

NEWS IN BRIEF

US blacklists Pak political party

REUTERS, Islamabad
The United States has placed a Pakistani political group called the Milli Muslim League (MML) on its list of foreign terrorist organisations, saying it was merely an alias for Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), blamed for 2008 Mumbai attack that killed 166 people. The Milli Muslim League is controlled by LeT chief Hafiz Saeed.

Four Christians shot dead in SW Pakistan

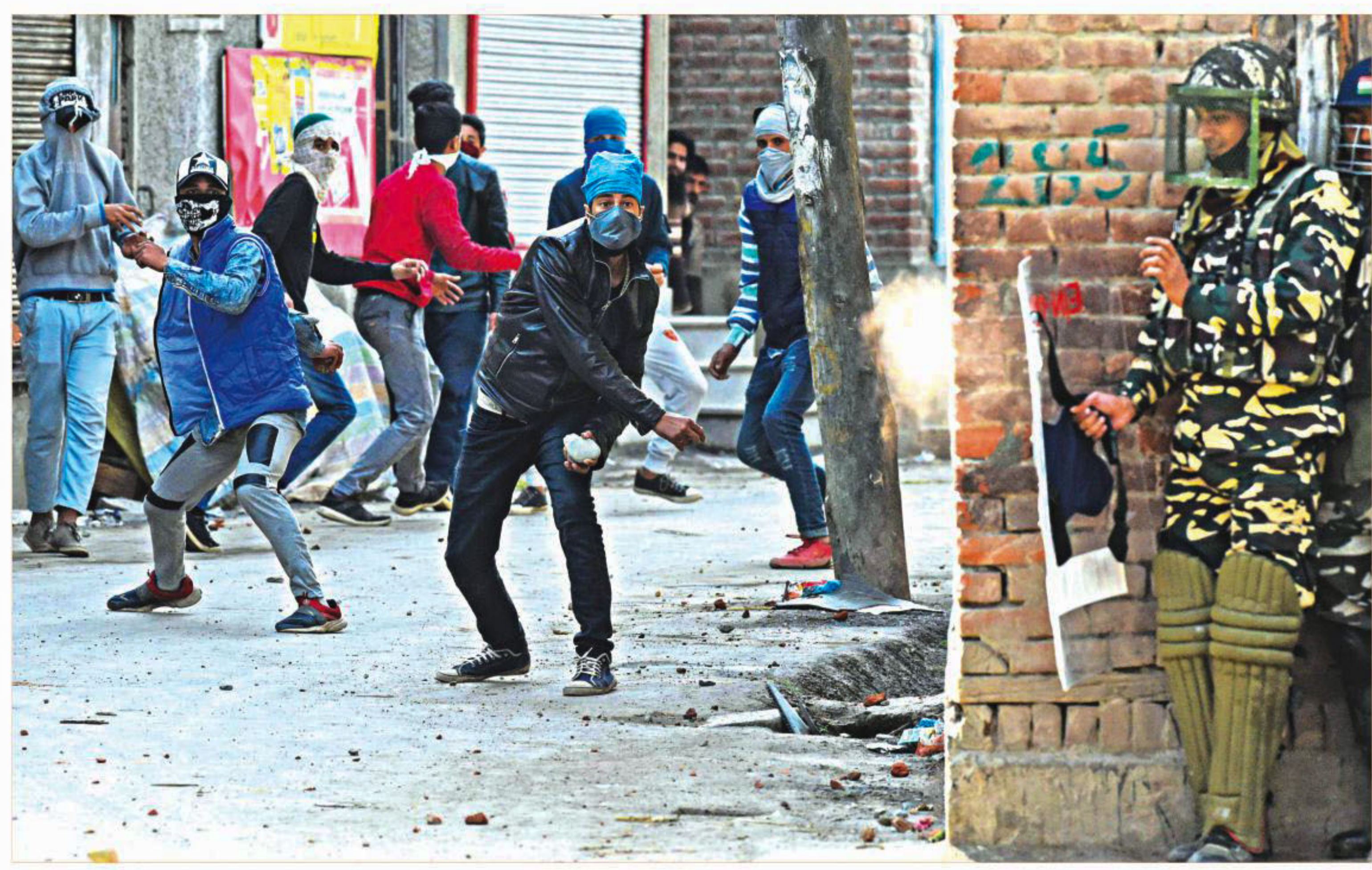
AFP, Quetta
Four Christians were shot dead in southwestern Pakistan on Monday, police said, in an attack claimed by the Islamic State group. The incident occurred in a Christian-majority neighbourhood in the city of Quetta, capital of the Balochistan province. Christians make up less than two percent of Muslim-majority Pakistan's 200 million people.

