

NEWSIN brief

EU approves new military HQ

AFP, Brussels
The European Union yesterday approved plans for a military headquarters to coordinate overseas security operations, foreign affairs head Federica Mogherini said. Mogherini, who has pushed hard for the EU to take on an increased military role, said foreign and defence ministers of the 28 member states "unanimously" backed the project. The facility will initially run three operations which do not involve the use of force, other than in self-defence.

North Korea orders Malaysian envoy out

AFP, Seoul
North Korea said yesterday it would expel Malaysia's ambassador after its own envoy was ordered out of the Southeast Asian nation, in an increasingly bitter row over the assassination of Kim Jong-Nam at Kuala Lumpur International Airport. The KCNA report came shortly after the North's ambassador Kang Chol flew home from Kuala Lumpur.

Philippine senators end Duterte inquiry

REUTERS, Manila
Philippine senators abruptly ended a hearing yesterday into allegations by a retired policeman that a "death squad" operated under President Rodrigo Duterte when he was mayor of Davao City, citing no proof that it even existed. Arturo Lascanas admitted to lying in October during another Senate inquiry into alleged extrajudicial killings by a hit squad linked to Duterte.

13 terror attack plots foiled in UK since 2013

AFP, London
Security services have foiled 13 potential terror attacks in Britain since 2013, its most senior counter-terrorism policeman said yesterday. Mark Rowley, assistant commissioner of London's Metropolitan Police, said incidents inspired by the Islamic State group were a "large part" of the problem although al-Qaeda remained a significant threat, while the far-right was also an issue.

19 aborted female fetuses found in India

AFP, Mumbai
Indian police said yesterday they had found 19 aborted female foetuses dumped in a sewer in the western state of Maharashtra, highlighting the country's problem of female foeticide. Prenatal sex tests are illegal in India, a policy designed to stop unborn girls being aborted by parents desperate for a boy. But the tests are still thought to be common, particularly in poor rural areas.



People flee their homes in Al Mansour district, as Iraqi forces battle with Islamic State militants, in western Mosul, Iraq, yesterday. Inset, displaced people receive food at a camp in the city. Iraqi security forces advanced towards a compound of jihadist-held government buildings and a bridgehead, on the second day of a renewed push in west Mosul.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Anti-IS assaults gain ground in Iraq, Syria

AFP, Mosul
Iraqi forces advanced in west Mosul and fighters in Syria seized a key supply route to Raqqa yesterday as twin US-backed offensives gained ground against the Islamic State group. Supported by the US-led anti-IS coalition, Iraqi government forces and a Kurdish-Arab alliance in Syria are battling to push the jihadists from Mosul and Raqqa, the last two major urban centres under their control. Intense fighting in recent days has forced tens of thousands of people from their homes, raising fears for many more civilians still trapped in areas of IS's so-called "caliphate". In Iraq, security forces advanced yesterday towards a compound of jihadist-held government buildings and a bridgehead, on the second day of a renewed push in west Mosul. The operation to retake west Mosul began on February 19, but had slowed amid several days of bad weather until fresh drive began on Sunday. AFP reporters in west Mosul have witnessed intense clashes, with heavy automatic weapons fire and clouds of black smoke billowing over the city. In Syria, US-backed forces yesterday cut off a key supply route between IS stronghold Raqqa and the group's territory in Deir Ezzor province. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters, seized control of the only major road linking Raqqa along the Euphrates valley to Deir Ezzor, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring

Le Pen could win in France

Warns Hollande, vows to do everything in his power to stop it happening; ex-PM Juppe quits the race

AFP, Paris
Far-right leader Marine Le Pen could win the forthcoming presidential election in France, President Francois Hollande warned yesterday, vowing to "do everything" in his power to stop it happening. Polls suggest that Le Pen, leader of the National Front (FN), is likely to win the first round of France's election on April 23.

However, surveys also show she would then lose in the deciding second-round run-off on May 7 either to the centrist and pro-business Emmanuel Macron or conservative candidate Francois Fillon. "There is a threat" of Le Pen winning the election, Hollande acknowledged in comments to French daily Le Monde -- part of an interview with six European papers. "The far-right has not been so high (in the polls) for more than 30 years but France will not give in," vowed the president. France "is aware that the vote on April 23 and May 7 will determine not only the fate of our country but also the future of the European project itself," he added. Le Pen has vowed to ditch the euro as France's currency if elected and hold a referendum on the country's membership of the European Union.

