

# NEWS IN brief

## Assad calls US-backed militias 'traitors'

REUTERS, Beirut  
Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has described US-backed militias in eastern Syria as "traitors", his office said in an online statement. In a meeting with Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin in Damascus on Monday, Assad also welcomed a United Nations role in Syrian elections as long as it was linked with Syria's sovereignty, his office cited him as saying.

## EU agrees renewable energy targets for 2030

REUTERS, Brussels  
European Union environment and energy ministers on Monday agreed renewable energy targets for 2030 ahead of negotiations next year with the European Parliament, which has called for more ambitious green energy goals. Ministers said they would aim to source at least 27 percent of the bloc's energy from renewables by 2030, up from a target of 20 percent by 2020.



## Thai junta says it will lift ban on politics

REUTERS, Bangkok  
Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha yesterday said he would use a special order that gives the military sweeping powers to lift a ban on political activity that has been in place since a 2014 coup, paving the way for a 2018 general election. Major political parties had urged the government for months to lift the ban to allow parties to prepare for the vote and the announcement won some applause from government critics.



A Palestinian demonstrator hurls stones towards Israeli troops during clashes at a protest against US President Donald Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, near the West Bank city of Ramallah, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# Palestinians knock UNGA

Snubbed by US at UNSC, Arabs seek justice; UN condemns violence

AFP, AL JAZEERA ONLINE

The UN General Assembly (UNGA) will hold an emergency meeting after the US vetoed a UN Security Council resolution rejecting the US decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital. The request for the General Assembly meeting was put forth by a bloc of Arab nations, Turkey and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which bills itself as "the collective voice of the Muslim world".

Amid the uproar, US Vice President Mike Pence has delayed a visit to the Middle East, the White House said Monday, as a crunch tax vote on Capitol Hill looms and anger in the region over Washington's policy shift on Jerusalem persists.

Officials denied that Pence's decision was motivated by a wave of deadly protests in the wake of Trump's controversial decision to declare Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Aside from the protests, Palestinian, Muslim and Coptic leaders had cancelled meetings with the vice president, who had already trimmed the trip by three days.

US President Donald Trump recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel on December 6, reversing decades of US foreign policy and upsetting the Arab world and its Western allies.

The president of the General Assembly, Miroslav Lajcak, said that the emergency session will be conducted as soon as possible, while the

General Assembly will take it upon itself to consider matters further if the Security Council fails to exercise its primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security.

"The resolution can be passed by getting at least two-thirds of the votes of the members of the UN General Assembly," a Turkish foreign ministry source, who wished to remain anonymous, told Al Jazeera.

International law considers occupied East Jerusalem to be the capital for a future Palestine state, and does not recognise Israel's annexation of the territory, which it captured in the 1967 Six Day War.

And UN's human rights chief yesterday said he was "truly shocked" by Israeli troops' killing of a wheelchair-bound Palestinian protester in Gaza, and demanded an "independent and impartial investigation".

Ibrahim Abu Thurayeh, a 29-year-old who lost his legs after an Israeli attack a decade ago, was among five Palestinians killed on Friday during protests against Trump's decision. Hundreds were injured.

According to the resolution, the

## Three dead as violence surges in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian forces shot dead two suspected rebels in Indian-administered Kashmir in clashes that also killed a young woman, police said yesterday, as the deadliest year of the decade in the disputed territory draws to a close.

At least 210 militants have been killed this year -- the most since 2010 -- amid a military campaign to rout armed groups resisting Indian rule in the divided Himalayan region.

In addition, 57 civilians and 78 security personnel have also lost their lives in violence across the conflict-racked valley, according to police officials and watchdogs.

In the latest clash, two suspected militants were shot dead in a firefight that began Monday evening in southern Shopian district, inspector general of police Munir Ahmed Khan told AFP.

**JERUSALEM ROW**

**Pence delays Mideast visit over 'US tax vote'**

# KEY POINTS OF TRUMP'S NAT'L SECURITY STRATEGY

President Donald Trump's new national security strategy seeks to refocus the United States' relationship with China, Russia and the rest of the world, transforming his "America First" mantra into a set of policies and plans for protecting the homeland and advancing its economy. The following items were outlined in his administration's strategic document released on Monday:

### COMBATING CHINA

The strategy deems China, like Russia, to be a "revisionist" power, determined to reshape the world according to its own ideals. "Chinese dominance risks diminishing the sovereignty of many states" in its region and beyond, it says. The strategy calls for stronger traditional alliances and new partnerships in Asia amid a "geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order."

