

India, Pak exchange  
nuclear installation list

TOI, New Delhi

India and Pakistan yesterday exchanged lists of their nuclear installations under an agreement that aims to prevent both sides from attacking such facilities. The exchange was done through diplomatic channels simultaneously at New Delhi and Islamabad, said the ministry of external affairs (MEA) in a statement.

Four killed in London  
New Year violence

AFP, London

Four young men were stabbed to death in unrelated incidents in London on New Year's Eve, while a fifth is in a critical condition in hospital, police said yesterday. At least 80 people were killed in stabbings in London in 2017, more than half of them under the age of 25. Detectives launched four separate murder investigations into the overnight attacks.

Costa Rican plane  
crash kills 12

REUTERS, San Jose

A Costa Rican plane crashed into woodland off a popular tourist beach on Sunday, killing 10 U.S. citizens and two local pilots, the Costa Rican government said. The accident occurred in the mountainous area off the Punta Islita beach town in the province of Guanacaste, about 230 km west of the capital of San Jose.

Air strikes in Syria  
kill 12 civilians

AFP, Beirut

Air strikes on one of the last villages still held by the Islamic State group in eastern Syria killed 12 civilians, including four children, a monitor said yesterday. The strikes were carried out late Sunday on the village of Susa in Deir Ezzor province, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.



Protesters take part in the annual New Year's Day pro-democracy rally in Hong Kong yesterday. Angry protesters marched through Hong Kong against what they described as suppression by Beijing, days after Chinese authorities ruled that part of a city rail station would come under mainland law.

JERUSALEM ROW  
Palestine recalls  
envoy to US

AFP, Ramallah

The Palestinians said Sunday they were recalling their envoy to the United States for consultations in a move that follows US President Donald Trump's designation of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Palestinian foreign minister Riad al-Malki decided to recall PLO envoy to Washington Husam Zomlot to consult, official Palestinian news agency WAFA said, without providing further details.

Trump's December 6 announcement regarding the disputed city deeply angered the Palestinians and led to unrest. Palestinian officials had earlier said president Mahmud Abbas would refuse to meet US Vice President Mike Pence during a visit to the region that had been planned for December but which was later cancelled.

Abbas has also said he would accept no further role for the United States in the Middle East peace process.

Violence since Trump's announcement has left 13 Palestinians dead, with most killed in clashes with Israeli forces.

On Sunday, while marking the 53rd anniversary of his Fatah movement, Abbas called Jerusalem "the eternal capital of the Palestinian people".

Jerusalem's status is perhaps the most sensitive issue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israel sees the entire city as its capital, while the Palestinians want the eastern sector as the capital of their future state.

Israel occupied east Jerusalem and the West Bank in the 1967 Six-Day War. It later annexed east Jerusalem in a move never recognised by the international community.

'Nuclear button on my desk'

North Korean leader warns US it will never be able to start a war, offers olive branch to Seoul in his New Year's message

AFP, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un yesterday warned the United States he has a "nuclear button" on his table but offered an apparent olive branch to South Korea in a New Year message, saying he was prepared for talks and may send a team to the Winter Olympics there.

Kim struck a generally defiant note after a year of rising tensions marked by the North's multiple missile launches and its sixth and most powerful nuclear test -- purportedly of a hydrogen bomb.

"We must mass-produce nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles and speed up their deployment," he said in his annual televised address to the nation.

He reiterated his claim that his country had achieved its goal of becoming a nuclear state but insisted the expansion of the weapons programme was a defensive measure.

"We should always keep readiness to take immediate nuclear counter-attacks against the enemy's scheme for a nuclear war."

The North claims it needs nuclear weapons to protect itself from a hostile Washington and has striven to create a warhead capable of targeting the US mainland with an atomic warhead.

US President Donald Trump has responded to each test with his own amplified declarations, threatening to "totally destroy" Pyongyang and taunting Kim, saying he was on "a suicide mission".

But far from persuading Kim to give up his nuclear drive, analysts say Trump's tough talk may have prompted the North Korean leader to push through with his dangerous quest.

