

# NEWSIN brief

## US tells Taliban to consider talks offer

AFP, Washington

The United States on Monday called on the Taliban to consider an offer for peace talks extended by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. Ghani last week unveiled a plan to open talks with the Taliban, including eventually recognizing them as a political party. In return, Ghani said the militants should officially recognize the Afghan government and constitution.

## India's lion population increases to 600

AFP, Ahmedabad

The endangered Asiatic lion, which only lives in one forest in India, has fought back from the verge of extinction, with its population increasing to more than 600, a minister said yesterday hailing a major conservation campaign. In the late 1960s only about 180 Asiatic lions, which once roamed across southwest Asia but is now restricted to the 1,400 square kilometre Gir sanctuary in Gujarat state, were in the park.



## S Korean ex-president to face bribery grilling

AFP, Seoul

South Korean prosecutors yesterday summoned conservative former president Lee Myung-bak for questioning as a criminal suspect in a bribery scandal. The move means that all living former South Korean presidents have now either been convicted, charged or embroiled in criminal inquiries. Two of the ex-president's former aides have been arrested and the homes and offices of his brothers raided.



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un shakes hands with Chung Eui-yong who is leading a special delegation of South Korea's president, in this photo released by North Korea's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

# Koreas to hold historic summit

Seoul says Pyongyang ready to denuclearise if security guaranteed; Trump hails 'progress'

AFP, Seoul

The leaders of North and South Korea will hold a historic summit in the Demilitarised Zone next month after Pyongyang expressed willingness to give up its nuclear weapons in exchange for security guarantees, Seoul said yesterday.

The North is open to "frank" talks with the United States on denuclearisation and would suspend missile and nuclear tests while dialogue was under way, the South's national security adviser Chung Eui-yong said after returning from a meeting in Pyongyang with leader Kim Jong Un.

Responding to the news in a series of tweets, US President Donald Trump said he saw "possible progress" and that "for the first time in many years, a serious effort is being made by all parties concerned".

The potential talks "may be false hope, but the US is ready to go hard in either direction," Trump tweeted.

North Korea is subject to multiple rounds of UN Security Council

sanctions over its atomic and ballistic missile programmes, and has long insisted that its "treasured sword" is not up for negotiation.

But it is willing to abandon the programmes if its national security - and that of its leadership - is guaranteed, Chung said.

That remains a high threshold - Pyongyang has considered itself at risk of invasion by the United States since the Korean War ended in a ceasefire in 1953, leaving the two sides technically still at war.

But, Chung said, Kim is willing to discuss denuclearisation in talks with Washington - which could be the crucial concession needed to enable a dialogue to happen.

The developments are the latest steps in a rapid Olympics-driven rapprochement on the peninsula. They follow a year of high tensions during which Pyongyang carried out its most powerful nuclear test to date, along with multiple missile launches, including rockets capable of reaching the US mainland.

Kim and Trump traded personal insults and threats of war, sending fears of conflict spiralling.

But the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in the South triggered an apparent transformation, with Kim sending his sister to the opening ceremony and sparking a flurry of cross-border trips as South Korean President Moon Jae-in tries to broker talks between Pyongyang and Washington.

North and South agreed to hold a summit in late April in Panmunjom, the truce village in the DMZ, Chung said after leading the most senior delegation to travel North for more than a decade.

It will be the third meeting between the leaders of North and South, but the first to take place in the DMZ after summits in Pyongyang in 2000 and 2007.

The North "made clear that there is no reason to own nuclear (weapons) if military threats towards the North are cleared and the safety of its regime is guaranteed", Chung said.

Pyongyang "expressed willing-

ness to have frank dialogue with the US to discuss the denuclearisation issue and to normalise North-US relations," he added, and said there would be no provocations such as nuclear or ballistic missile tests while dialogue was under way.

"Also, the North promised not to use atomic weapons or conventional weapons towards the South," he told reporters, adding that Seoul and Pyongyang would set up a hotline between the leaders.

Kim said he would "understand" if the South goes ahead with delayed joint military exercises with the US that usually infuriate Pyongyang, a senior official at the South's presidential office added.

The envoys' visit had produced "a very important breakthrough", said Cheong Seong Chang of Sejong Institute think tank, calling the results "an important first step towards stably managing the North's nuclear and missile threats, preventing war on the Korean peninsula and building political and military trust".

