

No-deal Brexit 'more likely'

AFP, Brussels

The European Union's chief negotiator Michel Barnier yesterday warned it is "day after day more likely" that Britain will crash out of the bloc next week without an orderly withdrawal agreement.

Barnier was addressing a think tank in Brussels the day after British lawmakers again failed to unite behind any alternative to the Brexit withdrawal agreement Prime Minister Theresa May signed last year.

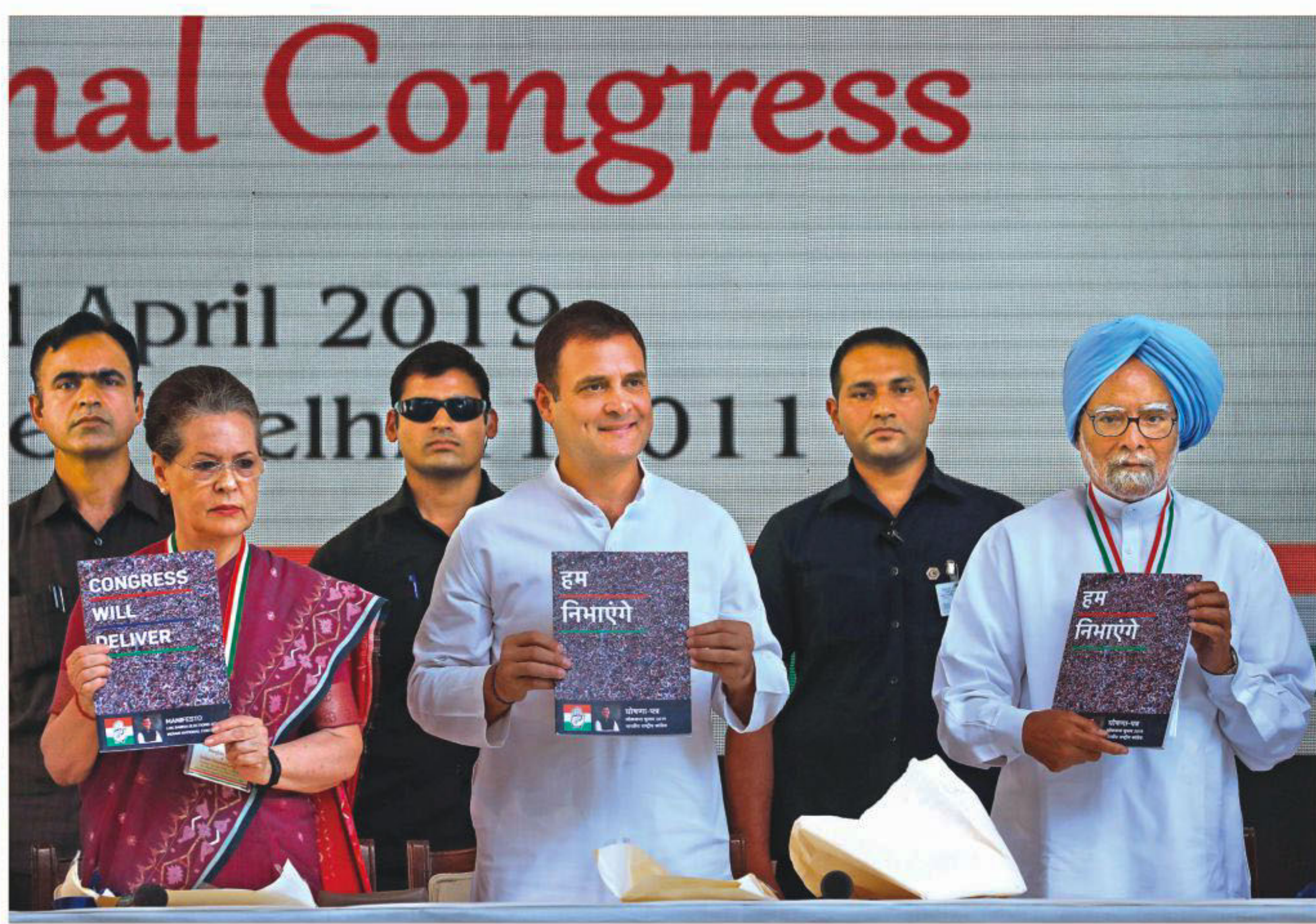
Proposed alternatives for retaining much closer economic ties after leaving the European Union, holding a second referendum or stopping Brexit to prevent a no-deal departure all failed to win a majority of votes in parliament.

