

NEWS IN
brief

GOP wins Mississippi's Senate runoff

Incumbent Republican Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith was leading Democratic challenger Mike Espy, a former congressman, by 54.4 percent to 45.6 percent with 94 percent of precincts reporting, according to Fox News and NBC. Hyde-Smith's victory preserves the 53-47 majority that Republicans will hold in the Senate when the new Congress convenes in January.

Blacks face 'widespread prejudice' in EU: report

Black people in the EU continue to face "widespread and entrenched prejudice" in many areas of life, according to a report published Wednesday. Thirty percent of respondents said they had experienced some form of racist harassment at some point in the five years before the survey which was carried out in 2015 and 2016. Five percent of those surveyed had experienced a violent attack.

Saudi pledges \$50m for Palestinian refugees

Saudi Arabia pledged \$50 million in aid on Wednesday to the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), which has been hit by the withdrawal of all US funding. More than five million registered Palestinian refugees are eligible to receive support from UNRWA, which was set up after Israel's creation in 1948.

Ildlib truce talks start

Negotiators from Iran, Russia and Turkey met in Kazakhstan's capital Astana yesterday, the Kazakh foreign ministry said, for two days of talks aiming to preserve a fragile 10-week-old truce in northern Syria. Talks were underway between delegations from the three regional power-brokers as well as the Syrian government and opposition, the ministry said in a statement.

Afghan team named for Taliban talks

Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani yesterday announced a 12-person team for prospective peace talks with the Taliban, as the UN renewed calls for direct negotiations between Kabul and the insurgents. Kabul has offered to meet face-to-face with the Taliban without preconditions, but the insurgents have not yet committed to direct negotiations.

BITS OF HISTORY (NOVEMBER 28)

- 1912:** Albania declared its independence after more than 400 years of Turkish rule.
- 1919:** Nancy Astor was elected as the first woman to sit in the British House of Commons.
- 1943:** Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin met in Tehran to chart the future Allied course for World War Two and decide a post-war future.
- 2016:** A plane carrying Brazilian Chapecoense soccer team crashes in the Colombian jungle.



Ukrainian servicemen take part in drills as President Petro Poroshenko (inset) visits the 169th training centre "Desna" of the Ukrainian Army ground forces in Chernihiv Region, Ukraine, yesterday. Story on page 16.

PHOTO: REUTERS

MADHYA PRADESH STATE POLLS

Congress eyes win ahead of 2019 polls

Millions of Indians voted yesterday in a state election seen as a key duel between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his main rival before the whole country goes to the polls in 2019. Modi's right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has governed the central state of Madhya Pradesh, home to 73 million people, since 2003 having won three state elections in a row. But polls suggest that the opposition Congress headed by Rahul Gandhi, scion of the Gandhi-Nehru dynasty, could win on the back of concerns about rising unemployment and by appealing to disgruntled farmers. The party, which lost power in Madhya Pradesh in 2003 and nationally to Modi in 2014 -- has campaigned aggressively against three-time chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on issues of corruption and misgovernance. The BJP is trying hard to maintain its winning momentum after defeating Congress in at least a dozen states since the 2014 national election victory, and has campaigned hard in Madhya Pradesh. An electoral defeat in the state would be a major setback for the party and dent the winning image of Modi. Modi himself has addressed no fewer than 10 rallies in the state in a hard-fought campaign. The vote is one of five state elections this month and next that are a litmus test of Modi's popularity ahead of general elections that have to take place before May but for which no date has been announced yet. Nearly 800,000 voters were also entitled to vote yesterday in the remote northeast state of Mizoram, which is governed by Congress. Results from all the state elections are due on December 11.

Korean ties get warmer

Countries study to relink railways; Kim 'open to nuke site inspection'

South and North Korea will launch a field study soon to relink railways cut since the 1950-53 Korean conflict, Seoul's Unification Ministry said yesterday, the latest development in improving ties between two sides technically still at war.

The announcement came after the UN Security Council granted sanctions exemptions last week following consultations between South Korea and the United States.

The Friday's survey would be a first step in an agreement to reconnect rail and road links reached by South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at their first summit in April.

About 30 officials from each side are expected to take part in the 18-day study, which will include a 2,600-km (1,615-mile) train trip. They will inspect two routes in North Korea, between Kaesong and Sinuiju in the west and Mount Kumgang and the Tumen River in the east, which would

ultimately be linked to the South, the ministry said.

