

NEWS IN brief

UNSC blacklists bin Laden's son

PTI, United Nations
The UN Security Council has designated Hamza bin Laden, the son of slain al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden, under its sanctions list, subjecting him to a travel ban, assets freeze and an arms embargo. The UN Security Council's 1267 ISIS and al-Qaeda Sanctions Committee listed 29-year-old Hamza bin Laden on Thursday, the day the US announced a reward of up to one million dollars for information about him.

2 more Aussie cabinet ministers quit politics

REUTERS, Sydney
Two more ministers in Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's cabinet said yesterday they will not contest elections due in May, adding to a flurry of high-profile resignations as opinion polls suggest the centre-right government faces a heavy defeat. Defence Minister Christopher Pyne and Defence Industry Minister Steven Ciobo both announced morning that they would not stand in the coming election.

US, S Korea to scale down drills

REUTERS, Washington
The United States and South Korea are expected to announce that they will not carry out large-scale spring joint military exercises, replacing them with smaller-scale drills, US officials said on Friday. The Foal Eagle field exercise, which usually involves thousands of combined ground, air, naval and special operations troops, takes place every spring. Key Resolve is a computer-simulated exercise.

BITS OF HISTORY (MARCH 02)

- 1962: The Burmese army, led by Ne Win, seized power in a coup.
- 2003: Half a million Algerians gave French President Jacques Chirac a rousing welcome at the start of the first full state visit by a French president since Algeria won independence in 1962.



Pakistani Kashmiris carry the coffin of a civilian, who was killed in a gunfight between Indian and Pakistan troops on the Line of Control (LoC), at a funeral ceremony on the outskirts of Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan-administered Kashmir, yesterday. Inset, An Indian man, wounded by a Pakistani mortar shell, being carried to a hospital in frontier town of Mendhar in Indian Kashmir.

PHOTO: AFP



Nobel Peace Prize for Imran Khan!

AFP, Islamabad
More than 300,000 people have signed online petitions calling for Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan to receive a Nobel Peace Prize after he freed an Indian pilot in a bid to defuse tensions with his country's arch-rival neighbour. The hashtag #NobelPeaceForImranKhan began trending on Twitter on Thursday after Khan unexpectedly announced that the captured pilot would be released as a "peace gesture". Abhinandan -- whose MiG fighter was shot down a day earlier as he chased Pakistani jets over disputed Kashmir -- was returned to India late Friday. Pakistan's information minister Fawad Chaudhry also submitted a resolution in the country's parliament yesterday demanding Khan be given the award for his contribution to peace in the region. "Imran Khan played a sagacious role in de-escalating tension between Pakistan and India," the resolution said. In his speech announcing Abhinandan's release, Khan referred to the catastrophic consequences of nuclear war as he called for talks with New Delhi. Thousands of people around the world are allowed to make nominations for the Peace Prize, including members of parliament and government ministers, former laureates and some university professors.

India-Pakistan train service to resume 'Loose-nukes' threat remains

CNN ONLINE

PTI, New Delhi

With Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman back in India from Pakistan's custody, and hostilities between the two nations dialed down several notches, both India and Pakistan have agreed to resume the services of the Samjhauta Express train that was suspended earlier this week.

The first train will leave from India on March 3, an official release said.

Pakistan had cancelled the train service from its end after an Indian Air Force package of jets unloaded bombs on the biggest training camp run by terror group Jaish-e-Mohammed in Pakistan's Balakot, which had claimed responsibility for the deaths of 40 CRPF soldiers in a suicide attack in Jammu and Kashmir's Pulwama district.

India reciprocated on February 28, cancelling the operation of the train, which runs from Delhi to Attari and from Lahore to Wagah on the Pakistan side.

Pakistan had dispatched 24 fighter aircraft to target Indian military installations, in response to the Indian Air Force strike on the Jaish camp, Indian media said.

A formation of eight Indian jets intercepted the Pakistani formation and chased them away, they added. Abhinandan's MiG 21 Bison was shot down by Pakistani and he was captured.

The Samjhauta Express, named after the Hindi word for "agreement", comprises six sleeper coaches and an AC 3-tier coach. The train service was started on July 22, 1976 under the Shimla Agreement that settled the 1971 war between the two nations.

