

NEWSIN
brief

Erdogan, Trump
discuss Idlib crisis

AFP, Ankara

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Saturday discussed with US counterpart Donald Trump ways to end the crisis in Idlib, Syria's last major rebel bastion, and condemned Damascus' attacks there, the Turkish presidency said. Hundreds of civilians have been killed while 800,000 Syrians have been forced to leave their homes to flee the offensive since December, according to the United Nations.

Ghani hopeful about
US-Taliban deal

AFP, Munich

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on Saturday voiced cautious optimism about a partial truce agreed between the Taliban and US and said that a further announcement was expected in the coming 10 days. The agreement for a seven-day "reduction in violence" announced this week has raised hopes that a comprehensive peace deal could follow. But it is still not clear when the period will begin. The acid test of the Taliban's sincerity will be their willingness to accept elections, Ghani said -- something they have always refused to engage in.

Army deployed as
storm Dennis hits UK

AFP, London

Storm Dennis swept across Britain yesterday with the army drafted in to help deal with heavy flooding and high winds, officials warning it could be "life-threatening" in South Wales. Almost 200 flood warnings were in place early yesterday, extending from Scotland's River Tweed to Cornwall in southwest England. Winds of over 90 miles per hour were recorded in Aberdaron, south Wales.



Supporters of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) hold cut outs of party President Arvind Kejriwal and Indian national flags after Kejriwal's swearing-in ceremony as Delhi Chief Minister, in New Delhi, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Kejriwal sworn in
as Delhi CM

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Just a week after leading his Aam Aadmi Party to a stunning landslide victory defeating BJP in Delhi assembly elections, Arvind Kejriwal yesterday took oath as chief minister of the city-state at a mega ceremony, reports our New Delhi correspondent.

Attended by thousands of AAP supporters, Kejriwal and six of his key ministers Manish Sisodia, Satyendar Jain, Gopal Rai, Kailash Gehlot, Imran Hussain and Rajendra Gautam were also sworn in.

In a brief address after the swearing-in function at Ramlila Maidan, Kejriwal, 49, a former Indian Revenue Service officer, said "now that elections are over, the politics is also over and he has 'forgiven' his political opponents for the remarks they made during the poll campaign."

"During campaigns, politics takes place and it did. I forgive you for all the things you have said against me, I request you also to forget all negative things. We have to work together for the progress of Delhi. We will work with the Centre too," Kejriwal said.

"I am your chief minister. I am Delhi's chief minister. Even BJP's, Congress' chief minister," he said, adding "it doesn't matter who you voted for, now all Delhiites are my family. I will work for everyone, be it from any party, any religion, caste."

During the high-octane election campaign, BJP leaders had accused Kejriwal of being an "anarchist and terrorist" although they denied it later.

Aam Aadmi Party returned to power for the third consecutive time with 62 seats of the 70-seat parliament at the end of one of the most polarising campaigns in the backdrop of the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests.

31 civilians killed

UN says strike an apparent retaliation for downing of a coalition jet

AFP, Dubai

Thirty-one people were killed in air strikes on Yemen Saturday, the United Nations said, the victims of an apparent Saudi-led retaliation after Iran-backed Huthi rebels claimed to have shot down one of its jets.

The Tornado aircraft came down Friday in northern Al-Jawf province during an operation to support government forces, a rare shooting down that prompted operations in the area by a Saudi-led military coalition fighting the rebels.

The deadly violence follows an upsurge in fighting in northern Yemen between the warring parties that threatens to worsen the war-battered country's humanitarian crisis.

"Preliminary field reports indicate that on 15 February as many as 31 civilians were killed and 12 others injured in strikes that hit Al-Hayjah area... in Al-Jawf governorate," the office of the UN humanitarian coordinator for Yemen said in a statement.

Lise Grande, the UN coordinator, denounced the "terrible strikes".

"Under international humanitarian law, parties which resort to force are obligated to protect civilians," she said.

"Five years into this conflict and belligerents are still failing to uphold this responsibility. It's shocking."

The rebels reported multiple coalition air strikes in the

area where the plane went down, adding that women and children were among the dead and wounded, according to rebel television station Al-Masirah.

The coalition conceded the "possibility of collateral damage" during a "search and rescue operation" at the site of the jet crash, which left the fate of its crew uncertain.

Without stating the cause of the crash, a coalition statement released by the official Saudi Press Agency said the crew, comprising two officers, ejected from the plane before it crashed but the rebels opened fire at them in "violation of the international humanitarian law".

SAUDI-LED AIR STRIKES IN YEMEN



surface-to-air missile" and the moment it struck the jet in the night sky, sending it crashing down in a ball of flames.

"The downing of a Tornado in the sky above Al-Jawf is a major blow to the enemy and an indication of remarkable growth in Yemeni (rebel) air defence capabilities," Huthi spokesman Mohammed Abdelsalam tweeted.

The escalation follows fierce fighting around the Huthi-held capital Sanaa, with the rebels seen to be advancing on several fronts towards Al-Hazm, the regional capital of Al-Jawf.

Modi rules out rethink
over Citizenship Act

THE INDIAN EXPRESS ONLINE

Amidst the ongoing nationwide protest against the contentious Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday reiterated that his government stands by the decision "despite all pressure".

"For years, India had been waiting for decisions like repealing Article 370 and the introduction of CAA. These decisions were necessary in the interest of the country. Despite all the pressure, we stood our ground over these decisions and will remain so," Modi said while addressing a public meeting in Varanasi.

Modi, who is on a day-long visit to his Lok Sabha constituency, laid the foundation of 50 projects worth Rs 1,254 crore, news agency PTI reported. He also flagged off the IRCTC's 'Maha Kaal Express' through video link.

