

# NEWS IN brief

## Boko Haram kidnaps 50 loggers in Nigeria

AFP, Kano  
Boko Haram jihadists abducted around 50 loggers in northeastern Nigeria close to the border with Cameroon, sources said Thursday. The hostages are mostly from a camp for people displaced by jihadist violence.

## 100,000 complaints in a month!

AFP, Islamabad  
A mobile app launched by the Pakistan government to allow the public to voice their grievances over creaking infrastructure has been inundated with responses. More than a hundred thousand complaints had been made through the official app, which launched only a month ago, an official said. Of those complaints, around 84,000 complaints were yet to be addressed, while around 16,000 had been resolved, he added.

## UAE mulling clemency request for jailed Brit

AFP, London  
The United Arab Emirates is reviewing a request for clemency from the family of a British researcher sentenced to life in prison on espionage charges this week, the country's ambassador to London said yesterday. A UAE court on Wednesday sentenced 31-year-old Matthew Hedges, who was studying for a doctorate on the UAE's foreign and security policies at Durham University in northern England.

## BITS OF HISTORY (NOVEMBER 23)

- 1996:** A hijacked Ethiopian Airlines with 163 passengers crashed into the sea off the Comoro Islands; 125 people died.
- 2001:** The UN war crimes tribunal charged former Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic with genocide.
- 2005:** Liberia's Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became the first woman to be elected head of state of an African country.
- 2011:** Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh signs a deal to step down from 33 years in power following 10 months of protests against his rule.



Women mourn as they watch the body of a suspected militant, who according to police was killed in a gun battle with Indian security forces, being carried away before his funeral in Kawani village in south Kashmir's Pulwama district, yesterday.

# Indian troops kill 6 separatists in J&K

## Death toll hits highest in a decade

REUTERS, Srinagar  
Indian troops killed six separatist militants in a gunbattle in the disputed region of Kashmir yesterday, the army said, taking the death toll for the year to the highest in nearly a decade.  
So far this year, 400 people have been killed in Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state, and more than half of them were guerrillas fighting Indian rule. It is the highest toll since 2008 when 505 people died.  
Indian forces have stepped up an offensive against militants operating inside the Kashmir Valley as well as those trying to intrude from across the border with Pakistan, officials say. The militants have hit back, targeting members of the Kashmir police and their families in recent months.  
Indian army spokesman Rajesh Kalia said an operation was launched in Sekipora village, around 50 kms south of Srinagar, after intelligence reports about the presence of a group of militants.  
Among the dead was a member of the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba who police say was part of the group that gunned down a top newspaper editor, Syed Shujaat Bukhari, outside his office in June.  
The number of deaths in violence in Jammu and Kashmir had dropped to 99 in 2012 but has been climbing since.  
The latest crackdown in southern Kashmir was prompted by the abduction of six people from the area by militants. While four were let off, the militants killed two whom they accused of being informers for the Indian security forces. One of them was beheaded, while a video of the assailants pumping bullets into the other went viral on the social media.

# Blast at mosque kills 26 in Afghanistan

AGENCIES  
An explosion ripped through a mosque inside an Afghan army base in the country's volatile eastern Khost province as Friday prayers were drawing to a close, killing at least 26 soldiers and wounding 57, the military said.  
According to reports, the explosion on Friday targeted members of the 2nd regiment of the Afghan national army, as they held their Friday prayers inside a military base.  
Reuters reported that at least 50 people were wounded.  
Sakhi Sardar, head of the hospital in Khost said most of the wounded were being treated for devastating shrapnel wounds.  
The blast may have been set off by a suicide bomber or a remotely detonated bomb but nothing was officially confirmed and details were sketchy.  
There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack, but the Islamic State group has previously claimed most suicide attacks on mosques.  
President Ashraf Ghani condemned the attack as "un-Islamic" and "inhumane".  
The explosion came just days after a suicide bomber killed 55 religious scholars gathered in the Afghan capital, Kabul, to celebrate the holiday marking the birth of Islam's Prophet Muhammad.  
The Taliban denied involvement in that bombing, which also wounded 94 people.  
The attack was the latest in a relentless, near-daily onslaughts in Afghanistan, where the Taliban regularly target Afghan military and police forces throughout the country.  
Friday's explosion comes as Afghan security forces suffer record casualties, which experts warn have reached unsustainable levels as the Taliban maintain the upper hand in the war.  
Since the start of 2015, when local forces took over from US-led NATO combat troops to secure the country, nearly 30,000 Afghan soldiers and police have been killed, President Ghani revealed this month -- a figure far higher than anything previously acknowledged.  
That is an average of around 20 soldiers killed per day.

