

NEWS IN brief

Four killed in Indian Kashmir gunbattle

AFP, Srinagar
Three soldiers and a suspected militant were killed in a gunbattle in Indian-administered Kashmir yesterday after an army patrol came under fire in the north of the territory, officials said. Army spokesman Rajesh Kalia told AFP that five other soldiers were injured in the gunfight.

Trump sons to launch Dubai golf course

AFP, Dubai
US President Donald Trump's sons are to inaugurate a branded golf course in Dubai on Saturday, the first public launch for the business empire since Trump took office in January. Donald Trump Jr and Eric Trump will attend the opening of Trump International Golf Club Dubai, developed by



Imelda Marcos loses bid to reclaim jewels

AFP, Manila
Former Philippine first lady Imelda Marcos has lost a long fight to reclaim jewels confiscated when her dictator husband was ousted, with the Supreme Court ruling she acquired them illegally. The items worth \$150,000 are now the property of the state, the court ruled, paving the way for the possible sale of a much larger collection of Marcos jewellery.



Hitler doppelganger arrested in Austria

AFP, Vienna
Austrian police arrested an Adolf Hitler lookalike Monday after he was spotted wandering around the Nazi dictator's hometown sporting his infamous moustache and side parting. The 25-year-old Austrian national was detained in his flat in Braunau am Inn where the Fuehrer was born on April 20, 1889.

Gambia to remain in Int'l Criminal Court

AFP, Banjul
The Gambia's new government has asked the UN to halt the process of withdrawal from the International Criminal Court (ICC) begun by the regime of former leader Yahya Jammeh. The Hague-based court is often accused of bias against African nations, leading The Gambia, Burundi and South Africa to send notice last year they would no longer recognise the ICC's jurisdiction.



The Oroville Dam spillway releases 100,000 cubic feet of water per second down the main spillway in Oroville, California. Inset, A flooded area. Almost 200,000 people were under evacuation orders in northern California after a threat of catastrophic failure at the United States' tallest dam. Officials said the threat had subsided for the moment as water levels at the Oroville Dam, 75 miles north of Sacramento, have eased. But people were still being told to stay out of the area.



PHOTO: AFP

UN warns of 'catastrophe'

Urges immediate access to deliver aid to 4 besieged towns

AFP, Damascus
The top UN official in Damascus has warned of a "looming humanitarian catastrophe" in four besieged towns in Syria, calling for immediate access to deliver aid to some 60,000 residents. In a statement late Monday, the UN humanitarian coordinator for Syria, Ali al-Za'atari, warned of dire conditions in the towns of Zabadani, Madaya, Fua and Kafraya. Zabadani and Madaya, in Damascus province, are besieged by government troops and their allies, while Fua and Kafraya are under siege by the rebels. "Sixty thousand innocent people are trapped there in a cycle of daily violence and deprivation, where malnutrition and lack of proper medical care prevail," the statement said. "The situation is a looming humanitarian catastrophe. The principle of

free access to people in need must be implemented now and without repeated requests," it added. Za'atari said the situation was complicated by the "tit-for-tat arrangement" between the towns, whereby no aid can be provided to Madaya and Zabadani without similar access to Fua

WAR IN SYRIA
Turkey claims IS bastion Al-Bab 'largely' under control
Jihadist infighting kills nearly 70: monitor

and Kafraya, and vice versa. Meanwhile, Turkey said yesterday that the one-time jihadist bastion of Al-Bab in northern Syria was "largely" under the control of Ankara-backed Syrian rebels after months of clashes with jihadists. "Al-Bab has largely been taken

under control finally," Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim told his ruling Justice and Development Party lawmakers in Ankara, without giving further details. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said yesterday nearly 70 fighters from two formerly allied jihadist groups had been killed during infighting over the past 24 hours in northern Syria. The clashes between former al-Qaeda affiliate Fateh al-Sham and the hardline jihadist Jund al-Aqsa faction erupted on Monday morning, after tensions over influence in the north-western province of Idlib. The fighting reflects the growing strained relations between different factions in Idlib province that once fought alongside either other against President Bashar al-Assad's forces. "There are battles between warlords, it's a war for influence," said Observatory director Rami Abdel

