

NEWS IN  
briefNZ PM Ardern calls  
Sept 19 election

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has called a general election for September, in a vote that will test whether her widespread popularity overseas is matched by support at home. The centre-left leader yesterday announced Kiwis would go to the polls on September 19, two months ahead of the last possible date for the ballot, when she will seek a second three-year term. The 39-year-old's first term won her international fame -- she became a mother while in office and received praise for her sensitive handling of the Christchurch mosques killings.

50 killed in militia  
clashes in C Africa

AFP, Bangui

Clashes between rival armed groups in Bria, a strategic town in eastern Central African Republic, have left dozens dead, a senior official said yesterday. "There are about 50 dead. Some bodies were immediately buried by relatives, so it is difficult to give a precise figure," said the prefect of Haute-Kotto department, Evariste Binguinidji. After mediation with UN peacekeeping forces sent to the area, "the town is calm."

Eight dead in US boat  
dock blaze: fire chief

AFP, Miami

Eight people were killed in a late night fire that swept through docked boats on a lake in the southern US state of Alabama, the local fire chief said Monday. "At this point, I can confirm eight fatalities," said Gene Necklaus, the fire chief of Scottsboro, Alabama, a town of 14,000 on the banks of Guntersville Lake where the blaze broke out. Necklaus had earlier said eight people were missing.



Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal, draws a painting at an art camp to protest against a new citizenship law, in Kolkata, India yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Brought CAA to correct  
historical injustice: Modi

Slams opposition for 'vote bank politics'

NDTV ONLINE

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday said the citizenship law was brought to "correct a historical injustice and fulfil a promise to minorities in the neighbouring countries". Speaking at a rally of the National Cadet Corps in Delhi, he spoke of the injustices made during partition, when a "line was drawn across a piece of paper".

At the time, he said, "those who governed an independent India accepted partition".

"Nehru-Liyaquat pact spoke about protecting minorities, Gandhiji wished the same. The government has introduced CAA to fulfil a promise India made," he added. Attacking political opponents who are opposing the Citizenship Amendment Act, he said they are motivated by "vote bank politics". Without naming anyone, he said such people are "negating atrocities".

"Some are acting to be the voice of Dalits, they are the same people who

ignore atrocities against Dalits in Pakistan, they forget that most of persecuted who have left Pakistan and come to India are Dalits," he said.

The opposition, he also said, is spreading propaganda that the government's decisions have "affected my reputation in the entire world". "These rumour-mongers must understand that I don't work for my reputation, but for India's repute," he said.

His words come in the backdrop of the six resolutions moved in the parliament of the European Union on the Citizenship Amendment Act, which expresses concern that it would create the "largest statelessness crisis in the world".

The opposition has accused the government of undermining India's reputation across the world. Yesterday, Congress's Rahul Gandhi attacked the government, saying, "India's global image, brotherhood used to be a characteristic feature, people use to criticise Pakistan. PM has destroyed this image".



## US bombing hits 10-yr high

Report says 7,423 munitions were dropped on targets in 2019 alone

AFP, Kabul

American warplanes dropped more bombs on Afghanistan in 2019 than at any other time in at least a decade, according to the US Air Force, as Washington intensified attacks in the country amid withdrawal talks with the Taliban.

In 2019 alone, the US dropped 7,423 separate munitions on targets in Afghanistan, where the US has been embroiled in fighting several militant groups since it invaded the country following the September 11, 2001 attacks.

The figure -- published online by US Air Forces Central Command -- represents a dramatic surge in bombings in Afghanistan compared to the peak of President Barack Obama's "surge" in 2009, when 4,147 bombs were dropped.

Since President Donald Trump was elected in 2016 the US has ramped up bombing runs over Afghanistan as the White House removed earlier restrictions that provided greater oversight over air raids aimed at preventing civilian casualties.

The UN and rights groups have repeatedly voiced concerns that the increase in air strikes across the country by US and Afghan forces have resulted in a major upswing in civilian casualties.