"(The North) can cope with any kind of nuclear threats from the US and has a strong nuclear deterrence that is able to prevent the US from playing with fire," Kim said yesterday.

"The nuclear button is always on my table. The US must realise this is not blackmail but reality."

When asked for a response to Kim's claim that he had a nuclear button on his desk, Trump said "We'll see, we'll see", in comments to reporters during the New Year's Eve party at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida.

Kim also sugared his speech with a conciliatory tone towards Seoul, indicating for the first time that the North is considering taking part in the South's Winter Olympics next month.

"(The Olympics) will serve as a good chance to display our Korean people's grace toward the world and we sincerely hope the Games will be a success," he said.



Don't extinguish hopes

Pope Francis urges understanding for migrants while addressing mass on World Day of Peace

REUTERS, Vatican City

Pope Francis described migrants and refugees as the world's "weakest and most needy" yesterday, using his traditional New Year's address to "give voice" to people he has urged leaders to do more to help.

Francis reminded some 40,000 people who gathered in St Peter's Square at the Vatican that he had chosen the plight of migrants and refugees as the theme for the Roman Catholic Church's World Day of Peace, which is celebrated every January 1.

"For this peace, to which everyone has a right, many of them are willing to risk their lives in a journey which is often long and dangerous, they are willing to face strain and suffering."

"Please, let us not extinguish the hope in their hearts, let us not suffocate their hopes for peace!"

Across the world, the mass movement of people has shot to the top of the political agenda, and Francis has made defending those who migrate a central theme of his papacy.

During a trip to Myanmar and Bangladesh last year, he met Muslim refugees and called for decisive measures to solve the political problems that caused many to flee.

He has also criticised President Donald Trump's stated intention to build a wall along the US border with Mexico to keep out illegal immigrants.

The pope said: "It is important that there is a commitment from everyone, from civil institutions, and those in education, welfare and church organisations, to ensure a peaceful future for refugees, migrants, everyone."

In a homily earlier yesterday, Francis said everyone should look after their soul by taking a moment of silence every day, "to keep our freedom from being corroded by the banality of consumerism, the blare of commercials, the stream of empty words and the overpowering waves of empty chatter and loud shouting".

He said that 2017 had been marred by war, lies and injustice, and he urged people to take responsibility for their actions.



Pak plans takeover of  
Islamist-run charities

AGENCIES

Pakistan's government plans to seize control of charities and financial assets linked to Islamist leader Hafiz Saeed, who Washington has designated a terrorist, according to officials and documents reviewed by Reuters.

Pakistan's civilian government detailed its plans in a secret order to various provincial and federal government departments on December 19, three officials who attended one of several high-level meetings discussing the crackdown told Reuters.

Marked "secret", a December 19 document from the finance ministry directed law enforcement and governments in Pakistan's five provinces to submit an action plan by December 28 for a "takeover" of Saeed's two charities, Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) and the Falah-e-Insaniyat Foundation.

The United States has labelled JuD and FIF "terrorist fronts" for Lashkar-e-Taiba ("Army of the Pure" or LeT), a group Saeed founded in 1987 and which Washington and India blame for the 2008 attacks in Mumbai that killed 166 people.

Saeed has repeatedly denied involvement in the Mumbai attacks and a Pakistani court saw insufficient evidence to convict him. The LeT could not be reached for comment.

The December 19th document, which refers to "Financial Action Task Force (FATF) issues", names only Saeed's two charities and "actions to be taken" against them.

The FATF, which is an international body that combats money laundering and terrorist financing, has warned Pakistan it faces inclusion on a watch list for failing to crack down on financing terrorism.

US President Donald Trump suggested yesterday that he would cut off foreign aid to Pakistan, accusing Islamabad of harboring violent extremists and lying about it, reported AFP.

Charities are run by Hafiz Saeed, founder of LeT

Saeed repeatedly denied involvement in the Mumbai attacks



Girls cry during the funeral of Fardeen Ahmad Khandey, a suspected militant who according to local media was killed in a gunbattle with Indian security forces after an attack on a police training center on Sunday, in south Kashmir's Tral yesterday.