"After the joint survey, we will work on drawing up a basic framework for the project, additional research and design, and the actual construction would be conducted in line with progress on North Korea's denuclearisation," the ministry said in a statement.



Meanwhile, South Korea's Yonhap news agency, citing a senior diplomatic source, reported on Tuesday that North Korean leader Kim is willing to allow inspectors into the reclusive country's main nuclear complex in Yongbyon.

Kim had earlier expressed openness to shutting down the site if Washington took "corresponding"

measures, but no offer to allow inspectors in to verify had been reported.

Asked about reports on Tuesday on North Korean willingness to allow inspectors in and whether there had been new developments, State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said she was "not aware of any of that," but Kim had agreed to inspections in a meeting with Pompeo recently.

The United States has stressed the importance of verification as it negotiates with the North about the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

US officials have been concerned that inter-Korean relations may be advancing too fast even as Pyongyang and Washington struggle to make headway in denuclearisation talks.

North and South Korea are technically still at war because the 1950-53 conflict ended in a truce, not a peace treaty.

North Korea has for years pursued nuclear and missile programmes in defiance of UN sanctions. But the two Koreas moved to defrost relations this year.

'If France, Germany can, why can't India, Pakistan'

Rivals break ground on visa-free Kartarpur corridor

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan yesterday laid the foundation stone for a corridor linking Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Pakistan's Kartarpur — the final resting place of Sikh faith's founder Guru Nanak Dev — to Dera Baba Nanak shrine in India's Gurdaspur district to facilitate visa-free movement of Indian Sikh pilgrims.

Union ministers Harsimrat Kaur Badal and Hardeep Singh Puri were present at the event. Punjab cabinet minister Navjot Singh Sidhu also attended the ceremony.

Speaking at the event, the Pakistan prime minister called for restarting trade links with India. "When France and Germany, which have fought many wars can live as good neighbours today, why not India and Pakistan," wondered Mr. Khan.

Mr. Khan said he believes poverty in the sub-continent can be reduced if the neighbours restart trade ties. "I say again that if

India moves one step forward, Pakistan will move two steps," he added.

Dismissing reports of differences between the government and the Army, Khan said, "When I went to India, I was told that army will not allow good relations with India, I want to say that all institutions are on the same page."

Kartarpur Sahib in Pakistan is located across the river Ravi, about four kilometres from the Dera Baba Nanak shrine. It was established by the Sikh Guru in 1522. The first Gurdwara was built here, where Guru Nanak Dev is said to have died.

The Kartarpur Corridor, which will facilitate the visa-free travel of Indian Sikh pilgrims to Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur, is expected to be completed within six months.

Thousands of Sikh devotees from India visit Pakistan every year to celebrate the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak. India had proposed the corridor to Pakistan around 20 years back.

CRACKDOWN ON COMMUNISTS

Alarm after Duterte 'death squad' plan

Rights groups yesterday raised fears after Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte announced plans to create a "death squad" targeting suspected communist rebels, saying it would worsen the "calamity" triggered by his deadly drug war.

The Philippines' 50-year fight against communist militants, one of Asia's oldest insurgencies, long pre-dates his anti-narcotics crackdown that has killed thousands and drawn international censure.

Duterte, like previous governments, initially held peace talks with the communists but shelved negotiations last year over deadly attacks against soldiers and police. The low-level, simmering insurgency has claimed 30,000 lives by the government's count.

In a speech Tuesday night, he took aim at the communist rebels' hit squads known as "sparrow units".

"What I lack is my own sparrow. That is where they (communists) have an edge... So I will create my own sparrow, Duterte Death Squad against the sparrow," the president said. "I will match their talent also for assassinating people," he added.

Since negotiations with the rebels broke down, Duterte also formally designated the Communist Party of the Philippines and its 3,800-member armed wing the New People's Army (NPA) as terrorist organisations.



Firefighters refill their water from a water tanker in Pacific Drive in Deepwater National Park area of Queensland, yesterday. Thousands of people were being evacuated from their homes in northeast Australia as bushfires raged across Queensland state amid a scorching heatwave.

PHOTO: AFP

Blast kills 23 outside China factory

A truck carrying combustible chemicals exploded yesterday at the entrance of a chemical factory in a northern Chinese city that will host the 2022 Winter Olympics, leaving 23 people dead and 22 others injured, state media and authorities said.

