

NEWS IN brief

2018 was Germany's hottest year on record

Germany recorded its warmest year in 2018, a period also marked by a drought lasting months, the country's DWD weather service said yesterday. The average temperatures for the year reached 10.5 degree Celsius, a new record high. According to the UN, the last four years were the hottest since global temperature records began, calling it a "clear sign of continuing long-term climate change".

Pentagon okays \$1b for Trump's wall

Acting Pentagon chief Patrick Shanahan has authorised \$1 billion to build part of the wall sought by Donald Trump along the US-Mexico border, the first funds designated for the project under the president's emergency declaration. The White House has laid out an ambitious 2020 budget proposal which contains \$8.6 billion in new wall funding.

S Arabia condemns US Golan move

Saudi Arabia rejected US President Donald Trump's recognition Monday of Syria's Golan Heights as Israeli territory condemning it as a violation of international law. The Golan remains "occupied Syrian Arab land," said a statement carried by the official SPA news agency. "This will have negative effects on the Middle East peace process and security and stability in the region."

BITS OF HISTORY (MARCH 26)

1979: In a ceremony at the White House, President Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Begin of Israel signed a peace treaty ending 30 years of war between the two countries.
2002: Up to 1,000 people were killed when a series of quakes struck Baghlan



Palestinians inspect a destroyed Hamas site after it was targeted in an Israeli air strike in Gaza City. Inset, A Palestinian girl cleans the face of her brother outside their destroyed house in Gaza City. Both pictures were taken yesterday. Story on page 16. PHOTO: REUTERS

Trump: media is 'Enemy of the People'

President Donald Trump yesterday branded the mainstream media the "enemy" and the "opposition party" after the Mueller report cleared him of collusion, accusing journalists of covering the Russia probe unfairly. "The Mainstream Media is under fire and being scorned all over the World as being corrupt and FAKE. For two years they pushed the Russian Collusion Delusion when they always knew there was No Collusion," Trump tweeted. "They truly are the Enemy of the People and the Real Opposition Party!" Trump has previously used "enemy of the people" -- echoing a Stalinist phrase used to describe political enemies -- to describe the media, which he has always said does not give him accurate coverage. This time, Trump is referring to the two-year probe led by special prosecutor Robert Mueller into Trump's opaque links with Russia and suspi-

Brexit in disarray

UK parliament plots Brexit Plan B after sidelining PM

AFP, London

Britain's parliament sought a new Brexit approach yesterday after seizing the initiative from Prime Minister Theresa May in a historic vote taken to stave off a looming "no-deal" divorce. Lawmakers exasperated by Britain's failed efforts to split from the European Union after three years of debates and negotiations voted Monday to give themselves a broader say on what happens next.

The motion creates parliamentary time for MPs to come up with their own proposals in place of the ill-loved deal May struck with Brussels at the end of last year. The unprecedented measure passed by a 329-302 margin and saw three junior ministers quit the government to vote against the premier. Richard Harrington said he resigned as business minister because May's course and the resulting impasse had left Britain with "a democratic deficit". Junior foreign minister Alistair Burt said he quit to help the House of Commons "come to a conclusion for the country's sake".

The measure was backed primarily by europhiles who want to either reverse Brexit or preserve much closer economic ties with the remaining 27 EU states.

No one is entirely sure how parliament will approach its new role in the week the 46-year partnership was scheduled to have ended. EU leaders pushed back Brexit day to April 12 after meeting May in Brussels last week and deciding that Britain still did not know what it wanted to do. The proposed agenda submitted to parliament Tuesday would see MPs first pick through an array of choices today.

The biggest worry for May is a mooted plan for parliament in the following days to take an even firmer grip of the Brexit agenda by passing legislation that forces the government's hand. Parliament's initial votes will be non-binding instructions that only carry political weight. May has already signalled that she might ignore them if they contradict her Conservative party's 2017 election platform. It included a vow to take Britain out of the EU customs union and single market -- the two vast organisations that open borders and regulate trade across most of the European continent. Parliament is now effectively re-considering how to go about Brexit all over again. But there are some hints that the current political shift could be scaring some of the rebels into line.

Mps vote for bigger role in Brexit process
Three junior ministers quit UK govt
DUP to vote against May's Brexit deal



'Most Indians happy with governance'

REUTERS, New Delhi

Most Indians are happy with the direction of the country and economic prospects for the next generation, a Pew survey published weeks ahead of general elections showed, although the level of satisfaction has fallen over time.

Lack of employment opportunities is India's biggest problem, said more than three-quarters of those polled, and that had not changed through most of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tenure, the survey found. The survey published on Monday said concerns about terrorism and Pakistan loomed large even before last month's crisis triggered by an attack on a security convoy in Indian Kashmir that Pakistan claims as its own. Three-quarters of Indians believe Pakistan to be a threat and 59 percent said terrorism had become worse.

"But despite these worries, most Indian adults are satisfied with the direction of their country and the economic prospects of the next generation," Pew said, summing up the survey result. Of those polled, 54 percent said they were satisfied with the way democracy is working in India. But satisfaction had declined 25 percentage points from 2017, when 79 percent voiced approval.

Men are more likely than women to give Indian democracy a thumbs-up, though one in five women decline to offer an opinion, it said. There were 2,521 respondents in the Pew Survey run from May 23 to July 23, 2018, the final year of Modi's term before the election.



...cations that his 2016 presidential campaign colluded with Russian agents in attempts to influence the election in his favor. According to a brief summary released by Trump's attorney general William Barr on Sunday, Mueller could not find evidence of collusion. The report also says Mueller could not decide whether Trump obstructed justice and left that up to the Justice Department. Trump has seized on that summary clearing him of collusion as a complete vindication of his many claims to have been subjected to a "witch hunt" -- and that the media, which covered the bombshell investigation, was part of an organized assault against



French President Emmanuel Macron (2ndL) welcomes EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker (L), German Chancellor Angela Merkel (C) and Chinese President Xi Jinping (R) before a meeting at the Elysee Palace in Paris, yesterday. Xi Jinping yesterday stressed the growing convergence between Beijing and the European Union on global issues from climate change to trade, urging the two sides to overcome their "suspicions." PHOTO: AFP

COLONIAL-ERA MASSACRES AND OPPRESSION

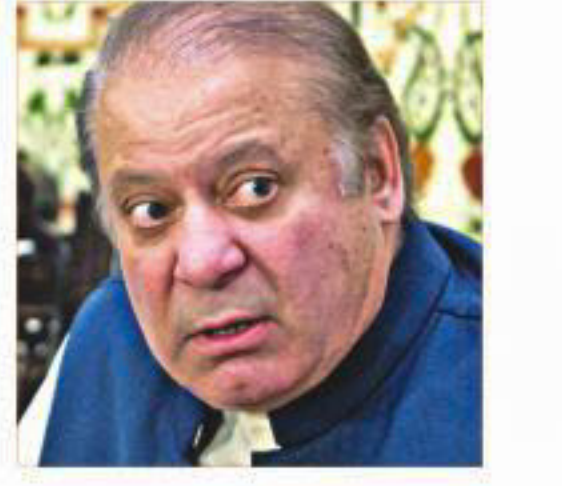
Mexico demands apology for abuses, Spain says no

AFP, Madrid

The 500-year-old wounds of the Spanish conquest have been ripped open afresh with Mexico's president urging Spain and the Vatican to apologise for their "abuses" -- a request Madrid said it "firmly rejects".

Spain's centuries of dominance in the New World, backed by the Catholic Church, leapt from the history books to the headlines when Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador called Monday on Spanish King Felipe VI and Pope Francis to apologise for the conquest and the rights violations committed in its aftermath. "I have sent a letter to the king of Spain and another to the pope, calling for a full account of the abuses and urging them to apologise to the indigenous peoples (of Mexico) for the violations of what we now call their human rights," Lopez Obrador said.

He made the remarks in a video, filmed at the Mayan ruins of the indigenous city of Comalcalco and posted on Facebook and Twitter. "There were massacres and oppression. The so-called conquest was waged with the sword and the cross. They built their churches on top of the (indigenous) temples," added the anti-establishment leftist. "The time has come to reconcile. But let us ask forgiveness first." After making his remarks, Lopez Obrador visited the city of Centla, the scene of the first battle between Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes and the indigenous peoples of the land now known as Mexico, on March 14, 1519. With the help of horses, swords, guns and smallpox -- all unknown in the New World at the time -- Cortes led an army of fewer than 1,000 men to defeat the Aztec empire, the start of 300 years of Spanish rule over Mexico. The abuses continued until independence in 1821, and beyond, Lopez Obrador said.



Pak ex-PM gets bail on medical grounds

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's Supreme Court agreed yesterday to release jailed former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on bail for six weeks to receive medical treatment but said he would not be allowed to leave the country. Sharif is serving a seven-year sentence imposed last year for failing to disclose the source of income that allowed him to acquire the Al-Azizia Steel Mills in Saudi Arabia. He has appealed. The sentence would be suspended for six weeks from the date of Sharif's release, Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa said. "In these six weeks he shall not be allowed to leave Pakistan," he said, reading the order, and added that Sharif would be expected to surrender voluntarily at the end of the bail term.

Three-time premier Sharif, who was disqualified from holding political office for life, has been suffering from a heart condition and kidney problems and has been admitted to hospital. A previous bail appeal was rejected last month. His daughter Maryam has accused Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party of mistreating her father, a charge the government denies. The issue has been the subject of bitter wrangling for weeks. The Supreme Court removed Sharif from office in July 2017 for not disclosing part of a salary drawn from his son's company and he was later convicted in two separate cases of failing to disclose sources of income.

Algeria army chief calls on Bouteflika to quit

AFP, Algiers

Algeria's army chief yesterday called for President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to be declared unfit to govern, following weeks of mass protests demanding the ailing leader step down after two decades in power. The move would potentially clear the way for elections to be organised in the coming months unless the president recovers.

"It is necessary, even imperative, to adopt a solution to get out of the crisis which responds to the legitimate demands of the Algerian people, and which guarantees the respect of the provisions of the constitution and safeguards the sovereignty of the state," General Ahmed Gaïd Salah said in a televised speech. The armed forces chief of staff, considered loyal to Bouteflika, added that the resolution "is in article 102" of the constitution, under which parliament could declare the president unable to perform his duties due to serious illness.

The 82-year-old leader uses a wheelchair and has rarely appeared in public since suffering a stroke in 2013. He has often flown to France or Switzerland for treatment. Bouteflika said last month he would run for a fifth term in office, despite concerns about his ability to rule, triggering a wave of protests that brought hundreds of thousands into the streets.

On March 11, after returning home from medical checkups in Switzerland, he made the surprise announcement that he was pulling out of the race. But he also postponed the elections, angering protesters who saw the move as a ploy to stay in power.

Although credited with helping foster peace after Algeria's decade-long civil war, Bouteflika has faced criticism for alleged authoritarianism. His current mandate expires on April 28. The army chief's call was welcomed with car horns honking in Algiers, where hundreds of students who have been at the forefront of the



Battle for West Bengal

BJP goes all in to weaken Trinamool congress's hold

REUTERS, Kolkata

At an election rally in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal, a local leader from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) described how workers from the state's ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) had disrupted a public meeting in January by destroying their vehicles. "So, we thrashed them in retaliation, smashed their vehicles and burnt their party office," Arup Das, a district secretary of the Hindu nationalist BJP, roared at the rally in the town of Kharagpur. "Stand up and protest," Das said to the crowd. "Trinamool Congress will run away in fear."

Political differences have been erupting into tension and sometimes violence across India ahead of the general election in April-May, but it's particularly bad in West Bengal. Both the BJP and the TMC are accusing each other of killings, beatings, vandalism and making false allegations to the police. After losing three state elections last

last year, and with weak farm incomes and slow jobs growth undermining his backing in the BJP's traditional Hindu base in the north, Modi is driving hard to pick up support in West Bengal. The push has set him and the BJP on a collision course with firebrand politician Mamata Banerjee, the TMC

leader and the state's chief minister. For Banerjee, popularly called 'Didi' or elder sister, defeating the BJP's challenge is vital to cement her power base and bolster her image as a possible future prime minister if opposition parties win enough seats to form a coalition government. "BJP is rising in West Bengal," said

Udayan Bandyopadhyay, head of the political science department at Bangabasi College in Kolkata. There is a sense of anti-incumbency that is working against Banerjee, who has won the previous two state assembly elections, Bandyopadhyay said. BJP did well at village council polls last year and a recent survey showed the party winning eight out of the 42 parliamentary seats in Bengal, up from two currently.

The BJP has been holding a series of mega rallies in West Bengal targeting specially on Mamata Banerjee's authoritarian-style rule, headlined by top BJP leaders, including Modi himself. Still, it will be an uphill task to defeat 64-year-old Banerjee, an aggressive and strong-headed politician with grassroots appeal. Hindu groups linked to the BJP also accuse her of appeasing Muslim voters, who make up about one third of the electorate, by providing separate schools, hospitals and training institutes for the community and handing out stipends.

Udayan Bandyopadhyay, head of the political science department at Bangabasi College in Kolkata. There is a sense of anti-incumbency that is working against Banerjee, who has won the previous two state assembly elections, Bandyopadhyay said. BJP did well at village council polls last year and a recent survey showed the party winning eight out of the 42 parliamentary seats in Bengal, up from two currently.

The BJP has been holding a series of mega rallies in West Bengal targeting specially on Mamata Banerjee's authoritarian-style rule, headlined by top BJP leaders, including Modi himself. Still, it will be an uphill task to defeat 64-year-old Banerjee, an aggressive and strong-headed politician with grassroots appeal. Hindu groups linked to the BJP also accuse her of appeasing Muslim voters, who make up about one third of the electorate, by providing separate schools, hospitals and training institutes for the community and handing out stipends.

Udayan Bandyopadhyay, head of the political science department at Bangabasi College in Kolkata. There is a sense of anti-incumbency that is working against Banerjee, who has won the previous two state assembly elections, Bandyopadhyay said. BJP did well at village council polls last year and a recent survey showed the party winning eight out of the 42 parliamentary seats in Bengal, up from two currently.

The BJP has been holding a series of mega rallies in West Bengal targeting specially on Mamata Banerjee's authoritarian-style rule, headlined by top BJP leaders, including Modi himself. Still, it will be an uphill task to defeat 64-year-old Banerjee, an aggressive and strong-headed politician with grassroots appeal. Hindu groups linked to the BJP also accuse her of appeasing Muslim voters, who make up about one third of the electorate, by providing separate schools, hospitals and training institutes for the community and handing out stipends.

Udayan Bandyopadhyay, head of the political science department at Bangabasi College in Kolkata. There is a sense of anti-incumbency that is working against Banerjee, who has won the previous two state assembly elections, Bandyopadhyay said. BJP did well at village council polls last year and a recent survey showed the party winning eight out of the 42 parliamentary seats in Bengal, up from two currently.

The BJP has been holding a series of mega rallies in West Bengal targeting specially on Mamata Banerjee's authoritarian-style rule, headlined by top BJP leaders, including Modi himself. Still, it will be an uphill task to defeat 64-year-old Banerjee, an aggressive and strong-headed politician with grassroots appeal. Hindu groups linked to the BJP also accuse her of appeasing Muslim voters, who make up about one third of the electorate, by providing separate schools, hospitals and training institutes for the community and handing out stipends.