

NEWS IN brief

Ex-VP of China's top court jailed for life

AFP, Beijing
The former vice president of China's highest court was jailed yesterday for taking more than \$16 million in bribes, the most senior judicial official ever convicted in a high-profile anti-graft drive. Xi Xiaoming, 62, was found guilty of taking the bribes in exchange for "assisting individuals and organisations with their cases and companies with their entry into the market," according to a statement.

Lanka war widows face sexual exploitation

AFP, Colombo
Tamil women who survived Sri Lanka's civil war now face widespread sexual exploitation by officials in their own community as well as from the army, the head of an ethnic reconciliation body said Wednesday. Former president Chandrika Kumaratunga said women who were widowed during the 37-year conflict were among the victims of abuse by officials.

Trump names Acosta as labour secretary

POLITICO.COM
President Donald Trump yesterday announced his intent to nominate Alexander Acosta, a former Justice Department official and current dean of Florida International University College of Law, for labor secretary, just a day after his first pick, fast-food CEO Andrew Puzder, backed out. "He's had a tremendous career," Trump said from the White House. "I think he'll be a tremendous secretary of Labor." Acosta, who was born in Cuba, would become the first Hispanic member of Trump's cabinet. He has been confirmed by the Senate for three prior positions, which could help smooth his path to the Labor Department. Still, his background is not without some controversy, including allegations that, while a U.S. attorney in Miami, he cut a sweetheart plea deal in 2008 with a billionaire investor accused of having sex with dozens of underage girls. Acosta clerked for Justice Samuel Alito when he was a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit. He also served on the National Labor Relations Board under President George W. Bush from 2002 to 2003, then left the NLRB to become an assistant attorney general for the Justice Department's Civil Rights division between 2003 and 2005. He served as U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Florida from 2005 to 2009, when he joined FIU.



A member of the Afghan security force fires a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launcher during an ongoing operation against Islamic State (IS) militants in Kot district of Nangarhar province yesterday. Afghan National Army and International Air forces have launched the joint military operation against the militants after they torched houses of locals and killed several people in the area. PHOTO: AFP

Pak raids hideout of militants

Six 'members of Taliban faction' dead

REUTERS, Lahore

Pakistani counter-terrorism police raided a militant hideout and killed six suspected members of a Taliban faction that has launched a new campaign of violence against the government, police said yesterday. Since Monday, several bomb attacks across the country have shattered a period of improving security, underscoring how militant groups still pose a threat in the nuclear-armed country of 180 million people. The Counter Terrorism Department in Punjab province said its officers surrounded a hideout of the Pakistani Taliban's Jamaat-ur-Ahrar faction in the city of Multan late on Wednesday and ordered the suspects inside to surrender. "But the terrorists started firing at the raiding party and threw explosives," a spokesman for the department, who the unit does not identify for security reasons, said in a statement. Six militants were killed while three or four escaped under cover of darkness, the department added. Two hand grenades, two automatic rifles and two pistols were recovered. The militant faction claimed responsibility for a suicide bomb attack near the Punjab provincial assembly in the city of Lahore on Monday that killed 13 people and wounded more than 80. Jamaat-ur-Ahrar said the attack was the beginning of a new campaign of violence against the government, security forces, the judiciary and secular political parties. Since then, militants have killed two bomb-disposal officers in the western city of Quetta and a suicide bomber blew himself up outside a government office near the north-western city of Peshawar on Wednesday, killing five people.

Fatal female assassins

North Korea defector says female agents are regime's weapon of choice

AFP, Seoul
North Korean female assassins, armed with good looks and poison tools, are now the weapon of choice for a ruthless regime stalking its opponents, a high-profile defector told AFP yesterday, after the latest apparent assassination. Hardy male agents wielding guns or knives have been ditched in favour of their female counterparts, who strike fear into the hearts of enemies, said An Chan-Il, a North Korean defector and renowned critic of Pyongyang's one-man rule. "We are always mindful of young women accosting us for possible revenge killings," An said. His comments come days after the half-brother of the North's leader Kim Jong-Un died in a spy novel-style assassination that Seoul said was carried out by Pyongyang agents. South Korean intelligence chiefs believe Kim Jong-Nam had toxins sprayed in his face as he walked through Kuala Lumpur International Airport. Two women have been arrested over the murder. An, a former North Korean com-

mando who defected to the South in 1979, is now a leading researcher on North Korean affairs, and a harsh critic of the Stalinist state. He is one of eight defectors who were given the highest degree of protection by the South. Following Jong-Nam's death, that number has increased to 20, he said.

