

# NEWSIN brief

## China to build \$1.5b Pakistan power line

AFP, Islamabad

China's State Grid Corporation is set to build a \$1.5-billion power line across Pakistan to enable the transmission of 4,000 megawatts of electricity from the country's north to south, the government said yesterday. The power transmission line would link the national grid between the southern Pakistani town of Matiari and easternmost city of Lahore, some 1,000 kilometres apart.

## Romania gets new PM after turmoil

AFP, Bucharest

Romania's president yesterday named social-democrat Sorin Grindeanu as the nation's new prime minister, bringing to a close weeks of uncertainty since the left won a parliamentary vote on December 11. The nomination sought to put an end to a political crisis sparked when Iohannis rejected a previous candidate who would have been the country's first female and first Muslim prime minister. Grindeanu now faces a confidence vote in parliament on his programme and cabinet nominees.

## 6.2 quake rattles Bali

AFP, Jakarta

A 6.2-magnitude earthquake was felt in the Indonesian resort island of Bali early yesterday, an AFP correspondent said, but there was no tsunami alert and no immediate reports of casualties or damage. The quake hit around 300 kilometres (190 miles) east of Bali at a depth of around 72 kilometres just off the island of Sumbawa at 6:30 am (2230 GMT Thursday), the US Geological Survey said.

