

# NEWS IN brief

## Clashes with bandits kill 50 in Nigeria

At least 50 people were killed in clashes with bandits in northwest Nigeria, which has been riven by cattle rustling and kidnapping, the state government said on Friday. The clashes happened on Tuesday in Sakajiki village, in the Kauran Namoda area of Zamfara state when civilian vigilantes mobilised people and confronted the bandits in the forest, a senior official said.

## Blasts kill 3, injure 20 in Afghanistan

Twin explosions yesterday in the eastern Afghanistan city of Jalalabad killed three people including a child and injured 20 others, local officials said. It was not clear what caused the explosions. No group took immediate responsibility.

## Pakistan to release 360 Indian prisoners

Pakistan will release 360 Indian prisoners this month, the foreign office said on Friday, as the nuclear-armed neighbours scale back from a confrontation. Pakistan foreign ministry said the prisoners would be released in four batches starting from April 8. There are 347 Pakistani prisoners in Indian jails and 537 Indian prisoners in Pakistani jails.

## Ebola toll tops 700 in DR Congo

Some 100 people have died in the Ebola epidemic in DR Congo over the past three weeks, taking the overall death toll in the latest outbreak past 700, according to health ministry data. Congo declared its tenth outbreak of Ebola in 40 years last August in northeastern North Kivu province before it spread into the neighbouring Ituri region.

## INDIAN POLLS 2019



## Shatrughan Sinha joins Congress

Actor-turned-politician Shatrughan Sinha yesterday officially joined the Congress. As he bid a farewell to the BJP, with which he has shared an acrimonious relationship for years, the lawmaker took pot shots at Prime Minister Narendra Modi and party chief Amit Shah. "In the one-man show, two-man army, everything happens from Prime Minister's Office... the ministers can't work freely anyway," he said. "We have seen how democracy turned into autocracy" he added. Shatrughan Sinha, 72, will contest as the Congress candidate from Bihar's Patna Sahib, his constituency of 10 years.

## First vote has been cast from Arunachal

The first vote for the Lok Sabha elections 2019 has been cast from Arunachal Pradesh by DIG Sudhakar Natarajan, head of ATS Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP). Service voters cast their votes from 10:00am Friday, five days before the first phase of the elections due on April 11. The Lok Sabha elections will be spread across seven phases, beginning from April 11. The polls will conclude on May 19 and results will be declared four days later on May 23.

## Mamata slams EC over cops transfer

The transfer of four top West Bengal police officers ordered by the Election Commission days before national polls has triggered an ugly war of words. In an unusually sharp letter, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has written to the poll body that the order was "highly arbitrary, motivated and biased" and was issued "at best of the BJP". The EC order to replace four police officers including the Kolkata Police Commissioner was issued Friday night, preventing them from being posted for any election related duties.



Riot police officers disperse crowds of migrants and refugees during clashes outside a camp in the town of Diavata in northern Greece, yesterday. For the third day, hundreds of migrants from camps elsewhere in the country gathered outside the Diavata camp after anonymous social media posts over recent days claimed that human rights groups stood ready to assist migrants in crossing into North Macedonia and on to other EU states.

# US 'full', can't take more

## Trump tells migrants, asylum seekers at Mexico border

US President Donald Trump visited the Mexican border on Friday to deliver a message to would-be illegal immigrants and asylum seekers: don't bother coming. "The system is full and we can't take you anymore... Our country is full," he said at a meeting with border patrol officers and other officials in Calexico, California. "So turn around, that's the way it is." Shortly after, Trump visited a section of recently refurbished border wall -- something he wants extended across far more of the US-Mexico frontier -- and said illegal immigrants had previously been "pouring" in.



The California trip followed a retreat from earlier threats to close the border, which had sparked fears of serious economic damage. Nevertheless, Trump sees his campaign against a "crisis" on the border as key to his 2020 reelection bid, and his time in Calexico was meant to keep that message in the headlines. Numbers of migrants and asylum seekers fleeing violence in Central America have risen sharply,

although there are enormous political divides on whether this constitutes the "national emergency" that Trump has declared. Around 200 protesters, accompanied by a giant inflatable balloon depicting Trump as a baby, were waiting for the president in Mexicali, the town on the Mexican side of the frontier. Waving US and Mexican flags, the protesters carried signs with messages such as "Stop separating families" and "If you build the wall, my generation will tear it down." On the US side, dozens of people lined the road that Trump's motorcade took, demonstrating support for his policies. "Build the wall," said one placard.

