

NEWS IN brief

UN allows N Koreans to travel to Vietnam

AFP, United Nations
A UN Security Council sanctions committee has agreed to allow North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's delegation to travel to Vietnam for a summit meeting with US President Donald Trump, diplomats said Wednesday. Vietnam had asked the committee to grant an exemption to senior North Korean officials, who are on a UN sanctions blacklist.

Russia indicts US investor for fraud

AFP, Moscow
Russian investigators yesterday formally charged US investor Michael Calvey with fraud following his controversial arrest, his lawyer said. Investigators presented him with the indictment on the charge of large-scale fraud as part of an organised group, which can carry up to ten years in prison.

Saudi to free 850 Indian prisoners from its jails

ALJAZEERA ONLINE
Saudi Arabia will release 850 Indians from its prisons after a request from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's (MBS) visit to New Delhi, India's Foreign Ministry has said. Saudi jails hold the greatest number of Indians incarcerated in any country abroad.



Local residents remove things from a bunker in the border town of Chakothi in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, some 3 km from Line of Control (LoC). Bunkers are being rebuilt and a blackout has been ordered in the area after a deadly attack in India-occupied Kashmir. Inset, an Indian student from the Saint Francis Girls High School holds a placard as they pay tribute to the slain Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel, in Hyderabad.

PHOTO: AFP



Modi shot film when country mourned

Alleges Congress; BJP hits back

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's Congress Party yesterday alleged that Prime Minister Narendra Modi continued shooting for a film in the Corbett National Park for his "propaganda and publicity" till the evening of February 14 despite the Pulwama attack taking place in the afternoon that day.

BJP responded to the Congress charge by saying that the opposition party has "shown its true colours and its content had a striking resemblance with those of Pakistani PM Imran Khan."

Citing reports in some Hindi newspapers, the Congress spokesman Randeep Singh Surjewala, at a press conference here, launched an all-out attack on the government and Modi over the Pulwama terror strike.

"In his hunger for power, the Prime Minister has forgotten 'raj dharma' (duty of governance)," he alleged.

Citing reports in the newspapers, Surjewala gave a timeline of events saying the terror attack happened at 3:10 pm on February 14 with the Congress reacting at 5:15 pm.

"The Prime Minister also knew about it, yet the PM, a person who claims himself to be a pseudo nationalist, continues to shoot a film (for Discovery channel) for self propagation in Corbett National Park in Ramnagar," he claimed.

"The Prime Minister continues to eat chai, samosas at seven o'clock at government expense in a PWD guest house when every single Indian household didn't eat their food," the Congress spokesperson said.

Senior BJP leader Ravi Shankar Prasad said "Congress has shown true face today. When the country condemning Pulwama attack and standing firmly with India, at that critical moment the true face of Congress party appears,

Big boost for Modi

83 percent Indians say BJP-led govt is the most likely outcome after 2019 general election

TOI, New Delhi

With Lok Sabha elections just a few weeks away, PM Modi has received a massive thumbs up in a mega Times Group online poll, with over two-thirds (83%) of the over 2 lakh respondents who took the survey saying a Modi-led NDA government was the most-likely possibility after the polls.

The poll also indicates that the Prime Minister's personal popularity remains high. With the official announcement of the general election days away, 84% of respondents said that they would prefer Narendra Modi as PM candidate if Lok Sabha polls were held today.

Congress president Rahul Gandhi is a distant second as the most-preferred choice for PM among online voters, with 8.33% voting for him, followed by 1.44% for Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee, 0.43% for BSP supremo Mayawati and 5.9% predicting another political leader as the next PM.

However, when asked if they considered Rahul Gandhi more popular today compared to 2014, as many as 31% responded in the affirmative, while 63% felt the opposite.

Significantly, only 3.47% respondents see a non-NDA, non-UPA mahagathbandan government as a likely scenario after the Lok Sabha poll.

The poll was conducted online between February 11 and 20 in 9 languages across 13 media properties of the Times Group. The results were concealed from respondents during the 10 days of online polling to negate motivated voting.

Almost half a million voted for this survey, however, in order to negate any attempt at gaming the result, ONLY logged in users' votes (over 2 lakh) were considered, ensuring that only one vote per person was counted.

