

Modi receives another blow

TDP quits India's ruling coalition

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Two days after suffering defeat in three parliamentary bypolls, India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party got another jolt yesterday as its long-standing alliance partner Telugu Desam Party (TDP) decided to part ways with the saffron outfit-led coalition and move a no-confidence motion against the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The TDP, which rules southern state of Andhra Pradesh, said its actions are in protest against the "injustice" meted out to the state by the Modi government by refusing to give special category status to the state which would entitle it to more funds from the federal government as grants and not as loans.

Naidu had held a tele-conference with TDP lawmakers on Thursday during which he was understood to have said that there was a "strong anti-BJP" mood in the country as reflected in the results of three bypolls in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar states on Wednesday.

On March 8, two TDP representatives in Modi government -- P Ashok Gajapati Raju and Y S Chowdary -- resigned as ministers after a meeting with the prime minister in protest against the federal government's refusal to grant special state category to Andhra Pradesh which would entitle it to more funds from the Modi government in the form of grants and not as loans.

The Telugu Desam Parliamentary Party will issue a notice to move the no-trust motion, party sources said. Meanwhile, another party of Andhra Pradesh, YSR Congress, a breakaway group of Congress party, has submitted a notice for moving a no-confidence motion against the Modi government for its refusal to accord special category status to the state.

If the motion is admitted, which requires the support of



BSP chief says BJP may call early polls after defeats in UP and Bihar

at least 50 lawmakers, it will be the first no-confidence motion during the tenure of the Modi government.

However, YSR Congress party has only nine lawmakers in the Lok Sabha where no-confidence motion is placed. TDP has 16 members in the Lok Sabha.

Meanwhile, Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati has said Bharatiya Janata Party may call for early parliamentary elections in the country after the saffron party's defeat in the three parliamentary bypolls in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar a couple of days ago.

"In Uttar Pradesh, we wanted to teach BJP a lesson and decided to support Samajwadi Party candidates so that it loses the seats earlier held by the chief minister and deputy chief minister... They have lost their sleep with this result," she told a BSP rally in Chandigarh on Thursday evening.

BJP lost to SP in both Gorakhpur and Phulpur, the Lok Sabha seats in Uttar Pradesh vacated by Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and by his Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Prasad Maurya respectively when they were elected to the legislative council. The BJP also lost the Lok Sabha bypoll in Araria in Bihar.

"With yesterday's result, there is great possibility that BJP will advance the Lok Sabha polls, which are otherwise to be held in 2019," Mayawati said.

The party, she added, may hold Lok Sabha polls along with assembly elections in seven-eight states.



Aerial view shows a pedestrian bridge collapsed at Florida International University in Miami, Florida, US, on Thursday. The death toll from the collapse has risen to at least six, Miami police said yesterday. The walkway, which connects Florida International University to a student housing area, went up less than a week ago but was not yet operational. At least eight cars were trapped when the 950-tonne bridge suddenly gave way on Thursday. Ten people were taken to hospital.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Deaths, exodus in Syria

Dozens killed as Ghouta, Afrin offensives reach decisive phase; Russia accuses West of enabling terrorists after talks with Turkey, Iran

AFP, Adra

Warplanes pounded Syria's Eastern Ghouta yesterday as Islamist groups tried to resist an advance by Russian-backed regime forces and civilians looked for cracks through which to flee the five-year-old siege.

At least 57 civilians were killed as the toll for the month-old assault near Damascus continued to mount and world powers remained unable to stop one of the seven-year con-



Afrin, sending thousands more civilians on to the roads.

Turkish artillery fire killed 18 civilians yesterday in the city of Afrin, where remaining residents were stocking up on food in preparation for a fully-fledged siege.

Meanwhile, Russia yesterday accused western powers of enabling terrorists in Syria, after meeting with Iran and Turkey for a new round of talks to try and broker an end to the conflict there.

The Russian, Iranian and Turkish foreign ministers had met in the Kazakh capital of Astana, and the focus of their consultations was Eastern Ghouta. The Astana meeting was to lay the ground for a summit involving the presidents of the three countries in Istanbul on April 4.

Speaking after the talks, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused the West of shielding terrorists and even trying to "preserve their combat potential"

Lavrov singled out Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a group made up mostly of al-Qaeda's ex-affiliate Al-Nusra Front which is present in Eastern Ghouta.

He claimed the group was "playing a role in a scenario directed by Western directors."

On the edge of Ghouta, a sprawling semi-rural area within mortar range of central Damascus, hundreds of civilians were still streaming out of destroyed towns, carrying scant belongings in bags and bundles.

