

NEWS IN brief

Belgium charges 9th Paris attacks suspect

AFP, Brussels
The Belgian authorities have charged a ninth person in connection with last month's Paris attacks which left 130 dead, the prosecutor's office said yesterday. A statement identified the man as Abdoullah C., a Belgian national born in 1985, who was arrested on Tuesday on charges of "terrorist murders and participation in the activities of a terrorist organisation."

Tornadoes, storms kill seven in US

AFP, Chicago
Storms and tornadoes killed at least seven people and left dozens injured when they ripped through large swathes of the south-eastern United States on Wednesday, reports and officials said. A series of tornadoes and twisters tore through several states, leaving a trail of destruction and ruining Christmas for some. Those killed were in the states of Mississippi, Tennessee and Arkansas, CNN said.



An armed Chinese policeman stands guard in the popular shopping and nightlife area of Sanlitun in Beijing, yesterday. Foreign embassies in China issued a warning on December 24 about possible threats against "Westerners" in a popular Beijing neighbourhood ahead of the Christmas holiday. The notice, from the US and British governments, covered the popular shopping and nightlife area of Sanlitun. PHOTO: AFP

US air strikes Taliban to break Helmand siege

Militants gain ground as Afghan forces struggle to cope with onslaught

AFP, Kabul
The US launched air strikes to bolster Afghan forces scrambling yesterday to beat back Taliban insurgents who seized large swathes of a key opium-rich district, following the first British deployment to the volatile region in 14 months.
The Islamists claim to have captured nearly the entire district of Sangin after storming its frontlines on Sunday, tightening their grip on the southern Helmand province.
Fleeing residents reported Taliban executions of captured soldiers as the insurgents advanced on the district centre, compounding fears that the entire province was on the brink of falling into insurgent hands.
The US army conducted air strikes on Wednesday to bolster Afghan forces mobilising reinforcements to relieve dozens of security forces holed up in

the district centre.
"US forces conducted two strikes in Sangin," a Nato spokesman said in a brief statement.
Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said insurgents had overrun the whole of Sangin, pinning down Afghan forces in a military base where trapped soldiers reported dire conditions.
"Our men are hungry and thirsty," Abdul Wahab, a local police commander in Sangin, told AFP.
"Stepping out to get bread means inviting death," he said, adding that dozens of his comrades had been killed and critically wounded.
The war in Helmand, seen as the epicentre of the expanding insurgency, follows a string of military victories for the Taliban after Nato formally ended its combat operations last year.
All but two of Helmand's 14 districts are effectively controlled or heavily

contested by the Taliban, who also recently came close to overrunning the provincial capital Lashkar Gah.
The turmoil in Helmand, the deadliest province for British and US forces in Afghanistan over the past decade, underscores a rapidly unravelling security situation in Afghanistan.
Britain on Tuesday said a small contingent of its troops had arrived in Camp Shorabak, the largest British base in Afghanistan, before it was handed over to Afghan forces last year.
The deployment, in addition to a recent arrival of US special forces in the region, is the first since British troops ended their combat mission in Helmand in October 2014.
The contingent, which an Afghan official said includes around 90 people, is on an "advisory" mission with London insisting they will not engage in combat.

Jaitley-Kirti Azad row BJP seniors decide to intervene

NDTV ONLINE
The four BJP elders, Murli Manohar Joshi, LK Advani, Shanta Kumar, Yashwant Sinha, have decided to intervene in the Arun Jaitley vs Kirti Azad row which has hit the party. The elders will meet Azad, and raise the issue in party forum instead of going public with their views, sources told NDTV.
Suspended on Wednesday after he publicly targeted Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley with allegations of corruption in the Delhi's cricket body DDCA he once headed, Azad had demanded that Prime Minister Narendra Modi or the BJP's margdarshak mandal look into his suspension.

