

NEWS IN brief

Saudi prince discusses Yemen with UN chief

REUTERS, Cairo
Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman received a telephone call from UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Tuesday to discuss progress on resolving the war in Yemen and other regional issues, Saudi Press Agency reported. It was unclear if the call discussed an international inquiry led by UN investigator on Khashoggi murder.

Swine flu outbreak kills 76 in Rajasthan

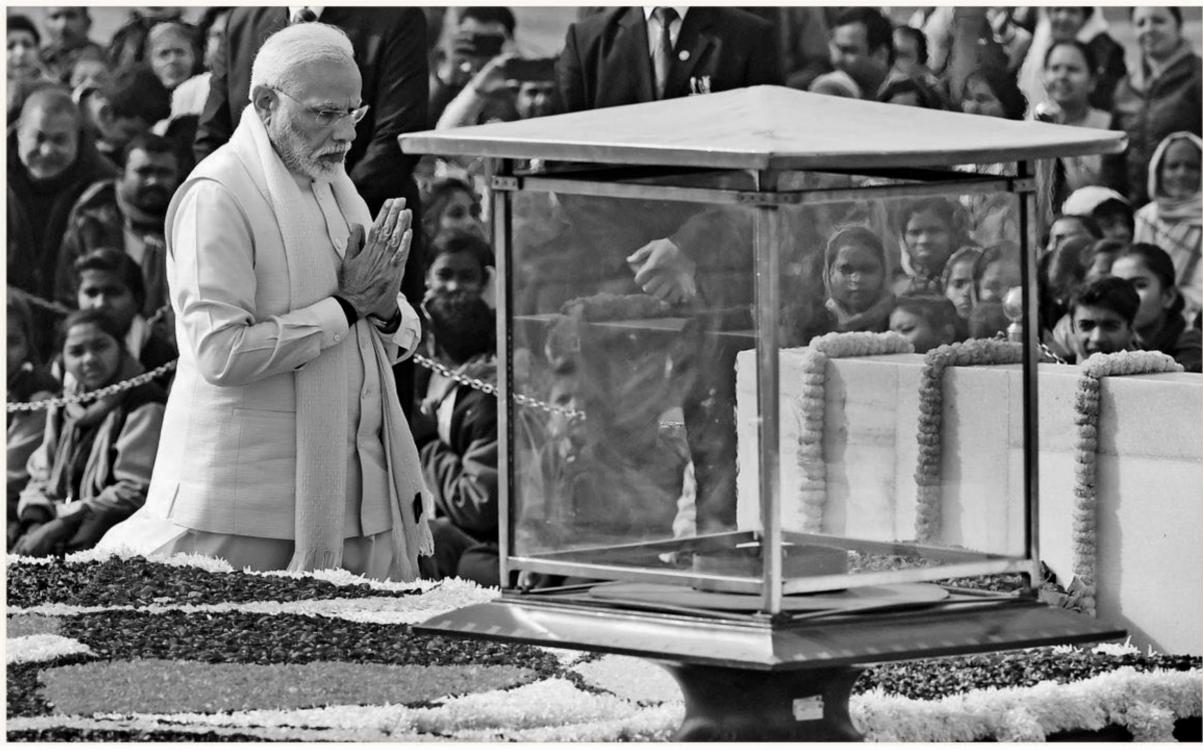
REUTERS, New Delhi
A swine flu outbreak in one of India's biggest tourist hubs, Rajasthan state in the west of the country, has killed 76 people this year, government officials said yesterday. Colder weather has worsened the seasonal outbreak of H1N1 virus, with Rajasthan recording more than a third of all swine flu deaths in India.

Chinese begin Lunar holiday exodus

AFP, Beijing
Millions of Chinese have begun the annual exodus for the Lunar New Year, the world's largest annual human migration, leaving major cities to return to their hometowns for the holiday. The most important holiday in the Chinese calendar places great emphasis on family reunions, and travelers must get home by Monday to usher in the Year of the Pig the following day.