An exodus of similar proportions was under way hundreds of kilometres to the north near the border with Turkey, as civilians tried to escape a looming siege of the city of Afrin.

The Observatory said on Thursday that more than 30,000 people had fled the city of Afrin in 24 hours and civilians were still trying to slip out yesterday before Turkish-led forces cut the last exit road.

Russian air strikes kill 57 civilians in Ghouta

Turkish fire on Afrin kills 18 civilians

flict's worst crises.

The war entered its eighth year with another deadly assault unfolding in the north, where Turkish-led forces pressed an operation to seize the Kurdish-majority region of

Zuma to face trial on graft charges

AFP, Pretoria

Former South African president Jacob Zuma will face prosecution on corruption charges that haunted much of his term in office, the country's chief prosecutor said yesterday.

"After consideration of the matter there are reasonable prospects of a successful prosecution of Mr Zuma," said National Director of Public Prosecutions Shaun Abrahams at a media briefing in Pretoria.

Last year, a court ruled against a decision by prosecutors in 2009 to drop the corruption charges against Zuma just months before he became president.

Zuma's criminal charges relate to multi-billion-dollar arms procurement deals struck by the government in the late 1990s and



from which he is accused of profiting corruptly to the tune of four million rands (\$345,000, 280,000 euros). Zuma and other officials were accused of taking kickbacks from the \$5 billion (4.2 billion euros) purchase of fighter jets, patrol boats and other arms manufactured by five European firms, including British military equipment maker BAE Systems and French company Thales.

Zuma resigned as president last month after the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party threatened to remove him from office.



Indian Kashmiri villagers look on next to the debris of a house after a gunbattle between suspected militants and government forces in the Balhama area of Khanmoh district near Srinagar, yesterday. Two Kashmiri militants were killed and one residential house, where the militants were hiding, was gutted during the fight.

PHOTO: AFP

Air India to fly over S Arabia to Israel

AFP, New Delhi

India's state-run carrier Air India yesterday said it will fly over Saudi airspace to Tel Aviv, a move that ends a decades-long Saudi ban on the use of its airspace for flights to Israel.

The decision comes at a time of growing ties between India and several Middle Eastern countries, and after Israel's leader Benjamin Netanyahu hinted at a diplomatic realignment in the region earlier this month.

"The Air India flights to Israel will start from March 22. The flights will take around seven hours and five minutes, and fly over... Saudi airspace," airline spokesman Praveen Bhatnagar told AFP.

The new route was announced by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi last July, with Netanyahu first suggesting in January the route could pass over Saudi Arabia.

Riyadh has no official ties with Tel Aviv, with Israel's national carrier El Al currently taking a detour over the Red Sea on its India service to avoid Saudi and Iranian airspace.

IRAN MEDDLING IN IRAQI POLLS: US

Meanwhile, US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis lambasted Iran on Thursday for "mucking around" in Iraq's upcoming elections in a bid to sway votes towards pro-Tehran candidates.

Speaking to reporters as he returned from a trip to Oman, Afghanistan and Bahrain, Mattis said officials he met with had expressed frequent concerns about Iranian behavior.

Mueller subpoenas Trump Org

Sources says Trump ready to replace national security adviser

AFP, Washington

The special counsel investigating Moscow's influence on the US election has subpoenaed the company founded by Donald Trump to turn over documents related to Russia, a report said Thursday, bringing the probe closer to the president.

For the first time since launching his investigation, Robert Mueller had subpoenas delivered to the Trump Organization in recent weeks ordering it to hand over all documents related to Russia and other issues under investigation, The New York Times reported, citing two people briefed on the matter.

The Trump Organization, an umbrella company including global real estate, hotel, and golf course properties as well as licensing, sales and brand development operations, did not directly confirm the latest subpoenas, and downplayed the Times report as "old news."

Asked for comment on the develop-

ment, White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders said: "We are going to continue to cooperate" with Mueller.

The revelation comes as Mueller, who is also examining Moscow's alleged collusion with the Trump campaign, has appeared to try to broaden his investigation to include



the influence that foreign money may have played on Trump's political activities.

Mueller has begun probing efforts by Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner to get foreign investors beyond Russia to provide financing for his company during the presidential transition,

CNN reported last month.

The special counsel has so far indicted 13 Russians for interfering in the 2016 US presidential race, and six other people including four former Trump aides or staffers.

In an interview with the Times last July, the president said that the special counsel would be crossing a "red line" if he probed his family's finances beyond any relationship with Russia.

But he stopped short of saying whether he would seek to fire Mueller for taking such action.

