

NEWS IN brief

2 killed in clashes with cops in Indian Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar
A civilian protester and a suspected militant were killed yesterday in clashes with government forces in disputed Indian-administered Kashmir, police said. Hundreds of villagers angry at the killing of the suspected rebel threw rocks at police who fired back using tear gas and bullets, killing one protester and injuring two others, Kumar said.

Facebook royal 'slur' puts Thai man in jail

AFP, Bangkok
A Thai man was sentenced to six years in jail yesterday for two Facebook posts about the king that were deemed in breach of the country's draconian royal defamation law. The conviction is the latest jail term handed down in an unprecedented lese majeste crackdown launched since arch-royalist generals seized power in a May 2014 coup.

Pak probe team won't be let into India airspace

THE HINDU ONLINE
The Pakistani team probing the Pathankot terror attack will not be allowed into the Air Force Station, Indian Minister of State for Defence Rao Inderjit Singh said on Tuesday. His statement puts to rest the speculation on giving Pakistan access to one of India's critical military installations on the western border.

Do not even write 'terrorist' by mistake!

REUTERS, London
A 10-year-old Muslim boy has been questioned by British police in the north of England after mistakenly writing in an English lesson that he lived in a "terrorist house", the BBC reported on Wednesday. The boy had intended to write that he lived in a "terraced" house but teachers did not realize he had made an error and reported the boy to the police in accordance with new counter-terrorism rules.

Vietnam's beloved sacred turtle dies

AFP, Hanoi
A sacred giant turtle venerated as a symbol of Vietnam's independence struggle has died, state media said, prompting an outpouring of grief and fears the death bodes ill for an upcoming communist leadership handover. The reptile, a critically endangered swinhoe softshell turtle, occupies a key mythological role in Vietnam -- in the past the turtle generally surfaced only rarely, with its sightings deemed auspicious. Experts say it was one of only four turtles -- better known as Yangtze giant softshells -- in existence. Two are in a zoo in China and the other lives in a different lake in Hanoi.



(From top left, clockwise) Pakistani rescuers shift an injured victim outside the Bacha Khan University in Peshawar; security personnel look at the dead bodies of militants; students react after coming out of the university; and students in Karachi shout slogans against the terror attack, yesterday. At least 21 people died in the Taliban assault on the university, where witnesses reported two large explosions as security forces moved in under dense fog to halt the bloodshed.



PHOTO: AFP

TERROR ATTACK AT PAKISTAN UNIVERSITY

Teacher defies Taliban Opens fire on militants to save students

AFP, Charsadda
A chemistry teacher who tried to shield his students by opening fire on Taliban militants during a deadly attack at a Pakistani university was known as "The Protector" even before his death in a hail of bullets yesterday. Lecturer Syed Hamid Husain, a 32-year-old assistant professor of chemistry at the Bacha Khan university in Charsadda, ordered his students to stay inside as Taliban gunmen stormed the school near the city of Peshawar.

"They fired directly at" the professor, sociology student Muhammad Daud told AFP, describing Husain as "a real gentleman and a respectable teacher". Shazeb, a 24-year-old computer science student, told AFP "He [Husain] had a 9mm pistol and used to tell us stories about his hunting trips."

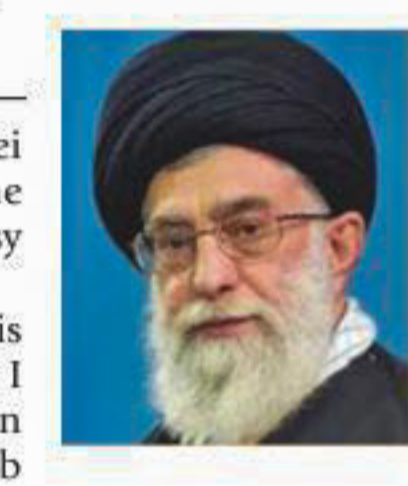


Students told of how the father-of-two opened fire on assailants as they rampaged across campus, giving the young people time to flee before he was cut down by gunfire. "We saw three terrorists shouting, 'Allah is great!' and rushing towards the stairs of our department," one man told reporters. He described seeing Husain holding a pistol and firing at the attackers. "Then we saw him fall down and as the terrorists entered the (registrar) office we ran away."

