

Taliban names new leader for US talks

AFP, Kabul

The Taliban have appointed Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a co-founder of the movement as the new head of their political office in Doha, where talks have been held since Monday with US officials seeking to end 17 years of conflict in Afghanistan. The announcement comes as the insurgents said Thursday they had held four straight days of talks with US officials in Doha.

Two UN peacekeepers killed by a mine in Mali

AFP, Bamako

Two UN peacekeepers died and several were wounded yesterday in central Mali after their vehicle hit a mine, the UN Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) said in a statement. The deaths come after jihadist gunmen killed 10 Chadian peacekeepers and injured at least 25 others in an attack on a UN camp in Aguelhok, northern Mali on Sunday.

2018 was fourth hottest yr on record

AFP, Washington

The last four years have been the world's hottest since record-keeping began, with 2018 the fourth warmest on record, according to data published Thursday by US research group Berkeley Earth. Temperatures in 2018 were around 1.16 degrees Celsius above the average temperature of the second half of the 19th century. "Global mean temperature in 2018 was colder than 2015, 2016, and 2017, but warmer than every previously observed year prior to 2015," the report said.

BITS OF HISTORY (JANUARY 25)

1991: Residential building collapses in Tel Aviv after Iraqi Scud missile attack.
2005: 258 Hindu pilgrims were crushed or burned to death in a stampede and fire during a pilgrimage to the popular Mandher Devi temple near Wai in western India.

Plans to end US shutdown fail in Senate

AFP, Washington

The US Senate on Thursday blocked dueling plans to reopen shuttered federal agencies, a fresh setback in efforts to end a month-long government shutdown, but President Donald Trump signaled he could back a "reasonable" proposal that includes border security. The legislative deadlock has halted salaries and payments to thousands of federal workers. Trump had backed a Senate measure which would have reopened the government and funded the wall, while a competing Democratic proposal would have opened government through February 8 without funding Trump's wall, and leave room for border security negotiations.

Ex-Trump adviser Stone indicted in Mueller probe

AFP, Washington

Roger Stone, a longtime adviser to Donald Trump, was arrested yesterday under an indictment issued by the US special prosecutor examining possible collusion between the president's campaign and Russia. Stone was charged with seven counts, including obstruction of an official proceeding, making false statements and witness tampering, according to Special Counsel Robert Mueller's office. The indictment concerns Stone's communications with WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, whose group leaked tens of thousands of stolen Democratic Party emails that embarrassed Trump's rival Hillary Clinton in an apparent bid to influence the 2016 presidential election. But Stone was not accused in the document of conspiring with Assange or Russian officials. The White House rejected the idea that the noose was getting tighter around Trump, who has denied any collusion

Military backs Maduro

China, Russia side with the incumbent leader as West backs opposition challenger

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela's powerful military threw its weight behind President Nicolas Maduro on Thursday as the US-backed opposition leader Juan Guaido pressed a direct challenge to his authority, and the fate of the crisis-wracked country hung in the balance.

As the death toll from days of street protests jumped to 26, a defiant Maduro announced the closure of Venezuela's embassy and consulates in the United States, a day after President Donald Trump's administration declared his regime "illegitimate."

And West followed Trump. EU yesterday said it is drafting an appeal for Maduro to convene quick elec-

VENEZUELA CRISIS

EU urges quick election; Pompeo warns against force

Caracas shuts embassies, consulates in US

US orders non-emergency embassy staff to leave Venezuela



Venezuelan Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez (C) delivers a press conference in Caracas, along with members of the top military leadership in support of Nicolas Maduro on Thursday. PHOTO: AFP

tions, with some demanding recognition of Guaido as interim president if he does not.

The oil-rich but economically devastated country was plunged into uncertainty Wednesday when Guaido, the 35-year-old head of the National Assembly, proclaimed himself "acting president" -- earning swift endorsement from Washington and a dozen regional powers including Brazil, Argentina and Colombia. Flanked by military top brass,

Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino, himself a general, declared the 56-year-old Maduro "the legitimate president" -- and vowed to defend his authority against an attempted "coup d'etat." Following Padrino's lead, eight generals in turn reiterated their "absolute loyalty to Maduro in messages carried on state television.

In Washington, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo kept up the pressure on the leftist leader, as the US called for an emergency UN Security

Council meeting on the crisis.

A furious Maduro on Wednesday issued US diplomats a 72-hour deadline to leave the country, and on Thursday said he was recalling all Venezuelan diplomats from US.

The State Department meanwhile ordered its non-emergency staff to leave Venezuela but refused to comply with a full expulsion, saying it would maintain diplomatic ties with "the government of interim President Guaido."

Outside South America, the United States has been joined by Canada and Britain in recognizing Guaido as Venezuela's interim leader, while France has also rejected Maduro's legitimacy.

