

NEWSIN brief
Britain set to get blue passports back
AFP, London
Britain will return to a blue and gold passport design after the country leaves the European Union in 2019 "to restore our national identity", its interior ministry announced yesterday.
The country will phase out the current burgundy colour travel document following Brexit.

Malaysia arrests 20 over 'terror links'
REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia has arrested 20 suspected militants, including 13 foreigners, police said yesterday, adding to a list of hundreds detained in recent years accused of having links to terror groups. The country has been on high alert since the US and the UK launched multiple attacks in Jakarta, Indonesia, in January 2016.

US backs re-election of Honduras president
REUTERS, Washington
The United States yesterday backed the re-election of Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez, a US ally, who was certified the winner in last month's presidential contest in Honduras despite allegations of fraud by the opposition.
"We congratulate President Juan Orlando Hernandez on his victory in the November 26 presidential elections," US State Department spokesman William Heather Nauert said.

Australian police make record meth haul
AFP, Sydney
Australia has seized more than Aus\$1.0 billion worth of methamphetamine in its biggest ever bust of the highly-addictive drug, police said yesterday.
Commonly known as "ice", the intercepted 1.2 tonne haul was offloaded from a boat, the Valkoista, which authorities believe came from China.



A Palestinian demonstrator hauls a tear gas canister fired by Israeli troops, during clashes at a protest as Palestinians call for a "Day of Rage" in response to US President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, near the border with Israel in the east of Gaza City, yesterday. Inset, Malaysian Muslims display placards as Malaysia's PM delivers his speech during a rally against US President Donald Trump in Putrajaya, outside Kuala Lumpur.
PHOTO: AFP

Trump's US security report 'criminal'
Says N Korea ahead of new sanctions
REUTERS, Seoul
US President Donald Trump's new national security strategy unveiled this week is a "criminal document" that seeks the "total subordination of the whole world to the interests of the US," North Korea's foreign ministry said yesterday.
"This has fully revealed that 'America's first policy' which the gang of Trump is crying out loudly about is nothing but the proclamation of aggression aimed at holding sway over the world according to its taste and at its own free will," a foreign ministry spokesman said, according to a statement released by state media outlet KCNA.

In the document, announced on Monday, Trump said Washington had deal with the challenge posed by North Korea's weapons programmes.
The UN Security Council was due to vote yesterday on a US-drafted resolution that seeks, yet again, to toughen sanctions on North Korea in response to its latest intercontinental ballistic missile launch, diplomats said.

The 90, seen by Reuters on Thursday, seeks to ban nearly three dozen refined petroleum product exports to North Korea by capping them at 500,000 barrels a year and demand the repatriation of North Koreans working abroad within 12 months.
It would also cap crude oil supplies to North Korea at 4 million barrels a year. The United States has been calling on China to limit its oil supply to its neighbor and ally.

MOSCOW'S ALLEGED CYBER ATTACK CAMPAIGNS

Stop meddling in foreign elections: UK tells Russia

REUTERS, Moscow
British foreign minister Boris Johnson told his Russian counterpart yesterday there was "abundant evidence" of Moscow meddling in foreign elections, but said any Russian efforts to interfere in last year's Brexit referendum had fallen flat.
On the first visit to Russia by a British foreign minister in five years, Johnson said he wanted to normalise UK-Russia relations, which were going through "a very difficult patch."
But that didn't mean pretending that Britain did not have serious concerns about Russia's behaviour, he said.
"We can't pretend that the (problems) do not exist, and that we share a common perspective on the events in Ukraine, or in the Western Balkans or... on Russian activities in cyberspace," said Johnson.
He also said Britain had a duty to speak up

for the LGBT community in Chechnya. Two men from Chechnya told Reuters in June they had been tortured because they were gay. Chechen authorities deny the allegations.
Johnson's visit comes at a time when relations between London and Moscow are strained by differences over Ukraine and Syria as well as by allegations, which Russia flatly denies, that Moscow has meddled in the politics of various European countries by backing cyber attacks and disinformation campaigns.
Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov challenged that narrative, however, saying Johnson himself had recently said he had no proof that Moscow had meddled in last year's British referendum on leaving the European Union.
"Not successfully, not successfully. I think is the word," Johnson - a leading advocate of Brexit - shot back, to which Lavrov replied: "He's scared that if he doesn't disagree with me, his reputation will be ruined at home."



