

NEWS IN brief

Bolivia orders arrest of ex-president Morales

Afp, La Paz

Bolivia's attorney general on Wednesday ordered the arrest of exiled former president Evo Morales after the interim government accused him of sedition and terrorism. Public prosecutors in La Paz signed a warrant for police to detain the 60-year-old -- who is in Argentina -- and take him to the attorney general's office. Morales fled Bolivia last month after civil unrest broke out following his re-election in an October 20 poll widely dismissed as rigged.

Algeria swears in new president

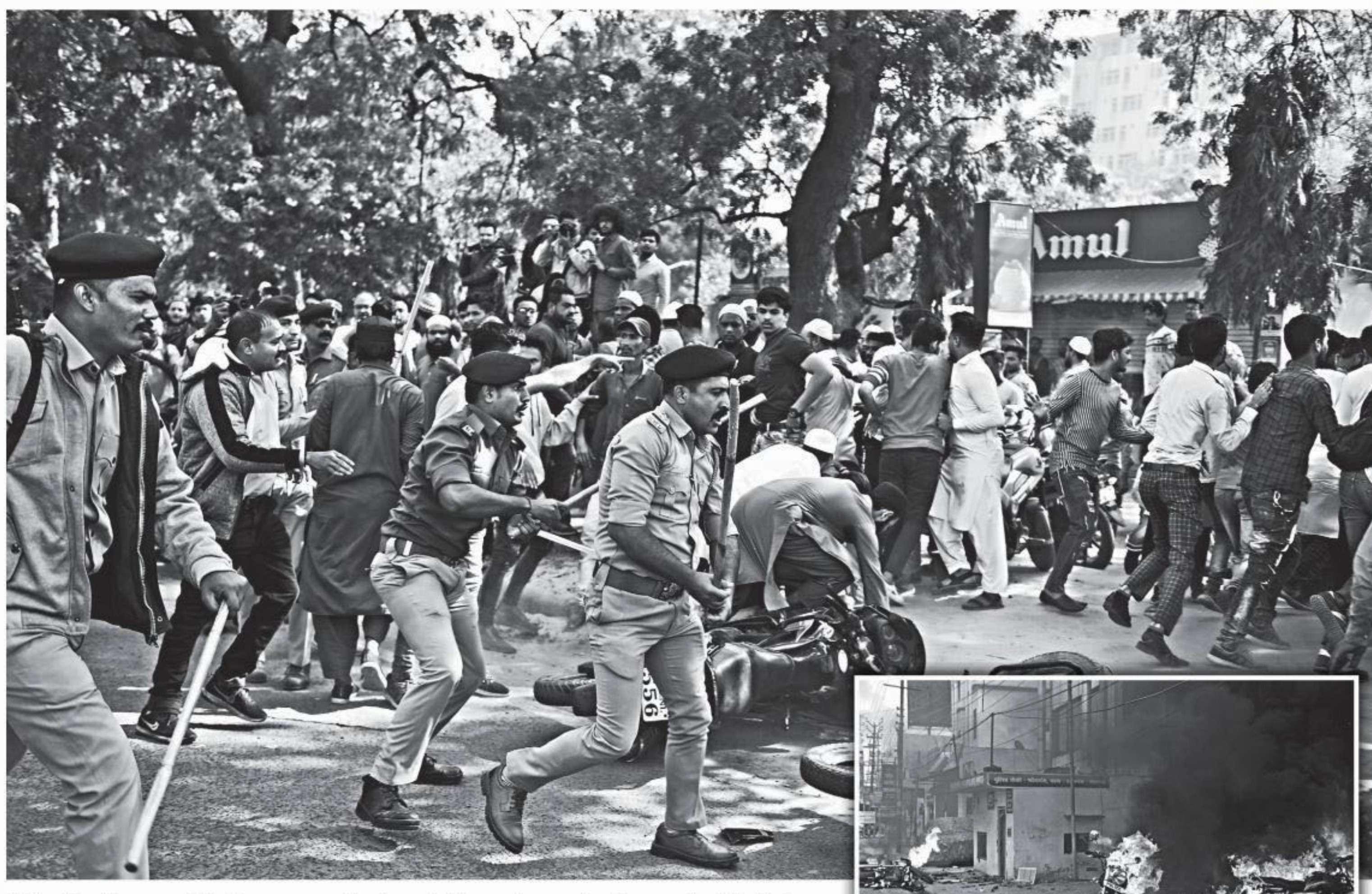
Afp, Algiers

Former prime minister Abdelmadjid Tebboune was sworn in as the new president of protest-hit Algeria yesterday, a week after winning a widely boycotted election. He succeeds veteran president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who was forced from office in April in the face of mass demonstrations. Tebboune must now address the grievances of the protesters, who have remained on the streets to prevent what they see as a ploy by the political elite to retain its hold on power.

Hezbollah-led Diab set to be Lebanese PM

Afp, Beirut

Lebanese academic and former minister Hassan Diab received the backing of Shia group Hezbollah and yesterday looked set to be named the crisis-ravaged country's new prime minister. Caretaker premier Saad Hariri pulled out of the race on Wednesday and his bloc did not nominate any candidate when much-delayed consultations to form a new government got under way at the presidential palace. The nomination of Diab would yield a lopsided government.



Gujarat police react to disperse protesters during a demonstration against India's new citizenship law in Ahmedabad yesterday. Inset, Police motorcycles burn after being set on fire during demonstrations in Lucknow.

PHOTO: AFP



AFGHAN TROOPS WITHDRAWAL

US promises to consider India

Afp, Washington

The United States promised Wednesday to take into account India's concerns as it looks to pull out of Afghanistan, in high-level talks that agreed on several ways to boost the democracies' emerging alliance.

The talks in Washington came against the backdrop of major protests in India over a citizenship law that critics say targets Muslims, but Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was careful not to annoy his guests by speaking forcefully on the issue.

Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper, meeting for a day of talks with their Indian counterparts, said they spoke in depth on the renewed US talks with the Taliban aimed at ending America's longest war.

"We understand the concerns that India has, too -- rightful concerns that they have -- about terrorism emanating from Pakistan," Pompeo told a joint news conference.

