

NEWS IN brief

Twitter suffers major outage

Millions of Twitter users were blocked from their feeds yesterday as the social networking site went down for over an hour in several countries. A spokesperson for Twitter Europe confirmed the outage, while users in South Africa, Brazil, Philippines, Nigeria and Uganda reported problems.

UK PM backs veil ban in schools

Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron has said he backs the right for UK schools to prevent Muslim girls from wearing veils in the classroom. The Prime Minister said he would support "proper and sensible rules", which may require people to show their faces in some circumstances, but did not advocate a nation-wide ban on full-face coverings.

Nasheed leaves for UK for treatment

Former President of Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed has left Maldives Monday evening to the UK to undergo medical treatment. A press release of the High Commission of Maldives in Dhaka yesterday said Nasheed has signed the standard guarantee document agreeing to return to the Maldives, to serve the remainder of his sentence following the completion of the medical treatment in the United Kingdom. Nasheed's brother is acting as guarantor during his stay abroad, the press release added.

Pakistan lifts ban on YouTube

Pakistan said on Monday it had removed a three-year ban on YouTube after the Google-owned video-sharing website launched a local version that allows the government to demand removal of material it considers offensive. Pakistan banned access to YouTube in September 2012 after an anti-Islam film, "Innocence of Muslims", was uploaded to the site, sparking violent protests across the muslim-majority country.

World's oldest man dies at 112 in Japan

The world's oldest man, Yasutaro Koide, died yesterday at the age of 112 in central Japan, a local official said. It was not immediately clear who would succeed Koide as the world's oldest male. Currently, the world's oldest person is American Susannah Mushatt Jones who is 116.



Migrants walk through a frozen field after crossing the border from Macedonia, near the village of Miratovac, Serbia, on Monday. The International Organization for Migration yesterday said Greece has seen 21 times more migrants arrive on its shores so far this month than in all of January 2015.

WAR IN IRAQ

UN reports 'staggering' violence

The UN says the violence suffered by civilians in Iraq "remains staggering", with at least 18,800 killed between 1 January 2014 and 31 October 2015. Some 3.2 million people have also been displaced internally over the same period, according to a report. The UN accuses so-called Islamic State of systematic and widespread violence including holding some 3,500 mainly women and children as slaves. Alleged abuses by troops, militiamen and Kurdish forces were also recorded. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Raad Al Hussein said the report "starkly illustrates what Iraqi refugees are attempting to escape when they flee to Europe and other regions. This is the horror they face in their homelands". The report, by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, is based on interviews with the displaced and direct testimony from victims, survivors or witnesses of rights abuses. It says the figures of 18,802 civilians killed and 36,245 wounded between 1 January 2014 and 31 October 2015 could be much higher. About half of the deaths were recorded in Baghdad province and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were the deadliest tactic used against civilians. It notes that up to 900 children have been abducted in the IS-held northern city of Mosul, to be indoctrinated and given military training. Women and children were also subjected to "sexual violence", the report states. The most up-to-date UN estimate of internally displaced people in neighbouring Syria is 6.5 million, while more than 4.6 million others have fled to neighbouring states - including almost 245,000 to Iraq. More than 250,000 people are estimated to have been killed since the conflict erupted there in 2011.

Unity government formed in Libya

A Libyan unity government was formed yesterday under a UN-brokered deal aimed at ending years of bloodshed, but it was unclear whether the leaders have wide support from the warring sides. World powers are appealing to the country's rival parliaments to back the new administration to end political paralysis that has provided fertile ground for jihadists and people-smugglers. But less than half of the members of the two parliaments signed up to the UN-sponsored agreement last month. The unity government, headed by businessman Fayed al-Sarraj, who was named prime minister-designate under the UN-sponsored accord, comprises 32 ministers, the administration announced on its Facebook page. There was no immediate reaction from the country's two legislatures. Libya has been in chaos since the 2011 ouster of longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi. On December 17, under UN guidance, around 80 of 188 lawmakers from Libya's internationally recognised parliament and 50 of 136 members of the Tripoli-based General National Congress signed the unity government deal. European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini said the agreement on the members of the unity government was an "essential step" in implementing the UN-brokered deal.

Beef ban in India 'ISIS letter' threatens to kill Modi

Goa police has started investigations into an anonymous letter signed by ISIS that says the terror outfit will kill Indian PM Narendra Modi and Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar for banning beef in India. "Since you are not allowing to eat beef, you will be taken care of," the postcard said while referring to Modi and Parrikar. The letter was received at the home and general administrative departments. Speaking to TOI, IGP V Renganathan said that they have initiated an inquiry into the matter. He added that the postcard was posted locally. Police also said that they have decided to step up Parrikar's security in the state.

Nepal charter talks fail to end protests

Talks between the Nepali government and minority groups to resolve a dispute over a new constitution have fallen apart, opposition leaders said yesterday, dashing hopes that protests that have led to crippling fuel shortages will end soon. More than 50 people have been killed since August in anti-government protests in the Tarai region, a narrow strip of plains that runs along Nepal's southern border with India. A resulting slowdown in cross-border truck traffic has plunged the landlocked nation into a fuel crisis that has hampered aid to survivors of last year's deadly earthquakes and spawned a lucrative black market. The ethnic Madhesi groups who live in the Tarai say Nepal's new constitution, its first since the nation abolished its centuries-old monarchy, alienates their members, granting them low representation in parliament and government bodies. After talks fell apart on Monday night, dozens of Madhesi activists burned tyres on the road in the southern business town of Birgunj, police said, in continuing protest against the charter's carving the lowland region into federal states dominated by mountain communities. Nepal blames India, its largest trading partner, for siding with the protesters near its border and invoking an unofficial blockade on trucks crossing from India into Nepal, a charge that India has repeatedly denied. In the eastern border town of Kakarvitta, a long row of motorcycles and scooters stood in the middle of a bridge marking the border with India, as their owners poured smuggled fuel into their tanks. "It's been good business," said a woman named Devi, who came from the Indian border town of Raniganj to sell petrol to Nepalese in plastic tubs and bottles. The United Madhesi Front, which wants state boundaries to be redrawn to give their communities more power, said talks with government negotiators that started two weeks ago had become "meaningless". Defence Minister Bhim Rawal said the boundary issue would be settled by a political committee in three months, but Madhesi party leaders were not convinced.

