

NEWSIN  
brief

WHO extends  
Ebola emergency

AFP, Geneva

The UN health agency on Wednesday said it was extending its global emergency designation for the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo but said the sharp decline in cases was “extremely positive”. The recent outbreak was first identified in August 2018 and has since killed more than 2,300 people in eastern DR Congo. The WHO, however, said it was downgrading the national and regional risk of the disease from very high to high, while it kept the global risk at low.

Somalia’s journalists  
under fire: Amnesty

AFP, Nairobi

Journalists in troubled Somalia are “under siege”, facing bombings, beatings, attacks and arrests, rights group Amnesty International said yesterday. The East African nation has long been seen as one of the riskiest places to work as a journalist. Journalists face threats on all fronts, from attacks by Somalia’s al-Qaeda-allied Al-Shabaab fighters, to the internationally backed authorities. At least eight journalists have been killed since 2017, and at least eight more fled the country, the report said.

Australia extends ban  
on visitors from China

AFP, Sydney

Australia yesterday announced a ban on travellers from China would extend for at least a week beyond Saturday’s planned deadline, as the death toll from the coronavirus soared. Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the government would maintain “entry restriction on foreign nationals who have recently been in mainland China” for further week “to protect Australians from the risk of coronavirus”.



Member of Parliament (MP) Gurjeet Singh Aujla (R) and Congress Party workers shout slogans during a protest against the price hike of the liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) cylinder, in Amritsar, yesterday.

PHOTO:  
AFP

US announces 7-day  
truce with Taliban

AFP, Brussels

The United States has secured a seven-day reduction in violence in talks to help seek a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan, Pentagon chief Mark Esper said yesterday.

The announcement came as Nato defence ministers met in Brussels and a day after Afghan President Ashraf Ghani reported “notable progress” in negotiations with the Islamist insurgents.

“The United States and the Taliban have negotiated a proposal for a seven-day reduction in violence,” Esper told reporters, dubbing his meetings with Nato colleagues “productive.”

“We’ve said all along that the best, if not the only, solution in Afghanistan is a political agreement. Progress has been made on that front and we’ll have more to report on that soon, I hope.”

Esper did not say when the partial truce would begin, but on Wednesday a Taliban official told AFP that the group would begin a “reduction of violence” starting from today.

“It is our view that seven days for now is sufficient but in all things our approach to this process will be conditions based, I will say it again, conditions based,” Esper said.

“So it will be a continual evaluative process as we move forward, if we go forward.”

Washington and the insurgents have been locked in gruelling talks that have stretched over more than a year, seeking an end to what has already become America’s longest war.

India SC tells parties to justify  
rise in ‘criminal candidates’

Says ‘winnability’ can’t justify such malpractices

NDTV ONLINE

Political parties must upload on their websites details of criminal cases against poll candidates and the reasons for selecting them, the Indian Supreme Court said yesterday, flagging an “alarming rise in the criminalisation of politics” in the last four national elections.

The Supreme Court said it would be mandatory for parties to upload the details of their candidates’ criminal history on their websites, on social media and in newspapers within 48 hours of selection. “Political parties will have to specify reasons for selecting candidates having pending criminal cases against them on their website,” said the court.

Parties must submit the same details to the Election Commission within 72 hours, the court said.

“The reason to select candidates should be based on merit and not winnability. Winnability can’t be the only justification,” the top court directed.

If political parties failed to give the details, or the

Election Commission was unable to implement the directive, it would be considered contempt of court, the judges said.

The verdict comes on contempt petitions filed by lawyer Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay and others.

In September 2018, a five-judge constitution bench had asked the central government to immediately enact laws to ban those involved in serious crimes from contesting elections and becoming party officials.

BJP leader and lawyer Ashwini Upadhyay had filed a contempt petition against the central government and the Election Commission, alleging that no serious efforts were made to stop the criminalization of politics despite the court order.

The court had earlier even ordered that candidates publish their criminal details in the newspaper thrice after filing their nomination. The petitioner had alleged that the Election Commission had not attempted to implement this order effectively.

In the latest election, the Delhi polls, over 50 per cent of the newly-elected MLAs face serious cases.



‘It will save a lot of money’

Trump says he doesn’t mind if Manila cuts military pact

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump said on Wednesday he did not mind Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte’s decision to end a decades-old military agreement with the United States, a position at odds with that of his defense secretary who viewed the move with dismay.

