

Reuters photographer
Behrakis dead at 58

AFP, Athens

Award-winning Reuters photographer Yannis Behrakis has died aged 58 after a battle with cancer, Greece's foreign press association said yesterday. He won many prestigious awards like the World Press Photo in 2000, Bayeux-Calvados in 2016, and Photographer of the Year by the Guardian in 2015. The married father of two also led a Reuters team that won the Pulitzer Prize in 2016 for coverage of the migration crisis.

Israel hits Hamas
sites in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli aircraft have struck two Hamas observation points in the Gaza Strip, a security source said yesterday, after the army reported balloons carrying an "explosive device" were sent toward Israel. No injuries occurred from the strikes late Saturday east of Al-Bureij in the central Gaza Strip and east of Rafah in the south of the blockaded enclave run by Islamist movement Hamas, according to a Hamas security source.

Five children killed in
attack in Hodeida: UN

AFP, Dubai

Five Yemeni children were killed in an attack on their home in flashpoint Hodeida province, the UN and medics said, months into a ceasefire agreed by the government and rebels. The UN children's agency (UNICEF) said that the five children were "playing at home" when they were killed on Thursday. It did not give details on the nature of the attack or the perpetrators.

BITS OF HISTORY
(MARCH 03)

1918: Germany and its allies signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Russia, ending hostilities between them.

2009: A dozen gunmen attacked Sri Lanka's cricket team, wounding six players and a British coach and killing at least eight Pakistanis in Lahore.



An Indian Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) supporter waves a flag among the crowd of other supporters listening to Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) 'Sankalp' rally in Patna in the Indian eastern state of Bihar, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

J&K 'strictly internal' issue

Says India as OIC slams New Delhi on Kashmir in resolution

NDTV ONLINE

Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of India and is a matter strictly internal to India, New Delhi said on Saturday after the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) criticised India on Kashmir in a resolution adopted by the influential grouping of 57 countries. The resolution came just a day after Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj, as the guest of honour, called out "states which shelter terrorists".

In its first reaction to the resolution, India's Ministry of External Affairs said, "Our stand is consistent and well known. We reaffirm that Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of India and is a matter strictly internal to India."

In a sharply-worded statement on Saturday, the OIC hit out at what it called "intensified Indian barbarities since July 2016" and "illegal detentions and disappearances" in Jammu and Kashmir.

On Friday, Swaraj had urged the OIC to "act together" to combat global terrorism amid heightened tensions between India and Pakistan triggered by the Pulwama terror attack last month. Though she did not name Pakistan in her 17-minute address, she said, "If we want to save humanity, we must tell the states who provide

shelter and funding to terrorists, to dismantle the infrastructure of the terrorist camps and stop providing funding shelter and funding to the terror organisations based in that country."

She also said terrorism, which was destabilising regions and putting the world at great peril, was not against any religion. "Terrorism and extremism bear different names and labels. It uses diverse causes. But in each case, it is driven by distortion of religion, and a misguided belief in its power to succeed. The fight against terrorism is not a confrontation against any religion," Swaraj said.

On Saturday, the OIC adopted a resolution on Kashmir, attacking India for "indiscriminate use of force against innocent Kashmiris" and also praised Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan for sending back Indian Air Force pilot

Abhinandan Varthaman, who was captured after an aerial encounter on Wednesday.

In response, Pakistan's Foreign Office said that the OIC meeting of foreign ministers had concluded with a resolution that "supported" Pakistan on the Kashmir issue.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi had skipped the meeting of foreign ministers because the OIC had invited Swaraj to the event, sending junior officials to "represent the country's interests".

OIC praises Pak PM for
sending back IAF pilot
Resolution 'supported'
Pakistan on the Kashmir
issue: Islamabad



Flash floods kill 20 in Afghanistan

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

At least 20 people, including many children, have been killed in flash floods in six districts and the capital of Afghanistan's southern province of Kandahar, the United Nations has said.

The victims were killed when their homes collapsed or the vehicles they were travelling in were swept away, according to the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

"At least 10 people, including children, are still missing," said the UN agency in a statement on Saturday.

"It is anticipated that up to 2,000 homes may have been damaged", with severe damage to infrastructure also being reported.

AIR STRIKES ON PAKISTAN

India refuses to share proof

Modi accuses opposition of
destroying armed forces' morale

AGENCIES

A top Indian minister has said the government would not share proof that "a very large number" of militants were killed in air strikes inside Pakistan this week, after doubts were raised there were any casualties in the attack that stoked tensions between the nuclear-armed rivals.

