

NEWS IN brief

Thai polls to be held no later than Feb 2019: PM

REUTERS, Bangkok
Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha yesterday said a general election he had promised to hold in November would take place "no later" than February 2019, the latest delay to anger critics of the government. The junta has promised and postponed elections several times since its 2014 coup overthrew a civilian government. The latest date was set for November but last month the military-appointed legislature changed the election law, pointing to further delay.

14 dead in Papua New Guinea quake

REUTERS, Melbourne
Up to 14 people were killed in landslides and by collapsed buildings during a powerful earthquake in the remote Papua New Guinea highlands, police said yesterday, with unconfirmed reports of up to 30 dead. The 7.5 magnitude quake that rocked the region early on Monday also damaged mining and power infrastructure and led ExxonMobil Corp to shut its \$19 billion liquefied natural gas (LNG) plant, the country's biggest export earner.

Sri Lanka mosque damaged in clash

REUTERS, Colombo
At least five people were wounded and several shops and a mosque damaged in a clash between majority Sinhalese Buddhists and minority Muslims in eastern Sri Lanka, police said yesterday. Renewed tension has been growing between the two communities since last year, with some hard-line Buddhist groups accusing Muslims of forcing people to convert to Islam and vandalising Buddhist archaeological sites.



SYRIA CRISIS A Syrian man stands inside a destroyed building in the rebel-held town of Haza, in the besieged Eastern Ghouta region on the outskirts of the capital Damascus, yesterday. A humanitarian "pause" announced by Russia in Syria's deadly bombardment of Eastern Ghouta struggled to take hold, with fresh violence erupting and no sign of aid deliveries or residents leaving the besieged enclave. PHOTO: AFP

Male declines Delhi's invite for naval exercise

AGENCIES
Maldives has declined India's invitation to participate in the biennial naval exercise Milan, which starts March 6, Navy Chief Admiral Sunil Lanba said yesterday. Maldives has not given any reason for the decision, Lanba told reporters on the sidelines of an event here. Navy sources said over 16 countries have confirmed their participation in the exercise. The biennial exercise 'Milan' is being organised in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the backdrop of China's growing military posturing in the Indo-Pacific region and officials said the issue is likely to figure during deliberations among navy chiefs of the participating countries at the event. "The interactions during Milan encompass sharing of views and ideas on maritime good order and enhancing regional cooperation for combating unlawful activities at sea," spokesperson of Indian Navy Capt D K Sharma said. Besides fostering cooperation through naval exercises and professional interactions, Capt Sharma said 'Milan' will also provide an opportunity to the participating navies to nurture stronger ties in dealing with various security challenges. India, the US and several other nations have been pressing for freedom of navigation in the disputed South China Sea, reported PTI. India recently expressed its "deep dismay" over the Maldives' decision to extend the state of Emergency for another 30 days. India has also urged Maldives government to release the Chief Justice and a Supreme Court judge and political prisoners. Meanwhile, the Maldivian opposition said yesterday it had hired a former UN rights rapporteur to push the global body to intervene in a political deadlock that has roiled the troubled honey-moon islands. The opposition alliance, which includes the parties of former presidents Mohamed Nasheed and Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, said they had enlisted British lawyer Ben Emmerson to advise them on securing UN mediation in the crisis, reported AFP.

INDO-MALDIVES TENSIONS
Biennial exercise is being organised in Andaman, Nicobar
Maldives opposition seeks UN-mediated talks to end deadlock

Afghan Taliban calls for direct talks with US

AFP, Kabul
The Taliban has called for direct talks with the US to find a "peaceful solution" to the conflict in Afghanistan, in an apparent policy shift after months of escalating attacks. Civilian casualties surged in recent months as militants from the Taliban unleashed a wave of bloodshed in urban areas and on security forces in response to a new open-ended military policy by US President Donald Trump. In a statement posted late Monday, the Taliban said it "calls on American officials to talk directly to the Political Office of Islamic Emirate regarding a peaceful solution to the Afghan quandary". The statement referenced local reports that said US envoy Alice Wells had suggested during a recent visit to Kabul that a window was still open for talks.

