

NEWSIN brief

Pakistan senate deputy chairman denied US visa

ANI, Islamabad
The US has refused a visa to Pakistan senate deputy chairman Maulana Abdul Ghafoor Haideri. Following this development, the chairman has also directed "no delegation, member of Congress or diplomat of the US will be welcomed by the senate of Pakistan, senate standing committees and senators in their official capacity [until] this issue is resolved".

240 beached whales return to sea in NZ

REUTERS, Sydney
New Zealand conservation authorities said 240 pilot whales that were stranded overnight at a remote bay which only days earlier had a larger beaching refloated themselves yesterday and were swimming offshore. "We had 240 whales strand yesterday in the afternoon and we were fearful we were going to end up with 240 dead whales this morning," Herb Christophers, a Department of Conservation spokesman said.

Brazil police strike on despite deal

AFP, Rio De Janeiro
Relatives of police in Brazil blockaded law enforcement stations Saturday in a protest over pay despite an agreement to end an officers' strike and limited police presence in some of the southeastern state's cities. At least 137 people have been reported killed amid looting and robbery in Espirito Santo state since police went on strike a week ago demanding better pay.



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (L) and US President Donald Trump (2nd L) are seen at Trump International Golf club in West Palm Beach, Florida, on Saturday. Trump tweeted a photograph in which he high-fiving the Japanese leader. "Having a great time hosting Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in the United States!" Trump commented.

8 killed in Indian Kashmir gunbattle

AFP, Srinagar
Eight people were killed in Indian-administered Kashmir yesterday after a gunbattle broke out between suspected rebels and the Indian army, officials said.
The alleged militants were hiding in a south Kashmir village when the military and police surrounded it and a firefight broke out.
"Four terrorists were killed and four weapons were recovered from the encounter site," army spokesman in Srinagar, Col Manish told AFP.
"Two soldiers were also martyred and three injured during the encounter."
Two civilians, including the son of the owner of the house in which the militants were hiding, also died, police told AFP.
Clashes occurred between government forces and protesters in the aftermath of the battle and at least 25 people were injured including 12 with bullet injuries, authorities said.
Three militants managed to escape, and a heavy police contingent has been deployed in the area "to maintain law and order", police added.
Kashmir has been divided between India and Pakistan since they won independence from Britain in 1947. Both claim the Himalayan territory in its entirety.
Several rebel groups have for decades fought tens of thousands of Indian troops deployed in the region, demanding independence or a merger of the territory with Pakistan.
The fighting has left tens of thousands, mostly civilians, dead.
The violence peaked last year after Burhan Wani, a 22-year-old separatist leader who enjoyed widespread support in the Muslim-majority region, was shot dead by Indian security forces in July.

End goal of Turkish ops is to capture of Raqqa

Says Erdogan; UK minister says IS's Syria stronghold should be isolated by spring

REUTERS, Istanbul
President Tayyip Erdogan yesterday said the final goal of a Turkish incursion into Syria was not just to retake the city of al-Bab from Islamic State, but to cleanse a border region including Raqqa of the jihadists.

Turkish-backed Syrian rebels are pressing a major offensive on al-Bab, 30 km south of the Turkish border. The advance risks putting them in direct conflict with Syrian government forces who are closing in on the city from the south.
"The ultimate goal is to cleanse a 5,000-square-km area," Erdogan told a news conference before his departure on an official visit to Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.
He said Turkish forces had no intention of staying in Syria once the area had been cleared of both Islamic State and Kurdish YPG militia fighters, whom Turkey sees as a hostile force.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a British-based war monitor, said rebels backed by heavy Turkish air strikes fought Islamic State north and southwest of al-Bab yesterday.
Turkey believes recent IS attacks in Turkey, including a New Year's Day shooting in an Istanbul nightclub that killed 39 people, have been steered from al-Bab and Raqqa, and it regards a clear-out of the towns as a national security priority.
Meanwhile, British Defence Secretary Michael Fallon on Saturday said Western-backed Syrian forces should isolate Raqqa "by the spring" before an offensive on the city itself.
"I hope that isolation will be completed by the spring and then operations to liberate Raqqa itself can begin thereafter," Fallon told reporters in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq.



