

NEWSIN brief

Court refuses to free jailed Catalan ex-VP

Spain's Supreme Court yesterday decided not to release former Catalan vice president Oriol Junqueras, jailed while he is investigated for rebellion and sedition over the region's independence drive. Three judges ruled unanimously that "there are signs that Junqueras committed the offences of rebellion, sedition and misuse of public funds," a spokesman for the Madrid court said.

Peru's Fujimori leaves clinic as free man

Peru's ex-president Alberto Fujimori was wheeled out of a Lima hospital late Thursday a free man following a controversial pardon by President Pablo Kuczynski. The December 24 announcement prompted protests in Peru. UN human rights experts condemned the pardon as politically motivated.

13 killed, 18 injured in Kabul suicide attack

The death toll from an IS-claimed suicide attack in Kabul has risen to 13, officials said yesterday, adding to the carnage caused by the militant group in the Afghan capital. All of the dead were police. Among the 18 wounded were 16 officers and two civilians.

Merkel starts over with coalition talks

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, weakened by an election setback in September, launches a second bid to build a coalition government on Sunday when she sits down with the Social Democrats (SPD) for exploratory talks. A re-run of her 'grand coalition' with the SPD appears to be the best option for conservative Merkel.



Members of Reporters Without Borders (RSF), next to RSF Secretary General Christophe Deloire (L), hold stencils made by French street artist C215 representing portraits of imprisoned Turkish journalists, as they take part in a demonstration in front of the Turkish embassy in Paris yesterday, during Turkish Prime Minister's visit to France.

India probes report on database leak

India on Thursday began investigating a report that access to its database of the identity details of more than 1 billion citizens was being sold for just \$8 on social media, in what could be one of the giant programme's biggest security breaches. The Tribune newspaper said it had been able to buy login credentials to the Aadhaar database, allowing it to acquire information such as the names, telephone numbers and home addresses of millions of people. The paper said it bought access for as little as 500 rupees (\$7.89) from someone on a WhatsApp social media group. The "case appears to be an instance of misuse," said the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), which runs the biometric identity card scheme, the world's largest. The agency said it had initiated a police complaint against the people responsible for selling the access, but did not identify them. Crucial data, "including biometric information, is fully safe and secure," the agency said in a statement. The database incorporates fingerprints and iris scans, besides basic information details. "Mere display of demographic information can't be misused without biometrics," it added, ruling out financial fraud, saying access to bank accounts required further authentication that involved fingerprint and iris scans. But the breach is the latest in a programme facing increasing scrutiny over privacy concerns and is likely to prompt further questions about data safety. India's Supreme Court is holding hearings to decide if a drive by the administration of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to link Aadhaar to private and public services infringes the privacy rights of individuals.

Trump faces new crisis

Explosive book expressing serious doubt about his fitness for office released early despite blocking attempt

US President Donald Trump lashed out at a bombshell-filled book that hit the shelves yesterday, dismissing it as "full of lies" after threats of legal action failed to block its release. Publishers responded to a cease-and-desist letter by moving forward by four days the release of "Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House" -- an expose by author and political muckraker Michael Wolff that quotes key Trump aides expressing serious doubt about his fitness for office. "I authorized Zero access to White House (actually turned him down many times) for author of phony book! I never spoke to him for book. Full of lies, misrepresentations and sources that don't exist," Trump tweeted. "Look at this guy's past and watch what happens to him and Sloppy Steve!" Trump wrote -- a possible reference to Steve Bannon, his former chief strategist, or Steve Rubin, the publisher of Wolff's book. The book -- which paints Trump as mentally unstable and far out of his depth -- includes extensive quotes from Bannon, who also received a "cease and desist" order from Trump's attorneys.

"Your publication of the false/baseless statements about Mr. Trump gives rise to, among other claims, defamation by libel, defamation by libel per se, false light invasion of privacy, tortious interference with contractual relations, and inducement of breach of contract," Trump's lawyers said in the letter to Wolff. Charles Harder, Trump's personal lawyer, in a legal notice provided to Reuters, warned of possible claims including libel against Wolff and publisher Henry Holt & Co and threatened to try to block publication of the book. Harder also told Reuters that "legal action is imminent" against Bannon.

In the book, excerpts of which were published this week, Bannon is quoted accusing Trump's eldest son Don Jr of "treasonous" contacts with a Kremlin-connected lawyer, and saying the president's daughter Ivanka, who imagines running for president one day, is "dumb as a brick."