Students and university officials paid tribute to the slain academic yesterday, saying he had been nicknamed "The Protector" even before his death. "He would always help the students and he was the one who knew all their secrets because they would share all their problems with him," 22-year-old geology student Waqar Ali said. "He was referred to by students as 'The Protector'."

Khamenei condemns Saudi embassy attack

AFP, Tehran
Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei publicly condemned yesterday for the first time the January 2 attack on Saudi Arabia's embassy in Tehran as "a very bad and wrong incident". "Like the British embassy attack before it, this was against the country (Iran) and Islam, and I didn't like it," he added. Britain's embassy in Tehran was stormed and ransacked by a mob in 2011. The arson attack on Saudi Arabia's embassy -- for which local media reports say as many as 140 people have been arrested -- led to Riyadh quickly severing diplomatic ties with Tehran. The incident occurred late at night after Saudi Arabia executed Shia cleric and activist Nimr al-Nimr, a force behind 2011 anti-government protests in the eastern province, for crimes against the kingdom. Khamenei and Iranian officials lambasted Saudi Arabia over the killing. However his remarks yesterday, in a speech to electoral officials ahead of the country's parliamentary polls on February 26, underscored that the embassy attack had no sympathy from within the Islamic republic's establishment. Iran's President Hassan Rouhani at the time said the violence was committed by "rogue elements" acting against the country's interests. The embassy vandals took selfies and smartphone video footage where they were seen holding items stolen from inside the building, causing deep embarrassment in Tehran. Rouhani and other officials condemned the arson and looting -- seen by millions worldwide via social media -- and he has urged speedy prosecutions.



Migrant child, woman die of cold in Greece

AFP, Athens
A five-year-old girl and a woman died of cold yesterday as they tried to reach Greece by sea, as the flow of migrants heading for Europe resumed following a lull due to high winds, police sources said. They said the girl died after she was rescued from the sea when the vessel she was traveling on capsized en route from Turkey to the Greek island of Lesbos. Fifty five other people on the boat were rescued. Frontex also rescued migrants including women and children aboard another boat that was in difficulty, but the crew were unable to save one woman who also died of hypothermia. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) said 77 people have died trying to reach the Greek islands from Turkey from January 1 to 18.

Powers meet in Paris as jihadists go global

AGENCIES
The defence ministers of seven countries leading the battle against the Islamic State group met in Paris yesterday to review strategy as the jihadists spread their influence around the globe. The French and US defence ministers, Jean-Yves Le Drian and Ashton Carter, hosted the meeting attended by their Australian, British, Dutch, German and Italian counterparts. British Defence Secretary Michael Fallon said it would look at ways to "capitalise on the setbacks that Daesh (an alternative name for IS) has suffered in Iraq and tighten the noose around the head of the snake in Syria."

IS has seen some setbacks, losing around a quarter of its self-proclaimed caliphate, including the Iraqi city of Ramadi to US-backed local forces last month. Washington this week claimed to have leaked IS documents showing the group had cut fighters' pay by half since the coalition stepped up bombing of oil production. Meanwhile, the Islamic State group on Tuesday confirmed the death of British extremist "Jihadi John", saying he was killed in a drone strike in their Syrian stronghold of Raqa in November.

WAR ON 'ISLAMIC STATE'

- Kerry, Lavrov meet as Syria talks in peril
- UN says France's Paris attacks response 'excessive'
- Over 1,000 civilians dead in Russia's Syria strikes: report
- Jihadists confirm death of 'Jihadi John'

In another development, the United Nations has warned that the state of emergency imposed by France in the wake of the Paris attacks is imposing "excessive and disproportionate restrictions" on fundamental human rights. Special rapporteurs on freedoms of opinion, expression, assembly and privacy were among those raising concerns with the Francois Hollande's government.

But the coalition must also face up to the spread of IS around the world, notably in Libya where political chaos has allowed the group to build a 3,000-strong force. Russia, a staunch ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, was not invited to the meeting, though US Secretary of State John Kerry met his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov in Zurich at the same time to discuss Syria. No decision came from that meeting as they failed to agree on who will represent the Syrian opposition in the talks next Monday in Geneva. "I'm increasingly disturbed by the Russian bombing," Fallon told reporters in Paris. Reports yesterday said Russian air strikes have killed more than 1,000 civilians in Syria since they began nearly four months ago.

