

NEWSIN
briefTrump retreats from
Mexico border threat

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump on Thursday retreated from his threat to close the US-Mexican border, warning he will instead impose car import tariffs if the major US trading partner does not do more to stop undocumented migrants and drug smugglers. Trump said he was giving Mexico one year to get the cross-border drug trade down or see him impose tariffs at 25 percent. If that does not work, closing the border would come next, he said.

Netanyahu ahead in
Israel polls: survey

AFP, Jerusalem

Final authorised opinion polls published yesterday just days ahead of the Israeli general elections showed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu heading for a fifth term in office, leading a right-wing coalition. The polls revealed the rival centrist Blue and White list led by former military chief Benny Gantz was running virtually neck-and-neck with Netanyahu's Likud ahead of Tuesday's vote.

Malaysia takes
U-turn on ICC

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's government did a U-turn yesterday on its decision to join the International Criminal Court, the prime minister said, after a backlash from a powerful Islamic ruler and opposition politicians. The Southeast Asian nation announced in March it was joining the world's only permanent war crimes tribunal after a reform-minded government came to power last year.

BITS OF HISTORY
(APRIL 05)

1951: Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were sentenced to death in the United States for passing atomic secrets to the Russians.

1952: Winston Churchill resigns as British prime minister.

2012: Historic presidential election in Afghanistan.

INDIAN POLLS 2019

Lok Sabha speaker
won't contest polls

Amid speculation on her candidature from the Indore constituency, outgoing Lok Sabha Speaker Sumitra Mahan yesterday said she won't contest the elections.

Mahajan wrote an open letter questioning the delay over the announcement of a candidate for the prestigious seat she has won since 1989. The BJP is yet to take a call on the constituency that goes to polls on May 19, the last phase of voting.

Priyanka 'won't
contest from
Varanasi'

Whether Priyanka Gandhi Vadra will contest the national election is still in the realm of speculation but what is certain is that she will not fight against Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his Varanasi constituency in Uttar Pradesh. Congress sources have indicated that Priyanka Gandhi, the party general secretary in charge of east Uttar Pradesh, will not contest against PM Modi because it will weaken the campaign in the rest of the state. Uttar Pradesh will vote in all seven rounds of the election from April 11 to May 19. The results will be declared on May 23.

Release of Modi
biopic postponed

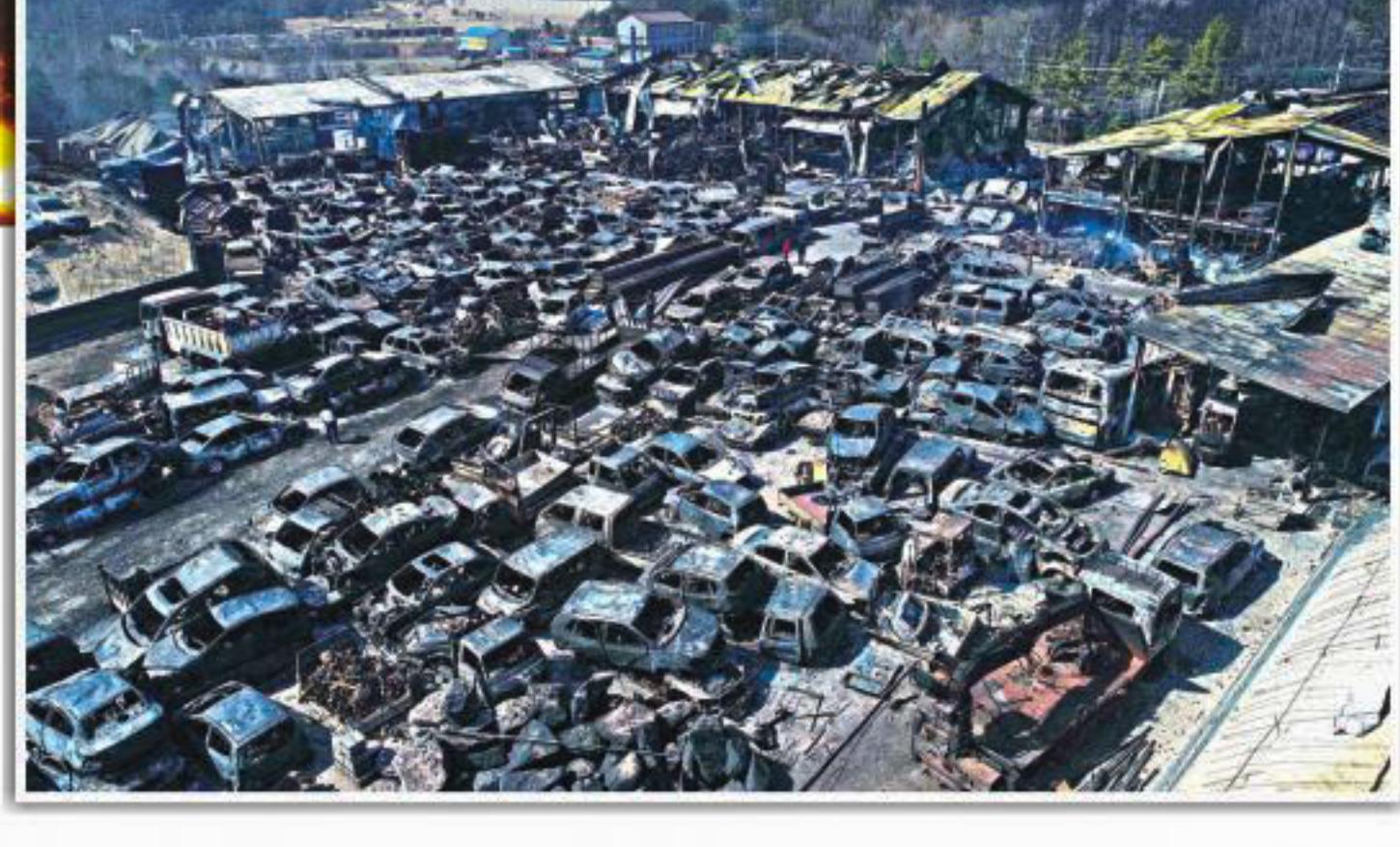
Film-makers yesterday postponed the scheduled release of a Bollywood biopic on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, after it failed to get a censor's certificate on time. India's main opposition Congress party had petitioned against the film's release, calling it a propaganda movie that would influence the country's national election that starts on April 11. Critics have labelled the movie a blatant attempt to sway voters in the six-week election. Congress has said its release should wait until voting ends on May 19.

