

NEWS IN
briefNZ cops probe threat to
terror attack mosque

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand police said yesterday they were investigating a threat made this week against one of the Christchurch mosques where 51 Muslim worshippers were killed in a mass shooting a year ago. Amid plans to mark the one-year anniversary of the March 15 massacre, police said the threat to Christchurch's Al Noor mosque was posted this week on encrypted messaging app Telegram.

US Supreme Court to
review Obamacare law

AFP, Washington

The US Supreme Court on Monday agreed to once again review former president Barack Obama's signature health care law, the target of repeated political and legal challenges over the past decade. The top court, which had upheld the law in 2012 and 2015, will examine a suit brought by Democrats seeking to counter lower court rulings that put in question the law's constitutionality. The nine justices will hear arguments in the case sometime in the fall and reach a decision in 2021, after the US elections in November in which health care is a major issue.

Kremlin critic's bank
accounts frozen

AFP, Moscow

Russia's main opposition leader Alexei Navalny said yesterday that authorities had frozen all of his bank accounts and those of his family, including his elderly parents. The 43-year-old anti-corruption blogger, who has emerged as President Vladimir Putin's most prominent critic, accused the Russian authorities of seeking to strangle him financially at a time when the Kremlin appears to be seeking to consolidate power during a sensitive transition period.



A Palestinian protester scuffles with an Israeli soldier after Israeli tractors started working on a Palestinian land near the village of Aqraba, south of Nablus, in the Israeli occupied West Bank, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Taliban attack Afghan bases

Two soldiers killed; Pak calls on Kabul to abide by prisoner swap deal

AGENCIES

The Taliban carried out more than a dozen attacks on Afghan army bases, officials said yesterday, hours after ending a partial truce and throwing into doubt peace talks between Kabul and the insurgents.

The intra-Afghan negotiations are due to begin March 10 according to a US-Taliban deal signed in Doha on Saturday, but a dispute over a prisoner swap has raised questions about whether they will go ahead.

The agreement includes a commitment for the Taliban to release up to 1,000 prisoners and for the Afghan government to free around 5,000 insurgent captives -- something the militants have cited as a prerequisite for talks but which President Ashraf Ghani has refused to do before negotiations start.

The row has highlighted the tough road ahead, with the Taliban's decision to end a partial truce Monday complicating matters further.

A defence ministry official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AFP

of overnight attacks on government forces in 13 of the country's 34 provinces.

Two soldiers were killed in one of the attacks that happened in southern Kandahar province, a government statement said.

An attack in Logar province near Kabul -- which was not included in the defence ministry official's tally -- killed



five security forces, the provincial governor's spokesman Didar Lawang told AFP.

The halt to the limited truce, which began on February 22, ends what was a welcome reprieve for ordinary Afghans who have born the brunt of the deadly violence.

But experts said the move was

unsurprising as both sides seek to exploit whatever leverage they hold to force the other's hand.

"Of course violence will go up, was bound to happen. no surprise Ghani balking on prisoner release: 1 of his few levers," Vanda Felbab-Brown, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, tweeted.

Kabul-based analyst Ahmad Saeedi told AFP the uptick in attacks reflected the insurgents' belief that "they have to keep the battlefield hot to be able to win on the negotiating table, as they did with the Americans."

Pakistan has called on the Afghan government to abide by a prisoner swap clause in the US-Taliban peace deal, the rejection of which saw the Taliban resume attacks in the northeast of the country, reports Aljazeera online.

In a statement yesterday, Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi called on both sides in the conflict to show restraint and come to the negotiating table for scheduled talks later this month.

Netanyahu claims biggest
win despite graft charges

AFP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday emerged victorious after Israel's third election in a year despite a looming corruption trial, dismaying the Palestinians who were angered by his hardline campaign pledges.

Monday's election left the veteran right-winger in prime position to form a government and end a year of political deadlock, after similar votes in April and September proved inconclusive.

The central election committee said it had counted 90 percent of the vote, with breakdowns of the result in the media showing Netanyahu's Likud party with 36 seats in Israel's 120-member parliament.

