

# Half of US troops to leave Afghanistan by April

Say Taliban; Washington says no timeframe set

AGENCIES

A Taliban official said on Wednesday the United States had promised to withdraw half of its troops from Afghanistan by the end of April, but the US military said no timeframe had been set.

Abdul Salam Hanafi, speaking on the sidelines of a meeting in Moscow between the Taliban and other prominent Afghan figures, said American officials pledged the pullout will begin this month.

"The Americans told us that from the beginning of February to the end of April half of the troops from Afghanistan will be withdrawn," Hanafi told reporters.

But Pentagon spokesman Army Colonel Rob Manning said the US military had received no orders to begin withdrawing, reported Aljazeera Online. "Peace talks with the Taliban continue, but [the Defense Department] has not received a directive to change the force structure in Afghanistan," said Manning. A US military spokeswoman in Kabul also denied an immediate troop withdrawal.

"If all parties do what is necessary to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a platform for terrorism, as conditions allow we are willing to look at changes in force presence," she told the AFP news agency.

Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, head of the Taliban delegation in Moscow, also contradicted Hanafi's earlier comments on an American withdrawal saying no date had yet been fixed.

## PEACE TALKS IN MOSCOW

Trump describes recent peace talks with Taliban 'constructive'

Pakistan activists' arrests fuel tension with Afghanistan

US President Donald Trump repeated in his State of the Union speech on Tuesday that he wants US troops to pull out from long-running wars, such as Afghanistan and Syria as soon as possible.

"Constructive" talks with the Taliban guerrillas have "accelerated," he said in a notably upbeat assessment.

Meanwhile, the arrest of a group of ethnic Pashtun activists at a rally in Pakistan this week rekindled an angry row with neighbouring Afghanistan yesterday as Afghan President Ashraf Ghani condemned Islamabad's treatment of the protesters, reported Reuters.



Indian students march as they take part in the 'Young India Adhikar March' protest rally, in New Delhi yesterday. Indian student groups affiliated to opposition political parties marched against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government over a range of issues including lack of jobs, investment in the education sector and autonomy of universities.

PHOTO: AFP

## NEWS IN brief

### Indian security forces kill 10 Maoist rebels

TNN, Raipur

In one of the biggest anti-Naxal operation this year, ten Maoists were gunned down by the security forces yesterday in the forests of restive Bijapur district in tribal Bastar region of Chhattisgarh. Uniformed bodies of ten Maoists were recovered from the spot along with 12 weapons in Takilod region located in north of Indravati river in Abujhmad area.

### Philippines hit by measles outbreak

AFP, Manila

A growing measles outbreak in the Philippines killed at least 25 people last month, officials said yesterday, putting some of the blame on mistrust stoked by a scare over an anti-dengue fever vaccine. Most of the dead are children and the toll is expected to rise as more cases are confirmed of the highly contagious disease, which has made a worldwide resurgence in recent years.

### Five killed in S African coal mine gas explosion

AFP, Johannesburg

South African police said yesterday that five people had died after trespassing into a disused mine, with local media reporting the deaths were caused by a gas explosion. At least 20 people are believed to be still trapped underground at the Gloria coal mine near the town of Middelburg in the eastern province of Mpumalanga after entering the shafts to try to steal cables.

### Brazil's Lula given 13 years in graft conviction

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

A Brazilian court Wednesday handed a near 13-year sentence to Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, in a new corruption conviction for the former leftist president already serving a lengthy jail term in a separate case. Lula, 73, was found guilty by a court in the southern city of Curitiba of accepting renovation work by two construction companies on a farmhouse in exchange for ensuring they won contracts with the state-run oil company Petrobras.

## BITS OF HISTORY (FEBRUARY 7)

**1971:** In a referendum, Switzerland voted in favour of female suffrage.

**1992:** European Community nations signed the Maastricht Treaty that created the European Union and led to the launch of the euro currency.

**2005:** Cuba, a country known for its fine cigars and where more than half of adults smoke, banned smoking in public.

**2012:** Maldives President Mohamed Nasheed announces resignation.

## For BJP, Bengal emerges as a top priority state

TNN, Kolkata

From a back-of-beyond location on the BJP's electoral map, West Bengal has suddenly emerged as a top-priority state for the Narendra Modi-Amit Shah duo in the run-up to the 2019 Lok Sabha polls.

BJP leaders have shifted into top-gear mode to break the ruling Trinamool's near-monopoly in Bengal soon after Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee announced taking the anti-Modi opposition dharna from Kolkata to Delhi on February 13 and 14. The Mamata-led opposition is also Modi's prime target.

