

# Madhesis reject Nepal charter amendment

AGENCIES

Ethnic protesters in Nepal rejected a constitutional amendment passed by the parliament in a bid to end months of protests that have blocked a key border crossing with India and caused shortages of fuel and other supplies.

Members of Madhesi ethnic parties boycotted a late night vote Saturday that approved the first amendment to the constitution with overwhelming support. Laxman Lal Karna of the United Democratic Madhesi Front said yesterday that the amendment was incomplete and did not address their concerns.

"We reject the amendment that does little to address our demands. It does not even touch our main demand for changing the borders of the provinces," Karna said.

Meanwhile, India yesterday described the first amendment of the Nepali Constitution, undertaken late on Saturday night, as "welcome developments", reports Hindu.

An official statement issued by the Ministry of External Affairs expressed support for the legislative process, and added, "We hope that other outstanding

issues are similarly addressed in a constructive spirit."

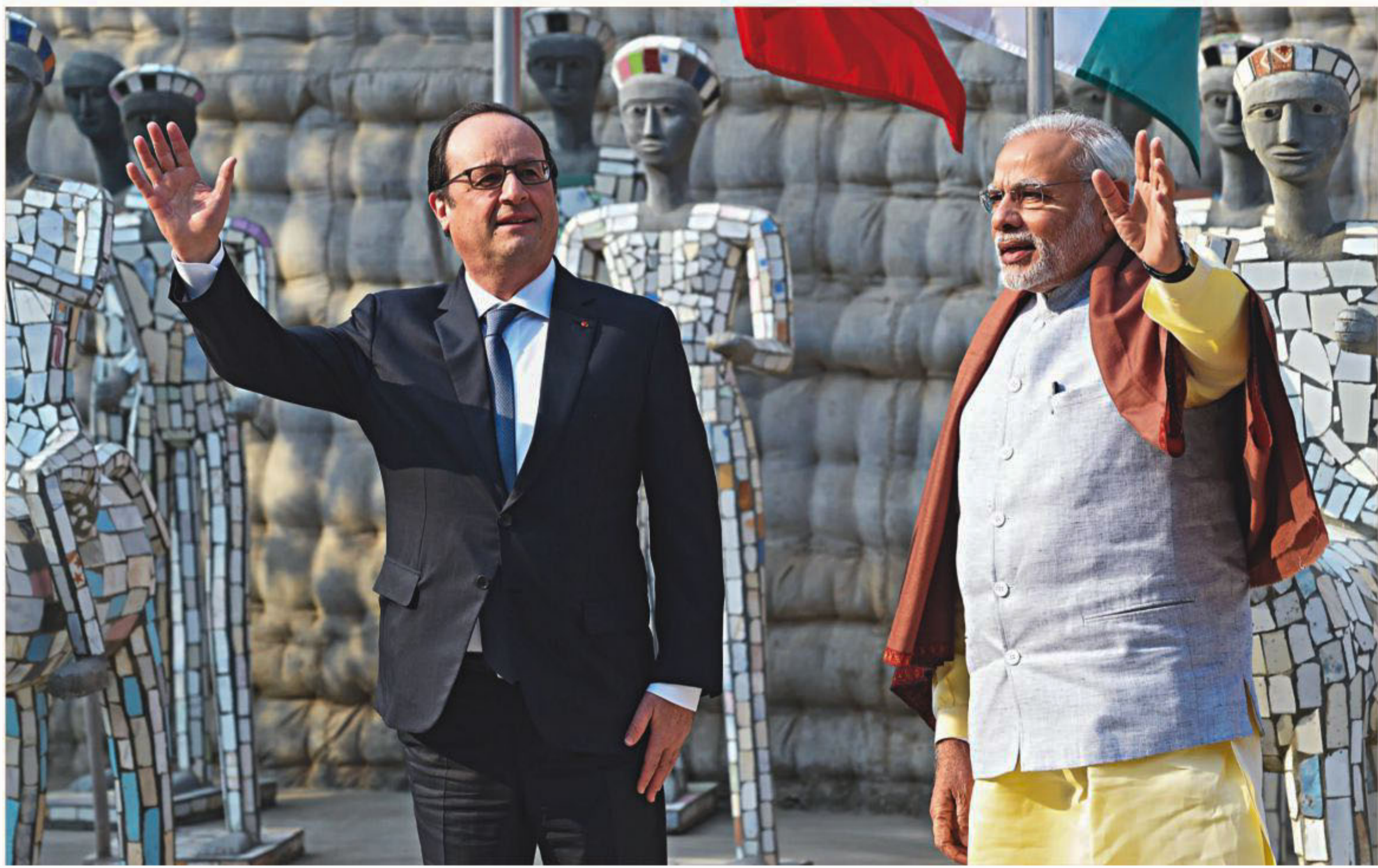
The amendment backed by Nepal's ruling coalition and the main opposition party changes the constitution to ensure proportionate inclusion of minority communities in government and electoral constituencies.

