

NEWS IN brief

AAP loses in Delhi civic polls; BJP retains MCD

As projected by most exit polls, the BJP was set to sweep the Delhi civic polls yesterday. As of mid-afternoon, the incumbent BJP had won 118 wards, and was on its way to a two-third majority. It has controlled the MCD for over a decade. AAP had won 29 wards. The Congress won 20 wards.

China convicts US woman for 'spying'

A Chinese court has sentenced an American woman to three and a half years in prison and deportation on espionage charges, a rights group said yesterday. Sandy Pang-Gillis was detained in March 2015 at the Macau border after visiting mainland China with a trade delegation from the Texas oil capital Houston. She was accused of stealing state secrets, according to sources.

Kashmir blocks social media after clashes

Authorities in Indian-administered Kashmir yesterday ordered internet service providers to block popular social media services including Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp after an upsurge in violence in the region. It is the first time the government has taken such a step, although it regularly blocks the mobile internet signal in the volatile Kashmir valley.

Japan in 'crisps crisis'

Legions of Japanese crisps addicts are suffering. The country is in the midst of a dire crisps shortage after violent typhoons wiped out potato crops in top tuber producing Hokkaido. Pictures online have shown store shelves bare and bags have been selling for inflated prices on Internet auctions. Japan may not usually be associated with crisps, but industry figures show they rake in nearly 163 billion yen (\$1.46 billion) in annual sales.

Nationalist Hong Kong activists arrested

Two Hong Kong independence activists who were barred from taking up their seats as lawmakers last year were arrested and charged yesterday with illegal assembly and attempted forcible entry into the legislative chamber. Baggio Leung and Yau Wai-ching belong to a new movement calling for a complete split from China for semi-autonomous Hong Kong.



French presidential candidate for the far-right Front National (FN) party, Marine Le Pen (C) smiles with people in front of the Whirlpool factory in Amiens, northern France, yesterday. Inset, presidential frontrunner Emmanuel Macron (R), head of the political movement En Marche!, greets a child outside the Cathedral in the same region. Marine Le Pen yesterday upstaged her rival Macron by making a surprise visit to an under-threat factory just as he was visiting the town where it is based.

'Ridiculous ruling'

Says Trump as court blocks his order on sanctuary cities

President Donald Trump yesterday slammed as "ridiculous" a US judge's ruling blocking an executive order that could deny billions of dollars to so-called sanctuary cities harboring illegal immigrants. Judge William Orrick of San Francisco's federal court on Tuesday issued a preliminary injunction barring any attempt to implement Trump's January 25 executive order. "First the Ninth Circuit rules against the ban & now it hits again on sanctuary cities - both ridiculous rulings. See you in the Supreme Court!" Trump tweeted. The ruling - which could affect more than 300 cities and counties that have denounced Trump's order -- is another blow to the White House following successful court challenges to its two travel bans targeting Muslim-majority countries. The White House reacted with a vitriolic statement late Tuesday, claiming that "the rule of law suffered another blow, as an unelected judge unilaterally rewrote immigration policy". The judge's "erroneous ruling is a gift to the criminal gang and cartel element in our country," and is "one more example of egregious overreach" by a single judge that "undermines faith in our legal system." The White House claimed that "San Francisco, and cities like it, are putting the well-being of criminal aliens before the safety of our citizens, and those city officials who authored these policies have the blood of dead Americans on their hands."

Syria regime launched 'chemical attack'

