

NEWSIN brief

One dead in Sydney Scientology stabbing

AFP, Sydney

One man died of stab wounds and another was injured yesterday, after an attack at a Scientology centre in Sydney. Police said a teenager was arrested. It is not clear whether the two victims were members of the Church of Scientology, and whether the attack happened in the centre or outside.

Spain rescues 400 migrants

AFP, Madrid

Spanish coastguards rescued 401 migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean over the first two days of the new year, they said Wednesday. The news comes just days after a charity rescue vessel carrying 311 mainly African migrants plucked off the coast of Libya docked in Spain.

US to hold missile drill in Okinawa

AFP, Tokyo

The US military will this year conduct its first ever missile drill around the Japanese island of Okinawa, according to a report Thursday, as Washington seeks to counter an increasingly assertive China. The US military has told its Japanese counterpart it plans to deploy surface-to-ship missiles in the strategically important Okinawa this year for the first such drill by Japan's key ally.

Leader of 'yellow vests' protests arrested

AFP, Paris

One of the leaders of the "yellow vest" anti-government demonstrations was detained by police in Paris late Wednesday for organising an unauthorised protest, signalling a harder line by the authorities against the movement. Eric Drouot was held while heading for the Champs-Élysées, which has been the scene of violent clashes over the last month.



A police officer wields his stick against the members of Kerala Students Union (KSU), the student wing of India's main opposition Congress party, outside a police station during a protest in Kochi, India, yesterday.

PHOTO:
REUTERS

TROPICAL STORM PABUK

Tourists flee Thai islands

AFP, Khao Lak

Tens of thousands of tourists have fled some of Thailand's most popular islands and resort areas as Tropical Storm Pabuk closes in and threatens to batter the southern part of the kingdom with heavy rains, winds and seven-metre waves.

The islands of Koh Phangan and Koh Tao, packed with holiday-makers during the peak Christmas and New Year season, have emptied out since Wednesday as tourists squeeze onto ferries bound for the southern Thai mainland, with swimming banned and boats set to suspend services.

Pabuk, Thailand's first tropical storm in the area outside of the monsoon season for around 30 years, is poised to hit the two islands as well as neighbouring Koh Samui on today afternoon, before cutting into the mainland.

Packing winds of 104 kilometres per hour (65 mph), Pabuk is unlikely to intensify into a full-blown typhoon, according to forecasters.

Pabuk, which means a giant catfish in Lao, is also expected to dump heavy rain across the south, including tourist hotspots in the Andaman Sea such as Krabi and Phuket.

Protests paralyse Indian state

REUTERS, Kochi/new Delhi

Conservative Hindu groups forced India's southern state of Kerala to a standstill yesterday as they protested against the state government for allowing two women to defy an ancient ban and enter a Hindu temple.

About 400 protesters, including some women, took to the streets of Kochi, the commercial capital of Kerala, in the early morning, backed by officials from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological parent of the BJP.

Many stores and other small businesses were shut after the Hindu groups called for a state-wide stoppage. Most bus services were halted and taxis were refusing to take passengers as some drivers said they feared they would be attacked.

The state's Chief Minister, Pinarayi Vijayan, told reporters that women were the target of some attacks by protesters, including women journalists covering the events.

India's Supreme Court in September ordered the lifting of the ban on women of

menstruating age entering the Sabarimala hill temple, which draws millions of worshippers a year.

The temple has refused to abide by the ruling and subsequent attempts by women to visit have been blocked by thousands of devotees.

In the early hours of Wednesday, two women were escorted by police into the temple through a side gate without being spotted by devotees guarding the temple.

The women offered prayers from the back of the crowd from the top of a staircase where they could see the deity below without drawing the attention of the priest or other devotees, a police official familiar with the operation said.

He did not wish to be identified due to the sensitivity of the issue.

"Surprise was the biggest element here," the official said.

Protests erupted soon afterwards. A woman police constable was attacked and molested by five protesters in one of the districts near Kochi on Wednesday, while a protester was pelted with stones and killed in a southern district of the state, police said.

Yesterday, protesters were seen marching towards the main city junc-

tion to stage a sit-in protest, shouting slogans and waving flags, with streets deserted.

The protests remained largely peaceful yesterday, Vijay Sakhare, Inspector General of Police Kochi Range, told Reuters.

