

# NEWSIN brief

## Ex-Catalan leader stays vague on possible return

REUTERS, Copenhagen

Spanish authorities are monitoring borders to make sure that fugitive Catalan separatist leader Carles Puigdemont does not sneak back into Spain to take up the presidency of the regional parliament again, a senior minister said yesterday. Puigdemont, speaking in Copenhagen, said his return from self-exile to Barcelona would be good for Spanish democracy.

## Seoul envoys visit North Korea ahead of Olympics

AFP, Seoul

A South Korean delegation crossed into the North yesterday to inspect venues for joint Olympic-linked events, even as Pyongyang demanded Seoul apologise for "despicable" protestors who burned Kim Jong-Un's image, as controversy mounts over the rapprochement. The two Koreas agreed that they would march together at the opening ceremony.

## India to open dozens of rape victim help centres

AFP, New Delhi

Dozens of support centres for women victims of sexual violence are to be opened across India under an scheme announced yesterday, as pressure grows on police over their handling of rape cases. Police in four states have signed up to the "Justice For Her" initiative, with Sheffield Hallam University in Britain.

## Turkey detains dozens more in 'terror'raids

AFP, Ankara

Turkey yesterday detained dozens more nationwide on accusations of spreading propaganda for "terror" groups. 91 were detained in 13 provinces ranging from Izmir on the Aegean to Van in the east over their postings on social media.



**A Palestinian protester throws a stone towards Israeli forces during clashes near the Jewish settlement of Beit El, on the outskirts of the West Bank city of Ramallah, yesterday, as protests erupted following US Vice President Mike Pence's pledge to move US embassy to Jerusalem by the end of 2019. Inset, Pence visits Jerusalem's Western Wall.**  
PHOTO: AFP

# Globalisation losing lustre

Modi warns against protectionism, defends open trade at Davos

AFP, Davos

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday acknowledged that globalisation is "losing its lustre" but warned that new trade walls are not the answer, opening a week of Davos meetings that will climax with a speech by the loudly protectionist US President Donald Trump.

After spectacular snowfall that stranded some high-flying delegates on their way to the Swiss ski resort, the World Economic Forum started in earnest basking in robust global growth but facing warnings that the world's have-nots are missing out more than ever.

Modi told the forum that India should serve as an example as it opens up to foreign investment, in a speech that delved into Indian scripture and had strong echoes of an anti-protectionist clarion call issued in Davos a year ago by Chinese President Xi Jinping as Trump prepared to take office.

"It feels like the opposite of

globalisation is happening. The negative impact of this kind of mindset and the wrong priorities cannot be considered less dangerous than climate change or terrorism," Modi said, staging the first appearance at Davos by an Indian prime minister since 1997.



"In fact everyone is talking about an interconnected world but we will have to accept the fact that globalisation is slowly losing its lustre," he said.

"The solution to this worrisome situation is not isolationism. Its solution is understanding and accepting change and formulating agile and flexible policies for these changing

times."

Trump came to office on a populist platform that demonised the globalist Davos elite. While some delegates are relieved that full-blown trade wars with the likes of China have yet to erupt, the president served a fresh reminder that his rhetoric has teeth.

Trump on Monday approved steep tariffs on imports of solar panels and washing machines to protect US producers, triggering an outcry in China and South Korea.

In a report unveiled in Davos, Oxfam said the world's richest one percent raked in 82 percent of the wealth created last year while the poorest half of the population received none.

In his own message to the Davos forum, Pope Francis warned that debates about technological progress and economic growth must not supplant concern for humanity at large.

"We cannot remain silent in the face of the suffering of millions of people whose dignity is wounded," the pontiff's message said.

## 2019 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN INDIA

# Shiv Sena will not ally with ruling BJP

REUTERS, Mumbai

A powerful regional political party has snapped ties with India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ahead of general elections in 2019, a party leader said yesterday, ending a nearly three-decade-old alliance based on nationalist ideology.

The Shiv Sena, a partner in the governing coalition formed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP in the western state of Maharashtra, has decided to contest elections on its own, the party's president, Uddhav Thackeray, said.