Moscow vetoes Western bid to pressure Tehran

REUTERS, United Nations
The United States threatened unilateral action against Iran on Monday after Russia vetoed a western bid for the United Nations Security Council to call out Tehran for failing to prevent its weapons from falling into the hands of Yemen's Huthi group. "If Russia is going to continue to cover for Iran then the US and our partners need to take action on our own. If we're not going to get action on the council then we have to take our own actions," US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley told reporters during a visit to Honduran capital Tegucigalpa. Haley did not specify what kind of action could be taken. The Russian veto was a defeat for the United States, which has been lobbying for months for Iran to be held accountable at the United Nations, while at the same time threatening to quit a 2015 deal among world powers to curb Iran's nuclear program if "disastrous flaws" are not fixed. "Obviously this vote isn't going to make the decision on the nuclear deal. What I can say is it doesn't help," Haley said. "That just validated a lot of what we already thought which is Iran gets a pass for its dangerous and illegal behavior." President Donald Trump warned European allies last month that they had to commit by mid-May to work with Washington to improve the pact. Britain drafted the failed UN resolution in consultation with US and France. The initial draft text - to renew the annual mandate of a targeted sanctions regime related to Yemen - wanted to include a condemnation of Iran for violating an arms embargo on Huthi leaders and include a council commitment to take action over it. In a bid to win Moscow's support, the draft that was vetoed had been weakened to simply "note with particular concern" the violation, which was reported to the council by UN experts monitoring sanctions.

US threatens unilateral action against Iran
Tehran accuses US, UK of misusing UN council

Ousted Pak PM's brother inches closer to power

AFP, Lahore
The brother of ousted Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif took a small step closer to the premiership yesterday after he was named head of the ruling party before a general election due this year. The promotion of Shahbaz Sharif comes after the Supreme Court last year toppled his elder brother Nawaz following corruption allegations, then last week banned him from leading his eponymous Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party. The move by the judiciary sparked fresh fears of political infighting within the PML-N before the election due sometime in 2018, with Nawaz's daughter Maryam Sharif gaining increasing influence over the party in recent months. But the party presented a united front with the election of Shahbaz, while Nawaz was appointed the party's guide "for life". "I propose the name of Muhammad Shahbaz Sharif," Nawaz announced during a meeting in Lahore to huge applause. Maryam later tweeted a message congratulating her uncle. The younger Sharif, currently the chief minister of powerful Punjab province, is seen as a political dealmaker, with many crediting him for the string of by-election victories since his brother was removed from the premiership. Nawaz Sharif first named Shahbaz as his successor shortly after he was ousted last July. But he designated current prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi as interim premier, noting that his sibling must first be elected to the National Assembly before taking the top office. The younger Sharif faces a rocky road ahead with elections to the Senate or upper house in early March. In accordance with last week's court ruling, all of the PML-N candidates will have to run as independents because they were selected by Nawaz.



Tjia Nyuk Hwa, 45, an Indonesian Christian is publicly flogged outside a mosque in Banda Aceh yesterday for playing a children's entertainment game seen as violating Islamic law. Aceh is the only province in the world's most populous Muslim-majority country that imposes sharia law and people can be flogged for a range of offences. PHOTO: AFP



'Case closed' in Bollywood star's death

AFP, Dubai
An investigation into the death of Bollywood superstar Sridevi Kapoor, who drowned in her bathtub in a Dubai hotel, has been closed, police said yesterday. "The Dubai public prosecutor's office has decided to release the body of Indian actress Sridevi to her family today (Tuesday) after the investigation into the incident was concluded and the case closed," read a tweet by the Dubai police. Sridevi, 54, drowned in her bathtub after losing consciousness at the weekend in a hotel in Dubai, where she was attending a wedding. Dubai had held the superstar's body since Saturday, pending the results of the post-mortem investigation. Meanwhile, Dubai has handed over the body of legendary Indian actress Sridevi to Indian authorities for it to be returned home, an Indian embassy official said yesterday. The official said the body had been "received, embalmed and taken on its way to India", the official, who asked not to be identified, told Reuters. Born Shree Amma Yanger Ayappan in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, Sridevi appeared in around 300 films and was awarded the Padma Shri, India's fourth highest civilian award, for her services to the film industry. She famously took a 15-year-break from the silver screen after marrying film producer Boney Kapoor but returned in the 2012 hit comedy-drama "English Vinglish". Her most recent film was last year's "Mom".

