

NEWS IN  
briefGunman kills five  
at US bank: police

AFP, Miami

A gunman killed at least five people on Wednesday at a bank in Sebring, Florida in the southern United States, police said. The alleged shooter, identified as a 21-year-old resident of Sebring, has been taken into custody. Their motive was not immediately clear, and the investigation into the shooting is ongoing, police said.

Greek MPs to vote  
on Macedonia

AFP, Athens

Greek lawmakers were expected to vote yesterday on a deal to change the name of neighbouring Macedonia and end one of the world's longest diplomatic disputes. The debate began Wednesday and was scheduled to conclude late yesterday with a vote on the Prespa Agreement which was signed with Skopje in June to rename the former Yugoslav republic.

Australian writer  
held in China

REUTERS, Beijing

Chinese authorities are holding an Australian writer, who used to be a Chinese citizen, on suspicion of endangering state security, China said yesterday, and his lawyer said he was suspected of espionage. Australian officials said Yang Hengjun was detained shortly after he flew in to the southern city of Guangzhou from New York last week.

BITS OF HISTORY  
(JANUARY 24)

1965: Winston Churchill, statesman and British prime minister from 1940-45 and 1951-55, died.

2004: Nasa's Opportunity rover arrived safely on Mars and sent pictures of the planet back to Earth about four hours after it landed.

2018: Gunmen storm Save the Children offices in Kabul.



Youths hold placards and shout slogans during a "Youth For Climate" rally in Brussels yesterday, calling on authorities to take action on climate and ecological issues.

Not going back to  
era of ballot papers

Says Indian CEC on EVM hacking row

PTI, New Delhi

Amid renewed demands against the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs), Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora yesterday asserted that the Election Commission is not going back to ballot papers.

EVMs are being used as a "football" due to a "motivated slugfest", he said. "I would like to make it very, very clear one more time that we are not going back to the era of ballot papers," Arora said, addressing a gathering ahead of National Voters Day.

He said the poll panel would not take the country back to an era where ballot papers were lifted by musclemen.

"We are open to any criticism and feedback. But we are not going to be bullied. We are going to keep using EVMs," he said using strong words to defend the machines.

Earlier, the Election Commission had approached the Delhi Police seeking probe against Syed Shuja, the US-based person who claimed that the EVMs were tampered with in 2014 parliamentary polls. Shuja made the claim at a press conference held in London on Monday via video-conferencing. The Delhi Police has registered an FIR regarding allegations of hacking of EVMs and rigging of polls.

Following Shuja's press conference, BSP chief Mayawati had asked the Election Commission to revert to ballot papers in 2019 Lok Sabha elections to ensure free and fair polls. Her new ally, Akhilesh Yadav, the SP president, too echoed the sentiments saying that reliability of the EVMs had come under the question.

The Congress also sought clarification from the Election Commission over the claims made by Shuja. However, the BJP and the JD(U) backed continued use of the EVMs in elections.

## US-N Korea talks approach

Kim 'believes in' Trump, expresses satisfaction over results of talks about second summit preparation

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un spoke highly of US President Donald Trump, state media said yesterday, and expressed satisfaction over the results of talks between officials from both countries about a second summit between Kim and Trump.

Kim said he would trust Trump's approach, the North's official KCNA news agency said, weeks after Kim warned North Korea could seek a "new path" if US sanctions and pressure continued. That suggested Kim was focused on the next meeting with Trump to produce results.

"Kim Jong Un said that we will believe in President Trump's positive way of thinking, wait with patience and in good faith and, together with the US, advance step by step toward the goal to be reached by the two countries," KCNA said.

It said Kim expressed "large satisfaction" at receiving a "great" letter from Trump and a briefing about the results of the negotiations from the North Korean delegation that visited Washington last week but did not elaborate.

Kim ordered working-level preparations for the second

North Korea-U.S. summit to be done well, KCNA said. The White House said last week a second Trump-Kim summit would be held in late February but did not say where.

That follows their landmark first summit in Singapore last June, which produced a promise to work towards the complete denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. Progress since then has been patchy.

Kim has indicated to South Korean President Moon Jae-in

he would undertake a "groundbreaking" denuclearisation measure, South Korean newspaper DongA Ilbo reported yesterday.

The newspaper, citing an unidentified source with direct knowledge of the US-North Korea situation, said the same had been made clear to Trump during

senior North Korean official Kim Yong Chol's Washington visit last week.

North Korea has hinted, for example, at the possibility of agreeing to the US demand for verification of denuclearisation efforts before it discards its Yongbyon nuclear facilities.

South Korea's top diplomat said on Wednesday the planned second summit next month must "deliver concrete results on denuclearisation".

The Indian military has seized upon the Andamans that lie near the entrance to the Malacca Straits to counter the Chinese challenge, deploying ships and aircraft since Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014 promising a more muscular policy.

Indian navy chief admiral Sunil Lanba commissioned the new base, called INS Kohassa, about 300 km (180 miles) north of the archipelago's capital, Port Blair, the navy said in a statement.

## Indian Navy opens 3rd base to counter China

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's navy opened a third air base in the far-off Andaman and Nicobar islands yesterday to beef up surveillance of Chinese ships and submarines entering the Indian Ocean through the nearby Malacca Straits, military officials and experts said.

New Delhi has grown concerned over the presence of China's bigger navy in its neighbourhood and the network of commercial ports it is building in an arc stretching from Sri Lanka to Pakistan that India fears could become naval outposts.

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The facility, the third in the islands, will have a 1,000-metre runway for helicopters and Dornier surveillance aircraft. But eventually the plan is for the runway to be extended to 3,000 metres to support fighter aircraft and longer-range reconnaissance aircraft, navy spokesman Captain D.K. Sharma said.

