

NEWS IN brief

Saudi crown prince to visit Jakarta on Feb 18

Indonesia will host Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for a state visit next week, Jakarta said yesterday, part of an Asian tour that includes stops in Pakistan, India and Malaysia. "He will arrive in Indonesia on February 18, and meet the president on February 19," presidential spokesman Johan Budi said.

Turkey rounds up 52 Syrian IS suspects

Turkish authorities yesterday detained 52 suspected Islamic State (IS) group jihadists in northwestern province of Bursa as part of a crackdown on the militants, state-run Anadolu news agency reported. Police launched raids at five addresses in the Osmangazi district to round up the suspects who were all Syrian nationals.

Police probe Aussie parliament brawl

Australian police are investigating a brawl between a senator and a top aide that left blood on the walls of the Australian parliament. Police and parliamentary authorities are looking into a Wednesday night altercation between 70-year-old Senator Brian Burston and a staffer for populist Senator Pauline Hanson.

BITS OF HISTORY (FEBRUARY 14)

- 1989:** Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa (edict) ordering the death of British author Salman Rushdie after the publication of his novel "The Satanic Verses".
- 2005:** Lebanon's former prime minister Rafik al-Hariri was killed in a bomb blast.
- 2008:** Northern Illinois University shooting in which a former student killed five students and himself during a lecture.



Indian soldiers examine the debris after an explosion in Lethpora in south Kashmir's Pulwama district killed at least 30 paramilitary officers yesterday. Local media reports said the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed Islamist group had claimed responsibility. PHOTO: REUTERS

AFGHANISTAN CONFLICT

No unilateral US troops pullout

Says Pentagon chief

Washington will not unilaterally withdraw from Afghanistan, the Pentagon chief said yesterday, as Nato said the Kabul government must be urgently brought into US peace talks with the Taliban aimed at ending the country's 17-year war. Acting defense secretary Patrick Shanahan said any decision to reduce the number of US troops in Afghanistan would be taken in coordination with Nato, which runs a training and support mission in the war-torn country. The United States is leading a push for peace talks with the Taliban, seeking a breakthrough in the grinding conflict, with the Islamists announcing Wednesday a fresh round of meetings in Islamabad. But Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg warned against any more delay in involving the Afghan government of President Ashraf Ghani in the process, saying that without it lasting peace would not be possible. President Donald Trump wants to end US involvement in Afghanistan, where 14,000 American troops are still deployed -- raising Afghan fears that Washington could exit before securing a durable peace deal. But, after talks with fellow Nato defence ministers in Brussels, Shanahan said Washington would not act alone. "There will be no unilateral troop reduction. That was one of the messages in the meeting today. It will be coordinated. We work together," he said after the meeting, which came after a tour of Kabul and Baghdad for Shanahan.

'It is a historic victory'

Celebrations erupt in northeast India after contentious citizenship amendment bill failed to pass in Rajya Sabha

AGENCIES

Celebrations have erupted in northeast India after a contentious nationality law put forward by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government failed to pass. The proposed changes to the 1955 Citizenship Act would have given Indian nationality to Hindus and other minorities emigrating from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The legislation -- passed by the lower house of parliament in January -- sparked angry protests in India's northeast, long riven by tensions between local tribal and indigenous groups, and settlers from outside. Modi's ruling alliance failed to present the bill in the upper house, which adjourned on Wednesday after its final session before general elections due by May. Local media reported that celebrations broke out in some half a dozen northeastern states after it became clear the bill would not be passed. "It is a historic victory for the people of northeast (India). The people of the seven states in the region stood together in opposing the bill forcing the country's ruling party to give in," Samujjal Bhattacharyya from the powerful All Assam Students' Union told AFP. "We are very firm in our opposition and are going to

oppose the bill if the BJP government comes to power" in the future, he added. The region has been plagued by decades of tensions between local tribal and indigenous groups and settlers from outside, including many Muslims and Hindus from nearby Bangladesh. While some groups there want to block all outsiders, human rights activists also condemned Modi's Hindu nationalist government for excluding Muslims in the proposed legislation. They say it will be the first time religion has been a criteria for nationality in India, which is officially secular. But the people remain wary of the BJP, a sentiment that gives the Congress a chance to reinvent itself in the region. The ruling party, for its part, hopes to make the most of the short breather it has received from the anti-citizenship bill protests. The National People's Party, the BJP's key partner in the Northeast, feels a crisis has been averted, reported NDTV Online. Party leaders said they would have had no option but to walk out of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance if the bill was passed. "Everybody from political parties to civil society groups stood together to oppose the bill. Today, the sentiments and the voice of the northeastern people have prevailed," said Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad Sangma, who led the regional parties' joint platform against the bill.



