

# WELCOME 2017



Fireworks explode over the Sydney Opera House and Harbour Bridge as Australia ushers in the New Year in Sydney. Australia rang in the new year with a spectacular fireworks display in Sydney, sending rainbow-coloured showers into the night sky and defying the global terror attacks that cast a pall over 2016. PHOTO: REUTERS

## Baghdad market blasts kill dozens

### Islamic state claims responsibility

AFP, Baghdad

Twin blasts ripped through a busy market area in central Baghdad yesterday, police said, shattering a relative lull in attacks in the capital and marring preparations for New Year celebrations.

Two suicide bombers attacked the Al-Sinek area, killing at least 27 people and wounding 53, a police colonel said. An officer in the interior ministry and a hospital official confirmed the toll.

"Many of the victims were people from the spare parts shops in the area, they were gathered near a cart selling breakfast when the explosions went off," said Ibrahim Mohammed Ali, who owns a nearby shop.

Torn clothes and mangled iron were strewn across the ground in pools of blood at the site of the wreckage near Rasheed street, one of the main thoroughfares in Baghdad, an AFP photographer said.

The area is packed with shops, workshops and wholesale markets and usually teeming with delivery trucks and labourers unloading vans or wheeling carts around.

The attack was claimed by the Islamic State jihadist group via its propaganda agency Amaq, which reported the "martyrdom operation" in Al-Sinek neighbourhood.

Baghdad has been on high alert since the start on October 17 of an offensive, Iraq's largest military operation in years, to retake the northern jihadist stronghold of Mosul.

IS has tried to hit back with major diversionary attacks across the country but has had little success in Baghdad. Saturday's twin bombings were the deadliest in the capital since the start of the Mosul offensive.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi had vowed earlier in 2016 that his forces would rid the country of IS by the end of the year but the Mosul operation has been slower moving that expected.

Huge crowds were expected to gather in the evening in Baghdad's streets to celebrate the New Year for only the second time since the lifting in 2015 of a years-old curfew.

## 'Great move'

Trump praises Putin after Russia refuses to expel US diplomats in tit-for-tat move

AFP, Washington

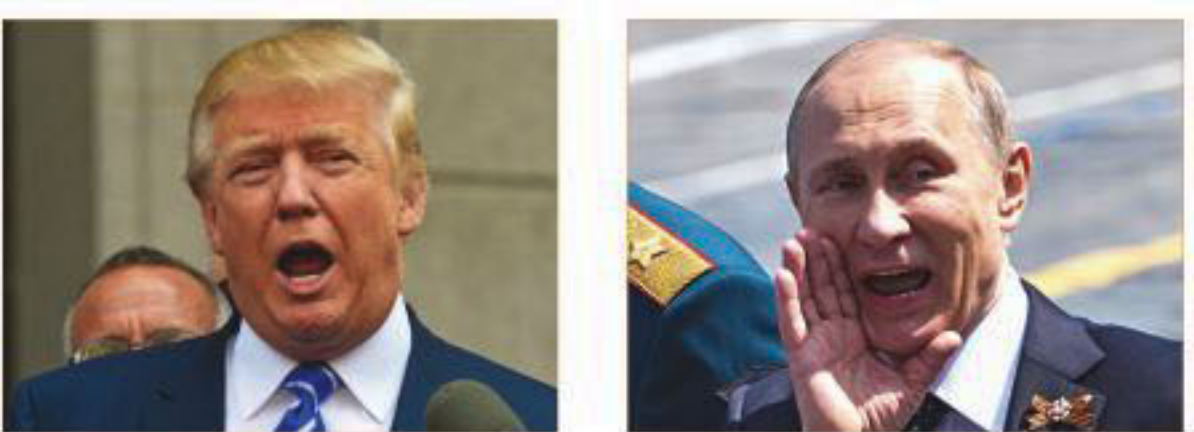
President-elect Donald Trump on praised President Vladimir Putin for refraining from tit-for-tat expulsions of Americans in response to US punitive measures over alleged Russian interference in the November election.

Putin's decision came despite the foreign ministry asking him to send home 35 US diplomats after President Barack Obama had expelled the same number of Russian staff.

Trump's intervention -- in a tweet -- however illustrated the shifting political tide in Washington, barely three weeks before the Republican is due to succeed Obama at the White House.

"Great move on delay (by V. Putin) - I always knew he was very smart!" the incoming US president wrote.