That would mark the party's best-ever result under Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving prime minister and its first to be indicted in office.

Netanyahu's bloc, which includes ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties, is likely still one or two votes short of a majority, but his party spokesman said it was confident of

luring defectors.

Likud's main challenger, the centrist Blue and White party, was projected to win 32 seats.

Counting its centre-left allies as well as the mainly Arab Joint List alliance, the anti-Netanyahu camp was expected to control 54 to 55 seats.

While there remains no guarantee that Netanyahu can form a coalition, he hailed Monday's election as a "giant" success.

"This is the biggest win of my life," he told supporters in Tel Aviv where people danced, sang and shouted "Bibi, king of Israel," using the premier's nickname.

Netanyahu campaigned on his tough position towards the Palestinians and on expanding

Jewish settlements in occupied West Bank. He also pledged to annex the Jordan Valley, a key part of the West Bank that Palestinian see as crucial for their future state, if he won. Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said the exit polls showed that "settlement, annexation and apartheid had won".

ISRAEL ELECTION

Won't let West Bengal
become Delhi: Mamata

PTI, Kolkata

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said yesterday all who came from Bangladesh and have been casting votes in elections were Indian citizens and did not require to apply for citizenship afresh.

Banerjee also slammed the Modi government for its handling of the communal riots in Delhi which has claimed 42 lives so far, and asserted she will not allow West Bengal to turn into another Delhi.

"Those who have come from Bangladesh are citizens of India... they have got citizenship. You don't need to apply for citizenship again. You have been casting your votes in elections, electing PM and CM now they are saying that you are not citizens. don't believe them," she told a public meeting here.

She also asserted she will not let "even a single person" to be driven out of Bengal. The West Bengal chief minister said no refugee living in the state will be deprived

of citizenship.

Hitting out at the central government over the Delhi violence, the TMC boss said, "Don't forget this is Bengal. What happened in Delhi will never be allowed to happen here. We do not want Bengal to turn into another Delhi or another Uttar Pradesh." The BJP has often accused Banerjee of "Muslim appeasement" and pandering to the interests of the minority community for "vote bank politics".

On Monday, Mamata alleged the violence in Delhi was "state-sponsored genocide".

"I am deeply pained by the killing of innocent people in Delhi. I think it was genocide... the violence in Delhi was state-sponsored," Mamata said while addressing a TMC event in Kolkata.

Mamata claimed it was due to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that "so many people were killed" in the Delhi violence. "Amit Shah should keep this in mind".



Migrants disembarked in the last three days on Lesbos Island, waits in the port of Lesbos, Greece yesterday. Greece was on a state of alert as it faced an influx of thousands of migrants seeking to cross the border from Turkey, with locals fearing a new immigration crisis.

PHOTO: AFP

Lanka calls parliamentary
polls on April 25

Sri Lanka's new president called a snap election on April 25 after sacking the national parliament where his party led a minority government, officials said Monday. Gotabaya Rajapaksa received the power to dissolve the 225-member legislature as it completed four-and-a-half out of its five-year term on Sunday. "We have received a formal notification dissolving parliament and setting out the election calendar," an Election Commission official told AFP. He said the notice was to be published in the government Gazette later Monday. Political parties and independent groups can file nomination papers later this month and the first session of the newly elected parliament has been scheduled for May 14, the official said quoting from the presidential decree.

Malaysia PM vows to fight
graft after week of turmoil

New Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin pledged to prioritise the fight against corruption on Monday after taking over from 94-year-old Mahathir Mohamad with the backing of a former ruling party tarnished by graft. Muhyiddin took office after a week of turmoil following the resignation of Mahathir, who was elected two years ago amid anger over the multi-billion dollar 1MDB scandal for which former prime minister Najib Razak is now on trial. "The government under my leadership will prioritise efforts to increase the integrity and good practices by government," Muhyiddin, 72, said in his first speech since being sworn in as premier on Sunday.

