

NEWS IN brief

Bus in Haiti flees accident, kills 38

AFP, Gonaives
A bus speeding away from a hit-and-run accident plowed into dozens of street musicians in northern Haiti on Sunday, killing 38 people, officials said. Another 13 people were injured in the crash which took place just before 4 am in Gonaives, a city of some 300,000 people located about 150 kilometers (90 miles) northwest of the capital Port-au-Prince.

Palestinian 'attacker' killed by Israeli forces

AFP, Jerusalem
Israeli police yesterday killed a Palestinian who attacked and wounded two border guards with a knife near an entrance to the Old City in occupied east Jerusalem, police said. A wave of violence that broke out in October 2015 has killed 255 Palestinians, 40 Israelis, two Americans, one Jordanian, an Eritrean and a Sudanese national, according to an AFP count.

Trump-Xi meeting planned in April

REUTERS, Washington
US President Donald Trump is planning to host Chinese President Xi Jinping at a two-day summit next month at his Florida Mar-a-Lago resort, US online media outlet Axios reported yesterday, citing officials familiar with the plans. The two-day meeting is tentatively scheduled for April 6-7, the US media outlet reported.

Nepal reports severe H5N8 bird flu on farm

REUTERS, Paris
Nepal has reported firmed an outbreak of severe H5N8 bird flu on a poultry farm in the Koshi region, the World Organisation for Animal Health said yesterday. The virus killed 3,650 of the 6,200 hens exposed, with the remaining animals culled, the Paris-based OIE said.

Car bomb kills 13 in Somali capital: report

REUTERS, Mogadishu
A car bomb near a hotel on a busy street in the Somali capital killed at least 13 people yesterday, police and the emergency medical services said, hours after a man was killed by a blast as he tried to ram through a checkpoint. Police said the blast damaged a house on Maka al Mukaram street but did not destroy its target, the Wehlye Hotel. "We have carried 13 dead people and 14 others are injured. The death toll may rise further," Abdikadir Abdurahman, director of aid-funded Aamin Ambulance services, told Reuters. A spokesman for Somali Islamist insurgent group al Shabaab claimed the attack.



Survivors walk after a blast in Kabul, Afghanistan yesterday. A powerful explosion struck a bus in downtown Kabul during rush hour yesterday, officials said, sending smoke rising in the sky just days after a deadly insurgent assault on Afghanistan's biggest military hospital. At least one woman was killed and eight other people were wounded, the interior ministry said. No group has so far claimed responsibility for the blast.

RUSSIA-TURKEY-BACKED PEACE INITIATIVE

Syria rebels won't attend Astana talks

AFP, Beirut
Syrian rebel factions will not attend a new round of negotiations with government figures in the Kazakh capital, an opposition delegation spokesman told AFP yesterday. "Rebel groups have decided not to participate in Astana," said Osama Abu Zeid, saying one reason for the boycott was "unfulfilled pledges related to the cessation of hostilities." The third round of talks in Astana, sponsored by government ally Russia and rebel backer Turkey, is scheduled to begin today. The Astana track has aimed to reinforce a fragile ceasefire deal brokered by Moscow and Ankara in December. "We decided not to participate in Astana because the reinforcement of the ceasefire was not implemented," said Ahmad Othman, commander of the Ankara-backed Sultan Murad rebel group. "The regime and the militias are continuing to bomb, displace, and besiege," he told AFP, saying rebel groups had informed the talks' sponsors of their decision. According to Syrian daily Al-Watan, which is close to the government, the regime's delegation was scheduled to arrive in Astana. The delegation will be headed once again by Syria's representative to the UN Bashar al-Jaafari, who has also led the government's representatives in parallel UN-backed talks in Geneva. A fresh round of negotiations in Switzerland is set to begin on March 23 and will focus on governance, constitutional process, elections, counter-terrorism and possibly