BITS OF HISTORY (JANUARY 30)

1933: German President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler chancellor. On this date in 1937, Hitler told the Reichstag that Germany was withdrawing its signature from the Versailles Treaty.
1979: White Rhodesians voted in a referendum in favour of a new constitution aimed at black majority rule in what is now Zimbabwe.
2003: Richard Reid, a British-born follower of Osama bin Laden, was sentenced to life in prison for trying to blow up a trans-Atlantic flight with explosives stuffed in his shoes.



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi pays homage at Raj Ghat, the memorial for Indian independence icon Mahatma Gandhi, on Martyr's Day to mark the 71st anniversary of Gandhi's assassination, in New Delhi yesterday. Gandhi was on the way to a prayer meeting in the Indian capital when he was shot three times in the chest and head on January 30, 1948.

PHOTO: AFP

Afghanistan talks 'proceeding well'

Says Trump after US, Taliban agree to peace framework

REUTERS, Washington

Negotiations in Afghanistan are going well, US President Donald Trump said yesterday, after US officials earlier this week said there had been significant progress in talks to end 17 years of war in the country.

Talks "are proceeding well," Trump wrote on Twitter. He did not address any possible peace accord with the Taliban or the presence of US troops in Afghanistan.

On Monday, US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad told the New York Times that the United States and the insurgent group had sketched the outlines of an eventual peace deal. Analysts, however, said there was no sign that the Taliban had agreed to US demands.

A US State Department spokesman said this week the talks had been "positive" but that no agreement had been reached.

The Trump administration has moved toward withdrawals of US forces after years of overseas deployments. A US official said last month that Trump planned to withdraw more than 5,000 of the 14,000 US troops in Afghanistan.

But the Republican leader of the US Senate offered legislation on Tuesday urging the US to keep troops in Syria and Afghanistan.

Saying that Islamic militant groups in the two countries continue to pose a "serious threat" to the United States, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said he had introduced an amendment to a broader Middle East Security bill urging a "continued commitment" until al Qaeda, Islamic State and other groups are defeated.

Modi 'sold' IAF

Rahul intensifies attack on PM over Rafale jet deal; govt, Ambani denies any wrongdoing

PTI, New Delhi

Launching a fresh attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the Rafale jet deal, Congress president Rahul Gandhi yesterday alleged that he "sold" the Indian Air Force (IAF) and "stole" opportunities of the youth by giving away Rs 30,000 crore to his "friend" and businessman Anil Ambani.

The government, as well as Ambani, have strongly denied any wrongdoing in the Rafale deal.

Addressing the concluding session of the Youth Congress nationwide public outreach campaign 'Yuva Kranti Yatra', Gandhi said no one will be able to suppress the truth about the "Rafale scam" and it will come out finally.

"The entire country knows that Mr Modi stole opportunities of the youth to give Rs 30,000 crore to Anil Ambani. No one can suppress the truth about Rafale, it will come out itself," he said.

"You have sold the Indian Air Force," he alleged, targeting Modi over the Rafale deal.

He said the prime minister spoke for one and a half hours in Parliament but when

asked questions on Rafale, he could not look in the eye and kept looking elsewhere.

"The prime minister is trying to hide the truth," Gandhi also alleged.

"You (Modi) cannot sleep in the night. When you sleep, you see the picture of Anil Ambani, you see the picture of Rafale jet, you see the picture of IAF martyrs... this is happening due to the Congress and Youth Congress workers who have shown you the truth. The entire country knows that you have played with the future of the youth," he alleged.

Gandhi also said the Congress will not be on the back foot and will instead play on the front foot. "Modi has to face the public in 2019," he said.

Attacking Modi, he also said, "The prime minister has worked on dividing the country, burnt the Northeast, Kashmir, made people fight in Haryana, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala."

"2014 taught us a lesson that we should not be arrogant and have humility... We did that and now the atmosphere is changing," he said.



Schools shut as toxic smog chokes Bangkok

AFP, Bangkok

Toxic smog forced hundreds of Bangkok schools to close yesterday, as authorities struggle to manage a pollution crisis that has stirred widespread health fears and taken on a political edge just weeks before elections.

