

NEWSIN  
brief

Sanders, Buttigieg  
in virtual Iowa tie

AFP, Washington

US Democratic presidential candidates Bernie Sanders and Pete Buttigieg were in a virtual tie as results from 100 percent of Iowa precincts were called late Thursday, but no winner declared in the state's caucuses after technical problems snarled the process. According to final results from the Monday caucuses Buttigieg, 38, leads with 26.2 percent followed by Sanders, the 78-year-old self-described democratic socialist, with 26.1 percent.

Hitman for Escobar  
dies in Colombia

AFP, Bogota

Pablo Escobar's most notorious hitman, known by the nickname Popeye, died on Thursday at age 57 after a life of crime he celebrated on YouTube, Colombia's prison authorities said. Jhon Jairo Velasquez had boasted of killing hundreds of people for his "boss" Escobar, the infamous drug lord killed by Colombian police in 1993 while on the run to avoid extradition to the United States.

Yemen Qaeda chief  
killed: Trump

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump confirmed Thursday that the US had killed the leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula -- days after the jihadist group claimed responsibility for a mass shooting at a US naval base. AQAP claimed responsibility on Sunday for a December 6 shooting at US Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida, in which a Saudi Air Force officer killed three American sailors. Washington considers AQAP to be the worldwide jihadist network's most dangerous branch.



A general view shows an empty street in Beijing yesterday. The official Chinese death toll from the coronavirus outbreak rose to 636, with the government saying total infections climbed past 30,000.

PHOTO:  
AFP

'Ghost city' with 25m people

REUTERS, Beijing

Snow covers the ground and the trees are bare amid near-freezing temperatures.

Despite this, Beijing would typically be thronged with morning traffic and tourists heading to Tiananmen Square, the Great Hall of the People and the Forbidden City.

Instead, Reuters Greater China Chief video producer Mark Chisholm has spent the last 10 days commuting through a "ghost city" to work amid an extension of the Lunar New Year holidays due to the coronavirus outbreak.

"You see empty walkways, empty streets with very little cars, bicycles or motorbikes," Chisholm said.

The virus, believed to have originated in the central Chinese city of Wuhan, has killed more than 630 people and infected more than 31,000, the vast majority of them in China.

The outbreak is also inflicting a growing toll on businesses and consumers in the world's second-largest economy. Strict transport curbs have been imposed in many parts of the country, and like Beijing, some

cities are in virtual lockdown.

Chisholm exits the diplomatic compound where he lives through double doors, and a guard at the gate wearing a face mask checks his temperature.

Chisholm finds Chang'an Avenue, the capital's main thoroughfare, almost completely deserted, with one or two people standing at bus stops, and roads devoid of traffic.

He then heads down a flight of steps into the underground Yong'anli train station on Line 1, his voice echoing in the vacant stairwell. The

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only people he encounters are the workers operating the thermal scanner at the turnstiles.

A platform normally packed with hundreds of people is eerily empty, the automated announcements reverberating in the otherwise silent station. Passengers sit in small groups on the train, everyone masked and no one making eye contact.

Chisholm gets off and walks into the three-storey Wangfujing shopping mall, filled with shuttered shops and bright red Lunar New Year decorations

featuring oversized rodents to mark the Year of the Rat.

Finally, as Chisholm nears the Reuters offices, he sees a man in a hazard suit spraying disinfectant into dark corridors from a yellow backpack.

"I've lived in Beijing for 15 years and never seen the city so deserted," Chisholm said. "I actually find it rather sad that this usually vibrant place has become a ghost city with 25 million people holed up in their apartments."

Meanwhile, panicky Hong Kong residents scooped noodles, rice, meat and toilet rolls into supermarket trolleys yesterday despite government assurances of ample supplies during an outbreak of a new coronavirus that has killed 637 people in mainland China.

Chinese-ruled Hong Kong has reported 25 cases of the fast-spreading virus and one of only two deaths outside mainland China.

Panic also hit Taiwan the same day, with local media reporting supermarkets having their shelves cleared on rumours that stepped-up production of face masks would lead to a shortage of raw materials to make toilet paper.

Pangolin identified as  
potential coronavirus host

AFP, Beijing

The endangered pangolin may be the link that facilitated the spread of the novel coronavirus across China, Chinese scientists said Friday.

Researchers have long suspected that the virus, which has now killed more than 630 people and infected some 31,000, was passed from an animal to a human at a market in the central Chinese city of Wuhan late last year.

Researchers at the South China Agricultural University have identified the scaly mammal as a "potential intermediate host," the university said in a statement, without providing further details.

The new virus is believed to have originated in bats, but researchers have suggested there could have been an "intermediate host" in the transmission to humans.

After testing more than 1,000 samples from wild animals, scientists from the university found the genome sequences

of viruses found on pangolins to be 99 percent identical to those on coronavirus patients, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

The pangolin is considered the most trafficked animal on the planet and more than one million have been snatched from Asian and African forests in the past decade.

They are destined for markets in China and Vietnam, where their scales are used in traditional medicine -- despite having no medical benefits -- and their meat is bought on the black market.

China in January ordered a temporary ban on the trade in wild animals until the epidemic is under control.

A price list that circulated on China's internet for a business at the Wuhan market showed a menagerie of animals or animal-based products including live foxes, crocodiles, wolf puppies, giant salamanders, snakes, rats, peacocks, porcupines, camel meat and other game -- 112 items in all.



UN must break 'habits'

Says Kushner as he defends Middle East plan

REUTERS, United Nations

Donald Trump's son-in-law and architect of the new US peace plan for the Middle East, Jared Kushner, has called on the UN Security Council to break its "habits" and solve the "hardest problem in the world", in a rare interview.

Kushner on Thursday presented the US peace plan to the UN Security Council, using maps and graphics to illustrate his contention that the parallel developments of Israeli settlements and Palestinian aspirations would lead to a point of no return for the creation of a Palestinian state.

"People want to see fresh thinking and progress," Kushner told reporters from six media outlets, including AFP. "What we are doing is just trying to fight against habits," he said.

The US plan retains a two-state solution and proposes making Abu Dis the capital of a Palestinian state. Palestinians however want all of east Jerusalem to be the capital of any future state.

