

192 Pak pilgrims denied visas by India for Nizamuddin's Urs. Foreign Office

ISLAMABAD, DEC 31 /-/ Pakistan today claimed that India has denied visas to nearly 200 pilgrims who wanted to visit the country to participate in the death anniversary ceremony of Hazrat Khawaja Nizamuddin Auliya. The Foreign Office said in a statement that "Pakistan regrets the last minute postponement and non-issuance of visas by India" for the visit of 192 devotees to participate in the Urs ceremony (death anniversary) in New Delhi from January 1-8. "As a result of this Indian decision, the Pakistani Zaireen (devotees) would be deprived of the opportunity to participate in the Urs, which is of special significance," the statement said. The visit was to take place under the provisions of the 1974 Pakistan-India Protocol on Visits to Religious Shrines and is an annual feature.

"This is unfortunate and runs counter to the letter and spirit of the 1974 Protocol and objective of people-to-people contacts," it said. The statement said that besides being violative of the bilateral Protocol, and the basic human right to religious freedom, such measures also undermined the efforts aimed at improving the environment, increasing people-to-people contacts and normalising relations between the two countries. "It is ironic that this was done on the occasion of Urs of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya who was a symbol of bringing communities closer to each other," the FO added. (PTI)

Dog statue of Trump in China mall is tickling the world funny

TAIYUAN, DEC 31 /-/ A mall in northern China has installed a larger-than-life canine statue which more than passing resemblance to US President Donald Trump to welcome the coming Year of the Dog. The giant pooch towers above shoppers in Taiyuan, capital of Shanxi province, sporting a slick golden pompadour, angled brows and a red scarf with one index finger raised in a distinctly Trumpian manner. As he was born in 1946, Trump, who has been accused of having more bark than bite, is a dog under the Chinese zodiac -- a trait which he shares with his predecessors George W. Bush and Bill Clinton. Those born in the Year of the Dog, according to Chinese astrology, are forthright and extremely loyal, in addition to having a strong sense of justice. But they can also be stubborn, irritable and easily angered. Last year the mall erected a large Trump-like rooster, which inspired numerous replicas, including a giant inflatable one placed not far from the White House this summer.

India offers fully funded training to Lankangovernment

COLOMBO, DEC 31 /-/ India has introduced over 40 training courses for Sri Lankan government officials to give them an understanding of India's approach towards governance, the Indian High Commission said here. The 45-day-long courses would be fully funded by the Indian government. From January 15, the Indian High Commission here said in a statement. The courses would work under the Indian Technical & Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme of the Ministry of External Affairs, the statement said. The training courses aim to give Sri Lankan government officials an understanding of India's approach towards governance and rural and urban development. (PTI)

B'desh arrests suspected Islamist militant near Rohingya camps

COX'S BAZAR, DEC 31 /-/ Bangladesh police today arrested a suspected Islamist militant from the border district of Ukhiya, near camps where thousands of Rohingya Muslims fleeing a military crackdown in Myanmar have taken shelter. The Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), an elite police tasked with tackling Islamist extremism in the Muslim-majority country, said it detained 30-year-old Sharful Awal for allegedly communicating with international Jihadist groups. Awal was freed on bail in January after he was charged with anti-terrorism and explosives-related offences in the Chittagong region. RAB local chief Ruhul Amin said in a statement. But after his release, Awal communicated with various international militant groups through social media in an effort to establish Khilafat (a callphoto) through so-called Jihad, Amin said. Police allege Awal is a member of a new faction of the Jamayetul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), a homegrown Islamist group, and was involved in organising local extremists.



