

NEWSIN brief

Japan unveils record defence budget

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's defence budget will swell to a record \$47 billion for the next fiscal year, the government said yesterday, as Tokyo beefs up its missile defence and deploys stealth jets in a bid to counter China. The defence spending was part of a \$912-billion national budget for the fiscal year starting in April 2019.

Russia probes BBC after UK berates RT

AFP, Moscow

Russia's broadcasting watchdog yesterday said it was probing the BBC in retaliation after a British regulator said Kremlin-funded RT television broke broadcasting standards citing a nerve agent attack in the country. The watchdog said it was "starting control measures" into BBC World News' compliance with Russian law. It would also probe the BBC's websites.

Dozens of bodies 'found in IS mass grave' in Iraq

AFP, Hawija

Iraqi authorities said they uncovered a new mass grave containing the remains of dozens of people in an area of northern Kirkuk province once held by the Islamic State group. UN said in November that more than 200 mass graves containing up to 12,000 victims had been found in Iraq that could hold vital evidence of war crimes by the jihadists.

Thirteen dead after fire in Czech mine

AFP, Prague

Thirteen miners died and 10 were injured after a methane gas fire erupted in a coal mine in the east of the Czech Republic, a spokesman said yesterday. The accident occurred at a depth of 880 metres at the CSM mine in the city of Karvina, about 300 kilometres east of Prague and close to the Polish border, on Thursday afternoon.

London airport reopens after drones sow chaos

AFP, London

London's Gatwick Airport reopened yesterday for a limited number of flights, after mysterious drone sightings caused chaos that left tens of thousands of passengers stranded over the past three days. Police said they were still hunting for the drone operator or operators and Transport Secretary Chris Grayling said "military capabilities" were being deployed to safeguard the airport.

BITS OF HISTORY (NOVEMBER 21)

1940: F Scott Fitzgerald, US short story writer and novelist, died. His works included "The Great Gatsby".
1973: The first peace conference between Israel and her Arab neighbours opened in Geneva. Jordan, Israel, Egypt, the United States, the Soviet Union and the UN took part.
1988: A bomb destroyed a Pan Am Boeing 747 over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing all 259 aboard and 11 people on the ground.



Members of the Catalan regional police force try to keep protesters behind crowd control barricades during scuffles at a Catalan pro-independence demonstration in Barcelona yesterday as the Spanish cabinet held a meeting in the city. The weekly cabinet meeting usually takes place in Madrid but the government decided to hold it in the Catalan capital as part of its efforts to reduce tensions in Catalonia, which last year made a failed attempt to break away from Spain.

PHOTO: AFP

Stop 'slanderous smears'

China slams, denies economic espionage charges from US, allies

REUTERS, Tianjin

China's Foreign Ministry said yesterday it resolutely opposed "slanderous" accusations from the United States and other allies criticising China for economic espionage, urging Washington to withdraw its accusations.

The United States should also withdraw charges against two Chinese citizens, the ministry said, adding that China had never participated in or supported any stealing of commercial secrets and had lodged "stern representations" with Washington.

"We urge the US side to immediately correct its erroneous actions and cease its slanderous smears relating to internet security," it said, adding that it would take necessary measures to safeguard its own cybersecurity and interests.

It has long been an "open secret" that US government agencies have hacked into and listening in on foreign governments, companies and individuals, the ministry added.

"The US side making unwarranted criticisms of China in the name of so-called 'cyber stealing' is blaming others

while oneself is to be blamed, and is self-deception. China absolutely cannot accept this."

US prosecutors indicted two Chinese nationals linked to China's Ministry of State Security intelligence agency on charges of stealing confidential data from American government agencies

SPYING CHARGES

Beijing blames US agencies for listening in on foreign govts



UK, Australia, New Zealand join US in slamming China

and businesses around the world.

Prosecutors charged Zhu Hua and Zhang Shilong in hacking attacks against the US Navy, the space agency Nasa and the Energy Department and dozens of companies. The operation targeted intellectual property and corporate secrets to give Chinese com-

panies an unfair competitive advantage, they said.

The pair were members of a hacking group known within the cyber security community as APT 10 and also worked for a Tianjin company Huaying Haitai Science and Technology Development Co, prosecutors said.

Reuters was unable to locate immediately contact details for Zhu or Zhang.

Britain, Australia and New Zealand joined the United States in slamming China over what they called a global campaign of cyber-enabled commercial intellectual property theft, signalling growing global coordination against the practice.

China's Foreign Ministry said Britain and other countries had also made "slanderous comments" stemming from "ulterior motives".

