

DRIVE AGAINST KURDS

Turkey starts ground ops in Syria

REUTERS, Istanbul

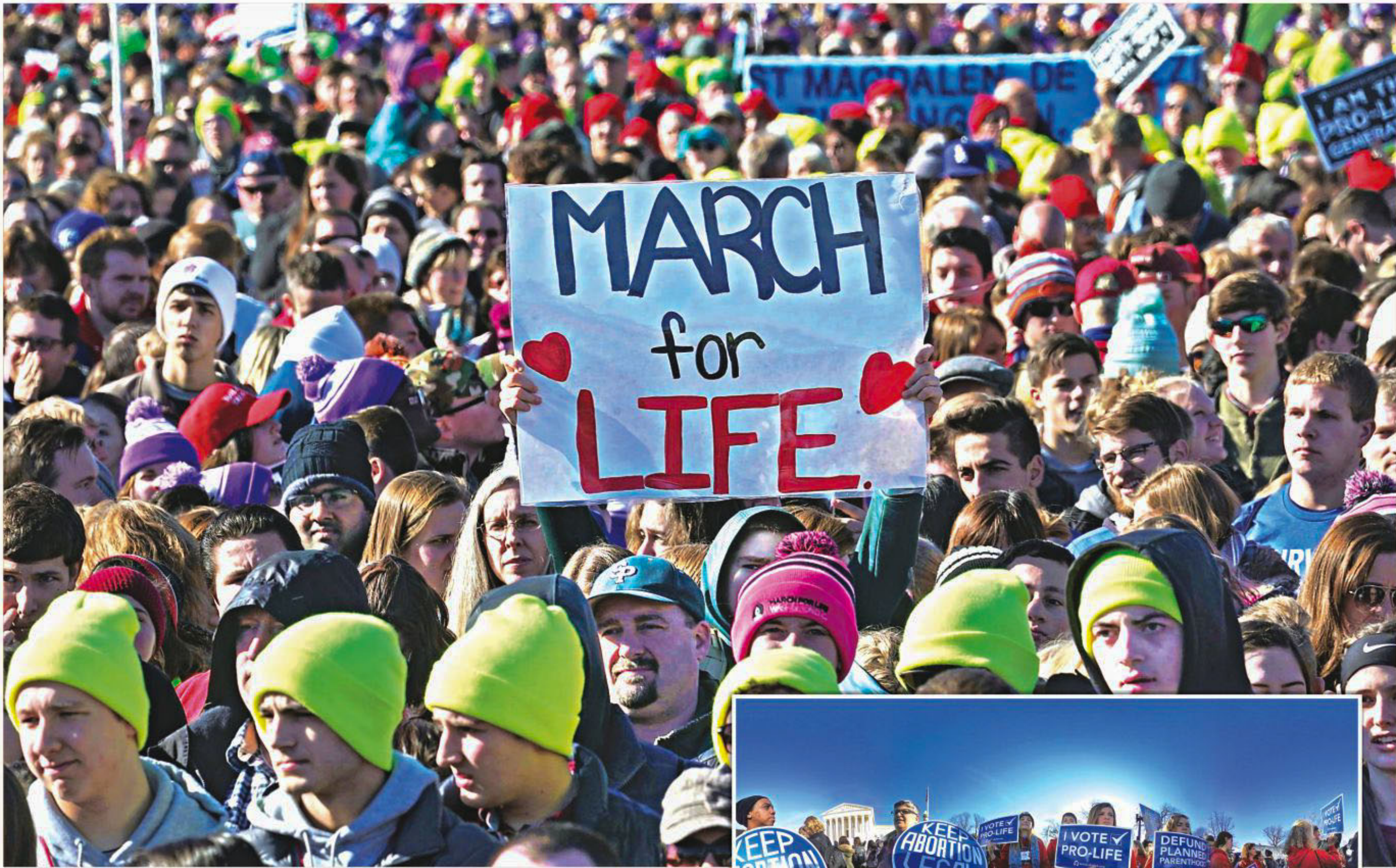
Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan yesterday said a military operation in Syria's Kurdish-controlled Afrin region had begun after cross-border shelling by the Turkish army.

