

NEWS IN brief

Israel reopens its sole crossing with Gaza

AFP, Jerusalem
Israel reopened its only crossing for people with the Gaza Strip yesterday, more than a week after shutting it following a destructive Palestinian protest. The reopening follows several days of relative calm, as Egyptian and UN officials attempt to broker a long-term truce between Israel and Hamas.

Three terrorists killed in J&K encounter

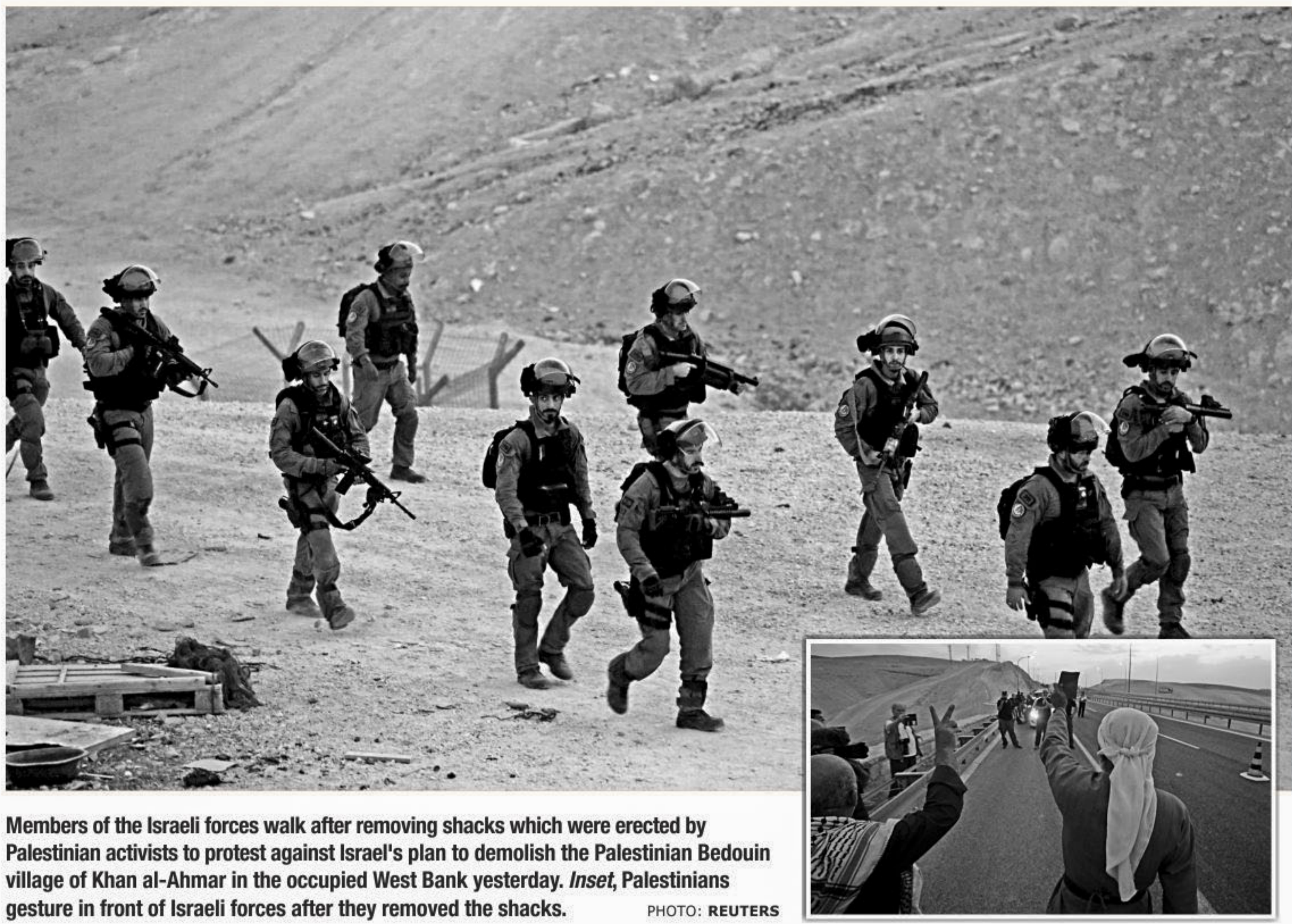
PTI, Jammu
Three Jaish-e-Muhammed (JeM) terrorists were killed and twelve security personnel, including a DSP, injured yesterday in an encounter in Jammu and Kashmir's Reasi district, police said. Security forces used drones and choppers in the operation, which was launched Wednesday to track the terrorists, aged between 18 and 22 years.