House votes to end US help

In rebuke of Trump's alliance with Riyadh, resolution would direct admin to withdraw US troops

AFP, Washington

The US House voted overwhelmingly Wednesday to end American involvement in Saudi Arabia's war effort in neighbouring Yemen, dealing a rebuke to President Donald Trump and his alliance with Riyadh. The chamber voted 248 to 177 to approve historic legislation that would direct the president within 30 days to "remove United States armed forces from hostilities in or affecting the Republic of Yemen," where a years-old conflict has killed thousands of civilians. Eighteen Republicans joined all voting Democrats in supporting the measure, a striking curtailment of presidential war powers. The vote puts pressure on the Senate to act. The Senate easily passed a similar measure late last year condemning the administration's defense of the Saudi kingdom, but it died as the last Congress ended with the then Republican-controlled House not bringing it to a vote. The House is under Democratic control, and the measure moved swiftly on the floor. "With my resolution passing the House,

we are closer than ever to ending our complicity in this humanitarian catastrophe," House Democrat Ro Khanna, who has spent years opposing US military interventions, said on Twitter. And with Senator Bernie Sanders helping lead the way on the legislation in the Senate, Khanna said, "A War Powers Resolution will pass through both chambers of Congress for the first time in history." Sanders, who is weighing a 2020 presidential run, applauded the House move. "The Senate must quickly pass this resolution and finally reassert Congress' constitutional authority over war," he said. The resolution is a reminder that Congress was given the legal ability to compel the removal of US military forces, absent a formal declaration of war. Should the Senate pass the resolution, it could force Trump to issue the first veto of his tenure. Bipartisan anger has simmered in Congress since the murder last October of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi by commandos from Riyadh.

SAUDI'S YEMEN WAR

Passage of resolution could prompt Trump to issue first veto

Situation in Yemen getting worse: UN

'Be silent or you're next'

Philippines journo slams Duterte gov't after being freed on bail; Canada FM condemns arrest

AFP, Manila

Philippine journalist Maria Ressa was freed on bail yesterday following an arrest that sparked international censure and allegations she is being targeted over her news site's criticism of President Rodrigo Duterte. Ressa, 55, spent a night in detention after authorities arrested the veteran reporter at her Manila office Wednesday in a sharp upping of government pressure on her and her website Rappler. The site and Ressa have been hit with tax evasion charges and now a libel case after clashing repeatedly with Duterte over his deadly crackdown on narcotics that has killed thousands. "The message that the government is sending is very clear... be silent or you're next," an emotional Ressa told reporters outside a Manila court. She stumped up a bond of 100,000-pesos (\$1,900), the sixth time since December

that she has paid bail on a government case. "I am appealing to you not to be silent, even if -- and especially if -- you're next," added Ressa, who was named a Time Magazine "Person of the Year" in 2018 for her journalism. International condemnation from dignitaries, press freedom and human rights groups has poured in since plainclothes agents appeared at Rappler to serve an arrest warrant. Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland tweeted she was "deeply troubled" by Ressa's arrest Wednesday. "A free press is a bedrock of democracy. Canada reiterates its call for due process to be respected and for journalists to be free from harassment and intimidation," Freeland added. Former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, tweeted in support: "The arrest of journalist @mariaressa by the Philippine government is outrageous and must be condemned by all democratic nations."