# Arms deals keep US-Saudi ties alive

CNN ONLINE  
A number of countries have restricted arms sales to Saudi Arabia since the kingdom began airstrikes on Yemen in 2015, in a war that the UN describes as the world's worst man-made humanitarian disaster.  
Calls for more restrictions on arms exports have been growing, particularly in Europe, since the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Turkey last month. US President Donald Trump, however, has repeatedly pointed to the US' lucrative arms deals with the Saudis as a reason to stand by the kingdom.  
Denmark and Finland on Thursday became the latest countries to suspend new arms deals with Saudi Arabia. Their announcements came just two days after Germany said it was stopping all arms transfers to the kingdom.  
Arms deals are often done in secret or with little publicity. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) tries to track deals involving major weapons, and a database of Saudi imports from the last decade shows the United States as the biggest supplier, followed by the United Kingdom, France, Spain and then Germany. But except one country, export is shrinking to the desert kingdom lately.  
The United Kingdom transferred arms worth an estimated \$843 million in 2016 but almost halved that value to \$436 million last year. French exports of major weapons to Saudi Arabia were worth \$174 million in 2015 but dropped to \$91 million in 2016 and \$27 million last year.  
Despite these decreases, the overall value of Saudi weapons imports actually increased by 38% between 2016 and 2017. That was almost entirely because of a huge uptick in transfers from the United States, which almost doubled its exports in terms of value from \$1.8 billion to \$3.4 billion in that time.  
Over the past five years, for example, the US accounted for 61% of major arms sales to the Saudis. The UK was a distant second, with a 23% share, while France, in third place, was a mere 4%.  
In a statement on Tuesday, Trump said that canceling major arms contracts with the Saudis would be foolish, and that "Russia and China would be the enormous beneficiaries" if the US halted its sales.  
China supplies a negligible amount of major weaponry to Saudi Arabia, SIPRI data shows, but it is on the increase. Russia supplies so little it is not included in the organization's database.  
"China has made some more substantial inroads into the Saudi arms market, in particular selling armed drones," Pieter Wezeman, a senior researcher with SIPRI's arms transfers and military expenditure program said.  
"The details are shady and we may very well have underestimated China's role as an arms exporter to Saudi Arabia. But China doesn't come anywhere near the USA, UK or even France as arms suppliers. Still, the important point here is that Saudi Arabia has explored the possibility of diversifying its supplier base."



# Master swindler Man bags \$400,000 'impersonating former South Korea first lady'

AFP, Seoul  
A woman pretending to be a former South Korean first lady was arrested yesterday on suspicion of swindling a politician out of nearly \$400,000, a report said.  
Claiming to be late president Roh Moo-hyun's widow Kwon Yang-sook, the fraudster allegedly persuaded the then mayor of Gwangju to transfer her 450 million won (\$398,000), saying she needed it for her daughter and promising to repay it quickly.  
At the time Yoon Jang-hyun, a member of the Democratic party of both Roh and current President Moon Jae-in, was seeking the organisation's nomination for a second term as leader of the southern city.  
Corruption allegations are commonplace in South Korean politics, and its last two presidents Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye are both serving prison sentences for graft.  
Roh himself committed suicide by jumping off a cliff in 2009 after he was questioned over a corruption case involving Kwon.  
Her alleged impersonator texted around 10 prominent figures in Gwangju in December but Yoon was the only one to pay out, Yonhap news agency reported.  
In the event he did not secure the mayoral nomination and has left the political scene.



A South Korean military officer (R) and a North Korean military officer shake hands during an operation to reconnect a road across the Military Demarcation Line inside the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) separating the two Koreas. Picture taken on Thursday.



# Srisena suffers another setback in parliament

AFP, Colombo  
Sri Lanka's deposed prime minister secured control of a key committee in parliament yesterday, dealing a blow to the country's president in the latest twist in a month-long political crisis.  
Sri Lanka has been politically paralysed since October 26 when President Maithripala Sirisena sacked Ranil Wickremesinghe as premier and replaced him with divisive former leader Mahinda Rajapakse.  
But a vote yesterday gave Wickremesinghe control of a selection committee entrusted with setting the legislative agenda in the absence of a working government.  
Shortly before Speaker Karu Jayasuriya took a vote on setting up the panel, legislators loyal to Sirisena and Rajapakse walked out of the chamber in protest.  
Rajapakse has lost two no-confidence votes in the assembly, but refuses to step down.  
Two weeks after sacking Wickremesinghe, Sirisena initially suspended parliament and then dissolved it, calling snap elections for January.  
However these moves were suspended by the Supreme Court days later pending an investigation.  
For 19 days, Sri Lanka had two claimants to the prime minister's post -- but since last Thursday parliament speaker Jayasuriya held that he would recognise neither.