"My battle against corruption has ruffled many feathers, including TMC's. So, they all assembled in Kolkata and collectively abused me. They got together to save their own families and hide their corruption. I will not rest till the corrupt are punished," Modi said in his Facebook post on Wednesday.

Taking the cue, the BJP national president announced at a public rally in Aligarh that party workers won't rest until the lotus blooms in 23 of the 42 Lok Sabha seats in West Bengal.

Never has Bengal been the focus of BJP's

countrywide campaign as it was on Wednesday when party president Amit Shah spoke at length in Aligarh on Saradha, Rose Valley Ponzi scams and the Bengal CM's desperate bid to protect a police commissioner facing CBI inquiry.

Mamata is going all-out against BJP. She showed the "political vendetta" card at the Modi government yet again on Wednesday, hours after calling off her satyagraha in Kolkata on Tuesday. The Trinamool chief targeted the Centre on Enforcement Directorate's questioning of Robert Vadra in an illegal foreign assets case.

"They (Centre) are sending notices to everybody days ahead of elections. We are going to make a representation to the Election Commission. It may be a cheating case or a simple cheat case. But they are seeing a larger conspiracy in all of them," Mamata said in a bid to consolidate the opposition bloc.

The message has reached her ranks. Trinamool was organising dharnas across Bengal against BJP yesterday.

## LOK SABHA POLLS RUN-UP



## FB unveils new rules for political ads in India

TOI, New Delhi

Ahead of the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, Facebook yesterday announced changes to the way political ads appear on its platform. As per the changes, the social media users will now be able to see the political ads with "Published by" or "Paid for by" disclaimers that have been specified by advertisers.

Facebook is also working on an Ad Library where users can learn more about ads related to politics, including a range of impressions and spend and demographics of who saw the ad.

In the coming weeks, people will start seeing the country locations of the people managing pages that run political ads to better understand the origin of the page, the social media giant said.

The Ad Library archives political ads for up to seven years and is available to anyone, regardless of whether they are logged into Facebook or not.

## MAMATA'S PROTEST AGAINST CBI

## Five top cops in West Bengal to lose medals

NDTV ONLINE

India's Ministry of Home Affairs has asked the West Bengal government to initiate disciplinary action against five police officers who took part in protests against the CBI in Kolkata earlier this week, sources said yesterday. It also plans to strip them of their medals in keeping with the All India Service Rules, they added.

The Union government may also remove the names of the officers from an empanelled list and bar them from serving at the central level for a certain period of time.

Sources identified the officers as West Bengal Director General of Police Virendra, Additional Director General of Police Vineet Kumar Goyal, Additional General of Police (Law and Order) Anuj Sharma, Commissioner of Police (Bidhanagar Commissionerate) Gyanwant Singh, and Additional Commissioner of Police (Kolkata) Supratim Daska.

Sources in the Ministry of Home Affairs said the police officers -- who are supposed to remain neutral -- had taken a political stand by participating in the protest.

Although the Bengal government is not duty-bound to follow the order, this will only serve to further escalate friction between the state and the Centre.

West Bengal Chief Minister Banerjee had launched a sit-in protest on February 4 against the CBI's attempts to question Kolkata Police Commissioner Rajeev Kumar in connection with the Saradha and Rose Valley chit fund scams. She called it off her on Tuesday evening, after the Supreme Court forbade the CBI from taking any coercive action against the police officer, categorically stating that he was not part of the agitation.

## WAR ON DRUGS

## Lanka to begin hangings within two months

Says President Sirisena

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president said Wednesday that a 42-year moratorium on capital punishment will end within two months with the hanging of drug convicts.

Maithripala Sirisena told parliament he was committed to bringing back the death penalty for drug offenders, months after vowing a tougher line on spiralling narcotics-related crime inspired by a similar crackdown in the Philippines.

"I hope to carry out the first hanging within a month or two," he said. "I appeal to human rights organisations not to try to pressure us on this decision."

Criminals in Sri Lanka are regularly given death sentences for murder, rape and drug-related crimes but until now their punishments have been commuted to life jail.

Following a visit to the Philippines last month, Sirisena said he wanted to copy President Rodrigo Duterte's strongarm tactics in dealing with illegal drugs.

Justice Minister Thalatha Athukorale said Tuesday that administrative procedures for the execution of five drug convicts had been completed and Sirisena now only had to sign death warrants.

The president did not say how many would be involved in the first hangings.

