

NEWS IN brief

Tillerson plans Africa trip for early 2018

AFP, Ramstein

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson met US military officers on Wednesday to prepare for a trip to better coordinate American security and diplomatic strategy in Africa. Tillerson plans to make the trip in the first quarter of 2018, the State Department said.

Qatar, France sign fighter jet deal

AFP, Doha

Qatar yesterday announced a deal to buy 12 French-built Rafale fighter jets, as it faces a boycott by neighbouring Gulf states in the region's worst political crisis in years. The 1.1-billion-euro order, announced during a visit by French President Macron, allows for an option to buy a further 36 jets.

AU to bring 20,000 migrants home

AFP, Addis Ababa

The African Union has upped its goal to repatriate stranded migrants from Libya, saying in a statement that it aims to bring 20,000 Africans home in next six weeks. Pressure has grown on the body to get their citizens out of Libya after report showed black Africans being sold as slaves in north African country.

Slovenian spies on strike

AFP, Ljubljana

Slovenian secret service agents have gone on strike for the first time in their history demanding better pay and working conditions, the government said yesterday. It said in a statement however that "all tasks crucial for national security and other state interests" were still being fulfilled.



Nepali voters take part in provincial and national parliament elections at an open air polling station in Birgunj yesterday. Nepal's troubled south votes in historic elections many hope will bring much-needed stability to the desperately poor country, but which have been marred by violence and fears of ethnic tension.

ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

BJP looks all set to retain Gujarat: poll

TNN, New Delhi
As polling begins in India's Gujarat in just two days, the final round of Times Now -VMR opinion poll has thrown up interesting results.
BJP is projected to win the Prime Minister's home state comfortably but the target of 150 that the party set for itself seems distant. The survey projects BJP to win anywhere between 106-116 seats, that's well above the required majority mark of 91 seats.
Congress under its President-elect Rahul Gandhi, and his grand alliance of caste grouping has not been able to convert crowds into votes, registering a minor increase in seats from 61 now to anywhere between 63-73 seats in the next assembly. Clearly the caste coalition hasn't worked as contradictory interests of Hardik-Alpesh-Jignesh worked a cross purposes for the Congress.
Times Now-VMR Opinion Poll was conducted by Votersmood Research (VMR). A total of 6,000 interviews were conducted at 684 polling booths across all four socio-economic regions of Gujarat.
Interviews among eligible voters — covering all age groups, gender and the urban/rural divide — were conducted using a completely digital hands free interface, straight from tablet to computer.
The study was done from Nov 23 to 30, 2017 with a margin of error +/- 3%.
The Gujarat assembly election for the 182 constituencies will be held in two phases on December 9, 2017 (First Phase) and December 14, 2017 (Second Phase). The results for the Gujarat elections will be declared on December 18, 2017.

PHOTO: AFP

Indo-China ties on fire again

Beijing lodges official protest after an Indian drone invades its airspace before crashing in Sikkim-Tibet border region

AFP, Beijing
China lodged an official protest with India yesterday after charging that an Indian drone had "invaded" its airspace before crashing, months after the two sides ended a tense border standoff.
Beijing said the incident occurred "recently" at the border separating India's northeastern Sikkim state and China's Tibet region, but it did not say exactly where and when.
India's army said the unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) was on a "regular training mission" when ground control lost contact with it "due to some technical problem" and it crossed over the demarcation line.
The Chinese foreign ministry urged India to "stop the activities" of drones near the border after the UAV "invaded" its airspace.
"The action of the Indian side violated China's territory and is not conducive to the peace and tranquility of the border area," foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang told a regular news briefing.

"China is dissatisfied with this and lodged solemn representations with the Indian side," he said, referring to the official diplomatic protest.
A Chinese army official said earlier that border troops "took a professional and responsible attitude" and carried out identification verification of the device.

