

NEWS IN brief

'Sr Qaeda leader' killed in US strike in Syria

AFP, Washington
A US drone strike has killed a senior Egyptian al-Qaeda leader in Syria who previously operated in Afghanistan, the Defense Department announced Tuesday. The November 18 strike near Sarmada in northwestern Syria targeted Abu Afghan al-Masri.

Indian police kill six Maoists in shootout

AFP, New Delhi
Six heavily armed Maoist rebels were killed yesterday in a jungle gunbattle with police in eastern India, an officer said. Police said they opened fire after being attacked during a search yesterday morning in the Maoist stronghold of Latehar district in Jharkhand state.

Colombia, Farc to sign new accord today

AFP, Bogota
Colombia's government and FARC guerrillas will sign a new peace accord today, after a previous agreement to end their half-century-old war was defeated in a referendum, both parties said. The new, revised accord will be submitted to Congress for approval, rather than put to another referendum, they added. Last month voters taking part in that referendum surprisingly snubbed the first accord.

Far-right loner gets life for MP Jo Cox murder

AFP, London
A far-right extremist was sentenced yesterday to life imprisonment without the possibility of release for murdering British MP Jo Cox a week before Britain's EU referendum in a "politically motivated" attack. The jury at London's central criminal court convicted Mair of killing the mother-of-two, who campaigned for Britain to stay in the European Union, as she arrived at a library to meet her constituents on June 16.

Iran vows retaliation over US sanctions

AFP, Tehran
Iran will retaliate if the United States renews sanctions next month, supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned yesterday. The US Congress last week voted to renew long-standing sanctions linked to Iran's ballistic missile tests and human rights record that pre-date the controversy around Iran's nuclear ambitions. The 10-year sanctions must still be approved by the Senate and President Barack Obama by the end of the year.

Obama's last Medals of Freedom

AFP, Washington
Basketball star Michael Jordan, actor Robert De Niro and music legend Bruce Springsteen were among the 21 people honored with the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Tuesday. During a ceremony at the White House President Barack Obama gave out the awards -- the nation's highest civilian honor -- for his last time to a diverse group of sports stars, scientists, artists and philanthropists. "Everybody on this stage has touched me in a very powerful personal way," Obama said. "It's useful when you think about this incredible collection of people to realize that this is what makes us the greatest nation on earth. "Not because of what we are, not because



Indian trade union members pose for media holding banned currency notes during a demonstration against demonitisation in Chennai, yesterday. Long queues snaking outside banks have become an ubiquitous sight in India two weeks after the government's shock decision to withdraw the two highest denomination notes from circulation.

PHOTO: AFP

Nine killed in Indian firing on POK bus

AFP, Muzaffarabad
At least nine people were killed and seven others wounded in cross-border fire which hit a Pakistani bus in disputed Kashmir yesterday, officials said, the latest deadly skirmish between India and Pakistan. The incident came a day after India said three of its soldiers had been killed by Pakistani troops and threatened "retribution", a claim that was angrily rejected by Pakistan. The violence took place in Nagdar village in Pakistani-held Kashmir's scenic Neelum Valley. Local administration official Sardar Waheed said firing was continuing, preventing ambulances from reaching the scene. Pakistan's prime minister condemned the firing. Pakistan's foreign ministry said it also summoned the Indian Deputy High Commissioner, JP Singh, to its foreign ministry to protest the "targeting a civilian bus and an ambulance which was rescuing the affectees of the attack on the bus" and declared it a blatant violation of international humanitarian law. On Tuesday the Indian army accused Pakistan of sending soldiers across the Line of Control, the de facto border that divides Kashmir, and killing three of its soldiers, saying one of the bodies had been mutilated. But Pakistan angrily rejected the claim in a series of tweets from a foreign ministry spokesman late Tuesday, calling it "baseless" and a "fabrication".

IS surrounded in Mosul

Iraq says the city is completely cut off from the world

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Iraqi-led forces have cut off the Islamic State group's last supply line from Mosul to Syria, completing the isolation of the jihadist stronghold, security officials said yesterday. Hashed al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation) paramilitary forces reached the road linking Tal Afar to Sinjar, west of Mosul, and linked up with Kurdish forces there, the officials said. "Hashed forces have cut off the Tal Afar-Sinjar road," senior Hashed commander Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes said on social media, referring to two towns on the road linking Mosul to Syria. A Kurdish security official told AFP that Hashed forces had linked up with other anti-IS forces, including Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) fighters, in three villages in the area. Iraqi forces launched a major offensive on October 17 to retake Mosul, which is the country's second city and where jihadist supremo Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed a caliphate in 2014. Federal forces have already entered the city from the east, Kurdish

forces are also closing in from the north and south and only the west had remained open. The latest development will make it very long and dangerous for IS if it attempts to move fighters and equipment between Mosul and the Syrian city of Raqa, the last two bastions of their crumbling "caliphate". IS has been targeting civilians who