When asked to rate five years of the Modi government, over two-third of respondents rated its track record as good or very good. Out of this, 'very good' accounted for 59.51% and 'good' for 22.29%. About 8.25% termed it as average, while 9.9% found it to be poor.

The online survey asked respondents to rate the biggest successes as well as failures of the Modi government. On successes: 34.39% respondents rated more access to facilities for the poor from various schemes as their top choice, followed closely by implementation of GST (29%).

TIMES MEGA POLL

Two-third of respondents rated Modi govt's track record as very good

More access to facilities for poor emerged as biggest success of Modi

Nine countries at UNSC seek to override China

AFP, United Nations

The United States, France, Britain and six other countries on the UN Security Council have called for a meeting on Myanmar that is expected to face opposition from China, diplomats said Wednesday.

The meeting requested for next week would be to hear a report from UN envoy Christine Schraner Burgener who last month paid a 12-day visit to Myanmar to discuss the plight of Rohingya refugees.

Around 740,000 Muslim Rohingya are living in camps in Bangladesh after they were driven out of Myanmar's northern Rakhine state during a military campaign in 2017 that the United Nations has described as ethnic cleansing.

Myanmar has agreed to take back some of the refugees in a deal reached with Bangladesh, but the United Nations insists that the safety of the Rohingya be a condition for their return.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has criticized as "too slow" Myanmar's

efforts to address the Rohingya crisis and described the lack of progress as a source of "enormous frustration."

Schraner Burgener, a Swiss diplomat, has made four visits to Myanmar since her appointment in April but appears to have returned empty-handed each time.

Belgium, Germany, Poland, Kuwait, Peru and the Dominican Republic joined the three veto-holding powers to push the council to turn its attention to Myanmar.

Diplomats said China was expected to raise objections but it remained unclear whether it would seek to block the meeting with a procedural vote.

Nine votes are required in the 15-member council to hold a meeting, and vetoes do not apply.

The Chinese mission at the United Nations did not respond to a request from AFP for comment.

In October, China failed to win enough support at the council to block a report from the head of UN fact-finding mission in Myanmar.

ROHINGYA CRISIS

Meeting requested for next week would discuss Rohingya crisis

It remained unclear whether China will block the meeting

Nepal govt's move sparks freedom of speech concerns

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government on Wednesday tabled draft legislation that would impose harsh penalties for "improper" social media posts, igniting concerns it could be used to suppress freedom of speech and stifle dissent.

Under the proposed law, the government would have the power to block social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube unless they register in Nepal.

And social media posts deemed defamatory or against national sovereignty could be punished with up to five years in jail and a fine of 1.5 million Nepalese rupees (\$13,000).

No timetable was given for passing the bill, but activists have described it as an attempt to shackle criticism of the powerful communist government, which has a two-thirds majority in parliament.

"The bill is against the freedom of expres-

sion and justice as it criminalises online expression," Tara Nath Dahal of Freedom Forum, a media freedom organisation, told AFP.

The government has defended the bill, saying it is needed to ensure data and internet security.

"The bill was registered to manage social networking sites because the challenges caused by such sites are increasing," information minister Gokul Prasad Baskota told parliament.

Under the proposed law, the government can also instruct social network site operators to remove posts. Failure to do so could lead to a three-year jail term and a 30,000-rupee fine.