"We assured them that we would take that into account," he said.

Pompeo voiced hope that talks with the Taliban, which veteran US negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad is leading, will eventually bring a "significant reduction in violence" that will let the United States "reduce its footprint."

India is a sworn enemy of the Taliban, whose hardline 1996-2001 regime was allied with rival Pakistan and welcomed virulently anti-Indian Islamist extremists.

India has been one of the top backers of Afghanistan's internationally recognized government, pouring in \$3 billion since the US-led invasion toppled the Taliban regime after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

Progress of non-Muslims 'left us in lurch': Mahathir

Reuters, Kuala Lumpur

Muslim nations need to do more business among themselves, trade in each other's currencies and keep up with non-Islamic countries to stop being left at their mercy, their leaders said yesterday at a summit boycotted by Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi-based Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) said on Wednesday it was against the interests of the Muslim world to hold meetings outside the organisation, which has for decades acted as the collective Islamic voice.

Both Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan have been frustrated by the OIC's hand-wringing and failure to take action in support of Muslim causes. Mahathir said the Kuala Lumpur summit, which ends on Saturday, was aimed at understanding why Islam, Muslims and their countries were "in a state of crisis, helpless and unworthy of this great religion."

"While we may not have been able to fully dissect all that had caused our pain and anguish, we are mostly in agreement that it is our inability to keep up with the progress and development of the non-Muslims that has

left us in the lurch," he said.

"Due to that, Muslims the world over suffer and as many are dependent on the mercy and charity of the non-Muslims. To my mind, we have no choice but to develop and progress as fast as possible."

It was unclear to what extent the leaders would broach the major crises afflicting Muslims, ranging from the age-old disputes in the Middle East and Kashmir to conflicts in Syria and Yemen, through to the plight of persecuted Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and millions of Uighur Muslims held in camps in China's Xinjiang region.

A question from the audience on the treatment of Uighurs, put to the dais that included Mahathir, Erdogan and Iranian President Hassan

Rouhani, was ignored.

Without mentioning the OIC by name, Erdogan said the biggest problem that platforms bringing the Islamic world together faced was a lack of implementation.