French rail strike begins in test for Macron

AFP, Paris
Commuters across France faced severe disruptions yesterday as rail workers launched three months of rolling strikes, a major test of President Emmanuel Macron's resolve to reshape the country through sweeping reforms. More than three-quarters of train drivers joined the first day of the walkout.

Massive crystal meth seized on Thai border

AFP, Bangkok
Thai authorities have seized a massive methamphetamine haul worth almost \$38 million near the Laotian border, officials said yesterday, highlighting the kingdom's role as a pipeline for drugs flooding through Southeast Asia. Early yesterday authorities found some 788 kilograms of crystal meth -- a high-purity form of the stimulant -- in an abandoned pick-up truck in northern Chiang Rai prov-



Kashmiri protestors clash with Indian government forces yesterday during a second day of strike called by Kashmiri separatists against recent killings in Srinagar. Twenty people have been killed in Indian Kashmir in some of the fiercest fighting this year in the restive Himalayan region, police said, as authorities braced for more violence.

REDUCTION OF TENSIONS IN KOREAN PENINSULA

China hails North Korea's efforts

REUTERS, Beijing
China appreciates North Korea's "important efforts" to ease tension on the Korean peninsula, senior Chinese diplomat Wang Yi told the North's foreign minister yesterday, hours after he called on all sides to stay focused on talks.
China has traditionally been secretive North Korea's closest ally, though ties had been frayed by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's pursuit of nuclear weapons and missiles and Beijing's backing of tough UN sanctions in response.
But in late March Beijing vowed to uphold its friendship with its isolated neighbour and won a pledge from Kim to denuclearise the peninsula during a meeting with President Xi Jinping.
China's Foreign Ministry gave only hours notice that Wang, a State Councillor and China's Foreign Minister would meet North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho.
Wang told Ri that Xi and Kim had reached an important consensus on achieving a peaceful resolution to the peninsula nuclear issue during Kim's visit to Beijing.
"China appreciates North Korea's position working toward denuclearisation of the peninsula and its important efforts to ease the situation on the peninsula, and supports meetings between the leaders of the North and South and between the North and the United States," Wang said, according to a Chinese Foreign Ministry statement.
The ministry cited Ri as saying that North Korea would "maintain close strategic communications" with China on peninsula-related issues.
North Korea's official news agency KCNA had said that a delegation headed by Ri left yesterday to meet other foreign ministers in Azerbaijan and to visit Russia, but made no mention of China.

Israel has 'right' to its land

Says Saudi crown prince; king reaffirms 'steadfast' support to Palestinians

REUTERS, Riyadh
Saudi Arabia's crown prince said in a published interview that Israelis are entitled to live peacefully on their own land, another public sign of an apparent thawing in ties between the two countries.
Asked if he believes the Jewish people have a right to a nation state in at least part of their ancestral homeland, Mohammed bin Salman was quoted by US magazine The Atlantic as saying:
"I believe the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have their own land. But we have to have a peace agreement to assure the stability for everyone and to have normal relations."
However King Salman reiterated Saudi Arabia's support for a Palestinian state after his son's statement.
The king also emphasised the need to advance the peace process in a phone call with US President Donald Trump on Monday night, made after Israeli security forces killed 16 Palestinians last week during a demon-

stration along the Israel-Gaza border.
King Salman reaffirmed "the kingdom's steadfast position towards the Palestinian issue and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people to an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital", state news agency SPA said yesterday.
Saudi Arabia - birthplace of Islam and site of its holiest shrines - does not officially recognise Israel. It has maintained for years that normalizing relations hinges on an Israeli withdrawal from Arab lands captured in the 1967 Middle East war - territory Palestinians seek for a future state.
"We have religious concerns about the fate of the holy mosque in Jerusalem and about the rights of the

Palestinian people. This is what we have. We don't have any objection against any other people," said Prince Mohammed, who is touring the United States to drum up investments and support for his efforts to contain Iranian influence.
No senior Saudi official is known to have previously accepted that Israel has a right to any land beyond the practical need to secure a lasting deal.
Saudi Arabia opened its air space for the first time to a commercial flight to Israel last month, which an Israeli official hailed as historic following two years of efforts.
In November, an Israeli cabinet member disclosed covert contacts with Saudi Arabia, a rare acknowledgment of long-rumoured secret dealings which Riyadh still denies.
Saudi Arabia condemned Trump's move to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel last year. But Arab officials told Reuters at the time that Riyadh appears to be on board with a broader US strategy for an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan still in its early phases of development.



