

NEWS IN brief

7 Maoist rebels killed in India gunfight

At least seven suspected Maoist rebels were killed yesterday in a gunfight with police in the remote forests of central India, an officer said, the latest deadly encounter in the country's long-running insurgency. Police ambushed a group of heavily armed rebels passing through the dense forests of a Maoist stronghold in Chhattisgarh state, triggering an hours-long gun battle before the suspected guerrillas fled.

Myanmar probes murder of 4 in Rakhine

Myanmar police are investigating the murder of four people in northern Rakhine state, the government said yesterday. The corpses of three women and a man were found buried in a field near Luuphanpyin village in Maungdaw township last Thursday, according to the office of de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi.



Russia's UN envoy Churkin dies at 64

Russia's ambassador to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, who for years fended off Western criticism and defended Moscow's actions in Ukraine and Syria, died Monday in New York. He was 64. Churkin collapsed while at work at the Russian mission to the United Nations Monday morning and was rushed to a Manhattan hospital, apparently suffering from heart problems, diplomatic sources said.



Pakistani volunteers move a blast victim to a hospital in Peshawar yesterday, after multiple Taliban suicide bombings at a court complex in the Tangi area of Charsadda district. Story on page 16. PHOTO: REUTERS

Trump picks top security adviser

Outspoken anti-Russian general to replace Flynn; thousands march in 'not my president' protests

US President Donald Trump on Monday named Lieutenant General Herbert Raymond McMaster as his new national security adviser, choosing a military officer known for speaking his mind and challenging his superiors. The appointment came as about 10,000 anti-Trump protesters marched in New York to shouts of "not my president!" Monday, joined by others in cities across the United States on its Presidents Day holiday. The "Not My Presidents Day" protests aim to show grassroots opposition to the Republican president remain fervent one month after his January 20 inauguration. McMaster is a highly regarded military tactician and strategic thinker, but his selection surprised some observers who wondered how the officer, whose Army career stalled at times for his questioning of authority, would deal with a White House that has not welcomed criticism. "He is highly respected by everybody in the military and we're very honored to have him," Trump told reporters in West Palm Beach where he spent the weekend. "He's a man of tremendous talent and tremendous experience."



One subject on which Trump and McMaster could soon differ is Russia. McMaster shares the consensus view among the US national security establishment that Russia is a threat and an antagonist to the United States, while the man whom McMaster is replacing, retired Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, appeared to view it more as a potential geopolitical partner. Flynn was fired as national security adviser on Feb 13 after reports emerged that he had misled Vice President Mike Pence about speaking to Russia's ambassador to the United States about US sanctions before Trump's inauguration. The ouster, coming so early in Trump's administration, was another upset for a White House that has been hit by miscues, including the controversial rollout of a travel ban on people from seven Muslim-majority countries, since the Republican president took office on Jan 20. The national security adviser is an independent aide to the president and does not require confirmation by the US Senate. He has broad influence over foreign policy and attends National Security Council meetings along with the heads of the State Department, the Department of Defense and key security agencies.

UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS Montreal declared a 'sanctuary city'

Canada's second most populous city has voted to declare itself a "sanctuary city" for undocumented immigrants, allowing authorities to provide council services such as housing and food banks to people without legal immigration status. Montreal, the largest city in Quebec, joins three cities in Ontario - Toronto, London and Hamilton - in adopting a "sanctuary city" status to help protect undocumented immigrants. Mayor Denis Coderre, a former immigration minister in Canada's government who put forward the motion, said he wants to give undocumented immigrants better access to health care, housing and integration, CIVNews reported. At the Quebec boarder, the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) has converted an unused basement into a refugee claimant processing centre, as authorities attempt to process the growing number of asylum seekers crossing into the country from the United States. The CBSA said the number of people making refugee claims at Quebec border crossing has more than doubled from 2015 to 2016. Last month, 452 people made claims in Quebec compared with 137 in January 2016, the agency said. Many "sanctuary cities" in the US protect undocumented immigrants by limiting how much local police and local authorities can work with federal immigration services to allow people to be reported and deported.

Asean concerned about China's militarisation

Southeast Asian countries see China's installation of weapons systems in the South China Sea as "very unsettling" and have urged dialogue to stop an escalation of "recent developments", the Philippines said yesterday. The region's foreign ministers were unanimous in their concern over China's militarisation of its artificial islands, but were confident a framework for a code of maritime conduct could be agreed with Beijing by June, Philippine Foreign Secretary Perfecto Yasay said. Yasay did not say what developments provoked the concern, but said the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations (Asean) hoped China and the United States would ensure peace and stability. He said demilitarisation would be a key component of any Asean-China code of conduct, but it was too soon to say whether Beijing's dismantling of its weapons installations would be a prerequisite. "The Asean members have been unanimous in their expression of concern about what they see as a militarisation of the region," Yasay told reporters after a ministers' retreat on the Philippine island of Boracay. Referring to China's manmade islands in the Spratly archipelago, Yasay said Asean countries had "noticed, very unsettlingly, that China has installed weapons systems in these facilities that they have established, and they have expressed strong concern about this." With the Philippines chairing the bloc this year, Yasay's comments signal a rare, firm position by a grouping that often struggles to achieve consensus, due to its contrasting opinions on how to respond to China's assertiveness. Asean's statements of concern often avoid mentioning China by name. Much is at stake from upsetting China, as Asean members, to varying extents, are under its influence and need its trade, investment and tourists. Regional geopolitics has become more uncertain since the election of US President Donald Trump, particularly over his administration's role in a region strongly courted by Washington during the "pivot" of predecessor Barack Obama.