Before leaving Washington earlier Friday, Trump said that his previous threats to shut down the border had been successful in persuading Mexican authorities to clamp down by stopping migrants on their journey north. "Mexico, I have to say, has been very, very good... over the last four days since I talked about shutting down the border," he said.

## BREXIT IMPASSE

# UK minister sees deal with Labour

REUTERS, Bucharest/London

The British government is optimistic about reaching some form of deal with the opposition Labour Party to end a deadlock on Brexit as work on a compromise continues, Britain's finance minister Philip Hammond said yesterday. But Labour said the governing Conservatives needed to be more flexible and had not shown any movement on a political declaration of intent on the future relationship between London and Brussels once Britain has left the European Union.

No talks have been arranged yet between the two sides for this weekend, a Labour source told Reuters. Prime Minister Theresa May has asked EU leaders to postpone Britain's exit from the bloc next Friday until June 30 but the EU insists she must first show a viable plan to secure agreement on her thrice-rejected divorce deal in the British parliament. It is the latest twist in a saga which leaves Britain, the world's fifth-biggest economy, struggling to find a way to honour a 2016 referendum vote to take the country out of the globe's largest trading bloc. Hammond, however, told reporters he was upbeat about breaking the impasse. "I am optimistic that we will reach some form of agreement with Labour," he said on the sidelines of a meeting of European Union finance ministers in Bucharest, adding he expected the exchange of "some more texts today."



## UK issuing passports without EU on cover

Britain has begun issuing passports with the words "European Union" removed from the front cover -- despite Brexit being delayed and uncertainty over when the country will leave the bloc. The interior ministry confirmed that some passports introduced from March 30, the day after Britain was originally due to depart, no longer include references to the EU following a 2017 decision. However, it said some newly-issued travel documents would still bear the bloc's name -- which has sat atop British passport covers -- in a bid to save public money. British passports have become ensnared in the country's Brexit divisions after the government announced in 2017 it would return to traditional blue passports "to restore national identity". The travel documents had dark blue covers from 1921, but Britain switched to burgundy from 1988, in common with other passports in what was then the European Community.



## Nasheed makes political comeback in Maldives

The Maldives yesterday held its first parliamentary election since former strongman leader Abdulla Yameen was forced to stand down, with his arch-rival expected to make a big comeback in the vote. Mohamed Nasheed, another former president, is the highest profile candidate up for election for the 87-member People's Majlis, or parliament. He returned from an enforced exile abroad after Yameen lost an election in September to Nasheed's deputy, Mohamed Ibrahim Solih. Solih said he expected yesterday's poll to return a strong legislature led by his Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP). Nasheed is widely expected to play a key role in the new legislature. He was jailed for 13 years on a controversial terrorism charge when Yameen was in power. However, the conviction was overturned last year after the presidency changed.



## Rising Thai political star hit with sedition charge

The telegenic leader of an anti-junta political party who rose to prominence in Thailand's election last month was charged with sedition yesterday, drawing hundreds of his supporters onto the streets urging him to "fight". Billionaire Thanathorn Juangroengruangkit heads the youth-oriented Future Forward Party which won more than six million votes in the March 24 poll, the first since a 2014 coup, with its message of ousting the military from politics. It had joined an anti-junta coalition with six others claiming the right to form a government in the aftermath of the disputed vote whose full results are expected by May 9. Earlier this week he posted on Facebook that police had summoned him to appear today to face a sedition charge related to anti-junta rallies in 2015. He said the charge was "politically motivated".

# World powers urge Haftar to halt advance on Libya capital

Libyan forces under Khalifa Haftar battled their way to the south of Tripoli on Friday, prompting the UN Security Council and the G7 to demand a halt to the military advance on the capital. Haftar, commander of the self-proclaimed Libyan National Army (LNA), launched an offensive on Thursday to take the capital, held by a UN-backed unity government and an array of militias. The lightning assault was ordered as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was in Libya for a visit aimed at cementing a political deal on holding elections. After meeting with Haftar in the eastern city of Benghazi, Guterres said he was leaving "Libya with a deep concern and a heavy heart" and voiced hope that a "bloody confrontation" could be avoided. Shortly afterwards, LNA forces clashed with a pro-government alliance less than 50 kilometres (30 miles) south of the capital, a unity government source said. After a closed-door emergency meeting in New York, the Security Council called on