France says it has proof; Saudi says Assad must go

French intelligence services have scientific proof that the Syrian regime was responsible for a suspected chemical attack that killed 87 people, France's foreign minister said yesterday. Jean-Marc Ayrault said analysis of samples taken at the scene of the April 4 attack in rebel-held Khan Sheikhun in which 31 children were among the dead showed "there is no doubt that sarin gas was used" and that it was produced by Syrian laboratories. "There is no doubt about the responsibility of the Syrian regime given the way that the sarin used was produced," Ayrault told journalists after the report was presented at a meeting of French defence chiefs. He said the substance France believes was used in the attack contains hexamine, a component that was also found in a gas attack in northwest Syria in 2013. "We are able to confirm that the sarin used on April 4 is the same sarin that was used in an attack in Saraqeb on April 29, 2013," he said. Ayrault said the chemical fingerprint is "typical of the method developed in Syrian laboratories". "This (production) method bears the regime's hallmarks and allows us to determine its responsibility for this attack," he said. A French diplomat said the analysis was carried out on unexploded ordnance found at Khan Sheikhun, reported AFP. Meanwhile, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir discussed Syria's future with his Russian counterpart in Moscow yesterday after which he said Riyadh still believed there was no political future for President Bashar al-Assad. Al-Jubeir, after talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, also told a news conference that Riyadh wanted to end what he called Iran's meddling in the Middle East, reported Reuters. The Saudi minister gave a positive assessment of Russian-backed Syrian peace talks in Kazakhstan, but said he thought there was no need to widen the list of participants in those talks, which are sponsored by Iran, Turkey and Russia.

A win-win reality show?

Donald Trump and the US media may still be at war after the president's first 100 days but both sides are also reaping benefits from the hostilities between the former reality TV star and what he calls the "fake news" industry. Trump's decision to snub this weekend's White House Correspondents' Dinner has underlined how little love is lost between the president and "the opposition" - as his top advisor Steve Bannon has dubbed the media. But analysts say that while Trump uses the press as a foil to deflect bad news, media outlets are getting a lift from consumers looking for credible information about his administration -- or simply tuning in for a dose of the daily Trump show. "Trump has been gold for the mainstream media," says Tobe Berkovitz, a former political consultant who is now a communications professor at Boston University. Berkovitz says Trump has "a handy devil he can blame for all his stum- bles," and as a result, "both sides are pretty happy with each other." Newspapers such as the New York Times have seen a significant bounce in circulation since Trump's victory last November and cable news networks have also enjoyed a ratings rise. "You can attribute a lot of that to Donald Trump," said Dan Kennedy, a Northeastern University journalism professor, said there is more interest in news because it is a time of "great anxiety." Trump regularly refers to the New York Times as a "failing" newspaper and often has digs at traditional cable networks. But he has nevertheless granted interviews to nearly all the mainstream media and some pundits say the seeming animosity is not all that it appears. "It's more than a little bit of a show," says Kennedy. Trump, he said, "turns around and calls a lot of the reporters that he excoriates publicly." Politico reporters Ben Schreckinger and Hadas Gold, who interviewed more than three dozen members of the White House press corps, wrote that Trump is engaged in a "fake war" on the press, that the president's staff works to maintain relationships with journalists. Nevertheless, the short-term lift from Trump may be the harbinger of longer problems, says Jeff Jarvis, a City University of New York journalism professor. "If it's bad for democracy, it's bad for the press," Jarvis said. "He's attacking our credibility, attacking our trust."



TRUMP AND THE MEDIA



Nepalese school children take part in a candle lighting memorial for the victims of the April 25, 2015 earthquake in Kathmandu, yesterday, as Nepal marks two year anniversary of the deadly earthquake. More than 700 heritage sites were damaged in the disaster which killed nearly 9,000 people and destroyed half a million homes.

NEW ANTI-GULEN CRACKDOWN

Turkey detains 1,000 'secret imams'

Turkish authorities arrested more than 1,000 people yesterday they said had secretly infiltrated police forces across the country on behalf of a US-based cleric blamed by the government for a failed coup attempt last July. The nationwide sweep was one of the largest operations in months against suspected supporters of the cleric, Fethullah Gulen, a former ally of President Tayyip Erdogan who is now accused by the government of trying to topple him by force. Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu said the overnight crackdown targeted a Gulen network "that infiltrated our police force, called 'secret imams'." "One thousand and nine secret imams have been detained so far in 72 provinces, and the operation is ongoing," he told reporters in Ankara. In the aftermath of the failed July coup, authorities arrested 40,000 people and sacked or suspended 120,000 from a wide range of professions including soldiers, police, teachers and public servants, over alleged links with terrorist groups. The latest detentions came 10 days after voters narrowly backed plans to expand Erdogan's already wide powers in a referendum which opposition parties and European election observers said was marred by irregularities.