SOURCE: AFP, INDIAN EXPRESS



SOUTH KOREA INFERNO

A forest fire is seen raging near a town in Sokcho, South Korea. Inset, Burnt out vehicles are seen at an auto junkyard in the town. The giant forest fire swept across swathes of South Korea yesterday, as authorities declared a rare national disaster, deploying 900 fire engines and tens of thousands of personnel to bring it under control. Fanned by strong winds the fire, which broke out late Thursday, quickly spread through the mountainous area, incinerating 400 homes and 500 hectares of land. Nearly 4,200 people were evacuated and one person died, authorities said, while 35 were injured. PHOTO: AFP



Delay Brexit until June 30

May asks EU; bloc suggests 1-yr flexible extension

REUTERS, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday wrote to Brussels asking for a delay of Brexit until up to June 30, while saying she aims to get Britain out of the EU earlier to avoid it participating in European elections.

But Donald Tusk, who chairs EU summits, has proposed a longer Brexit postponement of one year for Britain's feuding politicians to agree and ratify a plan.

"The only reasonable way out would be a long but flexible extension. I would call it a 'flexension', an EU official said.

Any such extension would still require unanimous approval of the other 27 EU countries and some, notably France, suggested they wanted a better justification from London for its request.

Britain is now due to leave the EU in a week, but May has been forced to seek more time after Britain's parliament repeatedly rejected her withdrawal agreement.

Her Conservative Party is deeply divided, as is the main opposition Labour Party, leading to a bewildering marathon of inconclusive votes in parliament that stretched Britain's centuries-old unwritten constitution

to its limits. Scenarios running the gamut from abandoning the EU abruptly with no deal to cancelling Brexit altogether have all gone down to defeat.

Obscure parliamentary procedures have been resurrected, providing daily drama from the House of Commons but making the future of Britain's biggest change in generations no clearer.

After finally recognising that her minority Conservative government could not push through a Brexit deal on its own, May started talks this week with Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn in the hope of coming up with a cross-party solution.

But that means accepting the need for more time, including the possibility of Britain holding European Parliament elections on May 23, which May has long hoped to avoid at all cost.

"The United Kingdom proposes that this period should end on 30 June 2019," May said in the letter.

The government will want to agree a timetable for ratification that allows the United Kingdom to withdraw from the European Union before 23 May, 2019, and therefore cancel the European Parliament elections, but will continue to make responsible preparations to hold the elections should this not prove possible.

France wants clear
reason for extension

May aims to avoid
European parliament
election

Taliban storms west
Afghanistan district
Dozens reportedly killed

REUTERS, Herat

Hundreds of Taliban fighters stormed a district in Afghanistan's western Badghis province, with both Afghan government forces and the insurgent group suffering dozens of casualties, provincial officials said.