But it is Trump himself who is cast in the most unfavourable light by a series of his top aides, reported AFP. The book claims that for "Steve Mnuchin and Reince Priebus, the president was an 'idiot.' For Gary Cohn, he was 'dumb as shit.' For H.R. McMaster, he was a 'dope.' The list went on." White House issued a scorched-earth dismissal of the book, its author and his sources.

Trump's lawyer says legal action imminent against Bannon
New book on admin 'full of lies': Trump
In the book, Trump's eldest son was accused of treasonous contacts

North, South Korea agree to first talks in two years

North Korea yesterday agreed to hold official talks with the South next week, the first in more than two years, hours after the United States and South Korea delayed a military exercise amid a standoff over the North's nuclear and missile programmes. South Korea said the North had sent its consent for the talks to be held on Tuesday. The last time the two Koreas engaged in official talks was in December 2015. The meeting will take place at the border truce village of Panmunjom where officials from both sides are expected to discuss the Winter Olympics, to be held in the South next month, and other inter-Korean relations, South Korean Unification Ministry spokesman Baik Tae-hyun told reporters. North Korea asked for further negotiations about the meeting to be carried out via documented exchanges, Baik said. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un opened the way for talks with South Korea in a New Year's Day speech in which he called for reduced tensions and flagged the North's possible participation in the Winter Olympics. But Kim remained steadfast on the issue of nuclear weapons, saying the North would mass produce nuclear missiles for operational deployment and again warned he would launch a nuclear strike if his country was threatened. In a tweet, Trump, who hurled fresh insults at the North Korean leader this week, took credit for any dialogue that takes place. "Does anybody really believe that talks and dialogue would be going on between North and South Korea right now if I wasn't firm, strong and willing to commit our total 'might' against the North," Trump tweeted. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov yesterday called on Washington not to spoil the opportunity for dialogue between Seoul and Pyongyang, news agency TASS said. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang welcomed North and South Korea for "taking positive steps to improve ties".

Trump takes credit for bringing two Koreas together
Don't spoil chance for peace: Moscow tells Washington

Coral belching rises five-fold: study

Coral bleaching, a deadly disease that strikes reefs when oceans heat up, has risen nearly five-fold since the 1980s, threatening the future of these vital ecosystems, researchers said Thursday. Severe coral bleaching events used to happen once every 25 to 30 years. Now, they occur every six years on average, said the report in the journal Science. "Before the 1980s, mass bleaching of corals was unheard of," said lead author Terry Hughes, director of the Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies. "But now, repeated bouts of regional-scale bleaching and mass mortality of corals has become the new normal around the world as temperatures continue to rise." Millions of people worldwide depend on corals for their livelihoods, whether for tourism or scuba diving, or for the fish and sea creatures that make their homes in reefs. When water temperatures rise suddenly, algae in the corals can die, cutting off an important source of nutrients. If warming persists for several months, corals can turn white and die. The study analyzed bleaching events at 100 locations around the world between 1980 and 2016.



Men struggle against wind and snow as they push a shopping cart across 125th street in upper Manhattan during a snowstorm in New York City, New York, US, on Thursday. A giant winter "bomb cyclone" walloped the US East Coast with heavy snow and freezing cold that made for treacherous travel conditions and bone-chilling misery.

'Don't fear death': Xi Chinese President urges blunt call to entire military as geopolitical tensions mount in Asia

President Xi Jinping has issued a blunt call for China's military to be ready for war and unafraid to die defending the country, as geopolitical tensions mount in Asia. Xi's exhortation to the world's largest fighting force, parts of which were revealed only late Thursday, came during what state media characterised as a rare address by the Chinese leader to the country's entire military. Xi cemented his status as China's most powerful leader in decades during an October Communist Party congress, and this week's rhetoric and images of massed soldiers and tanks seemed designed to back up his new strongman image. China's military personnel should "neither fear hardship nor death," Xi told thousands of military personnel during an inspection visit Wednesday to the People's Liberation Army's Central Theater Command in northern Hebei province, according to the official Xinhua news agency.



