

NEWS IN brief

US halts military training for Saudis

AFP, Washington

The Pentagon announced Tuesday it was temporarily suspending operational training for Saudi military students in the United States following a shooting rampage last week by a Saudi air force officer. Saudi Arabian military students in the United States will continue classroom instruction but operational training is halted pending a security review.

Lawmakers okay US space force

AFP, Washington

The United States is getting a new space force along with \$738 billion in military spending under an agreement backed by lawmakers on Tuesday that fulfils a priority of President Donald Trump. The 2020 spending in the National Defense Authorization Act is a jump from the \$716 billion authorized last year. The bill has won the approval of Democratic and Republican lawmakers in both the House and Senate armed services committees.

Blast damages Afghan hospital near US base

AFP, Kabul

At least one person was killed and dozens wounded when a bomb exploded close to the largest US military base in Afghanistan yesterday, damaging homes and a hospital under construction near Bagram Airfield. The attack -- which has not yet been claimed -- comes as Washington resumed talks with the Taliban on Saturday, three months after President Trump abruptly halted diplomatic efforts that could end America's longest war.



Britain's Liberal Democrat leader Jo Swinson (C) stands between a Stop Brexit sign as she attends a campaign event at Esher Rugby Club in Esher, south west London, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Youth vote an unpredictable factor

AFP, London

Young voters are the most europhile and left-wing in Britain, yet also the least likely to vote, representing an unknown factor in Thursday's battle for Downing Street.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's centre-right Conservatives are ahead in polling but the youth vote, which has been growing over the years, could swing the result.

At the last general election in 2017, 66 percent of voters aged 18 and 19 backed the left-wing Labour opposition, with just 19 percent behind the governing Conservatives.

According to pollsters YouGov, the results showed the older the voter, the more likely they are to vote Conservative -- the tipping point being the age of 47.

At the European Parliament elections in May, when multiple members are returned per constituency, younger voters backed the Liberal Democrats and the Greens -- two anti-Brexit parties.

However, general elections are run on a first-past-the-post system and given a choice between Labour or the Conservatives winning a seat, the youth vote is likely to swing behind Labour, said Rosalind Shorrocks, a politics lecturer at the University of

Manchester. Brexit is a major issue among younger voters, some of whom would have been too young to take part in the seismic 2016 EU membership referendum.

Labour is offering a second referendum, with a choice between a softer form of Brexit or Remain, with millions of EU nationals added to the franchise.

UK POLLS IN NUMBERS

45.7 million voters

650 House of Commons seats up for grab

Expected final results: Early hours of Friday

"Issues young people care about the most are Brexit, the climate crisis, and the NHS," said Johnny Lucas, spokesman for For our Future's Sake (FFS), a student campaign for a second referendum. Brexit is especially a major factor among those who could not vote in 2017, he added.

According to FFS, 1.4 million people aged under 25 have registered to vote this time around -- compared

to 900,000 in 2017.

"This surge of young people registering to vote outstrips all projections and expectations," said FFS co-founder Amanda Chetwynd.

"This is the real 'youthquake' which was heralded in 2017, and it makes the outcome of this election all the more unpredictable."

Experts predict a higher turnout amongst younger voters today.

In 2017, almost 54 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds voted, compared to just 38 percent at the previous election in 2015, according to pollsters Ipsos MORI.

The older the voter, the more likely they are to vote. Some 71 percent of the over-65s voted in 2017.

A student at the elite Oxford or Cambridge universities is likely to vote in the same way as youngsters without further education working in their first job.

According to YouGov, voters split roughly in the same numbers regardless of their socio-economic grade.

"The class divide in British politics seems to have closed and it is no longer a very good indicator of voting intention," it said of the 2017 result.

Shorrocks said young women were more likely to be pro-Labour than young men.

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

Britons will head to the polls today for a snap general election which was called to break the country's Brexit impasse. The ballot is expected to shape how, or whether, the United Kingdom finally quits the European Union almost three and a half years after the EU referendum. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative Party and Jeremy Corbyn's main opposition Labour Party have presented radically different proposals for ending months of political deadlock over the issue. The electorate, also deeply divided over Brexit, will now have its say in a poll dubbed the "most important" for a generation.

Why is an election being held?

Months of fractious political disagreement over Brexit saw MPs agree in October to hold an early general election. Before that, they had repeatedly rejected the divorce deal brokered by Johnson's predecessor, Theresa May, forcing her resignation. They then moved to block Johnson from pushing his revised Withdrawal Agreement through Parliament at breakneck speed. With no apparent majority among MPs for any course of action over Brexit -- resulting in three requests so far to delay the UK's departure -- an election appeared to be the natural end-game as the year progressed.

How does the vote work?

Voters in 650 constituencies across the UK will elect an MP to the lower chamber House of Commons via the first past the post system. To win, candidates need to get more votes than any of their competitors. A party needs to win 326 seats to secure a majority in the Commons and be asked to form a government by the monarch, Queen Elizabeth II. Parliament's upper chamber, the House of Lords, is unelected. If no party achieves a majority, there is a hung parliament. In this scenario, the party with the largest vote share may form a minority government, seek

to win 14 percent of the vote share and 13 seats in Parliament. The Scottish National Party (SNP), which only fields candidates for the 59 constituencies in Scotland, is projected to win 43 seats, but only three percent of all votes cast.

How will the vote shape Brexit?

Johnson has promised to "get Brexit done" by the end of January if his Conservative Party scoops a majority. However, even if Parliament passes the existing withdrawal agreement by that deadline, a potentially gruelling negotiation over the UK and EU's future relationship will begin as the transition period comes into effect. Johnson says this period will not be extended past the end of 2020, when it is currently scheduled to end, but there is widespread doubt over whether a trade deal can be concluded before then. The transition period can be extended by up to two years if the UK and EU both agree. If Labour wins, it will ask the EU for another Brexit extension to allow time to renegotiate the current withdrawal agreement. Corbyn wants a softer divorce deal based on a new UK-EU customs union and close EU single market alignment. Labour's reworked agreement would be put to a legally-binding second referendum



out the support of smaller parties for a "confidence and supply" arrangement, or try to build a formal coalition. On polling day, voting centres will be open from 7:00 - 22:00 GMT. Final results from the poll are expected to be declared by the early hours of Friday.

What is expected?

The Conservative Party appears set to win the largest vote share of the vote and possibly a majority of seats. A YouGov study said the Tories were on course for a 28-seat majority in the 650-seat House of Commons under Britain's first-past-the-post system. On November 27, it forecast a 68-seat majority. "The margin of error here could put the final number of Conservative seats from 311 to 367," YouGov said. The lower end of that range would leave Britain with another hung parliament, where the biggest party does not have a majority, and the very real possibility of Brexit being delayed for years or even cancelled in a second referendum. Among the smaller parties, the pro-European Liberal Democrats are predicted



within six months, alongside an option to remain in the EU. The SNP is aligned with Labour in supporting a second referendum, so long as remaining in the EU is an option on the ballot paper, while the Liberal Democrats have pledged to revoke Article 50 and cancel Brexit altogether if they win.

What else are Britons concerned about?

A sluggish economy, creaking health and social care provision, the unfolding climate crisis, and law and order are among other key concerns. Uncertainty over the UK's future relationship with the EU has seen the economy register its slowest annual rate of growth in almost a decade, with year-on-year growth in the last quarter falling to an anaemic one percent. Meanwhile, the NHS continues to struggle under severe financial pressure, with hospital waiting times now at their worst-ever level on record. A decade of austerity imposed by successive Conservative-led governments has also seen budgets for policing, housing and welfare all dramatically cut.



Security personnel use batons to disperse students protesting against the government's Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB), in Guwahati, yesterday; Inset, Social activists set fire to posters during a protest in Kolkata. PHOTO: AFP



China biggest jailer of journalists: CPJ

REUTERS, Washington

China imprisoned at least 48 journalists in 2019, more than any other country, displacing Turkey as the most oppressive place for the profession, a report by the Committee to Protect Journalists report said yesterday.

At least 250 journalists were imprisoned worldwide this year, according to the report, which the committee compiles annually. The total last year was 255, said the report by the New York-based CPJ.

China's total rose by one since last year. The report noted that "the number has steadily increased since President Xi Jinping consolidated political control of the country."

"A crackdown in Xinjiang province - where a million members of Muslim ethnic groups have been sent to internment camps - has led to the arrests of dozens of journalists, including some apparently jailed for journalistic activity years earlier," the report said.

Asked about the report by a regular briefing in Beijing yesterday, foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said US-based institutions had no credibility.

Turkey imprisoned 47 journalists in 2019, down from 68 last year. Saudi Arabia and Egypt, both with 26; Eritrea with 16; Vietnam, with 12; and Iran with 11 were the next-most oppressive countries for journalists, the report said.

It noted that "authoritarianism, instability, and protests" this year had led to an increase in the number of journalists imprisoned in the Middle East.

About 8% of those imprisoned globally are women, down from 13% last year, the report said. Politics, human rights and corruption were the subjects most likely to land journalists in jail, it said.



Hafiz Saeed indicted on 'terror financing'

A Pakistani anti-terrorism court indicted Hafiz Saeed, the alleged mastermind of deadly 2008 attacks in Mumbai, on terror financing charges yesterday, a government prosecutor and defence lawyer said. Defence lawyer Imran Gill said his client pleaded not guilty. The charges were read as the 70-year-old Saeed was present in court, prosecutor Abdur Rauf Watto told Reuters. "He has been charged for collecting funds for banned organisations, JuD and LeT," he said. Saeed is the founder of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a militant group blamed by the United States and India for the four-day Mumbai siege, in which 160 people were killed. The indictment came ahead of a world financial watchdog Financial Action Task Force (FATF) meeting early next year to decide whether to blacklist Pakistan for its failure to curb terror financing.

