

NEWSIN brief

Indian soldier, 2 rebels killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar
An Indian soldier and two suspected rebels were killed yesterday in a gun battle in northern Indian-administered Kashmir. The Indian army, which maintains a heavy presence in the disputed territory, said that the two separatist rebels had clashed with soldiers in Naidkhai, just north of the main city Srinagar. Suspected rebels attacked a police patrol in a separate incident on Friday in the southern Kulgam region, killing two officers and injuring one.

France set to label settlement goods

AFP, Jerusalem
Israel has accused France of aiding a boycott of the Jewish state, after Paris announced new guidelines for labelling goods from settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. France published the guidelines late Thursday on enforcing European Union regulations on labelling goods from the West Bank and east Jerusalem, which the international community considers occupied Palestinian land, as well as the Golan Heights which Israel seized from Syria in 1967. It comes a year after the European Union backed the labelling of products from Israeli settlements.



Veteran journo Dilip Padgaonkar dies

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi
Veteran journalist Dilip Padgaonkar, who was widely respected for his secular and liberal approach on key issues facing India and the world, died at a hospital in western Indian city of Pune. The 72-year-old journalist died of heart attack and multi-organ failure, said sources. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, among others, condoled his death, saying he was a leading public thinker whose contribution to journalism will always be remembered.



Ethnic Rohingya refugees use a shoe to hit a placard with portrait of Myanmar State Counsellor and Foreign Minister Aung San Suu Kyi during a protest against the persecution of Rohingyas in Myanmar, outside the Myanmar Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, yesterday. (Below) The satellite images released by Human Rights Watch show Wa Peik Village in Maungdaw District, Myanmar. The left picture was recorded in 2014 and the right one on November 10, 2016 show burnt out homes. PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

DEFAMATION CHARGES Myanmar media execs in court

AFP, Yangon
Two Myanmar media executives appeared in court yesterday charged with defamation, in a case that has crystallised fears for press freedom under the country's new democratic government. The CEO of Eleven Media Group, Than Htut Aung, and the chief editor of one of its papers, Wai Phyo, appeared in court handcuffed together after two weeks awaiting trial. The pair were charged with defamation under Myanmar's controversial telecommunications law, which was frequently used by the former quasi-military government to punish critics. A high-profile member of Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party brought the charges over a column accusing him of receiving a \$100,000 watch from a businessman, who later won plum contracts. Despite hopes the Nobel laureate's government would usher in a new era of free expression, several people have been prosecuted for defamation since her party took over in late March. The case comes as concerns deepen over freedom of expression under Myanmar's new leadership. Freedoms have increased under Suu Kyi but monitors say many outlets still exercise self-censorship in fear of the law.

Turkey threatens to open migrant floodgate on EU

Erdogan says Ankara to open borders if membership bid blocked
AFP, Istanbul
President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday threatened to open Turkey's borders to allow migrants to reach the EU, in a move that would tear up a landmark deal that has reduced the flow. Erdogan's comments, some of his toughest in recent times against the European Union, prompted an immediate warning from Germany which helped broker the deal that such "threats" were unhelpful. The threat came a day after the European Parliament angered Ankara by backing a freeze in EU accession talks, already hit by alarm over its crackdown in the wake of the July 15 failed coup. "Listen to me. If you go any further, then the frontiers will be opened, bear that in mind," Erdogan told the EU during a speech in Istanbul. He said Brussels had cried out for help in 2015 as tens of thousands of migrants massed at Turkey's border crossing with EU member Bulgaria. "You began to ask us 'what will we do if Turkey opens its borders?'" he asked. On March 18, Ankara and Brussels forged a deal for Turkey to halt the flow of migrants to Europe -- an accord that has largely been successful in reducing numbers crossing the Aegean Sea between Turkey and Greece. Turkey agreed to step up maritime and land border controls in exchange for incentives on its long-stalled membership bid, including visa-free travel for its citizens and an acceleration of accession talks. However with an October target passing, no apparent progress on the visa issue and the accession talks stalled, Ankara has accused Brussels of failing to keep its side of the bargain. In response to Erdogan's remarks, Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokeswoman Ulrike Demmer said the deal was in the interest "of all parties" and that "threats on either side are not helpful". The vote by the EU Parliament reflected spiralling tensions between Ankara and the bloc after Brussels repeatedly expressed alarm over the magnitude of Turkey's crackdown after the coup. Almost 37,000 suspects have been arrested, and tens of thousands of others have lost their jobs since the attempted putsch.

