

NEWSIN brief

Two 'IS operatives' arrested in Gujarat

TNN, New Delhi
Gujarat's Anti-Terrorism Squad has yesterday arrested two suspected IS terrorists, who were allegedly planning to carry out serial blasts at some religious places in Gujarat in the next couple of days. The two, who are brothers, were in touch with IS operatives overseas through social media, police said, adding they have recovered bomb-making material from the two.

Australia, Indonesia restore military ties

AFP, Sydney
Australia and Indonesia yesterday said that full military ties between the two countries had been restored, after Indonesia's military suspended cooperation in January because of "insulting" teaching material found at an Australian base. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull made the announcement alongside Indonesian President Joko Widodo, who arrived in Australia on Saturday for his first visit as president.

Iran holds naval drills amid tensions

REUTERS, Dubai
Iran launched naval drills at the mouth of the Gulf and the Indian Ocean yesterday, a naval commander said, as tensions with the United States escalated after US President Donald Trump put Tehran "on notice". Since taking office last month, Trump has pledged to get tough with Iran, warning the Islamic Republic after its ballistic missile test on Jan 29 that it was playing with fire and all U.S. options were on the table.



Saudi king kicks off Asia tour in Malaysia

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur/dubai
Malaysia welcomed Saudi Arabia's King Salman yesterday for the start of a rare, month-long Asian tour, where the monarch will build ties and seek to draw more investments to the oil-rich gulf nation. The visit is the first by a Saudi king to Malaysia in more than a decade. King Salman also plans to visit Indonesia, Brunei, Japan, China, the Maldives and Jordan.

16 churchgoers die in India road accident

AFP, New Delhi
Sixteen people were killed and more than 50 injured when a truck carrying churchgoers overturned in a hilly region of northeast India early yesterday, police said. The truck was carrying people from three villages to a local church in the West Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya state.

Death trap for fleeing civilians

Police say dozens of people killed by landmines as fighting intensifies

CNN ONLINE
More than 50 civilians have been killed or injured by landmines since Friday night as they fled a village about 9 miles west of Mosul, Iraq's Federal Police said in a tweet Saturday. Residents in the village of Sahaji were trying to escape the fighting as Iraqi forces advance on western Mosul. IS is in control of hills between Sahaji and Mosul, Iraq's second city. Iraqi Federal Police units have gained more ground as they lead the charge to force IS from western Mosul, Lt Gen Raid Shakir Jaudat said Saturday.

resistance in western Mosul's al-Tayaran neighborhood, just north of the Mosul International Airport runway. Iraqi forces seized control of the airport overnight Thursday.

human shields. Meanwhile, private Kurdish TV channel Rudaw said one of its top reporters, Shifa Gardi, was killed Saturday afternoon in a bomb

Mamoun neighborhood in southwest Mosul after ISIS had been "holding them as human shields," said Jassem Mohammad al-Jaff, Iraq's minister of migration and displacement.

BATTLE TO LIBERATE WESTERN MOSUL FROM IS



Residents and federal police officials said IS fighters had rounded up civilians in al-Jawsaq and surrounding areas, and forced them deeper into Mosul. The terror group is known for using civilians as

attack while covering clashes in Mosul. Her cameraman, Younis Mustafa, was also injured, the channel said in a statement. More than 1,500 Iraqi civilians were evacuated from the newly liberated al-

ASSASSINATION OF KIM JONG-NAM IN MALAYSIA

Kim died within 20 minutes of attack

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Kim Jong-Nam was dead within 20 minutes of being attacked and would have suffered a "very painful death" as his major organs shut down, Malaysia's health minister said yesterday.

The estranged half-brother of the North Korean leader was killed with lethal nerve agent VX, police have revealed, after he was ambushed at Kuala Lumpur airport on February 13.

Two women can be seen shoving something into Kim's face in leaked CCTV footage of the brazen assassination before he seeks help.

"He died in the ambulance. He fainted in the clinic," Health Minister S. Subramaniam told reporters.

"From the time of the onset (of the attack) he died within 15 to 20 minutes."

