

NEWS IN brief

US Senate approves Turkey sanctions bill

REUTERS, Washington
A US Senate committee backed legislation on Wednesday to impose sanctions on Turkey after its offensive in Syria and purchase of a Russian S-400 missile system, the latest move in the chamber to push Republican President Donald Trump to take a harder line against Ankara. The Republican-led Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted by 18-4 to send the "Promoting American National Security and Preventing the Resurgence of ISIS Act of 2019" for a vote in the full Senate.

Denmark arrests 20 over attack plot

AFP, Copenhagen
Danish police said Wednesday they had arrested 20 people suspected of planning "Islamist attacks". The suspects had tried to acquire weapons and explosive devices, police said. "Police searched 20 addresses and arrested 20 people", Copenhagen police chief Jorgen Bergen Skov said at a press conference. He did not specify the target of the possible attack but said police had arrested all the suspects it had on its radar. "They are people who have both the intent and ability to commit a terrorist attack," Bergen Skov said.

Malaysia's Anwar Ibrahim quizzed

AFP, Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia's leader-in-waiting Anwar Ibrahim was questioned by police yesterday over allegations he sexually assaulted a male former aide, the latest scandal to hit the veteran politician's career. Anwar told AFP he was quizzed at national police headquarters over the claims by Muhammad Yusoff Rawther, which he has vehemently denied.



Sikh refugees from Pakistan and Afghanistan celebrate the approval of Indian government's Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) in Amritsar yesterday. Inset, people, who claim to have migrated from Pakistan's Sindh Province, offer sweets to images of India's PM Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah during celebrations in Ahmedabad.



AYODHYA VERDICT

India SC dismisses review petitions

TOI, New Delhi
The Supreme Court yesterday dismissed all the petitions seeking review of its November 9 verdict in Ayodhya land dispute case. The five-judge bench headed by chief justice S A Bobde and comprising justices D Y Chandrachud, Ashok Bhushan, S Abdul Nazeer and Sanjiv Khanna, which took these review pleas for consideration in-chamber, rejected them after finding no merits. The top court considered the review pleas of only those who were parties to the four lawsuits filed initially in the vexatious dispute. There were 18 review petitions, of which nine have been filed by parties who were part of the earlier litigation and the other nine were filed by "third parties". The apex court refused to entertain nine review pleas filed by those who were not party to the original litigation. Among the nine "third parties" were 40 rights activists who had jointly moved the top court seeking review of its verdict. With the rejection of these review petitions, the consequential request of parties for an open court hearing on these pleas also get dismissed. A 5-judge bench, headed by the then chief justice of India Ranjan Gogoi, had in a unanimous verdict on November 9 decreed the entire 2.77 acre disputed land in favour of deity 'Ram Lalla' and also directed the Centre to allot a five-acre plot to Sunni Waqf Board for building a mosque in Ayodhya. On December 2, the first plea seeking review of Ayodhya verdict was filed in the apex court by Maulana Syed Ashhad Rashidi, legal heir of original litigant M Siddiq and also the Uttar Pradesh president of the Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind.

CAB faces first legal hurdle

Indian Union Muslim League files writ petition with SC

NDTV ONLINE
India's Citizenship (Amendment) Bill (CAB), which is set to become law after it was cleared by both houses of parliament amid opposition protests, will now face the Supreme Court test. The Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) has approached the Supreme Court against the citizenship bill. Its petition argues that the proposed law violates the constitution by allowing citizenship based on religion. The bill provides for Indian citizenship to non-Muslims who fled Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan and entered India before 2015. The opposition in parliament argued that the bill violates Article 14 of the constitution, which promises the right to equality and equality before law. Congress leader and former union minister P Chidambaram, who spoke in the Rajya Sabha Wednesday evening before the vote on the bill, said the CAB is unconstitutional and "the battleground shifts to the Supreme Court". Many Congress leaders have indicated that the party may challenge the bill in court. "It is certainly legislation highly

suspect in constitutionality in terms of basic structure and legal validity. "I have no doubt that it deserves to be challenged and will in the near future be challenged (in court)," Abhishek Manu Singhvi, a Congress spokesperson and a senior lawyer, told Press Trust of India.

