

NEWSIN brief

Sweden to bring back conscription: report

AFP, Stockholm
Sweden announced yesterday that it will reintroduce compulsory military service starting this summer to respond to global security challenges including from Russia. "The government wants a more stable staff supply system and to boost its military capability because the security situation has changed," Swedish Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist told TT news agency.

UN drugs board slams killings in Philippines

AFP, Vienna
The UN-linked International Narcotics Control Board yesterday condemned the use of extrajudicial killings in the Philippines, where President Rodrigo Duterte's much-criticised war on drugs has claimed more than 6,500 lives. In a new annual report, the INCB said that "extrajudicial action, purportedly taken in pursuit of drug control objectives, is fundamentally contrary to the provisions and objectives" of international drug conventions.

US drone strikes kill 7 'Qaeda men' in Yemen

AFP, Aden
Four separate US drone strikes killed at least seven suspected al-Qaeda members in Yemen yesterday, security officials said, barely a month after a controversial US commando raid against the jihadists. A dawn strike targeted the home of a known al-Qaeda member in the Yashbum Valley in the southern province of Shabwa province, a provincial security official told AFP.

China drills again near Taiwan

REUTERS, Beijing
Chinese jets and warships carried out exercises near Taiwan and into the Western Pacific yesterday, as the self-ruled island's defence minister warned of a growing threat from its giant neighbour. Democratic Taiwan is increasingly concerned over China's military designs, especially recent rounds of Chinese drills near Taiwan.

11 killed in Ukraine coal mine blast

AFP, Kiev
At least 11 coal miners were killed yesterday when a methane gas blast tore through a pit in western Ukraine, the head of the coal miners' trade union said. "A methane explosion. 11 killed," Mykhaylo Volynets wrote on Facebook. Ukraine's emergency services said that 20 people were unaccounted for and that 172 miners were in the pit at the time. It added that people were buried under ground after the blast.



Nguyen Thi Xuan (R), 92, married to a former Japanese soldier, greets Japanese Emperor Akihito (L) and Empress Michiko (2-L) as they meet with family members of Japanese veterans living in Vietnam, at a hotel in Hanoi, Vietnam, yesterday. Japan's royal couple listened to the tearful stories of Vietnamese children who were abandoned by their Japanese soldier fathers. PHOTO: REUTERS

By 2050, India will have most Muslims

Says Pew Research Centre

TNN, New Delhi
Because they have the youngest median age (30) of all religious groups, Muslims are the fastest-growing such group in the world, and by 2050, India will be the country with the world's largest Muslim population, said American think tank Pew Research Centre, this week.
While Islam is currently the world's second-largest religion after Christianity, it is now also the fastest-growing major religion. And if current demographic trends continue, the Muslim population is expected to exceed the number of Christians by the end of this century, Pew said.
There were 1.6 billion Muslims in the world as of 2010 - roughly 23% of the global population - according to a Pew estimate. Currently, Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population.
In a 2015 report, Pew said that while the world's population is projected to grow 35 percent in the coming decades, the number of Muslims is expected to increase by 73 percent - to 2.8 billion in 2050. In fact, Muslims are the only major religious group projected to increase faster than the world's population as a whole, the think tank said.
"The growth and regional migration of Muslims, combined with the ongoing impact of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL) and other extremist groups that commit acts of violence in the name of Islam, have brought Muslims and the Islamic faith to the forefront of the political debate in many countries," the think tank's report said.

Afghan-based IS expands

Say members of the movement, govt officials in Kabul

REUTERS, Kabul
An Islamic State offshoot based near the Afghan-Pakistan border is expanding to new areas, recruiting fighters and widening the reach of attacks in the region, members of the movement and Afghan officials said.
Some members of the so-called "Khorasan Province" of Islamic State claimed responsibility for the recent attack on a Sufi shrine in Pakistan that killed 90 people, and IS gunmen were blamed for the deaths of six local aid workers in the north of the country, far from their stronghold in eastern Afghanistan.
Any expansion would pose a new challenge for US President Donald Trump, as he considers how many American troops to keep in Afghanistan where the main security threat remains the Taliban insurgency.
Trump has vowed to "totally destroy" the Middle East-based Islamic State, yet has spoken little of Afghanistan, where US forces have been posted for 15 years.