"If we still haven't made any progress regarding the Palestinian cause, if we still can't stop the exploitation of our resources, if we still can't say 'stop' to the fragmentation of the Muslim world over sectarianism, that's why."

MUSLIM SUMMIT

Many Muslim nations dependent on mercy of non-Muslims: Mahathir

Discussion on treatment of Uighurs was ignored



It's a 'personal vendetta'

Former Pak leader Musharraf slams death sentence; his lawyers plan to appeal

Afp, Islamabad

Exiled former Pakistan military leader Pervez Musharraf dismissed the unprecedented treason conviction and death sentence handed to him earlier this week, saying the ruling was the result of a "personal vendetta".

The special court's decision announced Tuesday marked the first time a former leader of the armed forces has been convicted of treason and sentenced to death in Pakistan, where the military wields enormous power and has ruled the country for roughly half its 72-year history.

"This case was taken up and proceeded due to a personal vendetta by some people against me," said Musharraf in a video statement released by his assistant late Wednesday night.

Musharraf -- who is reportedly in Dubai and in poor health -- appeared in a hospital bed in the video looking frail and was straining to speak.

The former general however said he remained undecided on his next move or

whether his legal team was planning to appeal the conviction.

Meanwhile, Musharraf's lawyers said they will appeal against the sentence to the Supreme Court, which the government, the complainant in the treason case, is unlikely to oppose.

The treason case -- which began in 2013 and is one of several involving Musharraf -- centred on his decision to suspend the constitution and impose emergency rule in 2007.

The ruling has infuriated Pakistan's security establishment, with the military's spokesman swiftly condemning the verdict and saying the armed forces were in "pain and anguish" over the decision.

"An ex-Army Chief, Chairman Joint Chief of Staff Committee and President of Pakistan, who has served the country for over 40 years, fought wars for the defence of the country can surely never be a traitor," the military said Tuesday.

Prime Minister Imran Khan -- a former rival of Musharraf -- has stayed largely quiet since the ruling.



India leads world: study

China ranks second with 1.8m deaths

Afp, Washington

India leads the world in pollution-linked deaths followed by China and Nigeria, according to a report published Wednesday that estimated the global impact of contaminants in the air, water and workplace.

The report by the Global Alliance on Health and Pollution (GAHP) found pollution to be the largest environmental cause of premature death on the planet, causing 15 percent of all deaths -- some 8.3 million people.

Among the ten countries with the most pollution deaths in 2017, the latest year for which data was available, were some of the world's largest and wealthiest nations, along with some poorer ones.

India and China led in the number of pollution deaths, with about 2.3 million and 1.8 million deaths respectively, followed by Nigeria, Indonesia and Pakistan.

The United States, with 325 million people, came in at number seven with almost 200,000 deaths.

"The report reminds us all that pollution is a global crisis," said Rachael Kupka, acting Executive Director of GAHP. "It does not matter where you live. Pollution will find you."

Pollution-linked deaths rates were highest in some of the world's most impoverished countries where poor water sanitation and contaminated indoor air are major killers.

Chad, Central African Republic and North Korea saw the highest number of deaths per 100,000 people (287, 251 and 202 respectively), with India entering the per capita list at number 10 with 174 deaths per 100,000 people.

"India has seen increasing industrial and vehicular pollution from urban growth while poor sanitation and contaminated indoor air persist in low-income communities," the report said.

On the other end of the scale, five nations in the Arabian Peninsula rank among the 10 countries in the world with the lowest death rates from pollution, with Qatar reporting the lowest.

POLLUTION LINKED DEATHS

US came in at number seven with almost 200,000 deaths

Five Arab nations rank among 10 countries with lowest death rates



Hong Kong protesters rally outside diplomatic missions in the city yesterday to urge foreign governments to follow the United States and pass human rights bills to raise pressure on Beijing and support their pro-democracy campaign.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Chinese univ charter cuts 'freedom of thought'

Afp, Shanghai

A top Chinese university has removed references to "freedom of thought" from its charter, triggering a rare act of student defiance, while two other institutions added language stressing fealty to President Xi Jinping and the Communist Party.

A video circulating this week showed students at Shanghai's Fudan University singing the school song -- which extols "academic independence and freedom of thought" -- in an apparent protest.

