

NEWS IN brief

Sindh criminalises 'forced conversions'

Pakistan Sindh province Thursday passed a law making "forced conversions" punishable with a life sentence and forbidding minors from changing their religion, a bid to protect minorities in the conservative Muslim country. Forced conversions, particularly of Hindus to Islam, are an issue in Sindh and throughout the Muslim nation of some 200 million, where minorities have long fought for their rights.

2 killed in bomb attack in Turkey

Two people were killed and 21 wounded yesterday when a car bomb exploded outside a local government building in the southern Turkish city of Adana, the latest attack to rock Turkey this year. The bomb exploded in the car park of the governor's office for the Adana region, the governorate said in a statement. No one claimed responsibility.

Nigeria accused of killing 150 Biafra activists

Amnesty International yesterday accused Nigeria's security forces of killing at least 150 pro-Biafra protesters and injuring hundreds since August 2015. The army denied the charge. The watchdog said its report was based on analysis eyewitness accounts relating to demonstrations and other gatherings of Biafran activists, who were asking for a separate state for the Igbo people of southeast Nigeria.

12 arrested in India baby trafficking ring

Twelve people have been arrested in eastern India for trafficking newborn babies, who were smuggled out of clinics in biscuit boxes, police said yesterday. Police busted the illegal adoption racket after they found three newborns inside a cardboard box being taken from a clinic north of Kolkata on Monday night.



Rescue workers carry out a victim at the site where a power plant's cooling tower under construction collapsed in Fengcheng, Jiangxi province, China, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

China power plant collapse kills 67

At least 67 people were killed when part of a power station under construction in China collapsed yesterday, state media reported, the latest industrial accident in a country with a dismal safety record. A cooling tower platform plunged to the ground in the early hours, trapping an unknown number of people beneath it, the official Xinhua news agency said. State broadcaster CCTV put the toll at 67, with local reports saying one person was still missing and two others injured. Pictures of the scene in Fengcheng, in the central province of Jiangxi, showed a grey mass of concrete slabs, steel girders and twisted metal splayed in a heap on the ground inside a large round structure. The construction of two 1,000-megawatt coal-fired power units at the Ganneng Fengcheng power station began last July and was expected to be completed by early 2018, the local Yichun city government said on a verified social media account last year. The expansion was budgeted to cost a total of 7.67 billion yuan (now \$1.1 billion), it added. Industrial accidents are common in China, where safety standards are often laxly enforced. In August a pipeline explosion at a coal-fired power plant in the neighbouring province of Hubei killed 21. Earlier this summer more than 130 people were taken to hospital after chemicals leaked from a plant in eastern China. In April a chemical fire burned for 16 hours in the coastal province of Jiangsu after an explosion at a facility storing chemicals and fuel, requiring 400 firefighters to quell the flames. Last December, the collapse of a gypsum mine in the eastern province of Shandong left one person dead and 13 others unaccounted for, with four miners only rescued after being trapped underground for 36 days.

Colombia, Farc sign revised peace deal amid opposition

Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos and Marxist Farc rebel leader Rodrigo Londono signed a revised peace accord on Thursday in a far more sober ceremony than a first deal rejected last month by millions at a plebiscite. As they inked the pact with a pen made from a bullet at a Bogota theater, onlookers chanted "We did it!" The new accord to end 52 years of war in Latin America's fourth-largest economy was put together in just over a month after the original pact was narrowly and unexpectedly defeated in an Oct. 2 referendum for being too lenient on the rebels. The government and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have met in Cuba for the last four years to end the region's longest-running conflict that has killed more than 220,000 and displaced millions in the Andean nation. Opposition leader and former President Alvaro Uribe spearheaded the push to reject the original accord and wanted deeper changes to the new version. He is furious Santos will ratify the new deal in Congress instead of holding another vote and is urging street protests. The signing ceremony marked a six-month countdown for the 7,000-strong FARC to abandon weapons and form a political party. Despite widespread relief at an end to conflict, many among Colombia's largely conservative residents are angry because, like the original agreement, the new document offers no jail time for FARC leaders who committed crimes like kidnappings and massacres, and it allows them to hold political office. The understated signing in Bogota's Teatro Colon before mostly government and local dignitaries was a far cry from the fanfare celebration in September, where the coastal city of Cartagena hosted world leaders. Santos, who won the Nobel Peace Prize last month for his peace efforts, wants to get the deal in place as quickly as possible to maintain a fragile bilateral ceasefire. The expanded and highly complex new 310-page document makes only small modifications to the original text, such as clarifying private property rights and detailing more fully how the rebels would be confined in rural areas for crimes committed during the war. The FARC, which began as a rebellion fighting rural poverty, has battled a dozen governments as well as right-wing paramilitary groups. An end to the war with the Farc is unlikely to end violence in Colombia as the lucrative cocaine business has given rise to criminal gangs and traffickers.