The constitution was adopted in September by the Constituent Assembly despite protests from Madhesi groups, reports AP.

The Madhesi in south Nepal have been protesting for months, saying the constitution carved Nepal's seven states unfairly with borders that cut through their ancestral homeland. They want a larger state, more government representation and more local autonomy.

The protests and a general strike in much of southern Nepal has blocked a key border crossing with India, through which Nepal gets much of its fuel and other supplies. It resulted in severe shortage of fuel and medicines.

More than 50 people have been killed since August in protest-related violence. Three people were killed on Thursday when police opened fire on Madhesi protesters



French President Francois Hollande (L) and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (R) wave at the Rock Garden in Chandigarh, yesterday. Hollande is invited to India to be the guest of honour at this year's Republic Day parade on January 26, the final day of a state visit that is expected to focus on trade and security.

PHOTO: AFP

## Kerry reassures Saudi Arabia

Says countries' ties stronger than ever

AGENCIES

US Secretary of State John Kerry said yesterday that the US friendship with Saudi Arabia is stronger than ever and that the two will work together to try to end wars in Syria and Yemen.

"We have as solid a relationship, as clear an alliance and as strong a friendship with the kingdom of Saudi Arabia as we have ever had, and nothing has changed because we worked to eliminate a nuclear weapon with a country in the region," he said, referring to the Iran nuclear deal.

Kerry delivered the remarks to US Embassy employees a day after meeting with Saudi and other Gulf officials on a visit aimed at reassuring US allies who are skeptical about the agreement.

He said that Saudi Arabia is "committed to work with us in the efforts to try to stabilise Syria and calm down this hyped-up, exploited division between Sunni and Shia."

Kerry began a visit to Asia yesterday in which he plans to press China to put more curbs on North Korea after its nuclear test and to urge Southeast Asia to show unity in response to Beijing's claims in the South China Sea.

In Beijing, Kerry is expected to stress the need for a united front in response to this month's North Korean nuclear test through additional UN sanctions, a senior official of the US State Department said.

## Afghan Taliban set conditions for peace talks

AFP, Kabul

The Afghan Taliban yesterday reiterated their pre-conditions for the resumption of peace talks with Kabul, including their removal from international terror blacklists, at an informal meeting with lawmakers and activists in Doha.

Members of the Taliban's political office in Qatar launched two days of discussion with an Afghan delegation Saturday. The militant group emphasised its headline stance on talks aimed at ending their 14-year insurgency, ruling out negotiations until their preconditions were met.

The High Peace Council -- the government body tasked with negotiating with the Taliban -- urged the militants to resume talks before laying out pre-conditions.

## Pak 'must' dismantle all terror networks

Says Obama, gives credit to Modi for reaching out to Sharif after Pathankot attack

AGENCIES

In a strong message, US president Barack Obama told Pakistan yesterday that it "can and must" take more effective action against terrorist groups operating from its soil by "delegitimising, disrupting and dismantling" terror networks there.

Describing the terror attack on the IAF base in Pathankot as "another example of the inexcusable terrorism that India has endured for too long", Obama gave credit to Prime Minister Narendra Modi for reaching out to his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif after the attack.