Facebook removes page

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dedicated to promoting hatred and violence against others", a Facebook spokesperson said in an email. "If a person consistently shares content promoting hate, we may take a range of actions such as temporarily suspending their ability to post and ultimately, removal of their account." The page was taken down in late January. Wirathu could not be reached for comment, but he said in a video last year that his account had been temporarily banned for 30 days because "Facebook is occupied by the Muslims." Facebook use has grown exponentially in Myanmar since a quasi-civilian government opened up the telecoms sector in 2013, making it easier for people to access the internet in the largely Buddhist country. Hardline monks like Wirathu took to the platform as well, gaining notoriety for fanning anti-Muslim hatred through inflammatory posts. His tirades have been blamed for

stoking sectarian violence, which has plagued Myanmar's transition to democracy. After Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi came to power in 2016, the government dissolved the Ma Ba Tha group to which Wirathu belonged, and slapped the monk with a one-year speaking ban. But the man who once appeared on the cover of Time magazine as the "face of Buddhist terror" remains influential. The social media giant has faced calls to rein in hate speech on its Myanmar accounts for years, with pressure mounting during the Rohingya crisis. That Swe Win, a Yangon-based interfaith activist, said Facebook's move sent a symbolic message about not tolerating hate speech. But getting rid of the page will not resolve the problem, he warned. "They remove his account but not his videos, and his religious hate speeches, they are still on Facebook and his followers are spreading it," he said.

'Noah's Ark' gathers a million crop varieties

AFP, Longyearbyen
Norway's 'doomsday' seed bank, which seeks to protect the world's crops from natural disasters, on Monday said it had gathered more than a million varieties as it marked its 10-year anniversary. Dubbed the "Noah's Ark" of food crops, the Global Seed Vault is located deep inside a mountain on Svalbard, a remote Arctic island in a Norwegian archipelago and has the capacity to store up to 4.5 billion seeds. Launched in 2008, the Svalbard vault was on Monday marking its 10th anniversary by taking shipments of more than 76,000 seed samples, with depositors from all over the world delivering crops such as black-eyed peas, the Bambara groundnut and the Estonian onion potato. Although housed in Norway, the seeds belong to the donor states and institutions and they can withdraw them at their convenience. The delivery raises to 1,059,646 the overall number of unique crop varieties deposited in the so-called "doomsday vault" since it opened on February 26, 2008 with the aim of providing a "fail-safe seed storage facility, built to stand the test of time and the challenge of natural or man-made disasters."

30-yr jail term sought for ousted S Korean president

AFP, Seoul
South Korean prosecutors yesterday demanded a 30-year-jail sentence for former president Park Geun-hye, sacked over a wide-ranging corruption scandal which exposed shady links between big business and politics and prompted massive street protests. The 66-year-old daughter of a former dictator was dismissed in March 2017 and has now been in custody for almost a year. "We ask the court to hand down 30 years in prison and (a fine of) 118.5 billion won (\$110 million) for the accused, who must take ultimate responsibility for the scandal as the 18th president of this country," prosecutors said in a statement. They said Park, in collusion with her secret confidante and long-time friend Choi Soon-sil, took or was promised bribes totaling 59.2 billion won (\$52 million) from three South Korean companies, Samsung, Lotte and SK, in return for policy favours. Park has also been charged with coercing 18 large firms to "donate" a total of 77.4 billion won to two dubious foundations controlled by Choi. The Seoul Central District Court earlier this month found Choi guilty of abuse of power, bribery and interfering in government business and sentenced her to 20 years in prison. The verdict and sentence was seen as a potential pointer to the decision in Park's separate trial in the same court, because 15 of the 18 charges Choi faced mirror charges against the ex-president. The verdict on Park is expected on April 6. "The accused (Park) abused her power delegated by the people for private gain for Choi and herself... violated core constitutional values on the protection of the market economy and free democracy," the statement said.



CORRUPTION SCANDAL