

# NEWSIN brief

## Thai court jails blind woman for royal insult

AFP, Bangkok

A blind woman was yesterday jailed for 18 months by a Thai court for sharing a Facebook post deemed defamatory to the royal family, her lawyer said, the latest victim of a tough law that shields the monarchy from criticism.

Nuhurhayati Masoe, 23, was punished for publishing an excerpt from an article on the social media platform in October 2016.

## Israeli jets hit Gaza site after rocket fire

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli air strikes targeted a site in the Gaza Strip overnight in response to rocket fire from the Palestinian enclave, with no injuries reported, the military and Gazan security sources said yesterday. No Israelis have been wounded by the rocket fire.

## Small fire doused at Clintons' property

AFP, New York

Emergency crews extinguished a small fire on the property of former president Bill Clinton and his wife Hillary in Chappaqua, New York on Wednesday, officials said. A police spokesman in New Castle, a town near Chappaqua, told AFP that the call came in just before 3:00 pm, the fire was put out, and there were no injuries.

## Indian pilots grounded after 'mid-air row'

AFP, Mumbai

An Indian airline said yesterday it had grounded two pilots over allegations they had a fight and both briefly stormed out of the cockpit during a New Year's Day flight from London to Mumbai. Jet Airways is investigating claims that a male pilot slapped his female colleague during a heated argument while the plane was in the air with 324 passengers on board.



Relatives of Palestinian Mosab al-Tamimi, 17, who was killed during a confrontation between Israeli troops and Palestinian stone-throwing protesters, mourn during his funeral near the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday. Unrest continues to erupt across West Bank following US President Donald Trump's declaration of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM VIOLATIONS US places Pak on special watch list

REUTERS, Washington

The US State Department has placed Pakistan on a special watch list for "severe violations of religious freedom," it said yesterday, days after the White House said Islamabad would have to do more to combat terrorism to receive US aid.

The State Department also said it had re-designated 10 other nations as "countries of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for having engaged in or tolerated egregious violations of religious freedom.

The re-designated countries were China, Eritrea, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. They were re-designated on December 22.

"The protection of religious freedom is vital to peace, stability, and prosperity," the department said in a statement. "These designations are aimed at improving the respect for religious freedom in these countries."

US President Donald Trump has criticised Pakistan for not doing more to combat terrorism, and his administration has informed members of Congress that it will announce plans to end "security assistance" payments to the country.

Pakistan has said it is already doing a lot to fight militants, and summoned the US ambassador to explain a tweet by Trump that said the United States had been foolish in dispensing aid to Islamabad.

# Japan faces greatest danger since WWII

Says PM Abe, vows to bolster defences

REUTERS, Tokyo

The security situation facing Japan is the most perilous since World War Two because of North Korea's "unacceptable" provocations, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said yesterday and he vowed to bolster defences to protect the Japanese people.

Tension in the region has been rising, particularly since North Korea conducted its sixth and largest nuclear test in September, and then in November, said it had successfully tested a new intercontinental ballistic missile that could reach all of the US mainland.

"It is not an exaggeration to say that the security environment surrounding Japan is at its severest since World War Two. I will protect the people's lives and peaceful living in any situation," Abe told a New Year news conference.

Abe said Japan would take new steps to strengthen its defence posture but he did not go to specifics.

The government approved a record military budget last month, with defence outlays due to rise for a sixth year, increasing by 1.3 percent to 5.19 trillion yen (\$46 billion), with the biggest item 137 billion yen in reinforcing defences against North Korean ballistic missiles.

The US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, said this week the United States was hearing reports that North Korea might be preparing to fire another missile, and she warned it not to.

"It is absolutely unacceptable that North Korea is trampling the strong desire of Japan and the rest of the international community for peaceful resolutions and continuing with its provocative behaviour," Abe said.

Meanwhile, US President Donald Trump and his South Korean counterpart Moon Jae-In have agreed to delay military exercises until after the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang next month, Moon's office said yesterday.

## N KOREA TENSIONS



## Tibetan put on trial in China for subversion

AFP, Beijing

A Tibetan who has waged a campaign to preserve his region's ancestral language was put on trial in China for inciting separatism yesterday in a case Amnesty International denounced as "ludicrously unjust".

Tashi Wangchuk was featured in a New York Times documentary that followed him on a trip to Beijing, where he attempted to get Chinese state media and courts to address what he describes as diminishing use of the Tibetan language.

Wangchuk was put on trial at the Intermediate People's Court in Yushu, his hometown in a Tibetan area of northwestern China's Qinghai province.

The charge can carry a sentence of up to five years, but Wangchuk's lawyer Liang Xiaojun said prosecutors were expected to seek even more jail time.

## INDEPENDENCE DAY SPEECH

# Myanmar leader calls for reform of constitution

REUTERS, Yangon

Myanmar's civilian president called in an Independence Day speech yesterday for reform of a military-drafted constitution and for justice for all recognised minorities under a federal system, but made no mention of the treatment of its Rohingya Muslim people.

Amending the charter to remove a dominant political role for the military has been one of the most contentious issues facing Myanmar as it emerges from nearly half a century of strict army rule.

The debate over constitutional reform, however, has been muted since the assassination in January last year of a lawyer advising government leader Aung San Suu Kyi's ruling party on the issue.

