

NEWS IN brief

Pak inmate killed in Indian jail

Indian prisoners stoned to death a Pakistani inmate in a jail yesterday amid mounting tensions over a suicide bombing that Delhi has blamed on its arch-rival neighbour, an official said. The Pakistani had been eight years into a life term at Jaipur Central Jail in the western state of Rajasthan when he was attacked. The killing came amid calls for retribution across India over a car bombing in Kashmir last Thursday which killed at least 40 Indian paramilitaries.

Germany to halve food waste by 2030

Germany yesterday launched a drive to halve food waste by 2030 as research shows every consumer on average throws away 55 kilograms (120 pounds) of edibles a year. The new strategy would target households, producers, retailers and the restaurant industry to get them to cut down the 11 million tons of food wasted a year. The new push would aim to help Germany meet UN and EU targets and reduce its climate footprint.

Huawei says it is 'welcomed' in India

Huawei says it has been embraced by the Indian government despite concerns elsewhere over the security of its products. Huawei, the world's biggest maker of telecommunications equipment, has been on the defensive in recent months as the US government has pushed allies to rule out using its equipment in super-fast 5G mobile networks over spying fears.

BITS OF HISTORY (FEBRUARY 20)

1942: In World War Two, the Japanese invaded Portuguese Timor.
2002: 361 people were killed when a fire engulfed a packed passenger train heading from Cairo to Luxor in Egypt's worst ever rail disaster.



A military vehicle with the US-backed coalition in Syria drives behind a convoy of trucks carrying Islamic State group's fighters and their families after they left IS's last holdout of Baghouz in Syria's northern Deir Ezzor province, yesterday. Inset: IS militants are seen sitting on one of the trucks. PHOTO: AFP

BATTLE FOR LAST IS HOLDOUT IN SYRIA

Convoy evacuates women, children

A convoy of trucks evacuated dozens of people including women and children from the Islamic State group's last Syria holdout yesterday, bringing US-backed forces closer to retaking the last sliver of the "caliphate". The implosion of the jihadist proto-state which once spanned swathes of Syria and neighbouring Iraq has left Western nations grappling with how to handle citizens who left to join IS. Around 15 trucks carrying men, women and children exited the village of Baghouz, the last patch of IS territory in eastern Syria, according to AFP correspondents. Women wearing face veils, several children as well as men were seen inside the vehicles. Their exact number and nationalities were not immediately clear. A SDF spokesman said the trucks were evacuating a first batch of civilians, but some remained inside. Backed by air strikes by a US-led coalition, the SDF have trapped IS fighters in less than half a square kilometre in Baghouz. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said a surrender deal appeared to have been reached with the jihadists. "There are reports of a deal, but we don't know the details yet," it said. On Tuesday, the SDF said several IS fighters and dozens of civilians handed themselves over to the Kurdish-led force. Spokesman Adnan Afrin said fighters were among those who left the pocket, but did not say where they were from, or if they were civilians.

Take steps to defuse tensions

UN chief urges India, Pakistan, offers help to broker solution

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UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has called on India and Pakistan to take immediate steps to defuse tensions and offered to help broker a solution if both sides agree. The two countries have been locked in a diplomatic clash following a suicide attack on February 14 in Kashmir that killed 40 Indian security personnel, triggering counter-operations by Indian forces in the area. "We are deeply concerned at the increasing tensions between the two countries," said UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric. Guterres "stresses the importance of both sides to exercise maximum restraint and take immediate steps" to de-escalate, while also offering to mediate "should both sides ask," said Dujarric. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi appealed to Guterres to step in to defuse tensions, in a letter seen by AFP. The attack was claimed by Pakistan-based Islamist group Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM).