But both Russia and China and have thrown their weight behind the embattled Maduro.

Russian President Vladimir Putin called Maduro to express support, charging that the "crisis has been provoked from the outside."

China, Venezuela's main creditor, opposed "interference in Venezuelan affairs by external forces." Maduro has retained the support of Mexico, Cuba and Bolivia, all led by leftist governments.

'We just ran'

Displaced cower in pagoda as new Rakhine conflict flares

AFP, Buthidaung

As bullets smashed into the walls, the residents of Alecheung village jolted from their sleep and fled leaving everything behind -- civilian victims of a crackdown by Myanmar's army on ethnic Rakhine militants in an area already concussed by violence.

"I just ran... I didn't even have time to take my phone," Zaw Win, 22, told AFP yesterday from a makeshift camp in the grounds of a pagoda, a few kilometres from his village in restive Buthidaung district.

Rakhine state, which borders Bangladesh, is a cauldron of religious and ethnic hatreds.

In 2017, 720,000 Rohingya Muslims were expelled in an army crackdown. UN investigators say that operation merits prosecution for genocide.

Now the majority ethnic Rakhine -- who are Buddhist and who helped drive out the Rohingyas -- are in conflict with the same army they supported against their Muslim neighbours.

On January 4 the Arakan Army (AA), a militant group espousing greater autonomy for the Rakhine, killed 13 in raids on police border posts, prompting an army kickback.

AFP reporters joined the first government-steered media visit to Buthidaung, one of the areas of restive Rakhine worst hit by fresh violence.

The displaced from Alechaung, a village for mainly Buddhist minority in the area, fled two weeks ago.

"We ran for our lives," said Noe Zin Tun, 23, a primary school teacher, adding she still feels desperately insecure

Majority ethnic Rakhine-- who are Buddhist and who helped drive out Rohingyas -- are in conflict with Myanmar army



despite the shelter within pagoda walls.

Rohingyas also still live in Buthidaung, marooned between hostile neighbours and warring parties.

CRUCIBLE OF HATE

The fighting has added a new, complex dimension to the troubles of a state that since 2012 has hosted religious and communal riots, the mass exodus of Rohingyas and killings across all ethnic lines.

"The conflict has entered a dangerous new phase in which ethnic divisions have more clearly been brought to the fore," the International Crisis Group warned in a report.

The implosion of Rakhine has also undercut the push by Suu Kyi's civilian government to end the wars that have roiled Myanmar since 1948.

A major investment drive for the state by government has left many Rakhine fearing they will be further sidelined as mainly Chinese companies carve up their state's resources and ports.

While they helped drive out their Muslim neighbours, Rakhine still complain that they remain the bottom of the pile, as the plight of the Rohingya attracts aid and international focus.

As the crisis spirals, support for the Arakan Army is growing. "We are proud of them as they are fighting for our land," said San Shwe, 32, a motorcycle taxi driver from Sittwe who lost his home in communal riots in 2012.

End your bickering

Queen sends Brexit message to UK politicians

REUTERS, London

Queen Elizabeth has sent a delicately coded message to Britain's factious political class over Brexit, urging lawmakers to seek common ground and grasp the big picture to resolve the crisis.

With the clock ticking down to March 29, the date set in law for Britain to leave the European Union, the United Kingdom is in the deepest political crisis in half a century as it grapples with how, or even whether, to exit the European project it joined in 1973.

While Elizabeth, 92, did not mention Brexit explicitly in an annual speech to her local Women's Institute in Norfolk, the monarch said every generation faced "fresh challenges and opportunities."

"As we look for new answers in the modern age, I for one prefer the tried and tested recipes, like speaking well of each other and respecting different points of view; coming together to seek out the common ground; and never losing sight of the bigger picture," the queen said.

Though steeped in the conventional

language the queen has made her hallmark, the remarks in the context of Britain's crisis are a signal to politicians to sort out the turmoil that has pushed the world's fifth largest economy to the brink.

"She's been a gold standard monarch for very nearly 67 years now and this is a particularly gilt-edged moment, I think it's very important what she said and how she said it," historian Peter Hennessy said.

Buckingham Palace declined to comment though the British media was clear about the significance of her remarks. The Times' headline read: "End Brexit feud, Queen tells warring politicians".

As head of state, the queen remains neutral on politics in public.

Prime Minister Theresa May is engaged in a last-ditch bid to win support for a tweaked divorce deal after parliament this month crushed the original plan in the biggest defeat in modern British history.

The Northern Irish party which props up May's minority government has decided to back her new deal if it includes a time limit to the Irish backstop, The Sun newspaper reported.



Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and members of his government applaud after a vote on an accord between Greece and Macedonia changing the former Yugoslav republic's name in Athens, Greece, yesterday. Greek lawmakers ratified a landmark name change deal with neighbouring Macedonia, handing Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras a diplomatic triumph and bucking street protests to end one of the world's most stubborn diplomatic disputes.

India launches 4-inch satellite

AFP, Sriharikota

A lightweight satellite designed by students that can be held in the palm of the hand has been launched by Indian scientists, burnishing the country's credentials in miniature design technology.

The 10-centimetre (four-inch) cube satellite, named KalamSat V2, weighs just 1.2 kilograms (2.6 pounds), according to students from the private Space Kidz India group who designed the celestial unit.

It was launched from the Sriharikota space centre in southern Andhra Pradesh state on Thursday, drawing praise from Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"Heartiest congratulations to our space scientists for yet another successful launch of PSLV. This launch has put in orbit KalamSat, built by India's talented students," Modi tweeted.

The launch was another feather in the cap for the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), which won Asia's race to Mars in 2014 when one of its spacecraft reached the Red Planet on a shoestring budget.

The KalamSat V2 was built at a cost of 1.2 million rupees (\$16,900). It will serve as a communications satellite for ham radio transmissions used by amateurs for non-commercial activities. In 2017 an even smaller satellite, weighing just 64 grams and designed by the same group, was launched in the US aboard a NASA rocket, but never reached orbit.



Pretty faces cant win votes

Bihar minister on Priyanka Gandhi

STAR REPORT

An Indian state minister yesterday courted controversy for his remarks on Congress General Secretary Priyanka Gandhi, saying, votes are not won with "a very pretty face" in politics. Vinod Narayan Jha, a minister of Bihar, said Priyanka Gandhi has no political achievement to her credit.

"Votes can't be won on basis of pretty faces. Moreover, she is the wife of Robert Vadra who is accused of involvement in land scam and several corruption cases. She is very beautiful but other than that she holds no political achievement," the BJP leader said.

Earlier, senior BJP leader Sushil Kumar Modi had made similar remarks on Priyanka Gandhi Badra's entry into active politics.

He said, "Duplicates do not work in politics. Priyanka might resemble Indira, but there is a big difference."

Priyanka was handed over the charge of Uttar Pradesh on Wednesday and will work in the capacity of General Secretary in-charge of Uttar Pradesh East. The 47-year-old is set to take charge as the AICC General Secretary from the first week of February, Congress Party said.

Meanwhile, Congress workers in Varanasi, the parliamentary seat of Prime Minister Modi, have urged Priyanka to contest from the constituency. Posters featuring Priyanka have come up across Varanasi in recent days.

MAJOR SURVEYS AHEAD OF GENERAL ELECTION IN INDIA

NDA to fall short of majority

REUTERS, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling coalition will emerge as the largest group in a parliamentary election expected in the next few months but will fall short of a majority required to rule, two surveys showed on Thursday.

NDA, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party-led alliance, is forecast to win 233 of the 543 seats in parliament at stake, the poll by ABP News-CVoter said, short of the half-way mark of 272. A survey by India Today-Karvy Insights put the BJP and its allies on 237 seats.

Modi, who swept to power in 2014 with the biggest majority seen in India in decades, is facing public discontent over a lack of jobs and a weak farm economy. No date has yet been announced for the election, which must be held by May.

ABP said 22,309 voters were surveyed across all 543 seats of the lower house of parliament over Dec-Jan. Opinion polls have a mixed record in India where millions of people vote.

On Wednesday another survey

showed the BJP facing a rout in the most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, which sends the largest number of representatives to parliament and holds the key to which party forms a government.

Thursday's poll also showed the BJP doing badly in Uttar Pradesh, slumping

Modi facing popular discontent over jobs, low farm prices
Polls say no clear winner to emerge from election
Opposition Congress seen making strong gains

to just 25 of the 80 seats at stake. In 2014, the state propelled Modi to victory handing his group 73 seats.

"In a nutshell a popular prime minister (Modi) is facing stiff challenge from a united opposition," ABP said summing up the results of its survey.

The ruling BJP will make up some of its losses with victories in the eastern states where its influence has been limited in the past, the poll said.

But it will still be 39 seats short of the simple majority required to rule and will have to try to stitch together alliances with regional parties.

Some of these small groups are wary of aligning with Modi's group, however, which is seen to have pursued a partisan Hindu-first agenda and raised disquiet among the country's 160 million Muslims.

The ABP poll showed the main opposition Congress taking 167 seats and the regional parties together 143. The Congress has appointed Priyanka Gandhi, sister of its president Rahul Gandhi, to a party post in a move aimed at further energising the party ranks who see the Nehru-Gandhi family as vote-getters.

India Today said it conducted face-to-face interviews with 13,179 voters across 97 parliamentary constituencies for its survey.