

NEWSIN brief

India test-fires nuke capable missile

India yesterday successfully test-fired its indigenously developed nuclear capable Prithvi-II missile as part of a user trial by the military from a test range in Odisha, defence sources said. The trial of the surface-to-surface missile, which has a strike range of 350 km, was carried out after successful trials of Agni-5 on January 18 and Agni-1 missile on Monday.

Pak man to hang for blasphemy murder

A Pakistani court yesterday sentenced one person to death and five others to life imprisonment for lynching a student accused of blasphemy. Last April, Mashal Khan, 23, was stripped, beaten and shot by a gang of mostly students before being thrown from the second floor of his dorm at the Abdul Wali Khan University in the north-western city of Mardan. An additional 25 people were given three-year sentences.

Palestinian shot dead after stabbing Israeli

A Palestinian stabbed a security guard at the entrance to an Israeli settlement and was shot dead yesterday, the army said, in the latest violence in the occupied West Bank. The guard was lightly wounded at the entrance to the Karmel Tzur settlement north of Hebron, the army said in a statement.

US launches fresh raids against Taliban

US bombers have struck multiple Taliban targets in a new air offensive over the past four days in far north-eastern Afghanistan near the China and Tajikistan borders. The strikes hit Taliban training sites in Badakhshan province, "preventing the planning and rehearsal of terrorist acts," the Southern Command said.



Rescue workers carry a victim's body from a building which tilted to one side after its foundation collapsed in Hualien after a strong 6.4-magnitude quake rocked eastern Taiwan early yesterday. Rescuers combed through the rubble of collapsed buildings on Wednesday, in a search for 67 people missing after a strong earthquake which killed at least seven near Taiwan's popular tourist city of Hualien. The magnitude 6.4 quake, which hit near the coastal city just before midnight on Tuesday, injured 260 people and caused four buildings to collapse, officials said. PHOTO: AFP



BREXIT TRANSITION PERIOD

Anger as EU unveils punishment plan

The EU yesterday defended a plan to sanction Britain if it breaks the rules of the post-Brexit transition period, saying it needed to be able to act against any "foul play" by London. British pro-Brexit lawmakers reacted angrily against "threats" from Brussels after the European Commission published a draft agreement for the nearly-two year transition phase. It calls for the remaining 27 European Union states to have the ability to curb Britain's access to the single market, possibly reintroducing trade tariffs and customs checks, if it breaches the terms of the agreement. But Stefaan De Rynck, the advisor to EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier, insisted it was standard practice to have possible punishments when an international agreement is broken. "The EU responds to PM (Theresa) May's request to benefit from single market and customs union for a limited time during which all must play by the same rules," De Rynck tweeted. Britain and the EU began talks this week on the transition, which Brussels says should last for 21 months from the day Britain leaves the bloc on March 29, 2019, until December 31, 2020. During that period it says Britain must follow all EU laws without having any decision-making powers, in exchange for frictionless access to the single market and customs union enjoyed by the remaining 27 member states. But the EU's draft, in the final footnote on last page of five-page document, calls for the ability to sanction Britain in cases where it would take too long to refer a breach of the transition rules to the European Court of Justice.

German parties strike deal on coalition govt

German Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives made major concessions to the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) to agree a coalition deal yesterday that should give Europe's powerhouse a new government after four months of uncertainty. In a move likely to herald a shift in Germany's euro zone policy, a source involved in the negotiations said the SPD would take the finance ministry, a post held until recently by conservative Wolfgang Schaeuble, widely despised in struggling euro zone states during his eight-year tenure for his rigid focus on fiscal discipline. SPD leader Martin Schulz said earlier this week that his party had ensured an agreement with the conservatives would put an end to "forced austerity" and set up an investment budget for the euro zone. Handing over the crucial finance ministry suggests the conservatives had to make big concessions to get the SPD to agree to renew

the 'grand coalition' that has governed Germany since 2013 and secure Merkel's fourth term in office. Merkel said the difficult coalition talks had been worth it and the government would be a stable one. Schulz said the agreement reached with the conservatives would mean a change in direction for the European Union. SPD's 464,000 members still have the chance to veto the deal in a postal ballot. Julian Reichelt, editor of Germany's biggest selling paper, Bild, suggested they had got the better end of the deal, tweeting: "This is the first SPD government led by a CDU chancellor." The deal should allow Germany to resume its leading role in international affairs and, at least for now, put an end to questions about how long Merkel will stay in her job. A negotiating source said the SPD would have the finance and labour ministries while media reported it would also secure the justice, family and environment ministries.

POLITICAL CRISIS IN GERMANY

- SPD to get foreign, finance, labour ministries
- CDU to get economy and defence ministries
- Bavarian CSU to get interior ministry

'Toughest' sanctions soon

Warns US; Kim's sister set to make landmark visit to South for Olympics

US Vice President Mike Pence vowed tough new sanctions against North Korea and called it the world's most tyrannical regime yesterday, two days before he is due to attend the winter Olympics, along with two of the North's most senior officials. Speaking in Tokyo on his way to South Korea, which is hosting the Games over the next three weeks, Pence said he would soon announce the stepped-up sanctions in an effort to pressure the North to abandon its nuclear and missile programmes. The Games, being staged 80 km from the heavily militarised border between the two Koreas, is set for an awkward political encounter, with Pence as well as the North Korean leader's younger sister attending Friday's opening ceremony. South Korea wants to use the event to re-engage with the North and pave the way for talks to resolve a political crisis widely regarded as one of the world's most dangerous, with US President Donald Trump and Pyongyang swapping nuclear threats.