Hostilities escalated rapidly following a suicide car bombing on Feb 14 that killed at least 40 Indian paramilitary police in Indian-controlled Kashmir. India accuses Pakistan of harbouring the Jaish-e Mohammad Islamist group that claimed the bombing.

Indian warplanes carried out air strikes on Tuesday inside northeast Pakistan's Balakot on what New Delhi called militant camps. Islamabad denied any such camps existed, as did local villagers in the area when Reuters visited.

Some Indian opposition leaders have asked the government to share evidence of the strikes.

But India's Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, one of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's top lieutenants, said "no security agencies ever share operational details".

"It's a very irresponsible stand," Jaitley said at a conference organised by the India Today media group.

Modi yesterday ripped into the Congress, accusing the party of providing ammunition to Pakistan with its criticism of the government over the air. Contending that the Congress stance would only please Pakistan, he said, "They asked for evidence of the surgical strikes. Now, they ask for evidence of the strikes by the Air Forces".



"I want to know from the Congress and other parties why they are bent on destroying the morale of the armed forces. Why is the Congress giving speeches where enemies are benefitting? When we had to stand united against terror factories, 21 parties united for questioning us," he added.

Indian Air Force officials said earlier it was up to the political leaders to decide when and how to release evidence of the Balakot strike.

Jaitley dismissed suggestions that the rapid escalation in tensions with Pakistan had anything to do with India's domestic politics ahead of a general election due by May. Pollsters expect the ruling party to benefit from the nationalistic passion sweeping the country.

Meanwhile, another Union Minister SS Ahluwalia yesterday said that the aim of the Indian Air Force strike in Pakistan's Balakot was to send out the message that India is capable of hitting deep inside enemy lines and did not intend to inflict "any human casualty".

Ahluwalia said neither Prime Minister Narendra Modi nor any government spokesperson had given any figure on casualty of the IAF air strikes. Rather, it was the media and social media where the unconfirmed figures of terrorist killed were being circulated, he said.

N Korea has no economic future with nuke weapons

Says Trump; US, S Korea end key military drills

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump said on Saturday that North Korea does not have any economic future with nuclear weapons as the Pentagon confirmed the United States and South Korea had agreed to end joint large scale spring military exercises.

"North Korea has an incredible, brilliant economic future if they make a deal, but they don't have any economic future if they have nuclear weapons," Trump said at a Conservative Political Action Conference.

He added that the relationship with North Korea seemed to be "very, very strong."

According to a statement, acting Pentagon Chief Patrick Shanahan spoke with his South Korea counterpart on Saturday and they agreed to adapt their training programs.

The two "made clear that the Alliance decision to adapt our training program

reflected our desire to reduce tension and support our diplomatic efforts to achieve complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula in a final, fully verified manner," the Pentagon said.

South Korea's military issued a similar statement also confirming plans to end the spring joint military exercises.

Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Lee Do-hoon is planning to visit the United States in the coming week to meet US officials to discuss the second US-North Korea summit as well as the future agenda, according to a South Korean official.

The Pentagon said the US and South Korea had agreed to "newly designed Command Post exercises and revised field training programs." US officials have long said the scope of the spring exercises, known as Foal Eagle and Key Resolve, would be reduced.



US President Donald Trump hugs American flag at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) annual meeting at National Harbor near Washington, US, on Saturday. Trump rallied right-wing activists on Saturday with a speech offering conservative red meat on immigration, trade and the threat of "socialism" as he sought to move on from a bruising week in domestic and international politics.

PHOTO: AFP

SYRIA WAR

Qaeda-linked group kills 21 regime forces

AFP, Beirut

A Syrian jihadist group linked to al-Qaeda killed 21 regime and allied forces yesterday near Idlib province, in one of the deadliest breaches of a six-month-old truce deal, a monitor said.

"At dawn, 21 fighters from the regime forces or allied militia were killed in an attack by Ansar al-Tawhid jihadists, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

"Five jihadists were also killed," Rami Abdel Rahman, the director of the Britain-based monitoring group, said.

Ansar al-Tawhid has ties to the larger Hurras al-Deen group, which is also active in the area. Both are considered semi-official franchises of al-Qaeda in Syria.

The area of Idlib and small parts of the adjacent provinces of Hama and Aleppo are mostly controlled by the rival Hayat Tahrir al-Sham organisation.

HTS is led by fighters who formerly belonged to al-Qaeda's ex-affiliate in Syria.

Yesterday's deadly assault was carried out against regime positions in the village of Masasna, in the north of Hama province, the Observatory said.

"It was one of the highest casualty figures among regime ranks since the Putin-Erdogan deal," the Observatory's Abdel Rahman said.