Turkey's army yesterday said it hit shelters and hideouts used by militants from three groups - the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), PYD and YPG, after militants fired on Turkish positions inside Turkey.

"We will destroy the terror corridor gradually as we did in Jarabulus and El-bab operations, starting from the west. Afrin operation has de-facto started in the field. Manbij will follow," Erdogan said.

Erdogan has repeatedly said he would crush the Syrian Kurdish militia in Afrin, which he views as a security threat to Turkey.

Direct military action against territory held by Kurdish militia opens a new front in Syria's civil war and sees Ankara confronting Kurds allied to the United States at a time when Turkey's relations with Washington are reaching breaking point.



Pro-life and pro-choice activists (inset) participate in rallies in Washington, DC on Friday marking the anniversary of the Supreme Court Roe v. Wade ruling that legalised abortion in 1973. Thousands of anti-abortion activists rallied in the US capital Friday for their annual March for Life, fired up by President Donald Trump, who cheered on their "beautiful cause" in a live address from the White House.

PHOTO: AFP



CROSS-BORDER FIRING BETWEEN INDIA, PAKISTAN

Tension soars as 4 killed

AFP, Srinagar

Tensions escalated in Kashmir yesterday as a soldier and three civilians were killed in cross-border firing by the Indian and Pakistani armies, officials from the two countries said.

The latest wave of violence this week has left at least 21 dead, including soldiers, suspected militants and civilians on both sides of the heavily-militarised border that divides the disputed Himalayan region.

Indian Army spokesman Colonel N.N. Joshi said one of their soldiers was killed yesterday by Pakistani fire in Poonch sector along the de facto border, the Line of Control (LoC).

Two civilians, including a 15-year-old boy, were killed in a separate cross border assault along a stretch of uncontested frontier between Kashmir and the Pakistani province of Punjab, director general of police Shesh Paul Vaid told AFP.

Across the border, Pakistan's foreign office in a statement said Saturday a 60-year-old civilian was killed and two others including a six-year-old were injured in firing by Indian soldiers.



An Indian villager sits in front of her home following shelling from Pakistan in Jammu, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Four civilians had died in the firing during the previous two days, the statement added.

Both sides regularly trade fire along the border, parts of which are disputed, and civilian casualties are common. But this week has been particularly bloody.

Pakistan said four of its soldiers were killed in Indian firing on Monday.

Earlier this week Indian soldiers also killed five suspected militants who they said were trying to infiltrate from Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

The latest deaths come a day after two Indian soldiers and two civilians were killed Friday when mortars fired by Pakistani soldiers landed in populated areas along the border in RS Pura area.

India and Pakistan on Friday summoned each other's diplomats to register protests over the killings with both accusing the other of initiating the cross-border fire.

The bitter rivals fought two of their wars over control of Kashmir, which has been divided between the nuclear-armed neighbours since partition in 1947.

JERUSALEM ROW

Pence heads to Mideast amid Arab anger

AFP, Cairo

US Vice President Mike Pence headed for Egypt yesterday to begin a Middle East trip overshadowed by anger in the Arab world over Washington's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Pence had been due to travel to the region in December but controversy over President Donald Trump's decision to move the American embassy in Israel to Jerusalem saw many planned meetings cancelled.

While the deadly protests that erupted in the Palestinian territories at the time have subsided, concerns are mounting over the future of the UN aid



agency for Palestinians (UNRWA).

Washington has frozen tens of millions of dollars of funding for the cash-strapped body, putting at risk operations to feed, teach and heal hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees.

The Palestinian leadership, already furious over the Jerusalem decision, has denounced the US administration and had already refused to meet Pence in December.

UNPRECEDENTED CRISIS IN INDIAN JUDICIARY CJ to hear Judge Loya Case tomorrow amid accusations

NDTV ONLINE

A bench headed by Chief Justice Dipak Misra will hear tomorrow the case about Judge BH Loya's death, one of the main triggers for last week's unprecedented crisis in India's judiciary.

The Chief Justice's bench had yesterday fixed the next date of hearing and ordered that the case be put up "before the appropriate Bench as per the roster".