While exceptional measures may be required under exceptional circumstances, this does not relieve the authorities from demonstrating that these are applied solely for the purposes for which they were prescribed, and are directly related to the specific objective that inspired them," they said in a joint statement.

Oceans to have more plastic than fish by 2050: report

AL JAZEERA ONLINE
The world's oceans may have more plastic debris than fish by the year 2050, according to a report produced by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and published by the World Economic Forum. The study, released on Tuesday, found that a whopping 32 percent of all plastic packaging escapes collection systems and finds its way into natural ecosystems, including the oceans. Currently, 8 million tonnes of plastic end up in the ocean each year - the equivalent of a dump truck of plastic rubbish every minute. At current rates, that will have grown to two trucks a minute by 2030, and four a minute by 2050 - by which time, by weight, there will be as much plastic in the oceans as fish. "One of the biggest problems [to] focus

on is single use and disposable plastic," Dianna Cohen, CEO of the Plastic Pollution Coalition, told Al Jazeera. Based on interviews with more than 180 experts in the field, the report found that most plastic packaging is used only once before being discarded. "There is no system in place that helps take these [plastic] materials back [after use]," Cohen said. "It impacts the entire ecosystem in the ocean. If you come from a country that gets its primary livelihood or protein source from the ocean, then the fish you may count on to eat is ingesting plastic, getting entangled in it, and dying from having stomachs full of it." Cohen called on governments to take steps to prevent further plastic waste by forcing producers to take back the plastic used in packaging. "We all have the power to do something to reduce the amount of plastic we use on a



Blast targets Afghan TV channel bus

7 people killed
AFP, Kabul
Seven people were killed yesterday when a suicide bomber struck a minibus carrying employees of popular Afghan TV channel TOLO, just months after the Taliban declared the network a legitimate "military target". The bombing near the Russian embassy in downtown Kabul also left 24 people wounded, in the latest in a wave of attacks despite an international push to jumpstart Taliban peace talks. No group has so far claimed responsibility for the bombing, which marks the first major attack on a media organisation in Afghanistan. "Our office bus taking TOLO staff home came under attack," an employee at the channel told AFP. The bombing left some staff members burning inside the vehicle, another employee said, adding that the bus was mostly filled with behind-the-scenes workers from the channel's graphics and dubbing departments. The loud explosion sent a plume of smoke rising in the sky, with ambulances and firefighters rushing to the scene which was littered with charred debris. The interior ministry said the attack left seven people dead and 24 others wounded. The Taliban in October declared TOLO and ITV, both privately run news stations as legitimate "military targets". The group said the move was in response to their reports claiming that Taliban fighters raped women at a female hostel in Kunduz, after the group briefly captured the northern city in late September last year. The Taliban rejected the reports as fabrications, saying they were examples of propaganda by the "satellite networks". The attack, which highlights the growing dangers faced by journalists in Afghanistan, comes just two days after a second round of a four-country meeting in Kabul aimed at reviving talks with the Taliban.

The curse of being a 'Dalit' student

BBC ONLINE
"My birth is my fatal accident... I always was rushing. Desperate to start a life... I am not sad. I am just empty. Unconcerned about myself. That's pathetic. And that's why I am doing this."
These are excerpts from the last letter that Rohit Vemula, a PhD student at Hyderabad Central University wrote before he killed himself on Sunday. It is, at once, an eloquent and chilling suicide note: a young man who loved "science, stars, nature and people", and aspired to become a science writer like Carl Sagan, ended up defeated and crushed by discrimination and apathy.

Vemula and the four other students faced allegations last August that they attacked a member of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) - the student wing of the governing Hindu nationalist BJP - on the campus. Some reports say an investigation had found no "conclusive evidence" of the assault. The university stopped paying his monthly stipend of 25,000 rupees (\$369; £258) allegedly because he raised issues under the campus's Dalit-led students union. It also began an investigation into his - and his friends - conduct. In

August federal minister Bandaru Dattatreya, a BJP junior minister, wrote a letter to the federal education ministry complaining that the university had become a "den of casteist, extremist and anti-national politics". In September, Vemula and four other students were suspended - although the minister denies this was linked to his missive, which he says was not about the Dalit students, but a general comment on the restive campus. Vemula's death has sparked off a firestorm of protest across India.