But prison officials said Tuesday that authorities were still trying to fill a vacancy for an hangman, despite placing advertisements for the position last year offering a salary of 35,000 rupees (\$200) a month.

While Sri Lanka's last execution was more than four decades ago, an executioner was in post until his retirement in 2014. Three replacements since have quit after short stints at the unused gallows.

## ROW OVER 'CAMBRIDGE DEGREE'

## Malaysia deputy PM urged to quit

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's deputy foreign minister was urged to quit yesterday following allegations he lied about having a degree from Cambridge University, with an opposition lawmaker accusing him of "deceiving the people".

Marzuki Yahya's educational background came under scrutiny after doubts were raised on social media that he had a distance-learning degree in business administration from the British institution, which was previously listed on his Wikipedia profile.

After initially insisting he would prove he had the degree, Marzuki said late Wednesday that he had in fact not studied at the prestigious British university but at Cambridge International University in the United States.

"I think they (my critics) misunderstood (my credentials). I (studied) at the Cambridge International University in the US," Marzuki -- a member of Bersatu, a party in the ruling coalition -- told news portal Malaysiakini.

"I was doing logistics (before joining politics). So I just took that certificate for my knowledge to expand my business."

One of the programmes listed on the US institution's website is "logistics".

The claim sparked mockery in Malaysia, with many questioning the institution's credibility.



A Kashmiri milkman walks during a snowfall in Srinagar yesterday. Kashmir's road links with the rest of India were cut off as heavy snowfall closed the Jammu-Srinagar national highway.

PHOTO: AFP

## Indian man to sue parents for giving birth to him

NDTV ONLINE

A 27-year-old from Mumbai is planning to sue his parents for giving birth to him without his consent.

Raphael Samuel has made news around the world after reports emerged that he is taking his parents to court for giving birth to him. A committed antinatalist, he believes it is morally wrong of people to procreate as it only leads to misery and burdens the earth's resources.

Antinatalism is a school of thought that argues that human life is so full of suffering that people should stop having children for reasons of compassion.

According to the Guardian, Samuel wrote in a Facebook post that he loves his parents, but they had him for their own "joy and their pleasure." The post now seems to have been deleted, though other posts on antinatalism remain on his feed. "Why must I suffer? Why must I work? Someone had

you for their pleasure," reads one of them.

In an interview to Latestly, Samuel explains: "Procreation is the most narcissistic act on Earth. Ask anyone why they procreate it will always start with 'I wanted.' Introducing a child into a world that is suffering is wrong. An antinatalist's agenda is to convince people to stop reproducing.

Why? Because life involves a lot of suffering."

In the Facebook post, he also shared his mother's views on his plans to sue her. "I must admire my son's temerity to want to take his parents to court knowing both of us are lawyers. If Raphael could come up with a rational explanation as to how we could have sought his consent to be born, I will accept my fault," reads the post, attributed to Samuel's mother, Kavita Karnad Samuel.

Though many have called him out for his "ingratitude" and "ridiculous case", Samuel continues to preach about antinatalism on his Facebook page, Nihilanand.



## 'Climate chaos' in the offing

Scientists say melting ice sheets will trigger extreme weather across the world within a matter of decades

AFP, Paris

Billions of tonnes of meltwater flowing into the world's oceans from the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets could boost extreme weather and destabilise regional climate within a matter of decades, researchers said Wednesday.

These melting giants, especially the one atop Greenland, are poised to further weaken the ocean currents that move cold water south along the Atlantic Ocean floor while pushing tropical waters northward closer to the surface, they reported in the journal Nature.

Known as the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC), this liquid conveyor belt plays a crucial role in Earth's climate system and helps ensure the relative warmth of the Northern Hemisphere.

"According to our models, this meltwater will cause significant disruptions to ocean currents and change levels of warming around the world," said lead author Nicholas Golledge, an associate professor at the

Antarctic Research Centre of New Zealand's Victoria University of Wellington.

The Antarctic ice sheet's loss of mass, meanwhile, traps warmer water below the surface, eroding glaciers from underneath in a vicious circle of accelerated melting that contributes to sea level rise.

Most studies on ice sheets have focused on how quickly they might shrink due to global warming, and how much global temperatures can rise before their disintegration -- whether over centuries or millennia -- becomes inevitable, a threshold known as a "tipping point."

But far less research has been done on how the meltwater might affect the climate system itself.

"The large-scale changes we see in our simulations are conducive to a more chaotic climate with more extreme weather events and more intense and frequent heatwaves," co-author Natalya Gomez, a researcher in the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences at McGill University in Canada, told AFP.

