

NEWSIN brief

India acquits ex-telco minister of corruption

India's former telecoms minister was yesterday cleared of his alleged role in a multi-billion dollar fraud that ballooned into one of the country's biggest-ever political scandals. A special court in New Delhi acquitted A Raja of corruption and also dropped charges against a slew of other bureaucrats and corporate executives implicated in the 2008 scandal that cost the state billions in lost revenue.

Peru's president fights impeachment threat

Peruvian President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski was yesterday set to face his country's Congress over allegations of graft and covering up ties to a disgraced Brazilian construction group, with many lawmakers seeking to impeach him.

Children threatened by mines in Ukraine: UN

Hundreds of thousands of children are at imminent risk of being hit by mines and other explosive weapons in war-torn eastern Ukraine, one of the most mine-contaminated places on earth, a UN report said yesterday.

France urges Libya to act on UN peace plan

France's foreign minister yesterday urged Libya's unity government to act on a United Nations plan for 2018 elections and a national dialogue to stabilise the war-torn country. Oil-rich Libya has been wracked by chaos since a 2011 Nato-backed uprising that toppled longtime dictator Moamer Gaddafi.



Smoke rises from a fitness centre building in Jecheon, South Korea, yesterday. At least 29 people were killed and 26 injured in a major blaze at the fitness centre building, officials said, in one of the country's deadliest fire disasters.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Philippines ferry capsizes with 251

Four dead; seven passengers missing

Four people were killed and seven were missing after a Philippine ferry with 251 people on board capsized during bad weather yesterday near the capital, Manila, disaster officials and a coastguard spokesman said. Accidents involving boats sailing between the many islands of the Philippines are common. Vessels are often overloaded but the coastguard said that was not the case yesterday and the ferry had the capacity to carry 286 people. A total of 240 people were rescued from the sea by fishermen and rescue boats sent out by the coastguard hours after the ferry capsized and sank, about eight miles off Real town in Quezon province. "Search and rescue operations will continue until all crew and passengers are accounted for," said coastguard spokesman Captain Armand Balilo. Most of the rescued passengers were brought to Dinahican port. Two men and two women drowned, he said. The ferry set sail at around dawn from a port in Real. Survivors told reporters the weather turned bad three hours later with strong winds and huge waves. The ferry began taking in water and in minutes it capsized and sank, they said. Disaster officials said search and rescue operations were hampered by heavy rain and huge waves caused by a tropical storm affecting the southern Philippines. A tropical storm is expected to make landfall on the southern island of Mindanao late yesterday or early today.

Improve ties with India

Pak army chief urges lawmakers at the senate committee

In an extraordinary gesture, Pakistan army chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, urged the country's lawmakers to try to improve relations with India, assuring them that their efforts would be fully backed by the Army. His address comes in the backdrop of sustained American emphasis to Pakistani leadership on mending ties with India. "The military is ready to back political leadership's initiative for normalization of relations with India," Gen Bajwa told lawmakers at the senate committee of the whole House during his first appearance before a parliamentary forum on Tuesday. Gen Bajwa was invited by senate chairman Raza Rabbani and was accompanied by Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) chief Naveed Mukhtar. Top military officers, Major General Sahir Shamshad Mirza and Major General Asim Munir. The session continued for nearly four-and-a-half hours. Quoting senators, leading Pakistan daily Dawn said Gen Bajwa told legislators that he wants relations with all

neighbours to be normalised and urged politicians to try to improve relations with India. He assured them that their efforts would be fully supported by the army. The army chief's offer was particularly significant given a general perception that the army was against peace efforts with India. But Gen Bajwa said a large part of Indian military deployments was mostly against Pakistan. He also

tries tested atomic bombs. They have been developing new military technology to gain strategic advantage in the region ever since, including nuclear bombs.

Recently, General Joseph L Votel, Commander US Central Command, in his statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee, raised concerns about the tensions between the two countries. He said: "India remains concerned about the lack of action against India-focused militants based in Pakistan and even responded militarily to terrorist attacks in India-held territory earlier this year. We assess that these types of attacks and the potential reactions, increase the likelihood for miscalculation by both countries."

Commenting on India's stance on Pakistan's diplomatic isolation, General Joseph said: "India's public policy to 'diplomatically isolate' Pakistan hinders any prospects for improved relations. This is especially troubling as a significant conventional conflict between Pakistan and India could escalate into a nuclear exchange, given that both are nuclear powers."



His address came in the backdrop of US emphasis to leadership. He accuses India of fomenting instability in Pakistan.

North Korean soldier defects to South Korea

Seoul fires warning shots across DMZ

South Korean guards fired warning shots across the heavily militarised border with North Korea yesterday as a soldier from the North defected in thick fog, complicating efforts to ease tensions over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programmes. A South Korean defence ministry official said up to 20 warning shots were fired as North Korean troops approached too near the "military demarcation line" at the demilitarised zone (DMZ), apparently in search of the missing soldier. Yesterday's defection came about five weeks after a North Korean soldier suffered critical gunshot wounds during a defusing dash across the border. Two North Korean civilians were also found in a fishing boat on Wednesday and had sought to defect, officials in the South said. That brings the total number of North Koreans who have defected by taking dangerous routes either directly across the border or by sea to 15 so far this year, including two

other soldiers. That is three times the number last year, according to South Korean officials. Tensions on the Korean peninsula were already high after reclusive, impoverished North Korea accelerated testing of its missile and nuclear programmes this year in defiance of international pressure and UN sanctions. The defections also threaten to complicate South Korea's efforts to ensure the smooth running of the 2018 Winter Olympics, which begin in Pyeongchang in February. South Korean President Moon Jae-in said on Tuesday he had proposed postponing major military drills with the United States until after the games in an attempt to soothe relations, although officials in Seoul later said any proposed delay would depend on the North not engaging in any "provocations". In a notice published online, the US military's 8th Army said a "significant number of North Korean propaganda leaflets and CDs" had been distributed at "strategic locations" on multiple US military bases in South Korea.