According to court documents issued yesterday, it will continue to remain with the Chief Justice's bench.

Two petitions that sought an independent probe into Judge Loya's death had earlier been assigned to two judges including Justice Arun Mishra, the 10th most-senior judge of the Supreme Court.

But the two judges remitted the case back to the Chief Justice on Tuesday in wake of an unseemly controversy after four senior judges last week questioned what they called selective

assignment of cases with far reaching consequences. The four - Justices J Chelameswar, Ranjan Gogoi, Madan Lokur and Kurien Joseph - had underscored that sensitive cases should be heard by senior judges.

They had confirmed that their complaints include the case of the death of a CBI judge, BH Loya.

Judge Loya, 48, died in Nagpur in December 2014 while he was hearing a case that accused BJP chief Amit Shah of ordering a fake encounter in 2005. Weeks after the judge's death, Amit Shah was discharged from the case with a new judge ruling that there was no evidence to merit

his trial.

Two months ago, judge Loya's relatives said his death was unnatural. His sister Anuradha Biyani also claimed that he was offered a huge bribe to rule in favour of Amit Shah. A Maharashtra journalist BS Lone and activist-petitioner Tehseen Poonawalla had filed a petition to seek an independent probe.



Dipak Misra

The case was one of the main triggers of last week's crisis in judiciary

NEWSIN brief

Saudi Arabia intercepts another ballistic missile

REUTERS, Dubai

Yemen's Houthi movement fired a ballistic missile toward the southern Saudi province of Najran yesterday, the group's official al-Masirah TV reported, and a Saudi military spokesman said air defense forces had intercepted the missile. The TV channel said the short-range missile targeted a military base. There were no reports of casualties or damage. The Iranian-aligned Houthis have launched scores of missiles at the kingdom most of them being intercepted.

Trump to meet UK PM in Davos next week

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump plans to meet Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May at the World Economic Forum in Davos next week, the White House said Friday. The announcement came after Trump cancelled a planned trip to London, casting further doubt on the strength of the vaunted trans-Atlantic "special relationship."

Egypt's ex-military chief to run against Sisi

REUTERS, Cairo

Former Egyptian armed forces chief of staff General Sami Anan yesterday said he intended to run in the country's presidential election in March. General-turned-President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi announced late on Friday he would run for a second term. The vote will be held on March 26-28, with a run-off vote on April 24-26 if no candidate wins more than 50 percent in the first round.

IOC, Koreas meet to finalise Olympic deal

AFP, Lausanne

After the two Koreas struck a deal for the North to attend the Winter Games in the South, Olympic bosses were meeting yesterday to resolve the devils in the details of the landmark pact. North and South Korea will march together at the opening ceremony under a unification flag and field a united women's hockey team, while the North has said it will send a 550-member delegation to the Games. North Korea has taken part in seven of the last 12 Winter Olympics, most recently in Vancouver 2010.



A sign announcing the closure of the Statue of Liberty, due to the US government shutdown, sits near the ferry dock to the Statue of Liberty at Battery Park in Manhattan, New York, US, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Russian calls US defence strategy 'confrontational'

China says US warship 'violated' its sovereignty

AFP, United Nations

Russia's foreign minister described a new US national defense strategy as "confrontational" after Washington singled out China and Russia as growing threats.

Meanwhile, Beijing yesterday said it had dispatched a warship to drive away a US missile destroyer which had "violated" its sovereignty by sailing close to a shoal in the disputed South China Sea.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov rejected US suggestions that China and Russia were undermining international efforts to strengthen global security.

"It is regrettable that instead of having a normal dialogue, instead of using the basis of international law, the US is indeed striving to

prove their leadership through such confrontational strategies and concepts," Lavrov told a news conference at the United Nations.

He spoke after US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis released in Washington the national defense strategy that identifies competition between big powers as a priority rather than fighting terrorism.

Meanwhile in South China Sea, The USS Hopper sailed within 12 nautical miles of Huangyan Island on the night of January 17 without alerting Beijing, the foreign ministry said.

Also known as Scarborough Shoal, the ring of reefs lies about 230 kilometres from the Philippines in the South China Sea, where Beijing's claims are hotly contested by other nations.

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