BREXIT TALKS

May hosts key summit as EU hardens stance

British Prime Minister Theresa May held her first talks with key EU Brexit negotiators yesterday, as the bloc hardens its position ahead of a summit to lay down its "red lines". May hosted European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and chief negotiator Michel Barnier at Downing Street for the first face-to-face talks since she triggered the two-year process of withdrawing from the European Union. The encounter over dinner came as the EU has toughened its strategy, making new demands over financial services, immigration and the bills Britain must settle before ending its 44-year-old membership in the bloc. The latest draft negotiating guidelines, agreed on Monday by Barnier and European diplomats, point to months of difficult talks ahead as the EU seeks to ensure Britain does not get a better deal outside the bloc than inside. According to the document, seen by AFP, the other 27 EU countries will seek to hold Britain liable for the bloc's costs for at least a year after it leaves in 2019 -- longer than was previously proposed. Britain will also be required to give EU citizens permanent residency after living there for five years. And the guidelines recommend that Britain's dominant finance industry will not necessarily be tied to any future trade deal with the EU and that it must also stick to the bloc's rules if it wants easy access to EU markets. May has committed to pulling Britain out of Europe's single market to end free movement of EU citizens into Britain, but says she wants to form a new partnership with the bloc.

Uber 'flying car' by 2020!

Dallas the same year ahead of "full-scale operations" in the Texas region by 2023. The announcement came a day after Silicon Valley "flying car" startup Kitty Hawk, reportedly backed by Google co-founder Larry Page, released a video of its airborne prototype and announced plans for deliveries of a "personal flying machine" this year. Uber's plans appear more ambitious, and include partnerships with US-based Bell Helicopter, Brazilian manufacturer Embraer and Slovenia's Pipistrel to produce flying machines for short distance urban operations. Uber has grown into the world's largest venture-backed startup, with a valuation estimated at some \$68 billion despite ongoing obstacles with regulators and taxi operators. In addition to ridesharing in some 80 countries, Uber is also testing self-driving cars in three US metro areas.

Mamata suffering from BJP phobia

Says Amit Shah

BJP president Amit Shah yesterday took a dig at West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee and said she is suffering from 'BJP phobia' and claimed that her constant criticism of his party was indicative of its rise in Bengal. "Mamata Banerjee is having BJP phobia. She is seeing Bharatiya Janata Party behind everything," Shah told mediapersons during a press conference in Kolkata. Shah said Mamata Banerjee's government had proved to be a complete failure in developing the state and instead spawned a murky track record of violent politics and corruption. The BJP chief said that the Saradha scam and Narada sting are proof that TMC is a highly corrupted party. He further charged that the state government has been unable to curb infiltration from Bangladesh over the border, as a result of which there has been a rise in extremist attacks and fake currency. The BJP remains committed to bringing back the lost glory of the state if it comes to power and would seal the border to stop infiltration from Bangladesh, the BJP chief added.

Japan disaster minister resigns over quake gaffe

Japan's gaffe-prone disaster reconstruction minister resigned yesterday after remarking it was lucky the catastrophic 2011 earthquake-tsunami had hit a largely rural region rather than Tokyo. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was forced to apologise to residents of the devastated northeastern region of Tohoku, which is still recovering more than six years on, after Masahiro Imamura sparked outrage with his comments. "It was good that it (the disaster) occurred over there in Tohoku," he said late Tuesday. "If it had been close to the capital zone, there would have been enormous damage," he added, referring to the vast Tokyo conurbation. A massive undersea quake on March 11, 2011 sent a tsunami barreling into Japan's northeastern coast, leaving more than 18,500 people dead or missing and sending three reactors into meltdown at the Fukushima nuclear plant. After submitting his resignation, Imamura said he deeply regretted the comments. "I caused great trouble to the people of Tohoku and hurt their feelings. I'm very sorry," he told reporters, bowing. Abe, who was attending the same political gathering on Tuesday, apologised to guests soon after Imamura's remarks, saying they were "extremely inappropriate". Imamura's words "hurt the feelings of people in the disaster-hit areas", a grim-faced Abe said yesterday in further comments on the incident. Abe said he will replace Imamura with Fukushima native and veteran politician Masayoshi Yoshino. Abe's approval rating, although still above 50 percent, has recently fallen, as scandals erode public confidence in a government now in its fifth year.

