

Six killed in Kashmir poll violence

AFP, Srinagar
Six civilians were killed in Indian-administered Kashmir yesterday when police opened fire at protesters who stormed polling stations during a by-election for a parliamentary seat, a top officer said.
State and paramilitary police fired bullets and shotgun pellets as thousands of protesters shouting slogans against Indian rule charged into voting booths in Budgam district near the main city of Srinagar.
"Violent protests happened at many places in Budgam. Protesters damaged and snatched EVMs (electronic voting machines) at some places," Shantmanu, the state's chief electoral officer, told AFP.
"Six civilians were killed and 70 were wounded," Shantmanu, who uses only one name, told reporters.
Many were grievously injured with bullets fired by police and paramilitary troops, hospital sources in Srinagar said. The electoral officer said more than 100 government personnel, including police and paramilitary officers were also injured in the clashes.

US crossed 'red lines' in Syria

Say Russia, Iran in a joint statement, vow to respond to new aggression after US policy U-turn

AGENCIES
A joint command centre made up of the forces of Russia, Iran and militias supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said the US strike on a Syrian air base on Friday crossed "red lines" and it would respond to any new aggression and increase its support for its ally.
The United States fired dozens of cruise missiles at a Syrian air base on Friday from which it said a deadly chemical weapons attack had been launched earlier in the week, escalating the US role in Syria and drawing criticism from Assad's allies including Russia and Iran.
The statement came after the US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, told CNN that removing Bashar al-Assad from power is a priority, cementing an extraordinary U-turn in the Trump administration's stance on the embattled leader.
"What America waged in an aggression on Syria is a crossing of red lines. From now on we will respond with force to any aggressor or any breach of red lines from whoever it is and America knows our ability to respond well," said the statement published by the group on media outlet Ilam al Harbi (War Media).
US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, meanwhile, blamed Russian inaction for helping fuel the chemical weapons attack it had reacted to, saying Moscow had failed to carry out a 2013 agreement to secure and destroy chemical weapons in Syria.



MISSILE ATTACK ON AIRBASE
US's UN envoy says toppling regime is first priority
Putin and Rouhani, in phone call, condemn US aggression
Joint command of regime allies say presence of US troops in northern Syria 'illegal'

He said the United States expected Russia to take a tougher stance against Syria by rethinking its alliance with Assad because "every time one of these horrific attacks occurs, it draws Russia closer into some level of responsibility."
Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iran's Hassan Rouhani said in a phone call that aggressive US actions against Syria were not permissible and violated international law, the Kremlin said yesterday.

The two leaders also called for an objective investigation into an incident involving chemical weapons in Syria's Idlib and said they were ready to deepen cooperation to fight terrorism, the Kremlin said in a statement on its website.
Syrian army forces had been losing ground across the country until Russia intervened militarily in September 2015, propping up Assad and protecting its own interests in the region.
Assad has also drawn heavily on foreign Shia militias sponsored by Iran, led by Lebanon's Hezbollah group, for his most important gains since the Russian intervention.
The joint command centre also said the presence of U.S. troops in northern Syria where Washington has hundreds of special forces helping the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to oust Islamic State was "illegal" and that Washington had a long-term plan to occupy the area.
The regional alliance said the US cruise missile strikes on a Syrian base which Washington said was involved in a chemical attack that killed dozens of civilians would not deter their forces from "liberating" all of Syrian territory.
At UN, Washington's UN ambassador said that Bashar al-Assad cannot stay in power after the suspected chemical attack.
Nikki Haley's comments in an interview airing Sunday came as part of an apparent shift in US policy towards Assad's government after the alleged chemical attack last

week on the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhun that killed 87 people, including many children.
In the interview with CNN, Haley said peace in Syria was impossible with Assad in power.
"Regime change is something that we think is going to happen," she said, adding that Washington was also focused on fighting the Islamic State group in Syria and ending Iranian influence.
US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson insisted however that defeating IS in Syria remained Washington's top priority.
"It's important that we keep our priorities straight. And we believe that the first priority is the defeat of ISIS," Tillerson said in an interview with CBS television's "Face the Nation" being broadcast later Sunday.
After years of calling for Assad's removal during former president Barack Obama's tenure, Washington appeared to be stepping back from seeking regime change in Syria in recent weeks.
Prior to the attack in Khan Sheikhun, Tillerson said Assad's fate should be decided by the Syrian people, suggesting Washington would not oppose him standing for reelection.
And Haley too said Washington's priority was "no longer to sit and focus on getting Assad out."
More than 320,000 people have been killed in Syria since the conflict began, and strikes have continued since the suspected chemical attack.

