

NEWS IN
brief14 killed in Nepal
pilgrimage bus crash

AFP, Kathmandu

At least 14 people died after a bus carrying pilgrims veered off a highway and rolled down a steep slope in central Nepal yesterday, officials said, the latest deadly traffic accident in the Himalayan nation. Police said the bus carrying 32 passengers plunged 70 metres onto a lower stretch of the winding road in Sindhupalchowk district. Some 18 passengers who were injured were taken to hospital. The cause of the accident was not yet known, but police said reckless driving down the steep and winding road could have been a key factor.

Child killed as quake
strikes Philippines

AFP, Manila

A powerful earthquake hit the southern Philippine island of Mindanao yesterday, killing a child and damaging buildings in an area still recovering from a string of deadly quakes in October. Police said a rescue operation had been launched at a heavily damaged market building near the 6.8 magnitude quake's epicentre, which is about 90 kilometres from the major city of Davao. Patients were evacuated from hospitals as a precaution.

NZ volcanic eruption
toll rises to 18

AFP, Wellington

The death toll from New Zealand's White Island volcano eruption rose to 18 yesterday, including two people whose bodies have not been recovered, police said. Forty-seven people were on the island -- a popular tourist attraction -- when the explosion happened. The death toll now stands at 18 after an Australian victim who had been repatriated to Sydney died in hospital almost a week after the deadly eruption.



Demonstrators take part in a musical concert to protest against the Indian government's Citizenship Amendment Act in Guwahati, yesterday. Inset, A woman is being helped by her fellow demonstrators after she was injured during a protest in New Delhi.

PHOTO: AFP



'No automatic citizenship'

New Delhi tries to assure NE states; Amit Shah offers hope to Meghalaya

STAR REPORT

The central government in India has moved to allay fears over an influx of Bangladeshi Hindu refugees into the northeast with a number of tweets on the official PIB Twitter handle this morning, after violent protests engulfed Assam and parts of the region for a fifth consecutive day yesterday.

In a series labelled "#Mythbusters", the centre claimed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) would not trigger a fresh wave of migration and said: "...population share of Hindus in Bangladesh has declined from 28 per cent to 8 per cent... most minorities have already migrated".

The centre also said fears the CAA would make Indian citizens of the 1.5 lakh undocumented Hindu Bengalis in Assam were misplaced.

"No foreigners will get citizenship automatically by the Act. A prescribed authority will scrutinise each application submitted for citizenship; and only those persons complying with the criteria specified in the Act will be granted Indian citizenship," one of the tweets reads.

The centre has also claimed that the "scale of atrocities... in Bangladesh has been coming down in recent years" and that "large-scale migration on account of religious persecution is now a remote possibility".

Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Raveesh

Kumar made similar remarks on Thursday, hours after Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen cancelled his visit. A day earlier Momen said allegations of repression of minorities in his country were "untrue".

The controversial Act which seeks to grant Indian citizenship to non-Muslim refugees from

INDIA'S CONTENTIOUS CITIZENSHIP ACT



Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, was passed earlier this week, after a heated debate in parliament -- Trinamool Congress MP Derek O'Brien said it was from the "Nazi playbook".

In its outreach to protesters yesterday, the centre also reassured them that regional identities would continue to be protected under Article 371 and said the "sanctity

of the 1985 Assam Accord would be preserved.

The centre also reiterated that tribal areas of certain states and areas under the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system (this includes the entire state of Manipur) would be exempted.

Meanwhile, Indian Home Minister Amit Shah has assured that the concerns of Meghalaya regarding the law will be looked into after Christmas, the state's Chief Minister Conrad Sangma has said.

Meghalaya is one of the northeastern states which have been witnessing widespread protests over the law. There have been concerns that the application of law will dilute the tribal demography of the state.

Following widespread protests and violence in state capital Shillong and other areas, parts of the state have been under curfew for much of the week. Since Friday, mobile internet and SMS services were blocked across the state, markets remained shut and vehicles stayed off the roads.

In addition to protests in the northeast, the Chief Ministers of at least 5 other states have said the CAA will not be implemented in their territories, setting up a legal tug-of-war between them and the centre.

However, constitution experts unanimously hold that states have no option other than implementing a law passed by national parliament, reports our New Delhi correspondent.

UK PM can't keep Scotland in
union against will: Sturgeon

Says Johnson must accept another referendum

REUTERS, London

Scotland's first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, yesterday warned Prime Minister Boris Johnson that he could not keep Scotland in the United Kingdom against the country's will.

Johnson and his government have repeatedly said they will not give the go ahead for another referendum on Scottish independence, but Sturgeon said after the Scottish National Party won 48 of Scotland's 59 seats in the UK parliament, her party had been given a mandate for one.

"If he thinks ... saying no is the end of the matter then he is going to find himself completely and utterly wrong," Sturgeon told the BBC's Andrew Marr Show.

"You cannot hold Scotland in the union against its will ... If the United Kingdom is to continue it can only be by consent. And if Boris Johnson is confident in the case

for the union then he should be confident enough to make that case and allow people to decide."