Fudan's charter change was announced by the Ministry of Education on its website late Tuesday and criticism quickly trended on social media before China's ever-vigilant online censors acted to delete posts and block discussion.

Besides removing "freedom of thought", it adds "arming the minds of teachers and students with Xi Jinping's new era of socialist ideology with Chinese characteristics".

It also obliges faculty and students to adhere to "core socialist values" and build a "harmonious" campus environment -- a code phrase for the elimination of anti-government sentiment.

The ministry announced similar pro-government changes for Nanjing University in eastern China, and Shaanxi Normal University in the north earlier this month, although neither institution had referenced freedom of thought previously.

Xi took office in 2012 and has implemented a campaign to increase the Communist Party's grip and build a personality cult around himself that includes calls for adherence to a vaguely defined "Xi Jinping Thought", recalling the days of Communist founder Mao Zedong.

Masterminds jailed for life

Powerful Ampatuan family planned massacre of 57 people, including 32 journos, to quash an election challenge from a rival clan in 2009

Reuters, Manila

A Philippine court yesterday found the bosses of an influential political clan guilty of masterminding a 2009 massacre of 57 people, a ruling cheered as a partial victory for justice and a challenge to the country's notorious culture of impunity.

Eight members of the powerful Ampatuan family were among 28 people sentenced to life imprisonment over their roles in an ambush on an election motorcade in Maguindanao province, and the gunning-down of all who witnessed it.

Among the victims of the "Maguindanao Massacre" were 32 journalists in what was one of the world's single biggest attacks on media.

The ambush was also the biggest instance of election violence in the Philippines, where assassinations are common in provincial politics, especially in Mindanao, a southern region prone to lawlessness and the rule of warlords aided by abundant arms.

The case was widely considered the trial of the decade

in the Philippines due to the infamy of the Ampatuans, a dynasty with political connections that went all the way up to then President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

It was also seen as a test of whether democratic institutions could withstand pressure from rich and powerful interests.

Fifteen other defendants were jailed yesterday for accessory to murder and 56 were acquitted. Seven cases were dismissed, among them that of family patriarch, Andal Ampatuan, who died in prison of a heart attack in 2015.

Salvador Panelo, spokesman for President Rodrigo Duterte, said the ruling should be respected and the massacre represented a "merciless disregard for the sacredness of human life" and should never be repeated.

More than 80 of 197 suspects are still at large, including 12 Ampatuans, raising concerns that witnesses and victims' families might never be safe.

"This case has a long way to go," said Esmel Mangudadatu, a congressman whose wife was shot more than a dozen times during the ambush.



PHILIPPINE MASSACRE

Small blasts hit Rakhine town as Suu Kyi visits

Afp, Yangon

Three small explosions went off in a southern Rakhine town in Myanmar yesterday just before civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi landed there in a rare visit to the conflict-ridden state, a local official said.

The blasts happened in the normally quiet town of Manaung on an island off Myanmar's western coast where Suu Kyi was due to open a solar power plant.

"There were three explosions, but no casualties," Win Myint, spokesperson for Rakhine's regional government, told AFP.

He said it happened before Suu Kyi arrived, but since they were on the other side of town the event went ahead as planned and she had since left safely on a flight to Yangon.

"This has never happened in Manaung before."

No group has yet claimed responsibility for planting the small bombs, which detonated at the side of a road, photos from local media showed.

The area has remained largely unscathed by unrest further north, where Myanmar's military is locked in an increasingly vicious conflict with the Arakan Army (AA).

The rebel group claims to be fighting for more autonomy and rights for the ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and garners sympathy from many local people who have long felt marginalised in the Bamar-majority country.

But tens of thousands have fled their homes over the past year and dozens of civilians have been killed.

There have been allegations of abuse against both sides. Rights groups say Myanmar's military has abducted, tortured and killed civilian detainees.

Nearly 70 local administrators in northern Rakhine tried to resign en masse this week after one of their peers was killed by the military.

The army admitted responsibility but said he had been caught in the crossfire, which locals deny.

"We're worried for our lives," said village head Myo Kyaw Aung, one of the administrators of Minbya township who had his resignation refused.