India, China navies rescue hijacked ship

AFP, New Delhi
The navies of India and China yesterday carried out a joint operation to rescue a merchant ship hijacked by Somali pirates in the Gulf of Aden, the Indian defence ministry said.
After receiving a distress call on Saturday night, the Indian warships established contact with the captain of the merchant vessel who had locked himself in a strong room along with 18 Filipino crew.
"An Indian Navy helicopter undertook aerial reconnaissance of the merchant vessel... to sanitise the upper decks of the merchant ship and ascertain the location of pirates, if still on board," a statement from the defence ministry said.
Emboldened by the helicopter cover, some crew members gradually emerged from the strong room.
They searched the ship and confirmed that the pirates had fled overnight.
A boarding party from the nearby Chinese Navy ship then arrived on the merchant ship, while the Indian Naval helicopter provided air cover for the rescue operation.

CRACKDOWN ON ROHINGYAS IN RAKHINE

UN calls on Myanmar to release detained children

AFP, Yangon
The UN children's agency UNICEF has called on Myanmar's government to release Rohingya children detained as part of a sweeping military campaign in Rakhine state.
More than 600 people were arrested in an army crackdown on Rohingya Muslims in the north of the restive state. The operation was launched after deadly attacks by militants on police posts in October.
Rohingya escapees in neighbouring Bangladesh, where more than 70,000 have fled, gave UN investigators accounts of beatings, torture and food deprivation inside the jails.
Minors are among those detained.
UNICEF's deputy executive director Justin Forsyth said he had given the country's de facto civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi details of around a dozen youngsters being held in Buthidaung prison.
"There are some children that are detained in prison, so those are the cases that we're raising," he told AFP late on Saturday at the end of a brief trip to Myanmar.
"Any child that's detained is an issue for us."

Nobel Laureate Suu Kyi and Myanmar's army chief both recognised "that there's an issue here" but made no firm commitment for their release, he added.
The UN Human Rights Council has agreed to send a mission to Myanmar to probe allegations that troops and police raped, killed and tortured Rohingya in their months-long campaign.
Myanmar has rejected the accounts collected by UN investigators in the Bangladesh refugee camps, who said the crimes could amount to ethnic cleansing.
"I think ethnic cleansing is too strong an expression to use for what is happening," Suu Kyi said in an interview with the BBC last week.
UN rights envoy for Myanmar Yanghee Lee said some 450 people were being held in Buthidaung prison when she visited in January, most without access to lawyers or their families.
A group calling itself the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army has claimed the October attacks, which it said were intended to defend the rights of the persecuted minority after years of worsening conditions.



Blood and debris are seen on a street near a church in Alexandria after a bomb blast struck worshippers gathering to celebrate Palm Sunday, yesterday. The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for bombing two churches killing at least 38 people in the deadliest attacks on the Coptic Christian minority in recent memory.

PHOTO: REUTERS

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

France's Macron unveils priorities

AFP, Paris
French presidential frontrunner Emmanuel Macron yesterday detailed his priorities for his first few months in office if elected, as polls showed the unpredictable race tightening just two weeks before voting.
Macron, 39, told the Journal de Dimanche newspaper one of his first measures would be to pass a law setting new ethical standards for parliament, followed by related legislation that will cut the number of MPs by a third.
He also foresees a visit to Berlin and a tour of European capitals to drum up support for his plan to deepen economic integration in the eurozone, create a European border force and put in place greater protections for European industry.
Elsewhere yesterday, his main rivals far-right leader Marine Le Pen and scandal-hit rightwinger Francois Fillon were seeking to persuade the roughly 30 percent of voters who are yet to make their minds up.