He was referring to an agreement reached in the Russian resort of Sochi between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Under the September 17 deal, Turkey was supposed to exert its influence over anti-regime groups in the Idlib region to get them to pull back their fighters and heavy weapons from a demilitarised zone.

Polygamy 'injustice' to women: cleric

AFP, Cairo

The grand imam of Egypt's famed Al-Azhar institution, Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, has described polygamy as an "injustice" for women.

"Polygamy is often an injustice to women and children," said the influential cleric, in quotes published on Twitter late Friday by Al-Azhar, Sunni Islam's most prestigious seat of learning.

The practice is the result of "a lack of understanding of the Quran and the tradition of the Prophet (pbuh)," he added.

Tayeb also addressed the issue in a weekly Friday television show, telling viewers: "Those who say that marriage must be polygamous are all wrong".

He added the Quran says that in order for a Muslim man to have multiple wives, he "must obey conditions of fairness -- and if there is not fairness it is forbidden to have multiple wives".

After the grand imam's comments sparked fervent debate on social media, Al-Azhar on Saturday clarified that he did not call for polygamy to be banned.

In his Friday comments, Tayeb called more broadly for the way women's issues are addressed to be revamped.

"Women represent half of society, if we don't care for them it's like we are walking on one foot only," he said in the remarks published on Twitter.

The grand imam's approach was welcomed by Egypt's National Council for Women.

Russia says will prevent US intervention in Venezuela

REUTERS, Moscow

Russia will do all possible to prevent a US military intervention in Venezuela, the TASS news agency quoted the speaker of Russia's upper house of parliament as saying yesterday.

"We are very much concerned that the USA could carry out any provocations to shed blood, to find a cause and reasons for an intervention in Venezuela," Valentina Matvienko told Venezuelan Vice President Delcy Rodriguez in Moscow.

"But we will do all in order not to allow this," said Matvienko, a close ally of President Vladimir Putin.

The statement came a day after Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told his US counterpart that Moscow was ready to take part in bilateral talks with Washington over the issue of Venezuela.

The situation in Venezuela was the main topic in a phone call between Lavrov and

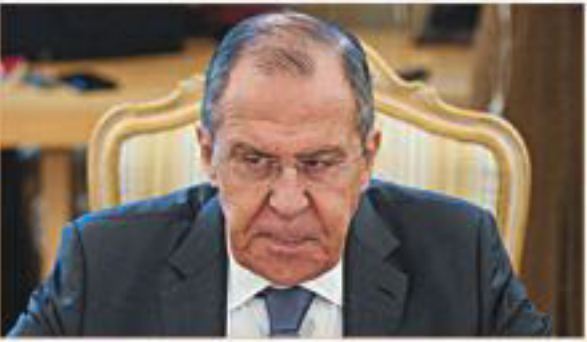
Mike Pompeo that took place on March 2, Russia's foreign ministry said on its website.

"In connection with Washington's proposal to hold bilateral consultations on the Venezuelan topic, it was stated that Russia is ready to participate in this," the ministry said in a statement.

It was "vital to be strictly guided by the principles of the UN Charter since only the Venezuelan people have the right to determine their future," the statement said.

Russia and the United States have been at loggerheads over a US-led campaign for international recognition of Juan Guaido, the Venezuelan opposition leader who declared himself the interim head of state, over President Nicholas Maduro.

In the phone call, initiated by the United States, Lavrov condemned the threats that Washington made towards "the country's lawful leadership," the ministry said, referring to Maduro.



'We should live in Holland'

Says Dutch husband of IS teen

AFP, London

The Dutch husband of Shamima Begum, a British-born teenager who fled to join Islamic State, wants to live with her in the Netherlands, the BBC reported yesterday after finding him in Syria.

Yago Riedijk, who is being held in a Kurdish-run detention centre in northeast Syria, married Begum days after she arrived in territory held by IS when he was 23 and she was 15, he told BBC television.

Begum, 19, from east London and now in a refugee camp, has said she would like to return to Britain but has been stripped of her British citizenship by the government which calls her a security threat.

Riedijk, who is 27 and says he now rejects IS, having fought for the jihadist group, says he wants to return home to the Netherlands with his wife and their newborn son.

In a first extract from the interview released by the BBC, he was asked if he thought marrying a girl of that age was acceptable.

"When my friend came and said there was a girl who was interested in marriage, I wasn't that interested because of her age, but I accepted the offer anyway," he replied.

Riedijk, from Arnhem, told the BBC that he had been imprisoned and tortured after IS suspected him of being a Dutch spy. He surrendered to Syrian fighters.