

NEWSIN brief

India boat accident toll rises to 26

AFP, New Delhi
The death toll from a boat accident in eastern India rose to 26 yesterday, a senior official said, warning of more casualties with rescue workers still scouring the waters. The non-motorised wooden boat, packed beyond capacity with revelers returning from a kite festival, capsized Saturday in the Ganges river near Patna, the capital of Bihar state.

Brazil jail riot kills 10

REUTERS, Sao Paulo
At least 10 people were killed in a Brazilian prison uprising late on Saturday, local media said, adding to chaos in the country's penitentiary system in which more than 116 inmates have died in gang warfare since the start of the year. The latest outburst of violence took place at the Alcaçuz jail in the northeastern state of Rio Grande do Norte.

Bahrain executions spark violent protests

AFP, Dubai
Bahrain yesterday executed three men found guilty of killing three policemen, sparking violent protests and stoking tensions between the country's Shia majority and its Sunni rulers. The three Shias faced the firing squad, six days after a court upheld their death sentences over a bomb attack in March 2014, the prosecutor's office said.

Thai flood toll hits 40

REUTERS, Bangkok
Thailand faces more hardship from unseasonable floods that have killed 40 people in its south, with more rain expected in the major rubber-producing and tourist region in coming days, a top disaster agency official said yesterday. Persistent heavy rain well into what should be the dry season has triggered floods across the south, cutting road and rail links and affecting about 1.6 million people.



INAUGURATION BOYCOTT Trump lashes out at US civil rights icon

AGENCIES
President-elect Donald Trump lashed out Saturday at a prominent civil rights icon and lawmaker who said he is skipping next week's inauguration ceremony because he sees the New York businessman's election as illegitimate. Trump aimed his latest Twitter blast at longtime congressman John Lewis and the majority-black district in Georgia he represents, drawing widespread criticism just days before the holiday honoring the slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. "I don't see this president-elect as a legitimate president," he told NBC's "Meet the Press" talk show in an interview on Friday. Trump fired back at him early on Saturday. "Congressman John Lewis should spend more time on fixing and helping his district" Trump said on Twitter. "All talk, talk, talk -- no action or results. Sad!" Known for his decades of work in the civil rights movement, Lewis, 76, marched with King at the August 1963 rally in Washington at which King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech. On March 7, 1965, he led a march in Selma, Alabama that ended in an attack by state troopers on the protesters that later became known as "Bloody Sunday." At least 16 House Democrats have publicly stated they will not be attending Trump's swearing-in at the US Capitol next Friday, with several indicating their absence will be an act of political protest -- but Lewis is the most prominent. Lewis earned a flood of support from Democratic colleagues -- and a few Republicans -- on Twitter. "Ahead of #MLKDay2017, let us remember that many have tried to silence @repjohnlewis over the years. All have failed." House Democratic minority leader Nancy Pelosi said.

NEW TRAGEDY IN MEDITERRANEAN Scores missing as migrant boat sinks

AFP, Rome
The Italian coastguard said on Saturday nearly a hundred people were missing after a boat with migrants sank off the Libyan coast. "The bodies of eight people have been recovered. Four people have been saved, and they say 107 migrants were onboard the boat in all," the agency's press office said. Search operations were continuing after nightfall in poor weather and sea conditions, it said. A French warship, patrolling under the EU's Frontex border operation, picked up the survivors and two merchant ships were heading for the area, located about 50 kilometres north of the Libyan coast. A Frontex plane and an Italian naval helicopter also joined the operation. On Friday, around 550 migrants were picked up from four inflatable dinghies by Italian coastguard vessels, an Italian naval ship, an NGO boat and a merchant vessel. In recent years Italy has been on the front line of migrants arriving across the Mediterranean and has been pushing for agreements with governments in North Africa to facilitate returns. According to the Italian interior ministry, over 180,000 migrants landed in Italy last year, an annual record. The UN has said more than 5,000 people died in 2016 trying to cross the Mediterranean, most of them on the Libya-Italy route. In another incident, the bodies of six migrants were found washed up on beaches near Algeiras, the port on the southern tip of Spain near Gibraltar, the Spanish sea rescue service said on Saturday.