Indian anchor reads report of husband's death live

AFP, Raipur
An Indian television presenter has been praised for her calmness and bravery after reading out a breaking news report of a road accident which killed her husband.
Supreet Kaur was presenting a news bulletin on the IBC-24 news channel in Chhattisgarh state on Saturday when a reporter phoned in live with details of an accident which killed three of the five people travelling in an SUV.
The report did not name the victims. But Kaur, 28, realised her husband was probably among those killed as he was travelling on the same route and at the same time with four others, the channel's news chief Anshuman Sharma told AFP.
"When the reporter said all the victims were from Bhilai and were travelling in a Renault Duster, she immediately had a hunch her husband had died in the crash."
Kaur nevertheless kept her composure. Only when the bulletin was over did she rush from the studio to confirm her fears.
"She is an extremely brave woman. She has been with us for the last nine years. We are really proud of her," said Sharma of Kaur, who was married two years ago.



SWEDISH TRUCK ATTACK

Suspect was an IS sympathiser

Police make second arrest; thousands hold peace vigil
AFP, Stockholm
The suspected Stockholm truck attacker had shown interest in extremist groups and was facing deportation after being refused residency, Swedish police said yesterday.
A second suspect has meanwhile been formally placed under arrest in connection with the attack that killed four people and injured 15 others, the Stockholm district court said.
The news came as thousands of people gathered under sunny spring skies amid a sea of flowers and candles to honour the dead and to stand against terrorism.
The first suspect, identified only as a 39-year-old man from Uzbekistan who was arrested hours after Friday's attack, is suspected of having sped a stolen beer truck several

NEWSIN brief

US soldier killed in anti-IS ops in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul
An American special forces soldier has been killed while conducting operations against the Islamic State group in Afghanistan, the US military said. The US-backed Afghan military has vowed to wipe out the group in its strongholds in the eastern province of Nangarhar as IS challenges the more powerful Taliban on its own turf.

6 'Islamic militants' killed in Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta
Indonesia's police shot dead six suspected IS-linked militants in a gunfight on Java island over the weekend, a police spokesman said yesterday. Police arrested one member of the group alive. Police claim the attackers were part of the IS-linked Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) network, which has been blamed for a series of recent attacks in Indonesia.



Rescue workers prepare to lift a passenger bus from a pit after a road caved in, in Chennai, India, yesterday. According to Chennai Metro Rail Limited sources, the incident happened due to the impact of a tunnel boring machine which was drilling beneath the road, a few metres beside the spot where the road caved in. No one was injured.

Norway cops destroy suspect device in Oslo

AFP, Oslo
Norwegian police yesterday said they had destroyed a suspect "bomb-like" device in the capital Oslo and made one arrest, on the heels of a deadly truck attack in neighbouring Sweden killed four people.
"Bomb disposal officers carried out a controlled explosion overnight Saturday," a Norwegian police statement said.
Police cordoned off part of the busy Gronland district and evacuated local bars and restaurants after the crude device -- described as having the capacity to cause only limited damage -- was discovered Saturday evening.
Norway's PST police security agency is investigating.



hundred metres (yards) down the bustling pedestrian street Drottninggatan in the heart of Stockholm.
The motive for the attack was not known, but the method resembled previous attacks using vehicles in Nice, Berlin and London, all of them claimed by the Islamic State (IS) group.
There has been no immediate claim of responsibility for the Stockholm attack. The 39-year-old suspect in the Stockholm attack "showed interest for extremist organisations like IS," police chief Jonas Hysing told reporters.
The suspect had also been due to be expelled from Sweden after his residency application was rejected last year.
Swedish Prosecution Authority spokeswoman Karin Rosander said meanwhile that the second suspect was arrested "on suspicion of a terrorist crime (by committing) murder", the same accusation as against the first suspect.
No other details about the person were disclosed.

PHOTO: REUTERS