# 'Unprecedented reign of terror'

Left accuses BJP of assaults, vandalism, arson in Tripura; state BJP unit warns against violence

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

CPI(M) yesterday accused BJP and its poll ally Indigenous People's Front of Tripura of unleashing an "unprecedented reign of terror" throughout the state after the election results were announced on March 3.

CPI(M)'s general secretary Sitaram Yechury had announced country-wide protests, accusing the BJP of "thriving on political violence" as clashes broke out between supporters of the two parties in Tripura after assembly election results were announced.

The Leftist party's state secretary Bijan Dhar claimed that 514 party activists were assaulted, 1,539 houses of the party activists were attacked and 196 houses set on fire since the announcement of results.

He also claimed that 134 CPI(M) offices were attacked and looted, 64 party offices were set on fire and at least 90 offices of different mass organisations had been occupied allegedly by BJP-IPFT supporters.

"I appeal to the state administration and the ruling parties to stop this violence.

"In a democratic system, change of government is usual but violence in such grave form is not acceptable by the people," Dhar said.

Reminiscent of the collapse of the Communist regimes in East Europe, a statue of Vladimir Lenin was pulled down by a mob armed with an excavator machine at Belonia town in Tripura state, a couple of days after BJP ended the Marxist rule of 25 years there.

South Tripura CPI(M) district secretary Tapas Datta said the five-feet-tall fibre glass statue of Lenin was pulled down allegedly by BJP workers on Monday at College Square in Belonia, about 110 kilometre from Agartala, amidst chants of 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai'.

The video footage and photos of the statue of Lenin being brought down went viral on social media and was published in many Indian dailies and websites.

The police said they have received complaints of "post-poll violence" from various parts of the state since Sunday night.

Urging people to maintain peace, the BJP's state unit president, Biplob Deb, who is set to be sworn in as the new chief minister of Tripura, said in a statement that nobody would be spared if they indulge in violence.

BJP trounced the CPI(M)-led Left Front in Tripura, winning a two-thirds majority.



A group of people with a bulldozer illegally razed a statue of Lenin in a public square in Tripura on Monday. PHOTO: NDTV

# More raids, more deaths

Nine civilians killed as Syria regime strikes shake Ghouta

AFP, Douma

Fresh air strikes and clashes shook the Syrian rebel enclave of Eastern Ghouta yesterday after desperately needed aid deliveries were cut short by fighting.

The brutal onslaught on the last major rebel stronghold near the capital, the latest regime offensive of the seven-year civil war, has sparked outrage but little action from the West.

Government troops have advanced rapidly across farmland in Eastern Ghouta in the past week, a monitor says, and as of early yesterday controlled 40 percent of the enclave, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Essential aid deliveries to tens of thousands of besieged civilians were cut short on Monday as the regime pounded the region.

At least nine civilians were killed in air strikes on the town of Idlib early yesterday, the Britain-based Observatory said.

In the latest attempt to end the seven-year war, the foreign ministers of regime allies

Iran and Russia and rebel backer Turkey are to meet next week in Astana, Kazakhstan's top diplomatic envoy said.

Turkey yesterday announced it would establish camps in neighbouring Syria, including near the border in Idlib, to settle 170,000 people fleeing from the civil war.

France and Britain have requested an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council to discuss the failure of the 30-day ceasefire to take hold in Syria, diplomats said.

The council is expected to meet today to discuss the air strikes and clashes in the Syrian enclave of Eastern Ghouta.

Meanwhile, a Russian transport plane crashed on landing at Russia's Hmeimim airbase in Syria, killing all 32 on board, the defence ministry said in a statement carried by RIA Novosti.

"The reason for the crash according to preliminary information could have been a technical fault," the ministry added, saying the plane had not come under fire.

Iran, Russia, Turkey to hold Syria meeting in Kazakhstan

Russian plane crash in Syrian base kills 32



Wounded Syrian children receive treatment at a make-shift hospital following reported government bombardments on the rebel-held town of Hamouria, in the besieged Eastern Ghouta region on the outskirts of the capital Damascus on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

# India a nation of and for Hindus!

Hindu nationalists aim to assert dominance by rewriting history

REUTERS, New Delhi

During the first week of January last year, a group of Indian scholars gathered in a white bungalow on a leafy boulevard in central New Delhi. The focus of their discussion: how to rewrite the history of the nation.

The government of Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi had quietly appointed the committee of scholars about six months earlier. Details of its existence are reported here for the first time.