Meanwhile, US President Donald Trump Tuesday condemned the Pulwama terrorist attack as "horrible situation". Trump told reporters at the Oval Office of White House that it would be "wonderful" if the two South Asia neighbours get along. Following the terrorist attack, his

KASHMIR TERROR ATTACK

Trump condemns attack, urges India, Pakistan to 'get along'

France, Britain and US in new push to place JeM leader on UN terror list

National Security Advisor, John Bolton, has supported India's right to self-defence. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, Bolton, and the White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders in separate statements have asked Pakistan to immediately take action against the

JeM and its leaders and end support to terrorist safe haven. In response to the rising tensions, France, Britain and the United States were considering a new push at the Security Council to place Masood Azhar, the leader of JeM, on the UN terror list, but faced opposition from China, diplomats said. China has twice blocked -- in 2016 and 2017 -- attempts to put the JeM leader on the blacklist. The group itself was added to the terror list in 2001. Kashmir has been split between India and Pakistan since independence from Britain in 1947. Both countries claim the former Himalayan kingdom in full and have fought two wars over it. India has long accused Pakistan of harboring militants who launch attacks on its soil. Pakistan's UN Ambassador Maleeha Lodhi met with Guterres and with the president of the Security Council to appeal for action, warning that a flareup in Kashmir could undermine peace efforts in Afghanistan. The United States is holding talks with the Taliban on ending 17 years of war.

'We will target USA'

Putin vows to respond to any deployment of nuclear weapons in Europe

REUTERS, Moscow
Russia will respond to any US deployment of short or intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Europe by targeting not only the countries where they are stationed, but the United States itself, President Vladimir Putin said yesterday. In his toughest remarks yet on a potential new arms race, Putin said Russia was not seeking confrontation and would not take the first step to deploy missiles in response to Washington's decision this month to quit a landmark Cold War-era arms control treaty. But he said that Russia's reaction to any deployment would be resolute and that US policymakers, some of whom he said were obsessed with US exceptionalism, should calculate the risks before taking any steps. "Russia will be forced to create and deploy types of weapons which can be used not only in respect of those territories from which the direct threat to us originates, but also in respect of those territories where the centres of decision-making

are located," he said. Alleging Russian violations, Washington said this month it was suspending its obligations under the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and starting the process of quitting it, untying its hands to develop new missiles. Russia denies violating the treaty. But it flowed the US move. The pact banned either side from stationing short and intermediate-range, land-based missiles in Europe and its demise raises the prospect of a new arms race between Washington and Moscow. But Putin, who has sometimes used bellicose rhetoric to talk up Russia's standoff with the West and to rally Russians round the flag, did not up the ante. Yesterday, he said any US move to place new missiles in Europe would leave Moscow with no choice but to respond because it would drastically cut the time it took US missiles to reach Russia, something that would pose a direct threat.



UK political sands shift

May travels to Brussels for crucial Brexit talks as three MPs abandon her Conservative Party

AFP, London
Three MPs quit the governing Conservative Party over Brexit yesterday, joining a mounting rebellion in parliament this week against the two major parties that is shaking the system in British politics. Anna Soubry, Heidi Allen and Sarah Wollaston said they planned to sit in parliament alongside eight former Labour MPs who, also citing their opposition to Brexit, have resigned from the main opposition party since Monday to form the new Independent Group. The trio of Conservatives, who support Britain remaining in the European Union, said in a joint resignation letter to Prime Minister Theresa May that Brexit had "re-defined" their party and was "undoing all the efforts to modernise it". "The final straw for us has been this government's disastrous handling of Brexit," they added, in stinging criticism of May's leadership, noting they could "no longer act as bystanders" to her EU exit strategy. "Following the EU referendum of 2016, no

genuine effort was made to build a cross-party, let alone a national consensus to deliver Brexit." The resignations posed a fresh and embarrassing headache for the prime minister as she prepared to travel to Brussels later yesterday for crucial talks with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. It also reinforced the view that Britain was plunging further into political turmoil as its MPs struggle to agree a divorce deal just five weeks before it is due to leave the bloc on March 29. The political impasse risks the country crashing out without an agreement, with the rising uncertainty blamed for a string of car-makers and other businesses recently announcing job cuts and reduced investment in Britain. May said she was "saddened" by the resignations and thanked the MPs for their "dedicated service to our party over many years". She noted Britain's membership of the EU has been "a source of disagreement both in our party and our country for a long time" but the MPs' move would not stop her delivering on the referendum result.