The district of Bala Murghab has been a recurring hotspot of fighting in the past two months, and officials have previously warned that it could fall to the Taliban without reinforcements.

Fighting in Afghanistan has escalated ahead of the usual spring season, as both sides seek to increase leverage in talks on a peace settlement.

The Taliban killed 36 members of the government forces and captured several security checkpoints in attacks that began on Wednesday night, Waris Sherzad, district governor of Bala Murghab, said late on Thursday. Fighting was ongoing, he said.

More than 30 Taliban were also killed, said Jamshed Shahabi spokesman for Badghis' provincial governor.

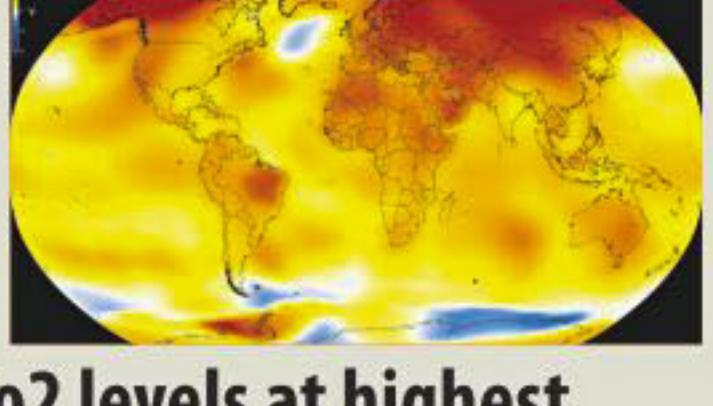
Taliban spokesman Qari Youssaf Ahmad said it attacked from four directions, capturing five checkpoints.

Afghanistan's defense ministry, in a series of tweets, said its forces chose to "tactically retreat" from the checkpoints to prevent civilian casualties. The ministry said it called in multiple air strikes on Taliban positions.

The conflict in Badghis has been particularly intense along with northern Kunduz province and Helmand province in the south in recent weeks. Both sides took heavy casualties in Badghis last month.

Amazon boss seals
record \$36b divorce

Amazon founder Jeff Bezos and his wife, MacKenzie, finalised the biggest divorce settlement in history on Thursday, leaving him with 75 percent of their stock in the tech giant and giving her nearly \$36 billion in shares. MacKenzie Bezos said she would give all of her stake to The Washington Post and the space exploration firm Blue Origin to her husband -- the world's richest man -- as well as voting control of her remaining Amazon stock. Jeff Bezos, 55, and MacKenzie, 48, a novelist, married in 1993 and have four children. Jeff Bezos founded Amazon in their Seattle garage in 1994 and turned it into a colossus that dominates online retail. According to Forbes magazine, the divorce settlement makes MacKenzie Bezos the third wealthiest woman in the world after L'Oréal heiress Francoise Bettencourt Meyers and Walmart's Alice Walton.

CO2 levels at highest
for 3 million years

The last time carbon dioxide levels were this high, Greenland was mostly green, sea levels were up to 20 meters higher and trees grew on Antarctica, according to scientists who warned this week that there is more CO2 in our atmosphere today than in the past three million years. Using a new computer simulation, researchers at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK), in Germany, found that the last time the earth's atmosphere had a CO2 concentration as high as today's was during the Pliocene epoch, the geological period 2.6-5.3 million years ago. CO2 emissions from human activities are the leading cause of climate change. Lead-author Matteo Wilhelmi told CNN that according to the simulation CO2 levels should not be higher than 280 parts per million (ppm) without human activity, but that they are currently 410 ppm and rising.

India didn't shoot down
Pak F-16: US report

A US magazine yesterday cast serious doubt on India's assertion that it shot down a Pakistani F-16 fighter jet during the two nuclear-armed countries' latest bust-up in February. Citing two unnamed senior US defense officials, Foreign Policy said US personnel recently conducted a count of Pakistan's F-16s and found none missing. This contradicts a statement from India's Air Vice Marshal RGK Kapoor that India downed a Pakistani F-16 in a dogfight over Kashmir on February 27. The dogfight happened after Pakistani aircraft entered Indian airspace a day after Indian aircraft carried out an airstrike on what it said was a "terrorist training camp" in Pakistan. That in turn was in response to a suicide bombing on February 14 in Indian-administered Kashmir that killed 40 Indian troops and which was claimed by a militant group based in Pakistan.

