

NEWS IN brief

SE Asia rains dampen smog crisis

AFP, Kuala Lumpur
Persistent rains have cleared the air across vast stretches of Southeast Asia that have choked for weeks on hazardous smoke from Indonesian fires, with officials and citizens expressing hope Thursday the crisis could soon end. Parts of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore enjoyed the cleanest air in two months, while affected areas of the Philippines and Thailand also gained a respite from pollution that has sickened hundreds of thousands.

Paul Ryan to be US House speaker

AFP, Washington
US Republicans on Wednesday nominated popular conservative Paul Ryan as their candidate for speaker of the House of Representatives -- a move they hope will unite their fractured camp after weeks of political infighting. Barring any disaster, Ryan will -- in a full vote in the Republican-controlled House set for Thursday -- be elevated to the most important job in Congress, putting him second in the line of presidential succession after the vice president.

Advance voting kicks off in Myanmar

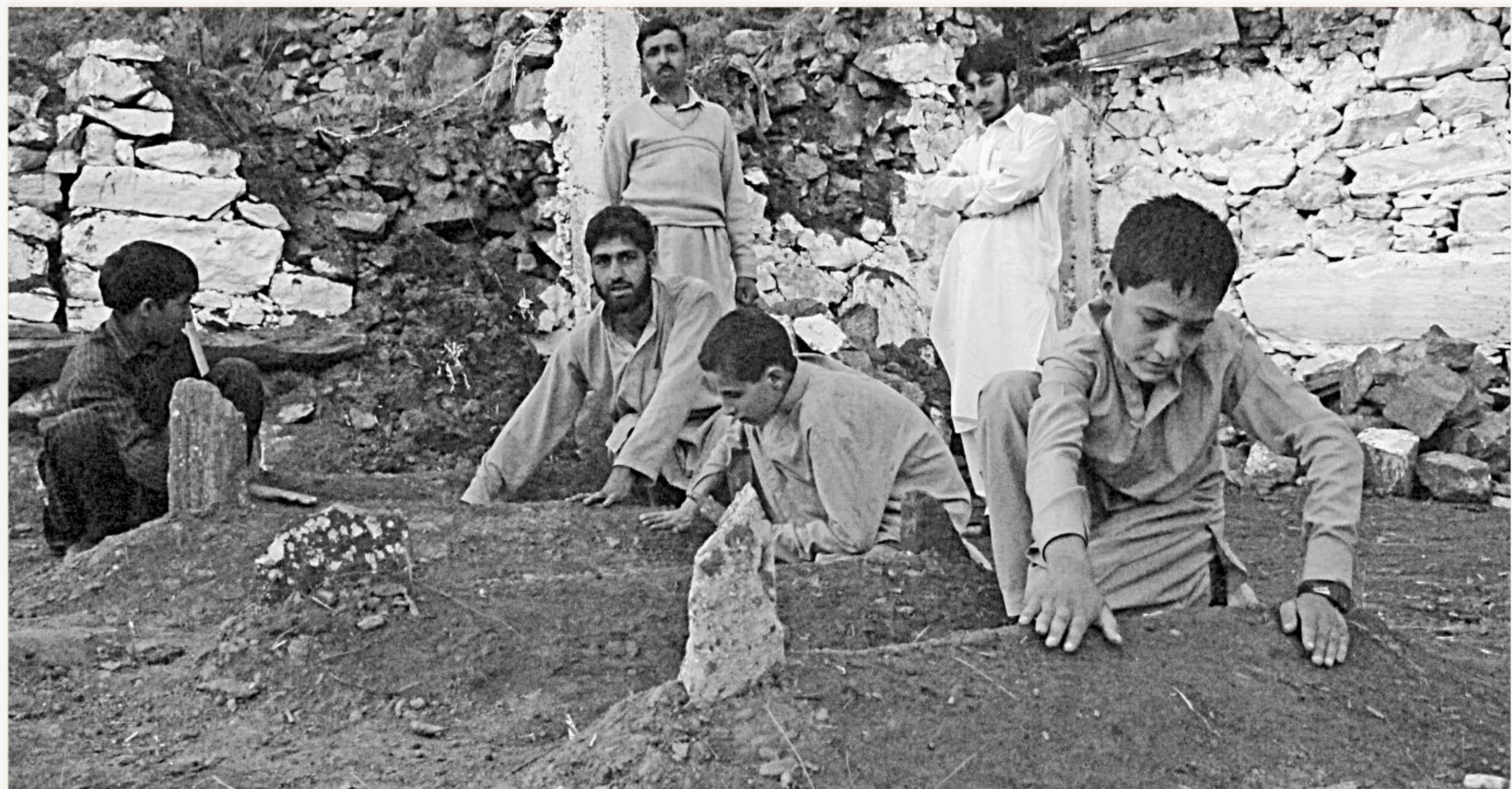
AFP, Yangon
Advance voting kicked-off in Myanmar yesterday for those unable to cast a ballot in their constituencies on polling day next week, many of whom are soldiers and civil servants. The early ballot comes after the country's overseas nationals cast advance votes earlier this month ahead of the November 8 polls trumpeted as Myanmar's freest and fairest in decades.