Five sources familiar with the attacks told Reuters the hackers breached the networks of Hewlett Packard Enterprise Co and IBM, then used the access to hack into their clients' computers. IBM said it had no evidence that sensitive data had been compromised. HPE said it could not comment.

US shutdown looms

Trump digs in on wall funding, Democrats adamant

AFP, Washington

The prospect of an embarrassing Christmastime shutdown of the US government loomed Friday as President Donald Trump and congressional Democrats remained far apart on a stopgap funding bill held up by discord over money for a border wall.

An air of chaos hung over Washington as a midnight deadline approached for lawmakers and the president to find a way to do a very basic task: keep the government up and running.

If they do not, key agencies will close and many workers will be furloughed right before Christmas without a paycheck.

The sense of turmoil was compounded by a falling stock market and Trump's abrupt decision to disregard advisers and allies and pull out of Syria and sharply reduce the US troop presence in Afghanistan.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, seen as a moderating force for an impulsive president, resigned in protest over the Syria

decision and Trump's approach to international alliances that are at the heart of US foreign policy.

On government funding, Trump reversed course on Thursday and rejected a measure that unanimously passed the Senate and was under consideration in the House.

Republican leaders had planned to pass a so-called continuing resolution (CR) that would fully fund the government until February 8 to allow time for debate about issues including border security.

But with ultra-conservative lawmakers and media personalities effectively demanding that the president stick to his campaign promises, Trump doubled down.

"I've made my position very clear. Any measure that funds the government has to include border security," he said at a White House event.

"Walls work, whether we like it or not," he added. "They work better than anything."

Democrats have refused to budge, saying they will not support a spending measure that funds Trump's wall.



Turn yourselves in Pope urges predator priests

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis yesterday urged predator priests who have sexually abused minors to turn themselves in, making one of his strongest comments ever on the crisis sweeping the Roman Catholic Church.

While it was not immediately clear if Francis was referring to the Church judicial system, civil justice, or both, Vatican sources believed it was the first time the pope had made such a direct appeal.

"To those who abuse minors I would say this: convert and hand yourself over to human justice, and prepare for divine justice," Francis said in his traditional Christmas address to the Curia, the Vatican's central administration.

He spoke two months before an extraordinary summit on the sexual abuse crisis that will be attended by the heads of some 110 national Catholic bishops' conferences and dozens of experts and leaders of religious orders in the Vatican.

Francis has previously used the Christmas address to denounce cases of corruption and mismanagement in the Curia. This time, he concentrated on the global sexual abuse crisis vowing not to "hush up".

I fear for my children

Says Indian veteran actor Naseeruddin Shah on mob killings, cow vigilantism

NDTV ONLINE

In an apparent reference to the killing of a policeman by a mob in Uttar Pradesh's Bulandshahr two weeks ago, Indian veteran actor Naseeruddin Shah has said that at many places the death of a cow is being given more importance than the killing of a policeman.

"There is complete impunity for those who take law into their own hands. In many areas we are witnessing that the death of a cow is more significance than that of a police officer," the 68-year-old actor said in an interview with Karwan-e-Mohabbat India on Monday as criticism mounts over the Uttar Pradesh administration's response to the killing of police inspector Subodh Kumar Singh in mob frenzy over cow slaughter allegations on December 3.

UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has been facing criticism for focusing more on the cow killing in a meeting he had with

senior officials just after the policeman's murder. He had ordered strict action against those behind the cow carcasses found in a forest, which provoked the mob violence.

Yogi Adityanath had controversially referred to the mob killing as a "durgatna (accident)". Days later, Uttar Pradesh Inspector General Ram Kumar reiterated that identifying the people who allegedly slaughtered the cattle was the "bigger question".

While multiple arrests have been made for cow slaughter, the main accused in the killing of the policeman still remains untraced.

In the interview, Naseeruddin Shah also said he was anxious over the well-being of his children, who he said have not been brought up as followers of any particular religion. "I feel anxious for my children because tomorrow if a mob surrounds them and asks, 'Are you a Hindu or a Muslim?' they will have no answer. It worries me that I don't see the situation improving anytime soon" he said.



Putin hints he may marry again

REUTERS, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday said he'd probably have to get married again, but did not say to whom.

Putin, 66, who jealously protects his privacy and that of his close family, was replying to a question posed by a reporter at his annual press conference, which focused mainly on international relations and the state of the economy.

"As a respectable person, I will have to do this at some point," Putin said, smiling.

Putin was married to Lyudmila Putina from 1983 until their divorce, announced in 2013. Their daughters, Katerina and Maria, both in their early 30s, are not involved in politics and have stayed firmly out of the limelight.

