

NEWS IN brief

Demos as Austrian far right sworn into govt

With a heavy police presence keeping thousands of protesters at bay, Austria's far right was sworn in yesterday as part of the new government. The coalition between the conservative People's Party and the Freedom Party has pledged to stop illegal immigration, cut taxes and resist EU centralisation.

Fire and collapse in Mumbai shop kills 12

Fire tore through a sweet shop in the Indian city of Mumbai before dawn yesterday, sparking a building collapse which killed 12 sleeping workers, authorities said. Four others were injured but some saved their lives by scrambling out seconds before the collapse.

South Africa's Ramaphosa elected ANC president

South African Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa was elected leader of the African National Congress yesterday in a close-run vote that will set the direction for the country and the scandal-plagued party that has ruled since the end of apartheid.



Ramaphosa, a 65-year-old union leader who became a businessman and is now one of South Africa's richest people, has vowed to fight rampant corruption and revitalise the economy. He narrowly beat Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, 68, a former cabinet minister and the ex-wife of President Jacob Zuma.



Supporters of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) holds a placard as they celebrate outside the party headquarters in New Delhi yesterday, with early counting of votes indicating a comfortable win for them in the key states of Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh. Inset, Amit Shah, president of BJP gestures as he celebrates with party supporters after the initial poll results.

IS attacks Kabul spy base

Afghan security forces battle militants for hours before killing two attackers at National Directorate of Security; two cops injured

Militants stormed an intelligence agency training centre in Kabul yesterday in an attack claimed by the Islamic State group, triggering an intense gunbattle with Afghan police. Security forces battled the militants, besieged in a construction site at the National Directorate of Security (NDS), for hours before killing at least two attackers.

"They were well hidden in buildings under construction. We exploded their VBIED and killed two or three of them," a source with the NDS told AFP on condition of anonymity, referring to a car bomb that attackers brought to the scene. Kabul police spokesman Basir Mujahid said two police officers were injured but there were no civilian casualties.

During the attack, roads to the area were closed and dozens of police and intelligence officers blocked access to the public. AFP reporters, who were held more than a kilometre away from the scene, saw ambulances and reinforcements headed towards the site. "I was going toward my school. It (the attack) happened suddenly... the police arrived in the area fast and blocked

the roads, not allowing anyone to get to their homes," Nawaed, a student, told AFP. IS claimed responsibility for the attack through its propaganda arm. "Two IS attackers raid the Afghan intelligence centre in Kabul," the jihadists' Amaq outlet reported.

The Afghan capital in recent months has become one of the deadliest places in the war-torn country for civilians, as the resurgent Taliban and increasingly IS both step up their attacks on security installations and mosques. Security in Kabul has been strengthened since May 31 when a massive truck bomb ripped through the city's diplomatic quarter, killing about 150 people and wounding around 400 -- mostly civilians.

No group has officially claimed responsibility for that attack, which the government blamed on the Taliban-allied Haqqani Network. Yesterday's attack represents another blow to beleaguered Afghan police and troops. The Taliban have targeted military installations in recent months, including a spate of attacks in October that killed around 150 people.



Congress fought anger with dignity

Says Rahul Gandhi after state polls

After it became clear the BJP is winning the Gujarat and the Himachal Pradesh elections, Congress president Rahul Gandhi tweeted saying the Congress "fought anger with dignity" and complimented his party workers for campaigning "decently".

These comments clearly referred to the fact that the Gandhi faction believes the BJP played dirty. They were also a reference to Prime Minister Narendra Modi accusing senior Congress leader Manmohan Singh and others in the party of colluding with Pakistan to ensure the BJP loses in Gujarat.

Rahul also said the party accepts the people's verdict. In Gujarat, the saffron party is ahead in 99 of 182 seats. The Congress is ahead in 79. The BJP needs only 92 to win which it appears is a target it will make.

However, if these trends continue, the BJP will have won a lot lower seats than the 115 it did in the last Assembly elections in 2012. By comparison, the Congress would have gained seats compared to the last go-around in 2012, when it won 61 seats.

In Himachal Pradesh, the BJP is ahead in 44 seats and the Congress in 21. Following a better-than-expected performance in the Gujarat assembly elections, Congress yesterday termed the results of the Gujarat assembly elections a "moral victory" for the party.

"Whatever the results, it was a moral win for Congress. It was a win for Rahul ji's issue-based campaign. BJP in the home state of PM Modi ji and Amit Shah ji is struggling to cross even 100", Congress leader Ashok Gehlot said.

CIA intel helped stop Russia terror attack

Putin thanks Trump, pledges to share info on threats to US

The Kremlin yesterday praised the "exemplary cooperation" between US and Russian security services after the CIA helped thwart a terror attack on a landmark Orthodox cathedral in Saint Petersburg.

In a phone call with US President Donald Trump on Sunday, Kremlin strongman Vladimir Putin expressed his gratitude for intelligence which allowed Russia's FSB security service to prevent attacks on the Kazan Cathedral, one of the best-known symbols of Saint Petersburg, and other places.

Russia's FSB security service said last week it had arrested seven members of the Islamic State group who had been planning terror attacks in crowded areas of Russia's former Imperial capital. Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov yesterday praised the case of "exemplary cooperation" between the security services of the two countries in the fight against terror. "There are certain sporadic contacts

between our security services but in this particular instance this (was) rather useful information that helped save a lot of lives," he told reporters. "And certainly it cannot but cause satisfaction and gratitude," Peskov added. "These are the standards we should aspire to so that they determine the future course."