"No deal was never our desired nor intended scenario. No deal was never my intended scenario, but the EU 27 is now prepared. It becomes day after day more likely," Barnier told the European Policy Centre.

"Let's not forget first that we have already an agreement, we have already a deal, and it was concluded by Theresa May and the British government and the European Council and European Parliament on November 25 last year, four months ago," he said.

"We tried to make sure that the UK could leave the EU on March 29, just as the UK had foreseen itself... If the UK still wants to leave the EU in an orderly manner, this agreement, this treaty is and will be the only one."

Barnier warned that if May cannot get this withdrawal agreement past the House of Commons, then there are only two other options available before London leaves the union on or shortly after April 12.



Rahul Gandhi (C), president of India's main opposition Congress party, his mother and leader of the party Sonia Gandhi and India's former prime minister Manmohan Singh (R) display copies of their party's election manifesto for the April/May general election in New Delhi, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS



Khashoggi's children getting millions: report

The children of murdered Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi have received multimillion-dollar homes and are being paid thousands of dollars per month by the kingdom's authorities, The Washington Post reported Monday. The payments to his four children - two sons and two daughters - "are part of an effort by Saudi Arabia to reach a long-term arrangement with Khashoggi family members, aimed in part at ensuring that they continue to show restraint in their public statements," the Post said. The houses given to the Khashoggi children are located in the port city of Jeddah and are worth up to \$4 million, the newspaper reported. In addition to the properties, the children are receiving \$10,000 or more per month and may also receive larger payments that could amount to tens of millions of dollars each, according to the report. Saudi Arabia's powerful crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, has been accused of orchestrating Khashoggi's killing, which the kingdom denies.

Indian polls: Demand soars for armoured cars

Politics can be a dangerous game in India. In the past, prime ministers were assassinated, political motorcades ambushed and party officials attacked, and some candidates aren't taking any chances. Orders for specialised armoured cars have been piling up in Punjab, Haryana and Maharashtra ahead of world's biggest election. It was not just political candidates keen to bullet and blast-proof their cars but party bookkeepers and backroom heavyweights too, the local companies refitting the bullet-proof amenities to the cars told AFP. The market for such cars in India is worth \$150 million a year and growing by double digits, industry representatives said. Companies like Mahindra & Mahindra, and Tata Motors, also offer a small range of pre-made armoured vehicles for civilian use. For an armoured-plated vehicle, it cost anywhere between \$7,000 and \$70,000 and it can take weeks. And getting permission from authorities takes longer time. More than 100 politicians or party officials were murdered in 2016 alone, the latest figures from India's National Crime Records Bureau show.

LOK SABHA POLLS MANIFESTO

Congress makes big promises

AGENCIES

India's main opposition Congress party made election pledges yesterday to halve unemployment in five years, but its promise to change a law on special powers for troops in disputed Kashmir drew criticism from the ruling party.

Congress has consistently trailed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in opinion polls, despite winning three key state elections late last year amid farm distress and a jobs shortage.

Releasing its manifesto for a staggered general election that starts on April 11, Congress highlighted five primary areas of focus -- farmer's debt, addressing unemployment, supporting entrepreneurs, education and healthcare, reported TOI online.

Party president Rahul Gandhi said Congress would expand an existing jobs programme to guarantee 150 days of work a year to rural households, up from 100 days.

"The main issues in the country today are unemployment and farmer distress," said Gandhi, releasing the manifesto.

"The economy is jammed, and everyone agrees that India's economy is stuck, so that needs to be restarted."

Congress also promised to simplify a goods and services tax, quickly fill 2.2 million government jobs nationwide, create 1 million more on rural and urban development panels, and reward

There are 5 primary areas of focus -- farmer's debt, unemployment, supporting entrepreneurs, education and healthcare

BJP criticises Congress stance on Kashmir law

businesses for employment generation. "Over a five-year period, I do think we can bring unemployment down to 3 percent to 4 percent," Praveen Chakravarty, a party official who analyses data, told Reuters. "We can certainly more than halve the unemployment number in a five-year period."

Gandhi said Congress had won voters' hearts with last week's plan to hand 72,000 rupees (\$1,041) a year to India's poorest, a promise the BJP has dismissed as a bluff and some economists have called fiscally irresponsible. "This is an ambitious manifesto," said Shilan Shah, an economist at Capital Economics in Singapore. "The income scheme promise, though a worthy initiative, looks implausible to implement, considering India's limited fiscal space. India does not have the financial infrastructure in place to give such handouts."

Modi's party came down hard on Congress for its pledge to amend a law that gives special powers to armed forces battling the Kashmir insurgency, in a bid to balance security needs and human rights concerns. "It wants to deprive them of immunity in what is literally a war zone," BJP spokesman Amit Malviya said on Twitter. "Not just that, it also suggests that armed forces indulge in sexual violence and torture of civilians."

Fake news thrives on Indian social media

WhatsApp starts fact-check service

REUTERS, New Delhi

Two weeks after a suicide bombing in Kashmir in February killed 40 Indian policemen, a Facebook user called Avi Dandiya posted a live video in which he played a recording of a call purportedly involving India's home minister, the president of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and an unidentified woman. The trio could be heard talking about arousing nationalist sentiment ahead of India's general election, with the BJP president allegedly saying in Hindi: "We agree that for election, we need a war".

Within 24 hours, one of Facebook Inc's fact-checking partners in India, BOOM, exposed Dandiya's video as fake.

By the time Facebook took down the post, it had received more than 2.5 million views and 150,000 shares. There is no Indian law that specifically targets fake news, but police in New Delhi registered a case of forgery against Dandiya and an official said investigations were ongoing.

Still, Reuters last week found at least four edited copies of Dandiya's videos on Facebook with about 36,000 views.

The videos underline how social media companies are struggling with fake news ahead of India's general election, which starts on April 11.

On Monday, Facebook said it had deleted 1,126 accounts, groups and pages in India and Pakistan for "inauthentic behaviour" and spamming, many linked to India's opposition Congress party.

Facebook's popular messaging app WhatsApp yesterday launched a service for Indians to check the veracity of information.

WhatsApp said in a statement it was working with local startup Proto to classify messages sent to the service by users as true, false, misleading or disputed.



Top Venezuela court strips Guaidó of post

Venezuela's Supreme Court called for Juan Guaidó to be stripped of his legislative immunity, tightening the noose on the opposition chief just days after authorities announced a ban on him holding public office. Guaidó -- recognized as Venezuela's interim president by some 50 countries -- is locked in a power struggle with President Nicolas Maduro that has drawn in neighboring states as well as superpowers such as the US and Russia. The court ruling cited Guaidó's violation of a ban on his travel to Venezuela when he visited Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Paraguay from late February to early March. SOURCE: REUTERS, AFP

Nasa slams India's anti-satellite test

AFP, Washington

The head of Nasa on Monday branded India's destruction of one of its satellites a "terrible thing" that had created 400 pieces of orbital debris and led to new dangers for astronauts aboard the International Space Station.

Jim Bridenstine was addressing employees of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration five days after India shot down a low-orbiting satellite in a missile test to prove it was among the world's advanced space powers.

Not all of the pieces were big enough to track, Bridenstine explained. "What we are tracking right now, objects big enough to track -- we're talking about 10 centimeters (six inches) or bigger -- about 60 pieces have been tracked."

The Indian satellite was destroyed at a relatively low altitude of 180 miles (300 kilometers), well below the ISS and most satellites in orbit.

But 24 of the pieces "are going above the apogee of the International Space Station," said Bridenstine. "That is a terrible, terrible thing to create an event that sends debris at an apogee that goes above the International Space Station," he continued, adding: "That kind of activity is not compatible with the future of human space-flight."

"It's unacceptable and Nasa needs to be very clear about what its impact to us is."



Militants fire weapons in the air as mourners march yesterday during the funeral of Palestinian Mohamad Edwan, who was killed during clashes in an Israeli raid, near Ramallah, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. PHOTO: REUTERS

Anti-Muslim hatred rising

Says UN chief; tough NZ gun laws easily pass first hurdle in House after mosque massacre

AFP, Cairo, Wellington

UN chief Antonio Guterres yesterday warned against growing hatred of Muslims, less than a month after a deadly attack on mosques in New Zealand killed at least 50 people.

His remarks came during a speech at Egypt's Al-Azhar, the Sunni Muslim world's foremost religious institution, where he met Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayeb.

"Around the world, we are seeing ever-rising anti-Muslim hatred, anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia," the UN secretary general said.

He cited the March 15 New Zealand mosque attacks by a white supremacist as well as a 2018 synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh that killed 11 people and is believed to be the deadliest against Jews in US history.