Five killed in jihadist attack on Somali hotel

Five people including three civilians were killed when jihadist militants stormed a hotel in Somalia's capital, police said yesterday, adding that all five attackers had also died after an hours-long siege. The attack on Tuesday evening, claimed by the Islamist group al-Shabaab, took place at a hotel in Mogadishu popular with politicians, army officers and diplomats. Several witnesses told AFP that the assailants were dressed in police uniform, which allowed them to approach the hotel without arousing suspicion. They then opened fire and threw grenades, triggering an armed response from security forces.

UN can't confirm Iran behind Saudi oil attack

The UN has been unable to confirm Iranian involvement in a dramatic attack on oil facilities in Saudi Arabia earlier this year, secretary-general Antonio Guterres said Tuesday. Drones and cruise missiles were used in the September bombardment, which knocked out half of the kingdom's crude production and fueled a record surge in prices. Saudi officials, the United States and several European countries accused Iran of responsibility for the attack, which Tehran has denied. UN investigators had been given access to debris of the weapons used in the attack, Guterres said in a six-monthly report to the Security Council on Iran's nuclear program, seen by AFP on Tuesday. But the investigation was not able to "independently corroborate that the cruise missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles used in these attacks are of Iranian origin," the report said. An investigation into the attack is continuing Guterres said. SOURCE: AFP

2002 GUJARAT RIOTS

Panel gives clean chit to Modi

PTI, Gandhinagar

The Nanavati Commission has given a clean chit to the then Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi-led government in the 2002 riots in the state where over 1,000 people, mostly of the minority community, were killed.

The commission's report was tabled in the Gujarat legislative assembly by minister of state for Home Pradeepsinh Jadeja yesterday, five years after it was submitted to the then state government.

"There is no evidence to show that these attacks were either inspired or instigated or abated by any minister of the state," the commission said in its report, which runs into over 1,500 pages and is compiled in nine volumes.

It said the police at some places were ineffective in controlling the mob because of their inadequate numbers or because they were not properly armed.

On some communal riot incidents in Ahmedabad city, the commission said, "the police had not shown their competence and eagerness which was necessary."

The commission has recommended inquiry or action against the erring police officers.

Former Supreme Court Justice G T Nanavati (ret'd) and ex-Gujarat high court Justice Akshay Mehta (ret'd) had in 2014 submitted their final report on the 2002 riots to the then state chief minister Anandiben Patel.

The commission was appointed in 2002 by the then state chief minister Narendra Modi to probe the riots, that took place after the burning of two coaches of the Sabarmati Express train near Godhra railway station, in which 59 'karsevaks' were killed.

Climate pledges 'misleading'

Greta tells UN meet, accuses nations of adopting 'clever ways' to avoid responsibilities

AFP, Madrid

Swedish activist Greta Thunberg yesterday accused wealthier nations of inventing ways to avoid slashing their greenhouse gas emissions, branding their climate action "misleading" at a summit in Madrid.

The UN climate forum tasked with saving the world from runaway global warming has become an "opportunity for countries to negotiate loopholes and to avoid raising their ambition" to act on climate, the 16-year-old told delegates.

"Countries are finding clever ways around having to take real action."

Nations are gathered in Spain's capital to finalise the rulebook of the 2015 landmark Paris climate accord, which aims to limit global temperature rises to "well below" two degrees Celsius and to a safer cap of 1.5C if possible.

A number of sticking points remain even as the two-week marathon negotiations enter the final days. Nations are at odds over how the fight against climate change should be funded and how carbon trading schemes should be regulated.

In addition, there has been precious little progress over the issue of "loss and damage" funding -- how countries already dealing with the worst impacts of climate-related extreme weather and drought should be compensated. Delegates and observers at the COP25

negotiations in Madrid told AFP that Washington was pushing for a change in the rules of the UN climate convention that could let history's largest emitter largely off the hook when it comes to "loss and damage" funding for developing nations.



US accused of seeking climate funding waiver at UN talks

2019 was nearly, but not quite, the worst year for the Arctic

Thunberg, who started her one-girl climate strike in her native Sweden a year ago but has since been catapulted to international stardom, told negotiators that their promises were a world apart from what was needed. "Recently a handful of rich countries pledged to reduce their emission of

greenhouse gases by so and so many percent by this or that date, or to become climate neutral or net zero in so and so many years," she said.

"This may sound impressive at first glance, but even though the intentions may be good this is not leadership. This is not leading, this is misleading."

UN chief Antonio Guterres on Wednesday appealed to industry to "shift into a high gear" by greening their businesses and dragging carbon emissions down.

The call came as a report on Tuesday said the Arctic had experienced its second warmest year since 1900, raising fears over low summer sea ice and rising sea levels.

The average temperature in the 12 months to September was 1.9 degrees Celsius higher than the 1981-2010 average, according to the Arctic Report Card of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA).

The UN says emissions must drop 7.6 percent globally every year to 2030 to stay on track for a 1.5C world.

At little over 1C of warming since the industrial period started, Earth in 2019 was shook by a string of deadly wildfires, super storms and floods made more intense by the changing climate.

Despite dozens of meetings and thousands of specialists working to implement the Paris accord, global emissions have increased by four percent in the years since the deal was signed.