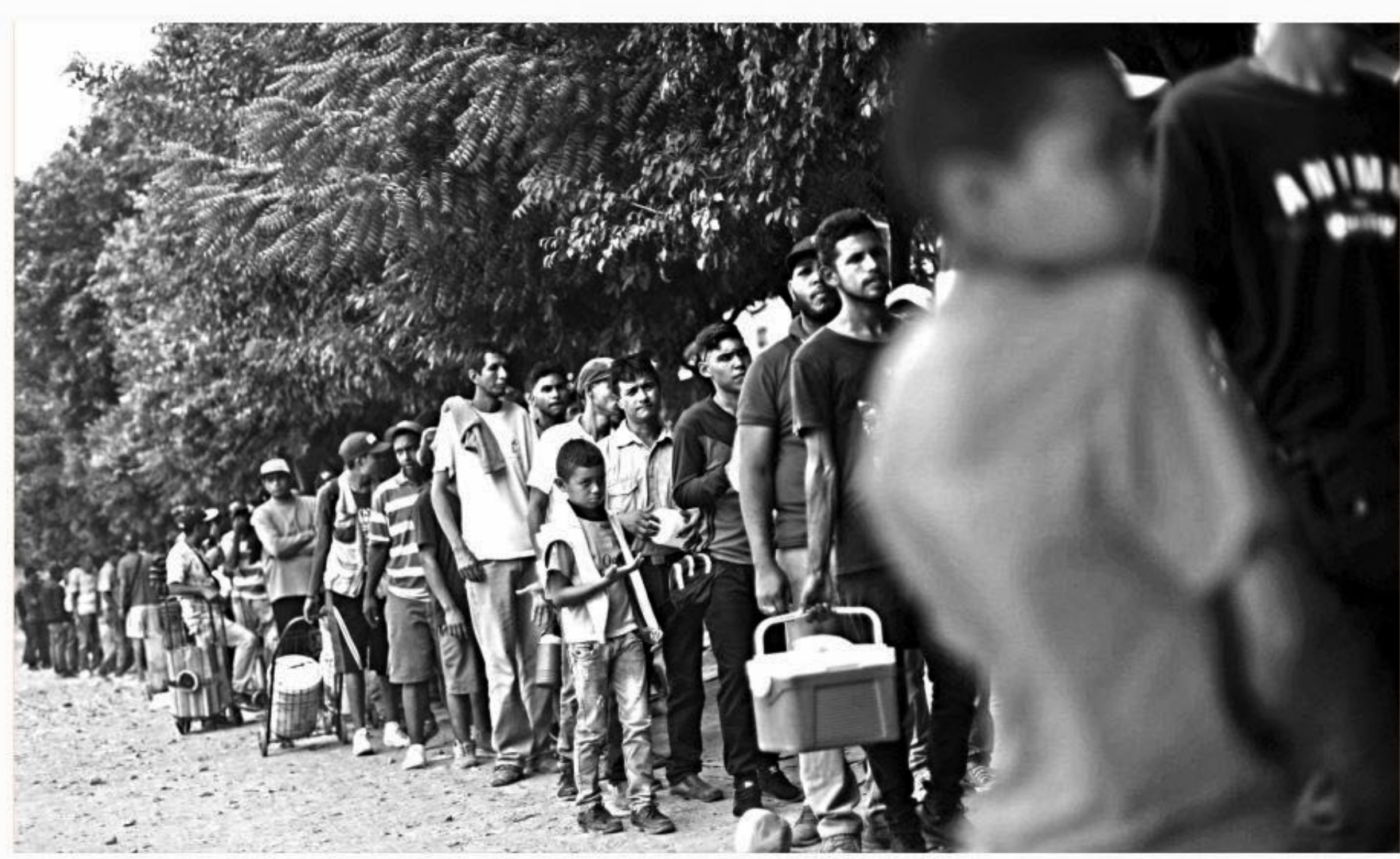
The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) has called on the government to address concerns raised by rights groups.

"The proposed law put forward by the Nepal government is a blatant attempt to control and muzzle freedom of expression on social media," it said in a statement.

SOCIAL MEDIA BILL

Draft legislation offers harsh penalties for 'improper' posts

Govt would have power to block social media platforms like Facebook



Venezuelans line up as they wait for a free lunch at the "Divina Providencia" migrant shelter outskirts of Cucuta, at the Colombian-Venezuelan border on Wednesday. Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido made plans to head for the border with Colombia to personally bring in US-supplied food and medicine in defiance of the military-backed government, raising fears of possible weekend confrontations.

PHOTO: REUTERS

India SC orders eviction of 1m forest dwellers

REUTERS, Bangkok

India's Supreme Court has ordered the eviction of more than 1 million indigenous people and others who live in forests, after the federal government failed to defend a law aimed at protecting their rights.

The top court's order, dated February 13 and delivered in written form on Wednesday, was in response to a petition against the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006, filed by some environmental groups who said the law impeded conservation efforts.