A truck carrying acetylene blew up when entering the plant, igniting nearby vehicles, according to the official Xinhua news agency. Rescue efforts and the investigation were still underway, Xinhua said.

The blast damaged 38 trucks and 12 cars. The injured were taken to hospitals for treatment following the blast at 00:41 am, according to the department.

MASS MURDER COVER-UP DURING CIVIL WAR

Top Lankan military official remanded

Sri Lanka's top-ranking military officer surrendered after weeks evading arrest for allegedly protecting the chief suspect in the high-profile murder of 11 people during the island's civil war.

Admiral Ravindra Wijegunaratne, dressed in full military regalia, appeared at the Colombo Fort magistrate flanked by supporters and serving navy officers. The court was told Wijegunaratne shielded a naval intelligence officer accused of 11 murders in the closing stages of Sri Lanka's bloody separatist war that ended in 2009.

Three warrants for Wijegunaratne's arrest were issued by the magistrate in early November but the Chief of Defence Staff, the highest military official in Sri Lanka, had refused to surrender. Police believe the 11 victims were murdered while in the illegal custody of the navy. Their bodies were never found. Military figures were accused of abductions and extrajudicial killings during the 37-year war against the Tamil Tiger separatist movement.

Several intelligence officers are facing prosecution over the murder of journalists critical of Mahinda Rajapakse, the former president whose tenure was marred by allegations of war crimes and grave rights abuses.

Jet was 'not airworthy'

Says preliminary report on crash, does not give cause; Pilots on final flight reported 'control problem'

A Lion Air jet that crashed into the sea off Indonesia last month was not in an airworthy condition on its second-to-last flight, when pilots experienced similar problems to those on its doomed last journey, investigators said yesterday.

Contact with the Boeing 737 MAX jet was lost 13 minutes after it took off on Oct 29 from the capital, Jakarta, heading north to the tin-mining town of Pangkal Pinang. In a preliminary report, Indonesia's transport safety committee (KNKT) focused on the airline's maintenance practices and pilot training and a Boeing anti-stall system but did not give a cause for the crash that killed all 189 people on board. The report unveiled fresh details of efforts by pilots to steady the jet as they reported a

"flight control problem", including the captain's last words to air traffic control asking to be cleared to "five thou" or 5,000 feet.

Information retrieved from the flight data recorder showed the "stick shaker" was vibrating the captain's controls, warning of a stall throughout most of the flight. The captain was using his controls to bring the plane's nose up, but an automated anti-stall system was pushing it down.

Pilots flying the same plane a day earlier had experienced a similar problem, en route from Denpasar, Bali to Jakarta, until they used switches to shut off the system and used manual controls to fly and stabilise the plane, KNKT said. The pilots of that flight reported problems to Lion Air's maintenance team, which checked the jet and cleared it for take-off the next morning.

INDONESIA PLANE TRAGEDY



Top LeT militant killed in J&K

Government forces in Indian-administered Kashmir killed a top commander of the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Toiba militant group Wednesday during a fierce firefight, police said, triggering clashes with protesters.

LeT is the proscribed group India blames for the 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai. Pakistani national Naveed Jatt, the man killed yesterday, had dramatically escaped in February from a hospital in Srinagar where he was brought from jail for a check-up two years after his arrest.

Police also say that Jatt was part of the group of assailants who killed prominent journalist Shujaat Bukhari in a daring attack inside Srinagar's high security press area in June.

Huge explosion rocks Kabul

Casualties feared: officials

A massive explosion rocked Kabul late yesterday amid fears a British security company had been targeted, officials said, with casualties expected in the latest violence to beset the Afghan capital. The interior ministry and police both said the blast had been a car bomb targeting a compound which houses G4S, a British security company, in east Kabul. There was no immediate confirmation from the company or the British embassy in Kabul, however.

Interior Ministry deputy spokesman Nasrat Rahimi said casualties were "not known". Kabul police spokesman Basir Mujahid said at least six wounded people had been evacuated from the site, but could not confirm their nationality. Earlier, sources had said the blast was followed by gunfire. "There was some gunfire at the beginning, but it has stopped," Mujahid said.

There was no immediate claim for the attack. Both the Taliban and the Islamic State group have stepped up their attacks on Kabul, which is one of the deadliest places in the country for civilians. According to its website, G4S provides security for the UK Foreign Office in Kabul.