THAI HUMAN TRAFFICKING Trial begins

Activists call for witness protection
REUTERS, Bangkok
Thai authorities must step up witness protection for a major human trafficking trial with the accused including an army general and one investigator fleeing the country fearing for his life, activists said on Thursday as the first witnesses gave evidence.
The case includes 88 defendants allegedly involved with lucrative smuggling gangs that were trafficking Rohingyas fleeing persecution in Myanmar, holding them for ransom in jungle camps before granting onward passage to Malaysia.
The investigation and arrests followed the grisly discovery in May of 30 bodies in a mass grave near a human trafficking camp close to the Thailand-Malaysia border.
Of 500 witnesses scheduled to testify, only 12 are receiving protection, while two have gone into hiding because of threats and others may follow suit, said Fortify Rights, a non-governmental organisation advocacy group.
"Witnesses are key to ensuring justice is served in this case. Their security should be the utmost concern to the Thai authorities," Fortify Rights Executive Director Amy Smith said in a statement.
One Rohingya man, a longtime legal resident of Thailand, went into hiding after receiving threats, while Police Major General Praween Pongsirin, chief investigator on the case, went into exile and is seeking asylum in Australia.
Two prison buses brought the defendants to court yesterday, including the army general and a suspected



kingpin.
The defendants crowded into a seventh floor courtroom and heard testimony from two Bangladeshis who were held for two years in a trafficking camp in Songkhla, near the Malaysia border, said Prayuth of the attorney-general's office.
The court allowed journalists to observe the proceedings by video but barred them from reporting the witness testimony to prevent other witnesses from being influenced.
A court official said last month that hearing testimony from the 500 witnesses could take up to two years.
Thailand has come under fire in recent years for the trafficking of migrants, many of them Rohingya Muslims from eastern Myanmar and Bangladesh facing religious and ethnic persecution. Some migrants faced torture and starvation in the jungle camps.
The country's reputation further suffered after reports of labour violations and slave labour in its huge seafood industry.
Despite the current crackdown and trial, the United States' annual Trafficking in Persons report kept Thailand for a second year on Tier 3 - the lowest tier - for failing to comply with the minimum US standards for the elimination of trafficking.
"The Thai government needs to show its sincerity about

TOP QUOTE
"All posts are temporary. Only God and the motherland are eternal."
GEORGIA'S PRIME MINISTER IRAKLI GARIBASHVILI SAYS AFTER RESIGNING

Japan probes Syria journo kidnap report

AFP, Tokyo
Japan yesterday said it was investigating the reported kidnapping of a Japanese journalist in Syria by an armed group, after two of its citizens were beheaded earlier this year. Media rights group Reporters Without Borders said Jumpei Yasuda, a freelance journalist, was kidnapped in July as he was crossing the border into the country and is still being held hostage by the group, which was not named.

Indonesian ferry accident toll hits 20

AFP, Jakarta
The death toll from a ferry disaster in central Indonesia has climbed to 20, an official said yesterday, though nearly 60 people remain missing five days after the boat sank in rough seas with 116 people. Search and rescue agency chief Bambang Soelistyo told AFP 13 corpses were found Wednesday in the southern gulf of Sulawesi island, where the ill-fated ferry sent a distress signal before losing contact at the

Don't name Modi in slogans

Sonia tells party MPs in Lok Sabha

TNN, New Delhi
Chief of India's Congress party Sonia Gandhi drew a line on the party's aggression against the government when she censured fellow MPs for naming the prime minister in slogans.
As has been happening during the winter session, Congress members were protesting in the well on Wednesday when PM Narendra Modi came to Lok Sabha in the middle of question hour.
While raising slogans against Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, the MPs continued demanding that the PM respond to charges of corruption. At times, they referred to the PM by his name.
That is when Sonia, seated in the front row, pointed to Bengal MP Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury and the group, asking them to refrain from naming Modi. Immediately, the slogans were purged. Modi left the lower House at the end of question hour.
The reason behind the Congress chief's intervention was not clear given that she has put a premium on aggression in the House and Rahul Gandhi has been at the forefront of attacks on "Modiji" outside. Many speculated that it was to buffer the party against the charge that it was disrespectful to the top post.
While Congress lacks numerical strength to force a blockade in Lok Sabha, it ran non-stop protests during the winter session, even managing to force disruptions at times. The confrontation led to Speaker Sumitra Mahajan



Russia's President Vladimir Putin (L) and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi exchange presents during a meeting at the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia, on Wednesday. Modi is on a two-day official visit to Russia.