Guterres warned of a surge in hate speech he said was "entering the mainstream, spreading like wildfire through social media."

"We see it spreading in liberal democracies and as well as in authoritarian states."

Guterres is on a two-day trip to Egypt. Following his visit to Al-Azhar, he was scheduled to meet President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

Meanwhile, new legislation to tighten New Zealand gun laws in the wake of the Christchurch mosque shootings drew overwhelming support when it was introduced to parliament yesterday.

Lawmakers voted 119-1 in favour of the bill, which bans military-style semi-automatic (MSSA) rifles like those used in the March 15 rampage by a white supremacist which claimed 50 lives.

Police Minister Stuart Nash said the attack by accused gunman Brenton Tarrant showed current firearms restrictions were inadequate.

"Far too many people in this country have access to these dangerous firearms for no legitimate purpose, but at significant risk to the public," he said.

New Zealand has about 1.5 million privately owned firearms, or 0.3 per person, including an estimated 13,500 MSSAs.

The government has also said it will review laws dealing with hate speech.



Algerian president Bouteflika resigns

REUTERS, Algiers

Algeria's President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has submitted his resignation, state news agency APS said yesterday, following weeks of mass protests against his rule.

The ailing, 82-year-old leader stood down shortly after the army chief of staff demanded immediate action to remove him from office.

"There is no more room to waste time," state news agency APS quoted Lieutenant General Ahmed Gaed Salah Bouteflika, who years, had said he would quit before On Monday, was in power for 20 would quit before On April 28.

But a protest parties rejected while hundreds of through the capital Algiers to demand of a political system widely seen as incapable of significant reform.

Bouteflika, a veteran of Algeria's war for independence, has rarely seen in public since he suffered a stroke in 2013.

He had sought to fend off the wave of dissent against his two-decade-old rule that began on February 22 by reversing his decision to seek a fifth term. But he did not say when he would go, further angering protesters.



US-led force tracks Syria jihadists

AFP, Beirut

A US-backed force said yesterday it was chasing Islamic State group jihadists in eastern Syria, as coalition warplanes pound the militants more than a week after their "caliphate" was declared defeated.

The Syrian Democratic Forces, supported by warplanes of a US-led coalition, dislodged IS fighters from their last redoubt in the village of Baghouz near the Iraqi border on March 23, following a months-long offensive.

The US-backed alliance is now "tracking down remnants of the terrorist group", SDF spokesman Mustafá Bali said yesterday.

The US-led coalition said it was supporting sweeping operations with air strikes on jihadist hideouts.

113m suffer 'acute hunger': UN

AFP, Paris

More than 113 million people across 53 countries experienced "acute hunger" last year because of wars and climate disasters, with Africa the worst-hit region, the UN said yesterday.

Yemen, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan and Syria were among the eight nations accounting for two-thirds of the total number of people worldwide exposed to the risk of famine, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said in its 2019 global report on food crises.

Launched three years ago, the annual study takes stock of the countries facing the greatest difficulties.

African states were "disproportionally" affected as close to 72 million people on the continent suffered acute hunger, the FAO's emergencies director Dominique Bourgeon told AFP on Tuesday.

Conflict and insecurity remained key factors, along with economic turbulence and climate-related shocks like drought and floods, the report found.

In countries on the verge of famine, "up to 80 percent of the population depend on agriculture. They need both emergency humanitarian aid for food and measures to help boost agriculture," Bourgeon said.

The report highlighted the strain put on countries hosting large numbers of refugees, including neighbouring nations of war-torn Syria as well as Bangladesh, which has received more than a million Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar.

The FAO said it also expected the number of displaced people to increase "if the political and economic crisis persists in Venezuela" which is likely to declare a food emergency this year.

Globally, the study noted that the overall situation slightly improved in 2018 compared to 2017 when 124 million people suffered acute hunger.

The drop can partially be attributed to the fact that some countries in Latin America and the Asia Pacific region for instance were less affected by weather disasters that had struck in previous years.

However, the FAO warned that the year-on-year trend of more than 100 million people facing famine was unlikely to change in the face of continued crises.

Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria all suffered bad droughts in 2018, which severely impacted agricultural output.

The FAO also stressed that "high levels of acute and chronic malnutrition in children living in emergency conditions remained of grave concern".



BITS OF HISTORY (APRIL 2)

1982: Argentina invades the Falkland Islands, to take them back from British control.
2015: Gunmen attack Garissa university in Kenya, killing nearly 150 people.