# S'pore fires starting gun on sensitive political transition

AFP, Singapore  
Singapore's ruling party yesterday set in motion a carefully orchestrated political succession that will see the founding family hand over the premiership, a crucial moment in the city-state's short history.  
Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat was named first assistant secretary general in the People's Action Party (PAP), which has ruled Singapore since it gained self-rule from Britain in 1959, putting him on course to become premier.  
The 57-year-old is now expected to take over in the coming years from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the son of the late founding premier Lee Kuan Yew, who oversaw the country's rapid economic development during three decades of sometimes authoritarian rule.  
The power transfer, which begins as Singapore gears up for elections that could come as soon as next year, is in line with 66-year-old Premier Lee's plan to hand power to a broadly younger generation of leaders.  
Heng would be the country's fourth prime minister and the second from outside the Lee family.  
It will be a sensitive moment for the financial hub of 5.6 million people, with the country's transformation into one of the world's wealthiest and most stable societies inextricably linked in many people's minds to the rule of the Lee family.  
"A smooth transition to the new team to lead us beyond the next elections is important not only for the PAP, but also for Singapore's future," said Prime Minister Lee on Facebook following the announcement.  
During an unprecedented family feud last year that captivated the political, Lee rejected allegations he harboured political ambitions for his son -- meaning the looming change of leadership could spell the end of the Lees holding the country's top job.



# Free rice made TN people lazy

Says Madras HC  
TNN, Chennai  
The Madras High Court has said distribution of free rice and other such government schemes had made the people of Tamil Nadu lazy and as a result workers had to be brought in from northern states.  
Making it clear that the court is not against distribution of rice free of cost to economically backward people, a division bench of Justice N Kirubakaran and Justice Abdul Quddus asserted that such schemes should not be provided to all irrespective of economic status.  
The court was hearing a habeas corpus plea moved by an accused in a rice smuggling case challenging his detention under the Goondas Act.

# Migrants defy Trump at Mexico border

US forces flex muscle  
AFP, Tijuana  
Hundreds of Central American migrants staged a boisterous demonstration on the US Mexico border Thursday, screaming for President Donald Trump to let them in as US soldiers and riot police put on a menacing show of force.  
The increased tension over the presence of a thousands-strong migrant caravan came as Trump marked Thanksgiving Day by threatening to close the border if he thinks Mexico has lost control of it.  
Vehicle and pedestrian traffic at the busy San Ysidro crossing came to a halt for 40 minutes as dozens of US police wearing helmets and holding rifles formed a line facing the Mexican side of the frontier.  
American soldiers in khaki-colored uniforms set off rockets that exploded with a pungent-smelling white smoke. Helicopters hovered overhead.  
At almost the same time as the police and troop exercise, at another nearby border crossing called El Chaparral, Central American migrants from the caravan emptying into Tijuana defied the president with a loud rally.  
"Open the gates, Trump! We are not looking for war, but work," shouted Alberto Ruiz, a 22-year-old Honduran.  
After a trek of more than a month from Honduras, nearly 5,000 migrants have been living in a makeshift shelter fashioned from an open air sports arena.

# BREXIT NEGOTIATIONS

## EU struggles to agree on Gibraltar

AFP, Brussels  
European Union negotiators met yesterday to try to clear the last hurdle before Sunday's summit to endorse the Brexit deal, but Spain's eleventh-hour objection over Gibraltar means the final text could not be ready until the last minute.  
Four months before Britain leaves the EU, the legal divorce treaty and an accompanying political declaration on future ties are ready to be rubber-stamped by British Prime Minister Theresa May and the leaders of the 27 countries remaining in the EU after Brexit.  
Spain has asked for changes to the withdrawal treaty and the declaration on a new EU-UK relationship to make clear any decisions about the disputed British overseas territory of Gibraltar would only be taken in direct talks with Madrid.  
"We've worked very hard and have in fact reached agreement with Spanish colleagues in respect of Gibraltar's role in the withdrawal process," Gibraltar's Chief Minister Fabian Picardo said yesterday.  
Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said on Thursday Spain would be against the draft deal on Britain's exit from the European Union if there are no changes.  
Under EU rules, the withdrawal treaty is adopted by a majority and not unanimity, so a single state cannot block it. However, EU leaders want unity on this most politically sensitive matter.  
The Brexit package faces vehement opposition in the British parliament, which must vote in favour for it to take effect. Otherwise Britain risks leaving the bloc on March 29, 2019, without an agreement to mitigate