Hollande, who has battled stubbornly high unemployment throughout his five-year term and has suffered low poll ratings, decided last year not to run for a second term. He said it was his "last duty... to do everything to ensure that France is not convinced by such a plan" of taking the country out of the EU.

Meanwhile, former French prime minister Alain Juppe ruled out a run for the French presidency yesterday, boosting embattled rightwing party colleague Francois Fillon whose campaign has been thrown into chaos by a fake job scandal.

Juppe, 71, was the most likely candidate to replace Fillon and try to unite their deeply divided Republicans party only seven weeks from the start of the two-stage election. Polls suggest Juppe would be more popular with voters, but the centrist is considered too soft on immigration and other social issues for many of Fillon's supporters and the right flank of the party. "I confirm for a final time that I will not be a candidate to be president of the republic," Juppe said in a downbeat statement that criticised Fillon and said France was "sick" and suffering from a "profound crisis of confidence."

FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION



Hollande Marine Le Pen Alain Juppe

US govt warns against annexing West Bank

Says Israeli minister; Palestinian killed in gunfight

AFP, Jerusalem
Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman said yesterday that the United States has warned that annexing the West Bank would lead to an "immediate crisis" with President Donald Trump's administration.

Lieberman sought to push back against those in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition calling for a declaration of Israeli sovereignty over all or part of the occupied territory. He said annexation would provoke a crisis with Washington and result in steep costs for the Israeli government since it would be required to provide services to Palestinians in the West Bank. "We have received a very clear, direct message from the United States stating that the application of Israeli law in Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) would provoke an immediate crisis with the new administration," Lieberman said before a parliamentary committee. Some 2.6 million Palestinians live in the West Bank, which Israel occupied in 1967.

The latest call for annexation came on Sunday, when lawmaker Miki Zohar from Netanyahu's Likud party said in a television interview that "the two-state solution is dead". Zohar advocated a single state, but said that Palestinians in the West Bank should not be allowed to vote in Israeli parliamentary elections.

Others have made similar calls, including Education Minister Naftali Bennett who heads the religious nationalist Jewish Home party. In his comments yesterday, Lieberman also laid out an economic argument against annexation, saying Israel immediately "will be required to spend 20 billion shekels" on various social services. Meanwhile, a Palestinian was killed in an exchange of fire with Israeli troops in the West Bank city of Ramallah, the Israeli army said yesterday. The man, identified by Israeli police as 31-year-old Bassel al-Aaraj, was shot dead after opening fire on soldiers who came to arrest him at his home on Sunday night.



China hikes defence budget to \$152b

PTI, Beijing
China has hiked its military spending by seven percent to \$152 billion, about three times higher than that of India, as Beijing braced for countering America's push into the disputed South China Sea.

After skipping the customary mention of the figures of defence spending in the work report submitted by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to lawmakers on Sunday, state-run Xinhua news agency yesterday announced that the military budget for this year stands at 1.04 trillion yuan (\$152 billion). China's defence budget for 2017 will grow seven percent from the actual figure in 2016, Xinhua quoted an official with ministry of finance as saying yesterday.

"The country's military spending this year will stand at 1.04 trillion yuan (about US 152 billion) with 1.02 trillion yuan from the central budget," the Xinhua report said. This is the first time that China's military spending crossed a trillion yuan. Last year China's military spending was 954.35 billion yuan, a 7.6 percent increase from 2015. China's defence budget is about three times higher than India's \$53.5 billion.