LOC TENSION WITH INDIA Pakistan warns of full-fledged crisis

Alarmed by the escalation of tension with India along the LoC, Pakistan yesterday asked the UN to act before the situation snowballs into a "full-fledged crisis". Pakistan's ambassador to the UN Maleeha Lodhi met the Deputy UN Secretary General Jan Eliasson and the Chef de Cabinet of the Secretary General Edmond Mulet during which she alleged that the situation along the Line of Control (LoC) posed a "grave threat to international peace and security". Lodhi, according to a statement issued by the Permanent Mission of Pakistan to the UN, in her meeting with UN officials alleged that escalating tensions on the LoC "was a deliberate attempt" by India to "divert the attention of the international community from the gross human right violations being committed" by it in Kashmir. Meanwhile, a day after Indian troops killed 10 civilians in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said Pakistan will not tolerate India's "deliberate targeting" of civilians and ambulances. "We cannot tolerate deliberate targeting of innocent civilians particularly children and women, ambulances and civilian transport," the Prime Minister said during a high-level meeting on Thursday. The clash occurred a day after India warned of retribution after losing three soldiers in Pakistan firing and after Pakistan yesterday rejected as "false" and "baseless" the charges that the body of an Indian soldier was mutilated by Pakistani soldiers in a cross LoC-attack.



UK's FM calls for end to violence

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson called for an end to violence in Kashmir during a visit to Islamabad Thursday, warning tensions between India and Pakistan are holding the region back from becoming an "incredible boomzone". Johnson, who said he was visiting Pakistan for the first time, spoke a day after at least nine people were killed in Pakistani-held Kashmir when a civilian bus was hit by cross-border fire. The deadly incident, which came after months of dangerous tensions between the nuclear-armed rivals, saw Pakistani and Indian military officials speak via a special hotline, according to the Pakistani military, which said it reserves "the right to respond". Johnson warned former colonial power Britain could not act as a mediator in the nearly 70-year-old dispute over the Himalayan region, saying it must be up to India and Pakistan to find a "lasting solution" that allows for Kashmiri self-determination. He also voiced concern over recent incidents "on both sides" of the de facto Kashmir border, the Line of Control (LoC). "We call for an end to the violence and for both sides to exercise restraint," he said, framing the issue as a matter of economy as well as security. The "mutual sequestration" of the Indian and Pakistani economies was holding the region back from fulfilling this potential, he warned.

UNREST IN XINJIANG Residents ordered to turn in passports

All residents in China's restive region of Xinjiang must hand in their passports to local police stations for "examination and management", the Global Times newspaper said Thursday. "Anyone who needs the passport must apply to the police station," an anonymous police officer in Aksu prefecture told the paper, adding that the policy had been implemented throughout Xinjiang. Many members of the more than 10 million-strong Muslim Uighur minority in the region complain of discrimination -- including denials of passport applications -- as well as controls on their culture and religion. The Global Times article followed numerous reports from cities across the region of tightened passport controls. Photos of other notices posted on social media showed police stations in various counties and in the regional capital Urumqi requesting citizens hand in passports or stating that new documents would no longer be issued. In June, local state-run media reported that the mostly Kazakh residents of a Xinjiang border district had to give police DNA samples, fingerprints, voiceprints and a "three-dimensional image" in order to apply for certain travel documents, including passports.



People argue with each other as they wait for their turn to exchange or deposit their old high denomination banknotes outside a bank in Mumbai; and police detain supporters of India opposition parties in Ahmedabad and Chennai during protests against demonitisation yesterday.