### COUNTERING RUSSIA

The strategy is harsher on Russia than the president has been in public comments. It says Russia uses "subversive measures" to weaken America's credibility and European governments, specifically calling out Moscow for "its invasions of Georgia and Ukraine." The document doesn't specifically mention Russian meddling in last year's US presidential election.

### BUDDING INDIA ALLIANCE

The strategy promotes a deeper partnership with India. Pakistan, on the other hand, must crack down on "transnational terrorists" operating from its soil, it says. But the document offers Pakistan the carrot of greater trade and investment ties if it helps on counterterrorism. The regional approach could be part of the broader effort to counter China, which is investing billions in Pakistan.

### FIGHTING GLOBAL THREATS

Trump says the US must re-establish control of its borders to block "jihadist terrorists" and international criminal groups, familiar themes from his campaign and first 11 months in the White House. North Korea and Iran are singled out as the leading threats to US security, followed by what Trump



used to call "radical Islamic terrorist" organizations like the Islamic State group and al-Qaeda. The strategy emphasizes cyberthreats and says the administration will assess such risks to security, energy, banking and transportation.

### BIGGER, BETTER MILITARY

Trump's strategy calls for increased defense spending to use the military as a force for peace. It includes familiar calls for the government to work more efficiently with industry to buy and build better, more high-tech weapons and end budget limits established in the midst of the recession. It also renews Trump's for a modernized nuclear arsenal.

### ENDING N KOREAN THREAT

The US is ready to respond with "overwhelming force" to North Korean aggression and will "improve options" to compel the North to give up its nuclear weapons. However, the "options" aren't entirely spelled out. It seeks cooperation from longtime allies Japan and South Korea toward an "area defense capability" — but that would surely be opposed by China. The strategy calls for building better defenses against ballistic missiles, potentially defeating such weapons before launch.

### A MIDEAST BEYOND ISRAEL

The strategy specifically rejects the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as central to Middle East instability. Instead, it identifies extremist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group, along with Iran, as prime catalysts. "Israel is not the cause of the region's problems," the document says, noting that once-hostile countries are finding common ground with the Jewish state on security issues. SOURCE: AP

# Gujarat poll results gave a massive jolt to Modi: Rahul

BJP gets 99 seats in the 182-member assembly, down from 115

TIMES OF INDIA ONLINE

Indian Congress president Rahul Gandhi yesterday said the results in the Gujarat assembly polls had given a massive jolt to the BJP, as it is a clear signal that their political propaganda is no longer working on the people.

"BJP has received a tremendous blow in Gujarat. PM Modi keeps trotting out the party line but the people of the country are no longer listening," Rahul told reporters.

"I got to know that people in Gujarat do not approve of Modi ji's model, the marketing and propaganda is very good but it is hollow from the inside, they could not answer our campaign," he said.

He added that Monday's outcome further showed that the credibility of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and by extension the BJP, has come into question.

The Gandhi scion said the people of Gujarat had sent a message to PM Modi that

the BJP's politics of anger can be defeated by love, a method that the Congress had adopted.

"The people of Gujarat gave me a lot of love and the biggest lesson they taught me is that irrespective of your opponent's anger or wealth, you can put up a good fight with love," he added.

The BJP fought off a strong challenge from Rahul Gandhi-led Congress to win the Gujarat assembly polls for the sixth straight time on Monday, taking 99 seats in the 182-member assembly, down from 115 it won in 2012, and far lower than the 150-plus seats it had hoped for. The Congress, which had 61 in

2012, made inroads in the saffron bastion by securing 77 seats in the House. The Congress party has steadily lost ground since the BJP swept to power in national elections in 2014. Congress has lost a series of state elections over the last three years, winning only the state of Punjab.



Pakistani wellwishers take part in a vigil for the victims of a suicide attack on a church in Lahore, yesterday. A suicide bomb attack on a Pakistan church claimed by the Islamic State group killed at least eight people and wounded 30 during a service on December 17, just over a week before Christmas.