Yemen, UN seek talks with Huthis

REUTERS, Geneva
UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres yesterday urged the warring sides in Yemen to reach a political settlement to end a conflict now in its fourth year that has left 22 million people in urgent need of aid.
His Special Envoy Martin Griffiths will head to the United Arab Emirates, Oman and the Yemeni government-held city of Aden in the drive for peace, Guterres told reporters.
Griffiths has already held talks with both sides in the war which has drawn in regional powers, meeting Huthi authorities who hold the capital Sanaa as well as internationally-recognised Yemeni president Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi and Saudi officials in Riyadh.
Guterres said he saw "positive perspectives" for preparing a plan of action "to lead to an effective inter-Yemeni dialogue able to achieve a political solution, with of course the involvement of all those that are relevant in this conflict".
"I am optimistic about that possibility," the UN chief added.
Yemeni Foreign Minister Abdel-Malek al-Mekhlafi called for a return to the negotiating table and said that his government was working to open ports and airports to aid.
"We need to find the ideal solution which is a return to the talks table, to put an end to the war, to return to a sustainable system supported by the people of Yemen," he said, adding that this should include "the putschist parties" - referring to the Huthis - and those supported by the international community.
Guterres also announced that more than \$2 billion has been pledged towards a UN humanitarian appeal of \$3 billion for Yemen this year.



Germany seeks to extradite Puigdemont

AFP, Berlin
German prosecutors yesterday asked a court to order the extradition to Spain of Catalonia's ousted president Carles Puigdemont following a rebellion charge following his arrest in Germany last month.
The request comes after demonstrations by independence supporters at the weekend in Berlin and Catalonia calling for Puigdemont's immediate release.
"The prosecutor's office of Schleswig-Holstein state applied for an extradition arrest warrant against former Catalan regional president Carles Puigdemont from the superior regional court," it said in a statement.
It was not immediately clear when the court would rule on Puigdemont's possible extradition.
Puigdemont was arrested by German police on March 25 as he was travelling from Finland back to Belgium, where he has been living in self-imposed exile since Catalonia's failed independence bid last October.
The detention came two days after a Spanish judge issued European arrest warrants for Puigdemont and other fugitive separatist leaders. They have been ordered to stand trial for rebellion, misuse of public funds and disobeying the state for organising last year's referendum on Catalan independence, which Madrid deemed illegal.
German media say the request has been complicated by the fact that rebellion, which carries a maximum penalty of 30 years in jail in Spain, is not a crime under German law.

Studies: 2C cap won't save Arctic sea ice

AFP, Paris
Even if humanity stops global warming in its tracks at two degrees Celsius, long seen as the guardrail for a climate-safe world, Arctic sea ice will still disappear in some years, scientists have warned.
Holding the line at 1.5 C (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit), however, would make a huge difference, according to two separate studies published Monday in the journal Nature Climate Change.
In a 2C (3.6F) world, the Arctic Ocean would be ice-free roughly one-in-four years, whereas if warming does not exceed 1.5C, the odds drop to one-in-40, the researchers concluded.
The 197-nation Paris climate pact enjoins the world to halt warming at "well under" 2C above mid-19th-century levels, and "pursue efforts" to cap the rise at 1.5C.
With one degree of warming so far, Earth has already seen a crescendo of droughts, heatwaves, and storms ramped up by rising seas.
After remaining flat for three years, global CO2 emissions in 2017 went up by 1.4 percent, dashing hopes that they had peaked, the International Energy Agency (IEA) reported last week.
Voluntary national pledges made under the Paris pact to cut CO2 emissions, if fulfilled, would yield a 3C world at best.



Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan (R) talks with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin at the Presidential Palace in Ankara yesterday. Erdogan and Putin launched the construction of Turkey's first nuclear power plant, the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, in the Mediterranean Mersin region.



