

NEWS IN
briefTillerson defends US
foreign policy record

AFP, Washington

The United States' top diplomat defended his country's foreign policy record on Wednesday, saying progress had been made in the last year to rein in North Korea's nuclear ambitions and to counter the "immense challenges" posed by Russia, China and Iran.

Zimbabwe ex-army
chief sworn in as VP

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe's former army commander who led a military takeover that helped end Robert Mugabe's 37-year rule was yesterday sworn in as one of the country's two vice presidents. General Constantino Chiwenga, 61, took the oath of office in Harare, pledging to be "faithful" to Zimbabwe.

70 media outlets close
in Venezuela in 2017

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela saw almost 70 newspapers, TV and radio stations close in 2017 while attacks on journalists rose, the main union representing the media said Wednesday, accusing the socialist government of trying to "silence" the press. The union also recorded 498 attacks on journalists as well as 66 arrests.

Bali declares 'garbage
emergency'

AFP, Kuta

Bali's palm-fringed Kuta beach has long been a favourite with tourists seeking sun and surf, but nowadays its golden shoreline is disappearing under a mountain of garbage. Plastic straws and food packaging are strewn between sunbathers, while surfers bobbing behind the waves dodge waste flushed out from rivers or brought in by swirling currents.



A Palestinian woman scuffles with Israeli troops during a protest demanding Israel to release Palestinian teenager Ahed Tamimi, near Israel's Ofer Prison near the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday.

'Comfort women' deal
with Japan flawed

Says South Korean president

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's 2015 deal with Japan over Tokyo's wartime sex slavery was "seriously flawed", President Moon Jae-In said yesterday, telling officials to re-examine the controversial agreement.

The issue of women forced into sexual slavery for Japanese troops during World War II is a hugely emotional subject that has marred ties between the South and its former colonial ruler, Japan.

Moon's comments came a day after Seoul's foreign ministry said the deal -- which was pushed and endorsed by his predecessor Park Geun-Hye -- was faulty and had "failed to reflect the victims' views".

The unpopular agreement was meant to end the decades-long dispute with a Japanese apology and a payment of 1 billion yen (\$8.8 million) to survivors.

But it sparked anger among some survivors seeking an explicit apology from the Japanese government for the wartime abuses.

Following Moon's decision to order a review of the deal after being elected to office this year, a task force published a report Wednesday saying the agreement was rushed and did not do enough to seek out the opinions of the victims, often known by the euphemism "comfort women".

"It has been confirmed that the 2015 deal ... was seriously flawed," Moon said in a statement released yesterday.

"Although the 2015 deal was an official agreement endorsed by the leaders of both countries, I'd like to make it clear that the deal cannot solve this issue of 'comfort women'."

PHOTO:
REUTERS

Xi's new power moves

Chinese President takes control of paramilitary police ahead of constitutional change for the first time since 2004

CNN ONLINE

The ruling Communist Party (CCP) will discuss changing the country's constitution for the first time since 2004 next month, with analysts predicting Xi will further cement his grip on power.

The change could clear the way for the creation of a National Supervision Commission (NSC), a country-wide anti-corruption task force with sweeping new powers, though some have speculated there could also be a move to abolish term-limits on the Presidency, allowing Xi to serve on past 2022.

This comes on the back of a move by Xi this week to shore up his command of the country's armed forces by moving control of paramilitary police from the government to the CCP.

In October, the CCP enshrined "Xi Jinping Thought" as a guiding principle, elevating him to a level no Chinese leader has held since Mao Zedong.

At the same time, Xi unveiled a new leadership team which did not include any obvious successor, increasing speculation he may hold on to power at the end of his second five-year term as President.

Margaret Lewis, an expert in China's legal system at



Mao-era style self criticism session in which they vowed to follow Xi's lead, according to state news agency Xinhua.

"Xi has shown firm faith and will, clear commitment to the people, extraordinary political wisdom and tactics and a strong sense of responsibility, in leading the CPC and China in the great struggle with many new contemporary features," the Politburo said in a statement following the "meeting of self reflection."

Deng Xiaoping, during his time as leader, gave up most official positions but retained a huge amount of control over decision making, Lewis said.

"Titles matter, but there is more to power in China," she said, particularly the "extent to which other top leaders act as a check on his power."

This week, the Politburo, the party's top body, underwent a

"meeting of self reflection."

'Triple talaq' bill passed in India's Lok Sabha

TNN, New Delhi

After just a day of discussion, the Lok Sabha (LS) yesterday passed a bill that makes triple talaq a criminal offence.

The bill was passed after the House rejected a string of amendments moved by various opposition members.

Despite reservations by opposition parties, the bill was cleared on the same day that it was introduced - something that was possible because the BJP government has a brute majority in the Lower House.

The bill will now be tabled in the Rajya Sabha.

The draft bill, officially called Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill 2017, says, "any pronouncement of talaq by a person upon his wife, by words, either spoken or written or in electronic form or in any other manner whatsoever, shall be void and illegal."

The draft bill also has a provision of imprisonment for a term, which may extend to three years, and a fine, for violators.

"We are not interfering in Shariat", said law minister Ravi Shankar Prasad in the LS yesterday during the debate on the Triple

Talaq Bill.

"This law is for women's rights and justice and not regarding any prayer, ritual or religion," he added.

The law minister added that Centre is looking at the bill through the lens of humanity and not politics, as alleged by the opposition parties.

He said that judiciary in various judgements have conveyed their concerns from time to time on this issue. "We were expecting

that after this judgement, triple talaq cases would come down and situation would improve...about 300 triple talaq cases happened in 2017 and 100 were reported after the Supreme Court's judgement."

Several countries particularly Islamic nations including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Morocco, Indonesia, Malaysia and Tunisia have regulated this. "See where Islamic nations have reached and see where we are," he asked.