Under the landmark Forest Rights Act, at least 150 million people could have had their rights recognised to about 40 million hectares (154,000 square miles) of forest land.

The Supreme Court has asked officials in 16 states to submit details of rights claims settled, and "in the cases where claims have been rejected ... to ensure that eviction is made on or before the next date of hearing" on July 24.

The order "is a major blow to the struggle of tribals and forest dwellers for justice", advocacy group Campaign for Survival and Dignity said in a statement.

"Another historic injustice is about to be committed against tribals and other forest dwellers," said Shankar Gopalakrishnan, president of the group.

India has more than 100 million indigenous people, who are also known as Adivasis, or original inhabitants.

The court's order could affect claims of indigenous people in the remaining states and lead to more evictions, he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Campaigners say many states had rejected recognition of community forest rights on flimsy grounds as demand increased for land for mining and industry.

No more pop songs of praise: Tajik leader

AFP, Dushanbe

Tajikistan's authoritarian leader has called for an end to pop songs praising him, state television said yesterday, as the leadership cult surrounding the 66-year-old gathers strength.

The long-reigning strongman Emomali Rakhmon had "expressed concern" at "excessive advertising of the president's personality through music videos," it said.

"The president instructed the leadership of the Committee on Television and Radio Broadcasting instead to highlight the tireless work of the population, the country's significant achievements, the unique nature of this ancient land," it said.

Presidential personality cults are the norm in ex-Soviet Central Asia, where leaders face little political opposition or independent media.

In neighbouring Uzbekistan, authorities have also cautioned against music praising President Shavkat Mirziyoyev.

The head of the state agency responsible for regulating the pop industry said this week that Mirziyoyev "does not need an advert from artists" after one singer released a song "Selfie with my President".

Saudi crown prince gifted gold-plated gun in Pakistan

CNN ONLINE

It's not unusual for dignitaries to receive gifts during visits to foreign countries -- perhaps a Cuban cigar or a bottle of French wine.

But a delegation of Pakistani senators sprang a surprise Monday during a visit by Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to the country, presenting him with a gold-plated gun.

The Heckler & Koch MP5 is a sub-machine gun developed by German engineers, and this modified weapon has an elaborate pattern engraved on its gold-plated components.

Lawmakers also gave the crown prince, commonly known as MBS, a portrait of himself, a source at the senate told CNN.

Presenting MBS with a weapon will likely raise eyebrows at a time when the crown prince

has been embroiled in controversy over the death of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who was murdered at the country's consulate in Istanbul in October of last year.

US intelligence officials have said the killing could not have been carried out without bin Salman's knowledge. Saudi authorities have repeatedly denied that MBS knew anything about the operation.

MBS travelled to Pakistan at the start of an Asian tour widely seen as an attempt to bolster ties and improve the kingdom's image after a troubled year.

Islamabad went to great lengths to welcome bin Salman, honouring his arrival with a 21-gun salute and a fly-past by the country's air force. A massive security operation was also launched, with the capital's air space shut down and schools and all government institutions closed Monday.



'Xi cult' app becomes red hot hit in China

AFP, Beijing

A propaganda app that puts China's powerful President Xi Jinping in anyone's pockets has become a hit in the country -- with a helpful nudge from Communist Party officials.

Millions have downloaded the app, which tracks the amount of time users spend browsing inspirational quotes from the Chinese leader and watching short videos of his speeches and travels.

People are rewarded with points for sharing articles or answering quizzes on Communist heroes, and one day they may be able to redeem their scores for gifts such as pastries and tablets.

But it's not all fun and games. Some people say they felt pressured to download it, others hope it can help their careers, and local government officials have been heavily promoting it.

The app's name -- "Xuexi Qiangguo" or "Study to Make China strong" -- is a pun as the Chinese word for studying, Xuexi, can also be read as "Study Xi".

It has been downloaded nearly 44 million times on Apple and Android devices since its launch in January, according to Beijing-based statistics provider Qimai Technology.

"It's a perfect example of propaganda in the Xi era... that appeals to China's large online population," said Many Koetse, who tracks social trends in China as editor of What's on Weibo.

"The party will go wherever the people are."