

# NEWSIN brief

## Bad news for H-1B visa holders

The Trump administration is considering revoking an Obama-era rule that extends work authorisation to the spouses of H-1B visa holders, a move that could affect thousands of Indian workers and their families. Since 2015, the spouses of H-1B, or high-skilled, visa holders waiting for green cards have been eligible to work in the US on H-4 dependent visas, under a rule introduced by the previous Obama administration. The H-1B programme attracts foreign specialised workers to come to the United States for employment, many of them from India and China.

## WHO certifies Gabon as polio-free

The World Health Organization has declared Gabon a "polio-free country", given the lack of new reported or suspected cases in the central African country. Polio is a highly-infectious viral disease which mainly affects young children and can result in permanent paralysis. There is no cure and it can only be prevented through immunisation. Now the disease is endemic only in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the WHO recorded four cases this year -- two in each country.

## S Africa's ANC meets to elect new leader

South Africa's ruling ANC party holds a conference starting yesterday to elect its new leader in a hotly contested two-way race seen as a pivotal moment in the country's post-apartheid history. President Jacob Zuma, whose reign has been marred by graft scandals, will step down as ANC chief, but remain as head of state ahead of general elections in 2019. Competing for the party leadership are his ex-wife, former African Union chief Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, and Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa, a wealthy businessman.



## Saudi women allowed to drive motorcycles

Saudi Arabian women will be able to drive trucks and motorcycles, officials have said three months after the kingdom announced a historic decision to end a ban on women driving. In September, King Salman issued a decree saying women will be able to drive from next June as part of an ambitious reform push in the conservative kingdom.



(From left, clockwise) Rahul Gandhi, newly elected president of India's main opposition Congress party, kisses the forehead of his mother and leader of the party Sonia Gandhi after taking charge as the president during a ceremony at the party's headquarters in New Delhi, yesterday. Rahul Gandhi greets former Prime Minister and Congress party leader Manmohan Singh; Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, sister of Rahul Gandhi, gestured during the ceremony. (Story on page 16)



PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

## Sonia Gandhi isn't retiring

Priyanka says her mother to contest from Rae Bareilly again. There is no question of me contesting (the 2019 polls) ... my mother will contest from there (Rae Bareilly), Priyanka Gandhi-Vadra said after Rahul Gandhi assumed charge as Congress president at an event at the All India Congress Committee (AICC) headquarters here. She also lauded her mother, calling her the "bravest" woman for overcoming huge difficulties during her record 19-year tenure as the Congress chief. Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi (from Amethi) are the only two Congress representatives from Uttar Pradesh in the current Lok Sabha. The Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, 71, was thrust into the cauldron of Indian politics after marrying Rajiv Gandhi, scion of India's political first family, in February 1968. In 1998, she accepted the entreaties of Congress leaders to join the political fray and give the party a Gandhi figurehead. A year later she was elected to parliament.

# N Korea cant strike US

Mattis doubts Pyongyang's missile capabilities; Tillerson, at UN, says regime must 'earn its way back to table'

Secretary of Defense James Mattis said Friday he does not believe that North Korea's current intercontinental ballistic missiles are capable of hitting the continental US. North Korea's November ICBM "has not yet shown to be a capable threat against us right now," Mattis said during an off-camera briefing with reporters at the Pentagon on Friday. He added that the United States is still assessing the situation. "We are still examining the forensics, it takes a while," he said. Pyongyang tested a new missile on November 28 that flew higher and farther than any previous launch, and bragged afterward that its new Hwasong-15 could deliver nuclear warheads anywhere in the US. His assessment Friday was in line with technical analysts who say that North Korea's November launch didn't actually demonstrate an ability to hit the US or that it is making advances on the technical challenges required for a successful, operational ICBM.

Mattis said analysis from the most recent North Korean missile test is ongoing, and he reiterated that the diplomatic track being led by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is still the administration's leading policy when it comes to Pyongyang. Tillerson spoke at a special meeting of the UN Security Council Friday, "We will, in the meantime, keep our channels of communication open." Tillerson repeated that "we do not seek, nor do we want, war with North Korea." Tillerson said the US would require Pyongyang to achieve a period of quiet before the US would engage in talks, clarifying confusion created earlier in the week when he said he would talk without preconditions if North Korea was willing. That comment drew pushback from the White House. Meanwhile, a report yesterday said Japan is planning a record \$46 billion defence budget for the next fiscal year to strengthen its missile defence against the threat posed by North Korea. It will mark the sixth straight year of increases in defence outlays, topping the 5.12 trillion yen budget for the current fiscal year, the business daily Nikkei said. Mattis also said he does not see the need for a stepped-up military posture against Iran, the day after a top diplomat said evidence shows Tehran is supporting Huthi rebels in Yemen.



urging tougher international action to rein in Pyongyang and confronting North Korea's ambassador to the UN over his claims that the US is to blame for tensions on the Korean peninsula. "North Korea must earn its way back to the table," he said. "The pressure campaign must and will continue until denuclearization is achieved."

## TIMES GROUP'S MEGA ONLINE POLL

# 79% of Indians to vote Modi in 2019

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi remains India's most popular leader with no competition in sight, according to a mega online survey by the Times Group. Despite the note ban, GST and a no-holds-barred poll campaign in Gujarat, more than three quarters of respondents, in the survey conducted in nine languages across 10 Times Group media properties, said they will vote for him if Lok Sabha polls were held today. Similarly, 79% of those surveyed said a Modi-led government is currently the most likely scenario in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. According to the survey, only 20% said they would vote for Congress president-elect Rahul Gandhi in a head-to-head contest with Modi today. However, while a significant 58% of those surveyed remain unimpressed with him, 34% respondents said the Gandhi scion has been able to connect with voters. But what is worrisome for Congress is that as many as 73% of the respondents said they don't consider the party an alternative even after Rahul's elevation. While Rahul may or may not be winning the personality contest, the larger-than-life figure of Modi appears to be key for those who are in favour of BJP. Consider this - 31% of those surveyed said they wouldn't vote for BJP if he weren't to be its PM candidate.



## ARREST OF REUTERS' REPORTERS IN MYANMAR

# Local journo to don black T-shirts

A group of Myanmar journalists said they would begin wearing black T-shirts yesterday in protest at the detention of two Reuters reporters accused of violating the country's Official Secrets Act, as pressure builds on Myanmar to release the pair. The Protection Committee for Myanmar Journalists decried the "unfair arrests that affect media freedom". In a statement on Facebook, the committee said its members would don black T-shirts "to signify the dark age of media freedom" in Myanmar. They demanded the unconditional and immediate release of the two reporters, Wa Lone, 31, and Kyaw Soe Oo, 27. The journalists disappeared on Tuesday evening after they were invited to dine with police officers on the outskirts of Myanmar's largest city, Yangon. The two reporters had been working on Reuters coverage of a crisis that has seen an estimated 655,000 Rohingya Muslims flee from a fierce military crackdown on militants in western Rakhine state. The Ministry of Information said the journalists had "illegally acquired information with the intention to share it with foreign media", and released a photo of the pair in handcuffs.



Patients are evacuated to a parking lot outside a damaged hospital after an earthquake hit the city of Banyumas, Central Java, Indonesia. A powerful magnitude 6.5 earthquake struck the island of Java in Indonesia just before midnight on Friday, with authorities reporting three deaths and damage to hundreds of buildings. PHOTO: REUTERS

## PHILIPPINES STORM

# Three dead, 77,000 flee

At least three people were killed and tens of thousands were driven from their homes by floods as Tropical Storm Kai-Tak pounded the eastern Philippines yesterday, cutting off power and triggering landslides, officials said. Kai-Tak, packing gusts of up to 110 kilometres (62 miles) an hour, hit the country's third-largest island Samar in the afternoon and tore through a region devastated by Super Typhoon Haiyan four years ago, the state weather service said. Local officials reported three deaths on neighbouring Leyte island -- a two-year-old boy who drowned in the town of Mahaplag, a woman buried by a landslide and another person who fell into a flooded manhole in Ormoc city. Samar and Leyte, with a combined population of about 4.5 million, had borne the brunt of Haiyan in 2013, which left more than 7,350 people dead or missing. Military trucks drove through rising floodwaters on Samar and Leyte to rescue trapped residents, with more than 77,000 people now in evacuation centres, local officials said. Strong winds toppled trees and power pylons, knocking out power throughout the region while floods, small landslides and rock falls blocked roads and buried some homes, local officials and witnesses said. Farmland in the mainly rural region was also under water, while seven people were injured by landslides and flying objects, the regional civil defence office said in a report.

## A PICTURE AND ITS STORY

# A knife, a fake bomb belt, a death

I went to the road just outside Ramallah, as on previous days, because that is one of the places in the West Bank where Palestinians have been protesting against U.S. President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. The 100-metre stretch leads from the city limits of Ramallah to the Jewish settlement of Beit El, and has a filling station and a traffic circle. Earlier on Friday, which Palestinians were calling a "Day of Rage", I had tried working at the Kalandia crossing point into the West Bank, but the Israelis had thrown tear gas and I knew this would make taking good photographs difficult. Outside Beit El, a group of paramilitary Israeli police had driven back hundreds of Palestinians who

were throwing rocks and burning tyres. I was photographing the protesters, and did not see another Palestinian who apparently emerged close to the Israeli squad from a hiding place near the traffic circle. I heard the Israeli police shooting, and turned around. On instinct, I started taking pictures, all the time trying to keep well out of the line of fire. When the Palestinian fell, I could see that he was holding a knife, and wearing what looked like a suicide bomb vest. Israeli police said he had managed to stab and wound one of their number before being shot. Palestinian medics later said the attacker was dead, and that his bomb belt had been fake. SOURCE: REUTERS



## Fatah calls for protests against US VP Pence's Jerusalem visit

The call comes after a day of violence that killed 4 Palestinian conflict. Israel seized control of the eastern part of the city in the 1967 Middle East war and sees the whole of Jerusalem as its undivided capital. The Palestinians view the east as the capital of their future state. The call to protest came as thousands of Palestinians took part in funerals for four men killed Friday in clashes with Israeli forces during protests in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip. Mourners chanted anti-Trump slogans and masked men fired into the air during one of the ceremonies in the village of Beit Ula in the occupied West Bank. Funerals were also held for the two other Palestinians killed by Israeli forces in Gaza. Friday's deaths brought to eight the number of Palestinians killed in violence or air strikes since Trump's Jerusalem move. Pence will no longer see Palestinian officials during his visit to the region after they cancelled meetings in protest at the embassy move. The status of Jerusalem is one of the most controversial issues in the Israeli-