Russia's embassy in Washington quickly retweeted the



comment, which Trump pinned so it would appear at the top of his feed for several hours.

Trump's tweet enraged his Democratic foes as well as some members of his own Republican Party.

Claire McCaskill, a Democrat who serves on the Senate Armed Services Committee, wrote: "Our ENTIRE cyber intel community, best in world btw, agrees that this guy tried to mess in our election & the Russians are RT Trump Putin love."

The alleged hacking of the US presidential election in November outraged Obama, culminating in the expulsions and other sanctions.

But outlining why he would not retaliate, Putin cited Trump's imminent accession.

"We will not expel anyone," Putin said in a statement, also inviting children of US diplomats to a holiday party at the Kremlin. Instead, Moscow will plan its next steps "based on the policies pursued by the administration of president Donald Trump," while warning that the Kremlin reserves the right to respond.

The Russian leader chided the outgoing Obama for "unfriendly steps" amounting to "a provocation aimed at further undermining Russian-American relations."

Obama on Thursday unleashed a barrage of sanctions against Russia over alleged cyberattacks aimed at tilting the November election in Trump's favour.

The move follows years of bad blood with Putin that had seen Washington slap sanctions on Moscow over its behavior in Ukraine and Syria.

US intelligence has concluded that the Kremlin ordered a hack-and-release of Democratic Party and Hillary Clinton campaign staff emails in a bid to put Trump in the Oval Office.

Moscow has repeatedly denied the hacking allegations.

## Modi urges support against corruption, black money

Announces host of new schemes for poor in key speech

TNN, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday announced a host of new schemes for various sections of society even as he urged the people to continue supporting the government in the fight against corruption and black money.

In his televised address on the eve of New Year, his first since the surprise November 8 announcement, PM Modi offered relief to the poor, middle class, small businesses, farmers, senior citizens and pregnant women.

PM Modi set out a stern warning of tough action against the "dishonest" people even as he assuaged the honest people that the government will act as a friend to them so that their difficulties are eased.

Under the Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana, those belonging to the poor, lower middle and middle classes in cities will be eligible to

four per cent discount on housing loans upto Rs 9 lakh. Loans of upto Rs 12 lakh will receive interest subvention of 3 per cent, PM Modi announced.

Saying that banks should work for the benefit of poor, lower and middle classes, the credit guarantee scheme for small, medium and micro enterprises (SME) will be enhanced for loans up to Rs 2 crore.

Highlighting the six per cent increase in sowing during the last season, Modi declared that the government will bear 60 days' interest incurred on farmer loans. This amount will be directly transferred to the farmers' bank accounts.

The Prime Minister also said that 3 crore farmers' credit cards will be converted to RuPay cards in the next 3 months for ease of buying and selling at any time.

For senior citizens, a new scheme assures an interest of 8% for 10 years on deposits up to Rs 7.5 lakh.

## THREAT OF 'IMMINENT' ATTACKS ON NEW YEAR

### Israel alerts India

AGENCIES

Israel's anti-terrorism department has issued a severe warning against travelling to India, citing an "immediate and severe" risk to Western tourists.

The threat is said to be most acute in holiday locations in the south west of the country.

"A particular emphasis should be put on events in the coming days in connection with beach and club parties celebrating the New Year where a concentration of tourists will be high," the warning said.

The statement recommended that tourists avoid participation in such parties. It also called on families in Israel to contact their relatives in India and tell them of the threat.

In addition, it recommended avoiding markets, festivals and crowded shopping areas. Unusually, the warning was published on Friday evening in Israel, after the start of the Jewish Sabbath, when government offices close for business.

The directorate said the alert was in response to a "concrete basic threat", but did not specify what had prompted the warning.

In 2012, the wife of Israeli diplomat stationed in India, her driver and two others were wounded in a bomb attack on her car. Israel and India share close military ties.

In some areas of India, terrorist attacks are frequent, especially in Jammu and Kashmir, apart from in Ladakh. Attacks are less common in the north east.



## Ban Ki-moon bids emotional farewell to UN

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary Ban Ki-moon paid an emotional farewell to the United Nations on Friday, wistfully describing his two-term stint at the helm of the global body as something of a fairy tale.

"I feel a bit like Cinderella. Tomorrow at midnight, everything changes!" he joked to staff and colleagues as he wrapped up a decade leading the United Nations.

Beginning Sunday, former Portuguese prime minister Antonio Guterres, 67, takes over from Ban.

Guterres is the first former head of government to lead the UN, succeeding Ban for a five-year term.

