

NEWSIN brief

32 tourists killed in N Korea bus crash

AFP, Beijing

A bus crash in North Korea has killed 32 Chinese tourists and four North Koreans, the foreign ministry in Beijing said yesterday. Two other Chinese nationals were injured in Sunday's accident south of the capital Pyongyang, ministry spokesman Lu Kang told a regular press briefing. Lu said China was investigating the cause of the accident.

Far-right group attacks migrants on Lesbos

AFP, Mytilene

A far-right group made a violent attack overnight on migrants staging a sit-in protest on the Greek island of Lesbos, injuring around a dozen people, police said yesterday. The violence erupted late Sunday after members of the radical Patriotic Movement gathered on the central square of the island's main city Mytilene, where some 200 Afghan asylum-seekers launched the demonstration last week.

Saudi air strikes kill 20 at Yemen wedding

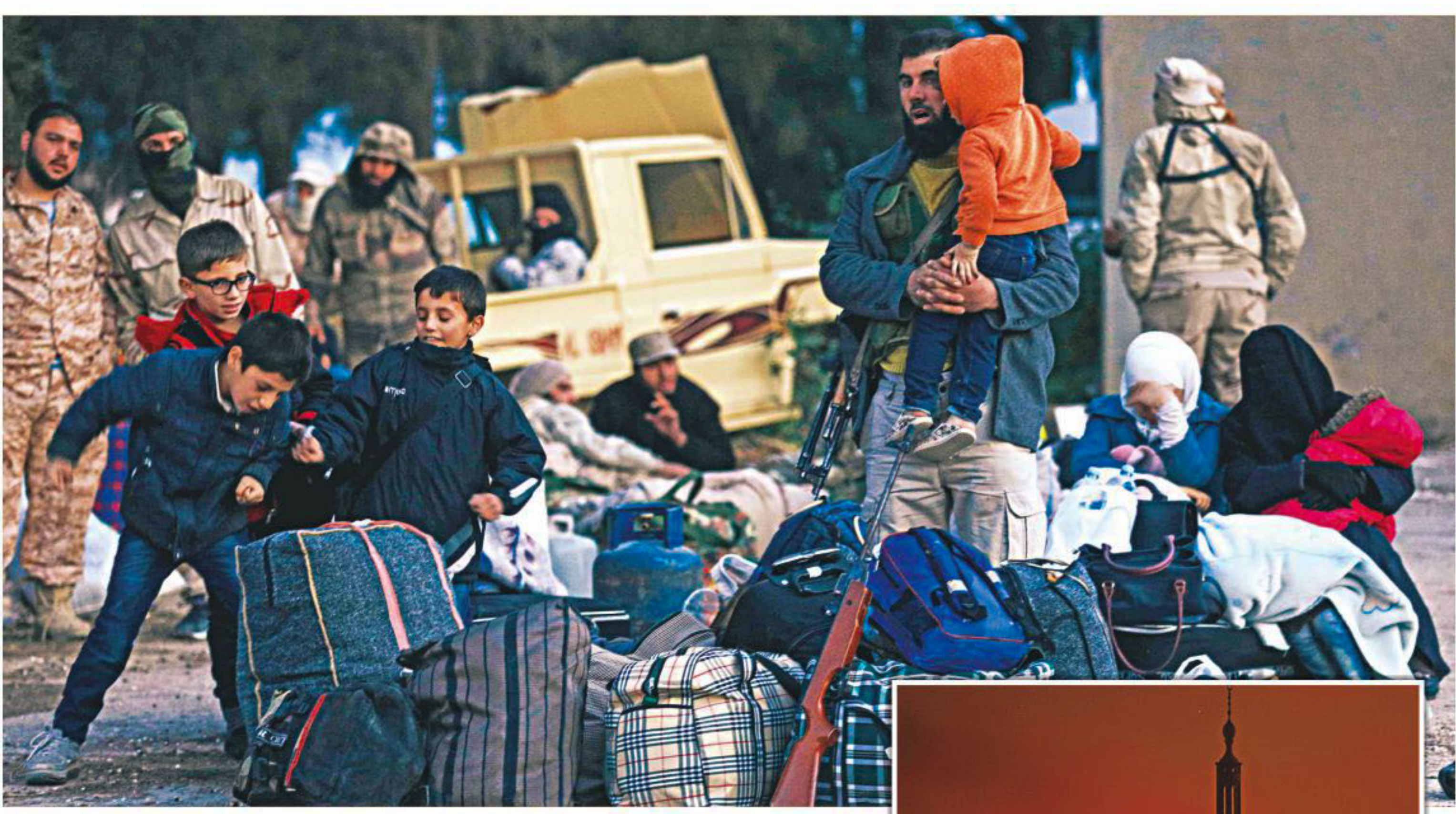
REUTERS, Dubai

Air strikes by a Saudi-led military coalition killed at least 20 people attending a wedding in a village in northwestern Yemen late on Sunday, medical sources said. The head of Al Jumhouri hospital in Hajjah told Reuters the hospital had received 40 bodies, most of them torn to pieces.

Cambodia king urges Senate to protect rights

REUTERS, Phnom Penh

Cambodia's King Norodom Sihamoni yesterday urged senators to protect justice and human rights as the upper house of the country's parliament met for the first time since the ruling party (CPP) swept a controversial election in February. Rights groups called the vote a "sham", while Western governments have imposed sanctions on senior CPP members.



A convoy carrying opposition fighters and their families from the East Qalamun area, 60 kilometres northeast of Syria's capital, arrives in Qalaat al-Madiq, some 45 kilometres northwest of Hama, yesterday after they were evacuated under a deal between opposition fighters and the Russia-backed regime. *Inset*, smoke and flames rising behind the minaret of a mosque in Yarmuk, a Palestinian refugee camp on the edge of Damascus, during overnight regime shelling on the southern district of the capital held by IS group.



UN COURT IN HAGUE

Throw out genocide conviction: Karadzic

AFP, The Hague

Once-feared Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic yesterday urged UN judges to overturn his conviction for war crimes during the Balkans conflict, and either acquit him or order a new trial.

Appearing at the start of his two-day appeal dressed in a dark suit and red tie, Karadzic, 72, smiled and greeted his defence team in the tribunal in The Hague.