KIM-JONG NAM KILLING



Malaysia makes more arrests in connection with Kim's half-brother death, pledges to return body after autopsy

Malaysia will return the body of the half-brother of North Korea's leader, the country's deputy prime minister said yesterday, as police probing the airport assassination quizzed three suspects. North Korea has made no comment on the killing, but its diplomats objected to an autopsy Malaysian investigators carried out, a senior official said.

A woman with an Indonesian passport was taken into custody overnight after her 26-year-old Malaysian boyfriend Muhammad Farid Bin Jalaluddin was arrested, police statements said. The pair were being questioned along with a 28-year-old woman with a Vietnamese travel document detained on Wednesday by detectives trying to get to the bottom of the murder of the estranged playboy brother of Kim Jong-Un. The portly 45-year-old Jong-Nam had some kind of liquid sprayed in his face after being set upon by two women, Malaysian police have said. He was rushed to hospital suffering from a seizure, but was dead before he got there. CCTV images that emerged in Malaysian media, purportedly of one of the suspects, showed an Asian woman wearing a white top with the letters "LOL" emblazoned on the front. Officers had obtained a seven-day remand order for the first suspect, named as Doan Thi Huong, and for 25-year-old Indonesian passport holder Siti Aishah, Selangor state police chief Abdul Samah Mat told AFP.

Whole world benefits from a strong EU

Says Canada's Trudeau, hails the 28-nation bloc as a model for peaceful cooperation

AFP, Strasbourg
Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told European lawmakers yesterday that the world is better off when the EU is strong, as anti-Brussels sentiment soars following the Brexit vote and Donald Trump's victory. "The whole world benefits from a strong EU," he said in a speech to the European Parliament, a day after MEPs approved a landmark free trade deal between the EU and Canada. "Canada knows that an effective European voice on the global stage isn't just preferable, it's essential," Trudeau told the assembly in Strasbourg, France. Trudeau also hailed the 28-nation bloc as "a truly remarkable achievement and an unprecedented model for peaceful cooperation." The European Parliament on Wednesday solidly backed an EU-Canada trade accord after nearly eight years of painful negotiations and activist anger.

Opponents to the deal, known as CETA, slam the deal as a "Trojan horse" to big business and a danger to health, democracy and the rule of law. But Trudeau, speaking in a mix of French and English, said that the EU and Canada "have made a big step to deepen our relationship and increase commerce that is both free and progressive". Trudeau spoke three days after meeting in Washington with US President Trump, who has vowed to embrace protectionism and reject big trade deals in order to preserve US jobs. "The conversations I had in Washington and the conversations I had here in Strasbourg are anchored in exactly the same thing -- a recognition that governments need to do better at creating growth and opportunities for all our citizens," Trudeau told reporters after his speech. Trudeau said Trump expressed "a very strong focus on getting things done for those who supported him, believed in him."



2005 DELHI BOMB BLASTS

Indian court jails one, frees two

AFP, New Delhi
An Indian court sentenced one person to 10 years' imprisonment but acquitted two others yesterday over bomb blasts that ripped through New Delhi in 2005, killing 62 people and wounding many more. New Delhi's Patiala House Court sentenced Tariq Ahmed Dar to a decade in jail for his involvement in the explosions that tore through two crowded markets and a bus ahead of the Hindu festival of lights, Diwali, in October 2005. But the court said that since Dar had already served 12 years behind bars while awaiting the outcome of his case, he could walk free. It also let off two of his alleged accomplices, Mohammed Hussain Fazili and Mohammed Rafiq Shah, citing lack of evidence from the prosecution. "The court acquitted two of the three accused in the case and the third one was convicted for unlawful activities," Sushil Bajaj, the lawyer for Fazili, told reporters after the hearing. "Unless there are any other pending cases against them, the court said they should be released from jail forthwith." All three were reportedly charged with waging war against the state, conspiring, collecting arms, murder and attempt to murder in 2008.