WAR ON IS
Shia militias close in on Tal Afar cutting Syria route
Civilians 'targeted by snipers' as they flee fighting

try to escape the heavy fighting in and around Mosul, leaving medical facilities struggling to cope with the number of people in need of trauma care. Around 200 people - at least 40 of them civilians - have needed emergency care for gunshot wounds in the last week, UN OCHA, the UN's humanitarian agency said, including women and children with life threatening and

complex injuries from sniper fire. Existing trauma centres around Mosul are completely unequipped to deal with the rise in casualties, OCHA said in its latest weekly report on the humanitarian situation in the fight for Mosul, with partner agencies working around the clock to try and free up additional facilities. More than 69,000 people have fled the frontlines as the US-backed Iraqi coalition's battle for control of the Isis-controlled city grinds on. But at least one million remain trapped as IS struggles to retain Mosul, by far the largest city in its possession and its last remaining stronghold in Iraq since it took over the area in 2014. The built-up city and the nature of urban warfare has slowed the coalition's progress considerably. Thousands of people are being forcibly moved as human shields at strategic locations, monitors report, and IS has managed to rig streets and bridges with hundreds of bombs and landmines as well as launching mortar and rocket fire. Suicide bombers driving through areas they know well are another major hazard for advancing Iraqi troops: they can appear in a matter of seconds and wound or kill entire units.

Court upholds life sentences for Khmer Rouge leaders

AFP, Phnom Penh
Cambodia's UN-backed court yesterday upheld life sentences for two top former Khmer Rouge leaders for crimes against humanity, in a verdict welcomed by survivors of the brutal regime. "Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea, 90, and ex-head of state Khieu Samphan, 85, were the first top leaders to be jailed in 2014 from a regime responsible for the deaths of up to two million Cambodians from 1975-1979. They appealed their convictions, accusing the court of a string of errors and the judges of failing to remain impartial due to their personal experiences under the regime. In a lengthy ruling yesterday after months of hearings, the bench upheld the bulk of the convictions and the jail terms, but accepted some legal errors had been made in the initial trial. Kong Srim, the Supreme Court Chamber's top judge, said the pair "had a complete lack of consideration for the ultimate fate of the Cambodian popula-



Nuon Chea



Khieu Samphan

tion", adding that the scale of their crimes was "massive". The Khmer Rouge regime dismantled modern society in Cambodia in their quest for an agrarian Marxist utopia, killing vast numbers and leaving a generational scar. Their convictions in August 2014 followed a two-year trial focused on the forced evacuation of around two million Cambodians from Phnom Penh into rural labour camps and the murders of hundreds of enemy soldiers at one of several execution sites. Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan are also currently undergoing a second trial for genocide of ethnic Vietnamese and Muslim minorities, forced marriage and rape. But the tribunal has had mixed successes. Despite the sheer brutality unleashed by the Khmer Rouge, survivors have seen just a handful of perpetrators brought to justice. Many key leaders have died without facing justice, including "Brother Number One" Pol Pot who passed away in 1998.

Election was rigged against Clinton in three key states!

Computer scientists urge Democrats to challenge results

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A group of renowned computer scientists and lawyers have urged Hillary Clinton to challenge the election results in three key states after they gathered "evidence" to suggest the election results were potentially manipulated. The group of activists, including voting rights lawyer John Bonifaz and J Alex Halderman, director of the University of Michigan's center for computer security and society, believe their evidence shows that results in these three battleground states - which lost Clinton the election on 8 November - might have been hacked. As reported by New York Magazine, the group is not speaking on the record but is privately lobbying Clinton's team to challenge the election results. In Wisconsin, Clinton received 7 per cent fewer votes in counties that depended on electronic-voting machines compared to countries that used optical scanners and paper ballots, and consequently Clinton

may have lost up to 30,000 votes. She lost Wisconsin by 27,000 votes. Clinton has made no indication she would challenge the results and the White House is intent on a smooth transition. The deadline to file for a vote recount is between Friday and next Wednesday for the three states. Trump has 290 electoral college votes, compared to Clinton's 232 votes. Clinton would need to win Michigan and overturn the results in Wisconsin and Pennsylvania to win the electoral college. Another factor is so-called "faithless electors" who will not vote for the candidate which won in the popular vote in their state. So far, six electoral college voters said they would not vote for Trump. There have only been 157 faithless electors throughout history but they have never overturned an election. Trump said on Tuesday during a meeting with the New York Times that he was "never a fan" of the electoral college and he would have preferred to win in the popular vote.