'Nat'l security is one part of human security'

Says Amartya Sen

THE HINDU ONLINE
In an interview with Indian daily The Hindu, Prof Amartya Sen spoke candidly about the need to prioritise human security and not just national security, the controversy that has dogged the Nalanda University, and, drawing inspiration from Adam Smith, the need for an intelligent response to rampant capitalism.
When asked about why the national security often becomes an alibi for not spending enough on human security, the Nobel laureate said there are three things. Firstly, security ultimately is a matter in which the leading concern should be around human life.
Secondly, it is true that in the name of national security, resources are often not allocated to things on which human security

Japan cabinet okays record defence budget

AFP, Tokyo
Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's cabinet yesterday approved Japan's biggest ever annual defence budget, as the country bolsters its military amid territorial rows and concerns over China's expanding naval reach.
The cabinet approved 5.05 trillion yen (\$41.8 billion) in defence spending for the next fiscal year starting in April, with the focus on strengthening protection of a string of southern islands, including Okinawa, that stretch from Japan's mainland to waters near Taiwan.
The allocation is part of a record 96.7 trillion yen national budget that will now be sent to parliament for debate and approval early next year.
The defence budget is 1.5 percent higher than the current fiscal year which was the previous record high, and marks the fourth straight annual increase in spending.
The trend reflects the hawkish Abe's attempt to build a military more active and collaborative with the United States, its biggest ally.
"We expect the latest procurement would contribute further to cooperation between Japan and the United States," a defence ministry official told reporters.
Japan is also wary of a possible escalation of tensions with China, where steady hikes in defence spending have raised concerns in Tokyo and Washington.
China's navy, air force and coast guard have increased activity in waters near Japan in recent years as Beijing seeks to more actively project its growing military power in the region and back up its claim in a territorial dispute with Tokyo over a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea.
China reiterated yesterday its frequent call for Japan to heed the lessons of its World War II aggression in China and other parts

Modi hails 'reliable friend' Russia Meets Putin with eye on defence deals worth billions

AFP, Moscow
Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday hosted Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a visit that could see the two countries agree a number of defence and energy deals worth billions of dollars.
Hailing ties with "robust, reliable friend" Russia, Modi praised Putin's leadership, saying he had "elevated the country to a qualitatively new level" despite Moscow's confrontation with West.
Speaking at the start of the talks, Putin for his part said he hoped to discuss the "privileged strategic partnership" of the two countries that are members of the BRICS emerging market nations group.
Russia has for years been a key military supplier for Delhi although the United States last year surpassed it as India's leading defence partner, and trade volume also fell, amounting to just \$9.5 billion in 2014.
However India eyes Moscow as a potential partner for infrastructure projects as the Modi government seeks to overhaul the country's railway network and build nuclear energy plants as part of the Make in India foreign investment drive.
Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the Kremlin expected the talks between Putin and Modi to help ease the visa regime between their two countries.
Ahead of the talks officials declined to discuss possible defence deals expected to be signed in Moscow, although media reported the two countries would be discussing some \$7 billion worth of contracts yesterday.
A media report last week said that India's top acquisition body had cleared the purchase of Russia's most advanced S-400 air defence systems.
During the Cold War India was the Soviet Union's closest military ally and a major importer of its military hardware.
Dipankar Banerjee, a defence analyst at New Delhi-based think tank Forum for Strategic Initiatives, said India was "vulnerable to Pakistan and China both in terms of missile attacks and air strikes" and that the S-400 defence systems were "very desirable" despite a hefty price tag.
Indian firm Reliance Defence Limited yesterday said it had decided to work with the Russian manufacturer of the S-400 "on the entire range of air defence missile and radar systems" that India needs.
Russian business daily Kommersant said this week that Putin's one-on-one talks with Modi would decide the fate of the deal as the two still needed to sort out pricing disagreements.
India could be in the market for as many as five systems, the paper said, quoting defence sources, with deals on Russian frigates and a helicopter-building joint venture also on the cards.
They could also announce the location of a new Russian nuclear energy plant in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, an extension of the Russian nuclear plant under construction in Kudankulam where one reactor is already in operation.
Modi is seeking to ramp up the country's nuclear energy use to meet the rising energy needs, with a programme for at least 12 new reactors, as well as reduce its heavy dependency on coal, the worst greenhouse gas producing fuel.
The trip is Modi's first state visit to Russia since he became prime minister in 2014.



depends, such as education, health care, and a social safety net.
Thirdly, the neglect of education, health care, and social safety net has been so foundational in India, so deeply rooted in the class structure of the society, that to blame it all on national security would be a mistake.
Talking about the true measure of a nation's progress towards being a more developed society, he said, "When we came up with the Human Development Index (HDI), the idea was to have a simple index that would capture something better than the GDP figures. If you look at the very first Human Development Report (HDR) of 1990, we invoked the idea of justice in a number of cases. I think as human development grows as a discipline, justice