'Insecure dictator'

Rahul slams Modi over 'snooping' order

NDTV ONLINE

Congress president Rahul Gandhi yesterday targeted Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi over a Home Ministry order that gives sweeping powers to investigating agencies to monitor data on computers, and called him an "insecure dictator" who is trying to turn India into a "police state".

The government has been panned by the opposition for the order, which gives ten central agencies powers to "intercept, monitor and decrypt any information generated, transmitted, received or stored in any computer". The order was signed by Home Secretary Rajiv Gauba.

"Converting India into a police state isn't going to solve your problems, Modi Ji. It's only going to prove to over 1 billion Indians what an insecure dictator you really are," Rahul Gandhi tweeted.

BJP president Amit Shah was quick to launch a counterattack.

"There were only 2 insecure dictators in the history of India. One imposed emergency and the other wanted unrestricted access to read letters of common citizens. Guess who were they @RahulGandhi?" he tweeted.

The Congress raised the issue in the Rajya Sabha, accusing the government of making the country a surveillance state. Finance Minister Arun Jaitley responded by saying that the Congress was playing with the country's security, and maintained that the order was a repeat of an order issued by the UPA government less than a decade ago.

When Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad pointed out that "national security was not mentioned anywhere in the order", Mr Jaitley said: "It (national security) is mentioned in section 69. And you are playing with the security of the country. That is what you have done just now."

India govt gives agencies free pass on surveillance

Defends order on security reasons causing uproar

NDTV ONLINE

Indian investigating agencies will have sweeping powers to intercept and monitor data on computers after a new home ministry order put out on Thursday. Ten central agencies have been equipped with powers of "interception, monitoring and decryption of any information generated, transmitted, received or stored in any computer," in the order signed by Home Secretary Rajiv Gauba.

Earlier, only the home ministry could scan calls and emails of people. The new order gives that power to the Intelligence Bureau, Narcotics Control Bureau, Enforcement Directorate, Central Board of Direct Taxes, Directorate of Revenue Intelligence, CBI, National Investigation Agency, Cabinet Secretariat (Research and Analysis Wing), Directorate of Signal Intelligence (in Jammu and Kashmir, North-East and Assam only) and the Delhi Police Commissioner.

This means not just calls or emails,

but any data found on a computer can be intercepted. The agencies will also have powers to seize the devices.

According to the notification, the subscriber or service provider or any person in charge of the computer resource is bound to extend all facilities and technical help to the agencies if they ask for data. If not, they can face seven years in jail and a fine.

Earlier, the government had authorised agencies to tap phone calls but after permission from the Home Secretary. The order was last updated in 2011 and enables agencies to get into social media accounts and telephone intercepts.

Responding to criticism from opposition parties and on social media, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said: "The authorization given to these agencies were brought to law under the UPA government in 2009. We cannot gain access to anybody's phone or data unless it is related to national security," said the senior minister.



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi hugs his Indian counterpart Sushma Swaraj before the start of the inaugural session of an India-China media forum in New Delhi, yesterday. The ministers held their first meeting under a newly-established framework and agreed on "ten pillars" of cooperation to enhance cultural and people-to-people exchanges. These are: cultural exchange, cooperation in films and television, museum administration, sports, tourism, exchanges between states and cities, traditional medicine yoga and education.

PHOTO: REUTERS

KHASHOGGI MURDER

Saudi Arabia modifies intelligence service

REUTERS, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia yesterday announced the creation of three new government bodies aimed at improving the country's intelligence operations in the wake of the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which has sparked international outrage.

King Salman ordered a restructuring of the intelligence service in October after the authorities, following initial denials, acknowledged that Khashoggi had been killed inside the kingdom's Istanbul consulate by a team of Saudi intelligence and security agents.

Saudi officials have said, without providing proof, that the 15-man team was put together by the deputy head of the General Intelligence Presidency, Ahmed al-Asiri, whom the king fired along with royal adviser Saud al-Qahtani.

The new government departments - for strategy and development, legal affairs, and performance evaluation and internal review - are meant to ensure that intelligence operations align with national security policy, international law and human rights treaties, state news agency SPA reported.

They were created by a committee headed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom's defence minister. He has denied accusations of ordering the hit against Khashoggi, a royal insider who became a critic of the crown prince.

The US Senate last week blamed Prince Mohammed for the murder, in a rare rebuke to President Donald Trump, who has said he wants Washington to stand by the 33-year-old de facto leader, despite a CIA assessment it was likely he ordered the killing.