

NEWSIN brief

YouTube to remain blocked in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

YouTube will remain blocked in Pakistan 'indefinitely', an official said yesterday, as experts have failed to find a way to filter content deemed offensive and blasphemous in the Muslim majority country. The video-sharing website has been blocked in Pakistan since September 2012 over its hosting of the "Innocence of Muslims" movie that sparked furious protests around the world.

Blasts kill at least 32 in Iraqi capital

AFP, Baghdad

Attacks in Baghdad including a suicide bombing inside a restaurant killed 32 people yesterday, hours before a years-old nightly curfew is due to be lifted, officials said. The suicide bomber struck in the Baghdad Jadida area in the capital's east, killing at least 23 people and wounding at least 43. Another attack -- said to have been either a suicide or roadside bombing -- hit a commercial area in central Baghdad, killing at least nine people and wounding at least 28.

Nigeria delays elections over Boko Haram threat

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The Nigerian government has postponed elections amid attempts to reclaim large swathes of the northeast of the country from the extremist Islamic insurgent group Boko Haram. A Nigerian official told Associated Press that voting, scheduled to go ahead on 14 February, would be postponed for six weeks to allow a new multinational force the opportunity to secure land under the control of the terrorist group.

Shiite militia tightens grip on Yemen

AFP, Sanaa

Yemen's Shiite Huthi militia yesterday formed a "security commission", consolidating its grip on power after a takeover denounced by opponents as a "coup" and condemned by the international community. The declaration was followed by a blast outside the Huthi-controlled presidential palace.

Pakistan trains Afghan army cadets

BBC ONLINE

Six Afghan army cadets have arrived for training in Pakistan, another sign of increased cooperation after years of distrust between the neighbouring countries. The cadets will be the first Afghans to attend the Pakistan Military Academy.

Poroshenko shows captured Russian IDs

AFP, Munich

Ukraine President Petro Poroshenko yesterday brandished in front of world leaders several passports taken from Russian soldiers in what he said was proof of Moscow's "presence" in his country. "This is the best evidence for the aggression and for the presence of Russian troops," he told the Munich Security Conference, speaking in English.

UKRAINE CRISIS



German Chancellor Angela Merkel (L), French President Francois Hollande (R) and Russia's President Vladimir Putin attend a meeting on resolving the Ukraine crisis, at the Kremlin in Moscow on Friday.

PHOTO:
AFP

Talks end with no word of a new peace plan

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Five hours of talks between European leaders and Russian president Putin have ended without any word of an agreement to resolve the crisis in Ukraine.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Holland arrived in Moscow to discuss a new Ukraine peace plan with Russia.

The joint mission from the two European leaders sent out signals of concern that the conflict has reached a dangerous new phase in Ukraine, which has already had a damaging effect on Russia's ties with Europe, and which is beginning to negatively impact EU economies.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the leaders had agreed on "constructive talks" in order to continue working towards a possible joint document on implementing a ceasefire agreement reached in the Belarusian capital of Minsk last September.

Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande are expected to speak next by phone today, Peskov said, indicating that Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko would also take part in the conversation.

Merkel and Hollande had already held talks with Poroshenko on Thursday when they visited Ukraine.

"The talks are over for now and our guests are already on their way to the airport," Peskov told reporters at the Kremlin.

"At the moment joint work is under way on preparing the text of a possible joint document on implementation of the Minsk agreements - a document which would include proposals made by the president of Ukraine and proposals formulated today and added by Russian President Putin."

More than 5,000 people have now been killed in fighting between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian government forces in east Ukraine.

12 killed in Ukraine Kiev says rebels massing forces

AFP, Donetsk

Seven civilians and five soldiers were killed in fighting in east Ukraine, government and rebel officials said yesterday, with Kiev accusing pro-Russian separatists of massing forces for fresh offensives.

Rebels are "accumulating forces for further offensive operations on Debaltseve and Mariupol," Ukrainian defence official Volodymyr Polyovyi told journalists.

The separatists were sending fresh tanks, armoured personnel carriers as well as multiple launch rocket systems to the Debaltseve region and Granite, around 35 kilometres northeast of Mariupol, Polyovyi said.

Debaltseve -- mid-way between rebel centres Donetsk and Lugansk -- has been the focus of fierce fighting for over a week as insurgent fighters try to encircle government troops holding the strategic railway hub.

Separatist fighters in January fired rockets at the strategic government-held port city of Mariupol, whose capture could open up a land bridge from Russia to Crimea.

Missile fire yesterday hit Debaltseve a day after a brief truce allowed hundreds of civilians to flee, government officials said.

