

NEWS IN brief

Toxic haze chokes Delhi

AFP, New Delhi
New Delhi was shrouded in a thick toxic haze yesterday after a night of frenzied Diwali fireworks sent the air quality plummeting despite a ban on their sale aimed at thwarting a repeat of last year's 'airpocalypse'. India's Supreme Court had banned the sale of firecrackers ahead of the Hindu festival of lights to prevent a repeat of last year's post-Diwali air pollution crises.

Ex-Nazi death camp guard charged

AFP, Berlin
German prosecutors yesterday charged a 96-year-old former SS guard at a Nazi death camp with complicity in the murder of detainees, in one of the last criminal cases linked to the Holocaust. The man, who was not named, was 22 years old when he worked at the extermination camp Majdanek in occupied Poland between August 1943 and January 1944.

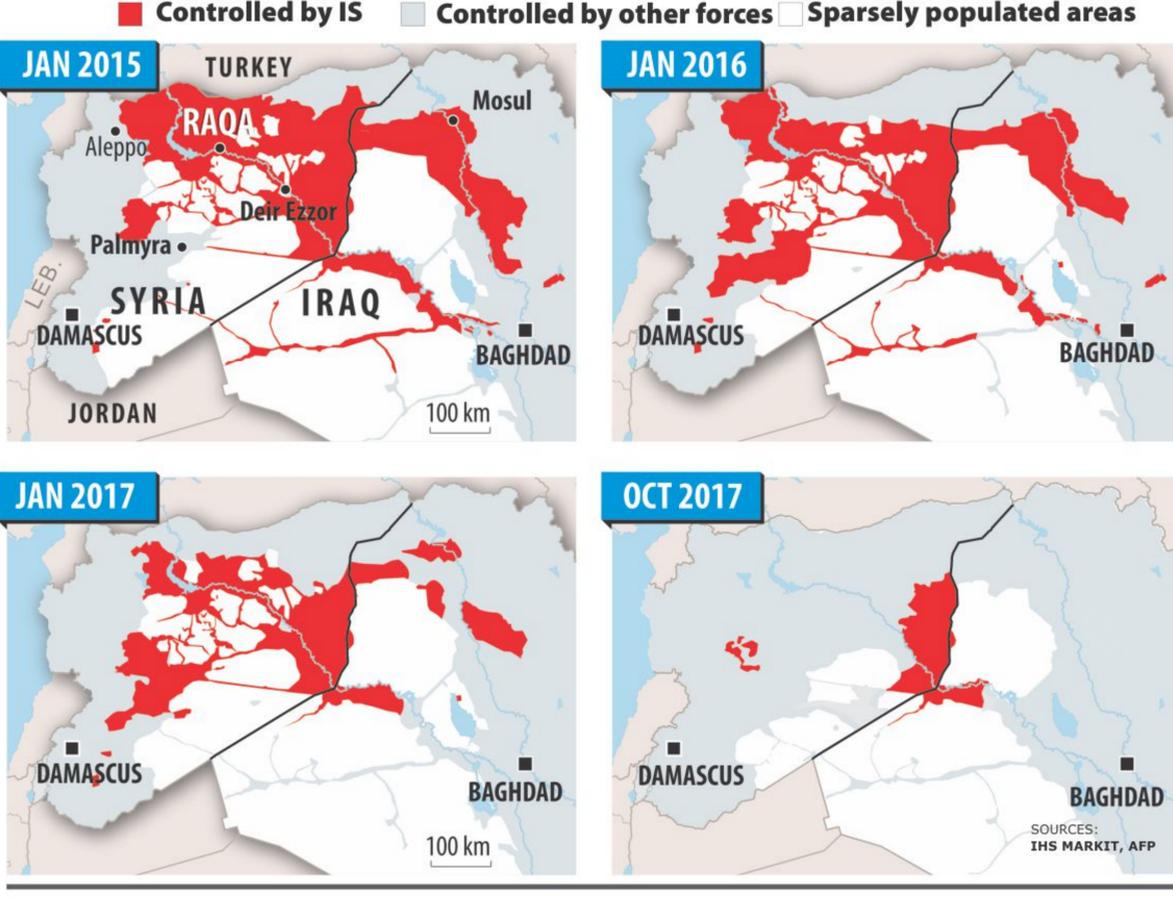
3m Americans carry a handgun daily

AFP, Miami
As many as three million people in the United States carry a loaded handgun daily, while nine million do so at least once a month, according to a US study. Most of these gun-toting Americans are young men, live in the south and say personal protection is a top reason for walking around with a deadly weapon, said the report in the American Journal of Public Health.

Attack hurts 26 in key Pakistan port

AFP, Quetta
Unidentified men threw a grenade into a labourers' hostel in the Pakistani port of Gwadar wounding 26 of them, police said yesterday, in an attack likely to raise concern about security for the Pakistani section of China's "Belt and Road" initiative. There was no claim of responsibility for the attack.

