



Supporters of India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) celebrate after learning of the initial poll results outside the party office in Kolkata yesterday. Inset: A supporter of BJP celebrates outside the party headquarters in New Delhi. PHOTO: REUTERS

'Modi, only Modi, is reason for victories

Says Amit Shah, Rahul greets Modi

AGENCIES

A beaming Amit Shah called the BJP's big victories in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand "the victories of Narendra Modi's leadership."

"It is now proven that since Independence, Modiji is the most popular prime minister of this country...the poor of the country love him," Shah said, unequivocally.

Shah also said victories in these states are "the most defining victories for the BJP since the division of the states" and "all due to Modi's pro-poor schemes and pro-development and pro-performance agenda."

Demonetisation, he claimed, had absolutely no negative role to play in the elections. "In fact this proves the masses and the poor of India are on the side of demonetization," he said.

"Akhilesh Yadav and Rahul Gandhi thoroughly criticized the note ban at every rally, but it has been proved that the people stand together with the PM on demonetization," Shah said.

The BJP President also said this is a "great, new era for UP since independence", an era when he believes UP will "grow like never before."

Meanwhile, Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi today congratulated Modi for the BJP's victories in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. What's more, PM Modi gave a solicitous reply to Rahul's wishes.

"I congratulate Shri Narendra Modi and the BJP on their victory in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand," Rahul tweeted yesterday after trends pointed to a resounding win for the saffron party in both states.

Immediately after Rahul's tweet, the prime minister said this in reply: "Thank you. Long live democracy."

It remains to be seen if this cordial exchange of greetings heralds a new phase in Modi and Rahul's relationship, which has been fraught with animosity and name-calling in the run-up to assembly polls in five states.

Maoist rebels kill 11 cops in Indian state

REUTERS, Bhubaneswar

Maoist rebels yesterday ambushed a paramilitary patrol in India's eastern Chhattisgarh state, killing 11 policemen, regional police said.

The attack on the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel took place in the forested area of Sukma district, a known area of Maoist activity, about 400 kms from the state capital, Raipur.

"Around 100 CRPF personnel had gone to provide security to ongoing road construction work when the Maoists ambushed them," Inspector General of Police Sunder Raj P. told Reuters.

Four policemen sustained injuries in the attack, he said.

Maoist rebels accuse the Indian government of plundering the mineral rich and underdeveloped east and central regions of the country at the expenses of the poor and landless among whom they draw support.

The level of Maoist violence, however, has fallen in recent years.

NEWS IN brief



Married men to become priests!

CNN ONLINE

Pope Francis has said he is open to married men becoming priests to combat the Roman Catholic Church's shortage of clergy. In an interview with German newspaper Die Zeit, Pope Francis said the lack of Catholic priests was an "enormous problem" for the Church, and indicated he would be open to a change in the rules governing eligibility for the priesthood.

India test-fires BrahMos missile

PTI, Balasore

India yesterday successfully test-fired the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, which is capable of carrying a warhead of 300 kg, from a test range along the Odisha coast. The cruise missile was test fired from a mobile launcher from the Integrated Test Range (ITR) at Chandipur near here at about 11.33am, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) officials said.



Manipur's 'Iron Lady' quits politics

AGENCIES

Manipur's 'Iron Lady' Irom Sharmila has reportedly decided to quit politics. The activist-turned-politician decided to enter politics after ending her 16-year-long fast against military rule in August 2016. She announced her decision to contest the Assembly elections in the state against incumbent chief minister Okram Ibobi Singh in Thoubal constituency. She suffered a crushing defeat by a margin of 15,000 votes. Irom Sharmila could muster less than 100 votes.

Air strike kills 26 in Yemen

AFP, Aden

An air strike by a Saudi-led Arab coalition on a market in Yemen killed 20 civilians and six rebels on Friday, medical and military sources said. The aircraft tried to target rebels at a roadblock on the southern outskirts of the Red Sea port of Khokha, but the fighters fled to a market where they were attacked, the sources said.