Ukraine's military had previously said that a temporary ceasefire that saw shelling of the beleaguered town halt for several hours Friday could be extended into yesterday.

DELHI EXIT POLLS FORECAST BJP suffers defeat

AFP, New Delhi

India's Narendra Modi was forecast to suffer the first major setback of his premiership yesterday as exit polls showed his party had been defeated in elections to Delhi's state assembly by a self-styled anarchist.

Five exit polls released after voting ended at 6:00pm indicated that the capital's former chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party had comfortably beaten Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, with four of them forecasting an overall majority.

While polls have been wide of the mark in the past, victory would be particularly sweet for the anti-corruption champion, trounced by Modi when they both battled for the seat of Varanasi in May's general election.

A steady stream of voters could be seen outside polling booths throughout the day and the electoral commission put the provisional figure for final turnout at an impressive 67 percent, a new record.

Rattled by Kejriwal's popularity, Modi headlined several major rallies, portraying his rival as a "backstabber" who betrayed voters last time round by quitting so early.

Having invested an unusually large amount of political capital in a state election, observers say a defeat will be a significant setback for a prime minister who has enjoyed an extended honeymoon with voters since his landslide general election victory.

Bedi, who had been hoping Modi's strong support would be decisive, refused to throw in the towel after the exit polls were released.



Pakistani relatives of schoolchildren killed in a Taliban attack on the Army Public School react as they protest against delays in the investigation in Peshawar yesterday. The December 16, 2014 attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar by a group of gunmen and suicide bombers prompted a bout of national soul-searching even in a country used to high levels of militancy, with the government moving to scrap a moratorium on executions and establish military courts.

PHOTO:
AFP

She's still alive ISIS hostage's family still hopeful

AP, Prescott

The parents of a 26-year-old American who Islamic State extremists say was killed in an airstrike in Syria said in a statement addressed to group leaders that the claim of their daughter's death concerned them but they were still hopeful she was alive.

The Islamic State group said on Friday that Kayla Jean Mueller of Prescott, Arizona, died in a Jordanian airstrike, but the government of Jordan dismissed the statement as "criminal propaganda," and the US said it had not seen any evidence to corroborate the report.

Mueller is the only known remaining US hostage held by the Islamic State group.

If the death is confirmed, she would be the fourth American to die while being held by Islamic State militants. Three others -- journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff and aid worker Peter Kassig -- were beheaded by the group.

"You told us that you treated Kayla as your guest, as your guest her safety and well-being remains your responsibility," Mueller's family said in a short statement released Friday.

Mueller is an aid worker who previously volunteered with organizations in India, Israel and the Palestinian territories. Her identity had not been disclosed until now out of fears for her safety. Her family said she was taken hostage by the Islamic State group on Aug. 4, 2013, while leaving a hospital in Syria.

"The common thread of Kayla's life has been her quiet leadership and strong desire to serve others," Mueller's family said.



US invites China's Xi, Japan's Abe for state visits

AFP, Washington

The United States has invited the leaders of China and Japan for prestigious state visits, President Barack Obama's top security adviser said Friday, signaling a deepening of his "pivot to Asia."

"In furtherance of our relationships throughout this vital region, I'm pleased to announce today that we have invited Prime Minister (Shinzo) Abe of Japan and President Xi Jinping of China for state visits," said National Security Adviser Susan Rice.

Rice also said that presidents Joko Widodo of Indonesia and Park Geun-Hye of South Korea would visit the United States this year as well.

Early in his presidency, Obama put forward plans to withdraw US military, economic and human resources from Middle East wars, deploying them to emerging Asia instead.

But he has sometimes struggled to keep the strategy on course given the Arab Spring, wars in Syria and Ukraine, and the economic crisis in Europe.

The visits -- which come on the back of a three-nation trip Obama made to Asia in November -- are designed to underscore that the strategy remains on track.

The announcement comes as the United States and Japan approach the final stage of talks on a vast trade agreement that would link a dozen countries on either side of the Pacific Ocean.

China seizes toilet rolls depicting HK leader

BBC ONLINE

China's authorities have seized 7,600 toilet rolls and 20,000 packets of tissue printed with the image of Hong Kong chief executive CY Leung.

Hong Kong's Democratic Party, which had planned to sell the novelty items at a fair next week, called the seizure a violation of freedom of expression.

The tissues were confiscated from a factory in mainland China on Friday. Leung is unpopular with much of the Hong Kong public, and products mocking him have sold well in recent years.

The confiscated tissues depicted the pro-Beijing leader with a variety of expressions.

Some printed the word "lying" on his forehead, while others showed him with fangs - a reference to how his opponents have described him as a wolf.