He described the expulsion of Muslims and Croats in the 1990s as "myths", at the start of his war crimes appeal.

He was sentenced to 40 years behind bars in March 2016 for the bloodshed committed during the Balkan country's three-year war from 1992-1995 which killed 100,000 people and left 2.2 million others homeless.

Once the most powerful Bosnian Serb leader, he became the highest ranked person to be convicted and sentenced at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), after former Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic died while on trial.

But Karadzic has lodged 50 grounds of appeal, maintaining to the Mechanism for International Criminal Tribunals (MICT) -- which has taken over from the ICTY -- that he was not given a fair trial.

"We're here today to ask you to overturn Radovan Karadzic's conviction and to order a new trial," defence lawyer Peter Robinson said, revealing that his client would address the court.

The right to a fair trial was a "universal value" of international justice, Robinson said, denouncing what he termed Karadzic's original "unwieldy, mega trial."



Ties would 'never rust'

China reassures unnerved Pakistan ahead of Xi's meeting with Modi over Indo-Sino rapprochement effort

REUTERS, Beijing

China yesterday reassured Pakistan that relations between the two countries were as firm as ever and would "never rust", ahead of a meeting this week between President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi that could unnerve Islamabad.

China and Pakistan like to call each other "all weather friends" and their traditional close ties have long been viewed with suspicion by Pakistan's neighbour and traditional enemy, India.

But Modi has tried to reset relations with Beijing after a years of disagreements over everything from their border to exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, and will hold an informal summit with Xi on Friday and Saturday in China.

China will continue to firmly support Pakistan, its top diplomat, State Councillor Wang Yi, told Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif at a meeting in Beijing.

"We are ready to work together with our Pakistani brothers to undertake the historical mission of national rejuvenation and achieve the great dream of national prosperity and develop-

ment," Wang said.

"In this way, our iron friendship with Pakistan will never rust and be tempered into steel."

There was no mention of the Xi-Modi meeting in comments made in front of reporters.