Sri Lanka PM faces tight trust vote

REUTERS, Colombo
Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe faces a no-confidence motion today that could go down to the wire and lead to political instability in the island nation, even if the government manages to scrape a win.
Wickremesinghe leads a national unity government in alliance with President Maithripala Sirisena's party, which has said it would vote against the prime minister, blaming him for failing to prevent an alleged scam in the bond market.
The opposition, which swept local elections last month, aims to drive a deeper wedge within the ruling coalition with the no-confidence motion and bring forward a national election due in 2020.
Wickremesinghe has faced criticism for failing to deliver on economic growth which slumped to 3.1 percent last year, its worst pace since a recession in 2001.
Wickremesinghe's United National Party-led coalition has 107 members in the 225-member parliament and, until now, the support of 42 members of the SLFP, which gave it a comfortable majority.
But if the SLFP votes against the government, Wickremesinghe could lose his majority.
He would then need the backing of minority parties in the opposition to stay in office.

Govt airstrike on Afghanistan religious school kills dozens

Many children among dead; UN launches probe

AGENCIES
Dozens of civilians, including children, have been killed in an Afghan air attack on a gathering at a religious school in the northern province of Kunduz, eyewitnesses and an official said.
A religious school in the Dasht-e-Archi district of the Kunduz province was targeted by air raids late on Monday, resulting in the death of at least 70 people, including top Taliban commanders, a district official told Al Jazeera on the condition of anonymity.
Ministry of Defense spokesman, Mohammad Radmanish, told Al Jazeera that the air raid was aimed at "top Taliban commanders".
The Taliban denied its fighters were present at the school during the time of the attack.

Witnesses told Al Jazeera that the gathering included "a lot of civilians" and the families of those killed in the attack "were devastated".
"There were children as young as 11 or 12 years old in the ceremony who were to be presented with awards and gifts for the completion of their religious courses," Mohammed Abdul Haq, who witnessed the attack, told Al Jazeera.
Other witnesses told Al Jazeera that more than 100 people were killed in the attack.
United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan said on Twitter that a human rights team on the ground will investigate the incident.
"UNAMA actively looking in to disturbing reports of serious harm to civilians yesterday from air strike at #DashtiArchi, #Kunduz. Human Rights team on ground establishing facts. All parties reminded of obligations to protect civilians from impact



AFRICAN MIGRANTS

Israel PM scraps relocation deal with UN

AFP, Jerusalem
Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday cancelled an agreement with the UN refugee agency aimed at avoiding forced deportations of thousands of African migrants only hours after having announced the deal himself.
The stunning turnaround after Netanyahu announced the accord in a televised address on Monday afternoon came as he faced mounting pressure from his right-wing base.
The UN refugee agency urged the PM to reconsider.
After the deluge of criticism, the premier said yesterday that the deal was being cancelled outright after having held discussions on it.

RSF, broadcasters move to fight against fake news

Launch new set of trust, transparency standards for journos

AFP, Paris
Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and leading broadcasters launched a drive against fake news Tuesday with a new set of trust and transparency standards for journalists.
The Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI), which hopes to be able to certify outlets and news sources with high standards of ethical norms and independence, is being backed by Agence-France Presse, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and the Global Editors Network.
RSF head Christophe Deloire said the idea was that search engines and social media platforms would give preferential treatment in their algorithms to media outlets that met the standards.
He hopes that it will lead to the setting up of a "trusted media label" in a world increasingly assaulted by fake news.
The drive with the EBU, the world's top alliance of public broadcasters, aims to set news standards from individual bloggers to large international media groups.

"In the new public arena in which false information circulates faster than real news, the defence of journalism requires reversing this trend by giving a real advantage to all those who reliably produce news and information, whatever their status," Deloire said.
"We have devised a self-regulatory mechanism based on a global analysis of the news and information, one that makes it possible to combine ethical with economic concerns."
"We are convinced that our initiative will help to foster integrity in the public debate while guaranteeing the broadest pluralism and independence," he added.
Deloire insisted that "white-listed" outlets would not only get greater online visibility but they were also likely to attract more advertising revenue.
The system would also help with public funding for the media, he said.
The move comes as Brussels is working on a Europe-wide plan to tackle fake news online, worried by Russian meddling in elections across the continent.