RETREAT OF THE ISLAMIC STATE GROUP



BLOCKING JIHADIST CONTENT ONLINE

G7, tech giants to work together

AFP, Ischia, Italy
G7 countries and tech giants including Google, Facebook and Twitter yesterday agreed to work together to block the dissemination of Islamist extremism over the internet.
"These are the first steps towards a great alliance in the name of freedom," Italian Interior Minister Marco Minniti said after a two-day meeting with his Group of Seven counterparts, stressing the importance of the internet for extremist "recruitment, training and radicalisation."
Officials said the accord aimed at removing jihadist content from the web within two hours of being posted.
"Our enemies are moving at the speed of a tweet and we need to counter them just as quickly," acting US Homeland Security Secretary Elaine Duke said.
While acknowledging progress had been made, Britain's Home Secretary Amber Rudd insisted "companies need to go further and faster to not only take down extremist content but also stop it being uploaded in the first place."
The meeting on the Italian island of Ischia off Naples also focused on ways to tackle one of the West's biggest security threats -- jihadist fighters fleeing Syria -- as the European Union promised to help close a migration route considered a potential back door for terrorists.
Tens of thousands of citizens from Western countries travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight for the Islamic State group between 2014 and 2016, including some who then returned home and staged attacks that claimed dozens of lives.

'Breakthrough' in Brexit talks

EU leaders back UK PM May with first step to trade talks

AFP, Brussels
EU leaders threw British Prime Minister Theresa May a lifeline in Brexit talks yesterday, agreeing at a Brussels summit to start preparations for the next stage of negotiations.
EU President Donald Tusk said reports the talks were in deadlock were "exaggerated", hailing a speech May made in Florence last month for breaking the impasse.
As expected, the other 27 leaders agreed there had been insufficient progress on the divorce talks to officially move on to the future relationship, delaying the decision to a December summit.
But they took just 90 seconds to approve the start of internal preparations for post-Brexit trade and a transition deal, work that Tusk said would take Britain's proposals on future relations into account.
And a French presidency source said "scoping work has already broadly started", referring to preparations on the broad areas a deal might cover.
May has struggled to contain divisions in her government since losing her parliamentary majority in a June election, and appealed to European leaders over dinner

Thursday to help her make headway in the Brexit talks.
In a move that risks being seen as a snub to the EU's gesture, however, she repeated yesterday that a detailed agreement on one of the biggest sticking points -- the financial settlement -- must wait.
European capitals are demanding detailed written commitments on finance before consenting to the start of trade talks, fearing that Britain's departure in 2019 will blow a hole in the bloc's budget.
Like Tusk, German Chancellor Angela Merkel struck an optimistic note, saying after Thursday's dinner that she could see "zero indications that we will not succeed" in reaching a Brexit deal.
However, French President Emmanuel Macron warned that agreement on a financial settlement was "a long way off".
The slow progress of the negotiations has stoked fears Britain could leave the EU in March 2019 without a deal in place, risking economic and legal chaos.
As well as the financial settlement, the EU wants progress on the rights of three million European citizens living in Britain and the issue of the Irish border.



Spain pushes for polls to diffuse Catalonia crisis

AFP, Madrid
Spain was preparing yesterday to seize powers from Catalonia's regional government as political parties pushed for elections as a way out of the country's worst crisis in decades.
Hundreds of separatists were making large cash withdrawals from Catalan banks in protest at Madrid's announcement Thursday that it would take unprecedented steps to impose direct control over semi-autonomous Catalonia after its leader threatened to declare a breakaway state.
Autonomy is a hugely sensitive issue in Catalonia, which saw its powers taken away under Spain's military dictatorship -- and there are fears of unrest in the wealthy northeastern region if Madrid seeks to erode it.
Catalan chief Carles Puigdemont has warned any such move could push regional lawmakers to declare unilateral independence following a chaotic referendum on October 1 on whether to split from Spain.
Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's cabinet is due to meet today to decide which powers to seize from

Catalonia, which controls its own healthcare, education and policing. Rajoy yesterday said a "critical point" had been reached in the crisis.
But Fernando Martinez-Maello, number three in Rajoy's conservative Popular Party, said Spain could avoid such drastic measures if Puigdemont backs down before the Senate meets to discuss the plans, likely by the end of October.
Puigdemont "can change course, can return to constitutional legality," he insisted.
Major political parties, who have overcome their differences to work together on preventing a break-up of Spain, were meanwhile pushing for fresh elections in the Catalan parliament, dominated by separatists since 2015.
News reports said the government and opposition Socialists had agreed elections should be called as early as January, which Carmen Calvo, the Socialists' chief negotiator, confirmed.
Fresh polls sanctioned by Madrid -- unlike the referendum, which had been ruled unconstitutional -- would give voters a say on how to move forward.