"It will be an important occasion for them (Modi and Xi) to exchange views on bilateral and international matters, from an overarching and long-term perspective with the objective of enhancing mutual communication," Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj said on Sunday.



Pak FM Khawaja Muhammad Asif (left) and Chinese FM Wang Yi pose after their press conference in Beijing yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

The confrontation between the nuclear-armed powers in the Himalayas underscored Indian alarm at China's expanding security and economic links in South Asia.

China's ambitious Belt and Road initiative of transport and energy links bypasses India, apart from a corner of the disputed Kashmir region, also claimed by Pakistan, but involves India's neighbours Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives.

State visit set to test Trump-Macron ties

Iran nuke deal, trade relations to dominate agenda

AFP, Washington

French President Emmanuel Macron flew into Washington yesterday on a three-day state visit expected to test his much-vaunted "friendship" with US counterpart Donald Trump, as the leaders tackle deep differences over Iran and other key dossiers.

In an interview broadcast on the eve of his departure, Macron rehearsed the arguments he will likely put to the US leader on America's trade fights, the Syrian conflict, and the imperiled nuclear deal with Tehran that Trump is threatening to quit.

But as the first state visit of the Trump era kicked off yesterday, such thorny issues will be on the back burner -- with the warm ties between the 40-year-old French leader and his American host instead on full display.

Less than a year after they shared an intimate meal on the second floor of the

Eiffel Tower, Trump and First Lady Melania will host Brigitte and Emmanuel Macron for a private dinner at Mount Vernon, the home of the first US president George Washington.

The serious business kicks in today with meetings at the White House followed by a state dinner, and on Wednesday the centrist leader will demonstrate his English-language skills -- a rarity for a French president -- in an address to a joint session of Congress.

Iran is set to top the agenda throughout the visit: Trump has set a May 12 deadline for the Europeans to "fix" the 2015 agreement that curbs Tehran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief, threatening otherwise to walkaway.

Macron, who has emerged as Trump's privileged European partner, is urging him on behalf of the Old Continent not to kill the deal.



ATTEMPTED MURDER DURING BRUSSELS SHOOTOUT

Paris attacks suspect sentenced to 20 years

AFP, Brussels

A Belgian court yesterday sentenced the sole surviving suspect in the Paris attacks, Salah Abdeslam, to 20 years in prison on terror charges over a bloody gun battle with police in Brussels days before his capture in 2016.

Abdeslam's co-defendant Sofiane Ayari received the same sentence after the pair were convicted of terrorism-related attempted murder over the shootout in which four police officers were wounded.

Judges at the court in Brussels said that "there can be no doubt about their commitment to radicalism" as they handed down the maximum jail term as demanded by Belgian prosecutors at the trial in February.

"The terrorist nature of the facts under question in March 2016 appears to be established," the judgment said.