Delhi shooter who pointed
gun at cop arrested

Mohammed Shahruckh, whose videos and images of waving a gun at Delhi Police personnel in the Jaffrabad-Maujpur area on February 24 when violent clashes broke out, has been arrested. Shahruckh had been absconding ever since the incident last week in which he threatened a police officer with a gun and even fired 8 rounds as rival groups pelted stones each other on the road. Now, after a week, Delhi Police yesterday arrested Shahruckh from Shamli in Uttar Pradesh. Earlier it was reported that Delhi Police had managed to arrest Shahruckh within days after he was caught on camera waving a gun at the Delhi Police officer. However, then the police said he was absconding.

SOURCE: AFP, PTI, REUTERS

Handshake? No thanks

Global greeting habits change due to coronavirus

AFP, Paris

Say no to a handshake, refuse every peck on the cheek and definitely avoid hugging. Instead, try a direct gaze, or maybe a hand gesture.

Around the world people are changing their habits at work, home and in worship to reduce the risk of contracting the new coronavirus and prevent it from spreading any further.

AFP looks at changes in behaviour due to the coronavirus, which has killed more than 3,000 worldwide.

CHINA

In Beijing, the capital of the country where the outbreak began, red hoardings tell people not to shake hands but to join their own hands together in a sign of greeting. Loudspeakers tell people to make the traditional gongxi gesture -- a fist in the opposite palm -- to say hello.

FRANCE

Newspapers have been filled with advice on how to replace kissing on the cheek -- an everyday greeting in France, even between people who

have only just met -- and handshaking, a common formality at work. Etiquette expert Philippe Lichtfus, who has been widely cited in the media, says handshakes are a relatively recent development that began in the Middle Ages.

BRAZIL

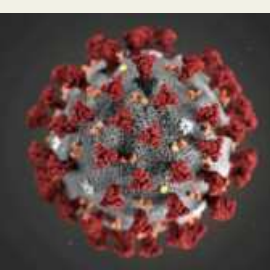
Brazil's health ministry has recommended that citizens not share metal straws used to consume the caffeine-rich South American drink mate, also known as chimarrao.

GERMANY

In a sign of the times, Germany's Interior Minister Horst Seehofer rebuffed Chancellor Angela Merkel's attempt to shake hands with him on Monday, smiling and keeping both his hands to himself. They both laughed and Merkel threw her hand up in the air before taking a seat.

SPAIN

The outbreak could hit one of Spain's most cherished traditions -- the kissing of sculptures of the Virgin Mary in the week leading up to Easter. With just a month to go before the week starts, the ritual could be banned.

Half of world's beaches
could vanish by 2100

Warn researchers; Australia could be hit hardest

AFP, Paris

Climate change and sea level rise are currently on track to wipe out half the world's sandy beaches by 2100, researchers warned Monday.

Even if humanity sharply reduces the fossil fuel pollution that drives global warming, more than a third of the planet's sandy shorelines could disappear by then, crippling coastal tourism in countries large and small, they reported in the journal Nature Climate Change.

"Apart from tourism, sandy beaches often act as the first line of defence from coastal storms and flooding, and without them impacts of extreme weather events will probably be higher," lead author Michalis Vousdoukas, a researcher at the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, told AFP.

"We have to prepare." Some countries,

such as the United States, are already planning extensive defence systems, but in most nations such massive engineering schemes will be unfeasible, unaffordable or both.

Australia could be hit hardest, according to the findings, with nearly 15,000 kilometres (more than 9,000 miles) of white-beach coastline washed away over the next 80 years, followed by Canada, Chile and the United States.

The 10 countries that stand to lose the most sandy shoreline also include Mexico, China, Russia, Argentina, India and Brazil.

Sandy beaches occupy more than a third of the global coastline, often in highly populated areas.

But new construction, sea level rise, storm surge from hurricanes or typhoons, and reduced sediment from dammed rivers are all eroding these shorelines, threatening livelihoods and infrastructure.

CLIMATE CHANGE