Buddhist monks chant inside Dhammakaya temple while police block access to the place in Pathum Thani province, Thailand yesterday. Thai police left empty handed after a day-long search of the massive temple for a monk wanted over a multi-million-dollar scam, the latest twist in a saga highlighting a split over the nation's faith. PHOTO: REUTERS

Girl, 7, gets letter from Google boss

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
A seven-year-old girl from Hereford who penned a letter to Google asking for a job, was delighted to receive a personal response from the chief executive himself. Chloe Bridgewater sent a handwritten letter to the tech giant in which she noted her computer skills and her interest in working in a place where she can "sit on bean bags and go down slides". The letter, first published by Business Insider, makes a pretty solid case for hiring Bridgewater. She wrote in it that she is experienced in tablet usage, computer robot games, swimming, spelling, reading, and sums. She even provided references: "My teachers tell my mum and dad that I am very good in class." "My dad told me that if I carry on being good and learning things that one day I will be able to have a job at Google," Bridgewater wrote, adding that she doesn't know what a job application really is but hopes the letter will do for now: "Thank you for reading my letter, I have only ever sent one other and that was to Father Christmas." The seven-year old received a reply from Sundar Pichai himself, according to a LinkedIn post by her father Andy Bridgewater, that has gone viral. "I think if you keep working hard and following your dreams, you can accomplish everything you set your mind to - from working at Google to swimming in the Olympics!" the Google chief executive wrote in the letter. "I look forward to receiving your job application when you are finished with school!"

Churchill's views on alien life revealed

AFP, Paris
War correspondent, statesman, astronomer. Stargazing may not be what Winston Churchill is best remembered for, but a treatise he wrote on extraterrestrial life has revealed his scientific acumen six decades later. Between ruling Britain and helping the Allies win World War II, the British Bulldog was among the first to theorise about other regions of the Universe in which conditions may be conducive to harbouring life, it has been revealed. Excerpts from his essay "Are We Alone in the Universe?" were brought to light Wednesday in the science journal Nature. "I am not sufficiently conceited to think that my sun is the only one with a family of planets," Churchill wrote in the document which astrophysicist Mario Livio laid hands upon last year at the US National Churchill Museum in Fulton, Missouri. There must be many other planets, he concluded, of "the right size to keep... water and possibly an atmosphere", and "at the proper distance from their parent sun to maintain a suitable temperature." This later became known as a star's "habitable zone". To qualify, a planet has to orbit its star at a distance far enough so that water does not evaporate in the solar heat, and near enough that it does not freeze beyond the rays' reach. Water is considered an essential requirement for life, however primitive. Churchill first drafted the paper in 1939, when Europe was on the brink of war, and revised it in the late 1950s while visiting his publisher in a village in the south of France, said Livio. As far as could be determined, the work has never been published or subjected to scientific or academic scrutiny.



Ex-army officer ordered Muslim lawyer's murder

Says Myanmar presidency

AFP, Yangon
A former military officer ordered the murder of a prominent Muslim lawyer and adviser to de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar president's office said on Wednesday. Ko Ni was shot in the head in broad daylight outside Yangon's airport late last month while waiting for a taxi, in a crime that rocked the political establishment. Suu Kyi's ruling National League for Democracy party branded the killing a political assassination and "terrorist act" against their policies. Ko Ni was a vocal critic of the army's lingering grip on power under Myanmar's new elected government and an important advocate for the country's embattled Muslims.

US, Venezuela tensions soar as Trump, Maduro spar

AFP, Washington
Tensions flared once again Wednesday between the United States and Venezuela as Donald Trump called for the release of a jailed foe of President Nicolas Maduro, who warned the new US leader not to provoke him. Diplomatic rows have become somewhat commonplace over the past 20 years between Venezuela's leftist leaders and Washington, the "imperialist" power they love to hate. They have not traded ambassadors since 2010. But with the Republican Trump only in office since January 20, any hope of some kind of breakthrough appeared to be quickly vanishing. "Venezuela should allow Leopoldo Lopez, a political prisoner & husband of @liliantintori (just met w/ @marcorubio) out of prison immediately," Trump tweeted. The post included a picture of Trump, Vice President Mike Pence, Lopez's wife Lilian Tintori and Florida Senator Marco Rubio at the White House. Trump's public schedule had only mentioned a dinner with Rubio. Lopez, the founder of Popular Will, one of the most headline of the parties opposing Maduro, is serving a 14-year prison term on charges of inciting unrest at anti-government protests that left 43 people dead in early 2014. Ties had already been rattled on Monday, when the US Treasury imposed sanctions on Maduro's powerful Vice President Tarek El Aissami and a businessman, whom US authorities accuse of being involved in drug trafficking. The US Treasury department froze the US assets of El Aissami and the businessman, Samark Jose Lopez Bello, and banned US nationals from doing business with them.



University students confront police officers blocking the way of a march demanding early elections to oust Venezuelan President Maduro in Caracas on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP