

NEWSIN  
brief

Nirav Modi's mansion  
demolished: officials

Indian authorities yesterday dynamited the multi-million-dollar seafront mansion of fugitive billionaire and jeweller to the stars Nirav Modi, officials said. The 33,000 square-foot property near Mumbai, believed to be worth \$14 million, was seized after Modi was accused of involvement in a massive bank fraud that rocked India's corporate community.

MH370 families seek  
answers, five years on

Emotional relatives of those aboard Flight MH370 yesterday demanded answers to one of the world's greatest aviation mysteries and called for the hunt to resume, five years on from the plane's disappearance. The Malaysia Airlines jet vanished on March 8, 2014 carrying 239 people -- mostly from China -- en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing.

Road accident in Mexico  
kills 25 migrants

A truck packed with Central American migrants swerved off a highway in southern Mexico Thursday, leaving at least 25 dead and 32 injured, officials said. The accident happened in Chiapas state, bordering Guatemala, the state attorney general's office said in a statement.

Finnish govt resigns  
over failed reforms

Finnish Prime Minister Juha Sipila's centre-right government resigned yesterday after it failed to push through a flagship social and health care reform package, just five weeks ahead of a legislative election. The wide-reaching reform has been a hard fought struggle over a decade and has divided successive governments.



Children sit next to their injured mother near the village of Baghouz, Deir Al Zor province, in Syria. Picture taken on Thursday.

'We'll seek vengeance'

Defeated IS jihadists still defiant

Defeated but unrepentant, some jihadists limping out of their besieged final bastion in eastern Syria still praise the Islamic State and promise bloody vengeance against its enemies. The skeletal and dishevelled figures shuffling out of the smouldering ashes of the "caliphate" may look like a procession of zombies, but their devotion seems intact.

At an outpost for US-backed forces outside the besieged village of Baghouz, 10 women stand in front of journalists, pointing their index fingers to the sky in a gesture used by IS supporters to proclaim the oneness of God.

They shout in unison: "The Islamic State is here to stay!"

Most refuse to disclose their names or nationalities.

Indistinguishable under their identical black robes, a group of women arriving at the screening point manned by the Syrian Democratic Forces swarm around reporters like hornets. Some throw rocks at the cameras of those trying to film them, while one screams at a photographer and calls him a pig.

Another grabs the uncovered hair of a female reporter, saying: "Have you not read the Quran, are you not ashamed?"

A third woman snarks at the way the reporter is dressed: "God curses women who resemble men".

The SDF are closing in on diehard jihadists and their relatives holed up in a makeshift encampment inside the village of Baghouz.

More than 7,000 people have fled the

bombed-out bastion over the past three days, escaping shelling by the SDF and air strikes by the US-led coalition against IS.

But for Umm Mohammed, a 47-year-old woman from Iraq's Anbar province, the men who have fled are "the cowards and the meek".

As for the women, "we left because we are a heavy burden on the men", she says.

"We are waiting for the (next) conquest, God willing."

Nearby, a little boy hums a jihadist anthem as he walks beside his mother, his jacket covered with dust.

The so-called "cubs of the caliphate" -- boys raised under IS rule and trained to fight from a young age -- are the reason the group will survive, another Iraqi woman says.

"The caliphate will not end, because it has been ingrained in the hearts and brains of the newborns and the little ones," says the 60-year-old, refusing to give her name.

Many women tell AFP that they want to raise their children on the ideology of the caliphate, even as its territorial presence fizzles out.

Nearby, a bearded man with a leg wound cursed the coalition, whose warplanes have pumelled the last jihadist redoubt.

"I only surrendered because of my injury," he says. "I have been with IS since the beginning."

One woman, who says she is from Damascus, tells AFP: "We have left, but there will be new conquests in the future".

Speaking from behind a veil that covers her face, she says: "We will seek vengeance, there will be blood up your knees."

Top court orders mediation

AGENCIES

India's Supreme Court has appointed an arbitration panel to mediate in a decades-long dispute over a religious site in northern Uttar Pradesh state's Ayodhya city.

The court yesterday ruled that the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute, as the contentious case is known as, will now be mediated through a panel headed by retired Supreme Court judge FM Kalifulla.

The other members of the arbitration panel include senior advocate, Sriram Panchu, and self-styled Hindu godman, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

The 70-year-old case involves a dispute over a one-hectare site in Ayodhya, where right-wing Hindus plan to build a temple dedicated to Lord Ram on the ruins of a 16th-century mosque demolished in 1992.

The Supreme Court-appointed arbitration panel has been given eight weeks to come to an agreement, which coincides with India's national elections, due in April and May.

Hindu nationalist forces affiliated with India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have ratcheted up their long-standing demand for the construction of a temple in the run-up to the election.

A five-judge Supreme Court bench, headed by Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi, said the order is a bid to "heal the hearts if possible".

The court described the dispute as a "festering wound" which has touched the religious sentiments of Hindus and

Muslims for decades and led to multiple rounds of communal violence.

In 1992, a Hindu mob tore down the Mughal-era mosque, triggering riots that killed about 2,000 people in one of the worst instances of communal violence in India since the 1947 partition of the country.

Out of concern for the sensitive nature of the subject, the court has directed the panel members to maintain utmost secrecy. The media has also been banned from covering its proceedings.

While holding control over the controversial site, the Supreme Court had been weighing petitions from both the communities on what should be built there.

Earlier, a five-judge panel, headed by Gogoi, had asked both Hindu and Muslim group involved in the case to explore the possibility of resolving their dispute through mediation.

Hindu groups say there used to be a temple at the site before the mosque was built by Mughal ruler Zahir-ud Din Babar in the early 16th century.

It is the most divisive dispute between India's majority Hindus and minority Muslims, who make up around 14 percent of the country's 1.3 billion people.

Right-wing groups affiliated to the BJP had called for legislation to allow a temple to be built, bypassing the Supreme Court. But Prime Minister Narendra Modi later said the judicial process should be allowed to take its course.

AYODHYA SITE DISPUTE IN INDIA



People attend a rally, held to support women's rights and to protest against violence towards women, in Saint Petersburg, Russia, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

VENEZUELA BLACKOUT

Maduro blames US for power outage

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro on Thursday blamed "American imperialism" for a prolonged power outage which affected most of the South American country.

The embattled president blamed the blackout on "the electrical war announced and directed by American imperialism against our people", he said on Twitter.

But US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo denied Washington was behind it. "Power shortages and starvation are the result of the Maduro regime's incompetence."

State-owned electricity operator Corpoelec blamed the outage on the act of "sabotage" at the Guri Dam, one of the world's largest hydroelectric stations and the cornerstone of Venezuela's electrical grid.

Speaking from the capital Caracas, Al Jazeera's Teresa Bo described the city as being completely in the dark.

For his part, Guaido, the self-declared interim leader said early on Friday that all but one of Venezuela's 23 states had no electricity and that capital Caracas had been without light for "a record" six hours.

"This blackout is evidence of the usurper's inefficiency," Guaido said on Twitter, referring to Maduro.

Maduro has presided over a massive economic crisis since he succeeded Hugo Chavez as president in 2013. The prolonged crisis has seen large numbers of people facing food and medicine shortages forcing millions to leave the country.

Anti-Semitism debate exposes  
fault lines among Democrats

AFP, Washington

A Muslim American congresswoman's remarks deemed anti-Semitic by some colleagues has exposed deep fault lines among Democrats, with the party seeking to contain the damage with passage Thursday of a measure condemning bigotry and hate.

After days of soul-searching and febrile recrimination, the Democratic leadership appeared desperate to move past a controversy that has left the party split two months since reclaiming the House majority.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi unveiled a resolution that she called the "strongest possible opposition" to anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and white supremacist bigotry.

The decision followed acrimonious debate over how to reprimand Minnesota Democrat Ilhan Omar, who sparked a firestorm over repeated criticisms of Israel and a powerful pro-Israel lobby in Washington that exerts influence in US politics.

The resolution passed overwhelmingly, 407 to 23, with all Democrats voting in favor including Omar herself.

The former Somali refugee had been assailed for suggest-

ing supporters of Israel are urging lawmakers to have "allegiance to a foreign country."

Lawmakers expressed outrage, warning that Omar was peddling in age-old anti-Semitic tropes about Jews having dual loyalties.

Weeks earlier she drew ire for suggesting Jewish political power comes through their money, and that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee lobbying group was paying US politicians to support Israel.

A vote had been expected on a resolution specifically condemning anti-Semitism.

The resolution does not mention Omar by name, and some Republicans complained that the measure's original intent was "watered down."

Omar joined the two other Muslims in Congress, Rashida Tlaib and Andre Carson, in praising the measure's passage.

"It's the first time we have voted on a resolution condemning Anti-Muslim bigotry in our nation's history," they said, noting the worrying rise of extremism in America.

"Our nation is having a difficult conversation and we believe this is great progress."

US House resolution condemns anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim bias, bigotry against minorities 'as hateful expressions of intolerance'



Algerian protesters hold banners reading "No to a fifth bid" as they demonstrate against their ailing president's bid for a fifth term in power, in Algiers, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

India signs \$3b sub  
deal with Russia

AFP, New Delhi

India has signed a \$3 billion deal to lease a third Russian nuclear-powered submarine for 10 years, giving Delhi a boost in the Indian Ocean against arch-rivals Pakistan and China, media reports said.

A defence ministry spokesman declined to confirm the agreement to AFP but the reports said that the submarine, the third India has leased from Russia, would be delivered by 2025.

Russia, India's Cold War ally, remains a major supplier of arms to India, irking the United States which has imposed sanctions on nations buying military hardware from Moscow.

Last October Russian President Vladimir Putin and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met and inked a deal for Delhi to buy Russia's S-400 surface-to-air missile defence system for \$5.2 billion.

But India also shares US fears about China's growing assertiveness in the Indian Ocean, where New Delhi has traditionally held sway.

In 2017 India and China had a military standoff over a Himalayan plateau claimed by both Beijing and Bhutan, a close ally of India. China has made inroads in Sri Lanka and Maldives, countries that India considers to be in its sphere of influence, through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).



China backs  
Huawei in US  
legal battle

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday threw its weight behind Huawei's legal battle against the United States, saying the telecom giant will not be a "silent lamb" to the slaughter and vowing to defend the rights of Chinese companies.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi voiced Beijing's support as Huawei mounts a legal and public relations campaign to counter US warnings that the company's networks and equipment could serve as Trojan horses for Chinese intelligence services.

US prosecutors have also charged the company and its chief financial officer, Meng Wanzhou, over allegations of violating Iran sanctions.

"It's quite obvious to any fair and unbiased person that the recent action against a particular company and Chinese individual is not just a pure judicial case but deliberate political suppression," Wang said at a news conference on the sidelines of China's annual parliament session.

"We have already and will continue to take all necessary steps, and resolutely safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese companies and citizens," Wang said, without explaining what kind of measures Beijing would take.

Huawei announced on Thursday that it had filed a lawsuit in the US state of Texas to seek the reversal of legislation that prevents American federal agencies from buying its equipment and services.