"As we build the Democratic Federal Republic, in accordance with the results of the political dialogues, we all need to work collectively for creating a suitable constitution," President Htin Kyaw said in his speech marking the 70th anniversary of

Myanmar's independence from Britain.

Htin Kyaw's post is largely ceremonial but he is a close ally of Suu Kyi. He did not elaborate on what he meant by suitable or spell out why he was suggesting the 2008 constitution drawn up by the military was unsuitable.

The constitution bars Suu Kyi from becoming president because it rules out candidates with a foreign spouse or child.

Suu Kyi's late husband was British as are her two sons.

It also reserves for the military one quarter of the seats in parliament and several major cabinet posts, including defence, interior and border affairs, giving it an effective veto over constitutional change and control of security affairs.

Myanmar began emerging from 49 years of military rule in 2011. Suu Kyi's party swept a 2015 election and formed a government but concern is growing that the reform programme is stalling or even sliding back.

This has been compounded by attacks on press freedom, including the detention of several journalists over the past year.



## KULBHUSHAN JADHAV CASE

# Pak releases another propaganda video

NDTV ONLINE

The Indian government has said it is not surprised by Pakistan's release of another propaganda video of Kulbhushan Jadhav, the Indian national sentenced to death by a Pakistani military court on allegations of being a spy, calling it a "coerced statement."

"This does not come as a surprise. Pakistan is simply continuing its practice of putting out coerced statements on video. It is time for them to realise that such propagandistic exercises simply carry no credibility," the foreign affairs ministry said in a statement, adding, "the absurdity of a captive under duress certifying his own welfare while mouthing allegations of his captors clearly merits no comment."

"Pakistan is best advised to fulfil its international obligations, whether it pertains to

consular relations or UNSC resolutions 1267 and 1373 on terrorism and to desist from continuing violations of human rights of an Indian national."

In the new video, played out by Pakistan's foreign office at a press briefing on Wednesday, Jadhav purportedly says that an Indian diplomat yelled at his mother when she and his wife visited the foreign office in Islamabad to meet him last week: "I saw fear in the eyes of my mother and wife. Why should there be fear? Whatever has happened has happened. They felt threatened. The Indian diplomat

who had come along with my mother was shouting the moment she stepped out. I saw him shouting, yelling at her. This [meeting] was a positive gesture, so that she (my mother) could be happy and I could be happy."



Iranian pro-government supporters hold posters of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei during a rally in support of the regime after authorities declared the end of deadly unrest, in the city of Mashhad yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

## YEMEN CONFLICT

# Saudi-led air strikes kill dozens

AFP, Aden

Saudi-led air strikes have killed dozens of rebels and civilians in the past 24 hours in Yemen's flashpoint province of Hodeida, medical sources said yesterday.

Saudi-led coalition warplanes carried out nine air raids overnight on positions of the Shia Huthi rebels in the Red Sea province, local sources told AFP.

The strikes killed 36 rebels and 12 civilians, sources at four hospitals in the provincial capital said.

Fighting between the Iran-backed rebels and the government of President Abedrabbo Mansur Hadi supported by the Saudi-led coalition has intensified in the past few weeks, causing a rise in civilian casualties.

Last week, the UN humanitarian coordinator for Yemen Jamie McGoldrick said coalition air strikes on December 26 killed 68 civilians in Hodeida and the neighbouring province of Iaez.

The coalition accused McGoldrick of bias towards the rebels, but did not deny the civilian deaths.

The military alliance intervened in support of Hadi's government in March 2015, after the Huthis took over the capital Sanaa and much of the rest of the country.

But despite the coalition's superior firepower, the rebels still control the capital and much of the north.

More than 8,750 people have been killed since the coalition intervened, according to the World Health Organization.

The WHO said yesterday at least 471 people in Yemen are believed to have been infected with diphtheria, killing one in 10 of them since the outbreak began in mid-August.

# Fear grips Muslims in Assam

REUTERS, Fofonga

Marzina Bibi, a Muslim woman living in India's north-eastern state of Assam, is petrified she will be declared stateless.

The 26-year-old's name was not on a preliminary list of citizens that was published at midnight on Sunday, although she holds a voter identity card and had voted in state elections in 2016.

"Why are they doing this to me?" Bibi asked, sitting beside a bamboo mat she was weaving outside her mud house in Assam's Fofonga village. "They think I am a Bangladeshi. I was born here, my parents were born here, I am an Indian."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which came to power in Assam in the April, 2016 elections, vowed during the campaign to act against illegal Muslim immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh. But rights activists say the drive is also targeting Muslims who are Indian citizens.

Two national spokesmen for the BJP declined to comment. A spokesman for the Ministry of Home

Affairs in New Delhi did not reply to e-mails and a telephone call seeking comment.

Citizenship and illegal migration are volatile issues in tea-growing and oil-rich Assam, home to more than 32 million people, about a third of whom are Muslims. Hundreds of people were killed in the 1980s in a violent protest by a native Assamese group against outsiders from the state taking the bulk of jobs and cornering resources, including land.

For the latest update of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), all residents of Assam had to produce documents proving that they or their families lived in the country before March 24, 1971, to be recognised as Indian citizens.

According to the preliminary list of the NRC, about 19 million people in Assam have now been verified as Indian citizens. More names will be added, and officials say the final list is likely to be published in July.

Reuters spoke to nearly two dozen Muslims, including Bibi, from paddy-growing villages around Fofonga who said their names were not on the preliminary list.

## DRIVE AGAINST ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