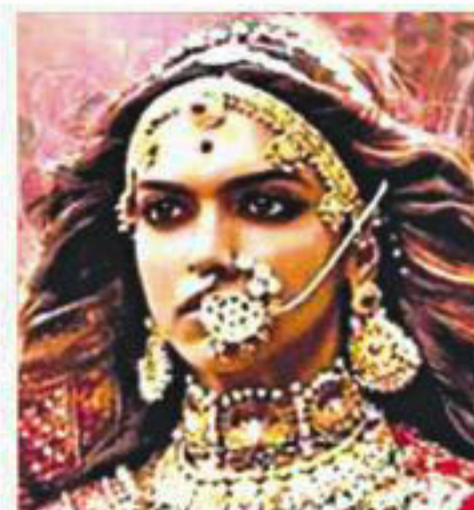
"We will contest elections in all states without making an alliance," Thackeray said.

The decision makes the Shiv Sena the first major political outfit to break an alliance with the BJP since Modi became prime minister in 2014.

The Shiv Sena enjoys considerable political clout in Maharashtra, home to India's financial capital of Mumbai, and like the BJP, it believes India is a fundamentally Hindu nation, despite its secular constitution.

Despite being allies in the state government, power sharing has led to discord between the two parties.

"The BJP has become arrogant after winning more seats in 2014 assembly elections, it has neglected its alliance partner in power sharing," said a senior Shiv Sena leader, who declined to be identified as the party is still in the state government.



# India's SC rejects bid to ban film

AFP, New Delhi

India's top court yesterday rejected a final bid by two states to ban a Bollywood film about a mythical Hindu queen which sparked violent protests by radical groups.

Threats by Hindu fringe groups against "Padmaavat", which is to be released tomorrow, have forced police to step up security around cinemas intending to show the movie.

The Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh state governments asked the country's Supreme Court to retract an earlier ruling stopping states from banning "Padmaavat".

"We do not find any merit in the applications," the court said yesterday.

"What is implicit in your argument is that you are incapable of maintaining law and order in your state," Supreme Court judge AM Khanwilkar told lawyers for the state governments at the hearing.

"You first implement our order and then if there is any violence then we can examine it on case to case basis."

Protesters claim the film falsely depicts a romance between 14th century Hindu queen Padmavati and Muslim ruler Alauddin Khilji. The producers deny this and insist the movie portrays her respectfully.

The Supreme Court last Thursday overturned a ban on the release of the film imposed by Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab and other states saying it violated creative freedoms.

# UN peacekeepers shouldn't shy away from 'using force'

Report calls for changes in policy after attacks on forces

AFP, United Nations

UN peacekeeping forces need to change the way they operate and not shy away from using force to reverse a worrying trend of escalating fatalities, according to a new report made public Monday.

The recommendations were submitted to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres in December by a team of experts headed up by Brazilian lieutenant general Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz, a former UN commander in Haiti and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

"The United Nations and troop- and police-contributing countries need to adapt to a new reality: the blue helmet and the United Nations flag no longer offer 'natural' protection," the report stated.

"Unfortunately, hostile forces do not understand a language other than force. To deter and repel attacks and to defeat attackers, the United Nations needs to be strong and not fear to use force when necessary," it

recommended.

Casualties have spiked since 2013, with 195 personnel in UN peacekeeping missions killed by acts of violence -- more than during any other five-year period in history. Last year saw the highest number of fatalities since 1994, with 56 deaths.

As missions face threatened budget cuts from the Trump administration, the report said troops are often too "in a defensive posture" and need to "take the initiative to neutralise and eliminate" threats to their security.

The report recommended that the United Nations start replacing officials, contingents and units that lack capacity to carry out their mandate. Deficient pre-deployment training is a main cause of fatalities, it said. Among the recommendations were "surprise exercises and tests" to verify troop readiness.

The report also called for missions to be strengthened with sophisticated equipment such as mine-protected vehicles, special weapons and night-vision goggles.



