

NEWSIN brief

Kim Jong-Nam's identity confirmed

Malaysia used a DNA sample from one of Kim Jong-Nam's children to confirm the identity of the assassinated half-brother of North Korea's leader Kim Jong-Un, the deputy prime minister said yesterday. The 45-year-old was poisoned with the deadly nerve agent VX in a brazen Cold War-style assassination on February 13 in Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

Irish woman killed in Goa: police

Indian police yesterday said they had launched a murder investigation after a young Irish woman was found dead in the popular tourist state of Goa. The 28-year-old's body was discovered in a field on Tuesday morning and an autopsy is being conducted to ascertain whether she was sexually assaulted, police told AFP.

Pakistan launches first census in 19 yrs

Pakistan yesterday launched its first census in nearly two decades, with security high as thousands of enumerators backed by the military began the enormous, politically-charged count. The weeks-long process, a challenge in a country known for corruption and dysfunction, will deploy a team of more than 300,000 people and involve 55 million forms.

Manipur gets BJP CM

Ending 15 years of Congress rule in Manipur, BJP leader Nongthombam Biren Singh was sworn in as the state's chief minister in Imphal yesterday. This is the first time the BJP has come to power in the north-eastern state.



Netherlands' far-right politician Geert Wilders (C) of the Freedom Party (PVV) arrives at a polling station to cast his ballot for Dutch general elections in The Hague, yesterday.

Europe watches as Dutch vote

Millions of Dutch flocked to the polls yesterday in a test of the "patriotic revolution" promised by far-right MP Geert Wilders, with Europe closely watching the outcome amid signs his support may be waning. Following last year's shock Brexit referendum, and Donald Trump's victory in the US, the Dutch vote is seen as a gauge of populism on the continent ahead of key elections in France and Germany this year. The Dutch election has also been gatecrashed by an explosive row with Turkey. Wilders voted in a school in The Hague, mobbed by hundreds of reporters, as final polls suggested he was trailing the Liberal VVD party of outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte. "Whatever the outcome of the election today, the genie will not go back into the bottle. And this patriotic revolution, whether today or tomorrow, will stay," Wilders said. Polls close at 2000 GMT, with exit polls expected shortly after. On a warm spring day, queues began swelling early and the research institute IPSOS said turnout was already "a lot" higher than at the same point in 2012 when final participation was 74 percent. Amid the tussle between Rutte and Wilders, many of the 12.9 million eligible voters had been wavering between the 28 parties running. Wilders has pledged to close the borders to Muslim immigrants, shut mosques, ban sales of the Koran and leave the EU.

'Fascism' rampant in Europe

Says Erdogan; EU says Turkey 'detached from reality'

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday said the "spirit of fascism" was running rampant in Europe, as pro-Nazis hackers defaced top Twitter accounts in an escalating crisis. Turkey and the European Union have become embroiled in an explosive crisis after key EU members The Netherlands and Germany blocked Turkish ministers from holding rallies to back constitutional changes expanding Erdogan's powers in an April 16 referendum. Erdogan has repeatedly accused the two countries of behaving like "Nazis", comments that have left The Hague and Berlin aghast and prompted warnings from Brussels for the Turkish strongman to show moderation. EU chiefs yesterday blasted his comments as "detached from reality" and incompatible with Turkey's ambitions to join the bloc.

Several top Twitter accounts -- ranging from Germany's Borussia Dortmund football club, tennis legend Boris Becker, Amnesty International, the French economy ministry and BBC North America -- were defaced by pro-Turkey hackers with a message slamming "Nazi Germany" and "Nazi Holland." "#NaziGermany. #NaziHolland. This is a small #Ottomanslap for you. See you on #April16. I wrote what? Learn Turkish." The message also featured a swastika and was followed by a video showing extracts of Erdogan speeches. According to legend, an Ottoman slap was a beheaded technique used in the Ottoman army that was strong enough to kill an opponent on the spot. Twitter confirmed the attack. There was no immediate claim for the current mass cyberattack. Turkey has suspended high-level relations with The Netherlands and blocked its ambassador -- currently outside the country -- from returning to his post.