Putin has pledged that Russian security services would pass on any information received about terrorist threats to the United States. The White House said the foiled attack could have killed "large numbers of people." It stressed that the cooperation "serves as an example of the positive things that can occur when our countries work together."

The FSB announced on Friday it had arrested seven members of an Islamic State group cell that had been planning a suicide bombing and "the killing of citizens" in crowded areas of Saint Petersburg on December 16.



Case against Reuters journalists can proceed

Says Myanmar as US, Canada, UK criticise arrests

Myanmar's civilian President Htin Kyaw, a close ally of government leader Aung San Suu Kyi, has authorised the police to proceed with a case against two detained Reuters reporters accused of violating the country's colonial-era Official Secrets Act, a senior government spokesman said.

Journalists Wa Lone, 31, and Kyaw Soe Oo, 27, were arrested last Tuesday evening after they were invited to dine with police officers on the outskirts of Myanmar's largest city, Yangon. "The Ministry of Home Affairs has already submitted the case to the Office of the President," Zaw Htay, spokesman for Aung San Suu Kyi, said by phone late on Sunday. He added that the president's office had given approval for the case to go ahead. Zaw Htay could not be reached yesterday

to clarify whether Htin Kyaw or Suu Kyi had been personally involved in the decision. Approval from the president's office is needed before court proceedings can begin in a case brought under the Official Secrets Act. A number of governments, including the United States, Canada and Britain, and United Nations' Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, as well as Reuters Editor-in-Chief Stephen J. Adler and a host of journalists' and human rights' groups have criticised the arrests as an attack on press freedom and called on Myanmar to release the two men. But two senior figures in the NLD yesterday joined the criticism of how the two men are being treated. The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) called on the authorities to immediately disclose the whereabouts of the pair.

ICJ calls on authorities to disclose reporters' whereabouts
Two NLD figures criticise way the journalists are being treated



Rescue team members carry the body of a miner after a landslide hit Srumbung Village in Magelang, Indonesia yesterday. Eight miners were killed and at least three more were missing following a landslide Monday on the slopes of a volcano on the Indonesian island of Java, officials said.

Trump denies he plans to fire Mueller

President Donald Trump insisted Sunday he has no plans to fire special counsel Mueller, despite his team's recent attacks on the credibility of the probe into Russian meddling in the US election.

With the ex-FBI director's investigation making inroads into the president's inner circle in recent weeks, Republicans have sought to cast doubt on its impartiality and pressed for a new independent prosecutor to investigate anti-Trump bias. This in turn has led to speculation that the administration could be laying the groundwork for firing Mueller.

But Trump shot down those rumors. Asked whether he was going to fire Mueller, the president told reporters: "No, I'm not."

Outage paralyzes Atlanta airport

Hundreds of flights cancelled; thousands left stranded for about 11 hours

The world's busiest airport in the US city of Atlanta was slowly resuming normal operations yesterday after a power cut stranded thousands of passengers and unleashed a storm of criticism. With electricity out for about 11 hours, some passengers were unable to disembark from their planes after landing, while those already inside the terminal crowded the darkened concourses where even some water fountains had reportedly stopped working.

"We all understand that Snafus happen and most of the folks down here are doing their jobs to the best of their ability," tweeted Anthony Foxx, a former transportation secretary under president Barack Obama who was stranded for several hours in his plane. "But, whatever the cause, it feels like this one was compounded by confusion and poor communication." US carrier Delta, whose largest hub is in the southern city, said it expected 300 more flight cancellations, mostly morning arrivals, "to give the operation there an opportunity to more quickly return to normal."

Campaign begins in Russia

Putin's top critic Navalny threatens to call for boycott if he is not allowed to take part in polls

Putin, who was first elected to the presidency in 2000, is widely expected to sail to victory, cementing his status as Russia's longest-serving ruler since dictator Joseph Stalin. Putin's top critic Alexei Navalny, 41, has been barred from putting his name on the ballot because of a criminal conviction, which he says is politically motivated. The head of Russia's Central Election Commission, Ella Pamfilova, said she was ready to hold the vote "at the right level". Navalny, who has been campaigning in far-flung Russian regions over the past year, has called on his supporters to take part in a protest on Sunday "for free elections". He has threatened to call for a boycott of the elections if he is not allowed to take part.



Shots fired at US base in England

US military personnel fired shots as they stopped a man who tried to force his way into a military base in central England used by the US air force yesterday, police said.

The Mildenhall Royal Air Force base said security staff locked down the base, used by the United States to refuel US and Nato aircraft in Europe, at about 1300 GMT following reports of a disturbance. "Shots were fired by American service personnel and a man has been detained with cuts and bruises and taken into custody," Suffolk Police said. "No other people have been injured as a result of the incident."

The US Air Force said the incident had been contained and that the suspect had been apprehended. Police said they remained on the base. The US embassy declined immediate comment. The 1,162-acre base, which houses about 3,100 US military and an additional 3,000 family members, is set for closure after the US said it was going to move its operations from the base to Germany. "The base was locked down and emergency personnel are responding to the situation," RAF Mildenhall said in a statement. "Individuals in the area surrounding the installation are asked to avoid the base at this time." A statement for the base said the lockdown had later been lifted.



In a letter to congressional committees, Trump campaign lawyer Kory Langhofer alleged the General Services Administration (GSA) "unlawfully produced" private materials, including privileged communications that Mueller then used as part of his Russia probe. The GSA is the government agency that supports presidential transitions -- the interim period after a new president is elected but before he takes office. Langhofer wrote that Mueller's office "received from the GSA tens of thousands of emails, including a very significant volume of privileged material," according to a copy of the letter published by Politico.