EFFORTS AGAINST TERRORISM CIA chief honours Saudi crown prince

AFP, Riyadh
The heir to Saudi Arabia's throne has been awarded a medal by the new director of the US Central Intelligence Agency, who honoured his counter-terrorism work.
Mike Pompeo, making his first overseas tour since being confirmed as spy agency chief in late January, made the presentation to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef at a weekend ceremony, the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) said.
Prince Mohammed, 57, has been interior minister since 2012 and has years of experience in intelligence work. Pompeo awarded him the George Tenet Medal in recognition of his "excellent intelligence performance, in the domain of counter-terrorism and his unbound contribution to realise world security and peace."

Britain may divide EU over Brexit negotiation

Warns European Commission president, UK Lords will not block bill, says Labour leader

AGENCIES
European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said he fears Britain will divide the European Union's 27 remaining members by making different promises to each country during its Brexit negotiations.

"The other EU 27 don't know it yet, but the Brits know very well how they can tackle this," Juncker told Deutschlandfunk radio. "They could promise country A this, country B that and country C something else and the end game is that there is not a united European front."

Britain will be by the end of March trigger formal divorce talks with the EU, a major test for the bloc which is struggling to have a grip on other challenges like keeping Greece in the euro zone, the refugee crisis and the election of Donald Trump as US president.

His warning echoed remarks by German Chancellor Angela Merkel at an EU summit in Bratislava last year aimed at finding a way forward after Britain's vote to leave, that the bloc is in a critical situation.

Juncker said one area where the remaining 27 could improve cooperation was defence. Britain and France are the only EU countries with nuclear arsenals.

In Britain, Labour's leader in the House of Lords has pledged not to hold up or "frustrate" the triggering of Article 50 - as the government's bill moves to the House of Lords for scrutiny.

Baroness [Angela] Smith pledged no "extended ping-pong" between the House of Commons and the House of Lords, but said peers would try to add "legitimate" amendments to the bill. Labour's peers have tabled a number of ideas they say could make the Brexit process run more efficiently, including the call for a meaningful vote on the final deal.

The Government has no majority in the House of Lords meaning that it must rely on the support of peers from other parties and none to clear the way for its legislative programme.



Swiss voters reject hate campaign

Relax citizenship law for immigrants

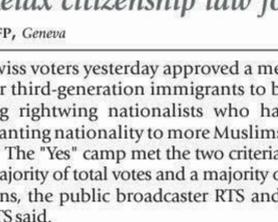
AFP, Geneva
Swiss voters yesterday approved a measure to make it easier for third-generation immigrants to become citizens, crushing rightwing nationalists who had stoked fears about granting nationality to more Muslims.

The "Yes" camp met the two criteria for a win by securing a majority of total votes and a majority of Switzerland's 26 cantons, the public broadcaster RTS and national news agency ATS said.

Fifty-nine percent voted "Yes," according to provisional figures given by the polling institute gfs.bern, and at least 14 cantons were in favour, according to official results.
The government as well as most lawmakers and political parties supported the proposal. Under it, the grandchildren of immigrants will be able to skip several steps in the lengthy process of securing a Swiss passport.

But the rightwing Swiss Peoples Party (SVP), the largest party in Switzerland's parliament, fought against it by putting issues of Islam and national identity at the centre of the debate.

According to a migration department study, less than 25,000 people in the country of about eight million currently qualify as third-generation immigrants, a definition meaning they have at least one grandparent who was born here or acquired Swiss residency.



This is how to motivate lazy bureaucrats!

Six officials in central China's Hubei province have been punished for dozing off in a meeting on how to motivate lazy bureaucrats, state media and the local government said. Pictures of the sleeping officials have received widespread coverage in Chinese media over the past two days, amid President Xi Jinping's sweeping crackdown on corruption, extravagance and dereliction of duty. SOURCE: REUTERS



A bushfire rages near Leadville in New South Wales yesterday. Australian authorities ordered the evacuation of some sparsely populated rural areas of New South Wales yesterday as nearly hundred of bushfires, fanned by extreme heat and strong winds, raged across the state, threatening homes and closing roads.