US POLICY SHIFT TO COUNTER CHINA

India ready to strengthen ties

REUTERS, New Delhi
India stood ready to further strengthen ties with the United States, the government said yesterday, after US Secretary of State Tillerson vowed to dramatically expand cooperation as a way to counter China's influence in Asia.
Tillerson, who is visiting India next week as part of a tour to the region, said in a speech the US had begun to discuss alternatives to Chinese infrastructure financing in Asia that critics say has spawned fears of a debt trap.
He also called for expanding the scope of security cooperation between India, the United States and Japan to include other countries such as Australia, a plan that China has said in the past would be de-stabilising to the region.
An Indian foreign ministry spokesman said Tillerson had made an important speech on the future of India-US relations and India looked forward to detailed discussions next week.
Tillerson did not say what he meant by creating an alternative to Chinese infrastructure financing, which India has also been increasingly concerned about as China seeks to build trade and transport links in Asia.
India was the only major country in Asia not to send a representative to a "Belt and Road Initiative" summit in Beijing in May because an economic corridor that China was building in Pakistan ran through territory claimed by India.



A Palestinian boy puts a tyre on fire during clashes with Israeli troops near the Jewish settlement of Qadomem, in the West Bank village of Kofr Qadom, near Nablus, yesterday.

8 killed in India as building collapses

AFP, New Delhi
A building collapse in southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu left eight people dead on Friday, an official said, the latest such disaster in the country known for its dilapidated properties and poor quality construction.
The group were among 11 employees of a state-run transport company including bus drivers and cleaners, who were sleeping in the 60-year-old, two storey office block near a bus depot when a portion of it caved in.
Officials said emergency workers had managed to rescue three of the workers from under tons of debris, who were being treated for their injuries at a government-run hospital.

Iraq completes Kirkuk takeover

Last Kurdish-held district falls after heavy clashes

REUTERS, Baghdad/Irak
Iraqi forces yesterday took control of the last district in the oil-rich province of Kirkuk still in the hands of Kurdish Peshmerga fighters following a three-hour battle, security sources said.
The district of Altun Kupri, or Perde in Kurdish, lies on the road between the city of Kirkuk - which fell to Iraqi forces on Monday - and Erbil, capital of the semi-autonomous region of Kurdistan in northern Iraq that voted in a referendum last month to secede from Iraq against Baghdad's wishes.
A force made up of US-trained Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service units, Federal Police and Iranian-backed fighters known as Popular Mobilisation began their advance on Altun Kupri at 7:30 am (0430 GMT), said an Iraqi military spokesman.
Kurdish Peshmerga forces withdrew from the town, located on the Zab river, after battling the advancing Iraqi troops with machine guns, mortars and rocket propelled grenades, Iraqi security sources said. Neither side gave immediate information about casualties in the fighting.

The Iraqi central government forces have advanced into Kirkuk province largely unopposed as most Peshmerga forces withdrew without a fight.
Altun Kupri is the last town in Kirkuk province on the road to Erbil, lying just outside the border of the autonomous region established after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003.
Iraqi forces are seeking to reestablish Baghdad's authority over territory which the Kurdish forces occupied outside the official boundaries of their autonomous region, mostly seized since 2014 in the course of the war on Islamic State militants.
Meanwhile, Iraq's top Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, yesterday called for the state to protect Kurds in northern Iraq, a rare political intervention by a figure whose words have the force of law for most of Iraq's Shia majority.
Tens of thousands of Kurds fled Kirkuk and Tuz to the two main cities of the Kurdish autonomous region, Erbil and Sulaimaniya, according to Kurdish officials.
The United Nations expressed concern on Thursday at reports of forced displacement and destruction of Kurdish homes and businesses, mainly in Tuz.



Bush, Obama slam Trump

CNN ONLINE
The Presidents club is turning on its newest member. Breaking the code of silence that retired commanders in chief normally maintain about their successors, both George W Bush and Barack Obama delivered clear jobs at the current occupant of the Oval Office on Thursday.
President Donald Trump, however, likely didn't feel a thing. His entire political brand stands as a living rebuke to the political establishment that both men once led and to the traditionalists who believe his behavior is eroding the prestige of the presidency itself.
While neither Bush nor Obama mentioned Trump by name or referred to his claims this week that he had been more attentive to relatives of slain US service members than they were, they used coincidental events to register their alarm with Trump's politics.
In New York, Bush delivered a strong indictment of Trump's populist nationalism, condemning trade protectionism and

bemoaning how politics had fallen prey to "conspiracy theories" and "outright fabrication." He also warned of the impact of "bullying and prejudice" in public life. It was not hard to work out who he was talking about in one of his most vehement interventions in politics since he left office in January 2009.
Obama, at the first campaign appearances of his post-presidency, warned about the tone and content of Trump-style politics -- after spending several weeks watching Trump undermine his proudest achievements including the Iran nuclear deal.
Apparently referring to the President's handling of racial violence in Charlottesville and sluggish condemnation of white supremacists, Obama lamented the "same old politics of division" while campaigning for New Jersey Democratic gubernatorial candidate Phil Murphy.
"Some of the politics we see now, we thought we had put that to bed," Obama said. "That's folks looking 50 years back. It's the 21st Century, not the 19th Century."