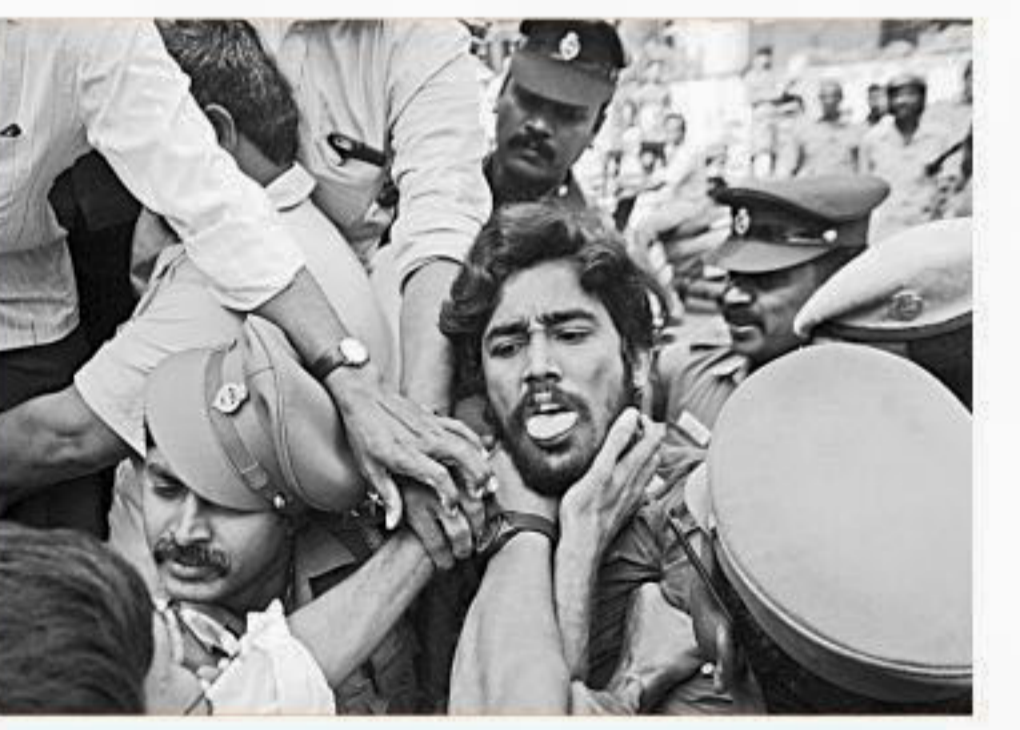


PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP

Obama pardons last turkey

President Barack Obama pardoned his last Thanksgiving turkey on Wednesday, an annual tradition that sees the US leader spare two birds -- the centerpiece of most holiday tables -- from the carving knife. Obama's teenage daughters, Sasha and Malia, who have stood by his side during previous pardons -- notably casting side-eye glances at their father's turkey-themed puns -- were absent this year. The festive occasion, rife with bad jokes and poultry photo-ops, saw Obama's significantly younger nephews, Austin and Aaron Robinson, take their place. "Unlike Malia and Sasha, they have not yet been turned cynical by Washington," Obama said to laughter. "Thanksgiving is a chance to gather with loved ones, reflect on our many blessings and, after a long campaign season, finally turn our attention from polls to poultry," he said as he introduced this year's turkeys -- two 40-pound, 18-week-old birds hailing from northwest Iowa, named Tater and Tot. Tot was pardoned in the Rose Garden ceremony, while Tater was on hand as an alternate, should anything go awry with the main bird. "I want to take a moment to recognize the brave turkeys who weren't so lucky, who didn't get to ride the gravy train to freedom, who met their fate with courage and sacrifice and proved they weren't anything go awry with the main bird."



Pak stage actress shot in Lahore

Unknown gunmen attacked stage actress Kismat Baig and her guard yesterday as her car passed through Harbanspura area. Kismat Baig suffered critical injuries and she was rushed to the hospital where doctors are trying to save her life. Speaking to Geo News, her driver said that three men in a car came out and first attacked the window glass with iron rods and then sprayed them with bullets. The driver who also suffered injuries added that they were armed with 9mm pistols. The gunmen took away Kismat's mobile phone and a gold chain in her neck. Kismat's mother ruled out the possibility that this was a robbery attempt. She alleged that last night when her daughter came home some men were following her. Kismat has earlier survived two similar attacks.



Turkish army blames Syria regime for deadly air strike

The prime ministry slapped a broadcasting ban on coverage of the strike an hour after the military's statement, Turkey's broadcast watchdog said on its website. The Turkish military launched an operation -- dubbed "Euphrates Shield" -- with tanks and air power in August to support Syrian opposition fighters seeking to retake territory from IS in northern Syria. The Ankara-backed rebels comprise several brigades rather than one organised force, according to experts. Hundreds of Turkish soldiers are taking part in the operation, which President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said this week was pushing forward with its aim of taking Al Bab from IS. The operation has also targeted Syrian Kurdish militia, whom Turkey views as linked to its outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has staged an insurgency in Turkey since 1984. The PKK is proscribed as a terror group by Washington and Brussels but not by the United Nations. The Turkish army yesterday blamed the Syrian regime for an air strike in northern Syria that killed three soldiers, the first time it has accused Damascus of killing its soldiers since launching its three-month military incursion. The incident came on the first anniversary of the shooting down of a Russian military jet over the Syrian border by the Turkish air force. That led to a seven-month crisis in relations between Turkey and Russia, an ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that has provided military support to Damascus. The army said the strike took place at 3:30 am (0030 GMT) without indicating where in Syria, although local media said it took place in the Al Bab region. "In the air strike assessed to have been by Syrian regime forces, three of our heroic soldiers were killed and one seriously," the armed forces said in a statement on its website. Turkish media reported earlier that the attack was by Islamic State (IS) jihadists.