Trump suffers first legal blow

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump's revamped travel ban is facing its first major legal setback, after a federal judge halted enforcement of the directive that would deny US entry to the wife and child of a Syrian refugee already granted asylum.

In a preliminary restraining order issued Friday that applies only to the Syrian man and his family, US District Judge William Conley in Wisconsin said the plaintiff "is at great risk of suffering irreparable harm" if the directive is carried out.

The man chose to remain anonymous because his wife and child are still living in war-ravaged Aleppo.

The order marked the first ruling against the revised directive, which temporarily closes US borders to all refugees and citizens from six mainly-Muslim countries.

It denies US entry to all refugees for 120 days and halts for 90 days the

granting of visas to nationals from Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Yemen and Sudan.

The new order, unveiled Monday, is due to go into effect March 16. Lifting an indefinite Syrian refugee travel ban and reducing the number of black-listed countries by removing Iraq, it replaces a previous iteration issued in January that was blocked in federal court.

NEW TRAVEL BAN TO US

COConley set a hearing for March 21.

In another legal challenge, the American Civil Liberties Union filed a complaint on behalf of several refugee assistance groups over the controversial executive order.

Separately, a federal judge in Seattle who issued a nationwide halt to Trump's original travel restrictions denied a motion to have the same ruling apply to the modified measures,

saying at least one of the parties must first file additional court papers.

The state of Maryland said it would join Monday the suit filed by the attorney general from Washington state, which also has the support of Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York and Oregon.

The state of Hawaii has filed a separate complaint, and a hearing in that case on whether to impose a national restraining order is set for March 15 as well.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration on Friday moved to clean house at the Justice Department, demanding the resignations of 46 federal prosecutors appointed during the two terms of his predecessor Barack Obama.

Justice Department spokeswoman Sarah Isgur Flores said Attorney General Jeff Session had asked "all remaining 46 presidentially appointed US Attorneys to tender their resignations in order to ensure a uniform transition."



Mohammad Mohiedine Anis, 70, smokes his pipe as he sits in his destroyed bedroom listening to music on his vinyl player in Aleppo's formerly rebel-held al-Shaar neighbourhood. PHOTO: AFP

Mass grave of hundreds found in Mosul prison

Iraq says no sign of IS chemical weapons use

AGENCIES

Iraqi paramilitary forces announced Saturday that they had discovered a mass grave at Badush prison near Mosul containing the remains of hundreds of people executed by the Islamic State group.

IS reportedly killed up to 600 people after seizing the jail in 2014, and was also said to have held hundreds of kidnapped women from Iraq's Yazidi minority at the facility.

The Iraqi military said that forces from the Hashed al-Shaabi -- an umbrella group of pro-government forces that are dominated by Iran-backed Shiite militias -- were among the units that recaptured the prison from the jihadists.

Hashed forces found "a large mass grave containing the remains of around 500 civilian prisoners in (Badush) prison who were executed by (IS) gangs after they controlled the prison during their occupation of Mosul," they said.

According to HRW, IS gunmen executed up to 600 inmates from Badush prison on June 10, 2014, forcing them to kneel along a nearby ravine and then shooting them with assault rifles.

Meanwhile, Iraq's UN envoy said Friday there was no evidence that the Islamic State group had used chemical weapons in the battle for Mosul.

Ambassador Mohamed Alhakim said he conveyed the information to the United Nations after speaking with his government in Baghdad on Friday.

"There is really no evidence that Daesh has used this chemical weapon," Alhakim told reporters ahead of a Security Council meeting on Iraq. Daesh is the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State (IS).

The Red Cross had reported that seven people, five of them children, had been hospitalized near Mosul in early March suffering from exposure to a chemical agent.

'Nazi remnants, fascists' Says Erdogan as Dutch PM bars Turkish FM in escalation of rally row

FM in escalation of rally row

REUTERS, Ankara/rotterdam

The Netherlands barred Turkey's foreign minister from landing in Rotterdam yesterday in a row over Ankara's political campaigning among Turkish emigres, and President Tayyip Erdogan retaliated, branding his Nato partner a "Nazi remnant".