BUSINESS VS PRESIDENCY

No conflict of interest Says Trump; appoints Nikki Haley as UN envoy

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Donald Trump has said his presidency would not be marred by conflicts of interest stemming from his business empire as he chose a Republican critic to join his cabinet yesterday, the first woman on his top team. And it followed a cordial chat between Trump and the New York Times, a newspaper he considers hostile, in which he softened his stance on climate change, torture and prosecuting his defeated rival Hillary Clinton. The issue of Trump reconciling his White House duties while owning billions in assets around the world has been a key concern since he won the presidency on November 8. American ethics law is lenient here: Trump is not required to give up his business portfolio. The Constitution does state that no one holding federal office can receive a gift or "emolument" from a foreign government. But this does not mean they cannot do business with private partners overseas. Trump said in a New York Times interview that in theory he can keep signing checks at his company but that he is "phrasing that out

now" and turning it over to his children. Trump's nomination of South Carolina's 44-year-old governor, Nikki Haley, daughter of an Indian immigrant, as US ambassador to the United Nations will be seen as a sign he is ready to broaden his political base. It came amid reports that he is also considering former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, another harsh campaign critic, this time for the key post of secretary of state. Trump's transition team spokesmen told reporters that another "cabinet level" appointment may be made later yesterday. Trump took another U-turn when he yesterday said that advice from his possible defense secretary Marine general James Mattis convinced him to think again about authorising the torture of detainees. In another development, retired US general David Petraeus yesterday indicated that he would serve in Trump's administration if he was offered a job, according to an interview on Britain's BBC radio. The Wall Street Journal has reported that Petraeus was under consideration for the post of defense secretary.



Nikki Haley

France to convene Syria talks

UN envoy fears 'brutal' Aleppo assault before Trump takes office
AFP, Paris
France yesterday accused Syria and its allies of using the political uncertainty in the United States to launch "total war" against rebel-held areas in the country and said states opposed to President Bashar al-Assad would meet in Paris soon. "Today one million people are besieged. Not just in Aleppo, but in Homs, Ghouta and Idlib, and that's the reality of the situation in Syria," Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault told reporters after a weekly cabinet meeting. "France is taking an initiative to confront this strategy of total war by the regime and its allies, who are taking advantage of the current uncertainty in the United States." A meeting of countries opposed to Assad, including the United States, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, will take place in the coming days in Paris, Ayrault said. The UN Special Envoy for Syria also expressed concern on Tuesday that Assad could launch a new offensive to crush eastern Aleppo before Trump takes office. Intense bombardment of east Aleppo, including of hospitals, have left residents even more deprived of medicines, food

Israel revives settlement plans : NGO

AFP, Jerusalem
Israel yesterday revived plans to build 500 new homes for Jewish settlers in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, an ominous sign for Palestinians wary of a Donald Trump presidency, an NGO said. "The political significance of this action is that it is the first plan to be promoted since the US elections," Betty Herschman from the Ir Amim NGO said. The plan for 500 housing units in Ramat Shlomo, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighbourhood in east Jerusalem of around 20,000, had been on hold since 2014, Ir Amim said. The announcement is likely to be interpreted by some as a first step in Israel expanding its settlements in the wake of Trump's upset election victory. Israeli right-wingers hailed his triumph as ushering in an administration far less critical of settlement expansion than that of outgoing President Barack Obama's.

Dalai Lama has 'no worries' about Trump

AFP, Beijing
The Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama said Wednesday he had "no worries" about US President-elect Donald Trump and looked forward to meeting him -- a prospect which would anger Beijing. The Nobel Laureate called the US "a leading nation of free world" at a press conference on a visit to Mongolia, where he met with Buddhist worshippers despite strident demands from Beijing that he be barred from entering the country. "Sometimes I feel during election, the candidate has more freedom to express," he said in English in response to a question about the US elections. "Once they [are] elected, having the responsibility, then they have to planning their sort of vision, their works according [to] reality," he added. "So I have no worries." He said he had plans to visit the US next year and looked forward to meeting Trump -- then giggled.



Bruce Springsteen, Tom Hanks and Ellen DeGeneres react after being presented with the Presidential Medal of Freedom by US President Barack Obama in White House. PHOTO: AFP