INDIA'S CITIZENSHIP BILL
IUML says the bill violates constitution by allowing citizenship based on religion
Many Congress leaders indicated that party may challenge the bill in court

Asked if the Congress would approach the Supreme Court against the bill, Congress general secretary KC Venugopal said, "We will explore all possibilities." A former Chief Justice of India, RM Lodha, said "exclusion or inclusion on the basis of religion may not meet

the touchstone of the constitution". Home Minister Amit Shah, while defending the bill in parliament, said it made a "reasonable classification" and so is legally sound. Constitutional expert Subhash Kashyap says it is an argument that could stand in court. "The Constitutional position is that Article 14 guarantees equality before the law. Several judgements of the Supreme Court have said that reasonable classification is permissible and if the classification is reasonable, then there is no violation of the fundamental right. "The question will be whether the classification between infiltrators and refugees is reasonable. If that classification is reasonable, then there will be no violation of Article 14," Kashyap told news agency ANI. Amnesty International said the law was "bigoted" and called for it to be immediately repealed. "In a secular country like India, slamming the door on persecuted Muslims and other communities merely for their faith reeks of fear mongering and bigotry," the global rights groups said in a statement.

US 'reprimanded' Pak for misusing F-16s: report

PTI, Washington
The US reprimanded Pakistan Air Force chief in August for misusing F-16 fighter jets by undermining their shared security platforms and infrastructures, a media report here has said, months after the Indian Air Force shot down an F-16 jet of Pakistan Air Force during an aerial combat over Kashmir. Andrea Thompson, the then-undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs, wrote a letter to Pakistan Air Force chief Air Chief Marshal Mujahid Anwar Khan in August over the matter, US News reported on Wednesday. While the letter written did not directly mention the incidents in the immediate aftermath of the February 26 Balakot airstrikes, US News quoted a source as saying that the communication served as a direct response to America's concerns about the F-16 use over Kashmir in February.

INDO-PAK DOGFIGHT



"While we understand from you that these aircraft movements were done in support of national defense objectives, the US government considers the relocation of aircraft to non-US government authorised bases concerning and inconsistent with the F-16 Letter of Offer and Acceptance," Thompson said in his letter. A suicide bomber of Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) terror group killed 40 CRPF personnel in Jammu and Kashmir's Pulwama district on February 14. India launched a counter-terror operation against a JeM training camp in Balakot on February 26. The next day, Pakistan Air Force retaliated and downed a MiG-21 in an aerial combat and captured its pilot Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, who was later released. The IAF had said that during the aerial engagement on February 27, one of its MiG-21 Bison shot down a F-16.

Ready to be flexible

US tells UN on North Korea nuke talks, warns of response against provocations

REUTERS, United Nations
The United States is ready "to simultaneously take concrete steps" toward a deal aimed at getting North Korea to give up its nuclear and missile programs, but the Security Council must be prepared to respond to any provocations, the US envoy to the United Nations said on Wednesday. The 15-member Security Council met on Wednesday at the request of the United States as concerns grow internationally that North Korea could resume nuclear or long-range missile testing - suspended since 2017 - because denuclearization talks between Pyongyang and Washington have stalled. "We remain ready to take actions in parallel, and to simultaneously take concrete steps towards this agreement. We are prepared to be flexible in how we approach this matter," US Ambassador Kelly Craft said. "And we recognise the need for a balanced agreement that addresses the concerns of all parties." But she added that North Korea needed

to make "the difficult, but bold decision" to work with the United States. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has given US President Donald Trump until the end of 2019 to show flexibility. North Korea's UN ambassador, Kim Song, declared on Saturday, however, that denuclearisation was off the table. Trump then warned that Kim risked losing "everything" if he resumes hostility and that North Korea must denuclearize. Trump and Kim have met three times since June 2018, but no progress toward a deal has been made. Craft said that the UNSC must be ready to "act accordingly" if North Korea follows through on its public hints that it could resume "serious provocations." "In practical terms, this would mean that the DPRK could launch space vehicles using long-range ballistic missile technology, or that they could even test-launch intercontinental ballistic missiles, which are designed to attack the continental United States with nuclear weapons," Craft said.



Police remove climate change activists from the EU Council headquarters, during a Greenpeace protest, ahead of an EU leaders summit in Brussels, Belgium yesterday.