On Saturday, Sturgeon urged that the British PM to "focus on reality" and recognise that the Scottish National Party (SNP) has been given a mandate for a second independence referendum.

However, Johnson, boosted by his own Conservative Party winning an 80 seat parliamentary majority in the election, told Sturgeon by phone on Friday that he opposed another independence vote.

Scots voted in an independence referendum in 2014 to remain in the United Kingdom, but they also voted in the 2016 Brexit referendum to stay in the European Union, while a majority of English and Welsh voters supported leaving the bloc.

Since then Sturgeon has argued that Scotland deserves another vote on becoming an independent nation because it is being taken out of the EU against its will.



The Red Rebels, part of the Extinction Rebellion Australia demonstrator group, participate in a climate protest rally in Sydney, yesterday. Protesters rallied in front of the landmark Sydney Opera House demanding urgent climate action from Australia's government, as bushfire smoke choking the city caused health problems to spike.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Corbyn 'sorry'
for election
wipeout

AFP, London

Britain's main opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn yesterday apologised for waging a disastrous campaign that handed Prime Minister Boris Johnson a mandate to take the UK out of the EU next month.

But the veteran socialist defended his far-left platform and blamed the media for helping relegate his century-old party to its worst performance since before World War II.

"I will make no bones about it. The election result on Thursday was a body blow for everyone who so desperately needs real change in our country," Corbyn wrote in the Sunday Mirror newspaper.

"I wanted to unite the country that I love but I'm sorry that we came up short and I take my responsibility

'This is like a flag for us'

Assam's 'sons of the soil' cherish new protest symbol

AFP, Guwahati

At the epicentre of deadly protests in Assam, a red and white cloth has come to symbolise the struggle of the Indian state's indigenous "sons of the soil" against a new citizenship law that they see as a dangerous threat to their unique culture.

Traditionally worn by fishermen and peasants, millennials and others in the far-flung region have co-opted the gamosa, tying it around their heads, their waists and emblazoning it with anti-government slogans.

"This is like a flag for us," said Jatin Borah, 22, one of thousands taking to the streets in days of riots and running battles with police firing blanks and live ammunition that have left five people dead.

"It represents Assam, its culture and collective political and social aspirations of its people," the student told AFP.

"It's our pride. It is uniting us."



India's northeast region sandwiched between Bangladesh, China and Myanmar has long seethed with inter-ethnic tensions, with armed tribal groups still resisting being part of India.

Assam in particular has long seen hostility between locals and Bengali-speaking immigrants brought by the British to toil on tea plantations or who flowed in around Bangladesh's 1971 war of

independence.

Years of agitation driven by student organisations that included the 1983 Nellie Massacre -- when at least 2,000 people were butchered in six hours -- only ended in 1985 with the Assam Accord.

Part of the agreement was to root out foreigners and this year a contentious citizens' registry left off 1.9 million people unable to prove that they or their forebears were in

Assam before 1971.

They face possible statelessness, incarceration in prison camps or even deportation.

Now Prime Minister Narendra Modi has re-opened old wounds with legislation passed last week that could give citizenship to 20 million immigrants living in India -- including some 500,000 in Assam.

Graffiti has sprung up across Guwahati, Assam's main city and the epicentre of days of riots and clashes with police that left six people dead and dozens hurt, saying it violates the hard-won 1985 deal.

"The law poses a direct threat to our culture, livelihood and homeland," Samujjal Battacharya, a senior figure in the still-powerful All Assam Students Union (AASU) organisation.

"We won't accept even a single immigrant. Assam has taken enough immigrants in the past," he said as protesters chanted "Long Live Assam" and "Hail, Mother Assam".

Clashes at HK mall
break uneasy calm

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong police used pepper spray and made multiple arrests yesterday as small groups of black-clad pro-democracy protesters targeted some of the city's malls, ending a rare lull in violence.

Flashmob protests and vandalism broke out in multiple locations, prompting riot police to use pepper spray and make arrests in at least two shopping centres as members of the public heckled the officers.

AFP reporters in a Sha Tin mall saw a secondary school girl and a 16-year-old boy arrested, the pair shouting out their details as officers led them away.

Earlier in the afternoon an elderly woman was knocked over in the same mall after a fight broke out when a shopper tried to stop protesters from spraying graffiti.

Masked activists had also trashed restaurants run by Maxim's, a catering giant owned by a tycoon that has become a frequent target because his daughter has criticised the pro-democracy movement.

The skirmishes are the first to break out in three weeks. Hong Kong has been upended by six months of massive pro-democracy protests that have seen violent battles between police and hardcore demonstrators.

But public anger remains as Beijing and city leader Carrie Lam show no sign of giving further concessions despite the election success. Lam is currently in Beijing for an annual visit and is set to meet President Xi Jinping today.



for it." Thursday's snap general election turned into a re-run of the 2016 EU membership referendum in which Johnson championed the Brexit cause.

Johnson now commands an 80-vote majority in the 650-seat House of Commons -- a margin last enjoyed by the late Tory icon Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s.

A sombre but combative Corbyn said Friday that he will step aside once Labour completes a period of "reflection" about its mistakes. The party is expected to have a new leader in place before England votes yet again in local polls in May.