May to push for 'hard Brexit'

AGENCIES
British Prime Minister Theresa May will target a clean divorce from the EU when she sets out her Brexit plans in a major speech this week, newspapers reported yesterday. In tomorrow's address, she will call for Britain to unite and get behind Brexit, pleading for an end to the "insults" and rancour between Leavers and Remainers, her Downing Street office said. But newspapers said she would be laying out the path towards a "hard Brexit" -- a strategy likely to infuriate embittered Remain voters even more. May will spark two years of Brexit negotiations when she triggers the Article 50 departure process by the end of March. She has been under pressure to reveal her strategy for the talks that will set out the future relationship between Britain and the European Union. Downing Street would not be drawn on matching reports in several newspapers that she was targeting a "hard Brexit" -- pulling of the single market, the European customs union and the European Court of Justice, in order to regain control of EU immigration. The Sunday Times said May would announce that Britain is seeking a "clean and hard Brexit", citing the above points. "May's triple Brexit blast" was how The Sun put it, saying May will "show she means business by announcing a triple whammy departure from the EU". The Sunday Telegraph quoted a government source as saying: "She's gone for the full works. People will know when she said 'Brexit means Brexit', she really meant it." Her comments came as finance minister Philip Hammond said Britain could change its economic model to regain competitiveness if it were to leave the EU without an agreement on market access. Those comments, from an interview with German newspaper Welt am Sonntag, were interpreted as a warning that Britain could use its corporate tax as a form of leverage in Brexit negotiations. Hammond said Britain had not taken a firm position on post-Brexit EU immigration, but the message from the June referendum vote to leave the bloc was: "we must control our immigration policy". He said EU citizens would be free to travel to Britain and do business there -- but the debate was over the right to work, settle and set up business. "Clearly we need people to come and work in our economy to keep it functioning," he said. But as for having no control, "that has to stop". "He appears to be making a sort of threat to the European community," said Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the opposition Labour Party. "It seems to me a recipe for some kind of trade war with Europe in the future." Nevertheless, Corbyn said he would not block the triggering of 'Article 50' - the legal process of leaving the EU. The problem for Britain is that the EU is likely to insist on freedom of movement for EU citizens in return for full access to the single market, while many of those who voted for Brexit did so precisely in order to be able to restrict immigration.



Duterte threatens martial law to wage his drug war

AFP, Manila
Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has threatened to impose martial law to prosecute his deadly war on drugs, three decades after the nation shed dictatorship with a famous "People Power" revolt. "If I wanted to, and it (the illegal drugs problem) will deteriorate into something really very virulent, I will declare martial law if I wanted to. No one will be able to stop me," Duterte said in a speech on Saturday night. The 71-year-old former state prosecutor said the aim would be "to preserve the Filipino people and the youth of this land". Duterte won elections in May last year on a pledge to wipe out illegal drugs, promising an unprecedented crackdown to stop the Philippines from becoming what he termed a narco state. The crackdown has left at least 5,700 people dead in just over six months, raising concerns of a breakdown in the rule of law with security forces and vigilantes carrying out extrajudicial killings. The Philippines' longtime ally, the United States, has led international criticism of the killings, with outgoing President Barack Obama urging Duterte to stop his war "the right way". Duterte has reacted furiously to the criticism and vowed to continue his war until illegal drugs are eradicated. Martial law would allow Duterte to use the military to enforce civilian law and detain people at length without charging them. The Philippines last endured martial law during the 20-year rule of dictator Ferdinand Marcos, who was accused of plundering billions of dollars from state coffers and overseeing widespread rights abuses. Duterte, speaking to local businessmen in his southern home town of Davao city, warned he could ignore a 60-day limit that the parliament is allowed to repeal. "And I'd tell you now, if I have to declare martial law, I will declare it -- not about invasion, insurrection, not about danger. I will declare martial law to preserve my nation -- period," he said.



Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF) gather at the University of Mosul during a battle with Islamic State militants, in Mosul, Iraq, yesterday. Iraqi forces swept the campus of Mosul University to clear it of any remaining IS militants after taking full control of the area, a spokesman said.