RAPE-MURDER SUSPECTS

India SC orders probe into cop shootings

AFP, New Delhi
India's top court yesterday ordered an inquiry into the police shootings of four rape-murder suspects, as speculation grew that four other men convicted of the infamous 2012 Delhi bus gang-rape would be executed soon. The men were killed in what police claimed was a "shootout" last week, raising fresh concerns about the alleged use of extrajudicial killings by Indian authorities. The accused had been re-enacting their alleged rape and murder of a 27-year-old veterinarian in the southern city of Hyderabad in late November. A former Supreme Court judge was appointed to head the inquiry, alongside a retired High Court judge and a former head of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), India's equivalent to the FBI. The probe was tasked by the court to complete its investigation in six months. The rape and murder of the young woman sparked widespread demonstrations and calls for swift and tough justice, with people taking to the streets and cheering after the men were shot dead. The huge public outcry recalled the rape and murder of a woman on a Delhi bus in 2012, where nationwide protests also broke out against the high levels of sexual violence and India's broken criminal justice system. There has been increased speculation in local media that the men convicted of the Delhi bus assault would be hanged as soon as Monday, the anniversary of the attack. Neighbouring Uttar Pradesh state has been asked to provide the jail with two hangmen on short notice, the Press Trust of India reported.

New Delhi's toxic haze lingers

Air quality turns 'severe'

REUTERS, New Delhi
India's capital New Delhi was shrouded in a toxic haze for the second straight day yesterday, and visibility dropped due to cooler temperatures and lower wind speeds that let deadly pollutants hang in the air. The air quality index crossed 400 on a scale of 500, indicative of "severe" conditions that pose a risk for healthy people and can seriously impact those with existing diseases. The index measures the concentration of deadly pollutant PM2.5 - tiny particles that can enter the bloodstream. Chronic exposure to such pollutants can contribute to the risk of developing diseases such as lung cancer, according to the World Health Organization. Federal pollution control officials were tracking the air quality status, Prashant Gargava, member secretary at the Central Pollution Control Board, told Reuters. The board falls under the federal environment ministry. Under an emergency action plan, authorities shut down brick kilns and halted all construction activity during the day. During the last two months, the capital's 20 million residents have breathed "moderate" to "satisfactory" air only for four days, according to a record of official data compiled by Reuters.

NZ military set for risky mission to retrieve bodies

Death toll rises to 8; dozens still in ICU

AFP, Whakatane
New Zealand's military will embark on a risky dawn mission to retrieve eight bodies from the still-active White Island volcano, officials said yesterday, as pressure from distraught victims' families mounted. Teams will move in "shortly after first light" today, deputy police commissioner Mike Clement said, despite volcanoologists warning that the chances of another significant eruption in the next 24 hours had risen to 50-60 percent. "They will go on to the island and they will make every effort to recover all of the bodies" and transport them to military frigate HMNZS Wellington anchored off the coast, he said. With the help of drone flights and helicopter pilots who were near the volcano immediately after the eruption, authorities have located six of the eight bodies on the island. Recovering the six will be a priority, Clement said. The number of people believed to have died in Monday's disaster now stands at 16. That includes the eight people thought to be still on White Island -- among them New Zealand tour guide Hayden Marshall-Inman. More than 20 people are in hospital's intensive care, many with severe burns, while seven others have been transferred to burns units in Australia.

VOLCANO ERUPTION



71 killed in Niger military camp

Jihadist attack

AFP, Niamey
Hundreds of jihadists attacked a Niger military camp near the border with Mali with shelling and mortars, killing 71 soldiers, the defence ministry said Wednesday. Tuesday's attack in Inates in the western Tillaberi region was the deadliest on Niger's military since the country's Islamist militant violence began in 2015. "Sadly, we regret to announce the following toll: 71 military personnel killed, 12 injured. Others missing," the defence ministry said in a statement aired on national television. The attack was carried out by "heavily armed terrorists estimated to number many hundreds", the statement said, adding that "a substantial number of terrorists were neutralised". The fighting lasted three hours, combining artillery fire with "the use of kamikaze vehicles by the enemy". An earlier toll from a security source put the number killed in the assault at more than 60. "The terrorists bombarded the camp with shelling and mortars," that source said. "The explosions from ammunition and fuel were the cause of the heavy toll." The source did not say which group was responsible for the deadly assault.