**WOMEN'S DEFIANCE OF
TEMPLE BAN**

**Police take over 600 protesters
into custody**

**Small businesses remain
shut, fearing attacks**

**Protesters damage state-run
buses in several cities**

"We arrested more than 600 people on Wednesday from Kochi and four other adjoining districts and took nearly 300 into preventive custody," Sakhare said.

In several places protesters damaged state transport buses, VP Pramod

Kumar, deputy director, public relations, state police headquarters, told Reuters.

The Kerala state government is run by left-wing parties and has sought to allow women into the temple - a position that has drawn criticism from both of India's main political parties, the ruling BJP and the opposition Congress.

The two women, Bindu Ammini, 42, and Kanaka Durga, 44, had approached the state police to find a way to enter the temple after a failed attempt on Dec 24.

For more than a week before Wednesday's visit, the women were under police protection at an undisclosed location, unknown even to their families, to prevent the plan from leaking out, he said.

In the early hours of Wednesday, the police took the two women to the hill temple inside an ambulance to avoid attention. Medical services are frequently used outside the temple because the elderly who go on the trek often face discomfort, the official said.

After offering prayers, the women merged with the crowd and headed to the exit, accompanied by four police in plain clothes, the police official said.

India SC slams govt over trapped miners

AFP, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court yesterday slammed authorities for their failure to rescue 15 workers trapped for 21 days in a flooded coal mine in the country's remote northeast.

The so-called "rat-hole" miners have been missing since December 13 when water gushed into the narrow pit from a nearby river in the state of Meghalaya.

The incident has been making headlines amid increasingly desperate efforts to save the group.

Multiple teams from the National Disaster Response Force, Coal India and the Indian Navy have been trying to reach the miners but in vain.

In response to a petition demanding that rescue efforts be stepped up, the top court said the government should ask the army to join rescue attempts, and asked why it had not yet done so.

"We're not satisfied with the rescue operations... We pray to God that all are alive. Whether they are alive or dead, they need to be taken out," the court said in its remarks.

Engineers with heavy-duty machines and divers were trying again yesterday to pump out water from the 115-metre deep (380 feet) tunnel.

A police spokesman said the water level had receded briefly on Wednesday but rose again, hampering the rescue work.

ROHINGYA DEPORTATION TO MYANMAR

India deports second group

More expulsions likely

REUTERS, Guwahati

India on Thursday deported a Rohingya Muslim family of five to neighbouring Myanmar, the second such group expelled in four months during a crackdown on illegal immigrants.

India's Hindu nationalist government regards the Rohingyas as illegal aliens and a security risk. It has ordered that tens of thousands of the community, who live in small settlements and slums, be identified and repatriated.

The husband, wife and three children had been arrested and jailed in northeastern Assam state in 2014 for entering India without valid documents, police said.

"The five Rohingyas have been handed over to Myanmar officials and they crossed the border," Bhaskar Jyoti Mahanta, Assam's additional director general of police, told Reuters.

A Reuters picture from the India-Myanmar border showed the family members posing, with security officials of both countries standing behind them.

Jails in Assam held 20 more Myanmar nationals, all arrested for illegal entry, he added. But it was not immediately clear if all were Rohingyas, a largely stateless Muslim minority in Buddhist-majority Myanmar.

"We shall send them back to Myanmar once we get their travel permits from that country," Mahanta said. "Most of them sneaked into India in search of a livelihood."

India's first deportation of seven Rohingyas men to Myanmar in October sparked fears of further repatriations among those shel-



A passenger train which hit parts from a freight train on the Great Belt Bridge is seen covered in Nyborg, Denmark January 3, 2019. The death toll from the accident in Denmark, when a truck trailer appeared to blow off a cargo train in strong winds and hit a passenger train, has risen from six to eight, police said.

PHOTO:
REUTERS

China population shrinks despite two-child policy

AFP, Beijing

China's population shrank last year for the first time in 70 years, experts said, warning of a "demographic crisis" that puts pressure on the country's slowing economy.

The world's most populous nation of some 1.4 billion for decades limited most families to one child in an attempt to keep population growth sustainable.

But since 2016 it has allowed couples to have two children in response to concerns about an ageing society and shrinking workforce.

The number of live births nationwide in 2018 fell by 2.5 million year-on-year, contrary to a predicted increase of 790,000 births, according to analysis by US-based academic Yi Fuxian.

Yi, a researcher at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is a long-term critic of the one-child policy and his work has previously gained traction among the country's leadership.