"Both leaders are advancing a dialogue on how to confront violent extremism and terrorism across the region," Obama told PTI in an interview here during which he answered a wide range of questions covering Indo-US ties and terrorism.

Meanwhile, Pakistan yesterday pledged further action to combat militants, but Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif admitted progress had often been slow, speaking just days after a deadly attack by heavily armed gunmen on a university campus killed 21 people.

Sharif said Pakistan would continue the fight against militants. "We will fulfil this responsibility," he told reporters in London, reports AFP.

During the interview with PTI, Obama said that Modi shared his enthusiasm for a strong partnership and "we have developed a friendship and close working relationship, including our conversations on the new secure lines between our offices".

## NEWS IN brief

### 'Germany rejects 10 percent of migrants'

AFP, Berlin

While Germany is still taking in around 2,000 refugees a day, it is now denying entry to about 200 others daily at its borders, the interior minister said yesterday. The tighter border controls come after the EU's top economy last year took in a record 1.1 million refugees and migrants, straining resources and sparking heated political debate.

### Alaska hit by 7.1 earthquake

AFP, Washington

A 7.1 magnitude earthquake struck southern Alaska at 1030 GMT yesterday, US seismologists said. The US Geological Survey said it was centered about 83 kilometers (51 miles) east of Old Iliamna. The USGS estimated it had a depth of 127 kilometers (79 miles). It was not immediately known if it had caused any injuries or serious damage.

### Malaysia arrests seven 'IS militants'

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian police said on Sunday they had arrested seven alleged Islamic State (IS) militants plotting violence, one of whom was in contact with an extremist blamed for the deadly Jakarta attack. Police said the group was planning attacks around Malaysia. Malaysia practises a moderate brand of Islam and has not seen any notable terror attacks in recent years.

### Ship sinks off Nicaragua; 13 dead

AFP, Managua

Thirteen Costa Ricans died Saturday when a small ship carrying 32 tourists from Latin America, the United States and Britain sank off Nicaragua's Little Corn Island in the Caribbean, officials said. Officials said the other passengers survived and were taken to nearby Big Corn Island. Media reports said the captain, who was also owner of the vessel, was arrested after being rescued, as authorities began an investigation.

### Bloomberg mulling White House run

AFP, New York

US billionaire and former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg is mulling an independent bid for the White House, The New York Times reported Saturday. The 73-year-old businessman is drawing up plans for a potential run on a third-party ticket for which he is prepared to spend \$1 billion of his personal fortune, the Times said, citing anonymous sources briefed on the



PHOTO: AFP

View of an egg fried on the pavement in Pozo Hondo, Santiago del Estero, Argentina on Saturday, while the temperature was 57 degrees Celsius. While much of the United States and China are freezing with temperatures plunging in double digits, parts of South America are facing simmering heat. The city's Mayor Claudio Nicolau fried the egg on the pavement of the main square of the city. It is not clear whether he ate it.

## Syria army seizes rebel-held town in Latakia

AFP, Beirut

Pro-government forces overran the last major rebel-held town in Syria's coastal Latakia province yesterday, as the United Nations prepares to host talks this week on ending the country's nearly five-year war.

State television said army forces, working with pro-regime militia, had seized control of the town of Rabia after heavy fighting with rebels.

It was the second strategic victory for pro-regime forces in Latakia in less than two weeks, after government troops seized the town of Salma from rebels on January 12.

"In the coming weeks, we will be able to announce that all of Latakia -- city and province -- is free from armed groups," a Syrian army commander in Latakia told AFP.

Rabia had been held by the opposition since 2012 and was controlled by a range of rebel groups including some made up of Syrian Turkmen, as well as al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Nusra Front.

Armed opposition factions have used northern parts of Latakia province to carry out rocket and bomb attacks on the provincial capital along the coast.

Backed by Russian air power, pro-regime forces are chipping away at that territory in a bid to secure the Assad clan's heartland. Russia's air force has operated out of the Hmeimim military airport in Latakia province since September 30.

The regime's latest advance came as world powers intensify efforts to reach a political solution to Syria's war.