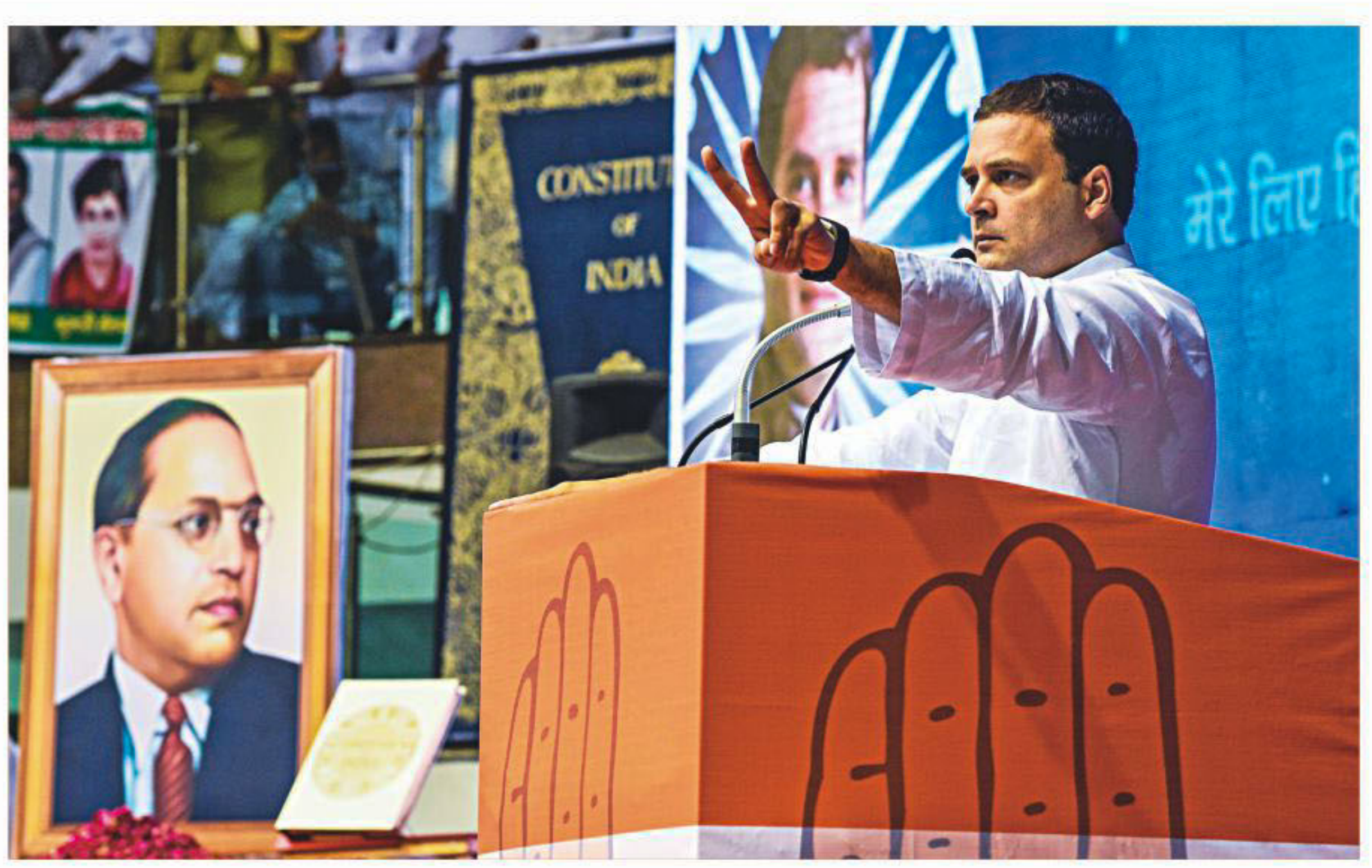
Neither Abdeslam, 28, a Belgian-born French national, nor Ayari, a 24-year-old Tunisian citizen, was in court to hear the verdict.

Abdeslam is being held in jail in France pending a separate trial over the November 2015 Paris attacks, claimed by the Islamic State jihadist group, in which 130 people died.

The pair were convicted of opening fire on a team of Belgian and French police who raided a flat in the Forest area of Brussels on March 15, 2016, following a tip-off about the Paris attacks.

An Algerian jihadist was killed in the raid as he provided covering fire for Abdeslam -- at the time the most wanted man in Europe -- and Ayari to escape.

Abdeslam was arrested and shot in the leg in a dramatic police operation three days later in the largely immigrant Molenbeek area of the Belgian capital, near his family home.



President of the Indian National Congress Party Rahul Gandhi speaks during the launch of the nationwide 'Save the Constitution' campaign in New Delhi yesterday. The Congress-led campaign aims to focus on alleged attacks on the Indian constitution by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government under his BJP, and the dilution of protections for the Dalit community and other "lower caste" groups.

Threat of nuke weapons use growing: UN

AFP, Geneva

A top UN official yesterday denounced growing rhetoric claiming that nuclear arms are necessary and warned that the risk of such weapons being used was on the rise.

"The threat of the use, intentional or otherwise, of nuclear weapons is growing," the UN's representative for disarmament affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, told a preliminary review meeting of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The United States, which holds one of the world's largest nuclear arsenals, also warned the conference that the prospects for progress on disarmament was currently "bleak".