About 1,20,000 ships pass through the Indian Ocean each year and nearly 70,000 of them pass through the Malacca Strait.

"The underlying thing is the expanding Chinese presence. If we have to really monitor Chinese presence, we need to be adequately equipped in the Andaman islands," said former navy commodore Anil Jai Singh.

"If you have air bases you can cover a larger area," he said, adding he expected the navy to permanently deploy more ships to the islands in the next phase of the buildup.

A Chinese submarine docked in Sri Lanka's Colombo port in 2014 that drew such alarm in New Delhi that Modi's government raised the issue with the Sri Lankan authorities.

## 'Go back to Italy'

Farmers stage protest as Rahul Gandhi visits his parliamentary constituency

ANI, Amethi

Farmers staged a protest and raised slogans against Congress President Rahul Gandhi in his parliamentary constituency Amethi in India's Uttar Pradesh.

The farmers protested in Gauriganj town in Amethi district on Wednesday demanding that either their land that was given to Rajiv Gandhi Foundation should be returned or they are provided employment.

Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday visited Amethi for campaigning for the general elections.

One of the protesters, Sanjay Singh told ANI: "We are very upset with Rahul Gandhi. He should go back to Italy. He does not deserve to be here. Rahul has grabbed our land."

They staged the protest near Samrat Cycle factory, which was inaugurated by former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi when he was the Lok Sabha lawmaker from Amethi.



## Bing search engine blocked in China

REUTERS, Bengaluru

Microsoft Corp's Bing search engine has been blocked in China, the company said on Wednesday, making it the latest foreign technology service to be shut down behind the country's Great Firewall.

"We've confirmed that Bing is currently inaccessible in China and are engaged to determine next steps," the company said in a statement.

It is the US technology giant's second setback in China since November 2017 when its Skype internet phone call and messaging service was pulled from Apple and Android app stores.

A search performed on Bing's China website - cn.bing.com - from within mainland China directs the user to a page that says the server cannot be reached.

The Financial Times, citing a source, reported on Wednesday that China Unicom, a major state-owned telecommunication company, had confirmed the government order to block the search engine.

Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), a government watchdog, did not respond to faxed questions about Bing's blocked website.

'Destroy' opponents if govt comes under threat  
Cambodia premier Hun Sen calls on military

AFP, Phnom Penh

Cambodia's strongman premier Hun Sen yesterday called on his country's military to "destroy" opponents if the government comes under threat, in a tirade in which he described himself as the "the one who steers the wheel" of the army.

The 66-year-old premier has in recent weeks turned up the rhetoric against the now-dissolved opposition party, the European Union and other critics of his government.

Since his ruling party swept a July election widely considered a sham, the EU has warned it may withdraw its Everything But Arms scheme which allows Cambodia's lucrative garment sector duty-free access to its massive market.

In the wake of the move, Hun Sen, a five-star general despite his position as the country's civilian leader, has been even more outspoken than usual.



"Some people say Hun Sen is consolidating power... that is very correct," he said in a speech to soldiers marking the 20th anniversary of the infantry -- which is headed by his son Hun Manet.

Hun Sen urged the army to "destroy" revolutions that attempt to topple the legitimate government" adding he is "not afraid to issue an order" if faced with threats.

"Better to see the death of four or five people rather than the death of tens of thousands and millions," he said, referring to the lives lost during the ultra-Maoist Khmer Rouge regime which left a quarter of the population dead.

He also called on the lines of soldiers in front of him to purge their ranks of any troops who oppose the government, saying "they must be destroyed."

"I am the one who steers the wheel," he added.

AFGHANISTAN CONFLICT  
US-Taliban peace talks raise hopes

REUTERS, Kabul

Talks between US and Taliban officials in Qatar entered a fourth day yesterday, with the two sides trying to establish a mechanism for a ceasefire in the 17-year Afghan war and open dialogue between the insurgents and the Afghan government.

US special peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad's meeting with Taliban representatives was originally slated to run over two days, and its unexpected extension was a positive sign, according to two senior Taliban leaders in Afghanistan who have been kept informed of the progress made in Qatar.

During the first two days, the talks focused on a roadmap for the withdrawal of the foreign forces and a guarantee that Afghanistan would not be used for hostile acts against the United States and its allies, according to one of Taliban leaders.

"The mechanism for a ceasefire and ways to enter into an intra-Afghan dialogue were the two other big topics that were supposed to be discussed on Thursday," he told Reuters, speaking on condition of anonymity.

A third source based in the Gulf, who has close ties to the Taliban representatives, said the decision to extend the meeting in the Qatari capital Doha came after "positive progress" during the first two days.

Officials at the US embassy in Kabul were not immediately available to comment on the diplomatic developments.

## Malaysia picks new king after abdication

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Members of Malaysia's royal families yesterday elected Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah as the new king, following the unexpected abdication of the previous monarch.

Sultan Abdullah, 59, ruler of the central state of Pahang, will formally take over the throne on Jan. 31 for a five-year term, the keeper of the ruler's seal said in a statement.

Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy with the king assuming a largely ceremonial role, including acting as custodian of Islam in the Muslim-majority country. The king's assent is needed for the appointment of a prime minister and various senior officials.

Malaysia's nine royal households take turns to provide a king, who is chosen through a vote in a Council



of Rulers, made up of the nine households, most of which are led by a sultan.

The king is elected for a five-year term.

The head of the Pahang royal family was next in line in take over from the former king, Sultan Muhammad V, who is the head of the state of Kelantan.

Sultan Muhammed abdicated this month after just two years on the throne, the first time a monarch had stepped down before completing their tenure.

No reason was given for his decision, which came after images purporting to show him getting married in Russia appeared on social media in December.