Sri Lanka seeks two more years to deliver war probe

AFP, Colombo
Sri Lanka has asked the United Nations for two more years to investigate war crimes as a previous deadline lapses, Colombo said yesterday, fuelling international concerns of a "worryingly slow" probe. A UN Human Rights Council resolution in October 2015 granted Sri Lanka 18 months to establish a credible investigation into abuses committed during the island's 37-year ethnic war. Allegations include claims government forces killed up to 40,000 Tamil civilians in the final months of fighting, which ended in May 2009. At least 100,000 people were killed during the separatist war between government forces and rebels from the Tamil Tigers group, with atrocities recorded by both sides. However, despite President Maithripala Sirisena agreeing to the UN resolution, Sri Lanka has so far failed to instigate an inquiry. Colombo now risks censure from the Human Rights Council, which could report Sri Lanka to the UN Security Council for punitive action such as sanctions. The foreign ministry yesterday in a statement said it had sought more time at the Human Rights Council in Geneva to deliver on accountability and ethnic reconciliation. The request follows a damning 18-page report that UN human rights chief Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein unveiled earlier this month, expressing concern over "worryingly slow" progress by Colombo. Zeid recommended that Sri Lanka adopt laws allowing for special hybrid courts to try war criminals, a demand already rejected by Sirisena, who declared he would never prosecute his soldiers. Sirisena, a member of the majority Sinhalese community, received the support of the Tamil minority after promising accountability for excesses carried out by the largely Sinhalese military. But Sri Lanka's main opposition Tamil party has accused Sirisena of failing to deliver on accountability. The UN has acknowledged that Colombo made some positive advances on constitutional and legal reforms, limited land restitution and symbolic gestures towards reconciliation. But it cautioned that the measures taken so far had been "inadequate, lacked coordination and a sense of urgency".

New Brexit fallout hits UK

Scottish leader seeks new independence vote as EU divorce looms
AFP, London
The risks to Britain of its vote to leave the EU were laid bare yesterday when Scotland's nationalist government announced a new independence vote, pre-empting this week's expected start of the Brexit process. Prime Minister Theresa May could announce as early as today that she is triggering the Article 50 process of withdrawing from the European Union, putting Britain on course to leave by March 2019 after four decades of membership. Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has long warned that largely pro-European Scotland would not accept a damaging break with the EU -- and on Monday she made good on her threat. "I will now take the steps necessary to make sure that Scotland will have a choice at the end of this process," she said at a hastily convened press conference in Edinburgh. This would be "a choice of whether to follow the UK to a hard Brexit or to become an independent country, able to secure a real partnership of equals with the rest of the UK and our own relationship with Europe", she said. The Scottish National Party (SNP) leader said she would next week begin seeking authority for a vote between autumn 2018 and early 2019 -- before Britain leaves the EU. May's government has repeatedly made clear it does not believe there should be another vote after a first Scottish referendum in 2014 in which a majority voted against independence, and she has the power to block Sturgeon's request. "Another referendum would be divisive and cause huge economic uncertainty at the worst possible time," a Downing Street spokesman said. However, rejecting Sturgeon's request would likely only enrage the Scottish nationalists' cause -- and is a major headache for May as she enters Brexit negotiations with the other 27 EU member states. Sturgeon's announcement came just hours before legislation empowering May to trigger Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty returns to parliament for its final stages. After heated debate and a delay in the upper House of Lords, the bill could win final approval by both houses by yesterday evening. It could be signed into law by the head of state Queen Elizabeth II as early as today, leaving May's path clear to begin Brexit whenever she wants. May has promised to trigger Article 50 by the end of March, a timetable her spokesman said on Monday the government was "firmly on track to achieve". Once May has notified the EU of her decision by letter, the other 27 EU leaders will take just 48 hours to issue their first draft proposal for the negotiations. But talks are not expected to begin for months as both sides finalise strategies for two years of mammoth negotiations. Article 50 provides only two years for Britain to unravel four decades of membership and forged new trade ties when it leaves the single European



Indian revellers play with colours during Holi celebrations in Chennai, yesterday. The Hindu festival of Holi, or the 'Festival of Colours' heralds the arrival of spring and the end of winter.

