosions on Saturday in the eastern Afghanistan city of Jalalabad killed three people and injured 20 others, local officials said. One child and two women were killed, said Mohammad Shoeb Sahak, deputy head of Nangarhar Hospital. **REUTERS**

## Nearly 80% turnout in Maldives poll

MDP poised to win parliamentary majority after more than two lakh voters exercise franchise

MEERA SRINIVASAN  
MALE

The Maldives witnessed a brisk polling day on Saturday, with nearly 80% voter turnout in the Indian Ocean archipelago's third multiparty parliamentary election.

The Election Commission extended polling time by two hours to accommodate more voters who were in queue braving the heat, its officials said. As counting continued late evening, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) was leading in many constituencies. Supporters of the MDP gathered at the sea front at around 11 p.m. as their party seemed poised for a majority. President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih and former President Mohamed Nasheed, who won a seat in Male, were on stage.

Earlier, over 2,00,000

Maldivians voted across the island nation and in polling stations abroad, in Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia and the U.K.

Saturday's polls, to elect representatives to 87 seats in the legislature, came around six months after Maldivians voted for change. In September, they elected Mr. Solih to power, dislodging former President Abdulla Yameen.

## MDP going it alone

Mr. Solih, who was then backed by a coalition of diverse parties led by his Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), will need a parliamentary majority to implement initiatives he promised as part of his reform agenda. The MDP decided to go it alone this election and is hoping to garner the numbers in the legislature, even as differences have begun to emerge within the coalition.



Public opinion: A woman voter in Male on Saturday. **AP**

"I just want someone good to represent me, my concerns in Parliament. I'm not from Male, I'm from an atoll. We need basic infrastructure there," said Aminath Fauza, 18, a first-time voter. She was echoing what appeared a common concern among many Maldivians

– the gap in development between capital Male and other atolls.

If Ms. Fauza's concern was development, senior citizen Abdulla Mooza, who was in a nearby queue waiting to vote, had other concerns. "I have to find out what happened to my son. The open-

ing we have now might be the only chance for me to do that and bring the perpetrators to justice," he said, referring to dissident journalist Ahmed Rilwan, who went missing in August 2014.

## Legal powers

"Already some are trying to block investigations, so we need the MDP to have a majority to go ahead," Mr. Mooza said, pointing to Speaker Gasim Ibrahim's refusal to call a vote on a Bill granting legal powers to presidential commissions formed to recover stolen assets and investigate unresolved murders.

Others like Mariyam Leen, 20, have few expectations and little hope. "I don't want anything from any of our politicians. Because none of them is going to do anything anyway. I still vote, it is my right," she said.

## Libyan commander's forces press on with Tripoli offensive

Pro-Haftar fighters have been slowed by government forces

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
TRIPOLI

Forces loyal to Libyan commander Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar on Saturday pressed on with an offensive on Tripoli, defying international calls to halt hostilities which risk plunging the country into civil war.

Pro-Haftar fighters have been slowed in their advance by forces loyal to Libya's internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), which sits in the capital. For the first time, forces backing the GNA launched air strikes on Field Marshal Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) –



Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar. **AFP**

which vowed to retaliate – around 50 km south of Tripoli. Pro-government forces in Tripoli confirmed they had targeted Field Marshal Haftar's men with "intensive strikes".

The air strikes came as fresh fighting flared on Satur-

day south of Tripoli between the pro-government forces and Field Marshal Haftar's troops despite calls from the international community to halt the military offensive.

Despite the Tripoli flare-up, UN envoy Ghassan Salamé insisted the April 14-16 talks in the Libyan city of Ghadames would go ahead.

"We are determined" to hold the talks "as scheduled" unless prevented by serious obstacles, Mr. Salamé told a press conference. "We want to reassure Libyans that we will stay alongside the Libyan people to make the political process a success without resorting to escalation."

## U.K. issues passports without EU reference

However, some documents still carry the name of 'European Union' on them

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
LONDON

Britain has begun issuing passports with the words "European Union" removed from the front cover – despite Brexit being delayed and its political leaders deadlocked over how to extricate the country from the bloc. The Interior Ministry said on Saturday that a long-standing decision to start introducing passports without reference to the EU had gone ahead from March 30, the day after the original date for Brexit.

Prime Minister Theresa May has delayed leaving the bloc amid stubborn opposition in Parliament to the divorce deal she finalised with European leaders in Novem-

ber. MPs have overwhelmingly rejected the agreement three times.

Ahead of an EU summit on Wednesday, she was forced to ask them for another extension, until June 30, to prevent Britain departing with no deal at the end of next week. But with EU heads growing increasingly impatient at the political paralysis in Westminster, they could offer just a shorter postponement – or a longer period of up to a year. The other 27 members must give unanimous backing to any extension.

British Finance Minister Philip Hammond struck an optimistic tone at a meeting on Saturday of European Finance Ministers in Buchar-



An anti-Brexit campaigner outside Parliament. **AP**

est, telling reporters that there were "no red lines" in the ongoing discussions.

In an apt sign of the befuddling circumstances around Brexit, Britain's Interior Ministry confirmed that some newly-issued passports now omit references to the EU on the cover while others still bear the bloc's name.