The Thai capital has been shrouded in murky haze for weeks, sparking social media criticism of the uneven response by the government and prompting rare scenes of residents donning masks on streets and on public transport.

Reasons given for the lingering pall include exhaust from traffic, unfettered construction, the burning of crop stubble, and pollution from factories getting trapped in the city.

Authorities have seeded clouds to provoke rain, sprayed overpasses with water to catch micro-pollutants.

UAE 'used spying tool' to target Qatar's emir, rivals

Says report citing sources from US hacking team

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani was one of hundreds of targets of a sophisticated intelligence operation by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to spy on perceived opponents, Reuters news agency reported.

A team of former US government intelligence operatives working for the UAE hacked into the iPhones of activists, diplomats and rival foreign leaders with the help of a sophisticated spying tool called Karma.

The cybertool allowed the Emirati state to monitor hundreds of targets beginning in 2016, from Qatar's emir and a senior Turkish official to a Nobel Peace laureate human-rights activist in Yemen, according to five former operatives and programme documents reviewed by Reuters.

The sources interviewed by Reuters were not Emirati citizens.

Karma was used by an offensive cyberoperations unit in the capital, Abu Dhabi, comprised of Emirati security offi-

cial and former US intelligence operatives working as contractors for the UAE's intelligence services.

The existence of Karma and the hacking unit, code-named Project Raven, have not been previously reported.

The Karma and Raven revelations come amid a major regional crisis and an escalating cyber arms race, with rivals such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE competing for the most sophisticated hacking tools and personnel.

The UAE, along with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt severed all political, diplomatic and economic ties with Qatar and imposed a land, air and sea blockade on the Gulf nation in June 2017.

The operatives used Karma to hack an iPhone used by Sheikh Tamim, as well as devices belonging to Turkey's former Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Simsek and Oman's head of foreign affairs, Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah. It isn't clear what material was taken from these devices.

Operatives used Karma to hack into iPhones of activists, diplomats

Protests fizzle as Asia Bibi expected to leave Pak

AFP, Islamabad

A call by Pakistani religious hardliners for protests fell flat yesterday as Asia Bibi, the Christian woman at the centre of a years-long blasphemy row, was expected to leave the country having cleared a last legal hurdle.

The Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), which led days of violent mass demonstrations after Bibi was acquitted of blasphemy last year, announced new protests after the Supreme Court upheld her innocence in a fresh ruling Tuesday.

But its leaders remain in detention after a government crackdown several weeks ago, and police deployed heavily at the junction between the capital Islamabad and neighbouring Rawalpindi which the TLP had designated as a protest site, preventing any huge gathering.

A mere 20 people demonstrated in Lahore while just eight mobilised in

Rawalpindi, despite emotive calls from the TLP that its supporters "cannot compromise on the honour of the Prophet".

Bibi, a labourer from central Punjab province, was convicted of blasphemy in 2010 and was on death row until her acquittal last year.

BLASPHEMY ACQUITTAL



She has been in protective custody since, and the government has refused to reveal her whereabouts for fear of her being targeted by vigilantes.

On Tuesday the Supreme Court threw out a petition seeking a final appeal in the case, which has drawn worldwide attention to religious extremism in

Pakistan.

The ruling has set the stage for Bibi to finally leave the country.

Speculation is rampant that she will seek asylum in a North American or European country, and unconfirmed reports suggest her children have already fled to Canada.



Israeli forces cover the body of an alleged attacker lying on the ground following an attempt stabbing on Israeli forces at the al-Zaim checkpoint on the outskirts of east Jerusalem yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

US security aid to Palestinians ends today

Envoys seek way to keep money flowing

REUTERS, Ramallah

US security aid for the Palestinian Authority is set to dry up today after it declined the money over concerns it could increase its exposure to US anti-terrorism lawsuits.

The loss of the some \$60 million in annual funding would mark another tear in ties between the Trump administration and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and potentially undermines his security cooperation with Israel in the occupied West Bank.