Tensions on the border between India and Pakistan last week pushed the two nuclear-powered South Asian adversaries closer to conflict than at any point in the past two decades. While the situation has calmed -- Pakistan on Friday released an Indian air force pilot it captured after shooting his plane down -- drastic swings in relations are the norm. Both countries know the risks when tensions spike. Following their separation in 1947, relations between India and Pakistan have been in a near constant state of agitation. The two sides have fought several major wars -- the last being in 1999 -- involving thousands of casualties and numerous skirmishes across the Line of Control in the contested Kashmir region. Since that last clash, both countries have quietly sought to enlarge and upgrade their military capabilities. With its military buildup over those decades, India now exceeds Pakistan on most numerical measurements -- fighter jets, troops, tanks and helicopters. India far surpasses Pakistan in



other measures, too, especially in military budget, \$64 billion to \$11 billion, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). But, as is often the case, numbers don't tell the whole story. India has about 3 million military personnel compared to fewer than 1 million for Pakistan, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, but New Delhi can't focus them all on its neighbor to the west. A chunk is focused on India's northeast and its border with China. And China is able to keep Indian attentions divided by keeping a close military relationship with Pakistan.

"There is a convergence with Chinese and Pakistan strategic thinking that has continued for five decades now," said Nishank Motwani, a visiting fellow at the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy with expertise on India and Pakistan. However, India, with a landmass nearly four times that of Pakistan, can put military assets well back from tense border regions, where any Pakistani strikes against them would encounter multiple layers of air defenses. In the smaller and more narrow Pakistan, military bases and assets are harder to shield. To carry out any attacks, India has the variety and num-

ber of aircraft -- fighters, ground-attack tankers and AWACs -- that Pakistan just can't match. Pakistan's navy and ground forces are no match too. One area where Indian and Pakistan are evenly matched is the area that raises the most worry whenever hostilities spike between the two -- nuclear weapons. Figures from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute last year show Pakistan with 140 to 150 nuclear warheads and India with 130 to 140. Experts worry that if the situation gets dire for Pakistan, they could be used before commanders in Islamabad could stop them. "Pakistan has a strategic policy of delegating nuclear release approval down to lower level tactical units," he said. "There is a real danger of 'loose nukes,' that is lower-level bellicose commanders using tactical nuclear weapons if they see fit." "Pakistan can use terrorist groups. That's a military strategy it has used for decades as a way to bridge the military gap with India," Motwani said. And every time India contemplates retaliation, the nuclear threat is there.

Assault launched on last IS enclave

Only jihadists remain in Baghouz; battle to last till all jihadists eliminated

REUTERS, Deir Al-zor Province

US-backed forces launched an attack on Friday to evict Islamic State from its last territorial bastion and seal four years of international efforts to roll back a "caliphate" that redrew the map of the Middle East.

While the fall of Baghouz, an eastern Syrian village on the bank of the Euphrates River, would mark a milestone in the campaign against the jihadists, they are still a threat, using guerrilla tactics and holding some desolate land further west.

Islamic State (IS) followers and fighters fell back to Baghouz as the group was gradually pushed out of its territory, including its twin capitals of Mosul and Raqqa, in 2017.

Thousands of them have poured out of the enclave over the last few weeks, an evacuation that held up the final assault.

The US-backed Syrian Democratic



Forces (SDF) removed the last batch of non-combatants and then moved in at 6 pm (1600 GMT), said Mustafa Bali, head of the SDF media office. "Nothing remains in Baghouz except for terrorists. The battle ... will not end until the elimination of Daesh and the liberation of the village," he told Reuters, using an Arabic acronym for IS.

"We expect a fierce and heavy battle," he said, adding that initial fighting involved heavy weapons. The SDF has previously said many of the jihadists left in Baghouz are foreign fighters who travelled from around the world to join IS after its leader declared a modern-day caliphate in 2014 over large swathes of Syria and neighbouring Iraq.