CATALONIA'S STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE

Catalan separatists won a crucial vote Thursday that pitted them against anti-independence parties, keying the region into further uncertainty. Here are the dates in the history of the wealthy region's independence drive:

- 'WE ARE ANATION'**
March 2006: Catalans agree a new autonomy charter, increasing their fiscal and judicial powers and describing Catalonia as a "nation".
- June 2010: Spain's Constitutional Court strikes down parts of the charter, in response to an appeal filed by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's conservative Popular Party (PP).**
A month later, hundreds of thousands of people protest in Barcelona against the ruling, amid chants of "We are a nation, we decide".
- DEMANDS FOR INDEPENDENCE**
September 11, 2012: More than a million people protest in Barcelona demanding independence for Catalonia. Major demonstrations are held in the following years on the same date, marking Catalonia's national day.
- November 26, 2012: Mas's centre-right CiU alliance wins the election over left but fails to secure an absolute majority in the regional parliament.**
- HUMAN CHAIN**
September 11, 2013: Hundreds of thousands of Catalans form a human chain stretching more than 400 kilometres (250 miles) across the Mediterranean coast to push for independence.
- SYMBOLIC VOTE**
November 9, 2014: Catalonia defies Madrid and presses ahead with a symbolic vote on independence. Turnout is just 37 percent, which is over 80 percent vote in favour of independence.
- PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY**
September 27, 2015: The pro-independence Together For Yes alliance secures 62 seats in the regional assembly and the radical left-wing separatist group CiUP wins 10, giving them an absolute majority.
- But the separatist block falls short of winning a majority of votes in the**



election, which is portrayed as a plebiscite on independence, capturing just 47.4 percent of the ballot.
January 10, 2016: Carles Puigdemont becomes president of Catalonia.
REFERENDUM DAY
March 2017: Catalan ex-president Mas is found guilty of "disobedience" for staging the 2014 symbolic referendum. He is banned from holding public office for two years.
June 2017: Puigdemont announces a referendum to be held on October 1. Voters are asked: "Do you want Catalonia to be an independent country CiUP in the form of a republic?" Spain's central government vows to block the vote.
October 27: The Catalan parliament declares multiple warnings from the central government and unilaterally declares independence from Spain.
SEPARATISTS BEHIND BARS
November 2017: Puigdemont goes to Belgium, before a Spanish court charges him and other top members of the hard government and its secessionists and rebellion. His former deputy Oriol Junqueras and other senior officials are remanded in custody pending trial.
December 19: Separatist and pro-independence candidates hold their final campaign rallies, with dozens ex-leader Puigdemont speaking to supporters via videotext from exile.
December 21: Catalan separatists win a crucial snap poll, raising the question of how they will govern, with Puigdemont in exile and Junqueras behind bars.
SOURCE: AFP

US puts Taliban on the run

Says VP Pence during surprise visit to Bagram base; militants kill six Afghan police in suicide attack

AFP, Kabul
here, we're making real progress in this fight for freedom in Afghanistan," Pence told the troops.
"We've dramatically increased American air strikes. And together with our Afghan partners, we've put the Taliban on the defensive," he said, also pointing at efforts to target the drug trafficking networks that help fund the Taliban.
"All across this country we've won new victories against the terrorists, no matter what they call themselves or where they try to hide."
The vice president also aimed a jab at neighboring Pakistan - reiterating word for word Trump's warning that it must stop offering cross-border safe havens to Taliban factions and armed jihadist groups fighting US troops and their Afghan allies.
Meanwhile, a suicide bomber drove an explosives-packed Humvee into a police compound in Afghanistan yesterday, killing at least six officers and destroying a building, officials said.

The supersonic's vexed campaign against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban - born from the rubble of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington - receives ever-less public attention in the United States these days.
"With the American people deserve to know that with the courage of everyone gathered



Peru's President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (seated) listens as his lawyer Alberto Borea addresses lawmakers of the opposition-ruled Congress, in Lima, Peru late Thursday. Kuczynski narrowly survived an impeachment vote by lawmakers accusing him of graft in relation to disgraced Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht. PHOTO: REUTERS

