

NEWS IN brief

Prison clashes leave 36 dead in Honduras

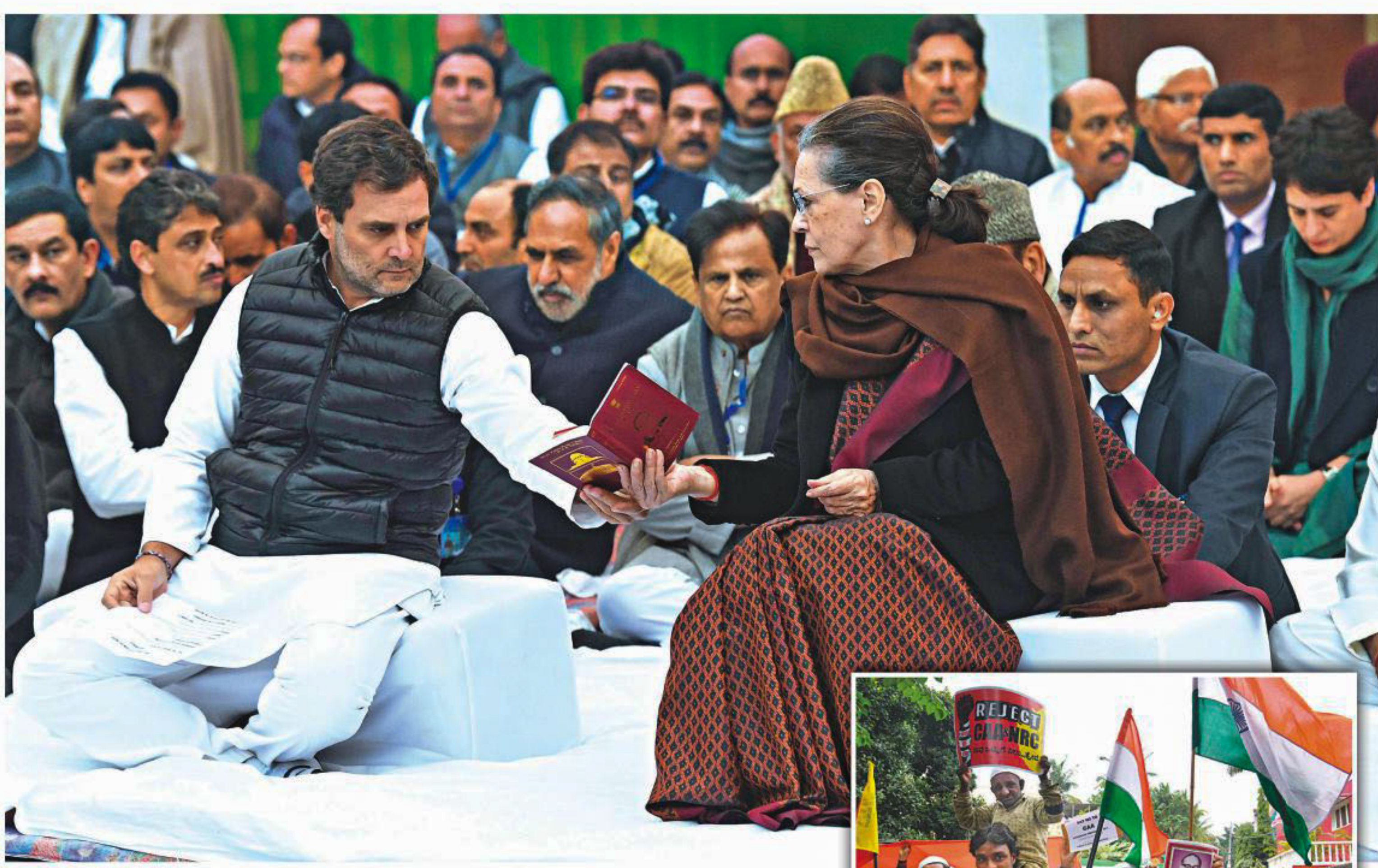
At least 36 people were killed in weekend clashes in Honduran prisons as the military and police try to regain control after a spate of murders linked to the criminal gangs plaguing the country. On Sunday afternoon, 18 gang members died in a clash between inmates at El Porvenir prison, 60 kilometers (40 miles) north of the capital Tegucigalpa. On Friday night, 18 prisoners died and 16 were wounded in a shooting at the prison in the port town of Tela, northwest of the capital.