TENSION IN S CHINA SEA

1.4m children face famine in four countries: Unicef

Nations to warn of a potential genocide. Unicef said 270,000 children in South Sudan were severely malnourished. Save the Children, a charity, said on Monday that more than 1 million children in South Sudan were at risk of starving. South Sudan has also been hit by the same east African drought that has pushed Somalia back to the brink of famine, six years after 260,000 people starved to death in 2011. Unicef said 185,000 children were expected to suffer from severe acute malnutrition in Somalia this year, but the figure was likely to rise to 270,000 in the next few months. Another 462,000 children are suffering from severe acute malnutrition in Yemen, where two years of war have caused economic collapse and severe restrictions on shipping. Famine has been ongoing since last year in parts of northeastern Nigeria. The number of children with severe acute malnutrition is expected to reach 450,000 this year, Unicef said.



New miniature frog species found in India

Scientists have discovered four new species of miniature night frogs small enough to sit on a fingernail in a remote part of India, according to a report published yesterday. The researchers, who spent five years exploring the lush Western Ghats mountains, said the tiny amphibians were there in abundance but had likely been overlooked because of their size. They also found three other species of night frogs, according to the report in the PeerJ medical sciences journal. "The miniature species are locally abundant and fairly common but they have probably been overlooked because of their extremely small size, secretive habitats and insect-like calls," researcher Sonali Garg was quoted as saying. Indian night frogs split off from other frogs some 70 to 80 million years ago, making them a particularly ancient group.

Plane crashes into Melbourne shopping centre Five passengers killed

A light aircraft smashed into shops and exploded into a "massive fireball" killing all five on board, including four American passengers reportedly golfers on the trip of a lifetime, officials in Australia said yesterday. The twin-engine Beechcraft plane veered just after take-off into a shopping centre, that was still closed, next to Essendon Fields airport near Melbourne. "Five on the aircraft and looks like no one has survived the crash," said Victoria Police Assistant Commissioner Stephen Leane. The private charter from Essendon, north of Melbourne, to King Island, 55 minutes to the south, came down just short of a major motorway packed with the heavy traffic of early morning commuters.

Israeli soldier gets 18 months' jail

Palestinians outraged; Khamenei backs liberation from Israel 'tumour'

A young Israeli soldier who killed a wounded and incapacitated Palestinian assailant was sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment yesterday, in a show of leniency that drew Palestinian outrage after one of the most divisive trials in Israel's history. Eleven months ago, Sergeant Elor Azaria was serving as an army medic in the town of Hebron in the occupied West Bank when two Palestinians stabbed and wounded another soldier. One of the assailants was shot dead by troops. The other was shot and wounded. Eleven minutes later, as the wounded man, Abd Elfatah Ashareef, 21, lay on the ground unable to move, Azaria, then 19, took aim with his rifle and put a bullet in his head. With the 50th anniversary of Israel's wartime capture of the West Bank approaching, the trial generated debate about whether the military, in accusing Azaria of violating open-fire rules and its ethical code, was out of touch with a public that has shifted to the right in its attitudes towards the Palestinians.

KILLING OF PALESTINIAN



In one poll, nearly half of Israeli Jews said any Palestinian attacker should be killed on the spot. A three-judge military court convicted Azaria of manslaughter last month, a crime that carries a maximum 20-year term. Prosecutors had asked for a three-to-five year sentence, noting the soldier had shot an assailant who had carried out an attack only minutes earlier. "They are laughing at us," Ashareef's father, Yusri, told Reuters after the sentence was announced. The Palestinian government said the



Smoke rises after a rocket fired by Iraqi forces in Albu Saif hit village held by Islamic State militants south of Mosul yesterday. Inset, An Iraqi sniper takes aim at IS positions. Iraqi forces consolidated positions yesterday after blasting their way to the southern edge of Mosul in an assault Baghdad and its partners hope will spell the doom of the jihadist "caliphate".

Trump decries 'horrible' anti-Semitism

US President Donald Trump denounced anti-Semitism in the United States yesterday in his most forceful remarks to date about a spate of threats to Jewish community centers around the country. Several Jewish community centers were evacuated for a time on Monday after receiving bomb threats, the JCC Association of North America organization said. Vandals toppled the headstones of about 170 graves at the Chesed Shel Emeth Society cemetery in St. Louis, Missouri, according to news reports. "The anti-Semitic threats targeting our Jewish community and community centers are horrible and are painful and a very sad reminder of the work that still must be done to root out hate and prejudice and evil," Trump told reporters. He was speaking at the end of a tour of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, where he also spoke out against racism. The comments marked a change in tone from Trump, who had declined to condemn explicitly the threats against Jews when asked last week, and had reacted at times with anger to reporters' questions on the topic, taking the questions as though they were accusing him personally of having anti-Semitic views. On Monday, bomb threats were called in to 11 Jewish community centers, including those in the Houston, Chicago and Milwaukee areas, according to David Posner, a director at JCC Association of North America. They were found to be hoaxes. No arrests were made and no one was injured. The FBI has previously said it is investigating recent threats as "possible civil rights violations."