Duterte on Tuesday announced termination of the two-decade-old Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper called the decision “unfortunate” as Washington and its allies press China to abide by “international rules” in Asia.

The US embassy in Manila called it “a serious step with significant implications.” Duterte’s decision, sparked by the revocation of a US visa held by a former police chief who led Duterte’s bloody war on drugs, takes legal effect in 180 days and US officials have expressed hope it can be reversed or delayed.

“I don’t really mind if they would like to do that, it will save a lot of money,” Trump told reporters at the White House when asked about Duterte’s move and

whether anything could be done to get him to reconsider. “My views are different from others,” he added.

Trump has frequently expressed a desire to bring US military forces home from decades-long deployments abroad and has strong-armed some allies into paying more for the right to U.S. defense.

Trump said the United States had helped the Philippines defeat Islamic State militants. He said he had “a very good” relationship with Duterte and added: “we’ll see what happens.”

Duterte’s decision could complicate US military interests in the broader Asia-Pacific region as China’s ambitions rise. Some Filipino senators quickly sought to block the move, arguing Duterte had no right to unilaterally scrap international pacts the country’s senate had ratified.

The VFA is important to the overall US-Philippines alliance and sets out rules for U.S. soldiers operating in the Philippines, a former US territory. Washington has called the relationship “ironclad,” despite Duterte’s complaints that include allegations of U.S. hypocrisy and ill treatment.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (C) shakes hands with Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan upon his arrival at the Nur Khan airport in Rawalpindi, yesterday.

CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

DEVELOPMENTS

DEATH TOLL TOPS 1,360

China reports 242 new deaths and 14,840 new infections in Hubei, the biggest one-day increases since the crisis began. It comes after authorities broadened their definition for infection to include people “clinically diagnosed” via lung imaging. China’s new official toll stands at more than 1,360 deaths and nearly 60,000 infections.

PARTY CHIEFS SACKED

Authorities sack the top political leaders of Hubei province and Wuhan, the highest profile figures to be removed in a purge over the way the outbreak has been handled. A top Red Cross official in Wuhan has also been fired for dereliction of duty and health officials removed in other cities.

MASS QUARANTINE IN VIETNAM

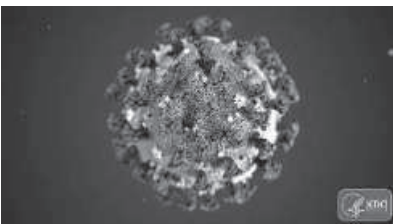
Vietnam becomes the first country outside China to impose a mass quarantine, confining more than 10,000 people to six villages near Hanoi for 20 days. Checkpoints are set up around the villages that make up Son Loi after the health ministry reports six infections there.

JAPAN SHIP CASES RISE

Another 44 people on board a quarantined cruise ship off Japan’s coast have tested positive, the health minister says, taking the number to 218. Thousands of people onboard the Diamond Princess are under quarantine until February 19, although Health Minister Katsunobu Kato says some elderly passengers will be allowed off if they test negative.

REJECTED US SHIP TO DOCK

The US cruise ship Westerdam is finally given permission to dock in Cambodia, having been turned away from several Asian ports over concerns that a passenger could be infected. This ship is to dock early Friday in Sihanoukville and passengers will be transferred directly to the airport to fly to Phnom Penh and onward.



MAJOR MOBILE FAIR SCRAPPED

The world’s top mobile telephone trade fair, the annual World Mobile Congress, is cancelled after fears stemming from the coronavirus spark an exodus of industry heavyweights. The event had been planned to run in Barcelona from February 24 to 27. The organising GSMA mobile trade association says “the global concern regarding the coronavirus outbreak, travel concern and other circumstances, make it impossible” for it to go ahead.

OIL MARKET HIT

The International Energy Agency warns that global oil demand will suffer its first quarterly drop in a decade as the COVID-19 virus lashes the economy in China and its impact ripples throughout the world. “Demand is now expected to fall by 435,000 barrels year-on-year in the first quarter of 2020, the first quarterly contraction in more than 10 years” when it dropped during the global economic crisis, it says.

SOURCE: AFP

KASHMIR, CAA

US senators  
express  
concerns

NDTV ONLINE

Ahead of US President Donald Trump’s India visit later this month, four top US senators have written to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, expressing concern about the internet curbs in Kashmir more than six months after Jammu and Kashmir’s special status was scrapped under Article 370, as well the preventive detentions of political leaders.