Germany elects Steinmeier as new president

AFP, Berlin
Billed as Germany's "anti-Trump", centre-left former foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier was elected yesterday as the new ceremonial head of state.

The 61-year-old, who regularly polls as Germany's most popular politician, will represent the EU's top economy abroad and act as a kind of moral arbiter for the nation.

His Social Democrats (SPD) hope the appointment will boost their fortunes just as their candidate Martin Schulz, the former European parliament president, readies to challenge Chancellor Angela Merkel in September elections.

Steinmeier received 931 of 1,239 valid votes after Merkel's conservatives, lacking a strong candidate of their own, agreed to back him to replace incumbent Joachim Gauck, 77, a former pastor from ex-communist East Germany.

The vote was held in Berlin's glass-domed Reichstag building by a special Federal Assembly, made up of national lawmakers and electors sent from Germany's 16 states -- among them deputies but also artists, writers, musicians and national football coach Joachim Loew.

With his snowy white hair, round glasses and dimpled smile, Steinmeier is one of Germany's best-known politicians, having twice served as top diplomat under Merkel for a total of seven years.

Interceptor ballistic missile test a success: India

TNN, New Delhi
India took a big step towards an operational two-tier ballistic missile defence (BMD) system by testing a high-altitude interceptor missile to destroy an incoming ballistic missile over the Bay of Bengal on Saturday morning.

"Today our scientists have made a missile that can destroy an enemy missile high in the sky. Only four to five countries in the world have done this," said PM Narendra Modi at an election rally in Badaun.

He even took a dig at his political opponents, holding that they would have to travel "very high" if they wanted proof of the successful test.

The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) was itself gung-ho about its long-delayed BMD system, claiming it would now be possible to deploy the two-layered missile shield to protect a city or strategic installation in two years.
But it had earlier also promised that New Delhi would get the missile shield, capable of tackling missiles with a 2,000km strike range, by 2014 at the latest. Scientists, however, say they are confident of achieving the target this time.
The "exo-atmospheric" (outside the earth's atmosphere) interceptor missile tested on Saturday, also called the PDV (Prithvi defence vehicle), after all, directly hit the target missile at an altitude of 97km. The test began at 7.45am with the two-stage target missile, mimicking an enemy ballistic missile, being launched from a ship in the Bay of Bengal.
In the fully-automated operation, with long-range radars continuously tracking the target and feeding data about its trajectory to the mission computers, the interceptor missile was then fired from the Abdul Kalam Island (Wheeler Island), off Odisha coast, around 200km away.



DEADLY PROTEST OVER ELECTORAL REFORMS Rockets hit Iraq Green Zone

AFP, Baghdad
Rockets were fired at Baghdad's Green Zone Saturday after Iraq's most violent protest in years saw seven people killed in clashes between police and demonstrators advancing on the fortified area.

The body coordinating security operations in Iraq said several Katyusha-type rockets were fired from within Baghdad at the Green Zone, which houses most of the country's key institutions.

"Several Katyusha rockets fired from the Baladiyat and Palestine Street areas landed in the Green Zone," the Joint Operations Command said in a statement, without specifying who fired them. There was no reported casualties.

The Green Zone is a vast area in central Baghdad that houses the prime minister's office, the presidency, parliament and several major embassies, including the huge US mission.

It could not be ascertained that both events were linked. The protest, the latest in a series across the country over the past few days, was focused on demands for electoral reform ahead of provincial polls slated for September.



The rally, mostly attended by supporters of cleric Moqtada Sadr, started peacefully but some protesters subsequently broke away and attempted to force their way past a police cordon to reach the Green Zone.
"There were seven dead as a result of the violence. Two of them are from the security forces and the other five are protesters," a police colonel told AFP on condition of anonymity. He said more than 200 were hurt in the chaos.
Saturday's demonstrators received a de facto green light to escalate their protest in the shape of a statement from the Najaf-based Sadr.
"If you want to approach the gates of the Green Zone to affirm your demands and make them heard to those on the other side of the fence... you can," he said.
Sadr, a mercurial Shiite who once led a rebellion against US occupation but has more recently spearheaded an anti-corruption protest movement, eventually called for restraint but warned Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi not to turn a deaf ear.
Abadi said the violence would be investigated and those responsible for it prosecuted.