"I'm announcing today the United States of America will soon unveil the toughest and most aggressive round of economic sanctions on North Korea ever," Pence said after meeting Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

struggle to conceal at the Olympics. Pence has voiced scepticism that the North, which is participating in the Games, will use the event for crude propaganda. As his guest at the opening ceremony, he is taking the father of Otto Warmbier, an



NORTH KOREA CRISIS

Pence says US won't let Pyongyang hide behind Olympics banner

N Koreans in one of largest peacetime crossings of border

"We will continue to isolate North Korea until it abandons its nuclear and ballistic missile program once and for all." Washington is taking a much tougher line on the North than its allies in Seoul, exposing tensions that South Korean President Moon Jae-in could

American student who died last year after being imprisoned in North Korea for 17 months. Sitting in the same stadium as VIP guests will be Kim Yo Jong, 28-year-old sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, and Kim Yong Nam, the North's nominal head of state.

Musk's Tesla car heads to Mars



The world's most powerful rocket, SpaceX's Falcon Heavy, blasted off Tuesday on its highly anticipated maiden test flight, carrying CEO Elon Musk's cherry red Tesla Roadster toward an orbit near Mars.

Screams and cheers erupted at mission control in Cape Canaveral, Florida as the massive rocket fired its 27 engines and rumbled into the blue sky over the same Nasa launchpad that served as a base for the US missions to the Moon four decades ago. Loaded with Musk's red Tesla and a mannequin in a spacesuit, the monster rocket's historic test voyage captured the world's imagination. SpaceX's webcast showed the Tesla Roadster soaring into space, as David Bowie's "Space Oddity" played in the background -- with the words "DON'T PANIC" visible on the dashboard, in an apparent nod to the sci-fi series "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy." The Roadster was also outfitted with a data storage unit containing Isaac Asimov's science fiction book series, the Foundation Trilogy, and a plaque bearing the names of 6,000 SpaceX employees. Musk posted a live video showing the "Starman" mannequin appearing to cruise, its gloved hand on the wheel, through the darkness of space, with the Earth's image reflected on the car's glossy red surface.

He tweeted late Tuesday night that the rocket's upper stage had made a successful final burn, sending the car and its mannequin passenger out of Earth's orbit, into an orbit around the Sun that brings it close to Mars. After surviving a five-hour journey through the Van Allen Belt -- a region of high radiation -- the car now embarks on a journey through space that could last a billion years and take it as far as 250 million miles (400 million kilometers) from Earth, the same as a trip around the equator 10,000 times. "Maybe it will be discovered by some future alien race," Musk told reporters. "What were these guys doing? Did they worship this car?" he mused.



People walk through the snow covered alley of the Champ de Mars yesterday following heavy snowfall in Paris. Exceptionally heavy snowfall brought public transport in Paris and surrounding regions to a near halt, spelling misery for commuters after hundreds were forced to abandon their cars to sleep in emergency shelters overnight. PHOTO: AFP

India PM's wife survives fatal car crash

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's wife Jashodaben had a narrow escape when an Innova car she was travelling in, rammed a truck near Chittoor, Rajasthan yesterday morning. Of the seven occupants of the vehicle, one died and three others were injured. The vehicle was completely smashed. "Jashodaben is okay. She's (in) comfort. She is getting primary health check-up done," said Suresh Khatik, the sub divisional magistrate of Chittoor. The accident took place around 55 km from Chittoor on the Kota-Chittoor highway. Jashodaben, a retired schoolteacher, had gone to attend a function in Kota.

Death toll soars in Ghouta

Regime air strikes kill 32 more defying ceasefire calls. The Syrian government's use of chlorine weapons in Syria. Chlorine is suspected of having been used on two occasions this month alone on Eastern Ghouta. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons said a fact-finding mission mandated "to establish the facts surrounding allegations of the use of toxic chemicals.... is investigating all credible allegations." The world's chemical watchdog voiced "grave concern" over the new reports. The US State Department said on Monday it had recorded six suspected chemical attacks in Syria in the past 30 days. The United Nations has said it is looking into reports of chemical attacks in Syria, and called on Tuesday for a month-long ceasefire across the country for civilians' sake. More than 340,000 people have been killed and millions displaced since the conflict in Syria erupted in March 2011.

WAR IN SYRIA

France says regime using chlorine gas citing 'evidence'

OPCW says probing 'all credible' reports of chemical attacks

HE WHO MUST NOT BE NAMED



When North Korea's chef de mission at the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in the South visited an athletes' village fitness centre he made a point of cheerily greeting each volunteer by name, reading them off their badges. But Won Gil-U came to a screeching halt when he met a young woman called Ko Jong-Un, a report said. Her forename matches that of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un, and Won -- who is also Pyongyang's vice sports minister -- was stunned into silence. After some moments he found his voice. "When he turned to me, he stared at my name tag and froze for a few seconds without a word," Ko was quoted as saying by Yonhap news agency. "Then, he said: 'I wouldn't dare to pronounce your name'. We all broke into hearty laughter."

CHINESE POLICE DON HIGH-TECH GLASSES TO NAB SUSPECTS



Chinese police are sporting high-tech sunglasses that can spot suspects in a crowded train station, the newest use of facial recognition technology that has drawn concerns among human rights groups. In a scene reminiscent of the dystopian sci-fi television show "Black Mirror", officers in the central city of Zhengzhou are wearing the digital shades amid the crush of travellers heading home during Chinese New Year. So far, the technology has allowed police to nab seven suspects accused of crimes ranging from human trafficking to hit and runs, as well as another 26 people who were using fake IDs.