'They raped us one by one'

Rohingya woman reveals horror tale
AFP, Telenaf
The brutal gang rape that Habiba and her sister endured is a story that is becoming depressingly familiar among the thousands of Rohingya refugees fleeing to Bangladesh to escape the violence of Myanmar's soldiers. "They tied both of us to the bed and raped us one by one," said 20-year-old Habiba, who has now found shelter with a Rohingya refugee family a few kilometres (miles) from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. "We're almost starving here. But at least no one is coming here to kill or torture," said Hashim Ullah, Habiba's older brother who escaped with his sisters. Habiba and her sister Samira, 18, say they were raped in their home in Udang village by troops who then burnt down their house. "They torched most of the houses, killed numerous people including our father and raped many young girls," said Habiba, who agreed to be identified in this story. "One of the soldiers told us before leaving that they will kill us if they see us around the next time they come here. Then they torched our house." Widespread allegations of rape have raised fears that Myanmar's security forces are systematically using sexual violence against the stateless Rohingya. The violence has forced thousands to flee, prompting a UN official to accuse Myanmar of carrying out "ethnic cleansing" of the Muslim minority. Similar stories of violence and dispossession fill the rows of plastic-roofed shacks that have become the only refuge for thousands of Rohingya Muslims who have fled Rakhine state. The escapees have told of gang rapes, torture and murder being carried out by Myanmar troops in the small strip of land that has been under military control after deadly raids on police border posts last month. Foreign journalists and independent investigators have been barred from entering the area. While the military and government have rejected the charges, rights groups have long accused the military of using rape as a weapon of war in several other ethnic conflicts which simmer in the country's borderlands.



BREXIT CHAOS British ex-PMs raise possibility of new vote

AFP, London
Former British prime minister John Major believes there is a "credible case" for a second referendum on Brexit, a newspaper reported yesterday, after his successor Tony Blair suggested the process could be stopped. Major, a former leader of Prime Minister Theresa May's Conservative party, warned against the "tyranny of the majority" in implementing the June vote to leave the European Union, in which 52 percent opted for Brexit. "I hear the argument that the 48 percent of people who voted to stay should have no say in what happens. I find that very difficult to accept," he told a dinner this week, according to The Times newspaper. "The tyranny of the majority has never applied in a democracy and it should not apply in this particular democracy." Asked if the public should be given another say on the terms of the withdrawal deal, Major reportedly said: "That is a matter for parliament. You can make a perfectly credible case for it. "I don't know whether that will happen. I think we need to see how things pan out before we decide exactly what needs to be done." He said he accepted Britain would not remain a full member of the EU but still hoped for a deal that would enable the country to stay as close as possible to the union and its single market.