MOVE TO AVOID GOVT SHUTDOWN

US Congress passes short-term budget

REUTERS, Washington
The US Congress on Thursday averted a government shutdown just one day before federal funding was due to expire, sending President Donald Trump a bill to provide just enough money to keep agencies operating through Jan 19.
With lawmakers eager to begin a holiday recess until Jan 3, the House and Senate hurriedly passed the hastily-written bill by votes of 231-188 and 66-32, respectively.
When Congress returns, lawmakers will immediately have to get back to work on appropriating more money for a fiscal year that already will be three months old. They will also have to pass an "omnibus" spending bill to fund the government from Jan. 19 through Sept 30.
Negotiators have been struggling for months over thorny issues such as the amount of defense spending, increasing versus increases for other domestic programs, including medical research and anti-terrorism activities.
Fiscal hawks, meanwhile, are arguing that Congress is again moving to pass through, spending caps that had been designed to tamp down mounting federal debt.
But some of those same lawmakers in the Republican-controlled Congress voted for a sweeping tax bill that will add \$1.5 trillion over the next 10 years to a national debt that already stands at \$20 trillion.

Russian hackers targeted 200 jourms globally: report

AP, Paris
Russian television anchor Pavel Lobkov was in the studio getting ready for his show when jarring news flashed across his phone: Some of his most intimate messages had just been published on the web.
Days earlier, the veteran journalist had come out live on air as HIV-positive, a tobacco-chewing revelation that drew responses from hundreds of Russians fighting their own lonely struggles with the virus. Now he'd been hacked.
"These were very personal messages," Lobkov said in a recent interview, describing a frantic call to his lawyer in an abortive effort to stop the spread of nearly 300 pages of Facebook correspondence, including sexually explicit messages. Even two years later, he said, "it's a very traumatic story."
The Associated Press found that Lobkov

was targeted by the hacking group known as Fancy Bear in March 2015, nine months before his messages were leaked. He was one of at least 200 journalists, publishers and bloggers targeted by the group as early as mid-2014 and as recently as a few months ago.
The AP identified journalists as the third-largest group on a hacking list it obtained from cyber-security firm Secureworks, after diplomatic personnel and US Democrats. About 50 of the journalists worked at the New York Times. Another 50 were either foreign correspondents based in Moscow or Russian reporters like Lobkov who worked for independent news outlets. Others were prominent media figures in Ukraine, Moldova, the Baltics or Washington.
The list of journalists provides new evidence for the US intelligence community's conclusion that Fancy Bear acted on behalf of the Russian government.



Indian woman burned to death by jilted lover

AFP, New Delhi
A woman in southern India died from burns yesterday after a man she turned down set her on fire on a crowded main road, police said.
The 25-year-old died after the man doused her in petrol and set her alight in Secunderabad city in southern Telangana state on Thursday.
Hearing her screams for help, passersby ran to put out the fire and rushed her to a hospital where she was admitted with 60 percent burns, investigating officer Srinivasa Rao said. "She succumbed to her burn injuries this morning," Rao told AFP by phone.
"Both of them had known each other for the last two years. The boy was under the impression that this girl was in love with him but when he asked her otherwise, he could not tolerate the insult."
The man was arrested Thursday night, before his victim died, and was initially charged with several offences including attempted murder and molestation.
"He is believed to have been in love with the victim and had begun to harass and stalk her when she showed disinterest, according to the Press Trust of India citing an unnamed police official.
The latest case adds to a grim record of crimes against women in India where reported offences have risen dramatically, particularly after the fatal gang rape of a 23-year-old woman in New Delhi in 2012.

Pakistan closes 27 intl NGOs in crackdown

REUTERS, Islamabad
Pakistan has ordered 27 international aid groups to shut down for working in unauthorised areas, spurring human rights campaigners to denounce sweeping constraints on free speech and humanitarian work.
The United Nations gave the 27 NGOs 90 days to conclude operations, according to a list seen by Reuters. Among those being expelled are Action Aid, World Vision, Christian International, Trocaire, Pathfinder International, Danish Refugee Council, Danish Soros' Open Society Foundations, Oxfam Novib, and Marie Stopes.
Tal Chaudhry, Pakistan's Minister of State for Interior Affairs, told Reuters the reason for shutting down the NGOs was because they were doing work in Pakistan "which is beyond their mandate and for which they have no legal justification."
He declined to give specific examples, but said the targeted NGOs spend "all their money" on administration, are not doing the work they said they were doing, and are working in areas where they were not authorised.
The Pakistan Humanitarian Forum (PHF), which represents 63 international aid groups, said the ministry had issued 11 of its members "letters of rejection." All of them said they will appeal. No reason for the rejections has been provided, the forum said.
Plan International, which has worked in Pakistan since 1997, said it is supporting over 1.6 million children across Pakistan. Plan said it was given no reason for the ministry's decision and would appeal it.