Indian army: UAV crossed over the border as ground control lost contact with it
In August, two nations pulled back their troops to resolve tense deadlock over the area

ately alerted" their Chinese counterparts to locate the UAV.
"The exact cause of the incident is under investigation," Indian army spokesman Colonel Aman Anand said in a statement.
"The matter is being dealt with in accordance with the established protocols through institutional mechanisms to deal with situations along the India-China border areas."
The drone incident follows a summer standoff in a Himalayan area where Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan meet.
In August, the two nations pulled back their troops to resolve the tense deadlock over the area, which is claimed by both China and Bhutan, an ally of India.
The dispute began in mid-June after Chinese troops started building a road on the Doklam plateau, known as Donglang in Chinese.
India has an army base nearby and moved soldiers into the flashpoint zone to halt the work, prompting Beijing to accuse it of trespassing on Chinese soil.

ROW OVER REFUSAL TO ACCEPT REFUGEE QUOTAS

EU takes Czechs, Hungary, Poland to top court

AFP, Brussels
The EU took the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to the bloc's top court yesterday over their refusal to accept quotas for asylum-seekers, setting up a new clash between Brussels and key eastern states.
The move shows the determination in Brussels to enforce the controversial scheme launched at the height of the migrant crisis in 2015 to share 160,000 refugees around the bloc and ease the burden on Greece and Italy.
"The European Commission has today decided to refer the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to the Court of Justice of the EU for non-compliance with their legal obligations on relocation," the commission said in a statement.
There was no immediate reaction from Prague, Budapest or Warsaw, but all three have previously said the quotas are part of attempts by Brussels to limit national sovereignty.
Brussels launched so-called infringe-

ment proceedings against the three countries in June for failing to take in any refugees under the quota system, and warned them last month of further action.
They face heavy fines for failing to comply with any eventual ruling by the Luxembourg-based European Court of Justice.
The ongoing row over the quota scheme has held up efforts to reform the bloc's asylum system, which leaders are supposed to be discussing at an EU summit in Brussels on December 14-15.
The EU's "relocation" scheme is now wrapping up having moved 32,000 out of an originally planned total of 160,000, but it caused bad blood when it was forced through two years ago despite the objections of some countries.
The row also underscores a growing rift between western European states and newer, former Soviet-bloc states in the European Union over a series of issues from migration to democratic standards.



Malaysian PM puts party on war footing before polls

Takes a swipe at ex-PM Mahathir Mohamad

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak put his party on a war footing yesterday as polls loom, vowing to "fight till the end" despite a massive financial scandal that has rocked his government.
The leader told the annual assembly of his United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) — which has ruled Muslim-majority Malaysia for six decades at the head of a coalition — that the country was facing a "crucial election".
"In this battle we fight till the end, in this election we will emerge victorious", he told thousands of cheering delegates wearing the red colours of his party in Kuala Lumpur.
He also took a swipe at veteran former premier Mahathir Mohamad, who has come out of retirement in a bid to try to oust his government, comparing him to toppled

Zimbabwe leader Robert Mugabe.
Elections must be called by August at the latest. Najib did not hint at a date in his speech but speculation is swirling that they will be taken place early next year.
Najib's chances of winning a third term have been dented by explosive graft allegations. Billions were looted from the 1MDB sovereign wealth fund that he founded in complex overseas deals which are being investigated in several countries.
Both Najib, who made no mention of the scandal during yesterday's speech, and the fund deny any wrongdoing.
The US Justice Department has led the charge in tackling the alleged pillaging, launching lawsuits through which it is seeking to recover \$1.7 billion in assets thought to have been purchased with looted money, from artwork to high-end real estate.



Liberal MP Warren Entsch lifts up Labor MP Linda Burney as they celebrate the passing of the Marriage Amendment Bill in the House of Representatives at Parliament House in Canberra, Australia yesterday.

SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

Franken resigns from US Senate

AFP, Washington
US Senator Al Franken yesterday said he will resign in the face of multiple accusations of sexual misconduct against him, becoming the second prominent Democrat to be forced out in a week over the snowballing harassment allegations convulsing the country.
Franken — a former comedian who made his name on the popular late-night show "Saturday Night Live" — announced his decision in an emotional yet somewhat defiant address from the floor of the Senate, where dozens of his colleagues had demanded he step down.
The once-popular 66-year-old Minnesota lawmaker apologized last month after acknowledging one incident of misconduct, vowing to work to regain public trust.
But with six other women now reportedly coming forward to accuse Franken of touching them inappropriately, a chorus of Democratic senators said it was time for him to go.
The first allegation against Franken — for which he has apologized — was made by sports broadcaster and former model Leann Tweeden, who said he forcibly kissed her, and touched her without consent as she slept, during a 2006 tour entertaining US troops deployed in Afghanistan.
But several other women have since come forward to say he groped them, triggering the revolt by female lawmakers against their own colleague.
In a well-coordinated social media attack, 12 of the Senate's 16 Democratic women took to Twitter or Facebook to demand Franken's resignation.
Seventeen male colleagues followed. It marked a dramatic and sudden show of unity against one of their own in the 100-member chamber, where the Republicans hold a slim majority.

The 'Rat Eaters' of Bihar

There are about 2.5m Musahars making up one of India's most marginalised communities

AFP, Alampur Gopnura

The rat kept crawling over Phekan Manjhi's arm as he battled to pin it to the ground before he eventually managed to kill it with repeated blows to the head.
The execution drew applause from neighbours huddled around the 60-year-old in a grimy courtyard outside his mud and straw hut. Another meal lined up for the Rat Eaters — some of India's poorest people.
Phekan said it would take 15 minutes to prepare the rat stew, as he dissected the animal with his fingernails.
"Almost everyone here loves this and knows how it's prepared," he added.
Phekan is one of about 2.5 million Musahars — "Rat Eaters" — one of India's most marginalised communities. Even the browbeaten low-caste Dalits look down on them.
"They are the poorest amongst the poorest and rarely hear about or get access to government schemes," said Sudha Varghese, who spent three-decades working

among Musahars in the northern state of Bihar, where most live and survive as dollar-a-day labourers.
"It's a daily struggle for the next meal and diseases like leprosy are an everyday reality," added Varghese, who was awarded India's top civilian honour for her work.
Phekan's neighbour in the village of Alampur Gopnura, 28-year-old Rakesh Manjhi, bemoaned his life.
"We sit at home all day with nothing to do. Some days we get work at the farm, on other days we go hungry or catch rats and eat it with whatever little grain we can get," Rakesh told AFP.
"Governments may have changed but nothing has changed for us. We still eat, live and sleep as our ancestors," said Phekan as he took the roasted rat off the fire and poked the tender meat.
Bihar's Welfare Department Minister Ramesh Rishidev insisted that life has improved for the Musahars.
"We've been working hard with the different communities, which includes the Musahars," the minister told AFP.



HUN SEN'S CLAMPDOWN ON DEMOCRACY

Cambodia laughs off Washington threats

AFP, Phnom Penh
Cambodia's government yesterday laughed off rare efforts by Donald Trump's administration to punish it over a clampdown on democracy and human rights, as the kingdom effectively becomes a one-party state under strongman Hun Sen.
The State Department said Wednesday it would bar Cambodian officials deemed to have been "undermining democracy" from entry to the US.
That came after Cambodia's Supreme Court last month dissolved the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) and redistributed its seats to factions allied with Hun Sen's ruling party.
The dissolution followed the arrest of CNRP leader Kem Sokha for treason. Dozens of other party members have fled the country in a snowballing crackdown on critics of the prime minister.

The State Department said its move was a "direct response to the Cambodian government's series of anti-democratic actions".
Hun Sen, one of the world's longest serving leaders, has used the kingdom's pliant judiciary to smother his critics as elections loom.
Ties between the two nations have withered in recent months with Hun Sen preferring Beijing's no-questions-asked offer of loans and investment to Washington's opprobrium on rights as he looks to extend his 32-year grip on power.
"If Cambodian people cannot go to US, it is ok, it is not a problem," government spokesman Sok Eysan said, shrugging off the State Department threats.
"If we can not join any meetings in the US, there are many other meetings outside the US that we can join."
The State Department did not disclose which Cambodian ruling party officials would be affected by the restrictions.