Minutes of the meeting, reviewed by Reuters, and interviews with committee members set out its aims: to use evidence such as archaeological finds and DNA to prove that today's Hindus are directly descended from the land's first inhabitants many thousands of years ago, and make the case that ancient Hindu scriptures are fact not myth.

Interviews with members of the 14-person committee and ministers in Modi's government suggest the ambitions of Hindu nationalists extend beyond holding political power in this nation of 1.3 billion people - a kaleidoscope of religions. They want ultimately to shape the national identity to match their religious views, that India is a nation of and for Hindus.

# Trump 'may' visit Israel for opening Jerusalem embassy

Ex-Trump aide rejects Russia probe subpoena

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump floated a fraught trip to open the new American embassy in Jerusalem, as the US president hosted Israel's equally embattled Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House Monday.

In the Oval Office, Netanyahu waxed lyrical, painting Trump as the heir to a pantheon of historical figures, and hailed the president's "bold" decision to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to the disputed city of Jerusalem.

Netanyahu likened the US leader to the ancient Persian king Cyrus the Great, who freed the Jews from captivity in Babylon, and Lord Balfour, who a century ago affirmed the rights of the Jewish people in Palestine.

The 71-year-old president responded with some lyrical waxing of his own, saying he would consider a trip to open the controversial embassy this May, when Israel celebrates 70 years since its declaration of independence.

"We're looking at coming. If I can, I will," Trump said. "I may. We will be talking about that and other things.

"Israel is very special to me. Special country, special people, and I look forward to being there..." he added.

Meanwhile, a former aide to Trump's election campaign said Monday he is rejecting a subpoena to provide information to the investigation into Russian meddling.

Sam Nunberg said collecting emails and other communications he had with other key Trump advisors, particularly Steve Bannon and Roger Stone, was too much trouble and he would not do it.

"They want me over at the grand jury. \*\*\*\* that. Why do I have to go?" he told CNN. "I'm not going to build the case that they are trying to build."

Nunberg worked for the Trump Organization beginning in 2011, before



# Bezos tops Forbes world's rich list

AFP, Paris

Amazon chief Jeff Bezos is now the world's richest person, having snatched the top spot from Microsoft founder Bill Gates who slips to second place, according to Forbes magazine's annual billionaires list published yesterday.

US President Donald Trump's ranking on the list fell to 766th place from 544th in the last edition, his wealth now being estimated at \$3.1 billion, \$400 million less.

Thanks to a 59-percent rise in Amazon shares over the past 12 months, Bezos almost doubled his fortune, taking it to \$120 billion, way ahead of Gates's \$90 billion - the biggest gap ever between the number one and two spots, Forbes said.

Legendary investor Warren Buffett held on to his number three ranking, followed by French industrialist Bernard Arnault, who jumped to fourth-richest person from his previous number 11 spot, mostly thanks to euro strength against the dollar, the magazine said.

Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg was fifth on the list. There are now a record 2,208 billionaires in the world, Forbes counted, and their combined worth is \$9.1 trillion, up 18 percent from last year.

The US has the most billionaires (585), followed by mainland China (373).

Falling fortunes or political headwinds, meanwhile, pushed 121 people out of the illustrious list, including all 10 Saudi Arabians, the magazine said.

## POST-POLL ITALY

# Left mulls Five Star deal to end deadlock

AFP, Rome

Senior members of Italy's vanquished Democratic Party were yesterday defying outgoing leader Matteo Renzi and eyeing a possible deal with the triumphant Five Star Movement after an election that ended in deadlock.

Anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S) leader Luigi Di Maio declared his party "the winners" after obtaining nearly 33 percent of the vote, but they need to form alliances in parliament if they are to govern.

Renzi ruled out the prospect as he announced his resignation on Monday, following disaster at the polls that saw his party's centre-left coalition slump to third place with 23 percent of the vote.

"During the campaign, we said we would not do a government with extremists. We have not changed our mind," Renzi said, adding that the Democratic Party (PD) would "not be a crutch for anti-system forces".

Political expert Giovanni Orsina said Renzi's departure meant "a convergence between the PD and the M5S is much more probable because Renzi was an obstacle to this."

But Renzi yesterday said he would only step down once a new government is formed, and would act as a "guarantor" that his party made no compromise with what he called the "wind of extremism" that swept Italy in Sunday's election.

However other leading voices in his party disagree and he now faces pressure to bring forward his resignation.

Michele Emiliano, governor of the Puglia region, said his party could offer "external support" to a M5S government.

In an interview with Il Fatto Quotidiano daily, Emiliano berated Renzi for not stepping down immediately.