This handout photo released yesterday by the Hasyamev Jayate NGO shows Indian students taking an oath to not marry without their parents' consent, at a school in Surat in India's western Gujarat state. The vast majority of Indian marriages are arranged by families and couples who defy tradition to marry outside caste and religion face a severe and sometimes deadly backlash. PHOTO: AFP

FAILED PM BID

Thai court to hear case against party

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's constitutional court yesterday said it would hear a case to dissolve the party which proposed a princess for prime minister, an ill-fated candidacy which threatens to sink the election strategy of the powerful Shinawatra clan. The Thai Raksa Chart party nominated Princess Ubolratana for premier last Friday, a bombshell move bringing Thai royalty to frontline politics for the first time since the 1932 establishment of a constitutional monarchy. Hours later the princess's brother -- Thailand's powerful king Maha Vajiralongkorn -- scuttled her political ambitions, hitting out at the attempt to bring her into politics as "highly inappropriate" and against royal traditions. In the days since, chaos has enveloped Thai Raksa Chart, which falls under the tutelage of Thaksin Shinawatra, a divisive billionaire ex-premier who sits at the heart of Thailand's bitter political schism. On Wednesday the Election Commission (EC) handed the case for dissolution of Thai Raksa Chart to the constitutional court on the grounds the party had taken "action considered hostile to the constitutional monarchy". The court "unanimously agreed to accept the request by the Election Commission", it said in a statement. The next hearing is on February 27. Party officials fear the case is being hustled through ahead of the March 24 election, which is already stacked in favour of the ruling junta, whose leader Prayut Chan-O-Cha wants to return as a civilian premier.

Bavarians in push for 'save the bees' vote

AFP, Berlin

A record 1.75 million Bavarians signed a petition to seek a referendum to "save the bees", a move that could have huge consequences for the German farming industry and environmental protection. The proposal for a vote to protect species diversity sets a target to have 20 percent of farmland meeting organic standards by 2025, before reaching 30 percent by 2030. Ten percent of green spaces in Bavaria should also be turned into flowering meadows, while rivers and streams must be better protected from pesticides and organic fertilisers. The number of people who descended on city halls across the state to sign the petition far surpassed the one million required to obtain a referendum within six months, under the state's direct democracy system. It also came despite opposition from the powerful regional farmers' association, which has urged the population to "stop bashing farmers" and warned of the potential financial costs to the industry. The petition also puts the Bavarian government led by the CSU -- sister party of Chancellor Angela Merkel's CDU -- under intense pressure, as it counts farming communities among its staunchest supporters.

Anwar plans to succeed Mahathir in two years

Hold Goldman Sachs to account over 1MDB

THE STRAITS TIMES ONLINE

Malaysia's would-be prime minister said he expects to take power from Mahathir Mohamad in less than two years but wants to give the current leader enough time to govern effectively before he assumes control. "Of course it's not five years because he's made it very clear they would not exceed two years," Anwar Ibrahim, leader of Parti Keadilan Rakyat, or the People's Justice Party, said in an interview on Wednesday in New York on Bloomberg Television. "But it's important to allow him to govern effectively because we are in very difficult and trying times." Anwar also said Malaysia "will not compromise" in its talks with Goldman Sachs Group on the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal, and that the bank "must bear responsibility". The nation has a responsibility to uncover any crimes the investment bank may have committed, he said, adding that he is not sure whether Malaysia can get the \$7.5 billion it is seeking from Goldman as compensation for the scandal. Malaysia filed criminal charges against the bank in December. Dr Mahathir had pledged during last year's election campaign to stand aside for Anwar once he was pardoned for a controversial sodomy conviction, which happened just a week after the opposition's shock victory in May. The 93-year-old Mahathir then pushed back the timeline to one to two years. Anwar concurred, saying he planned to travel and spend time with his family after more than three years of imprisonment.



DISUSED ZIMBABWE GOLD MINE

23 miners feared dead in flood

AFP, Harare

At least 23 illegal gold miners were feared dead in Zimbabwe yesterday after water flooded two disused shafts in a mining town 145 kilometres (90 miles) south-west of the capital Harare. Rescuers were trying to use pumps to extract water in the search for survivors and bodies at the site near the town of Kadoma. "We heard from their colleagues that at least 23 people are trapped in the mine shaft which was flooded by water from a dam wall which burst due to heavy rains on Tuesday night," Wilson Gwatinga, spokesman for mining company RioZim, owners of one of the mines, told AFP. "One of them is our mine which was no longer in operation. We are assisting on humanitarian grounds." The state-owned Herald newspaper said the other mine was privately owned. District administrator Fortunate Muzulu told the paper at least 23 people were trapped underground and that the "chances of rescuing any survivors are very slim". "The illegal miners entered the shafts at night to evade the owners," Muzulu said. Police would not confirm the incident, saying they were yet to receive a full report.