DEVELOPMENTS
PRO-ERDOGAN HACKERS LAUNCH TWITTER ATTACK
GERMANY WARNS AGAINST NATO BREAK WITH TURKEY



But far from stepping back, Erdogan ratcheted up his rhetoric a further notch, comparing the treatment of non-Europeans in Europe to that of the Jews in World War II and pointing to the rise of far-right populist politicians on the continent. "The spirit of fascism is running wild on the streets of Europe," Erdogan said in a televised speech. "Europe is heading towards being drowned in its own fears," Erdogan said. "Turkophobia is mounting. Islamophobia is mounting. They are even scared of migrants who take shelter there."

Many in The Netherlands -- a country bombed and occupied by the Nazis in World War II -- were hugely offended by Erdogan's comment that the country still had "vestiges of the Nazis". Analysts believe Erdogan is exploiting the crisis to bring out nationalist votes and ensure victory in the April 16 referendum on the new constitution that opponents fear will create one-man rule in Turkey.

Nearly 100,000 fled in 3 weeks as fighting rages

BATTLE FOR WEST MOSUL

Nearly 100,000 people have poured out of west Mosul in less than three weeks as Iraqi forces fought to retake the area from jihadists, the International Organization for Migration said yesterday. Iraqi security forces launched a major push last month to recapture west Mosul, which is the most populated urban area still held by the Islamic State group, with an estimated 750,000 residents when the battle began. Iraqi special forces units and police have made steady progress in the area, forcing IS out of a series of neighbourhoods and retaking important sites such as the airport, Mosul museum, train station and provincial government headquarters.

It marks an increase of around 17,000 from the displacement figure the IOM released the previous day, though this does not necessarily indicate that all of those additional people fled in the past 24 hours. The IOM also said that Iraqi government figures indicated a total of more than 116,000 people from west Mosul had gone through a screening site south of the city. IS overran large areas north and west of Baghdad in 2014, but Iraqi forces backed by US-led air strikes have since retaken most of the territory they lost, launching the operation to retake Mosul -- the country's last IS-held city -- in October.



FRESH CLASHES ON MYANMAR'S CHINA BORDER

Dozens more killed

Raging battles on Myanmar's border with China have claimed dozens more lives, military and official sources said yesterday, as the mounting death toll landed a fresh blow to the government's faltering peace process. Fighting broke out between troops and ethnic minority rebels in the Chinese-speaking Kokang border region in northeastern Shan State this month when insurgents dressed in police uniforms launched a surprise raid on security forces. Thousands of people have since fled to China to escape the ensuing gun battles, artillery strikes and fires, leaving Laukkai deserted. Military sources said 28 civilians and police have been killed, while the commander in chief's office has reported at least 46 insurgents have also died. Three more rebels were killed on Wednesday during an army offensive in which "some military officers and other (lower) rank soldiers were killed and injured," it added. State media reported on Tuesday that "dozens of soldiers" had also been killed in the escalating clashes. The bloodshed has threatened to derail de facto leader Suu Kyi's efforts to seal a peace deal with Myanmar's ethnic minorities, some of which have been fighting the state for decades. The UN said at least 50,000 people have fled their homes in Shan and Kachin States since September to escape some of the worst violence to grip Myanmar's restive border regions for decades.



Members of the Syrian civil defence, known as the White Helmets, remove a victim from the rubble of a destroyed building following a reported air strike in the northwestern city of Idlib, yesterday. At least 14 children were among 20 people killed in the air strike at dawn, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor said.

EU chief warns against Brexit deal 'threats'

The European Union will not bow to British "threats" that it is prepared to walk away from Brexit talks without a deal, the bloc's president, Donald Tusk, said yesterday. Tusk said Britain would come off worse than the 27 other EU members if the two-year negotiation process ended without an agreement on the terms of its departure. "We will not be intimidated by threats and I can assure you they simply will not work," Tusk told the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France. "The claims, increasingly taking the form of threats, that no agreement will be good for the UK and bad for the EU, need to be addressed," Tusk said. "I want to be clear that a no-deal scenario would be bad for everyone but above all for the UK." British Prime Minister Theresa May said in January that she was ready to leave the EU without a deal on future relations if necessary. "While I am sure a positive agreement can be reached -- I am equally clear that no deal for Britain is better than a bad deal for Britain," she said in a speech. The UK Brexit minister David Davis tried to play down the row yesterday, telling a parliamentary committee in London that despite some "sharp" remarks, the EU president had emphasised that Britain was a friend. Brussels is increasingly on edge as it waits for May to formally trigger the two-year Brexit process, which she has promised to do by the end of March. The EU says it wants to sort out Britain's bill for leaving, the rights of EU citizens and the border in Northern Ireland, before moving on to talks about a future trade deal.