The Democratic Party said the toilet rolls sold out at Hong Kong's annual Chinese New Year fair last year, and that they had planned to sell the products again this year to raise funds.

Lo Kin-hei, a vice-chairman of the Democratic Party, said that about \$12,900 worth of goods had been confiscated, with no reason given.

There was no immediate comment from the mainland Chinese authorities.

Last year, tens of thousands took part in protests in Hong Kong, demanding democratic reforms.

China has promised direct elections for the post of chief executive in 2017, but ruled that candidates had to be vetted by Beijing, angering many activists.



NYT editorial slams Modi

THE HINDU ONLINE

After US President Barack Obama raised the issue of religious intolerance in India, The New York Times published a very strong editorial criticising Prime Minister Narendra Modi for what it calls his "dangerous silence" on a series of communal events in the country.

The editorial, by the NYT editorial board, lists recent attacks on churches and reports of Ghar Vapsi or conversion and marks out the Vishwa Hindu Parishad for its proposed conversions programme in Ayodhya in March this year, saying the group "was playing with fire." "Mr. Modi's continued silence before such troubling intolerance increasingly gives the impression that he either cannot or does not wish to control the fringe elements of the Hindu nationalist right," the NYT editorial surmised.

New York Times editorial: 'Modi's Dangerous Silence'

What will it take for Prime Minister Narendra Modi to speak out about the mounting violence against India's religious minorities? Attacks at Christian places of worship have prompted no response from the man elected to represent and to protect all of India's citizens. Nor has he addressed the mass conversion to Hinduism of Christians and Muslims who have been coerced or promised money. Modi's continued silence before such troubling intolerance increasingly gives the impression that he either cannot or does not wish to control the fringe elements of the Hindu nationalist right.

Recently, a number of Christian churches in India have been burned and ransacked. Last December, St Sebastian's Church in East Delhi was engulfed in fire. Its pastor reported a strong smell of kerosene after the blaze was put out. On Monday, St Alphonsa's Church in New Delhi was vandalised. Ceremonial vessels were taken, yet collection boxes full of cash were untouched. Alarmed by the attacks, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India has urged the government to uphold the secular nature of India and to assure its Christians they are "protected and secure" in their own country.

There is also concern about the mass conversions. Last December, about 200 Muslims were converted to Hinduism in Agra. In January, up to 100 Christians in West Bengal "reconverted" to Hinduism. Hard-line Hindu nationalist groups, like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, make no secret of their support for a "homecoming" campaign designed to "return" non-Hindus to the fold. More than 80 per cent of Indians are Hindu, but Pravin Togadia of the VHP says his organisation's goal is a country that is 100 per cent Hindu. The only way to achieve that is to deny religious minorities their faith.

The VHP is reportedly planning a mass conversion of 3,000 Muslims in Ayodhya this month. The destruction of the Babri Mosque there in 1992 by Hindu militants touched off riots between Hindus and Muslims across India that left more than 2,000 people dead. The VHP knows it is playing with fire.

Modi has promised an ambitious agenda for India's development. But, as President Obama observed in a speech in New Delhi last month: "India will succeed so long as it is not splintered along the lines of religious faith." Modi needs to break his deafening silence on religious intolerance.



Lanka's new govt passes first parliament test

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's new government cleared its first test in parliament yesterday, securing a crushing majority for a welfare budget unveiled last month.

Legislators voted 164-1 to approve the January 29 budget that raised salaries of 1.6 million public servants, slashed food and fuel prices while slapping new taxes on the most profitable private companies.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said the near unanimous vote augured well for the country, which voted Mahinda Rajapakse out of office at January 8 elections after a decade of autocratic rule.

"This is a first step towards a new political culture in this country," Wickremesinghe said adding that the vote demonstrated they were working as a unity government.

India's JD(U) axes CM after clashes

AFP, New Delhi

One of India's biggest states was plunged into political turmoil yesterday when Bihar's chief minister was sacked by his own party leader after street clashes between their rival supporters.

After being booted out of the Janata Dal (United) party by his one-time mentor Nitish Kumar, Jitan Ram Manjhi is almost certain to be ousted as chief minister of India's third most populous state.

Manjhi was expelled from the JD(U) after trying to defy pressure to vacate his position and allow Kumar to stage a comeback after his surprise resignation last year.

Soon after Manjhi was formally expelled, Kumar was unanimously elected as leader of his party's assembly faction.

Although Manjhi has requested a dissolution of the assembly, Bihar's governor is more likely to first ask Kumar to form a new administration ahead of elections which are anyway due later this year.

QUOTE of the day



"We cannot win this war alone, but it is absolutely our war."

Jordanian Queen Rania's take on the prevalent ISIS crisis.