The Washington Post Thursday reported that Trump has decided to sack National Security Advisor HR McMaster, in what would be the latest in a string of high-profile White House departures.

The newspaper said that Trump is discussing potential replacements for McMaster, but is willing to take his time because he wants to avoid humiliating him as well as to have a successor ready.

S Korea, US to scale down military drills

AFP, Seoul

South Korea and the United States will scale down and shorten annual joint military exercises in light of a diplomatic thaw with Pyongyang, a report said yesterday.

The Key Resolve and Foal Eagle drills held every spring regularly infuriate the nuclear-armed North, which usually condemns them as preparations for invasion and responds with provocations of its own, ratcheting tensions higher.

But the two Koreas and the US are in the throes of an Olympics-led rapprochement, with South Korea announcing plans for a summit between Seoul and Pyongyang next month, and US President Donald Trump said to be meeting the North's leader Kim Jong Un by the end of May.

Citing a military source, the South's Yonhap news agency said Foal Eagle, a field exercise involving tens of thousands of troops, will start in early April but be halved in length from two months to one.

US strategic weapons such as B-1B bombers and aircraft carrier strike groups -- which have been often deployed to and near the Korean peninsula in times of high tension -- will not take part this time, Yonhap said.

Meanwhile, North Korea's foreign minister yesterday held talks in Stockholm with Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Lofven amid reports Sweden could play a role in setting up a proposed summit between Trump and Kim Jong Un.

NEWSIN brief

Philippines tells UN it will quit ICC

AFP, Manila

The Philippines has given official notice to the United Nations that it is withdrawing from the International Criminal Court, which is probing President Rodrigo Duterte's deadly drug war, Manila said yesterday. The move comes two days after Duterte announced his nation would quit the court.

Hillary fractures hand on India trip

AFP, New Delhi

Hillary Clinton has fractured her hand during a tour of India, reportedly slipping in a bathtub at a luxury hotel in a former palace in Rajasthan state. A doctor at the private Goyal Hospital told AFP yesterday that the 70 years old Clinton had undergone screening after suffering pain in her right hand following a fall.

Trump daughter-in-law files for divorce

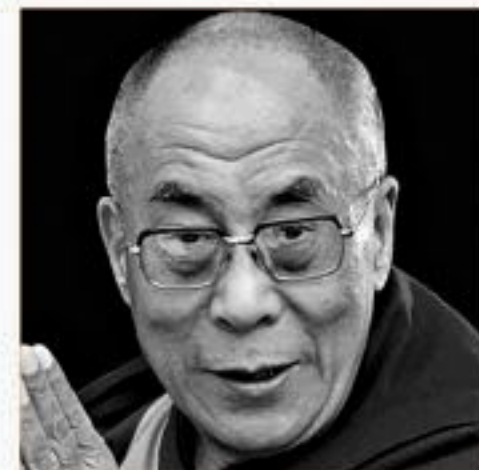
AFP, New York

The wife of Donald Trump Jr, the US president's eldest son, filed for divorce on Thursday in New York, according to several American media reports. Vanessa Trump, nee Haydon, married Donald Jr in November 2005. The couple, both 40, has five children between the ages of three and 10.

Saudi princess faces French arrest warrant

AFP, Paris

The sister of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is the target of a French arrest warrant for allegedly ordering her bodyguard to beat up a worker at her Paris apartment, legal sources said Thursday. The workman says he was hired to carry out some refurbishment at Princess Hassa bint Salman's apartment and she became angry after he took a photograph of the room. The workman says he was punched in the face, his hands were tied and he was forced to kiss the princess's feet during an hours-long ordeal.



Tibet can exist with China like EU: Dalai Lama

REUTERS, Beijing

Tibet can exist within China in the same spirit as the European Union stick together, the territory's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, considered a dangerous separatist by Beijing, said yesterday.

The Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959 after an abortive uprising against Chinese rule and set up a government in exile in the foothills of Dharamsala. Chinese troops had seized control of Tibet nine years earlier.

He says he only seeks autonomy for his homeland, not outright independence. He has also expressed a desire to return to Tibet.

"I always, you see, admire the spirit of (the) European Union," the Dalai Lama said in a video message to the International Campaign for Tibet on the Washington DC-based group's 30th anniversary on Thursday. "Common interest (is) more important than one's own national interest. With that kind of concept, I am very much willing to remain within the People's Republic of China. The Chinese word, 'gongheguo' (republic), shows some kind of union is there."

China says Tibet in an integral part of its territory and has been for centuries. Beijing also says its rule ended serfdom and brought prosperity to what was a backward region, and that it fully respects the rights of the Tibetan people.