Diplomatic sources said Palestinian, US and Israeli officials were seeking a way to keep the money flowing despite Abbas's decision to turn it down as of a January 31 deadline set by Congress' Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act (ATCA) of 2018.

The ATCA empowers Americans to sue foreign aid recipients in U.S. courts over alleged complicity in "acts of war".

Abbas's administration, long accused by Israel of stoking Palestinian militant attacks, worries about such legal exposure. It denies encouraging any such acts.

"We do not want to receive financial aid, including aid provided to the security forces, so as not to be subject to the anti-terrorism law approved by Congress," one Palestinian official told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

"The US administration was surprised by the Palestinian decision, and said it wanted to find a solution in order to continue aid to the Palestinian security services."

Such a solution may include finding alternative funds within the CIA budget or amending US legislation, he said.

FB paid users to track smartphone use

AFP, Washington

Facebook paid users, including teens, to track their smartphone activity as part of an effort to glean more data that could help the social network's competition efforts, according to a new report that may raise fresh privacy concerns.

An investigation by the online news site TechCrunch said the effort, which had been known as the Onavo Protect and later rebaptized as Facebook Research, was used to gather data on usage habits.

The news could be a further embarrassment for Facebook, which has been under heightened scrutiny over failing to crack down on manipulation of its platform and for sharing private data with its business partners.

Facebook said it shut down the application on Apple's iOS yesterday after the TechCrunch article was published. It remained unclear if it remained active for Android users.

The report said the initial Onavo app was shuttered for violating Apple's privacy policy and that the newer version may also contravene Apple's terms.

The program paid users ages 13 to 35 up to \$20 a month for "root" access to their devices to track their location, app usage, spending habits and other activity.

'Dying with dignity'

Tens of thousands of terminally ill patients refuse 'extension of life' in South Korea

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Tens of thousands of terminally ill patients decided to die without life-saving medical assistance over the past year after a new that allowed "dying with dignity" came into effect, a news report said yesterday.

The law went into effect on February 4 last year, allowing patients to sign up to forgo a "meaningless extension of life" by stopping or postponing four life-sustaining treatments, the Yonhap news agency reported.

It took nearly two decades of national debate before the South Korean National Assembly passed the so-called "dying-well" law. The issue drew public attention after two doctors were convicted of assisted murder and given suspended prison terms in 1997 for ending the life of

a brain-damaged patient at the request of his wife.

Since the law passed, 35,431 patients opted to die without receiving any further medical treatment, according to the Ministry of Health and Welfare.

Male patients stood at 21,291, with the remainder being women. Nearly 68% of the total refused life-prolonging treatments, with consent from at least two family members.

Additionally, data also showed about 16,000 terminally ill patients have registered with authorities to opt out of receiving further life-saving medical assistance.

Another 113,000 people sent a letter of intent to hospitals and public organisations to stop receiving treatment once they become terminally ill.



Brazil dam collapse toll rises to 84

AFP, Brumadinho

The death toll from the collapse of a Brazilian dam rose to 84 yesterday as mining giant Vale announced that moves to dismantle similar structures would hit production.

Brazilian authorities are stepping up their probe of Vale, with five engineers involved in the operating licenses and the last inspection of the dam arrested on prosecutors' orders in the state of Minas Gerais, where the disaster occurred Friday at one of the firm's mines.

Flavio Godinho, Civil Defense spokesman in Minas Gerais, said the death toll had increased from 65 to 84, while the number of missing fell from 292 to 276.

Shares in Vale -- the world's biggest iron ore miner -- meanwhile tumbled nearly two percent in Sao Paulo, still far from recovering from a 24-percent wipeout suffered on Monday.

The company said it will freeze operations around 10 dams in Brazil to dismantle structures such as the one that resulted in the Friday disaster -- a move that will reduce annual iron ore production by 10 percent or 40 million tons.

The dam collapse at the Vale mine near the town of Brumadinho occurred three years after a similar disaster at another one of its sights in the same region.

That 2015 dam rupture, near Mariana, killed 19 people and caused what was considered the worst environmental catastrophe Brazil had seen.