It said the discrepancy was due to an attempt to

save public money and insisted both designs would be "equally valid for travel". "In order to use leftover stock and achieve best value for the taxpayer, passports that include the words 'European Union' will continue to be issued for a short period," a spokeswoman added.

British passports have become ensnared in the country's Brexit divisions after the government announced in 2017 it would return to traditional blue passports "to restore national identity".

The travel documents had dark blue covers from 1921, but Britain switched to burgundy from 1988, in common with other passports in what was then the European Community.

## Rising Thai political star hit with sedition charge

This relates to his anti-junta rallies

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
BANGKOK

The telegenic leader of an anti-junta political party who rose to prominence in Thailand's election last month was charged with sedition on Saturday, drawing hundreds of his supporters onto the streets urging him to "fight".

Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit heads the youth-oriented Future Forward Party which won more than six million votes in the March 24 poll. It had joined an anti-junta coalition with six others claiming the right to form a government in the aftermath of the disputed vote, whose full results are expected by May 9.

Earlier this week, he posted on Facebook that police had summoned him to appear on Saturday to face a



Thailand's Future Forward Party leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit. **AP**

sedition charge relating to anti-junta rallies in 2015.

After emerging from a Bangkok police station, he told reporters he had been charged with "inciting unrest... helping the suspect escape... and the illegal assembly of more than 10 people" for his actions in 2015.

## H-1B visa cap for 2020 reached in 5 days: USCIS

It started receiving petitions on April 1

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
WASHINGTON

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) said it has reached congressionally-mandated 65,000 H-1B-visa cap for the fiscal year 2020, after it started receiving the applications for the most sought-after work visa among foreign, including Indian, professionals.

The USCIS on Friday said "it has received a sufficient number of petitions projected as needed to reach the congressionally-mandated 65,000 H-1B visa regular cap for fiscal year 2020."

The fiscal year begins October 1, 2019 and it the USCIS started receiving the visa petitions from April 1. However, the agency did not reveal the number of petitions received by it in the first five days.

The USCIS said it will next determine if it has received a sufficient number of petitions to meet the 20,000 H-1B visa U.S. advanced degree exemption, known as the 'master's cap'. The agency said it will reject and return visa fees for all unselected cap-subject petitions that are not prohibited multiple filings. It will continue to accept and process petitions that are otherwise exempt from the cap.

Last year, the USCIS received 1,90,000 cap-subject H-1B petitions. In 2018, it received 1,99,000 applications while in 2017, it got 2,36,000 petitions in the first five days after it started receiving the applications.

This is the first season of H-1B petitions after the USCIS announced enforcing new rules.

## Biden jokes about hugging in speech

Acknowledges that his physically intimate style of campaigning has to change

LISA LERER  
WASHINGTON

Joe Biden on Friday twice jokingly referred to complaints from several women that he had made them uncomfortable with his physical contact, and then gave a convoluted apology about their concerns and his behaviour. "I'm sorry I didn't understand more," he told reporters about his hugs and kisses to women over the years. "I'm not sorry for any of my intentions. I'm not sorry for anything that I have ever done. I've never been disrespectful intentionally to a man or a woman."

Speaking at an International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers conference in Washington, Mr. Biden used his first public remarks since the complaints emerged to try to push past the controversy that overtook his expected presidential cam-

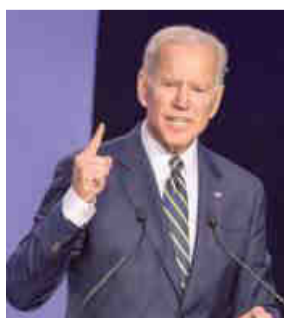
paign in the past week.

In his address, he largely stuck to his long-running political themes, highlighting the importance of uniting a divided nation and restoring the "great American middle class" – save for two notable asides.

## 'I had permission'

As he took the stage, he hugged Lonnie R. Stephenson, the union's president. "I just want you to know I had permission to hug Lonnie," he said, and the largely male crowd burst into laughter.

The joke came as Mr. Biden was fending off criticism from some Democrats who worry that he is out of step with the party's mores around gender and race. In recent days, he has struggled to address accusations from women that his hugs, kisses and other expressions of his physically intimate style of



Former Vice-President Joe Biden. **AFP**

politicking were unwelcome. Several minutes into his remarks, Mr. Biden spotted children in the audience. After welcoming them to the stage, Mr. Biden wrapped his arm around a young boy.

"By the way, he gave me permission to touch him," he said, to laughter. "Everyone knows I like kids more than people," he added.

But Mr. Biden acknowledged that his physically in-

timite style of campaigning would have to change – a shift he compared to his efforts to adjust to the practice of snapping selfies with voters. "It's going to have to change somewhat how I campaign," he said. "It's a new thing. It's important, and I'm sure it's going to take a while for it to settle out. But it's settled out for me."

But the public joking by Mr. Biden struck a nerve among some of the women who had expressed discomfort with their interactions.

"Biden's consent joke is a clear indication Biden doesn't get it and doesn't take the voice of the women who have come forward seriously," said Amy Lappos, who told the *The Hartford Courant* newspaper that Mr. Biden crossed "a line of respect" in their 2009 encounter at a fundraiser in Connecticut. **NY TIMES**