Indian PM defends cash ban after fierce criticism

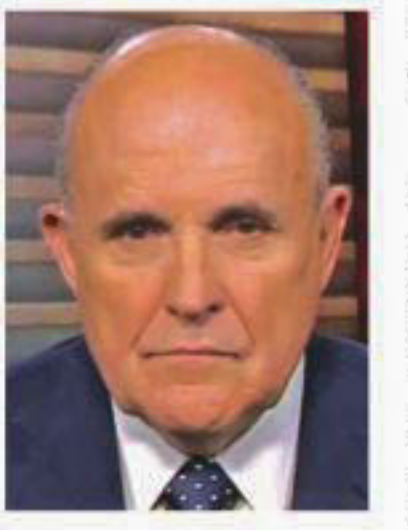
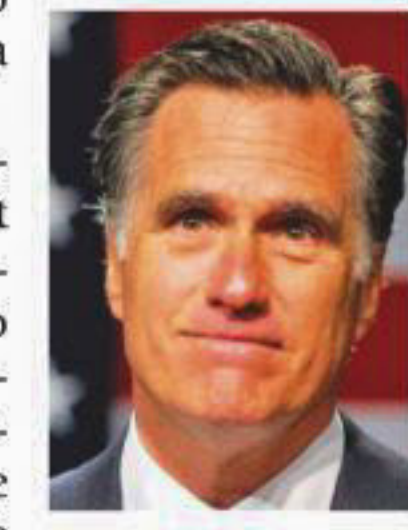
AFP, New Delhi
Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday hit back at the mounting criticism of his decision to withdraw all high-denomination bank notes from circulation, describing the move as "for the larger social good". The November 8 move to ban the 500 and 1,000 rupees (\$7.30, \$14.60) notes -- some 85 percent of all bills in circulation -- as legal tender has sparked turmoil in the vast cash-reliant nation. Long queues have formed outside banks across the country as people try to get rid of their old notes, and the government has repeatedly changed rules surrounding the exchange process in response to pressure from various groups and mounting chaos. "The decision isn't being criticised much (by the common man)," Modi said in a speech Friday, in which he praised citizens as "soldiers in this fight against corruption and black (unaccounted) money". "Some things have to be done above politics for the larger social good," he added. Critics of the move have included former prime minister Manmohan Singh -- whose economic reforms are credited with rescuing India from the brink of bankruptcy in the early 1990s -- who said that the decision could shave two percentage points from the country's GDP. Ratings agency Fitch has also said it would revise down India growth forecasts for the fourth quarter of 2016 after the shock move. Others have slammed the government for its "shoddy implementation" of the scheme. But Modi hit out at his rivals, saying those criticising his decision were doing so because they were "sad that they didn't get any notice, a chance to prepare for the decision". "It is such a great step. A big, big decision. And, for those who dream of a great future for the country, let's come together to remove the problems being faced by the common man," he added.



People gather around two passenger trains that collided in the city of Shahroud, in the north-central province of Semnan, killing at least 30 people, in this still frame taken from video, yesterday. Story on page 16. PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

Battle surrounds Trump's secy of state pick

AFP, Palm Beach
As families across a bitterly divided America gathered for Thanksgiving, a battle erupted Thursday in Donald Trump's camp over his pick for secretary of state, with loyalists seeking to block the path of Mitt Romney, a fierce former critic of the billionaire. With the president-elect hunkered down at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida for the holiday weekend -- from where he urged the country to unite after a "painful" campaign -- his team appears split over the prospect of making Romney, the Republican presidential candidate in 2012, America's top diplomat. Some of Trump's staunchest supporters have united to oppose naming a man who called the real estate magnate a "fraud" and a "conman" during the campaign, when he helped lead the party establishment's drive to sideline him. But the other leading choice for top diplomat, outspoken former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani -- one of Trump's loudest supporters



tweeted. "Some Trump loyalists warn against Romney as sec of state." Among them, former House speaker Newt Gingrich, another staunch Trump supporter, expressed skepticism that Romney would represent "the kind of tough-minded, America-first policies that Trump has campaigned on." Gingrich was joined by former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, who told Fox News he was "still very unhappy that Mitt did everything he could to derail Donald Trump." Trump has so far nominated mainly older white men for his future administration, representing tough, right-wing lines on immigration, Islamic extremism and other issues. They include Jeff Sessions as attorney general, Michael Flynn as national security adviser and Stephen Bannon as chief strategist. Trump's close aide Kellyanne Conway cast further doubt on his suitability Thursday in what appeared to be a bad sign for Romney. "Receiving deluge of social media & private comms re: Romney," she

More than 30 killed as trains collide in Iran

AFP, Tehran
Two trains collided and caught fire yesterday in a remote region of northern Iran, killing more than 30 people and injuring dozens more, in one of the country's worst rail disasters. Provincial governor Mohammad Reza Khabbazi told state television that the crash took place in Semnan province on the main line between Tehran and Iran's second city Mashhad. An express train operating from Tabriz in the northwest to Mashhad had been forced to stop between stations by a mechanical failure or because of extreme cold, Khabbazi said. Two coaches on the express burst into flames when a passenger train behind ran into the back of it at 7:50 am (0420 GMT). The front four coaches of the second train -- running from Semnan to Mashhad -- derailed and overturned. "One minute I was sleeping and the next I was being carried out of a coach on fire," one hospitalised passenger told state television. Television broadcast images of a huge column of black smoke and flames shooting into the sky from coaches with their windows shattered. "The bodies of 31 dead have been identified and more than 70 people hospitalised," Khabbazi said, indicating that the toll could rise. Hossein Kulivand, head of Iran's emergency services, quoted by the ISNA news agency, gave a casualty toll of 35 dead and 80 injured.