## Tunisia to arrest returning jihadists

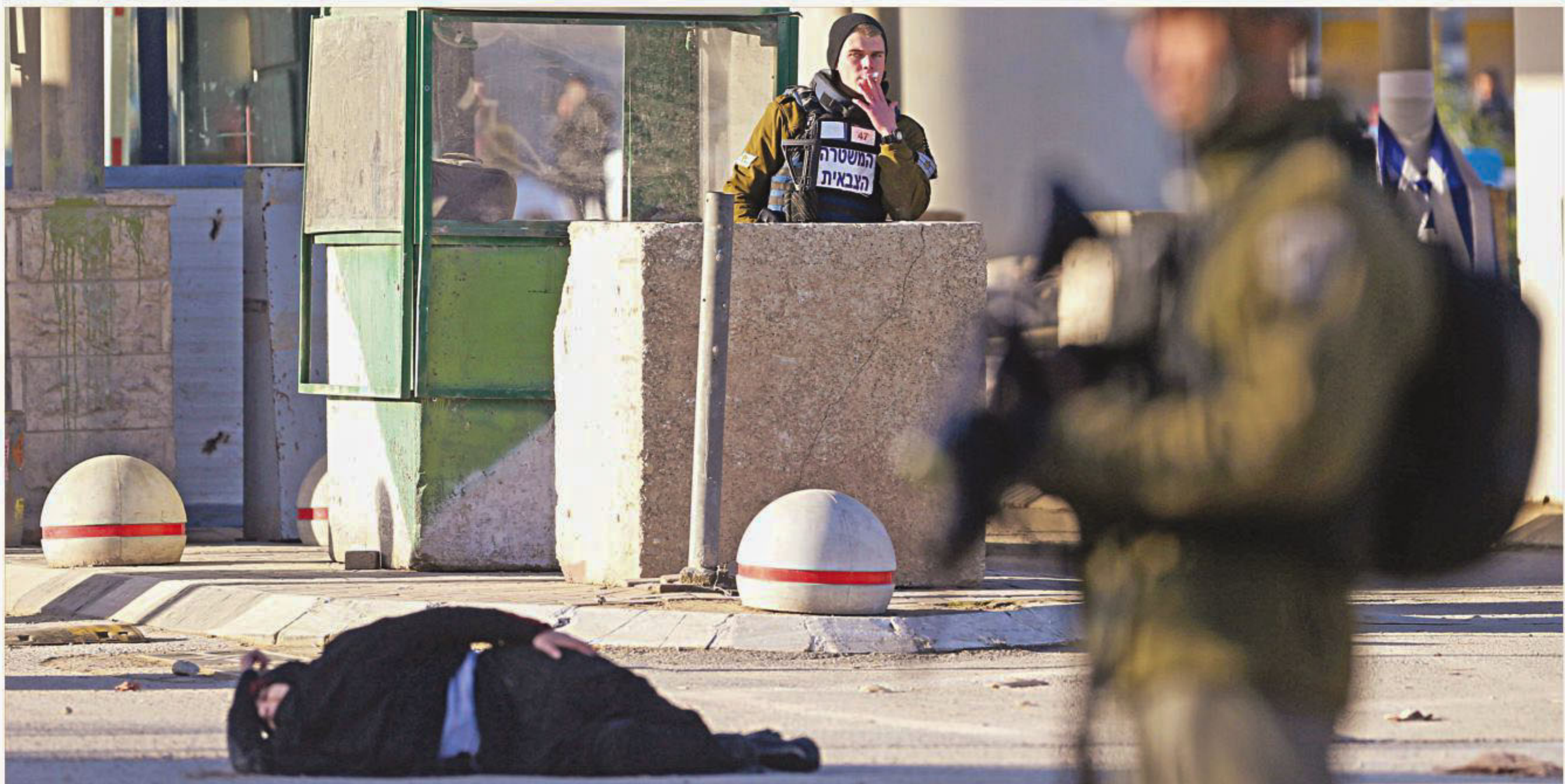
AFP, Tunis

Tunisia's Prime Minister Youssef Chahed on Thursday said all jihadists returning from foreign battlefields would be immediately arrested and judged according to the country's counter-terrorism law. Concern about the return of jihadists has risen since Tunisian Anis Amri, 24, was identified as the suspected attacker who mowed down 11 people with a truck at a Berlin Christmas market last week and also killed the driver.

## Drone strike kills local Qaeda chief in Yemen

AFP, Aden

A drone strike in Yemen likely carried out by US forces on Thursday killed a local al-Qaeda chief and his guard, a security official said. The strike hit a vehicle at Sawmaa in Al-Bayda province, killing Jalal al-Seydi, who was the "emir" of al-Qaeda in the town of Loder, in the neighbouring southern province of Abyan, the official said.



A Palestinian woman, who according to the Israeli police was shot and wounded after she attempted to stab Israeli officers, lies on the ground at Qalandiya checkpoint near the West Bank city of Ramallah, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Trump to meet spy chiefs to get Russian hacking 'facts'

AFP, Palm Beach

US President-elect Donald Trump on Thursday responded to a slew of US election related sanctions against Russia with a call for the country to "move on" and a conciliatory pledge to meet US spy chiefs he has harshly criticized.

"It's time for our country to move on to bigger and better things," Trump said, echoing previous prickly reactions to allegations his November win over Hillary Clinton was somehow tainted by Russian interference.

"Nevertheless, in the interest of our country and its great people, I will meet with leaders of the intelligence community next week in order to be updated on the facts of this situation," he added.

President Barack Obama on Thursday ordered a series of diplomatic and economic sanctions against Russia over the hacking which US officials say was aimed at disrupting the November election.

Trump has long treated such accusations as a thinly veiled effort by a Democratic president to

delegitimize a Republican victory.

But that defiant stance is running up against increasing opposition in his own party.

While Trump has already received intelligence briefings about the election and substantial evidence is in the public sphere, his pledge to meet with intelligence chiefs could provide a face-saving opportunity to further soften his stance.



Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday said he would not expel any Americans in response to Washington turfing out dozens of Russian diplomats.

The Kremlin strongman's shock decision came after Russia's foreign ministry asked him to send home 35 US diplomats in a tit-for-tat retaliation for the expulsion of the same number of its staff by President Barack Obama on Thursday.

Putin's move was a clear sign that Moscow is pinning its hopes on President-elect Donald Trump to help rebuild ties -- which have plunged to their lowest point since the Cold War -- when he takes office next month.

## 10 killed, scores missing

AFP, Lalmatia

Rescuers yesterday pulled out two more bodies from the rubble of a collapsed coal mine in eastern India, taking the death toll to 10, police said, as many were still feared trapped.

A massive mound of earth caved in late Thursday at the Lalmatia open cast mine in Jharkhand state, burying at least 23 miners and dozens of vehicles as hundreds of workers battled overnight to rescue them.

"Up till now, 10 bodies have been recovered after two more were pulled out. Coal mine authorities believe that there may be 2-3 more dead bodies inside," Jharkhand police spokesman, RK Mallick, told AFP.

He added that it was difficult to know how many may be trapped, but said close to a dozen were still unaccounted for.

Some of the workers had escaped the disaster site following the collapse, Mallick said, with unconfirmed media reports putting the number trapped at 50.

Images showed the dead covered with white sheets on makeshift quilts as colleagues and locals looked on at the rescue efforts.

Police and emergency workers used sniffer dogs, earth movers and their bare hands to

remove giant rocks and mangled, overturned trucks to locate the trapped workers under tons of earth.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed his grief on Twitter, promising to help the state government in its rescue operations.

"Saddened by the loss of lives at a mine in Jharkhand. My prayers are with those trapped inside," he said.

Federal disaster and rescue authorities have dispatched more than 200 rescue workers to the site.

The mine is operated by the government-owned Eastern Coalfields Limited. Its top official, Niladri Roy, told AFP that more than 250 metres (820 feet) of the mine collapsed as workers headed towards the exit around 7:30 pm Thursday.

There was no immediate explanation for the collapse, but the government has launched an investigation into the "unprecedented" incident.

In a separate incident on Thursday, four miners were injured at a government-run coal mine in Jharkhand's Dhanbad district.

A mine official said the workers were hit after the roof of the Putki Balihari coal mine partially collapsed. Two of the workers were critically injured.

### COAL MINE TRAGEDY IN INDIA



### BLACKLISTING JAISH-E-MOHAMMAD CHIEF

## China again blocks India's move at UN

REUTERS, New Delhi

China has blocked India's request to add the head of the Pakistan-based militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad to a UN Security Council blacklist of groups linked to al-Qaeda, India said yesterday.

India has accused Jaish-e-Mohammad and its top leader, Maulana Masood Azhar, of masterminding several attacks, including a deadly assault on an Indian air base in January.

Pakistan security officials interrogated Azhar and his associates after the attack, and said they found no evidence linking him to it.

Jaish-e-Mohammad has already been blacklisted by the 15-nation Security Council, but not Azhar, an Islamist hardliner and long-time foe of India.

Foreign ministry spokesman Vikas Swarup said that India had requested that Azhar be added to the list nine months ago and had received strong backing from all other members of the council.

But China, which put a hold on the move in April, had now blocked it, he said.

India has long accused its neighbour and rival Pakistan of using Jaish-e-Mohammad as a proxy to mount attacks on Indian soil, including in the disputed Kashmir region, and earlier gave what it called "actionable intelligence" to Pakistan, including telephone intercepts.



An Iraqi soldier fires from his weapon during clashes with Islamic State militants, north of Mosul, Iraq, yesterday. Inset, civilians flee fighting there.

PHOTO: REUTERS

### ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS

## UK criticises Kerry's key ME speech

AFP, London

The British government on Thursday said peace between Israel and the Palestinians cannot be brokered by focusing solely on settlement construction, following a stern warning over the practice by US Secretary of State John Kerry.

British Prime Minister Theresa May's spokesperson said Britain supports a two-state solution and believes the construction of settlements on Palestinian lands is illegal.

"But we are also clear that the settlements are far from the only problem in this conflict."

"In particular, the people of Israel deserve to live free from the threat of terrorism, with which they have had to cope for too long," the spokesperson said in a statement.

The comments from Downing Street come a day after Kerry issued a stern warning to Israel in which he said building settlements threatens the country's future as a democracy.

Kerry accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government of allowing Israel to slide towards a "perpetual occupation."

Without referring to the secretary of state's comments, the British government's comments appeared to criticise Kerry's speech.

"We do not, therefore, believe that the way to negotiate peace is by focusing on only one issue, in this case the construction of settlements, when clearly the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians is so deeply complex," May's spokesperson said.

"And we do not believe that it is appropriate to attack the composition of the democratically-elected government of an ally. The government believes that negotiations will only succeed when they are conducted between the two parties, supported by the international community," they added.

The statement follows a UN Security Council resolution last week which effectively declared Israel's settlements on areas of east Jerusalem and the West Bank beyond its 1967 border illegal.

## Saudi invites Iran for talks on hajj return

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia has invited regional rival Iran to discuss a return of its nationals to next year's hajj after Iranians were excluded from the pilgrimage following a major diplomatic row, reports said yesterday.

The Al-Hayat daily reported that Riyadh's pilgrims minister Mohammed Bentin had opened discussions with more than 80 countries, including Iran, to work out the details of the 2017 hajj.

"Iran's hajj delegation was invited to come to the kingdom" for preparations, the papers said.

The Arab News daily said Riyadh would welcome pilgrims for hajj and the smaller umra rite "irrespective of their nationalities or sectarian affiliations, including Iranian pilgrims".

More than 1.8 million faithful took part in this year's hajj, but Iranians stayed at home after tensions between Riyadh and Tehran boiled over following a deadly stampede during the 2015 pilgrimage.

Iran says it lost 464 people in the crush outside Makkah.

They were among more than 2,300 people killed in the worst ever disaster to strike the hajj -- one of the five pillars of Islam -- which capable Muslims must perform at least once.

Shia Iran and predominantly Sunni Saudi Arabia are at odds over a raft of regional issues, notably the conflicts in Syria and Yemen in which they support opposing sides.

Riyadh cut ties with Tehran in January after Iranian demonstrators torched its embassy and a consulate following its execution of a prominent Shia cleric.

## Malaysia plans to send aid flotilla

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur/Jangon

An aid flotilla carrying food and emergency supplies for Rohingya Muslims will sail from Malaysia for Myanmar's troubled Rakhine State next month, the Malaysian organiser said yesterday.

The flotilla, organised by a coalition of aid groups, has yet to receive permission to enter Myanmar, sparking fears of a confrontation with security forces that could worsen Myanmar's already-frayed ties with predominantly Muslim Malaysia.

Malaysia has been an outspoken critic of the Myanmar government's handling of a violent crackdown in Rakhine, which has killed scores of people and displaced 30,000 Rohingya, amid allegations of abuses by security forces.

The Malaysian Consultative Council of Islamic Organisations secretary-general Zuhani Zainol said the flotilla's organisers had applied for permission to enter Myanmar through its embassy in Kuala Lumpur, but had

yet to receive a reply.

"Even if we do not receive a response, we will continue to sail as we believe this is an important humanitarian mission," he said.

Myanmar's presidential office denied it had received a request and said it would not accept the flotilla's

### ROHINGYAS PLIGHT IN MYANMAR



arrival without prior permission.

"If they are looking for trouble, we will not accept that," Zaw Htay, spokesman for the presidential office, told Reuters.

"No non-Myanmar citizens can enter our body of water without our permission. If they do, we will respond

- we will not attack them, but we will not receive them."

The flotilla, departing from Malaysia on Jan. 10, would be carrying 1,000 tonnes of rice, medical aid and other essentials for the Rohingya population.

Earlier this month, Malaysia urged the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to coordinate humanitarian aid and investigate alleged atrocities committed against Rohingya Muslims. Both Malaysia and Myanmar are members of the 10-nation grouping, which has a long-standing policy of not getting involved in each other's internal affairs.

An estimated 150,000 to 200,000 Rohingyas, displaced by previous violence, live in Malaysia.

Myanmar has previously said access to Rakhine for humanitarian assistance would be open, but certain Rohingya communities have remained off-limits to aid agencies on security grounds.

### DEMONITISATION DRIVE IN INDIA

## Window closes as Modi eyes key state poll

AFP, Mumbai

Indians yesterday rushed to change their bank notes before a deadline to deposit invalid rupee notes closed, as Prime Minister Modi defended his controversial move to reduce cash in use.

His shock November 8 announcement rendered 86 percent of India's currency void, giving customers until December 30 to swap their old 500 rupee (\$7.30) and 1,000-rupee bills for new ones.

The Indian leader was widely hailed for his assault on tax evasion but long queues outside banks, a cash crunch and policy flip-flops quickly led to anger in some quarters.

"Technology has the power to empower the poorest of the poor," Modi said in a speech in Delhi. "This digital payment that I keep talking about, it will bring about a revolution."

Modi and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will learn if his risky gamble

has paid off when Uttar Pradesh (UP) holds the first of several 2017 state elections, likely in February.

"UP elections will be the first real test to see how people have judged the policy," said political analyst Devdan Chaudhuri, predicting that demonetisation will backfire for Modi at the ballot box.

"I cannot think that this will help BJP because the pain of (the) cash crunch is decimating the rural and the unorganised sectors. The repressed anger will come out soon. And the policy... will cost BJP dearly," he told AFP.

Modi, who came to power in 2014 pledging to tackle so-called "black" or undeclared money, was forced onto the defensive as frustration grew at the slow introduction of new notes.

There has been anger in rural areas where farmers have been unable to sell crops while small traders have reported a huge drop in earnings owing to a lack of paper currency in the system.