The new JMB faction has been blamed for a wave of attacks on foreigners and religious minorities, including the deadly attack on a posh Dhaka cafe last year in which 18 foreigners were shot and hacked to death. But the RAB's Amin said authorities have not found any connections so far between Awal and Rohingya refugees. An estimated 655,000 Rohingya have left Myanmar since late August to escape what UN officials have termed ethnic cleansing with possible "elements of genocide". Most of the refugees have settled in Bangladesh's southeastern border areas like Ukhiya. Bangladesh authorities have stepped up security and surveillance efforts in the Rohingya camps over fears the squalid settlements could be perfect recruitment grounds for homegrown and international extremist groups. The country's border forces have also tightened patrols to prevent Rohingya militants -- who have carried out a series of attacks on Myanmar security posts since October last year -- from entering Bangladesh territory. (AFP)

5 Pak Army personnel missing after avalanche

ISLAMABAD, DEC 31 /-/ At least five Pakistan Army personnel have gone missing after an avalanche hit an army base at the Siachen glacier, the world's highest battleground, a media report said today. The Pakistan Army has started a rescue operation in the area with the help of locals, while heavy machinery has also been sent to speed up the process, the Express Tribune reported. So far, the army has still not confirmed any casualties. Siachen, with heights of over 18,000 ft, has seen several deaths due to natural disasters.

Avalanches and landslides are common at the glacier during the winter and temperatures can drop to as low as minus 60 degrees Celsius. At least 135 people, including 124 Pakistani soldiers and 11 civilians, were killed in 2012 in an avalanche in Gajari sector near Siachen. Hundreds of troops have died on the glacier since 1984, mostly from avalanches, landslides, frostbite, altitude sickness or heart failure rather than actual combat. (PTI)

Dhaka Police bans rooftop parties on New Year eve

DHAKA, DEC 31 /-/ Briefing the media about "extensive security measures" for New Year's Eve on December 31, Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Commissioner Asaduzzaman Khan has said. "People can celebrate 31st night in their homes, but not on rooftops." The DMP commissioner announced it at a press conference on Saturday at the DMP Media Centre in Dhaka, reported the Dhaka Tribune. "All sorts of gatherings, playing loud music, dancing, concerts and any other party-related activities in open spaces are strictly prohibited. Celebrations can be held indoors only, where not even rooftop parties are allowed on 31st night since it could disrupt peace among neighbours," Commissioner Asaduzzaman said. However, five-star hotels, will be able to throw new year parties upon securing permission. DMP Police chief also stated that, "Carrying any kind of bags or flammable substance is strictly prohibited." In addition to this, no reckless driving and no use of crackers will be allowed on the night of the year end, according to the reports. "Tough measures will be taken against anybody who disobeys these



17 die in suicide attack on Afghan funeral: Officials

JALALABAD (AFGHANISTAN), DEC 31 /-/ A suicide attacker blew himself up at a funeral in eastern Afghanistan on Sunday, killing at least 15 mourners and wounding another 14, officials said, capping a deadly year for civilians. There was no immediate claim of responsibility but Taliban and Islamic State militants have stepped up assaults in recent months, with ordinary Afghans bearing the brunt of the violence. "The death toll of the attack targeting a funeral ceremony in Behsud district of Nangarhar has increased to 17," Nangarhar governor spokesman Attaullah Khogyani told AFP. Another 14 were wounded. All the casualties were civilians. An earlier statement from the governor's office said 12 people had been killed in the attack near the provincial capital Jalalabad.

The bomber struck during the funeral ceremony for a former governor of Haska Mina district who died recently of natural causes, the statement said. Provincial health director Najib Kamawal confirmed the toll. Photos posted on Twitter and Facebook purportedly of the scene showed pools of blood, clothes and shoes scattered on the ground. Other photos showed bodies lying in blood and a plume of black smoke rising into the sky. Terrified mourners, mostly elderly men, could be seen running from the scene. While the Taliban is still responsible for the majority of attacks and casualties across Afghanistan, IS militants have been on a rampage of particularly heinous attacks in Nangarhar, a restive province bordering Pakistan and a stronghold for IS, comes days after the group claimed an assault on a Shiite cultural centre in Kabul that left 41 people dead and more than 80 wounded.