Taliban kill US soldier in Afghanistan

The Taliban claimed responsibility for an attack on American troops yesterday that killed one US soldier and, according to the insurgents, wounded several more. The killing is likely to have consequences for ongoing talks between the US and the Taliban. President Donald Trump in September declared negotiations "dead" after the Taliban killed a US soldier in a Kabul bombing. US Forces-Afghanistan said one American service member was "killed in action" yesterday.

9 warehouse workers killed in Delhi blaze

At least nine workers have been killed and 10 others wounded after a fire broke out in a warehouse used to store textiles in India's capital New Delhi, according to police. The cause of the fire, which broke out in the early hours of yesterday in the Kirari area of the city, is not yet known. "It was a four-storey building which was mostly used as a cloth godown," said Atul Garg, director of fire services. "A [gas] cylinder burst because of the fire and a part of a wall also collapsed."



Congress president Sonia Gandhi (R) and ex-party president Rahul Gandhi attend a sit-in protest for "unity" in New Delhi yesterday, amid widespread protests against India's new citizenship law. Inset, Demonstrators carry Indian flags and placards as they arrive to take part in a rally against the citizenship law in Bangalore. PHOTO: AFP

INDIA'S CONTENTIOUS CITIZENSHIP ACT

Two states propose land rights amid fears

Authorities in the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal have vowed to protect the land rights of indigenous people and refugees amidst protests against a new citizenship law that critics say discriminates against Muslims. In the northeastern state of Assam, a planned law will prevent indigenous people from selling land to non-indigenous persons, Finance Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said. "That means our land will be preserved for our people," Sarma told reporters at the weekend after the state cabinet passed the measure. But there is little clarity on the definition of an indigenous person in the state, where nearly 2 million people were left off a citizens' register earlier this year. In addition, nearly two-thirds of the land in the state, which borders Muslim-majority Bangladesh, is common land, said Walter Fernandes, a senior fellow at the North Eastern Social Research Centre, a think tank. "When so much of the land belongs to the state, there is no question of selling or transferring that land," he said. "There are also several definitions of indigenous people, including tribal people, Assamese people, and others who have lived in the state for several decades. So it is not clear who the law will benefit," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Mamata Banerjee, West Bengal's chief minister, said she will not implement the citizenship law in the state. She said her government will expedite giving land rights to tens of thousands of immigrants who have lived in the state for nearly five decades. "The state has been granting land titles to migrants from Nepal and Bangladesh, which gives them an identity and some measure of protection," said Fernandes.

India bids to bust 'myths'

BJP launches video with animated Muslim characters on social media as part of a publicity blitz

India's ruling party yesterday launched a video with animated Muslim characters on social media in a publicity blitz to try to bust "myths" around a new citizenship law that has sparked deadly protests. The law has stoked concerns that Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government wants to marginalise India's Muslim minority. The short video clip shows two bearded men in traditional Muslim clothing discussing the legislation before concluding that the country can only progress if there is "peace and brotherhood". Twenty-five people have died in protests so far, but demonstrations took place yesterday in Chennai, Bangalore and Delhi with no violence reported. In Kolkata, there was a march in favour of the law. The video was released by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party on its Twitter handle. On Sunday Modi said Muslims "don't need to worry" about the new law. The ruling right-wing government also carried an advertisement across all national dailies with a "myths vs facts" explainer saying the law was not against India's 200 million Muslims. The advert also stated that there were no immediate plans to roll out a nationwide register of citizens, which has stoked fears of Muslims and others unable to prove they are Indian becoming stateless. Even if the register would be rolled out, "the guidelines would be framed such that no Indian citizen would face any harassment whatsoever," the advertisement read. The wave of protests across the country marks the biggest challenge to Modi's government since sweeping to power in the world's largest democracy in 2014. Further bad news for Modi came yesterday with indications that the BJP was set to be kicked out of office in the eastern state of Jharkhand following elections. Last month it also lost power in Maharashtra, home to Mumbai, in a major setback. The citizenship law, passed by parliament earlier this month, allows people of six religions from Muslim-majority Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan an easier path to citizenship.