During the first half of 2019 pro-government forces, including the US, killed 717 civilians, an increase of 31

Australia battles new  
bushfire threat

Smoke haze blankets capital

REUTERS, Sydney

Australian officials yesterday warned communities in bushfire-ravaged eastern states to strengthen fire defences amid forecasts of soaring temperatures and strong winds, as one approaching blaze cloaked the capital in thick smoke.

Bushfires have killed 33 people and about 1 billion animals since September, while 2,500 homes and an area the size of Greece have been destroyed.

Firefighters have used several days of cooler, damper weather across much of the continent to try to gain control of more than 100 blazes still burning before temperatures rise again from mid-week.

One blaze in a national park south of Canberra was upgraded to the emergency warning level, as the emergency services chief told residents to stay on alert, given rising winds could spark spot fires in the suburbs.

People in some areas near in Namadji National Park were told it was too late to leave.

"Helicopters and large air tankers are water-bombing, establishing containment lines and undertaking aerial surveillance," Canberra's emergency services said in a notice.

"The fire may pose threats to all lives directly in its path," Emergency Services Agency Commissioner Georgina Whelan told reporters. "...Firefighters may be unable to prevent a fire from reaching your property. You should not expect a firefighter on your door."

Winds of 5 kmph had reached gusts as high as 40 kmph (3.1-25 mph), she said, fanning the blaze and worsening conditions.

## AFGHAN CONFLICT

During the first half of 2019, pro-govt forces, including US, killed 717

Taliban, Afghan govt forces clash near US jet crash site

percent from a year earlier, the UN reported last year.

Most of the deaths came from US and Afghan air strikes, often in support of national forces on the ground, the report said.

The increase in bombings comes as Washington and the Taliban continue to wrangle over a possible agreement that would see US troops begin to leave Afghanistan in return for security guarantees.

The Taliban have been pushing to reach a withdrawal agreement with Washington by the end of January and are prepared to "scale down" military operations ahead of signing a deal, their chief spokesman said earlier this month.

The two sides had been negotiating an agreement for a year and were close to an announcement in September 2019 when US President Donald Trump abruptly declared the process "dead", citing Taliban violence.

Meanwhile, coalition forces flew sorties over the site of a crashed US military jet in eastern Afghanistan yesterday, hours after Afghan security forces trying to reach the charred wreckage clashed with Taliban insurgents.

The Bombardier E-11A -- used for military communications -- went down in snowy Taliban-controlled territory on Monday afternoon.

The Pentagon has confirmed the aircraft belonged to US forces, but dismissed Taliban claims it had been shot down.

## Exemplary courage

Indian schoolgirl wins bravery award for thwarting trafficker

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION, Chennai

An Indian schoolgirl who won a bravery award after she helped a child escape a trafficker, is to become the inspiration for a new anti-slavery campaign, officials said yesterday.

Carolyn Malsawmtluangi, from the northeastern state of Mizoram, was honoured by the government on India's Republic Day last week for "showing exemplary courage" after she stopped a human trafficker who had kidnapped a seven-year-old girl from a neighbouring village.

Malsawmtluangi, 11, first spotted the trafficker when playing volleyball with friends in June last year but assumed they were a mother and daughter, and even asked if the young girl wanted to join their game.

But after police raised the alarm over a trafficker the next day, Malsawmtluangi soon spotted the woman again and began talking to her before agreeing to take care of the girl while the woman ran an errand.

It was then that both girls escaped - Malsawmtluangi carrying the child on her shoulders and running home while avoiding stones hurled by the angry trafficker.

"If Carolyn had not stopped them, the trafficker would have disappeared with the little girl," said Khawlhrij Lahlupui, a secretary at the Mizoram State Council for Child Welfare that recommended her for the annual award.

"She was very brave to understand the danger to the little girl and save her," she said. "We plan to share her story in all schools and create awareness on trafficking and safety."

Of the nearly 6,000 victims of human trafficking in India each year, about half were children, according to the latest data from the National Crime Records Bureau.

Most are women and children from rural areas looking to escape poverty - lured to cities each year by traffickers who promise good jobs, but sell them into modern day slavery.



Chief Minister of Delhi Arvind Kejriwal (C) waves to his supporters during a road show for the upcoming Delhi Legislative Assembly election, in New Delhi yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Full potential  
of Saarc not  
utilised due to  
single country

Says Rajnath Singh

ANI, New Delhi

Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh yesterday said the full potential of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) was not utilised because of the behaviour and policies of a single country, in a reference to Pakistan.

"The full potential of Saarc has not been realised due to the behaviour and policies of a single country," Singh said at the 12th South Asia conference here.

In order to substantiate his claim, Singh cited how "a single country" stalled the Saarc motor vehicles agreement at the last Kathmandu session in 2015.

He emphasised that regional civil societies can influence governments through their proactive efforts.

Underlying that South Asia is at a critical juncture of history, the minister said: "We should not hold regional prosperity hostage to the interests of states who are obstructing all efforts aimed at regional cooperation. Our intra-regional trade has been abysmally low. We have to transcend these limitations."

He said that the theme of this year's South Asia conference, 'India's 'Neighbourhood First' Policy: Regional Perceptions' is timely.

He also said India was engaged in conversations with its neighbour in order to develop joint approaches for regional peace and security as South Asia is at a critical juncture of history where a world of opportunity is beckoning.

## Storage plans aren't safe

Experts warn materials used to store hazardous waste corrode far more quickly than previously thought

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Current methods for storing high-level nuclear waste are "severely" unsafe, scientists have warned.

Researchers at Ohio State University discovered that long-term plans to store radioactive waste from nuclear arms production are unsustainable and would result in radioactive materials being released into the environment.

The materials used to store the hazardous waste corrode far more quickly than previously thought, researchers write in a study published in scientific journal Nature Materials detailing their findings.

"This indicates that the current models may not be sufficient to keep this waste safely stored," said Xiaolei Guo, a deputy director at Ohio State University and lead author of the study.

"It shows that we need to develop a new model for storing nuclear waste." Most countries currently have no disposal sites for high-level nuclear



NUCLEAR WASTE

waste, which can remain radioactive for tens of thousands of years.

Finland has begun work on a long-term repository, while the US is also considering a permanent site in Nevada for its waste.

The storage solution involves

mixing the waste with other products to form glass or ceramics, before encasing them inside metallic canisters and burying them deep underground.

Due to changes in the chemistry of the nuclear waste over time, the glass and ceramic materials end up causing "severe" corrosion of the metal canisters.

"In the real-life scenario, the glass or ceramic waste forms would be in close contact with stainless steel canisters," Guo said.

"Under specific conditions, the corrosion of stainless steel will go crazy. It creates a super-aggressive environment that can corrode surrounding materials."

The authors of the study said one solution could be to develop a compatible barrier material to put between the metal and the glass or ceramics in order to prevent the corrosion.

Belgium's ex-king forced  
to recognise love-child

AFP, Brussels

Belgium's former king Albert II admitted Monday he is the father of a daughter born from an affair half a century ago after a DNA test he was forced to take came back positive.

Recognising he is the "biological father" of Belgian artist Delphine Boel, the 85-year-old ex-monarch said in a statement he had decided to halt a "painful" paternity legal battle that has dragged on since 2013, the year he abdicated and lost his immunity.

Albert had repeatedly denied being the father of Boel, who had made her claim over the past two decades before turning to the courts.

The former king agreed in May last year to take a DNA test to resolve the matter after a Brussels court levied a fine of 5,000 euros (\$5,500) for each day he refused.

Boel, now aged 51, has maintained that her aristocratic mother, Sybille de Selys Longchamps, had an affair with Albert

between 1966 and 1984. She was raised by her mother's husband, Jacques Boel, but won a court decision that he was not her "legal father".

Albert took over the throne following the death of his older brother, king Baudouin, in 1993. He reigned for 20 years, until 2013.

While Albert acknowledged marital problems with his wife queen Paola in the 1970s, he never admitted to having an extramarital child. He has three children with Paola, including Belgium's current king, Philippe.

In a statement on Monday, Albert's lawyers said the ex-king "has learnt the results of the DNA test... (and) the scientific conclusions indicate that he is the biological father of Mrs Delphine Boel."

Albert had decided, they said, "to put an end, with honour and dignity, to this painful procedure" being heard by Belgium's appeals court over his paternity.