US House passes two-year budget deal

AFP, Washington
The US House of Representatives on Wednesday passed a bipartisan, two-year budget deal that boosts federal spending by \$80 billion, reduces a government shutdown threat and raises the debt ceiling through the end of Barack Obama's presidency. Nearly 80 Republicans joined a united front of Democrats in favor of the legislation, which passed 266 to 167.

In a first, Italian PM visits Cuba

AFP, Havana
Italy's Prime Minister Matteo Renzi kicked off a visit to Cuba Wednesday, the first ever by an Italian head of government, seeking a trade foothold as the communist island renews ties with the US and Europe. Italian press reports said he would seek to boost Italy's presence in the tourism, restaurant, construction, recycling and renewable energy sectors.



Children smooth the dirt on the graves of relatives killed when their house was damaged by an earthquake in the village of Belliy Baba in Shangla District, Pakistan. The Photo was taken on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Aussie officials 'paid people smugglers' Says Amnesty, Australia slams claims as 'disgraceful slur'

AGENCIES
Australia yesterday reacted strongly after Amnesty International said it has evidence showing officials paid people smugglers to turn back boats and threatened asylum seekers. In a new report, the rights group says asylum seekers' lives were put at risk in two incidents in May and July. Meanwhile, Australia yesterday lashed out the damning claims, calling it a disgraceful slur that will change nothing. Immigration Minister Peter Dutton rejected the report and said Australia would not be "bullied" into changing its policies, reports AFP. Dutton added in comments made on commercial radio that Amnesty's allegations were "a disgrace". The country has a controversial policy of zero tolerance towards migrant boats approaching its territory. In one of the incidents on 17 May, 65 passengers and six crew were allegedly intercepted by Australian officials and subsequently turned back to Indonesia. Amnesty, which says it has interviewed all on board, claims that officials handed over US\$32,000 (£20,900) to the crew. The passengers were then transferred from their boat to two smaller rickety boats - one of which sank near an island in Indonesian waters. Passengers managed to swim to safety.

Aid reaches to victims; death toll passes 390

AFP, Chitral
Rescuers said yesterday they believed they have reached most of those affected by the powerful earthquake that ripped across Pakistan this week, but thousands of desperate survivors now face a race to rebuild with winter fast approaching. Rugged terrain, severed communication lines and an unstable security situation have impeded relief efforts since Monday's 7.5 magnitude quake killed more than 390 people in Pakistan and Afghanistan and levelled thousands of homes. But yesterday Pakistan's National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) said it believes it has reached "most of the affected area". A spokesman said helicopters are still searching for any survivors in the most remote, inaccessible areas of the mountainous region. Pakistan's confirmed death toll so far stands at 272, with more than 1,900 people injured and nearly 14,000 homes damaged, though the spokesman said the NDMA is still in the process of estimating a final toll. Desperate victims, meanwhile, appealed for aid, expressing fears for children in particular who were forced to sleep outside in sub-zero temperatures as winter sets in. "After November 15 there will be three to four feet of snow here and we have nothing to protect us," said Mir Wali, whose village Charun Ovir rests 10,000 feet up the mountainside in the northwestern district of Chitral. Dust is still rising from the mountain after the earthquake caused cracks in it, leaving villagers fearing a landslide or collapse. "Whatever the government has to do, it should do before the snowfall," he told AFP. "After that the roads will be blocked and we won't be able to save our children." In Afghanistan, authorities have put the toll at 121 people with some 8,000 houses damaged -- but there are fears the number of dead could still spike, with charities warning that the Taliban presence was hindering access to many of the affected areas. UNAMA official Mark Bowden said it appeared NGOs had the capacity to help after the quake, but that access to the areas "varies from one (insurgent) commander after another". Desperate survivors were left marooned on mountaintops in Badakhshan, the remote province where the epicentre of the earthquake was located and where much of the territory is controlled by the insurgents.

AFGHAN-PAK QUAKE

Historians rise against intolerance in India

TNN, New Delhi
After writers, artists, filmmakers and scientists, historians have spoken against the growing intolerance in India. A statement issued by Sahmat and signed by 53 historians including Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib and Mridula Mukherjee, expressed anguish over the "vitiated atmosphere" prevailing in the country. "Differences of opinion are being sought to be settled by using physical violence. Arguments are met not with counter arguments but with bullets," the statement says, recalling the Dadri lynching and ink attack on ORF's Sudheendra Kulkarni. "This is particularly worrying for us as historians as we have already experienced attempts to ban our books and expunge statements of history despite the fact that they are supported by sources and the interpretation is transparent. What the regime seems to want is a kind of legislated history, a manufactured image of the past, glorifying certain aspects of it and denigrating others, without any regard for chronology, sources or methods of enquiry that are the building blocks of the edifice of history," the statement said. Slamming the silence of PM Narendra Modi on the issue, the statement said, "And when it is hoped that the head of government will make a statement about improving the prevailing conditions, he chooses to speak only about general poverty; and it takes the head of the state to make the required reassuring statement, not once but twice. When writer after writer is returning their award of recognition in protest, no comment is made about the conditions that caused the protest; instead the ministers call it a paper revolution and advise the writers to stop writing. This is as good as saying that intellectuals will be silenced if they protest." Urging the state to ensure an atmosphere that is conducive to "free and fearless expression, security for all sections of society and the safe-guarding of the values and traditions of plurality that India had always cherished in the past," the historians