Xi also called for the military, a once-backward force whose rapid modernisation over recent years has raised alarm in Asia and Washington, to continue upgrading. He urged the PLA to step up research into high-tech means of warfare and engage in "real combat training", Xinhua said. "Create an elite and powerful force that is always ready for the fight, capable of combat and sure to win in order to fulfil the tasks bestowed by the Party and the people in the new era," he was quoted saying. As head of the Communist Party's Central Military Commission, Xi is commander-in-chief of China's more than two-million-strong armed forces. Xinhua called Xi's address to the troops "the first time for the commission to hold a mobilisation meeting for the whole armed forces." Other media reports said thousands of troops elsewhere in the country assembled at their installations to hear his speech. Since taking office in 2012, Xi has pushed for a muscular China, including calls in October to develop a "world-class" Chinese army by 2050.

Saudi Arabia intercepts Yemen rebel missile

Saudi Arabia yesterday intercepted a ballistic missile fired from Yemen into the kingdom's south, as Riyadh and its allies said the attack "proved" Iran's support for Yemen's Huthi rebels. The Riyadh-led military coalition fighting the rebels in Yemen in a statement said Saudi air defences intercepted the missile at around 0500 GMT, but reported no casualties. The Huthis, who are locked in war with Yemen's Saudi-backed government, earlier said they had fired a missile at Saudi Arabia's southwestern province of Najran in a statement tweeted by their Al-Masirah television channel. Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia has repeatedly accused its regional rival Iran of arming the Shia Huthis, but Tehran denies the allegations. Yesterday, coalition spokesman Turki Al-Maliki said the foiled missile attack served as further proof that Iran armed the rebels. "This hostile act by the Iran-backed Huthis proves the Iranian regime remains implicated in supporting the armed Huthis," Maliki was quoted by Saudi state news agency SPA as saying. Maliki said the attack "deliberately targeted densely populated civilian areas" and had caused minor damage to the property of a Saudi citizen. The United States, a longtime ally of Saudi Arabia, has said Iran manufactured a missile fired by the Huthis towards Riyadh's international airport in November. In December, US ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley presented what she called "undeniable" evidence that the missile was Iranian-made. Tehran rejected the evidence as "fabricated".

US-PAKISTAN AID ROW WHY IT'S DIFFICULT TO CRACKDOWN ON PAK

Washington accuses Pakistan of playing a dangerous double game, taking billions in US aid while supporting militants attacking its forces in Afghanistan, including the Taliban. Its belated move to suspend assistance, after years of mistrust, highlights the perils of alienating a quasi-ally whose support is vital in the long-running Afghan conflict. WHAT DOES US WANT FROM PAKISTAN? Washington and Kabul accuse Pakistan of cynically supporting militant groups including the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani group. They say the insurgents have safe havens in Pakistan's border areas and links to its shadowy military establishment, which aims to use them in Afghanistan as a regional bulwark against arch-nemesis India. Pakistan's support for these groups must end, Washington insists. Islamabad has repeatedly denied the accusations, insisting it has eradicated safe havens and accusing the US of ignoring the thousands who have been killed on Pakistani soil and the billions spent fighting extremists. WHY HASN'T US AXED AID BEFORE? US figures show that more than \$33 billion has been given to Pakistan in direct aid since 2002. Given fears Pakistan is being duplicitous, cutting the money off seems an obvious step. It has been suspended before, notably after the US raid on the Pakistani town of Abbottabad in 2011 that killed al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. The discovery of the world's most wanted man, less than a mile from Pakistan's elite military academy, drew suspicions that he had been sheltered by the country's intelligence agency for years. But despite the provocations, the US does not want to completely



rupture its relationship with Pakistan, where anti-American sentiment already runs high. Pakistan also holds the Muslim world's only known nuclear arsenal and the US wants to prevent it from going to war with rival nuclear power India, or collapsing and allowing the weapons to fall into the hands of extremists. WILL THE US STRATEGY WORK? Some analysts have said there is no real way to pressure Pakistan, which believes keeping Kabul out of nemesis India's orbit is more important than clamping down on cross-border militancy. China -- which is investing some \$60 billion in infrastructure projects in Pakistan -- was the first to rush to Pakistan's defence after Trump's latest tweet criticising its militant policy. But China may also prove to be intolerant of any double-dealing with extremists. It has a horror of Islamist militancy and its own interests in keeping Pakistan and Afghanistan stable, from protecting its investment to ensuring security on the borders with its vast, restive western province of Xinjiang. In the end, observers say, until Washington addresses Pakistan's fears over India, it will not shake its support for militant proxies. SOURCE: AFP