There was no explanation about why the amount of the annual defence spending was not mentioned in Li's annual work report to the National People's Congress (NPC) on Sunday. On March 4, NPC spokesperson Fu Ying said China's defence budget will be increased by seven percent accounting for 1.3 percent of the country's GDP, compared with Nato members' pledge to dedicate at least two percent of GDP to



A Palestinian woman reacts as she sits next to the rubble of her house after it was demolished by the Israeli army as it did not have an Israeli-issued construction permit, in the West Bank city of Hebron yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Sort Afghan 'mess' or Russia will

Pak army to US

TNN, New Delhi

Pakistan's military has told Washington to sort out the "total mess" in Afghanistan because not doing so might tempt Russia to stage a Syrian-style intervention in their country, reported British newspaper The Telegraph, quoting a high-level Pakistani army source. The source is convinced that if ISIS leaves or is pushed out of Syria and Iraq, "the next place for them to gather in is Afghanistan." And the alleged collapse in security since the beginning of the withdrawal of Western troops from Afghanistan - following a 16-year-old partially successful campaign - has meant the West now faced "losing control", the source added, in the article published yesterday.

This is the "total mess" that Russia could use as an excuse to extend military operations into Afghanistan, said the senior Pakistan army source who didn't wish to be named, to The Telegraph. As it is, many in the Russia government fear the West is using ISIS as "a plot to destabilise its backyard" in Central Asia. In fact, Russia last month held a conference on Afghanistan, along with China, India, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. Some analysts said this signalled Russia's intention to play a more active role in AfPak. The Pakistan army source said that in a meeting last month with the 'Resolute Support Mission' commander US General John Nicholson, the American admitted that Afghan forces were in a stalemate against the Taliban. To that, Pakistani army officials told Nicholson: "A stalemate is still a win for the Taliban." The source added to The Telegraph: "We have told General (James) Mattis that Afghanistan is slipping out of control, and that if things are not put right, America will have a huge crisis on its hands." Mattis is

Robots sent to Fukushima nuke site just keep dying

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The Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco), which oversees management of the site, needs to ascertain the location and size of the leakages before the clean-up can begin in earnest.

The radiation levels on the site are far higher than any human could possibly survive, so engineers are using purpose-built "scorpion" robots with cameras attached to survey the scale of the damage. The latest attempt to harvest data on Fukushima failed after a robot designed by Toshiba to withstand high radiation levels died five times faster than expected.

The robot was supposed to be able to cope with 73 sieverts of radiation, but the radiation level inside the reactor was recently recorded at 530 sieverts. A single dose of one sievert is enough to cause radiation sickness and nausea.



Myanmar rebel clashes leave 30 dead

AFP, Yangon
At least 30 people were killed yesterday in a day of intense fighting in a town on Myanmar's border with China, authorities said, after rebels dressed in police uniforms launched a surprise raid.

Artillery and small arms fire continued throughout the day in Laukkai, a main town in the Kokang region of the northeastern state of Shan. The clashes are some of the worst to break out in the Chinese-speaking Kokang region since fighting in 2015 left scores dead and forced tens of thousands to flee across the border into China.

Myanmar is already torn by various ethnic insurgencies. But the Kokang conflict has raised tensions with its giant neighbour.

FBI chief rejects Trump wiretap accusation

REUTERS, Washington
The former top US intelligence official rejected President Donald Trump's accusation that his predecessor, Barack Obama, wiretapped him even as the White House on Sunday urged Congress to investigate Trump's allegation.

The New York Times reported on Sunday that FBI Director James Comey asked the Justice Department this weekend to reject Trump's wiretapping claim because it was false and must be corrected, but the department had not done so. The report cited senior US officials. The White House asked Congress, controlled by Trump's fellow Republicans, to examine whether the Obama administration abused its investigative authority during the 2016 US presidential campaign, as part of an ongoing congressional probe into Russia's influence on the election. Trump on Saturday alleged, without offering supporting evidence, that Obama ordered a wiretap of the phones at Trump's campaign headquarters in Trump Tower in New York. "There was no such wiretap activity mounted against the president-elect at the time, or as a candidate or against his campaign," former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, who left his post at the end of Obama's term in office in January, said on NBC's "Meet the Press." Under US law, a federal court would have to have found probable cause that the target of the surveillance is an "agent of a foreign power" in order to approve a warrant authorizing electronic surveillance of Trump Tower. Asked whether there was such a court order, Clapper said, "I can deny it." Democrats accused Trump of trying to distract from the rising controversy about possible ties to Russia. His administration has come under pressure from FBI and congressional investigations into contacts