Enforced through fines but notorious for cases of forced abortions and sterilisation, the one-child policy caused birth rates to plummet after it was introduced in 1979.

However childbirths have not increased as much as forecast since the two-child policy came into force and there has been rising speculation the government will further ease restrictions.

Last year marked a "historic turning point for the Chinese population", said Yi, who studied publicly available data on births in towns and villages across China.

This downward trend may be irreversible, he cautioned, due to factors such as a decrease in the number of women of childbearing age and the reluctance of couples to have children due to rising education, health and housing costs.

Yi's calculations show that the number of deaths in 2018 was about 11.58 million and the total population shrank by 1.27 million.



tering in its refugee camps, and concern that those returned faced the risk of abuse at the hands of Myanmar authorities.

The men returned to their villages in a relatively untroubled area of Kyauktaw in the northern Rakhine state. They have been given so-called National Verification Cards, a residency document that conveys a status short of citizenship.

India's Border Security Force arrested 230 Rohingyas last year until end-November, the highest number of detentions in at least four full years, the Ministry of Home Affairs told parliament on Tuesday.

India estimates that 40,000 Rohingyas live in the country in camps across the country, including the capital, New Delhi, having arrived over the years after fleeing violence and persecution in Myanmar, which denies them citizenship.

In August, a UN report accused the Myanmar military of mass killings and rapes of Rohingyas with "genocidal intent" in 2017 in an operation that drove more than 700,000 of them to flee to neighbouring Bangladesh, according to UN agencies.

Myanmar has denied the charges, saying its military launched a counter-insurgency operation after attacks on security posts by Muslim militants in August last year.

Trump says received 'great' letter from N Korea's Kim

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump said Wednesday he had received a "great letter" from Kim Jong Un, after the North Korean leader warned Pyongyang may change its approach to nuclear talks if Washington persists with sanctions.

"I just got a great letter from Kim Jong Un," Trump told a cabinet meeting, reiterating that he still expected to hold a second summit with the North Korean leader, after the pair signed a pledge on denuclearization of the Korean peninsula in Singapore last June.

"We really established a very good relationship," Trump said. "We'll probably have another meeting."

Trump has cast his first summit with Kim as a major diplomatic victory, and on Wednesday repeated his claim that there would be a "big fat war in Asia" had they not sat down to talk.

But progress has stalled since the Singapore summit with the two sides disagreeing over the meaning of their vaguely-worded declaration, and the pace of US-North Korean negotiations has slowed, with meetings and visits cancelled

at short notice.

Speculation about a second Trump-Kim summit has meanwhile ebbed and flowed, with the US president saying that he hoped it would take place early this year.

In a brief tweet on Tuesday, Trump said he "look(s) forward to meeting with Chairman Kim who realizes so well that North Korea possesses great economic potential!"

The North is demanding relief from multiple sanctions imposed over its banned nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, and has condemned US insistence on its nuclear disarmament as "gangster-like."

In his New Year speech Kim called for the sanctions to be eased, saying that the North had declared "we would neither make and test nuclear weapons any longer nor use and proliferate them," and urged the US to take "corresponding practical actions."

Culminating in late 2017, the North has carried out six atomic blasts and launched rockets capable of reaching the entire US mainland, but has now carried out no such tests for more than a year.

MEDITERRANEAN MIGRANT CRISIS

Annual deaths fall by over a quarter: UN

AFP, Paris

The number of migrants who died or went missing attempting to cross the Mediterranean fell by more than a quarter in 2018 over the previous year, to 2,262, the UN refugee agency said yesterday.

The number of migrants who arrived in Europe after surviving the sea crossing also dropped by roughly the same proportion last year to 113,482 after 172,301 in 2017, according to the UNHCR's full-year figures.

A total of 3,139 were reported dead or missing in 2017.

"The Mediterranean has been for years the most deadly sea crossing in the world for refugees and migrants," UNHCR spokeswoman Celine Schmitt told AFP in Paris.

The data also confirmed that Spain had become the main gateway into Europe for migrants and refugees who travel from north Africa, with 55,756 people registered as arriving there by sea in 2018.

Italy, under its hardline anti-immigration government, cut the number of arrivals dramatically last year to 23,371 -- around a fifth of the number who arrived in 2017 when 119,369 crossed from Libya.

All of the figures are far down from their peak in 2015 when an estimated one million people crossed the Mediterranean to Europe, mostly from Turkey into Greece.