PROTESTS OVER CITIZENSHIP LAW



Stalled talks with US not good for North Korea

S Korea tells China; Xi expresses concerns

It is "more important than anything" to keep up the momentum for talks between the United States and North Korea, South Korean President Moon Jae-in told Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing yesterday. North Korea has set a year-end deadline for the United States to change what it says is a policy of hostility amid a stalemate in efforts to make progress on their pledge to end the North's nuclear programme and establish lasting peace. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump have met three times since June 2018, but there has been no substantive progress in dialogue while the North demanded crushing international sanctions be lifted first. On Saturday, state media said the United States would "pay dearly" for taking issue with the North's human rights record and said Washington's "malicious words" would only aggravate tensions on the Korean peninsula. China is North Korea's most important diplomatic backer and trading partner, and Moon took his message about the significance of talks straight to Xi. "It is more important than anything to keep up the momentum for dialogue between North Korea and the United States," Moon said, according to his spokesman Ko Min-jung who was present at the meeting in Beijing's Great Hall of the People. Ko cited Xi as saying that many people are concerned about the tense situation on the Korean peninsula. "China and South Korea should gather strength to help North Korea and the United States sustain the momentum for dialogue," she cited Xi as saying. Earlier, Moon's office quoted him as saying that the suspension of US-North Korea talks and rising tensions was not beneficial for South Korea, China or North Korea.



Palestinian residents paying bribes to leave Gaza

It could cost up to \$4,000 to expedite travel from the blockaded territory to Egypt

For residents of the besieged Gaza Strip, there are two ways to leave and neither is easy. The first route is via the Erez crossing on the eastern edge of the territory into Israel, while the second option is to travel south to Egypt via Rafah. The Erez route requires obtaining permission from the Israeli authorities. The permits are extremely difficult to acquire and limited to those who fit into several categories, including some pre-approved businessmen and medical cases. The route through the Israeli-controlled crossing also brings the risk of being pressured to spy for Israeli intelligence agencies, Hamas officials told Al Jazeera. On the other hand, exiting via Rafah means the prospect of waiting for months to obtain travel documents from the Hamas government in Gaza. However, there is a way to expedite the process which involves spending hundreds, or sometimes thousands of dollars in bribes to jump the queue. Since Hamas seized control of Gaza in 2007, after unexpectedly winning the Palestinian elections the previous year, both Israel and Egypt have imposed a stifling blockade on the coastal enclave, choking off Gaza's economy and severely constraining the movement of its residents. Mohammed Hussein Khalaf, a student from Gaza who is now in Jordan, told Al Jazeera his family paid \$4,000 for him to leave two years ago after Egypt tightened entry restrictions on Palestinians from Gaza. They raised the funds mostly by borrowing from relatives, he told Al Jazeera. For the vast majority of the 1.9 million residents of Gaza, the Rafah route is often the only viable option. In order to leave via Egypt, they register their request with the Hamas government, but with thousands of names on the waiting lists, approvals can take months.



Iraqi demonstrators burn tires to block a street during ongoing anti-government protests in Kerbala, Iraq yesterday. Thousands of protesters blocked roads and bridges in southern Iraq, condemning Iranian influence and political leaders who have missed another deadline to agree on a new prime minister. PHOTO: REUTERS

Iran, India agree to speed up Chabahar port project

Tehran and Delhi have agreed to accelerate the development of an important Iranian port, India's foreign minister said during a visit to the sanctions-hit Islamic republic yesterday. Chabahar port -- being jointly developed by India, Iran and Afghanistan -- is on the Indian Ocean about 100 kilometres (62 miles) west of the Pakistan border. But development has stalled, despite waivers to sanctions that the United States began reimposing last year after withdrawing from a landmark 2015 nuclear deal with Iran. "Just concluded a very productive #IndiaIran Joint Commission Meeting," Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanya Jaishankar tweeted. Iran's President Hassan Rouhani said yesterday in a joint news conference with Jaishankar that the project would boost trade in the region.