Ban, in a more serious vein, said it has been a "privilege" to have been at the head of an organization that endeavored to tamp down global conflict and end suffering -- and said it was an honor to have shared that mission with his co-workers.

"You should be very proud -- just as I am so very proud to call you my colleagues," the South Korean diplomat said.

He added that in his decade at the UN, he has endeavored "to never give up. To keep dreaming, to keep believing, and to keep working hard until we achieve progress," he said.

Ban added that as UN chief, he also has been guided by a desire "to keep the focus on people -- on people's rights and people's dignity... and to stand up for those who are left behind."



Iraqi forces launch a rocket in Mosul's eastern Al-Intisar neighbourhood on Friday, during an ongoing military operation against Islamic State (IS) group jihadists. Iraqi forces advanced on December 29 after declaring a new phase in their offensive on eastern Mosul, stepping up efforts to reclaim the Islamic State group's last major stronghold in the country. PHOTO: AFP

## Good news for Elephants

Hope rises as China says it will ban ivory trade by end of 2017

AFP, Beijing

China will ban all ivory trade and processing by the end of 2017, the government said, in a move hailed by conservationists as a "game changer" for African elephants.

African ivory is highly sought after in China, where it is seen as a status symbol, with prices for a kilo (2.2 pounds) reaching as high as \$1,100.

"To better protect elephants and better tackle the illegal trade... China will gradually stop the processing and sale of ivory for commercial purposes" by the end of 2017, the State Council, China's cabinet, said in a statement late Friday.

"Before then, law enforcement agencies will continue to clamp down on illegality associated with elephant tusks," the official Xinhua news agency said, quoting a government official as saying.

A first batch of workshops and retailers would be forced to close by the end of March.

The move comes after Beijing said in March it would

widen a ban on imports of all ivory and ivory products acquired before 1975, after pressure to restrict a trade that sees thousands of elephants slaughtered every year.

Conservationists estimate that more than 20,000 elephants were killed for their ivory last year, with similar tolls in previous years. The WWF campaign group says 415,000 of the animals remain.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which took effect in 1975, banned the ivory trade in 1989.

China permits the resale of ivory bought before the 1989 ban -- and also has a stockpile purchased with CITES approval in 2008, which it releases for sale with certification.

Beijing would continue to allow auctions of ivory antiques deemed to have come from legitimate sources, under strict supervision, the government added.

The United States -- the world's second-largest consumer of illegal ivory after China -- announced in June a near-total ban on the trade of African elephant



## IS chief alive, still leading

Says Pentagon

AFP, Washington

The Pentagon said Friday it believes that Islamic State chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is indeed alive, despite repeated efforts by the US-led coalition to take out the jihadist group leader.

Baghdadi has kept a low profile, despite having declared himself the leader of a renewed Muslim caliphate, but last month released a defiant audio message urging his supporters to defend the northern Iraqi city of Mosul.

It is not clear if he is in the besieged city.

In mid-December, the United States more than doubled the bounty on the shadowy IS leader's head to \$25 million.

## Islamist terrorism poses biggest test to Germany

Merkel says in her New Year address as polls nears

REUTERS, Berlin

Islamist terrorism is the biggest test facing Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel said yesterday in a New Year's address to the nation, and vowed to introduce laws that improve security after a deadly attack before Christmas in Berlin.

Merkel, seeking a fourth term as chancellor in 2017, described 2016 as a year that gave many the impression that the world had "turned upside down". She urged Germans to shun populism and said Germany should take a leading role in addressing the many challenges facing the European Union.

Ahead of the 2017 election, polls put her conservative bloc well ahead of rivals but a fractured electoral landscape risks complicating the coalition arithmetic.

"Election year 2017: For Merkel, nothing is certain any more", ran a headline in Saturday's edition of mass-selling daily Bild.

Liberals across the Atlantic have hailed Merkel as an anchor of stability and reason in a year that saw Donald Trump elected as US president, Britain vote to leave the EU and US-Russia relations deteriorate to Cold War levels.

The record number of migrants has hurt Merkel's popularity and fuelled support for the AfD, which says Islam is incompatible with the German constitution. But her conservatives are still expected to win the general election in nine months.

Merkel has made security the main election platform for her Christian Democrats (CDU).

In her speech, she said the government would introduce measures to improve security after a failed Tunisian asylum seeker drove a truck into a Christmas market in the capital on Dec. 19, killing 12 people in the name of Islamic State.