UN chief issues  
'red alert' for  
unity in 2018

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Sunday issued a year-end "red alert" to a world he said faces the perils of inequality, nationalism, xenophobia and possibly even nuclear war unless it works to resolve its differences.

"When I took office one year ago, I appealed for 2017 to be a year for peace," he said in his New Year's message. "Unfortunately, in fundamental ways, the world has gone in reverse."

"Conflicts have deepened and new dangers have emerged. Global anxieties about nuclear weapons are the highest since the Cold War," an allusion to the crisis over North Korea's nuclear tests and missile firings.

"Climate change is moving faster than we are."



Trump looks to US midterm  
elections in year-end tweets

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump tweeted right to the end of 2017 Sunday, boasting of his accomplishments in his turbulent first year in office and throwing down the gauntlet for the US midterm elections.

He highlighted his tax cut and a surging stock market in a series of New Year's Eve tweets that seemed to set the table for next year's fight for control of the US Congress.

"Why would smart voters want to put Democrats in Congress in 2018 Election when their policies will totally kill the great wealth created during the months since the Election," he said.

"People are much better off now not to mention ISIS, VA, Judges, Strong Border, 2nd A, Tax Cuts & more?"

"2nd A" appears to refer to the constitutional right under the Second Amendment to keep and bear arms -- though it was unclear what action, if any, Trump has taken in that regard.

Trump is ringing in the New Year at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach, Florida before returning to Washington.

"As our Country rapidly grows stronger and smarter, I want to wish all of my friends, supporters, enemies, haters, and even the very dishonest Fake News Media, a Happy and Healthy New Year," he tweeted, repeating his often-used term for well-established news outlets which have issued investigative reports that cast him in a negative light.

"2018 will be a great year for America!" Trump said.

He goes into 2018 with the lowest approval ratings of any modern first-year US president, after a year during which he shattered political expectations, strained longstanding alliances and courted controversy on race and immigration.

Republicans now hold a slender one-seat majority in the US Senate after a Trump-endorsed candidate lost a special election in Alabama.



DISMISSAL OF PRINCES  
Jordan royal palace  
denies rumours

REUTERS, Amman

Jordan's royal palace warned it would take legal measures against anyone spreading what it said were lies about the ruling family, just days after King Abdullah relieved his brothers from top army posts in a major shakeup.

The king, a staunch US ally, said on Tuesday that his brothers Prince Ali and Prince Faisal and his cousin Prince Talal - who all had high military ranks - would be retiring from the armed forces.

He said the move was part of a reorganization of the armed forces' hierarchy and structure.

Prince Faisal was head of the royal air force and deputy chief of staff, while Prince Ali had for years been in charge of the royal guards responsible for the king's protection.

Talal Bin Mohammad, a Sandhurst graduate who was and an officer in the elite special forces, was also sent into retirement. They were all given honorary promotions.

A palace statement on Sunday said it would pursue legal measures against those who propagated "lies and false claims" in social media and online websites with the goal of driving a wedge between the royal family and ordinary Jordanians.

"These fabricated news circulated recently are aimed at undermining Jordan and its institutions," the statement said.

NEW YEAR'S EVE IN INDONESIA  
Hundreds tie knot in  
free mass wedding

AFP, Jakarta

Hundreds of Indonesian couples celebrated getting married in Jakarta on New Year's Eve in a free mass wedding.

The communal event, attended by 437 couples, was staged by authorities to ease residents' struggles with bureaucracy.

Many Jakartans cannot access public services because they have never legally been married, according to governor Anies Baswedan.

"If they want to celebrate their wedding anniversaries, they will not only celebrate it with their families but the whole world (who) will celebrate with them because it coincides with New Year's," the governor said.

Muhammad Nasir, 64, and his 65-year-old wife Aminah, who only goes by one name, have been married since 1968 -- but only according to Islamic law due to financial reasons.

They have five children and nine grandchildren, but as they have never been legally married some of their children do not have birth certificates.

They immediately signed up to the mass wedding when they heard about it.