Now he has not only the stubborn Taliban to consider, but also militants swearing allegiance to IS, although US officials are generally less alarmed about its presence in Afghanistan than local officials.
"Daesh is not only a threat for Afghanistan but for the region and the whole world," said Shah Hussain

Still, three members of the group told Reuters a handful of Arab advisers helped direct propaganda, recruiting and identifying targets for attack.
IS is suspected of carrying out several attacks on minority Shia Muslim targets in Afghanistan, and the February suicide bombing at the Pakistani shrine bore some of the hallmarks of the sectarian group.
The AMAQ news agency, affiliated to IS in the Middle East, said the movement was responsible for the shrine bombing, but Abu Omar Khorasani, a senior member of the Afghan chapter who sometimes speaks for IS there, denied involvement.
"Islamic State has no proper base in Pakistan, but it has sympathizers and links in Pakistan," said one member of the group, based in Afghanistan. "Mostly the attackers and suicide bombers enter from Afghanistan to Pakistan."
Western and Afghan security officials believe fighters frequently switch allegiances between militant groups, making it difficult to know who is to blame for violence.

Mortazawi, spokesman for President Ashraf Ghani's office, using a common Arabic name for the group.
The extent of direct operational links between IS in Afghanistan and the Middle East remains unclear, although most fighters in the "Khorasan Province" are Afghans, Pakistanis or Central Asians.

Offshoot of group is based near border with Pakistan
Growing threat a challenge for Trump
Extent of operational links with ME is unclear

Saudi king urges fight against terrorism

Signs deals during landmark visit to Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta
Saudi Arabia's King Salman yesterday called for a united fight against terrorism in a speech to Indonesia's parliament during a landmark state visit to the world's most populous Muslim-majority country.
The king is making the first visit by a Saudi monarch to Indonesia in almost 50 years as part of a tour of Asia, accompanied by a 1,000-strong delegation and hundreds of tons of luggage.
In a speech to hundreds of people at the legislature in the capital Jakarta, he called for an intensified fight against terrorism.
"The challenge we, especially Muslims, face now is terrorism," he said. "We should close ranks in combating terrorism, radicalism and strive to bring world peace for the benefit of all of us."
Saudi Arabia is part of a US-led coalition that has carried out air strikes against the Islamic State (IS) group and other jihadists in Syria.
IS is under pressure in Iraq and Syria, as government forces make a drive to retake areas held by the jihadists.
Saudi Arabia has witnessed a series of deadly attacks claimed by IS since late 2014,

mostly targeting the Shia minority and security forces, killing dozens of people.
Indonesia and Saudi Arabia Wednesday signed agreements in areas ranging from trade to aviation after the kingdom's monarch reached Jakarta.
King Salman and Widodo oversaw the signing of 11 cooperation memoranda



following talks at the Bogor palace. Apart from trade and aviation, they included agreements on boosting cooperation in science, health and fighting crime.
Jakarta and Riyadh also inked an agreement that builds on an existing \$6 billion deal between state-owned energy firms Aramco and Pertamina to expand an Indonesian oil refinery.

EU prods members to take in refugees

Threatens fines if they don't comply

AFP, Brussels
The EU yesterday stepped up warnings that countries could be punished if they fail to share the burden of mainly Syrian refugees stranded in Greece and Italy.
Migration Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos said member states had until September to take in 160,000 Syrian and other refugees from the two countries, which have been on the frontline of the migration crisis.
So far only 13,500 have been relocated in a process bogged down by general inertia and resistance from Eastern European states which oppose Muslim immigration.
"If we don't have tangible efforts by September... the commission will not hesitate to make use of its power," Avramopoulos, who is Greece's EU commissioner, told a news conference.
The EU has been trying to convince members states "to do their duty," he said.
"But if it is not the case in the future, infringements might be an option," he said.
As the executive branch of the 28-nation EU, the European Commission is able to launch "infringement proceedings" to impose fines on member state that break the bloc's rules.
Countries like Hungary and Slovakia have proposed paying "solidarity" contributions instead of actually taking in any migrants.



Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah (2nd from R) visits a primary school in the Palestinian Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar in the Israeli-occupied West Bank yesterday. The UN raised concerns last month over newly announced demolition plans in the Palestinian Bedouin village that threaten dozens of buildings including the primary school. PHOTO: AFP

N Korea nuke threat

White House mulls direct military action

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An internal White House review of strategy on North Korea reportedly includes the possibility of direct military action or regime change to counter the hermit kingdom's nuclear threat.
Deputy national security adviser KT McFarland held a meeting with other officials to discuss the US response to a fresh series of provocations from the North, the Wall Street Journal reports.
McFarland requested for all options to completely overhaul American foreign policy towards Pyongyang, including for the country to recognise North Korea as a nuclear state and the possibility of a direct conflict.
The proposals are now being vetted prior to review by President Donald Trump.
It comes as South Korea and the US agreed last week to strengthen cooperation on financial sanctions against North Korea after Pyongyang's latest ballistic missile test last month.
US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and South Korea Finance Minister Yoo Il-ho expressed "great concern" over North Korea's ballistic missile test and promised to follow through with United Nations sanctions, as well as their own, the South Korean ministry said in a statement after a call between the pair.
North Korea has condemned the start of annual US-South Korean military drills with fiery rhetoric, threatening to "mercilessly foil the nuclear war racket of the aggressors with its treasured nuclear sword".
A spokesman for the General Staff of the North Korean People's Army said the North's reaction will be the toughest ever, but did not elaborate.
South Korea's military said it will "resolutely" punish North Korea if provoked.

Facebook uses AI to spot suicidal users

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Callison-Burch told BuzzFeed. "The people who have posted that content [that AI reports] are more likely to be sent resources of support versus people reporting to us."
The system is currently being tested in the US. The site has also announced new safety features for Facebook Live, which has been used to live stream several suicides.
Users can now flag up concerning Facebook Live behaviour with the site, which will display advice and highlight the video to staff for immediate review.
The goal is to provide help as quickly as possible, mid-broadcast rather than post-broadcast.
Facebook has started using artificial intelligence to identify users who are potentially at risk of taking their own lives.
The social network has developed algorithms capable of scanning posts and comments for warning signs.
These could be phrases such as "Are you okay?" or "I'm worried about you", or more general talk of sadness and pain.
The AI tool would send such posts to a human review team, which would get in touch with the user thought to be at risk and offer help, in the form of contact details for support services or a chat with a member of staff through Facebook Messenger.
The site had previously relied on other users reporting worrying updates.
"The AI is actually more accurate than the reports that we get from people that are flagged as suicide and self injury," Facebook product manager Vanessa



US drone kills 2 on motorbike in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar
A US drone yesterday killed two men riding a motorbike in Pakistan's northwest tribal region, officials said, the first such attack in the country under the administration of new American President Donald Trump.
Drone strikes are extremely unpopular among many Pakistanis because they are seen as a violation of the country's sovereignty, although leaked documents have shown that Islamabad and Washington have secretly colluded over some cases in the past.
The attack occurred in the Sara Khwa area of Kurram, one of seven so-called tribal districts that lie along the border with Afghanistan, where Pakistan has been battling a homegrown Islamist insurgency for more than a decade and a half.

North Korean held over Kim death to be freed

Kuala Lumpur cancels visa-free deal with Pyongyang
AFP, Kuala Lumpur
The only North Korean arrested over the dramatic airport assassination of Kim Jong-Nam is to be deported, Malaysia said yesterday, as it announced the abrupt cancellation of a visa-waiver programme with Pyongyang.
The moves came the day after two young women appeared in court charged with murdering the estranged half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un with a banned nerve agent.
Attorney general Mohamed Apandi Ali said 47-year-old Ri Jong-Chol would be released and deported today.
"He is a free man. His remand expires and there is insufficient evidence to charge him," Apandi said. "He has no proper [travel] documents so we will deport him."
Seven other North Koreans are wanted in connection with the killing, including a diplomat and an airline employee who are believed to be in Malaysia.
Four others are thought to have fled to Pyongyang on the day of the murder.
Ri was arrested days after Kim suffered an agonising death when he was attacked at Kuala Lumpur International Airport as he waited to board a flight to Macau.
CCTV footage shows two women approaching the heavyset 45-year-old and appearing to thrust a cloth in his face.
Meanwhile, Kuala Lumpur has cancelled a visa-free travel deal with Pyongyang as a diplomatic spat deepens over the assassination of the half-brother of North Korea's leader, Bernama reported yesterday.
The government implemented the change on the grounds of national security, the Malaysian news agency quoted the country's deputy prime minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi as saying.
The cancellation will take effect on March 6, after which North Koreans entering Malaysia will be required to obtain a visa, the report added.



Ri Jong-Chol