Nepal's newly elected President Bidhya Bhandari (3rd L) administers the oath of office in the presence of former President Ram Baran Yadav (2nd L), Vice President Parmanand Jha (L), Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli (4th L), also known as KP Oli, and Constituent Assembly chairperson Onsari Gharti Magar (R) at the presidential building "Shital Niwas" in Kathmandu, Nepal, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Myanmar's 'Muslim-free' polls | Maldives Crisis: Trouble in paradise

Report says Suu Kyi ordered 'Islamic purge' in her party ahead of polls

AL Jazeera Online
Myanmar's main opposition party, led by the Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, deliberately bypassed Muslim candidates ahead of the November election, a senior party member told Al Jazeera's Investigative Unit. Speaking on the condition of anonymity, the source said Suu Kyi ordered an "Islamic purge" in the National League for Democracy (NLD) to appease growing anti-Muslim sentiment fuelled by headline Buddhist nationalists. Not one of the NLD's 1,151 candidates standing for regional and national elections is Muslim, despite there being around five million Muslims - or between 4 and 10 percent of the population - in the country. There are also no Muslim candidates in the military-backed, governing Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) running in what has been billed as the country's first free and fair general election in 25 years. In the run-up to the vote, local election commissions reportedly rejected dozens of Muslim candidates with authorities denying that their parents were citizens, claims which many of the shunned candidates denied. "I think Suu Kyi is a bit concerned about the Ma Ba Tha, so it became an Islamic purge here," said the source. The Ma Ba Tha is an increasingly effective, ultranationalist Buddhist movement, also known as 'The Association for the Protection of Race and Religion', whose



outspoken members are known for their bitter speeches attacking the ethnic minority Muslim Rohingya. Suu Kyi, 70, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, for her non-violent struggle for democracy. Her silence on the marginalisation of the Rohingya and general exclusion of Muslims, however, has drawn criticism. Win Htein, a senior NLD member who is coordinating its campaign, told Al Jazeera that the party decided that to secure the best chance of winning, Muslims would have to be left out. "In the present climate, we believe that it is a better strategy to win by leaving out Muslims candidates in coming election," he said, claiming that potential candidates of the Islamic faith had "agreed to that". Some 15 Rohingya candidates were barred in August from running, again on account of their parents being 'foreign-born'. Earlier this year, the government effectively disenfranchised about 700,000 people, mostly Rohingya, when it declared holders of "white cards" ineligible to vote. "Rohingya Muslims have been removed from the elections by the USDP where they used to participate. You could say that where Islam is concerned, everyone - the monks and the government - is united. "Now the elections are unequivocally Islamic-free," Win Htein added.

AFP, Colombo
To honeymooners lounging on its sparkling sands, the Maldives may appear the closest thing to paradise on earth. But away from the beaches, a gripping but vicious power struggle is playing out, which observers say has yet to run its course and in which outsiders show little inclination to intervene. The vice-president is behind bars over claims he tried to blow up his boss on his speedboat, joining the island's first democratically-elected leader. The president's election running mate is on the run, and the presidential spokesman was sacked last week. Largely operating behind the scenes is the patriarchal figure of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, a 77-year-old former ruler who critics say is using his half-brother, Abdulla Yameen, as a proxy president. "What we are seeing today is the return of the dictator through his half-brother," said opposition Maldivian Democratic Party spokesman Hamid Abdul Ghafoor. Gayoom ruled with an iron fist for 30 years before losing the island's first genuine elections to MDP leader and one-time prisoner Mohammed Nasheed. Barely three years later, climate activist Nasheed was toppled when security chiefs and judges appointed by

Gayoom revolted against attempted reforms. Since then, observers say Gayoom's clan has steadily re-exerted control, flattening anyone in its way. When Nasheed attempted a comeback in 2013, the election was twice postponed before Yameen won a controversial run-off. Nasheed was subsequently jailed for 13 years for "terrorism" related charges. Allies have also run into trouble, with Vice President Ahmed Adeb arrested last week for treason over the speedboat explosion that left Yameen unscathed but injured the first lady. Adeb's predecessor Mohamed Jameel was sacked in July for treason. He has yet to return home. Then defence minister Mohamed Nazim was jailed in March for trying to topple the government. "Gayoom and Yameen got together to keep Nasheed out of power and they succeeded. Yameen is now moving to eliminate any potential challenge," said a Western diplomatic source. "There's bad blood within the ruling clan, but they have united to keep others out. We have not seen the end of the purge. The UN has criticised "serious flaws" in Nasheed's trial and sentencing, which came less than three weeks after his arrest, and US Secretary of State John Kerry spoke of "troubling signs" for Maldivian democracy.