Malaysia charges ex-PM's lawyer

AFP, Kuala Lumpur
Former Malaysian leader Najib Razak's chief lawyer was arrested and charged with money laundering yesterday, as authorities intensified a crackdown on corruption linked to the previous government. Shafee Abdullah, 66, led Najib's legal team when the former prime minister was charged for his role in 1MDB scandal.

Maduro travels to China in search of fresh funds

REUTERS, Caracas
Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro is travelling to China to discuss economic agreements, as the crisis-struck OPEC nation seeks to convince its key Asian financier to disburse fresh loans. "I am going with great expectations and we will see each other again in a few days with big achievements," the leftist leader said on Wednesday.



Members of the Israeli forces walk after removing shacks which were erected by Palestinian activists to protest against Israel's plan to demolish the Palestinian Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar in the occupied West Bank yesterday. Inset, Palestinians gesture in front of Israeli forces after they removed the shacks. PHOTO: REUTERS



Ease visa rules for foreign journo

Maldives opposition urges govt ahead of Sep 23 presidential polls

REUTERS, Male
The main Maldives opposition party said on Wednesday that President Abdulla Yameen's government must ease "draconian" visa measures limiting the number of foreign journalists coming to cover a presidential election on September 23. Yameen is seeking a second five-year term in the Indian Ocean archipelago popular with tourists. But his main rivals have been jailed for charges ranging from terrorism to attempting to topple the government, leading to doubts abroad about the legitimacy of the vote. The Maldives has been beset by political instability since a police mutiny forced its first democratically elected leader, Mohamed Nasheed, out of office in 2012. The main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) said in a statement that visa rules were aimed at keeping foreign journalists out "in order to reduce scrutiny of (Yameen's) unlawful and unconstitutional behaviour". It called for the regulations to be eased. "The measures should be viewed as a pre-emptive cover-up of planned electoral fraud," it said. According to new measures, journalists must apply for business visas, for which they need a Maldivian sponsor, and submit forms giving details of previous employment, travel history, qualifications, bank account details and a police clearance certificate, the MDP said. Previously, the Maldives gave journalists visas on arrival. Opposition presidential candidate Ibrahim Mohamed Solih called on Twitter for the authorities to "reverse restrictive measures against international journalists".

S Korea strikes upbeat tone

President Moon says Pyongyang 'willing to denuclearise', admits of 'blockage' as US, N Korea demand each other to act first

AFP, Seoul
North Korea is "willing to denuclearise" and the US is prepared to end hostile relations, President Moon Jae-in said yesterday as he struck an upbeat tone ahead of his third meeting with Kim Jong Un next week.

at a point of compromise." Moon, who helped broker the June summit between Kim and US President Donald Trump and has called for a follow-up meeting between the two sides, added South Korea would help mediate contacts between Washington and Pyongyang to "speed

their historic Singapore meeting. However, no details were agreed, and Washington and Pyongyang have sparred since over what that means and how it will be achieved. Last month, Trump abruptly cancelled a planned visit by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Pyongyang.

KOREA DENUCLEARISATION

US willing to end hostile ties with North: South

Koreas will be holding meeting today to discuss third summit: report



The summit will be the third between the leaders of North and South Korea this year and comes as talks between Washington and Pyongyang over dismantling the North's nuclear arsenal have stalled. Moon conceded there was a "blockage" and both sides needed to compromise to make progress on the controversial subject.