Two N Korean civilians found in fishing boat seek to stay. Pause in military drills depends on North's behaviour: Moon

WWI sub mystery solved

Australia finds wreckage of country's first submarine more than a century after it vanished off PNG

After 103 years, Australia's oldest naval mystery has been solved, Defence Minister Marise Payne told reporters in Sydney. "This is one of the most significant discoveries in Australia's naval maritime history... The loss of AE1 in 1914 was a tragedy for our then fledgling nation." Payne said she hoped the discovery would help investigators establish the cause of the sinking. Rear Admiral Peter Briggs said the most likely cause of the loss "remains a diving accident", The Australian newspaper reported. "The submarine appears to have struck the bottom with sufficient force to dislodge the fin from its footing," it quoted Briggs as saying. He said the vessel appeared to have suffered a "post sinking, high energy event" that would have caused the submarine to flood rapidly, probably near the surface.



Palestinian and Lebanese protestors wave the yellow Hezbollah flags during a demonstration in Lebanon's southern border town of Naqura yesterday to denounce the US decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

AIR POLLUTION

Kashmir bans burning of leaves

With air pollution worsening in New Delhi and beyond, Indian-administered Kashmir has decided to step up efforts to combat its own worsening air quality. The state's government announced last month that it would begin enforcing an existing ban on the burning of leaves and wood pruned from trees. The government said such burning is hazardous to residents' health and ash from the fires contributes to the melting of glaciers in the region. Kashmir has millions of fruit and other trees, including poplar, willow and Chinar, an oriental plane tree. Some are traditionally pruned in autumn and early winter, or produce leaves that fall as a thick red and amber carpet on the ground. Often the pruned wood and leaves are burned, with the ash combined with charcoal for winter heating or mixed into the soil to enrich it. Under existing state environmental and municipal laws such burning is illegal, but this year the government has decided to enforce the ban, issuing circulars to district authorities asking them to strictly implement the law. According to a note accompanying the order from the chief minister's office, burning is aggravating air pollution and producing fine particulate that is particularly hazardous when breathed in. Dr. Parvaiz Koul, head of internal and pulmonary medicine at Sher-e-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences in Srinagar, said he believed burning was most likely contributing to a growing burden of respiratory disease in the city.

SOUTH AFRICA POLITICS

New ANC leader aims to fight corruption

Cyril Ramaphosa, the new leader of South Africa's governing ANC party, said yesterday he aims to stamp out corruption and pursue a policy of "radical economic transformation" that will speed up expropriation of land without compensation. Ramaphosa, a 65-year-old union leader who became a businessman and is now one of South Africa's richest people, is likely to become the country's next president after elections in 2019, because of his party's electoral dominance. His promise to fight rampant corruption and revitalise the economy has been hailed by foreign investors. "This conference has resolved that corruption must be fought with the same intensity and purpose that we fight poverty, unemployment and inequality," Ramaphosa said in his maiden speech at the close of a five-day party meeting where he was elected. "We must also act fearlessly against alleged corruption and abuse of office within our ranks," he said in the early hours yesterday after a long delay. Ramaphosa, who is South Africa's deputy president, was elected the new leader of the African National Congress (ANC) on Monday, succeeding President Jacob Zuma as party head after Zuma's presidency became tainted with corruption allegations.

Food security worsening in ME, North Africa: UN

Yemen suffers worst malnutrition among all nations

Food security in the Middle East and North Africa "is fast deteriorating" because of conflicts in countries from Syria to Yemen, the UN's food agency said yesterday. Violence in nations that also include Libya, Iraq and Sudan are leading to "a widening gap in well-being" compared with other parts of the region, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said in a report. "The level of under-nourishment in the conflict countries is now six times larger than that in non-conflict countries," it said. Yemen is suffering the worst food insecurity and malnutrition of all the conflict-hit countries in the region, followed by Syria and Sudan, it said. For more than two years, Yemen has been locked in a devastating civil war between the Saudi-backed government and Huthi rebels who swept into the capital in 2014. More than 8,750 people have been killed since a Saudi-led coalition intervened on the side of the government in March 2015. Nearly a quarter of the population of Yemen suffers from severe food insecurity, according to the FAO. Mark Lowcock, the UN under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs, said in November that unless the coalition ends the blockade of the country, Yemen will face "the largest famine the world has seen for many decades, with millions of victims". The FAO said the conflict-hit countries may not have sufficient resources to achieve the UN-adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).



Pope: Vatican foes of reforms are 'traitors'

Pope Francis issued a stinging new critique of some in the Vatican's top administration yesterday, saying people sacked for obstructing his reforms should not act like martyrs but admit they are "traitors". For the fourth year running, Francis used his annual Christmas greetings to the Roman Catholic Church's central bureaucracy, or Curia, to lecture the assembled cardinals, bishops and other department heads on the need for change. He said some in the bureaucracy - the nerve centre of the 1.2-billion-member Church and whose members are entrusted with carrying out the pope's decisions - were part of "cliques and plots". Francis called this "unbalanced and degenerate" and a "cancer that leads to a self-referential attitude". Since his election as the first Latin American pope in 2013, Francis has been trying to reform the Italian-dominated Curia to bring the Church's hierarchy closer to its members, to enact financial reforms and guide it out of scandals that marked the pontificate of his predecessor, former Pope Benedict. But he has encountered resistance, particularly as some departments have been closed, merged or streamlined. In his address yesterday, he spoke of those "traitors of trust" who had been entrusted with carrying out reforms but "let themselves be corrupted by ambition and vainglory."