The NPT, introduced at the height of the Cold War a half century ago, seeks to prevent the spread of atomic weapons while putting the onus on nuclear states to reduce their stockpiles.

Speaking at the opening of the Geneva meeting, Nakamitsu warned that "the world today faces similar challenges to the context that gave birth to the NPT."

The NPT treaty, which counts 191 state parties, faces a comprehensive review every five years, with preparatory committees each year in between.

The next full review of the treaty is scheduled for 2020.

The year's meeting comes after North Korea, which pulled out of the treaty 15 years ago, declared a moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile tests and said it would dismantle its nuclear test site.

Nakamitsu hailed the announcement, voicing hope that the move "will contribute to building trust and to sustaining an atmosphere for sincere dialogue and negotiations."



Dog helps save girl lost in bush

AFP, Sydney

A deaf and partially blind dog that kept a lost three-year-old girl safe in Australian bushland overnight was awarded police honours Saturday after leading rescuers to the child.

Emergency services began a search on foot and from the air for Aurora Friday after the young girl wandered off into bushland on a rural property in Queensland state.

Seventeen-year-old blue heeler Max stayed with the child through a rainy night before leading family and rescuers to her Saturday morning after more than 15 hours in the wild.

"Leisa (the child's grandmother) heard Aurora's voice, found Max first, and then Max led her to Aurora," Leisa's partner Kelly Benston said, adding the dog was partially blind and deaf.

Police were quick to make the hero pooch one of their own.

"SUCH A GOOD BOY, MAX!", Queensland Police posted on Facebook.

"For keeping her safe until she was found, you're now an honorary police dog!", police posted alongside a picture of family pet.

S Korea sets positive tone before summit

Halts border propaganda broadcasts

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korea halted the propaganda broadcasts it blares across the border with North Korea yesterday, aiming to set a positive tone ahead of the first summit in a decade between their leaders as the US president cautioned the nuclear crisis was far from resolved.

The gesture came after North said it would immediately suspend nuclear and missile tests, scrap its nuclear test site and instead pursue economic growth and peace, a declaration welcomed by world leaders.

North's leader Kim Jong Un is due to hold a summit with South Korean President Moon Jae-In at the border truce village of Panmunjom on Friday, and is expected to meet with Trump in late May or early June.

"North Korea's decision to freeze its nuclear programme is a significant decision for the complete denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula," South Korean President Moon Jae-in said in a meeting.

"It is a green light that raises the chances of positive outcomes at the North's summits with South Korea and the United States. If North Korea goes the path of complete denuclearisation starting from this, then a bright future for North Korea can be guaranteed."

South Korea's propaganda broadcasts, which include a mix of news, Korean pop songs, an criticism of the North Korean regime, were stopped at midnight, the defence ministry in Seoul said. It didn't specify if they would resume after the Kim-Moon summit.

"We hope this decision will lead both Koreas to stop mutual criticism and propaganda against each other and also contribute in creating peace and a new beginning," the defence ministry said.

It marks the first time in more than two years that the South's broadcasts have fallen silent. North Korea has its own propaganda loudspeakers at the border, but a defence ministry official said he could not verify that they had also stopped.

'I was wrong'

Armenia PM quits after mass protests

AFP, Yerevan

Armenia's Prime Minister Serzh Sargsian resigned yesterday after mass protests against his election, seen as a blatant power grab by the opposition.

"I am leaving the post of the country's leader," Sargsian was quoted as saying in a statement by his press service, just days after he took office.

"Nikol Pashinyan was right," he said referring to the leader of the protests. "I was wrong."

After serving for a decade as president, Sargsian was last week elected prime minister by lawmakers in a move the opposition said was designed to extend his rule under a new parliamentary system of government.

Constitutional amendments approved in 2015 transferred power from the presidency to the premiership.

Sargsian, a former military officer, was first elected president of the Moscow-allied country in 2008.

After the 2008 vote, 10 people died in clashes between police and supporters of the defeated opposition candidate.

He was re-elected in 2013, with his second and final term ending April 9. Earlier yesterday, protest leader Pashinyan was freed after police detained him Sunday following failed talks with Sargsian.