PHOTO: AFP

## Challenges waiting for Ramaphosa

AFP, Johannesburg

South African deputy president Cyril Ramaphosa faced wide-ranging challenges yesterday after being elected to lead South Africa's ruling party as it grapples with corruption allegations and disunity.

He narrowly won the vote to become head of the African National Congress (ANC) on Monday after a bruising race that exposed rifts within the organisation that led the fight against apartheid.

The victory puts Ramaphosa in line to succeed President Jacob Zuma, whose reign has been plagued by corruption scandals, a slowing economy and anger at the once-omnipotent ANC.

Ramaphosa is set to enjoy a brief honeymoon period -- the rand currency rose four percent against the dollar,



suggesting investor confidence in the wealthy former businessman, before pairing gains.

But he still faces unenviable challenges on public sector cuts to control the ballooning budget and how to battle Zuma-era corruption.

Political analyst Richard Calland warned that Ramaphosa would be constrained by allies of Zuma who were also elected into top ANC positions on Monday's vote.

The ANC, which has ruled since 1994 when Nelson Mandela won the first multi-racial vote, could struggle to retain its grip on power in the 2019 election due to falling public support.

## MASSIVE 'WANNACRY' CYBER ATTACK

# UK, US blame North Korea

REUTERS, Washington

Britain yesterday said North Korea was behind the "WannaCry" cyber attack that infected computers around the globe earlier this year, joining the United States in blaming Pyongyang for the ransomware incident.

Britain's National Cyber Security Centre had assessed it was highly likely that North Korea's Lazarus hacking group was behind the one of the most significant cyber attacks to hit the UK in terms of scale of disruption, the Foreign Office said.

The Trump administration has publicly blamed North Korea for unleashing the attack that crippled hospitals, banks and other companies across the globe earlier this year.

"The attack was widespread and cost billions, and North Korea is directly responsible," Tom Bossert, homeland security adviser to President Donald Trump, wrote in a piece published on Monday night in the Wall Street Journal.

"North Korea has acted especially badly, largely unchecked, for more than a decade, and its malicious

behavior is growing more egregious," Bossert wrote. "WannaCry was indiscriminately reckless."

The US government has assessed with a "very high level of confidence" that a hacking entity known as Lazarus Group, which works on behalf of the North Korean government, carried out the WannaCry attack, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss details of the government's investigation.

Lazarus Group is widely believed by security researchers and US officials to have been responsible for the 2014 hack of Sony Pictures Entertainment that destroyed files, leaked corporate communications online and led to the departure of several top studio executives.

The accusation comes as worries mount about North Korea's hacking capabilities and its nuclear weapons program.

Many security researchers, including the cyber firm Symantec, as well as the British government, have already concluded that North Korea was likely behind the WannaCry attack, which quickly unfurled across the globe in May to infect more than 300,000 computers in 150 countries.



# Yemen's Huthi rebels fire missile at Riyadh

Saudi defences intercept missile; no damage reported

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia said yesterday it intercepted a missile over Riyadh fired by Iran-backed Huthi rebels in Yemen who announced that the target was the official residence of King Salman.

Saudi Arabia and the United States have accused Iran of supplying weapons to the insurgents, and Riyadh described the latest missile as "Iranian-Huthi".

An AFP correspondent heard a loud explosion at 1050 GMT, shortly before the scheduled unveiling of the Saudi budget, which is usually announced by the king from the Yamamah palace, his official residence.

"Coalition forces confirm intercepting an Iranian-Huthi missile," the Center for International Communication, an arm of the Saudi information ministry, said on Twitter.

"There are no reported casualties at this time," it added.

It was the second missile fired by the Huthis -- who seized the Yemeni capital in 2014 -- at Riyadh in the past two months.

The attacks, which could further escalate a military campaign by a Saudi-led coalition against the rebels, underscore how the raging Yemen conflict is increasingly spilling across the border.

Saudi Arabia angrily accused its arch foe Iran of supplying the missile to the rebels, a charge Tehran strongly denied.

The UN said yesterday at least 136 civilians have been killed over 10 days of Saudi-led air strikes on Yemen this month, with the organisation's human rights chief decrying an "inferno" on the ground.

The UN human rights office said it had tallied 136 civilians killed and another 87 injured in the strikes on Sanaa, Saada, Al Hudaydah, Marib and Ta'ez governorates between December 6 and 16.

136 killed in Saudi-led coalition strikes on Yemen in 10 days: UN