A newly formed independent parliamentary group is pictured inside UK parliament, London, Britain yesterday in this image obtained from social media. PHOTO: REUTERS

Venezuela on alert after Trump threat

AFP, Caracas
Venezuela's military said Tuesday it was on alert at its frontiers following threats by US President Donald Trump and suspended air and sea links with the island of Curacao ahead of a planned aid shipment. Opposition leader and self-declared interim president Juan Guaido has vowed to bring aid in from various points Saturday "one way or another" despite military efforts to block it. But commanders doubled down on their allegiance to President Nicolas Maduro after Trump urged them to abandon him. "The armed forces will remain deployed and on alert along the borders... to avoid any violations of territorial integrity," said Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino. Regional commander Vladimir Quintero later confirmed media reports that Venezuela had ordered the suspension of air and sea links with Curacao and the nearby Netherlands Antilles islands of Aruba and Bonaire. Shipments of food and medicine for Venezuelans suffering in the country's economic crisis have become a focus of the power struggle between Maduro and Guaido. Aid is being stored in Colombia near the Venezuelan border and Guaido aims also to bring in consignments via Brazil and Curacao, which is off the coast of Venezuela. A Brazilian presidential spokesman said the country was cooperating with the United States to supply aid to Venezuela but would leave it to Venezuelans to take the goods over the border. Maduro says the aid plan is a smokescreen for a US invasion. He blames US sanctions and "economic war" for Venezuela's crisis. Guaido, the 35-year-old leader of the Venezuelan legislature, has appealed to military leaders to switch allegiance to him and let the aid through.

'No testing, no rush'

Says Trump on ending N Korea's nuke programme

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US President Donald Trump said Tuesday that while he hoped his next meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un would yield much progress, he was also in "no rush" for results. "I'd like to see ultimately denuclearization of North Korea," he told reporters, just over a week out from the February 27-28 summit in Hanoi, Vietnam. "I think that North Korea and Chairman Kim have some very positive things in mind and we'll soon find out, but I'm in no rush," he said, adding that sanctions were continuing in the meantime. "I hope that positive things are going to happen. I think it'll be a very exciting couple of days."

Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun was travelling to Hanoi in preparation for the summit. An AFP reporter and source confirmed Pyongyang's special representative for the US Kim Hyok Chol arrived in Hanoi yesterday with a North Korean delegation. Kim Hyok Chol is expected to meet with Stephen Biegun later in the week to lay the groundwork for talks between Trump and Kim in the Vietnamese capital on February 27-28. Two sources with direct knowledge of security and logistics planning told Reuters yesterday Vietnam is preparing for Kim to arrive by train for his summit in Hanoi next week with Trump. Kim's train will stop at the Vietnamese border station of Dong Dang, where he will disembark and drive 170 km to Hanoi by car, the sources said. Kim could possibly stay in the Melia hotel during his visit, one of the sources said. Separately, three other sources with direct knowledge of the summit preparations told Reuters the preferred location for the meeting between the leaders is the Government Guesthouse, a colonial-era government building in central Hanoi.



US, N Korea envoys arrive in Hanoi ahead of Trump-Kim summit



Vietnam preparing for Kim to arrive by train

Statue of US sailor kissing nurse vandalised with '#MeToo'

AFP, Washington
A statue depicting the famous scene of a sailor kissing a woman in New York's Times Square as people celebrate the end of World War II has been vandalised with red spray paint spelling out #MeToo. The graffiti covers the ankle-to-knee area of the left leg of the woman being kissed, said police in Sarasota, Florida where the statue is on loan to the city. The vandalism is believed to have been committed Monday, a day after the death of the sailor in the iconic photo, George Mendonsa, at the age of 95. In that image, taken by photographer

Alfred Eisenstaedt for Life magazine, Mendonsa is seen ecstatically bending over and kissing a woman in a white nurse's uniform. Eisenstaedt has described watching the sailor running along the street and grabbing any girl in sight. Mendonsa, who served in the Pacific during World War II, was on home leave when the picture was taken. The #MeToo arose to defend victims of sexual assault, harassment and abuse. Sarasota police said there is no surveillance video from the area of the vandalism and or known witnesses. They estimated damage as costing \$1,000 to fix.