They bore various nationalities including Russian, Indonesian and Azerbaijani. One woman told Reuters that IS militants still inside Baghouz had dug in and were ready to fight to the death. Some 40,000 people have crossed out of the jihadists' diminishing territory in the last three months as the SDF sought to drive the militants from remaining pockets. The village was the last populated territory held by the jihadists, who have been steadily driven by an array of enemies from land they once held which at its height was about the size of Britain, by one estimate. The SDF commander-in-chief said on Thursday that his force would declare victory within a week. He was later contradicted by US President Donald Trump, who said the SDF had retaken 100 percent of the territory once held by IS.

'Bye, bye Bouteflika!'

Tens of thousands protest in Algeria

REUTERS, Algiers

Tens of thousands of people in cities across Algeria called on President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to leave office on Friday in the country's biggest anti-government demonstrations since the Arab Spring eight years ago.

The protests were mostly peaceful but as crowds receded by late afternoon, scuffles broke out in the capital Algiers between police and protesters near the presidential palace, witnesses said. One person died, according to a local official. Local media said it was a 60-year-old man who suffered a heart attack.

Several protesters and policemen were wounded during clashes in Algiers, state television said. News website TSA put the number of wounded at 63, citing official figures. It said 45 people were detained.

A sea of demonstrators, young and old, had thronged the streets after Friday prayers, chanting "Bye, bye Bouteflika!" and "Peaceful! Peaceful!" Many were draped in the Algerian flag and carried placards and banners.

Large scale demonstrations - rarely seen in Algeria - against plans for Bouteflika to seek a fifth term in power in April elections began a week ago, but Friday saw the biggest turnout yet.

The 81-year-old suffered a stroke in 2013 and has been seen in public only a few times since. His re-election bid stoked resentment among Algerians who believe he is not fit to lead. Large crowds also gathered in the cities of Oran, Constantine, Setif, Tizi Ouzou and Bouira, residents and local media said.

Bouteflika, who will turn 82 on Saturday, has not directly addressed the protests. The authorities said last week he would travel to Geneva for unspecified medical checks, although there was no official confirmation he had travelled.



EU ready to give UK more guarantees on 'backstop'

REUTERS, Berlin

The European Union is ready to give Britain more guarantees that the Irish "backstop" is only intended to be temporary, the bloc's chief Brexit negotiator said on Friday.

"We know that there are misgivings in Britain that the backstop could keep Britain forever connected to the EU," Michel Barnier said in an interview with Germany's Die Welt newspaper to be published on Saturday.

"This is not the case. And we are ready to give further guarantees, assurances and clarifications that the backstop should only be temporary."

The backstop, an arrangement designed to prevent the return of "hard" border infrastructure between EU member Ireland and British-ruled Northern Ireland if there is no trade deal after Brexit that makes it unnecessary, has become the main point of contention in the proposed Brexit deal.

"We will not reverse the backstop," Barnier added. "It's an insurance. We don't want to make use of it. And this is also the case when you insure your house. It's only intended for the worst-case scenario."

British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt said last month that the key to securing a Brexit deal that the British government can get through parliament was to define the "temporary" nature of the Irish backstop more precisely.

US cranks up pressure on Venezuela with sanctions

REUTERS, Washington/Asuncion

The United States on Friday ramped up its attempt to dislodge Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro from power, imposing new sanctions and revoking visas, while opposition leader Juan Guaido said Maduro's support among the military was cracking.

Venezuelan military officials last weekend blocked an opposition-backed effort to bring food into the country via its borders with Colombia and Brazil, leaving two aid trucks in flames and five people dead.

Guaido, who is recognized by most Western nations as Venezuela's rightful leader, visited Paraguay and Argentina on Friday to shore up Latin American support for a transition government for the crisis-stricken nation.

But Maduro retains control of state institutions and the apparent loyalty of senior figures in the armed forces. Following a meeting with Argentine

Washington revokes visas of 49 people aligned with Maduro

Guaido tours South America, claims military support for Maduro draining away

said in a statement. The US State Department later said it had revoked the travel visas of 49 people as it cracked down on "individuals responsible for undermining Venezuela's democracy."



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un bids farewell before boarding his train to depart for North Korea at Dong Dang railway station in Vietnam, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS