

## US TO SEND 300 MARINES TO HELMAND PROVINCE

**KABUL:** About 300 US Marines will be sent to Afghanistan's Helmand province to assist Afghan security forces battling Taliban insurgents in intelligence and logistics matters, the unit's commander said over the weekend. The deployment to Helmand will be the Marines' first to the southern province since they left in 2014 as the US declared an end to its combat mission. Since then, Afghan security forces, still backed by Washington in the form of air strikes and hundreds of advisors, have struggled to contain the Taliban advance in Helmand.

Brigadier General Roger Turner told reporters on a conference call that the deployment would be part of a regular rotation to replace a US Army unit already training and advising Afghan troops in the province. And although the 300 Marines would mostly be experienced and senior officers who will work on intelligence, logistics, and administration, Turner said they were braced for a dangerous mission. "We're viewing this as a high-risk mission...We're not in any way viewing this as a noncombat mission, or something to take lightly."

Tens of thousands of Marines fought fierce battles against the Taliban in Helmand over five years. Nearly 1,000 coalition troops have been killed there since the US-led military intervention in 2001, more than in any other province. In the last two years the Taliban have captured areas that were the site of some of the deadliest battles for the Marines, including Sangin, Marjah and Nowzad, and for much of 2016 they have threatened to take the provincial capital Lashkar Gah.

In a statement posted online, Taliban officials

ridiculed the Marines' deployment as one of the "final failed efforts" by outgoing US President Barack Obama to stem the violence in Afghanistan. In recent months the US military has also announced rotations of roughly 3,000 Army soldiers to Afghanistan, where about 8,400 American troops conduct both advising missions, as well as "counter terrorism" operations against groups like Islamic State and al Qaeda. A small number of Marines are already in Afghanistan, including around 60 who help to secure the huge air base at Bagram. —Reuters



**BANGALORE, India:** French Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Development Jean-Marc Ayrault (L), speaks with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas 2017 event in Bangalore yesterday. —AFP

## FRENCH FM TO BOLSTER 'STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP' WITH INDIA VISIT

### 'STRESS STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP AND MOVE IT INTO A HIGHER GEAR'

**NEW DELHI:** French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault began a four-day visit to India with a meeting yesterday with Prime Minister Narendra Modi to bolster the "strategic partnership" between the two countries. Ayrault held talks for 45 minutes with the Hindu nationalist leader in the southern hi-tech hub of Bangalore, where he will stay until today evening. "The number one objective (of this trip) is to stress the strategic partnership and move it into a higher gear," the minister said. The visit is part of a series of meetings

between Indian and French leaders. President Francois Hollande has visited India twice during his five-year term, in 2013 and 2016. Modi, who took office in 2014, has twice visited France. Ayrault and Modi discussed in particular collaboration in the defense sector, a few months after the sale of 36 French Rafale fighters to India for about eight billion Euros (\$8.4 billion). Asked about the possibility of future arms deals with India, which has become the world's largest weapons importer as it tries to modernize its arsenal,

the minister said Modi was "ready to examine everything".

India "is a huge country, which has a very important need to ensure its security against all the challenges it faces", said Ayrault. The minister will tomorrow visit the western state of Gujarat, where Modi was chief minister for over a decade, accompanied by a delegation of about 100 representatives of French companies. Annual trade between France and India is worth some eight billion Euros, a figure that has grown markedly since 2000. — AFP

## SOUTH AFRICA'S ZUMA ADMITS MISTAKES AS ANC SET FOR CHANGE

**SOWETO, South Africa:** South African President Jacob Zuma yesterday denounced corruption within the ruling ANC party and admitted that mistakes had cost the party at the ballot box after a year of damaging scandals. Zuma is set to step down as leader of the African National Congress (ANC) in December, before he completes the maximum two terms in office as national president in 2019. He and other senior ANC figures have been embroiled in a series of graft allegations, as South Africa has struggled with a slowing economy, high unemployment and regular violent protests. In August, the ANC—which came to power in 1994 under Nelson Mandela after the end of apartheid—recorded its worst-ever election results at local polls.

"The ANC has heard the message that the people delivered in August. We accept that we have made mistakes," Zuma, 74, said in a speech marking the ANC's 105th anniversary. "When leaders and members of the ANC are corrupt and steal they are betraying the values of the ANC, the people and our country. We will not allow this." Among Zuma's possible successors are his ex-wife, African Union chief Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa and ANC treasurer-general Zweli Mkhize. On Saturday, the ANC's influential women's league pledged its support for Dlamini-Zuma. "The ANC will elect a new national leadership towards the end of the year," Zuma said.

"Too often, comrades fight for leadership

positions as they see leadership as the route to material and personal gain." As attacks on his presidency grew last year, Zuma survived an attempt by ANC rivals to oust him in November, shrugging off criticism of his conduct by the official anti-graft watchdog and the Constitutional Court. The watchdog probe uncovered evidence of possible criminal activity in his relationship with the Guptas, a business family accused of wielding undue political influence.

Zuma, who took power in 2009, retains strong loyalty among many rank-and-file ANC party members, as well as its lawmakers. He struck a humble note at the ANC celebrations in a sports stadium in Soweto, a hotbed of the struggle that ended white-majority rule more than 20 years ago. "The people have told us that we are too busy fighting each other and we do not pay sufficient attention to their needs," he said. "The ANC must unite so that we are able to unite the people against our common enemies—unemployment, poverty and inequality." Zuma gave a shortened version of his published speech as heavy rain lashed the venue. — AFP



**DURBAN:** This file photo shows Chairperson of the African Union (AU) Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma addressing the State of the Continent Media Briefing for the last time as the Chair of the AU Commission to conclude her four-year tenure, in Durban, South Africa. — AFP

## FORMER PAKISTAN ARMY CHIEF TO HEAD SAUDI-LED MILITARY ALLIANCE

**ISLAMABAD:** Pakistan's recently retired army chief Raheel Sharif has been appointed to lead a new Saudi-military alliance to fight terrorism, Pakistani media have reported. Government officials in Saudi Arabia could not be reached on Sunday to confirm the appointment to head the coalition, the founding of which Saudi Arabia's Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced at a sudden midnight press conference in December 2015.

Pakistani Defense Minister Khawaja Asif said in an appearance on Pakistan's Geo News channel on Friday that Sharif's appointment had been finalized a few days earlier. A statement carried by Saudi state news agency SPA in December 2015 said the new coalition would have 34 members, though more have joined since then. It also

said the coalition would be based in Riyadh to "coordinate and support military operations" against terrorism. Little has been heard of it since then.

The states it listed as joining the new coalition included Egypt, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Malaysia, Pakistan and several African nations. It did not include Shi'ite Muslim Iran and its allies Syria and Iraq, leading to speculation that it could become a potential Sunni bloc against Iran, a rival of Sunni Saudi Arabia for influence across the Arab world. Tehran and Riyadh are ranged on opposite sides in proxy conflicts in Syria and Yemen. General Sharif retired last November, the first Pakistani army chief in more than 20 years not to seek an extension to his term like some previous military leaders. — Reuters

## FOUR LEFTIST SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISTS VANISH IN PAKISTAN

**ISLAMABAD:** At least four Pakistani activists known on social media for their secular leftist views have gone missing this week, relatives and NGO workers said yesterday, as analysts voiced rights concerns. Two of the men—Waqas Goraya and Asim Saeed—disappeared on January 4, according to a cyber security NGO, while Salman Haider vanished Friday and Ahmed Raza Naseer Saturday, relatives said. The interior ministry has said it will investigate the disappearance of Haider, a Dawn newspaper blogger known for his outspoken views on enforced disappearances in the southwestern province of Balochistan, but made no reference to the others.

All four were active on social media groups promoting leftist, secular views, often against the military or conservative state. Pakistan is routinely ranked among the world's most dangerous for journalists, and reporting critical of the military is considered a major red flag, with journalists at times detained, beaten and even killed. "The state has controlled TV and now they're focusing on digital spaces," said

Raza Rumi, a writer and analyst who left Pakistan in 2014 after he was attacked by gunmen who shot his driver dead.

A security source denied intelligence services were involved in the disappearances. Naseer, who suffers from polio, was taken from his family's shop in central Punjab province, his brother Tahir said yesterday. Hours after Haider was due home Friday evening, his wife received a text message from his phone saying he was leaving his car on the Islamabad expressway, his brother Faizan said. Police later found the car and registered a missing persons report. Faizan said his brother had not received any specific threats.

Waqas Goraya, who is usually a resident of the Netherlands, was picked up on Jan 4, as was Asim Saeed, said Shahzad Ahmed, head of cyber security NGO Bytes for All. "None of these activists have been brought to any court of law or levelled with any charges. Their status disappearance is very worrying not only for the families, but also for netizens and larger social media users in the country," Ahma d said. — AFP

## BUDDHIST HARDLINERS STOP MYANMAR MUSLIM CEREMONY

**YANGON:** Hardline Buddhist nationalists stopped a Muslim religious ceremony in Yangon yesterday, witnesses and organizers said, as Islamophobic tensions boil over amid a bloody military campaign against Rohingya in northern Rakhine state. Dozens of people, led by a handful of maroon-robed monks, marched to the YMCA in Myanmar's commercial capital to shut down a service marking the Prophet Mohammed's birthday. "We have celebrated this festival for my whole life. Now this seems like an attack on freedom of religion," Kyaw Nyein, secretary of the Ulama Islam organisation, said FP.

"The monks tried to stop the ceremony without saying what we had done wrong... Why aren't authorities taking action?" Witnesses, who asked not to be named, said the monks barged into the ceremony shortly after it started demanding it be shut down. Police were called, but did not intervene to stop the hardliners. Tin Maung Win, vice president of the festival organizing committee, said Buddhist nationalists were trying to stir up political dissent against the NLD government led by Aung San Suu Kyi.

He said the religious extremists supported the military-backed USDP party and see the new elected government, which took power last year after win-

ning the first free election in some 50 years, as being too soft on Muslims. "We held the festival here for seven years without any violence, but today it happened. This is because of political interests," he said. Long-simmering Islamophobic sentiment has been on the rise in Myanmar since deadly communal violence erupted between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in western Rakhine state in 2012.

In recent years Buddhist hardliners have sought to restrict Muslim worship, destroying mosques and trying to ban ceremonies such as the ritual slaughter of cattle during the festival of Eid al-Adha. Tensions have boiled over since attacks on police posts along the Bangladesh border in October, which the government has blamed on Rohingya insurgents led by foreign fighters and backed by Middle Eastern money.

Until the recent fighting, the Rohingya had generally eschewed political violence despite decades of persecution. Dozens have died in the ensuing military crackdown, sending some 50,000 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh telling stories of rape, murder and arson at the hands of Myanmar security forces that activists say could amount to crimes against humanity. — AFP

## INDIA RIGHTS PANEL SAYS POLICE RAPED TRIBAL WOMEN IN MAOIST STRONGHOLD

**NEW DELHI:** India's rights watchdog said more than a dozen tribal women were raped and sexually assaulted by police in restive Chhattisgarh state, with the victims' lawyer slamming authorities over delays in arresting the accused yesterday. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) said at least 16 women were "victims of rape, sexual and physical assault" after it concluded an investigation into reports that police attacked several villages in Bijapur district during an operation against Maoist rebels in October 2015.

"Prima-facie, human rights of the victims have been grossly violated by the security personnel of the Government of Chhattisgarh for which the State Government is vicariously liable," the government panel said in a statement on Saturday. The NHRC said it was in the process of recording the testimonies of

20 more victims who were sexually assaulted during the incident. Several media reports at that time said police officers had raped or sexually assaulted at least 40 women in five villages and destroyed and looted homes during the anti-Maoist operation.

The reports said 11 women were gang raped, including a 14-year-old girl and a pregnant woman. Police filed an initial complaint and launched an investigation over the allegations but no arrests have been made yet. Kishore Narayan, who is representing 14 victims, said that the panel has backed their claims and accused the police of deliberately shielding the culprits. "The victims gave the names of the policemen involved in the barbarity but nothing has happened. They carried a sham investigation and are trying to obfuscate the case,"

Narayan said. He said they have filed a petition in the Chhattisgarh High Court demanding an investigation by a special police team from outside the state.

Activists often accuse Indian security forces of committing gross human rights violations including extra-judicial killings, arson and sexual assault in the conflict torn region. India is fighting thousands of armed Maoist rebels in the so-called "Red Corridor" which passes through swathes of resource-rich areas of central and eastern India and is mostly inhabited by underprivileged tribes. The guerrillas-inspired by Chinese revolutionary leader Mao Zedong say they are fighting the Indian government for land, jobs and other rights for poor tribal groups, with thousands of lives lost in the the decades-old insurgency. — AFP