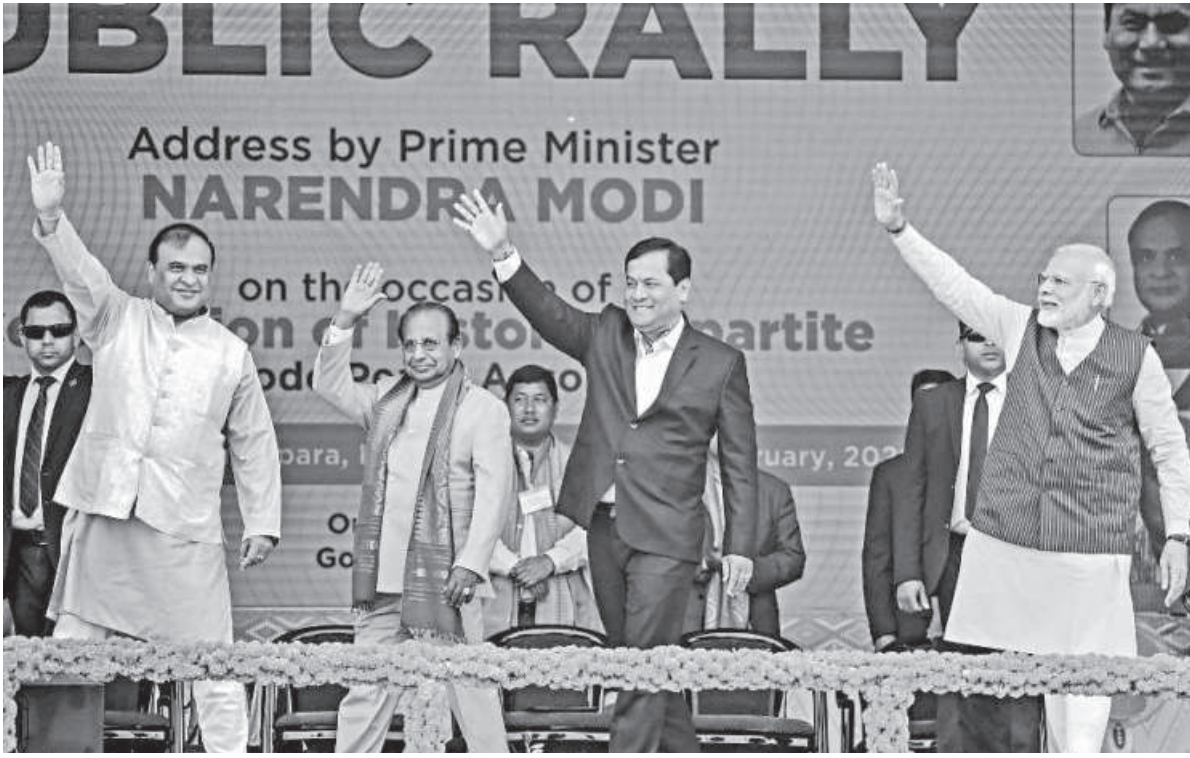
The US proposal also gives consent for Israel to annex Israeli settlements as well as the Jordan Valley, a narrow strip of land much of which is inside the West Bank, a key part of the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel since 1967.

Asked whether Israel could be flexible on the question of east Jerusalem, Kushner said that was up to the two parties themselves to decide.

Kushner also accused Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas of not wanting to reach a peace deal.

"I never felt like he was willing to get into details either because he is not a detail-oriented person or because he didn't know what he wanted to accomplish."

"He liked high level principles, but you can't solve problems with high level principles," he added.



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi (R) along with Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal, Assam Governor Jagdish Mukhi and Assam Finance Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma wave hands to the public during a public rally on the occasion of celebrations for tripartite Bodo Peace Accord at Khargaon-Tengapara area in Kokrajhar of northeastern state of Assam yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

India extends detention  
of Kashmiri leaders

AFP, Srinagar

Indian authorities have extended the detention of two former Kashmir chief ministers, held for the past six months under a security clampdown, using a law allowing for them to be locked up for two years without charge, police said yesterday.

Mehbooba Mufti and Omar Abdullah, despite having long supported Kashmir being part of India, were detained in August when New Delhi rescinded the region's autonomy and imposed a vice-like security and communications lockdown.

Facing international unease, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said the move was to bring peace to a region where tens of thousands have died in a three decade old uprising against Indian rule.

Separatist militants have been fighting some 500,000 Indian forces in the territory, demanding independence or to join

Pakistan which also controls part of the Himalayan region.

Mufti and Abdullah's provisional detention expired on Thursday and they were immediately booked under the Public Safety Act (PSA), a police source in Kashmir told AFP.

The legislation was used against a third former chief minister Farooq Abdullah, the father of Omar Abdullah, in September to keep the 82-year-old under house arrest.

Restricted Internet access was allowed in late January after a blackout lasting almost

six months that Modi's government had said was imposed for security reasons, but which has hit hard the economy, healthcare and education. However Kashmir's more than seven million inhabitants can still only access a "whitelist" of 301 government-approved websites that do not include social media.



Who is indigenous?

Millions may be denied land in Assam over definition

REUTERS, Guwahati

Millions of migrants and tribal people in India's northeastern Assam state could be denied land because of a new definition of the term "indigenous", land and human rights experts said.