In their letter, the senators also express concern over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act or CAA that triggered protests across the country.

The letter by the senators, two Democrats and two Republicans, says that the Indian government “continues to block most internet in the region... India has now imposed the longest ever internet shutdown by a democracy, disrupting access to medical care, business and education for 7 million people”.

“Hundreds of Kashmiris remain in ‘preventive detention’ including key political figures,” the letter to Mike Pompeo states. The senators said “these actions have severe consequences”.

Among the four senators who wrote the letter is Lindsey Graham who is very close to Trump.

“The Indian government has taken other troubling steps that threaten the rights of certain religious minorities and the secular character of the state. This includes the passage of the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act,” the senators say.

The US senators also want an assessment of the “number of individuals at risk of statelessness, denial of nationality pursuant to an NRC (National Register of Citizens)”.

Another wall goes up for Trump

India builds wall in Ahmedabad to shield view of slums

REUTERS, Ahmedabad

US President Donald Trump will be shielded from the sight of slums by a newly built wall when he visits the city of Ahmedabad during a visit to India this month.

A senior government said the wall was being built for security reasons, not to conceal the slum district.

But the contractor building it told Reuters the government “did not want the slum to be seen” when Trump passes by on the ride in from Ahmedabad’s airport.

“I’ve been ordered to build a wall as soon as possible, over 150 masons are working round-the-clock to finish the project,” the contractor said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The government official conceded that the wall was part of a “beautification and cleanliness” drive.

Whatever the reason, the 400-meter-long and seven-foot-high wall will prevent the US leader from getting a glimpse of a slum district that houses an estimated 800 families.

Trump, who has made his pledge to build a wall along the United States’ border with Mexico a feature of

his presidency, will visit India on Feb. 24-25 to reaffirm strategic ties that have been buffeted by trade disputes.

He is expected to attend an event dubbed “Kem Chho Trump” (“How are you, Trump”) at a stadium in Ahmedabad along the lines of the “Howdy Modi” extravaganza he hosted for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Houston last September.

Speaking at the White House on Tuesday, Trump quoted Modi as saying “millions and millions of people” would attend the rally.

The event provides Trump, who was impeached in December, with the opportunity to woo the support of hundreds of thousands of Indian-American voters ahead of the US presidential election in November.

But some slum dwellers whose homes will be cordoned off by the wall in Ahmedabad - the largest city in Modi’s home state of Gujarat - said the government was wasting tax-payer money to hide the poor.

“Poverty and slums are the reality of our life, but Modi’s government wants to hide the poor,” said Parvatibhai Mafabhai, a day worker who has lived there with his family for more than three decades.



VIOLENCE IN MYANMAR’S RAKHINE STATE

20 children injured as  
school hit by mortar

AFP, Yangon

Around 20 children were injured yesterday when mortar fire hit a primary school in the northern fringes of Myanmar’s Rakhine state, an area where the military is locked in battle with Arakan Army (AA) rebels.

The attack happened in Buthidaung township, one of several areas in lockdown, and it is not clear who was responsible. Scores of civilians have been killed, hundreds injured and some 100,000 displaced since January last year when both sides stepped up operations.

The AA claims to be fighting for more autonomy for ethnic Rakhine Buddhists.

Teacher Thar Aye Maung from Khamwe village told AFP by phone how his school was hit yesterday morning, injuring 21 pupils.

“One girl is badly hurt. Most of the others have injuries to their hands and legs.”

He said all the wounded children were ethnic Khami, a Buddhist minority in a state with a complex patchwork of different groups living alongside the Rakhine.

Maungdaw district chief Soe Aung confirmed the incident, but said 19 children had been wounded.

There was “no reason” to believe the mortar had been fired by the military, said Western command spokesman Colonel Win Zaw Oo, adding the army sometimes loses weapons and ammunition to the rebels.

“(The AA) fires at villages with our shells and then misleadingly claims the military is responsible.”

The armed rebel group could not be reached for comment.

The AA has ratcheted up operations in recent months with a series of brazen kidnappings, bombings and raids against the military and local officials.

The army has hit back hard, deploying thousands of soldiers to the area.

Buthidaung is one of nine townships to suffer a government-imposed internet blackout, restrictions decreed by rights groups in a statement yesterday.