The moon rises behind migrants and refugees wearing blankets over their shoulders as they walk after crossing the Macedonian border into Serbia on Saturday. Time is running out to solve Europe's refugee crisis with the unity of the continent hanging in the balance, said top officials at the elite World Economic Forum in Davos.

## 'Nehru letter' over Netaji starts Congress-BJP row

TNN, New Delhi

The political war over the legacy of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose heated up with Congress accusing the Indian government of deliberately creating a controversy over a purported letter by Jawaharlal Nehru allegedly calling Bose a "war criminal" and BJP hitting back, saying that the main opposition party should apologise for the disrespect it had shown to the legacy and memory of the freedom struggle icon.

Congress spokesperson Anand Sharma angrily called the letter "fake and mischievous" and aimed at maligning the party. The so-called letter has been doing the rounds of social media and websites without any substantiation and the 100 secret Netaji files declassified on Saturday by PM Narendra Modi have no reference to it.

Though the so-called Nehru letter has not been authenticated and historian Ramchandra Guha said it is a fake, BJP



pounced on the controversy to allege that the letter to then British PM Clement Attlee has come out "in which Nehru has termed the great freedom fighter Subhas Bose as a 'war criminal'".

"It's a deliberately created controversy to mislead people and try to belittle the great achievements of stalwarts of the Indian freedom struggle," Anand Sharma said.

This is an example of Congress tarring the image of leaders with a different viewpoint, BJP national secretary and spokesperson Shrikant Sharma said.

Unfazed by Congress's outrage, Modi has been meeting members of the Bose family and proceeded to declassify the papers and had promised to get foreign governments like Russia, Taiwan, China and Japan to release documents in their possession.

Congress slammed Modi for "deliberately creating" a controversy to divert attention from the "failures" of his govern-

## Amit Shah reelected as BJP chief

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Amit Shah was yesterday re-elected as the President of India's ruling

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that will see him heading the party for the next three years facing the challenge of some key electoral battles including the national elections in 2019.

Shah, 51, a close confidante of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was elected unchallenged in a process widely seen as a formality.

The election of Shah as party chief reasserts Modi's grip over BJP and there was consensus in both the party and RSS that Shah should get a full term as party head.



## 'I could shoot someone and not lose voters'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Donald Trump has boasted that he could shoot someone in the middle of a crowded street, without it affecting his popularity.

The frontrunner in the race to be named the Republican candidate for the White House, Trump made the comments at a campaign rally in Iowa. He faced an immediate backlash amid accusations of insensitivity, after a spate of killings in America has pushed the debate about gun violence to the top of the political agenda.

But when asked to clarify his comments after the rally, he refused to comment.

"I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue [New York] and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters," he said. "It's, like, incredible."

He pointed directly at a camera recording the speech and imitated pulling a trigger as he made the comments.

The business mogul has received unwavering and growing support from crowds of loyal backers among the Republican grassroots in his bid to become the next US president.

There were a total of 373 mass shootings in the United States in 2015, an average of more than one per day.



## Is it missing MH370?

'Plane wreckage' washes up in Thailand sparking speculations

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A piece of suspected plane wreckage has washed up on a beach in Thailand, prompting speculation that it may have come from the missing jet MH370.

A large piece of curved metal, crusted with barnacles, was found by villagers in the Nakhon Si Thammarat province, Reuters reported.

MH370 disappeared while flying from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing in March 2014 with 239 people aboard. So far, only one piece of wreckage has been recovered of the plane, washing up on Reunion island in July 2015. Nothing has been found since then, despite a search which has so far covered more than 80,000 square kilometres of the seabed.

Thailand's air force yesterday said it would bring the piece to Bangkok.

The metal panel measuring two metres (6.6 feet) by three metres was found by fishermen on Saturday in Nakhon Si Thammarat province in the Gulf of Thailand.

Thai army aviation experts have already inspected the debris and agreed it was likely to be from an aircraft, although more tests are needed for confirmation. A specialist team will go to Pak Phanang district today to collect the panel.