Autopsy results suggested the 45-year-old died from "very serious paralysis" due to a lethal nerve agent, Subramaniam said earlier yesterday.

Police are holding two women suspected of staging the attack as well as a North Korean man.

VX is so deadly it is listed by the UN as a weapon of mass destruction and overnight the scene of the killing in the budget terminal of Kuala Lumpur International Airport was swept by civil defence personnel in hazmat suits before being declared safe.

Both women suspected of carrying out the attack insisted they thought they were taking part in a prank video, although Malaysian police have said they knew what they were doing.



Syria's White Helmets will not attend Oscars

AFP, Beirut

Rescue workers from Syria's White Helmets group - the subject of an Oscar-nominated documentary - will not attend this weekend's Academy Awards ceremony because of intensified regime bombing and a rejected passport.

Raed Saleh and fellow White Helmet member Khaled Khatib had been set to attend Sunday's ceremony in Hollywood, where "The White Helmets" is shortlisted for best short documentary.

"After 3days at airport, not allowed to travel to #oscars2017 - had US visa - but passport not accepted. Sad, but important work to do here," Khatib tweeted Saturday from Istanbul.

US Customs and Border Protection spokesman Michael Friel said that "individuals need valid documents to travel to the United States," declining to comment further.

Earlier, Saleh told AFP he wasn't going because of a heavy workload "due to intensified regime strikes on the provinces of Damascus, Daraa and Homs."

More than 310,000 people have died since Syria's conflict erupted in March 2011, and more than half of the country's citizens have been forced to flee their homes.

Since the White Helmets group was created in 2013, it has hired more than 3,000 volunteers and claims to have saved more than 78,000 lives.

It takes its name from the protective headgear worn by its members.



Syrian men evacuate children from the rubble of destroyed buildings following reported government airstrike on the rebel-held town of Douma, on the eastern outskirts of the capital Damascus, on Saturday. Syrian regime forces carried out raids on several areas in the country causing the deaths of at least 13 civilians, according to Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

PHOTO: AFP

India conducts major drill to test combat readiness

PTI, New Delhi

The Indian Navy has carried out a mega exercise which saw participation of its strategic assets including nuclear-powered submarine and aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya, besides Su-30 and Jaguar fighter jets of Indian Air Force.

The Theatre-level Readiness and Operational Exercise (TROPEX) was conducted to test combat readiness of the combined fleets of the Navy, the Air Force, the Army and the Coast Guard.

The aim of the month-long exercise, which was carried out across the vast expanse of the Arabian Sea and the North Central Indian Ocean, was to test the combat readiness of the forces to deal with any possible threat.

"The exercise provided an apt opportunity to test the combat capability of the Indian Navy, Indian Army, Indian Air Force and Coast Guard, and strengthened inter-operability and joint operations in complex conflict situation," the Indian Defence Ministry said.

Over 45 ships from both the Western and Eastern Naval Commands, five submarines including the nuclear powered Chakra, 50 Naval aircraft, 11 ships from the Coast Guard, troops from the Army and 20 aircraft from the Air Force including Su-30s and Jaguars participated in the exercise from January 24 to February 23.

"The exercise, in complete coordination with the Army and Air Force, was conducted in phases to test the various facets of war-fighting and joint combat capabilities of the armed forces to respond to given threat situations," the ministry said.

It witnessed various weapon firings by ships, submarines and aircraft from both the Navy and the Air Force.

The Ministry said the interaction of the forces helped validate operational war fighting concepts and provided valuable lessons to sharpen combat skills.

The 2017 edition of TropeX included the conduct of largescale 'Out of Area Contingency' in island territory, which saw participation of all three services and their special forces," the statement said.

Trees, not bombs!

AFP, Kabul

The Taliban group in Afghanistan on Sunday used a rare public statement in the name of its leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada, to call on Afghans to plant more trees for worldly and other-worldly good.

Official Taliban outlets released the "special message" under Akhundzada's name, an uncommon move for the group.