Haftar's forces to halt their advance and warned that those responsible for re-igniting the conflict will be held responsible. The appeal for Haftar to halt his offensive was unanimously backed by the council, including Russia, which has supported the strongman. The council "called on LNA forces to halt all military movements" and "on all forces to de-escalate military activity," said German Ambassador Christoph Heugens, who holds the council presidency. UN envoy Ghassan Salame told the council that Haftar made clear to Guterres during the Benghazi meeting that he had no intention of halting his campaign, diplomats said. G7 foreign ministers meeting in the French resort town of Dinard urged an immediate halt to "all military activity and movements toward Tripoli", warning that civilians were in danger. The United States and its allies issued a joint statement urging "all parties to immediately de-escalate tensions". Russia called for "all possible efforts to fully resolve the situation with peaceful political means".



Protesters hold signs reading "France a terrorist state" and "Stop France's genocide in Mali" during a demonstration to protest government's failure to stop violence and France's presence in the country, on Friday, in Bamako.

# BJP using war hysteria to win polls

## Says Pak PM, slams Indian ruling party over downed F-16 claim

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan blamed India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for "whipping up war hysteria" over claims that India shot down a Pakistani F-16 during a standoff in February, saying the truth is always the best policy. US-based Foreign Policy magazine, citing US officials, said all of Pakistan's F-16 combat jets had been accounted for, contradicting an Indian air force assessment that it had shot down one of the jets. "The truth always prevails and is always the best policy," Khan said in a Tweet. "BJP's attempt to win elections through whipping up war hysteria and false claims of downing a Pak F 16 has backfired with US Defence officials also confirming that no F16 was missing from Pakistan's fleet." Nuclear-armed neighbours India and Pakistan engaged in an aerial battle over the disputed region of

Kashmir a day after Indian jets crossed over into Pakistan to attack a suspected camp of anti-India militants. An Indian jet was brought down during the fight and its pilot captured when he ejected on the Pakistani side of the border. He was later released. India said it too had shot down a Pakistani aircraft and the air force displayed pieces of a missile that it said had been fired by a Pakistani F-16 before it went down. Details of the India-Pakistan air engagement have not been fully provided by either side. If the US report turns out to be true, it would be a further blow to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who had said that India had taught Pakistan a lesson, ahead of elections next week. The BJP is campaigning on a platform of tough national security, especially with regard to arch foe Pakistan. BJP spokesman Bizay Sonkar Shastri dismissed Khan's accusations. "Firstly, their (Pakistan's) habit of lying is no secret to the world. Secondly, this is absolutely clear that the roots of terrorism lie in Pakistan and terrorism is cultivated in Pakistan," he told Reuters. The success of Indian air strikes on a camp of the Jaish-e-Mohammed militant group in northwestern Pakistan has also been thrown into doubt after satellite images showed little sign of damage. High-resolution satellite images reviewed by Reuters last month showed that a religious school run by Jaish appeared to be still standing days after India said its warplanes had hit the Islamist group's training camp on the site and killed a large number of militants.



# US to declare Iran's Revolutionary Guards as terrorist group: WSJ

The United States will designate Iran's Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organization, an unprecedented move that would ramp up pressure on the elite force, The Wall Street Journal reported Friday. The newspaper, quoting unnamed officials, said President Donald Trump's administration would announce the long-mulled decision as soon as Monday and that concerned defense officials were bracing for the impact. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp was formed after the 1979 Islamic revolution with a mission to defend the clerical regime, in contrast to more traditional military units that protect borders. The Revolutionary Guards have amassed strong power within Iran, including with significant economic interests.

The Guards' prized unit is the Quds Force, named for the Arabic word for Jerusalem, which supports forces allied with Iran around the region including Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Lebanon's Hezbollah. The Trump administration has already imposed sweeping sanctions on Iran after withdrawing last year from an international agreement under which Tehran drastically scaled back its nuclear program. A foreign terrorist designation would make any activities of the group toxic for the United States, with any transactions involving US institutions or individuals subject to punishment. The Wall Street Journal said that the Pentagon and the CIA had reservations about the move, saying it would increase risks for US troops without doing much more to damage the Iranian economy.