Iraqi airstrike hits IS commanders

Baghdadi's fate unclear: statement

AFP, Baghdad
The Iraqi air force has targeted a meeting of commanders from the Islamic State group that its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi may have been attending, a statement said on Monday. It was not clear in the statement sent by the Joint Operations Command coordinating the fight against the jihadists in Iraq whether the world's most wanted terrorist had been hit. An intelligence cell monitored a convoy that the statement said transported Baghdadi from the area of Raqa, the jihadists' main Syrian stronghold, across the border to the Al-Qaim area in western Iraq. The statement said Iraqi air force F-16 jets struck a meeting of top IS commanders on February 11 but provided no additional information on Baghdadi's fate. "The direct strike on the meeting location led to the death of 13 Daesh (IS) commanders," said the statement, which provided a list of names. The Iraq-born Baghdadi, who proclaimed a "caliphate" straddling Iraq and Syria in June 2014, was not one of those names. The Iraqi military has reported Baghdadi killed or wounded on numerous occasions since it launched a counter-offensive to regain the territory almost three years

TERROR FEARS Saudi 'deports 40,000 Pak workers'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has expelled almost 40,000 Pakistani migrant workers in the last four months, local media has reported. Over 39,000 people have been deported since October 2016 over visa violations and security concerns, the Saudi Gazette reported, citing unnamed interior ministry officials. As well as crimes including drug trafficking, forgery and theft, an unknown number of those removed from the country were suspected to have links to IS and other extremist groups, the paper said. The alleged mass deportations come after a year of strikes and other unrest in the kingdom due to unpaid wages following the oil market's decline and subsequent blow to the Saudi economy. Official Saudi statistics say that 243,000 Pakistanis were deported between 2012 - 2015. Mass deportations of migrant workers - which Human Rights Watch and other rights organisations say often involve illegal beatings and detention in poor conditions - are fairly common. 2010 census figures show that 8.5 million of Saudi Arabia's 27 million strong population, or around 30



Indian SC jails would be TN CM

AFP, New Delhi
India's Supreme Court jailed the anointed next leader of Tamil Nadu for four years for corruption yesterday, heightening the turmoil in a state still reeling from the death of its long-time matriarch. VK Sasikala was ordered to surrender to prison authorities after judges quashed her acquittal in a \$10 million "disproportionate assets" case also involving her mentor, the late CM Jayalalitha Jayaram. There was no immediate reaction from Sasikala who was not present at the apex court in New Delhi and has been holed up in a resort close to Tamil Nadu's capital Chennai since last week. But the verdict brought a juddering halt to the 59-year-old's meteoric rise as she was on the cusp of becoming the leader of one of India's most populous and prosperous states. The court ordered she immediately hand herself in to begin serving her sentence, which automatically bars her from holding public office for a decade, as well as fining her 100 million rupees (\$1.5 million). Sasikala had been anointed as Jayalalitha's successor by the state's dominant All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and was likely to be sworn in

India in record space mission

Set to launch 104 satellites in one go

AFP, New Delhi
India hopes to make history by launching a record 104 satellites from a single rocket today as its famously frugal space agency looks to zoom ahead in the commercial space race. The rocket is set to blast off from the southern spaceport of Sriharikota, India's Space Research Organisation (ISRO) said in a statement yesterday. The Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle would be carrying a 714 kilogram main satellite for earth observation and 103 smaller "nano satellites" which would weigh a combined 664 kilograms. Nearly all of the nano satellites are from other countries, including Israel, Kazakhstan, The Netherlands, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates and 96 from United States. If successful, India will set a world record as the first country to launch the most satellites in one go, surpassing Russia which launched 39 satellites in a single mission in June 2014.



Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (L) is greeted by US President Donald Trump in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington, US, on Monday. The two leaders avoided directly criticizing each other after a meeting in the White House, but made it clear they did not see eye-to-eye on US's efforts to ban refugees and travelers from seven majority-Muslim nations.

PHOTO: AFP

Immigration not linked to increased crime levels

Finds major US study; 'routine' raids nab 680 illegals

AGENCIES
There is no link between immigration and increased levels of crime, a study spanning four decades has concluded. Donald Trump has said his administration will publish a weekly list of criminal offences committed by non-US citizens - despite evidence showing "little support for the notion that more immigrants lead to more crime". A team of researchers led by the University at Buffalo in New York examined census data and crime reports from 200 US cities in the years between 1970 and 2010. They found "strong and stable evidence" that crime rates are not linked to immigration, said the study's lead author Robert Adelman, adding: "The results are very clear." Higher levels of immigration are in fact related to a drop in some types of crime, they discovered. Meanwhile, US officials said Monday said a series of 'routine' immigration raids across the United States last week rounded up more than 680 people for expulsion, most of them criminals. The raids, which stirred worries in immigrant communities about a tough crackdown by the new administration of President Donald Trump, took place in Los Angeles, Chicago, Atlanta, San Antonio and New York. While the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) said the raids were part of "routine" operations against illegal and criminal immigrants, Trump said he was following up on his presidential campaign promise to send millions of migrants, mostly from Central America, back to their



Trump's 'outdoor Situation Room'

AFP, Washington

Social media posts of Donald Trump and Shinzo Abe huddling with aides in a public dining room after North Korea's missile test raised questions Monday about his administration's handling of sensitive information. The conversation -- which would ordinarily take place behind closed doors and be classified -- was captured on camera from close range by a member of Trump's Mar-a-Lago club in Palm Beach, Florida on Saturday. Facebook user Richard DeAgazio posted pictures of Trump huddling with aides and Abe, and taking calls. One caption of the now removed posts read: "The President receiving the news about the Missile incident from North Korea on Japan with the Prime Minister sitting next to him." When the president is away from the White House, many crisis conversations take place in a Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility -- or SCIF. The facilities are normally out-of-bounds for individuals without security clearance and common digital devices such as unsecured mobile phones. The White House said that Trump was briefed in such a room "prior to dinner" and that no sensitive information was shared at the table.

King of university degrees

AFP, Velletri

Boffins eat your hearts out: the world record holder for the number of university degrees is a cheery but truculent 70-year old Italian. Luciano Baietti lives in the town of Velletri in the Alban Hills near Rome and spends his days pottering around his small house and garden. But at every morning at 3:00am he pulls out his textbooks and starts studying. He now holds 15 bachelors or masters degrees from universities across Italy, and is already embarking on his 16th. "Thanks to books, I feel free, dammit," he tells AFP. "After all, the words share the same root," he says, referring to the Italian words libro (book) and libero (free). The certificates proving his prowess hang on the walls of his study, framing a portrait of the 19th century French essayist, Louis-Francois Bertin, whom he cites as an influence. "He was a man of culture and knowledge," said Baietti, a former headmaster of a secondary school, who made it into the Guinness Book of Records in 2002 with his eighth degree, that time in motor skills. At that point he already had degrees in sociology, literature, law, political science and philosophy, most from Rome's prestigious La Sapienza University, one of the oldest in the world. Since then he's added seven others to his list, including one in criminology, a distance-learning one in military strategies from Turin, and the latest in tourism from an online university in Naples, which he was awarded at the start of this month. "Each time I set myself a new challenge, to see how far my body and my brain can go," says Baietti, who started life as a sports teacher. His long-suffering wife, some 30 years his junior, describes Baietti affectionately as "a real character" who is known throughout their town. He got most of the qualifications under his belt while also doing his day job and volunteering with Italy's Red Cross.