Union minister M J Akbar fiercely defended the bill and said it would have far reaching implications for 9 crore Muslim women living under the "constant fear of being divorced".

"We are not interfering in Shariat", said Law Minister Ravi Shankar

NAWAZ SHARIF PROBE

Pak anti-graft body gives nods for graft case

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan's anti-graft body has given the nod for launching a corruption case against ousted premier Nawaz Sharif and his younger brother Shahbaz Sharif.

National Accountability Bureau (NAB) chairman Javed Iqbal on Wednesday approved registration of the corruption case during an executive board meeting.

NAB officials said the case was related to alleged loss of over Rs 120 million to the national exchequer over the construction of a two-way road in 2000 from Raiwind to the Sharif family home in Jati Umra in the suburbs of Lahore.

The Sharif brothers have so far not reacted to the new allegations of corruption.

Nawaz Sharif, his daughter Maryam, son-in-law Muhammad Saif, and sons Hassan and Hussain, are already facing three NAB cases filed in September on the basis of the Supreme Court's decision of July 28 in the Panama Papers case that led to Sharif's ouster as premier.

However, the new case also includes Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif who has been tipped as a future prime minister if Nawaz's PML-N party wins the election next year.

Officials said the NAB in the same meeting also approved filing of six corruption references, complete four pending inquiries, and 11 investigations against different politicians and officers.

The meeting also decided to probe former prime minister Raja Pervaiz Ashraf who as minister for water and power from 2008-2011 caused a loss of Rs 113 billion to the national exchequer by delaying a key energy project.

India accuses Pakistan of
violating human rights

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India yesterday accused Pakistan of repeatedly violating human rights by the manner in which the latter had conducted a meeting between a former Indian Navy officer, accused of spying and sentenced to death by a Pakistani military court, and his family in Islamabad earlier this week.

Speaking in the Rajya Sabha, upper House of parliament, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj said Pakistan used the emotional reunion of Kulbhushan Jadhav and his wife and mother after 22 months as "a propaganda tool."

"There was violation after violation of human rights. Pakistan should be condemned in the strongest words for this behaviour," she said while making a statement in both Houses of parliament on the

KULBHUSHAN JADHAV ROW



Jadhav's mother Avanti and wife Chetankul were forced to change their dress and take off their mangalsutra (a married Hindu woman wears round her neck), bindi and bangles for the 45-minute meeting on Monday tightly controlled by Pakistani officers.



First Deputy Chairman of the Ukrainian parliament Iryna Herashchenko embraces a prisoner of war (POW) from the Ukrainian armed forces during the exchange of captives in Horlivka in Donetsk region, Ukraine on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

FACELESS NOTES

Philippines bank
left red-faced

AFP, Manila

The Philippine central bank said yesterday it accidentally released defective 100-peso bills with the face of a former president left out.

Officials at the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) made the admission after a woman's Facebook post showing the defective 100-peso (\$1.99) bills she received from an ATM went viral.

Chief among the mistakes on the notes is a blank space where the portrait of former president Manuel Roxas should have been. Two words from the country's official name were also missing.

BSP managing director Carlyn Pangilinan said the errors were caused by a "glitch" in a printing machine.

"Our quality control was manual before. Now, it is all machines so there are things that slip through," she told reporters.

Only 33 100-peso bills with the errors have been discovered so far, she added.

Authorities asked people to return the defective bills but conceded that some may want to keep them as potential collector's items.

Reuters journos arrested
after being handed papers
Say families during press briefing in Yangon

REUTERS, Yangon

Family members of two Reuters reporters detained in Myanmar said yesterday the pair had told them they were arrested almost immediately after being handed some documents by policemen they had gone to meet.

Wa Lone, 31, and Kyaw Soe Oo, 27, were arrested on December 12 on suspicion of violating the country's Official Secrets Act. The Ministry of Information has cited the police as saying they were "arrested for possessing important and secret government documents related to Rakhine State and security forces".

The two journalists had worked on Reuters coverage of a crisis in the western state of Rakhine, where an estimated 655,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled from a fierce military crackdown on militants.



In the first account of the circumstances of the arrests from the journalists themselves, Wa Lone's wife, Pan Ei Mon, told a news conference her husband said that he and Kyaw Soe Oo had a meeting at a restaurant on December 12 with two police officers they had not met before.

The policemen handed them two rolled-up papers and said they could take the documents home and open them there, Pan Ei Mon said, quoting her husband.

"They took the two rolled papers and paid the bill and went out from the restaurant," she said. "They were immediately grabbed by around seven or eight policemen who handcuffed them and arrested them. He told me that."

Nyo Nyo Aye, Kyaw Soe Oo's sister, told the news conference that her brother had

MARITAL LAW IN PHILIPPINES' MINDANAO
UN warns of massive
human rights abuses

REUTERS, Geneva

A Muslim indigenous community on the Philippine island of Mindanao has suffered widespread human rights abuses that could intensify with President Rodrigo Duterte's extension of martial law there, UN-appointed experts said.

Duterte has called the island a "flashpoint for trouble" and for atrocities by Islamist and communist rebels.

Lawmakers this month overwhelmingly backed his plan to extend martial law there through 2018, which would be the country's longest period of such emergency rule since the 1970s era of strongman Ferdinand Marcos.

The militarisation has displaced thousands of the Lumad people and some have been killed, said Victoria Tauli-Corpuz and Cecilia Jimenez-Damary, the UN Human Rights Council's special rapporteurs on the rights of indigenous peoples and internally displaced people.

"They are suffering massive abuses of their human rights, some of which are potentially irreversible," the pair said in a statement late on Wednesday.

"We fear the situation could deteriorate further if the extension of martial law until the end of 2018 results in even greater militarisation."