IS gains ground near key Syria eastern city

AFP, Beirut
The Islamic State group gained ground around a key eastern Syrian city yesterday, a monitor said, despite a heavy air strikes by government warplanes. The jihadists pressed their brutal assault on Deir Ezzor for the second day, seizing territory near an air base on the city's edges, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. "IS seized several hilltops that overlook the airport," and clashes gripped the area yesterday, said Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman. The advance came "despite more than 120 air strikes carried out by regime forces on jihadist positions since Saturday morning, in addition to heavy artillery fire," he said. Around 200,000 people live in Deir Ezzor city, which has been besieged by IS since early 2015 and is the capital of the oil-rich province of the same name. IS already controls more than half the city, but it has sought to capture the remaining government-held territory, including the military airport. It launched one of its fiercest assaults yet on Saturday, unleashing a wave of tunnel bombs and suicide attackers. At least 12 government fighters and 20 IS jihadists were killed. Meanwhile, heavy clashes erupted overnight between regime and rebel forces near Damascus after the official who negotiated a deal to restore water to the Syrian capital was killed, a monitor said yesterday. Government workers had entered the formerly rebel-held area in the Wadi Barada region near Damascus on Friday to begin restoring water to the capital after weeks of shortages.

UN: E-waste rising sharply in Asia

AFP, Manila
Electronic waste is rising sharply across Asia as higher incomes allow hundreds of millions of people to buy smartphones and other gadgets, with serious consequences for human health and the environment, according to a UN study released yesterday. So-called e-waste in Asia has jumped 63 percent in five years, the report by the United Nations University said, as it warned of a need for most nations across the region to improve recycling and disposal methods. The report said that in recent years, Asia has rapidly emerged as a major source of electronic waste, due to increasingly affluent consumers buying items such as phones, tablets, refrigerators, personal computers and televisions. Per capita the worst-offending economy in the region was Hong Kong, with each person in the Chinese territory generating an average of 21.7 kilograms (47.8 pounds) of e-waste in 2015. Cambodia, Vietnam and the Philippines were among the lowest e-waste generators with an average of about one kilogram for each person. Improper and illegal e-waste dumping means increased exposure to extremely toxic chemicals, leading to severe health and environment consequences.

No country for old men

AFP, Tokyo
Facing hardship, Japan's elderly inmates prefer jail
Every day is the same. He wakes at 6:45 am, eats breakfast 20 minutes later and reports for work at eight o'clock sharp. But this isn't your typical Japanese salaryman. This man is in his 80s and he is in prison -- a cage of structure and certainty that he is hesitant to ever leave. "I don't know what kind of life I should lead after I get out. I'll be worried about my health and financial situation once I leave," the inmate told AFP on condition of anonymity from Tokyo's Fuchu Prison, where he is serving time for attempted theft. His case is not unique: Japan is in the midst of a geriatric crime wave such that its prisons increasingly look like nursing homes. The situation has become so dire the government approved a plan to deploy nursing care staff to about half of Japan's 70 prisons from April, allocating a budget of 58 million yen (\$495,000). In 2015, almost 20 percent of those who were either arrested or interrogated by police were aged 65 or older -- up from 5.8 percent in 2000, according to the National Police Agency. Most are imprisoned for petty crime such as shoplifting and theft. The rise in senior crime is attributed to increased economic hardship, an ageing population, and pure greed, according to a 2013 report by the National Police Agency. The recidivism rate for the over-65s is high: According to government data, about 70 percent of elderly offenders are back behind bars within five years. "The reason why many older ex-convicts return to prisons is because it's difficult for them to be financially independent," said Akio Doteuchi, a senior researcher at NLI Research Institute.



US 'hostility' grows despite nuke deal

AFP, Tehran
US "hostility" to Iran is growing day by day despite Tehran's nuclear deal, a senior Iranian official said yesterday, ahead of the first anniversary of the historic accord. "The United States has done whatever it can do slow down Iran's progress" after the deal, said Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, the chief Iranian negotiator in the agreement that took effect on January 16 last year. "In the last 12 months, we have witnessed delays and the disrespecting of promises by the US and some countries. Their hostility increases by the day," Araghchi told reporters. The agreement between Tehran and six world powers saw a range of international sanctions lifted in exchange for limits on Iran's nuclear programme. Iran has seen a rise in oil exports and increased investment in manufacturing since it came into force. But Iranian officials have accused Washington of failing to abide by the deal, including with a raft of other sanctions related to non-nuclear issues that have helped deter major Western banks from returning to Iran. US President-elect Donald Trump vowed during last year's campaign to tear up the agreement, considered a key victory for President Barack Obama.