"North Korea is willing to denuclearise and therefore willing to discard existing nuclear weapons... and the US is willing to end hostile relations with the North and provide security guarantees," Moon said. "But there is a blockage as both sides are demanding each other to act first and I think they will be able to find

the denuclearisation process". The two Koreas will be holding a closed working-level meeting today to discuss the logistics of next week's summit, an official at the South's presidential office said. Trump and Kim Jong Un pledged to denuclearise the Korean peninsula at

the new US envoy for the North, Stephen Biegun, said in August Kim had promised "final, fully verified denuclearisation" at the Singapore summit.

But Pyongyang has slammed Washington for its "gangster-like" demands for complete, verifiable and irreversible disarmament.

South Korea's Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wa said yesterday that making progress on denuclearisation talks with North Korea is a "daily concern".

"Getting traction on the denuclearisation and peace process that is very much now in motion -- it's a daily concern to get movement on this," she told a regional economic forum in the Vietnamese capital Hanoi.

China denies claims of mistreating Muslims

US lawmakers back sanctions over Uighur crackdown

REUTERS, Geneva
China is not mistreating Muslims in Xinjiang province but is putting some people through training courses to avoid extremism spreading, unlike Europe which had failed to deal with the problem, a Chinese official told reporters yesterday.

It's the necessary way to deal with Islamic or religious extremism, because the West has failed in doing so, in dealing with religious Islamic extremism. Look at Belgium, look at Paris, look at some other European countries. You have failed."

Reports of mass detentions of ethnic Uighurs and other ethnic Muslims in China's far western region have prompted a growing international outcry, prompting the Trump administration to consider sanctions against officials and companies linked to allegations of human rights abuses.

He said the Chinese education centres were not "detention centres or re-education camps", which he dismissed as "the trademark product of eastern European countries", an apparent reference to Soviet Gulag detention camps during the Cold War. "To put it straight, it's like vocational training ... like your children go to vocational training schools to get better skills and better jobs after graduation."

"It is not mistreatment," said Li Xiaojun, director for publicity at the Bureau of Human Rights Affairs of the State Council Information Office. "What China is doing is to establish professional training centres, educational centres."

The Republican leaders of a US congressional commission on China urged Trump's administration on Wednesday to broaden sanctions on Chinese officials over its treatment of minority Muslims in the Xinjiang.



Afghan Charlie Chaplin brings joy amid conflict

REUTERS, Kabul
Afghanistan's Charlie Chaplin says he has witnessed suicide attacks, explosions and threats from hardline Islamic militant groups, but is determined to waddle and humbly to fulfil the primary goal of his life. "It is very simple, I want to give Afghans a reason to smile," said Karim Asir, a stand-up comedian who performs across the capital Kabul in Chaplin's trademark oversized shoes, baggy pants, cane and black bowler hat. Asir, 25, said Chaplin impersonators are found all over the world helping people ignore grief and making them laugh, and he does the same. Asir's early years were in Iran, where his family fled after the hardline Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 1996. There he saw performances of Chaplin on Iranian TV. After the family returned home, Asir

started wearing make-up and recreating Chaplin's characters in his performances, despite his parent's apprehensions.

His live performances provide respite in a city that routinely gets attacked by Taliban insurgents and suicide bombers, mainly claiming allegiance to Islamic State.

Asir says he has been threatened by militants who say his performances are un-Islamic. But despite the threats, he performs in public parks, orphanages, private parties and at charity events organised by international aid agencies.

"I want to give my people a chance to forget their problems such as war, conflicts and insecurity in Afghanistan," he said.

Afghanistan's traditional culture includes music and performance arts. However, under the Taliban's rule from 1996 to 2001, most cultural activities were banned because they were seen as anti-Islamic.



Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte (4th L, arm upraised) gestures while visiting the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) Operations Center at Camp Aguinaldo in Manila yesterday, as Typhoon Mangkhut barrels toward the Philippines. PHOTO: AFP

INDIA'S MALLYA CASE

Opposition seeks FM's resignation

REUTERS, New Delhi
The leader of India's opposition Congress Party has called for the resignation of Finance Minister Arun Jaitley over what he termed an act of "collusion" in the case of Indian tycoon Vijay Mallya - an accusation Jaitley denies. India wants to extradite the 62-year-old businessman from Britain to face criminal action relating to loans taken out by his defunct Kingfisher Airlines, and Indian authorities want to recover about \$1.4 billion they say Kingfisher owes. Mallya told media outside a London court where his case was being heard on Wednesday that he had met Jaitley to settle matters before he left the country, sparking accusations from Congress

Pak army curbs press freedom

Claims CPJ after speaking to journalists, media organisations; info minister says no media complaints about intimidation

REUTERS, Islamabad
Pakistan's military is using fear and intimidation to stifle the media and undermine press freedom even as overall violence against reporters has fallen, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said on Wednesday.

his ministry but if they were, they would be investigated. The CPJ spoke to various journalists and media organisations for its report, including Geo News, Pakistan's most popular television news channel.

The press freedom group said the military had established "lines of control" to pressure the media and journalists who pushed back or were overly critical were attacked, threatened or arrested.

In April, in the run-up to a general election, cable distributors stopped distributing Geo's programming, cutting off about 80 percent of households.

"The military has quietly, but effectively, set restrictions on reporting: from barring access to regions ... to encouraging self-censorship through direct and indirect methods of intimidation, including ... allegedly instigating violence against reporters," the CPJ said in a report.

At the time, two sources at the broadcaster told Reuters the military had told it to refrain from reporting on various topics including alleged military involvement in the ouster of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

The military routinely denies interference in politics or with the media. Its information wing could not be reached for comment by telephone nor did it respond to text messages seeking comment on the report.

The Supreme Court forced Sharif from office in July 2017 over his failure to declare some income.



The CPJ said while it was hard to document who made the order restricting Geo's distribution and for what reason, the broadcaster was known to have had disputes with the authorities. "Geo News's clashes with authorities started well before April 2018 and exemplify the divide between some media houses and the military ... (and) the growing use of indirect tactics to impose censorship, and the rise of self-censorship," it said.

FIRST ELECTION SINCE 2014 COUP

Thai opposition urges junta to lift politics ban

AFP, Bangkok
The toppled Thai opposition yesterday called on the ruling junta to lift the ban on political activities as the countdown begins for the kingdom's first election since a 2014 coup.

need to create a good atmosphere so that people can express their opinions." Pichai said that date is now increasingly likely, and cautioned the National Council for Peace Order (NCPO) -- the formal name for the junta -- against delaying it.

leader Rahul Gandhi that the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party government was in a position to prevent him leaving the country.

King Maha Vajiralongkorn endorsed two bills on Wednesday that clear the bureaucratic hurdles to a poll, which has been promised and delayed for years by the junta. An election is required to take place by May.

"If the NCPO postpones it again, there will be local and international pressure," he said. Puea Thai is affiliated to the Shinawatra clan, a powerful and wealthy political family whose parties and proxies have won every Thai general election since 2001.

"Vijay Mallya was given a free passage by the finance minister," Gandhi yesterday told a press conference of the perceived missed opportunity. Jaitley denied any settlement had been reached in a Facebook post on Wednesday, saying he had declined to hold an audience with Mallya by telling him there was "no point talking to me".

Junta critics want to hold political gatherings, which have been banned since a coup four years ago toppled the Puea Thai government led by Yingluck Shinawatra, Thailand's first female premier.

US Ambassador to Thailand Glyn Davies said in a statement yesterday that the endorsement of the two bills to move towards an election next year was a "positive step".

"There is no question of my having ever given him an appointment to meet me," Jaitley said in the post.

Junta figures floated February 24 poll date

ings have toppled their governments, pushing Yingluck -- and her older brother Thaksin, the family patron -- into self-exile to avoid jail terms in Thailand.

A spokesman for Jaitley declined to comment further yesterday.

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