Akhundzada, a cleric, is believed to have been in hiding since becoming Taliban leader in May 2016 following the death of his predecessor in a US drone strike in Pakistan.

In the statement, he urged Afghan civilians and Taliban fighters to "plant one or several fruit or non-fruit trees for the beautification of Earth and the benefit of almighty Allah's creations."

CRACKDOWN ON TERROR IN PAKISTAN

600 suspects arrested in Punjab; four killed

PTI, New Delhi

Pakistan Rangers have killed four terrorists and detained 600 terror suspects during over 200 search operations in Punjab province under the recently launched nation-wide military operation 'Radd-ul-Fasaad'.

The Pakistan army last week launched 'Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad' an Arabic word which translates roughly to 'elimination of discord' - across the country, to eliminate terrorists and consolidate gains of its counter-terrorism operations, days after a wave of suicide attacks that killed more than 125 people, including 91 at a Sufi shrine in Sindh.

An important part of the operation was deployment of paramilitary Rangers in Punjab province to counter terrorism.

Weapons and banned literature have been seized during the operation.

It was a long standing demand of the opposition parties to deploy Rangers in Punjab for operation against militants believed to be holed up in the southern part of the province.

The Counter-Terrorism Department of Punjab police has also killed 17 terrorists mostly belonging to JuA after the February 17 Lahore bombing.

Pakistan Air Force, Pakistan Navy, Civil Armed Forces (CAF) and other security and law enforcing agencies (LEAs) are supposed to participate in the operation.



US Democrats pick Perez to lead party

REUTERS, Atlanta

US Democrats elected former Labor Secretary Tom Perez as chairman on Saturday, choosing a veteran of the Obama administration to lead the daunting task of rebuilding the party and heading the opposition to Republican President Donald Trump.

Members of the Democratic National Committee, the administrative and fundraising arm of the party, picked Perez on the second round of voting over US Representative Keith Ellison, a liberal from Minnesota.

Following one of the most crowded and competitive party leadership elections in decades, Perez faces a challenge in unifying and rejuvenating a party still reeling from the Nov 8 loss of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. He immediately made Ellison his deputy.

After losing the presidency and failing to recapture majorities in Congress, party leaders are anxious to channel the growing grassroots resistance to Trump into political support for Democrats at all levels of government across the country.

"We are suffering from a crisis of confidence, a crisis of relevance," Perez, a favorite of former Obama administration officials, told DNC members. He promised to lead the fight against Trump and change the DNC's culture to make it a more grassroots operation.



Brides pose as they display their hands decorated with henna before taking their wedding vows during a mass marriage ceremony in which, according to its organizers, 131 Muslim couples took their wedding vows in Ahmedabad, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Drunken driver injures 28 at US Mardi Gras parade

Man drives into crowd in Germany killing one

AGENCIES

A pickup truck driven by a man who appeared to be "highly intoxicated" plowed into a crowd of spectators watching the main Mardi Gras parade in New Orleans on Saturday, sending more than 20 people to the hospital, police said.

The truck, traveling along the side of the street open to traffic along the Mid-City parade route, struck three other vehicles, including a dump truck, before veering onto the median where a crowd of people stood watching the procession, according to New Orleans police.

Five people were being treated at hospital trauma centers, and an investigation is ongoing, police said.

Police immediately apprehended the pickup driver, who according to eyewitnesses interviewed by Fox television affiliate WVEU-TV appeared disheveled, glassy-eyed

and under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Local media reports said 12 people were initially listed as critically injured.

Meanwhile in Germany, a man died and two other people were injured after a 35-year-old German man drove into a crowd standing near a bakery in the southwestern town of Heidelberg on Saturday, but the authorities said there were no indications that it was a terrorist attack.

According to the statement, the suspect was seen getting out of the car with a knife and was later tracked down to an old swimming pool. He was taken to a hospital in Heidelberg having been shot by police while being arrested, leaving him seriously injured.

The German authorities are on high alert after a failed Tunisian asylum-seeker drove a truck into a Christmas market in Berlin on Dec 19, killing 12 people.