Assam has a long-simmering movement against immigrants and its 2019 land policy, aimed at overhauling a three-decade old land law, seeks to allocate land to landless indigenous people - but does not specify who is indigenous.

"After we bring the law, an indigenous person can sell his or her land to an indigenous person only, not to anyone else. That means our land will be preserved for our people," health minister Himanta Biswa Sarma told reporters at a briefing.

The new land law comes as nearly 1.9 million residents, mostly Muslim, were left off a citizens register in Assam last year, as part of a drive to detect and detain illegal immigrants.

Protests erupted across India in December against a new citizenship law, with demonstrators in Assam fearing it would convert thousands of illegal migrants from neighbouring Muslim-majority Bangladesh into legal residents.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which also governs Assam, says there are hundreds of thousands of

illegal immigrants in Assam from Bangladesh.

To be included on the citizenship register, people had to furnish proof of residence in India going back decades, before March 24, 1971, the year in which hundreds of thousands of people fled Bangladesh, as it split from Pakistan.

Minister Sarma said a committee will define the term "indigenous", and consider various cut-off dates for arrival in the state to determine who belonged there and was entitled to receive land from the government.

Any definition would run counter to India's classification of indigenous people, which is applied to its 104 million tribal population - also known as Adivasis or "original inhabitants" - who make up nearly 10% of the country's 1.3 billion citizens.

Nationally, indigenous people are entitled to special rights and protections, including over land and resources.

Assam's new land policy is to set to further marginalise millions of poor tribal people and ethnic minorities, said Walter Fernandes, a senior fellow at the North Eastern Social Research Centre, a think-tank in Guwahati city in Assam.

"In a country where birth certificates, marriage certificates and death certificates are not common, how do you produce these records for yourself, let alone your parents?" he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Rains 'breaking the back'  
of Australia bushfire crisis

Heavy rain was raising hopes yesterday for an end to Australia's unprecedented bushfire crisis, as downpours douse blazes that have burned out of control for months. The devastating fires, fuelled by prolonged drought and record-high temperatures, have raged since September, burning more than 10 million hectares (25 million acres) and killing 33 people. An estimated billion animals have perished in the fires that destroyed more than 2,500 homes. The rains in New South Wales (NSW), which began earlier in the week in some areas and are forecast to extend into next week, are expected to drench a number of the remaining fires and help contain others. By yesterday afternoon there were no bushfires burning in NSW at the most dangerous emergency or "watch and act" levels -- a situation virtually unseen in almost half a year.

'Malala's shooter escapes'

Ehsanullah Ehsan, the Taliban terrorist responsible for shooting Nobel Peace prize winner Malala Yousafzai in 2012 and carrying out the deadly Peshawar Army school terror attack in 2014 in which 132 students were killed-has escaped from prison, according to an audio clip released by him. In the audio clip, which surfaced on social media on Thursday, Ehsanullah Ehsan said that he escaped the confinement of Pakistani security agencies on January 11, claiming Pakistani forces failed to keep their promises made to him during his surrender in 2017. "With the help of God, I succeeded to escape on January 11, 2020 from the confinement of the security forces," he is heard saying in the clip. Malala Yousafzai, 22, was shot for campaigning for girls' education in 2012 in Pakistan's Swat Valley.

'Yes, we remember'



Kerala Finance Minister Thomas Isaac delivered a budget speech with sharp political overtones in the state assembly yesterday, declaring that the entire state stands united against the BJP-led centre's Citizenship Amendment Act. Significantly, the cover of the budget document he held in his hand bore a painting that depicted Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. Thomas Isaac said that the painting, artist Tom Vattakuzhy's "Death of Gandhi", was meant to send a message to the centre. "The message is: Yes, we remember. That Mahatma was murdered, murdered by Hindu communists who are revered today by the ruling party and the central government," Thomas Isaac told mediapersons. "We are saying: 'We will remember it, people will not forget.'"

SOURCE: AFP