The extraordinary incident came hours after Mevlut Cavusoglu declared he would fly to Rotterdam despite being banned from a rally there to marshal support for sweeping new powers Erdogan seeks. Europe, he said, must be rid of its "boss-like attitude".

Cavusoglu, who was barred from a similar meeting in Hamburg last week but spoke instead from the Turkish consulate, accused the Dutch of treating the many Turkish citizens in the country like "hostages", cutting them off from Ankara.

Cavusoglu threatened harsh economic and political sanctions if the Dutch refused him entry, a threat that proved decisive for the Netherlands government.

It cited public order and security concerns in withdrawing landing rights for Cavusoglu's flight. But it said the sanctions threat made the search for a reasonable solution impossible.

Four planned Turkish rallies in Austria and one in Switzerland have also been cancelled in the dispute.

"Listen Netherlands, you'll jump once, you'll jump twice, but my people will thwart your game," Erdogan said at a rally. "You can cancel our foreign minister's flight as much as you want, but let's see how your flights come to Turkey now."

"They don't know diplomacy or politics. They are Nazi remnants. They are fascists."

Dutch Prime Minister Rutte called his reference to Nazis and Fascists "a crazy remark of course".

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose country Erdogan compared last week with Nazi Germany, has said she will do everything possible to prevent any spillover of Turkish political tensions onto German soil.



Rutte



Erdogan

Trump invites Abbas to White House

AFP, Ramallah

Donald Trump on Friday invited Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas to visit the White House sometime soon, both sides said after the first phone call between the pair since the US president took office in January.

Trump invited Abbas "to visit the White House soon to discuss ways to resume the (Palestinian-Israeli) political process," the official Palestinian news agency Wafa quoted Abbas's spokesman as saying.

The spokesman, Nabil Abu Rudeina, said that Trump stressed his "commitment to a peace process that would lead to a real peace between Palestinians and Israelis", Wafa reported.

In Washington, the White House said Trump "emphasised his personal belief that peace is possible and that the time has come to



Protesters hold candles as they celebrate the impeachment of South Korea's ousted leader Park Geun-hye (inset) at a rally in Seoul, South Korea, yesterday. Park Geun-Hye was holed up in the presidential Blue House yesterday as protesters took to Seoul's streets demanding her arrest, a day after a court upheld her impeachment. PHOTO: REUTERS

Potatoes on Mars?

AFP, Lima

Potatoes on Mars? Scientists are reporting promising results growing the tuber under conditions that mimic the Red Planet in an experiment in Peru linked to US space agency Nasa.

"Preliminary results are positive," the International Potato Center (CIP) said this week after a potato grew under simulated Mars atmospheric conditions in an experiment in Lima.

The CIP, in a report, said a potato was planted in a specially constructed CubeSat contained environment built by engineers from the University of Engineering and Technology in Lima.

The experiment ran from February 14 to March 5.

"Growing crops under Mars-like conditions is an important phase of this experiment," said Julio Valdivia-Silva, a Peruvian astrobiologist at UTEC in Lima who previously worked at Nasa.

"If the crops can tolerate the extreme conditions that we are exposing them to in our CubeSat, they have a good chance to grow on Mars," he said, adding that several rounds of experiments will be conducted to find out which potato varieties do best.

Potatoes, one of the world's largest food crops, are believed to have first been cultivated by the Inca Indians in Peru around 8,000 to 5,000 BC.

The potential ability of potatoes to grow under such conditions could signal promise for food supplies under climate change and extreme environments.

The custom environment for the Potatoes on Mars project was based upon designs and advice provided by Nasa.

The CIP experiment is set to last five years.



make a deal."

"The president noted that the United States cannot impose a solution on the Israelis and Palestinians, nor can one side impose an agreement on the other," said a statement from Trump's spokesman Sean Spicer.

"The president invited president Abbas to a meeting at the White House in the near future."

Trump received Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House in mid-February.

At that meeting, Trump broke with decades of US policy by saying he was not bound to the two-state solution for ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.