Top US envoy begins first Asia tour

Washington's top diplomat arrived in Tokyo yesterday to kick off a first tour of Asian capitals under the shadow of North Korea's nuclear posturing. An airplane carrying Secretary of State Rex Tillerson landed at the capital's Haneda airport, greeted by both Japanese and US officials. Tillerson has promised to take a tough line on Kim Jong-un's isolated regime as he talks to allies Japan and South Korea and to rival great power China. The former oilman will also talk commerce, after President Donald Trump's belligerent campaign rhetoric raised the spectre of a trade war between the United States and China. But US officials confirmed North Korea's provocative behaviour would be "front and centre" as Tillerson meets Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida. After Tokyo, it will be on to Seoul, a city already within range of North Korea's artillery and rocket batteries, for talks with the acting leader after a corruption scandal saw President Park Geun-Hye ousted last week. And then at the weekend, there will be his much anticipated trip to Beijing, amid reports that Tillerson will seek to finalise plans for Chinese leader Xi Jinping to visit Trump in April.

'My wife deserves a medal'

Says now famous BBC interview dad after racism row

The professor who became an incidental internet sensation when his family crashed a live television interview says his wife "deserves a medal" for looking after him and his now-famous children. Video of the interview with Robert Kelly, an expert on East Asian affairs, went viral and sparked a debate about racism after many commentators originally assumed his Asian wife was a hired helper. As Kelly, a professor at South Korea's Pusan National University, shared his insights from his home office last Friday, his daughter Marion waltzed into the room, followed by his toddler son James, who wheeled in on his baby walker. Kelly's wife Kim Jung-A, who was watching the interview on television from their living room, flew in seconds later, flinging her arms in a desperate

attempt to retrieve the young intruders, before returning on all fours to reach out and close the door. The interview -- described as a "perfect piece of physical comedy" by the BBC -- spread like wildfire, watched more than 160 million times on the broadcaster's Youtube page as of Wednesday. But it also triggered accusations of discrimination in South Korea after some online posters overseas immediately assumed that Kelly's wife was a nanny. "The babysitter is currently searching for new employment as of now," said a user on Twitter. Another tweeted: "Nanny got fired after this." Major South Korean media outlets said such comments were the result of prejudice about Asian women with white males, with South Korean broadcaster SBS referring to "Caucasian-centred racism".



Girl, 3 militants killed during Kashmir firefight

A seven-year-old girl and three militants were killed in a shootout with government forces in Indian-administered Kashmir yesterday, police said. Soldiers and police surrounded a village in Kupwara district at dawn on the de-facto border that divides the disputed territory with Pakistan, believing armed militants were in the area. "Three terrorists were killed in the operation. Unfortunately, we also lost a girl during the encounter," police told AFP. The girl and a young boy were hit by stray bullets more than 100 metres from the firefight, Vaid added. The boy is in a stable condition in hospital, while a police officer was also being treated for injuries.

Pakistan set to get fifth province

Pakistan is planning to declare the strategic Gilgit-Baltistan region as the fifth province, a move that may raise concerns in India as it borders the disputed Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Pakistan's minister for inter-provincial coordination Riaz Hussain Pirzada told Geo TV that a committee headed by advisor of foreign affairs Sartaj Aziz had proposed giving the status of a province to Gilgit-Baltistan. "The committee recommended that Gilgit-Baltistan should be made a province of Pakistan," Pirzada said yesterday. He also said that a constitutional amendment would be made to change the status of the region, through which the \$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passes. Gilgit-Baltistan is treated as a separate geographical entity by Pakistan. It has a regional assembly and an elected chief minister. Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab and Sindh are four provinces of Pakistan. The move may raise concerns in India as the disputed region borders Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). It is believed that China's concerns about the unsettled status of Gilgit-Baltistan prompted Pakistan to change its status. According to an earlier report in Dawn newspaper, Pakistan was mulling to elevate the constitutional status of the region in a bid to provide legal cover to the CPEC.