BJP'S TRIUMPH IN INDIAN STATE POLLS

How wins may decide who'll be India's next president

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi
With India's ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's emphatic win in assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand states and impressive performance in Manipur, the question now: how is it going to impact the elections for a new president due in July. President Pranab Mukherjee, who was elected president five years ago, steps down on July 25 this year and BJP has a chance to install its own man or woman in the Rashtrapati Bhavan, the official residence of the Indian head of state. Under the Indian Constitution, the presidential election is held in accordance with the system of proportional representation and voting takes place by secret ballot. Unless there is a consensus, the president will be chosen by an electoral college consisting of lawmakers of both houses of parliament the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha and elected members of the legislative assemblies of 29 states plus the federally-administered territory of Delhi and Puducherry. There are 776 parliamentarians and 4,120 states' legislators and the total strength of the electoral college is 10, 98,882 votes and the majority mark is 5,49,442 votes. After its victory in UP where BJP and its allies have bagged 325 seats, in Uttarakhand where it has secured 57 seats, and a good show in Manipur where it has got 21 seats, BJP must have heaved a sigh of relief because it has made the saffron outfit's task of having its own president much easier. BJP party has emphatic majority in the Lok Sabha, the lower House of parliament, but lacks majority in the Rajya Sabha, the upper House. It is already in power on its own in 12 states including Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Haryana, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Assam and in partnership with another party in Jammu and Kashmir and Andhra Pradesh. Having won power in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, BJP has decisively moved to assume power in Goa and Manipur states despite finishing a close second behind Congress there by roping the support of smaller regional parties and independent legislators. This will clearly propel the party into a more comfortable position to ensure the victory for its candidate in the presidential elections. But that may not be sufficient given the complex calculus of the presidential election. In the electoral college, each vote also has a weightage or value depending on the size of the population he or she represents. Lawmakers have the highest value (708) for each vote while the value of a state legislator's vote depends on the population of the state. Uttar Pradesh, which is the most populous state with a population of 220 million, has higher weightage than any other state. The value of a UP legislator's vote (208) is the highest. So, the win in UP, which has 83,824 votes in the presidential election, will definitely come handy for BJP in the presidential polls. UP, Goa, Uttarakhand, Punjab and Manipur together account for 1,03,756 votes in Presidential poll. At present, BJP is short of the required number of votes to push through its own candidate as president. Before the recent elections in the five states, it was estimated that BJP and its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) allies were short by about 75,000 votes to win the presidential election. However, post-assembly polls, BJP is expected to add 63,000 votes to its bag. It remains to be seen how BJP manages to bridge the deficit in the number game. Political circles in Delhi are abuzz with speculation that BJP may seek the help of regional outfits like Biju Janata Dal, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and Telangana Rashtra Samiti which are in power in Odisha, Tamil Nadu and Telangana states respectively to make up for the gap. Also falling vacant in August is the Indian vice president's office with incumbent Mohammed Hamid Ansari who will also complete his second five-year term in office. While BJP is certain to nominate one of their own for the post of president, the post of VP could be used by the party to trade off with an NDA ally. To have President of its choice will help BJP to get turn into laws Bills passed by parliament smoothly and also in politically-sensitive situations like imposing federal rule in a state ruled by parties opposed to BJP, say analysts who point to the Indian



MOSUL OFFENSIVE

Forces gain more grounds

Islamic State fighters 'trapped' after last road cut
AFP, Mosul
Iraqi forces yesterday said they had taken more territory from the Islamic State group as they press an offensive that has seen them recapture a third of west Mosul and trap jihadists inside. A renewed push launched on March 5 has forced IS out of several neighbourhoods and key sites, including the main local government headquarters and the famed Mosul museum, tightening the noose around fighters there. West Mosul is the most-populated urban area still held by the jihadists, followed by Syria's Raqi, which is also a key target in the US-led anti-IS campaign. Iraq's Joint Operations Command announced additional gains yesterday, saying that forces from the elite Counter-Terrorism Service had recaptured west Mosul's Al-Nafat neighbourhood. Lieutenant General Raed Shakir Jawdat said that forces from the Rapid Response Division, another special forces unit, and the federal police were working to search and clear territory on the edge of Mosul's Old City. The forces are conducting "combing and search operations in the liberated areas of Bab al-Toub, searching for traps and mines and terrorists hiding among the people," Jawdat said in a statement. Mosul's Old City -- a warren of narrow streets and closely spaced buildings where hundreds of thousands of civilians are believed to still reside -- could see some of the toughest fighting of the campaign to retake Iraq's second city. While CTS and Rapid Response are spearheading the advance inside Mosul, Iraqi army forces and pro-government paramilitaries are fighting IS to the west. Soldiers from the 9th Armoured Division scored a key victory on Saturday night when they cut the last road out of west Mosul, said Brett McGurk, the US envoy to the international anti-IS coalition. "Any of the fighters who are left in Mosul, they're going to die there, because they're trapped," McGurk told journalists in Baghdad.

Indian FM gets charge of defence ministry

Parrikar resigns to take charge as Goa CM; BJP crosses magic mark in Manipur
PTI, New Delhi
Indian Finance Minister Arun Jaitley was given the additional charge of the defence ministry yesterday after Manohar Parrikar resigned to take on the new role of Goa chief minister. A Rashtrapati Bhawan communique said that the resignation of Parrikar as the defence minister, on advice of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has been accepted with immediate effect. Parrikar submitted his resignation after BJP staked claim to form an alliance government in Goa. He will be sworn in as the chief minister of Goa today heading the BJP-led ministry which has the support of regional outfits and Independents. Meanwhile, BJP submitted a list of 32 MLAs -- claiming a majority of two in Manipur's 60-member assembly -- to governor Najma Heptulla on Sunday and furnished letters of support from regional parties. BJP, which won 21 seats, claimed the support of National People's Party (4 MLAs), Naga People's Front (4), LJP (1) and two others -- lone independent Ashab Uddin and T Robindro Singh, who was elected on a Trinamool ticket. CM Ibobi Singh too met the governor and staked his claim. BJP meanwhile announced the name of Nongthombam Biren Singh as its chief ministerial pick for the state of Manipur.