Hong Kong gears up for Christmas holiday protests



More than 1,000 protesters, many in surgical masks and balaclavas, filled a harbourside plaza near Hong Kong's financial district late yesterday to demand full democracy and an independent inquiry into alleged police brutality. As Hong Kong gears up for Christmas celebrations, the protesters plan wildcat gatherings in prime shopping malls and a 'silent night' rally on Tuesday evening. The demonstrators gathered at the harbour-side on Monday sang "Glory to Hong Kong", a protest anthem, and shone lights from their mobile phones. Henry, a 28-year-old banker, said he was in the plaza to protest a recent police shutdown of Spark Alliance, a fund-raising platform for protesters.

Aussie PM defies coal critics as fires rage

Under-fire Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison yesterday rejected calls for "reckless" and "job-destroying" cuts to the country's vast coal industry in the face of a deadly climate-fuelled bushfire crisis. Morrison's conservative government has fiercely defended the lucrative coal industry in Australia, which produces a third of global coal exports and provides work in key swing electoral districts. "I am not going to write off the jobs of thousands of Australians by walking away from traditional industries," Morrison told the Seven Network, in one of several morning interviews rejecting calls for further action. SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

120,000 fleeing regime attacks in Syria's Idlib

The number of Syrians fleeing attacks in the country's northwestern Idlib province and heading towards Turkey has reached 120,000, a Turkish aid group said yesterday, adding it was setting up a camp for some of those uprooted. Syrian and Russian forces have recently intensified their bombardment of targets in Idlib, which Syria's President Bashar al-Assad has vowed to recapture, prompting a wave of refugees towards Turkey. President Tayyip Erdogan said on Sunday Turkey cannot handle a fresh wave of migrants, warning that European countries will feel the impact of such an influx if violence in Syria's northwest is not stopped. "In the last week, the number of people fleeing from the southern regions (of Idlib) to the north because of the increasing attacks has reached 120,000," said Selim Tosun, the Humanitarian Relief Foundation's (IHH) media advisor in Syria. Erdogan said on Sunday 80,000 people were currently on the move. The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a war monitor, said 40,000 civilians had been displaced since Thursday, the start of the latest military operation. Many of the migrants fled the city of Mara at al-Numan, with some going to camps near the Turkish border, while others have gone to stay with relatives or to the areas of Afrin and Azaz near the Turkish border, the IHH's Tosun said. The IHH said it had begun distributing 20,000 packages of food prepared for the migrants between the city of Idlib and the town of Sarmada. It was also preparing a tent camp in the area of Killi, a village some 13 km (8 miles) from the Turkish border.

Back to pre-internet stone age

People queuing for hours to pay bills or using govt 'internet kiosks'

In remote Indian Kashmir people have been offline since August, queuing for hours to pay bills or using government "internet kiosks". As protests rage in other areas of India, it's something people outside the Himalayan region are also getting a taste of. Indian authorities, who according to activists lead the world when it comes to cutting the internet, snapped Kashmir's access when New Delhi scrapped the region's seven-decade-old autonomy. In the past two weeks of violent protests across India against a new citizenship law, mobile internet has been cut in swathes of the country and fixed-line access in places too. In Kashmir, a security lockdown imposed in August has been eased and some cellphones now work again. But hundreds of political leaders and others remain locked up -- and there is no internet. In the main city Srinagar, Mohammad Irfan waited in a long line inside a large hall run by a state-owned telecommunications firm. "I would (previously) do this in my spare time or even while walking (on my cellphone)," Irfan told AFP. "But now I'm standing in this queue for about an hour each time to pay my phone bill." Flooded by complaints from businesses and people unable to do all the myriad things they used to online, authorities recently set up the internet kiosks. There are around a dozen of them for the region's seven million inhabitants, and people can only use the computers, when they function, for 10 or 15 minutes. With New Delhi saying it wants to avoid the net being used by militants -- a deadly separatist insurgency has raged in Kashmir for decades -- usage is also closely monitored. People have to show their identity details and say exactly what they want to go online for, including what websites they intend to visit -- and why. Visiting social media sites is not allowed. Officials pace behind the terminals, watching the screens closely and telling people to move on when they're done. Users suspect that every click is tracked by software too.

OFFLINE INDIAN KASHMIR