But Vemula's is not an exceptional story of caste discrimination on India's campuses. One report said eight Dalit students had taken their lives "unable to cope" with caste politics at Hyderabad University in the past decade. Between 2007 and 2011 alone, 18 Dalit students ended their lives in some of India's premier educational institutes, according to another estimate. A federal investigation into complaints of caste-based harassment and discrimination against Dalit and tribal students in Delhi's All India Institute of Medical Sciences, India's leading medical school, uncovered a shocking picture of abuse. The probe found most of the Dalit and tribal students complaining that they "did not receive the kind of support other students received from their teachers". The students said teachers did not give them the marks they deserved in exams. More than 90% of the students said they were routinely humiliated by examiners in practical and oral examinations. Vemula is just the latest victim of India's scourge of untouchability.



CASHING IN ON CATASTROPHE UK arms sales to Saudis up by 100 times

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
British arms companies have cashed-in on Saudi Arabia's military campaign in Yemen by ramping up arms sales to the country's autocratic government by over a hundred times, new figures show. Sales of British bombs and missiles to the Saudi Arabia surged to over £1bn just three months last year, according to an official record of arms export licences quietly released by the government this week. The sales, up from just £9m in the preceding three-month period, have occurred while the oil-rich autocracy conducts a military campaign in its neighbour's territory, where the United Nations has said a "humanitarian catastrophe" is unfolding. Saudi Arabia is intervening in Yemen to fight Houthi rebels, who control the country's capital but are not internationally recognised as its government. Criticism of the Saudi military operation have however included the bombing of multiple hospitals run by the charity Médecins Sans Frontières and the deaths of thousands of civilians, including 130 at a single wedding. The United Nations and the charity Action Aid have also said that around two-thirds of civilians casualties in the war have been caused by Saudi-led air strikes. The exact figure for British arms export licences from July to September 2015 was £1,066,216,510 in so-called "MLA" export licences, which relate to bombs, missiles, rockets, and components of those items. The arms are exported with the consent of ministers, who must sign off all licences for weapons. In November foreign secretary Phillip Hammond admitted that the weapons were being used in Yemen but said that Saudis "deny there have been any breaches of international humanitarian law". Human rights group Amnesty International UK accused the government of ignoring "overwhelming evidence" of civilian targeting. Roy Isbister, head of the NGO Saferworld's arms unit, told the Independent that the UK was breaking its obligations under international law.



Sarah Palin backs Trump

AFP, Washington
Former vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin endorsed Republican billionaire Donald Trump on Tuesday, saying the real estate mogul would "lead the charge" as America's next president. Palin, who flirted with her own White House run, emerged as a conservative icon and political powerbroker following her failed 2008 vice presidential bid. Since then she has endorsed several far-right candidates who went on to win seats in Congress. On the political front the coveted endorsement of Trump comes just 13 days before votes are cast in Iowa, the debut contest in the presidential primary race, and it could give a welcome boost to Trump. "No more pussyfooting around!" boomed Palin as she stood alongside Trump at his campaign rally in Ames, Iowa. "The president has to keep us safe economically and militarily," stressed Palin. Trump is a "master" dealmaker, she said. "He knows how to lead the charge. So troops, hang in there because help's on the way."

Using rhetoric that has helped her rally supporters on the campaign trail, Palin drew huge cheers -- and smiles from Trump -- when she blasted President Barack Obama as a "weak-kneed capitulator in chief" who leads from behind, particularly when it comes to battling so-called Islamic State extremists. "Are you ready for a commander in chief who will let our warriors do their job and go kick ISIS's ass?" she asked. Palin repeatedly knocked the Republican establishment for seeking to derail Trump, warning that they have been "wearing this political correctness kind of like a suicide vest." And she used her trademark on-stage drama to mock reporters she says have criticized her for years. "Media heads are spinning," she snickered. "This is going to be so much fun." Trump said he was honoured to receive Palin's endorsement. "She is a friend and a high-quality person whom I have great respect for. I am proud to have her support," he said. Palin's Trump nod is seen as a snub to conservative Senator Ted Cruz, who is neck and neck with Trump in Iowa and running second to him nationally.