Modi fooling people with 'lollipops'

Says Mamata over NRC, Citizenship Bill as Indian polls campaign heats up

PTI, Indian Express



Priyanka Gandhi takes a selfie during a rally in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

the TMC supremo said.

Prime Minister Modi is a "liar who is always fooling the people", she said.

The Trinamool Congress is contesting nine of the 14 Lok Sabha seats in the state, which is set to go to polls in three phases from April 11 to May 19.

Meanwhile, Modi and his rivals in the main opposition camp yesterday traded barbs over a number of issues as they travelled around the country to address rallies.

Addressing a rally in Amroha in Uttar Pradesh,

the prime minister said "some people" did not like the fact that terrorists are being given a reply in their own language.

And Rahul Gandhi, who is campaigning in Pune, without naming Modi said he won't hide behind hatred and anger.

"Hatred is cowardice. I don't care if the entire world is full of hatred. I am not a coward. I will not hide behind hate and anger. I love all living beings, including those temporarily blinded by hatred," he tweeted.

France won't take
back Syria jihadists

Germany repatriates IS children

AFP, Paris

France has ruled out the repatriation of French jihadists and their families detained in Syria after the fall of the Islamic State group's "caliphate", Interior Minister Christophe Castaner said yesterday.

France and other European nations have been wrestling with how to handle the hundreds of foreign fighters, many of whom are being held by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces which led the final push against IS.

French daily Liberation reported yesterday that in early March the government had been ready to bring home around 250 men, women and children before abandoning the plan given public hostility to the repatriations.

The issue is extremely sensitive in France, where a deadly 2015 attack on the capital claimed by IS killed 130 people and set off a wave of other deadly assaults since then.

"It's logical that our services considered all hypotheses. This was one of the hypotheses they prepared," Castaner said at a press conference following a meeting of G7 interior ministers in Paris.

"No communal repatriation was under consideration to be carried out," he said, reiterating that France would nonetheless study bringing back children of jihadist fighters on a "case-by-case basis".

Meanwhile, Germany has repatriated from Iraq several children of jailed jihadists, the foreign ministry said yesterday.

Modi's pre-poll promises
give BJP a boost: survey

THE HINDU ONLINE

A pre-election survey conducted by Lokniti, a research programme of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi, in March last week suggests that three decisions of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, taken between January 7 and February 26, might have the ability to change the course of what could have been a close election.

The three decisions are the announcement on January 7 of 10% reservation to economically weaker sections, the proclamation on February 1 of the PM-KISAN scheme to transfer money to farmers and the air strike on Pakistan's Balakot in the last week of February after the Pulwama terror attack by Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammad that claimed the lives of 40 CRPF personnel.

The CSDS-Lokniti-The Hindu-Tiranga TV

Three decisions of
NDA are declaration
of quota, farmers'
scheme and Balakot
air strike

voting issue will be for them, one-fifth of the respondents said it would be unemployment and one-sixth said development. Barely 2% said that national security and the air strike on Pakistan would be the single most important voting issue for them.

Libya plunges into chaos
Pro-Haftar forces pushed back near Tripoli; US, allies urge all parties to de-escalate tensions

AFP, Tripoli

Forces loyal to Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar were pushed back from a key checkpoint less than 30 kilometres from Tripoli, checking their lightning advance on the capital, a security source said yesterday.

Pro-governmental militiamen from the coastal town of Zawiya, west of Tripoli, retook the base after a "short exchange of fire", the source said on condition of anonymity.

The advance by Haftar's forces on Thursday, which came as the United Nations prepares to convene a conference later this month on organising delayed elections, prompted UN chief Antonio Guterres to voice his "deep concern".

Guterres was in Tripoli for talks with the head of the UN-backed unity government, Fayez al-Sarraj, when the offensive was announced. He was due to meet Haftar in eastern Libya later yesterday.

The UN Security Council was also to hold an urgent meeting



on the crisis as Western governments appealed for restraint.

Traffic was flowing normally past the checkpoint yesterday morning. Just a single armoured vehicle was seen. The allegiance of its occupants was not immediately clear.

The Zawiya militia is one of dozens that have proliferated since the overthrow of veteran dictator Moamer Gaddafi in a NATO-backed uprising in 2011 and are variously aligned with the UN-backed unity government in the capital and a rival administration in the east backed by Haftar's forces.

Most of the pro-Haftar fighters who briefly captured the checkpoint late on Thursday were rival militiamen from the town of Sabratha further west along the Mediterranean coast.

Dozens of them were captured and their vehicles seized, the security source said.

The UN Security Council was due to meet behind closed doors to discuss the crisis.

The United States and its allies issued a joint statement urging "all parties to immediately de-escalate tensions".