Syria peace talks face possible delay: UN

The United Nations has said it was waiting for regional powers spearheading the Syria peace process to agree on who will take part in talks starting in just one week's time and raised the possibility of a delay. The Geneva talks, the first between the Syrian government and the opposition since 2014, are scheduled to open in Geneva on January 25, but invitations have yet to be sent to the delegations. The 17 countries pushing for a peace deal, including the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iran, have been struggling to agree on the list of opposition leaders who will have a seat at the negotiating table. "At this stage, the UN will proceed with issuing invitations when the countries spearheading the international Syrian Support Group process come to an understanding on who among the opposition should be invited," said UN spokesman Farhan Haq. The Geneva talks are to pave the way to a new constitution and elections in 18 months to end Syria's nearly five-year war. Meanwhile, aid convoys have made new deliveries of fuel, food and medicine to four besieged Syrian towns, humanitarian officials said yesterday. They said fuel had entered Fuua and Kafra, which are under rebel siege, and Madaya, which is under a government siege. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights group yesterday said scores of Syrian government forces have been killed in three days of fighting with Islamic State in the east of the country, where the jihadist group has attacked government-held areas. According to Reuters, Islamic State advanced against government forces near the city of Deir al-Zor.



Indian Congress Party Vice President Rahul Gandhi talks during a protest after a student was found dead at a university hostel, at Hyderabad Central University in Hyderabad, yesterday.



First space flower

A bright orange zinnia has blossomed aboard the International Space Station, marking a first in space. "First flower even grown in space makes its debut," US astronaut Scott Kelly wrote on Twitter, with a photo of the flower. Growing such flowers -- zinnias are edible -- is part of a long term Nasa project known as Veggie. It is designed to produce food with an eye to long, manned missions to Mars. Such autonomy is key to astronauts' survival in space, Nasa says. Crew on the ISS have already grown and eaten lettuce last year aboard the orbiting craft and hope to produce tomatoes by next year. They are grown aeroponically -- without soil, in an air or mist environment. The system requires much less water and fertilizer, and plants grow three times faster than on Earth, Nasa says.

He utters 'poisonous words' UK MPs slams Donald Trump in parliament

British MPs branded Donald Trump a "stupid", "dangerous" and foolish "wazzock" who utters "poisonous words" in a debate over whether the US presidential contender should be banned from the UK. Parliament took up the topic after half a million people signed a petition calling for Trump to be excluded over his call for a temporary ban on Muslims entering the United States in the wake of extremist violence. Trump has also claimed that some areas of Britain are so radicalized that police fear for their lives. MPs argued over whether Trump should be banned from Britain - or whether he should not be stifled or banned but given the chance to express his views in order to expose them to ridicule. "While I think this man is crazy, while I think this man has no valid points to make, I will not be the one to silence his voice," said Conservative lawmaker Tom Tugendhat. Labour Party legislator Paul Flynn, who opened the session, said Trump had already received "far too much attention." "The great danger by attacking this one man is that we can fix on him a halo of victimhood" and boost his popularity among supporters, he said. But another Labour lawmaker, Tulip Siddiq, supported a ban. "This is a man who is extremely high-profile, ... a man who is interviewing for the most important job in the world," she said. "His words are not comical, his words are not funny. His words are poisonous." Labour's Jack Dromey said Trump was dangerous because he stirred up hatred among different faiths. Several Labour and SNP MPs were in favour of banning him from the UK saying his remarks fuel IS and other extremists' propaganda about how the West views Islam.

MYANMAR TRANSITION Army picks lawmakers

Myanmar army chief Min Aung Hlaing nominated military officers, who hold a quarter of seats in parliament, to their posts, state media said yesterday, another step by the army in what has so far surprised many as a remarkably peaceful transition after Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party swept the election. The 25 percent of seats in the national parliament gives the military an effective veto over changes to the 2008 junta-drafted constitution that bans Suu Kyi from becoming the president. Three key security ministries - defence, border affairs and home affairs - also remain under the control of the commander-in-chief.

DALIT STUDENT'S SUICIDE Rahul Gandhi pledges support to students

Rahul Gandhi, Congress vice-president and chairperson, Youth Congress, demanded drafting of a legislation that would support and protect students who express their own worldviews in educational institutions in the country. "The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) cannot demand students to follow just one ideology or politics," he said as he addressed a gathering of over 200 students at the protest venue on University of Hyderabad campus. A Dalit research scholar, Rohith Vemula had killed himself on January 17 on this campus, triggering countrywide protests against atrocities on Dalits in educational institutions in India. Rohith allegedly hanged himself to death 15 days after he was expelled from his hostel along with four other researchers following a scuffle between two students organisations - Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad and Ambedkar Students Association that took place on August 3, 2015. The five Dalit students had been on a sleep-in strike in the open on the campus ever since their expulsion. Expressing solidarity with the students, Gandhi, said the Union Minister in question (Bandaru Dattatreya) who wrote to the MHRD asking for a clampdown on UoH and "anti-national, casteist and extremist" elements on campus should be held responsible for the sad demise of Vemula.