PHOTO: REUTERS

# TURKEY'S MILITARY OFFENSIVE IN SYRIA

Empty shells are seen next to Turkish army tanks on the Turkish-Syrian border in Hatay province, Turkey, yesterday. The Turkish army yesterday clashed with Kurdish militia in Syria in an operation that has already left two of its soldiers dead, as the United States voiced alarm the offensive could endanger attempts to end the Syrian civil war. Turkey on Saturday launched operation "Olive Branch" aimed at rooting out the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia, which Ankara sees as a terror group, from its Afrin enclave in northern Syria.

# Social media threat to democracy: FB

AFP, Washington

Facebook acknowledged Monday that the explosion of social media poses a potential threat to democracy, pledging to tackle the problem head-on and turn its powerful platform into a force for "good."

The comments from the world's biggest social network were its latest response to intense criticism for failing to stop the spread of misinformation among its two billion users.

In a blog post, Facebook civic engagement chief Samidh Chakrabarti said he was "not blind to the damage that the internet can do to even a well-functioning democracy."

"In 2016, we at Facebook were far too slow to recognise how bad actors were abusing our platform," he said. "We're working to neutralise these risks now."

The post was part of a high-profile push by FB to reboot its image. Last week it announcement that it would let users "rank" the trustworthiness of news sources to help stem the flow of false news.

Facebook, along with Google and Twitter, faces global scrutiny for facilitating the spread of bogus news -- some of it directed by Russia -- ahead of the US election, the Brexit vote and other electoral battles.

# 2 students dead in US school shooting

REUTERS, Kentucky

A 15-year-old boy opened fire with a handgun in his high school in western Kentucky yesterday, killing two fellow students and wounding a dozen other youths before being arrested, the state's governor and police said.

The shooting began shortly before 8am CST (1400 GMT) at Marshall County High School in Benton, a small town about 130 miles (210 km) north-west of Nashville, Tennessee, according to Kentucky State Police and Governor Matt Bevin.

Authorities offered no information on the motive behind the shooting. There was no immediate indication how well the youth knew the victims.

# US Attorney General Sessions questioned in Russia probe

AFP, Washington

US Attorney General Jeff Sessions was questioned last week for several hours by investigators probing possible collusion between Russia and President Donald Trump's election campaign, the Justice Department confirmed yesterday.

Sessions, who like Trump has repeatedly downplayed the idea that Russian meddling helped Trump get elected, was the first known member of the president's cabinet to face questioning by Justice Department Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigators.

Sessions was also in charge of the campaign's team of foreign policy advisors, including George Papadopoulos, who had extensive Russian contacts and tried to set up a meeting between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Papadopoulos has pleaded guilty to making false state-

ments to the FBI about those contacts.

Mueller's interest in Sessions also might include what he knows about any attempts by Trump to obstruct the Russia investigation.

Sessions had a key role in the May 9, 2017 firing of FBI director James Comey, whose pursuit of the Russia meddling case angered Trump.

In March, Sessions recused himself from anything to do with investigations involving the 2016 election, a move that meant he had no power to influence Mueller's probe.

The Washington political news website Axios reported Monday that Sessions, at Trump's bidding, has most recently pressured Comey's successor Christopher Wray to fire FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe, a Comey ally.

Axios said Wray threatened to resign if McCabe was fired.



Jeff Sessions



Robert Mueller

## BLASPHEMY DISPUTE

# Pak principal shot dead by student

REUTERS, Islamabad

A Pakistani student shot and killed his school principal on Monday, in a dispute over the student skipping classes to attend rallies supporting the country's strict blasphemy laws, a police official said.

Sareer Ahmed, principal of the private Islamia College in the northern town of Charsadda, had an argument with one of his students for missing a number of classes. The student then shot the principal on campus, local police chief Zahoor Afridi told Reuters.

He said the unnamed student had attended a sit-in staged by a new ultra-religious political party, Tehreek-e-Labaik, late last year to oppose a small change in wording to an electoral law, which it said amounted to blasphemy. The protest, which brought the capital Islamabad to a standstill, ended in clashes between police and demonstrators that killed seven people.

Police have taken the student, who appeared to be 16 or 17 years old, into custody and filed a first information report against him. In a video recorded during the arrest, the student can be heard defending his actions.

There have been at least 67 murders over unproven allegations of blasphemy since 1990.