The prime minister also dedicated to the nation the Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Memorial Centre and unveiled a 63-foot tall statue of the RSS ideologue -- the tallest statue of the leader in the country.



Earlier this month, Modi, while replying to the Motion of Thanks to the President's address in the Lok Sabha, had called the CAA protests "a road to anarchy" and that "protest marches, violence, and arson" against a law duly passed and notified by Parliament will "create a problem for the country".

He had also targeted the Opposition saying they are building narratives keeping only the vote bank in mind.

Widespread protests, largely led by women, against the amended law which grants citizenship to non-Muslim minorities from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh have cropped up in the last two months. The law has become controversial largely because it excludes Muslims.

Several opposition ruled states across have also raised their concern against the CAA and said they will not implement the new citizenship law.

Besides the contentious Citizenship Act, Article 370 of the Constitution, which accorded special powers to the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, were abrogated by the government in August last year, turning the area into a federally-ruled territory.

Israel strikes Gaza
Cancels easing of restrictions

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli air force attacked Hamas positions in the Gaza Strip in retaliation to rocket fire from the Palestinian enclave into Israel, a military statement said.

The exchange of fire between both sides has escalated since last month after US President Donald Trump unveiled his Middle East peace plan, angrily rejected by the Palestinians as a capitulation to Israeli objectives.

"Fighter planes and helicopters have targeted positions of the terrorist organisation Hamas in central Gaza Strip," including a military post, said the Israeli military on Saturday, which earlier reported two projectiles had been fired into the Jewish state from the Gaza Strip.

Following the rocket fire, Israel announced it would cancel a slight easing of the blockade on the Gaza Strip.

"The extension of the fishing zone, the restoration of 500 commercial permits and the delivery of cement have been cancelled," because of the rocket fire, COGAT, the Israel defence ministry unit that oversees civilian activities in the Palestinian territories, said in a statement.

Hamas and Israel have fought three wars since 2008 but over the past year, the Islamists had gradually shaped an informal truce with Israel, under which the Jewish state has eased its crippling blockade of Gaza.

Israel justifies the blockade by the need to contain the Islamist movement Hamas -- designated a terrorist organisation by much of the West -- which has controlled the enclave since 2007.

Critics say it is collective punishment of two million people and feeds extremism.



Muslim women participate in a protest against India's new citizenship law, in Nagaon district of Assam, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Rocket attack hits near
US embassy in Baghdad

Multiple rockets hit an Iraqi base hosting American troops near the US embassy early yesterday, the latest in a flurry of attacks against US assets in the country. "The Coalition confirms small rockets impacted the Iraqi base hosting (coalition) troops in the International Zone... No casualties," said coalition spokesman Myles Caggins. Iraq's military said three Katyusha rockets hit inside the Green Zone, the high-security enclave where the US mission and base are located, as well as Iraqi government buildings, United Nations offices and other embassies. The attack was the 19th attack since October to target either the embassy or US troops across Iraq.

9 homeless drug users
shot dead in Kabul

Gunmen shot dead nine homeless drug users in the Afghan capital, officials said yesterday, shining a light on chronic drug abuse in the world's biggest producer of opium but a rare incident of apparently coordinated violence against addicts. The motive for the Saturday night attack by the unidentified gunmen in Kabul was not known and police said they were investigating. The men had been sleeping in an open area and a forensic examination had shown they were drug users. There are an estimated 2.5 million drug users in Afghanistan, the Ministry of Public Health says.

Libya arms embargo has
become a 'joke': UN



An arms embargo aimed at curbing fighting in Libya has become meaningless because of violations and it is imperative that those who breach it are held to account, a senior UN official said on Sunday. "The arms embargo has become a joke, we all really need to step up here," UN Deputy Special Representative to Libya Stephanie Williams said after a meeting of foreign ministers to follow up on a Berlin summit last month that agreed to uphold the embargo. Fighting has continued despite a call for a truce. Several countries backing rival factions in Libya have repeatedly violated an arms embargo, according to the United Nations, which has previously named the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Turkey for breaching the embargo.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

'Now, everything is allowed'

New era sees Saudi women light up in public

AFP, Riyadh

Rima settles in a chair at an upscale Riyadh cafe, looks around carefully and, seeing no one she recognises, drags on her electronic cigarette before exhaling a cloud of smoke.

"I feel that smoking in public is a part of exercising my newly won freedoms. I am happy that now I can choose," the 27-year-old Saudi who works for a private company in the capital told AFP.

Like Western feminists of the early 20th century, in an era of social change in Saudi Arabia some women are embracing cigarettes, shisha pipes or vaping as a symbol of emancipation.

The sight of women smoking in public has become much more common in recent months, an unthinkable prospect before the introduction of sweeping reforms in the ultra-conservative kingdom by the kingdom's ambitious de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Women are now allowed to drive, attend public sporting events and concerts, or obtain passports without the approval of a male guardian.

Najla, 26, said that despite the rapid social changes, double standards still existed, and that it was still



considered a "scandal and disgrace" if women smoked.

Najla started smoking while still a school student and, like her, up to 65 percent of female Saudi high schoolers light up secretly, according to a 2015 study by the medical faculty at King Abdulaziz University cited by Arab News.

Despite the limitations, in a country where until just a few years ago religious police would chase and hit women for infractions like wearing nail polish or allowing a strand of hair to escape from their hijab, the changes have been head-spinning.

"Most of our women clients order shisha. It's something that was totally unimaginable just three months ago," a Lebanese waiter told AFP at an up-market cafe in north Riyadh.

Heba, a 36-year-old longtime smoker who sat at a table nearby, described growing up in a closed country where "everything was forbidden to women".

"I never imagined I would be able to smoke shisha in public next to men," she told AFP.

"Now, everything is allowed. Women venture out without hijab, without abaya and they even smoke publicly."