That followed a Christmas Day attack, also claimed by IS, near an Afghan intelligence agency compound in the Afghan capital that left six civilians dead. On December 18 militants from the group stormed an intelligence training compound in Kabul, triggering an intense gunfight with police, two of whom were wounded. The Middle Eastern jihadist outfit has gained ground in Afghanistan since it first appeared in the region in 2015, and has scaled up its attacks in Kabul and elsewhere, including on security installations and the country's Shiite minority. The latest news comes at the end of a particularly bloody year for Afghans, with the number of civilian casualties on track to be one of the highest on record since the US invasion in 2001. More than 8,000 civilians were killed or wounded in conflict-related violence in the first nine months of this year, according to data collected by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. Last year's civilian casualty toll of 11,418 was the highest for a single year since the UN began systematically documenting civilian deaths and injuries in 2009. (AFP)

Ousted Pak PM Sharif leaves for Saudi Arabia

LAHORE, DEC 31 /-/ Pakistan's ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif today left for Saudi Arabia amid reports of a "deal" between the embattled Sharif family and the powerful military establishment. Sharif left for Saudi Arabia on a Saudi Airlines flight this evening. On his arrival he is scheduled to meet King Salman and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman to discuss what the ruling PML-N said are "important matters". Sharif, 67, had to step down as chief of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) after he was disqualified as prime minister by the Supreme Court on July 28 in the Panama Papers scandal. The Sharif family is facing three corruption cases linked to the scandal. The political future of Sharif, who leads the country's most powerful political family and his party, has been hanging in the balance since then. If convicted, he can be jailed. Sharif's family alleges that the cases are politically motivated. The younger brother, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif is already in Saudi Arabia on an "official visit". The Saudi government had sent a special plane for Shahbaz's travel to the kingdom last Wednesday. He is believed to have prepared the ground for the visit of his elder brother. Opposition parties say that since the Sharif family is facing multiple cases in courts and political chal-



Polish climber Krzysztof Wielicki, who will run a Polish expedition to scale K2 in winter, speaks during a news conference in Islamabad, Pakistan. —REUTERS

Pakman freed after spending nine years in jail on false blasphemy charges

LAHORE, DEC 31 /-/ A decade is a long span of time in someone's life -- more so in the life of a 58-year-old man in Pakistan who spent the last nine years behind bars. Pakistani newspaper Dawn on Saturday reported that the man was arrested on charges of blasphemy on September 29 of 2008 but on Friday, the Pakistani Supreme Court absolved him of the charges. The man was previously accused of

desecrating pages of the Holy Quran in a local mosque. A case under Section 295-B of the Pakistani Penal Code was registered and he was beaten up by the local panchayat before being handed over to police. A charge sheet was filed against him and a local sessions judge awarded life imprisonment. Although the Lahore High Court had upheld the charges, the Supreme Court on Friday ruled that

there was no evidence against the accused and freed him of his ordeal. The two-judge bench motivated by the man who had first reported the accused was, in fact, guilty of committing blasphemy.

Beijing blanketed by heavy air pollution

BEIJING, DEC 31 /-/ Beijing on Friday wore the familiar look of thick smog blanketing the skyline, presenting a bleak picture amid reports of improvement in air quality. China has made heavy investments to replace coal fired heating plants with that of natural gas to reduce air pollution in the country. PM 2.5, the fine particulate matter that causes smog today touched 253, regarded very unhealthy as per the reading of the air quality by the US Embassy in Beijing. The city wore the familiar look of thick smog blanketing the skyline presenting a bleak picture. The weather too turned very cold with temperature dropping to below zero. Beijing and several cities in northern part of China have been witnessing heavy pollution for the several years due to massive industrialisation and high usage of coal besides massive expansion of automobiles. The pollution levels in the city dropped this year as Beijing phased out more than 4,450 coal-fired stoves in 2017, reducing the capital city's coal consumption by nearly three million tonnes, local authorities said. The move also reduced emissions of 5,500 tonnes of smoke and 6,600 tonnes of sulfur dioxide, the



Beijing Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau said. As part of a campaign launched in 2013, Beijing has phased out about 99 per cent of coal-fired stoves in the city. Natural gas and other forms of clean energy are used to replace coal. Environmental monitoring results show that Beijing's average sulphur dioxide density, a major air pollutant, was 8 micrograms per cubic meter towards the end of October 2017, compared with the annual average density of 28 micrograms in 2013. Small stoves in Beijing's suburban and rural areas, not covered by the central heating system, had been blamed for worsening the city's smog during the winter. Beijing completed 338 projects to switch coal-fired heating to heating fuelled by natural gas in rural areas this year, involving 8.5 billion yuan (USD 1.3 billion) of investment, state-run Xinhua news agency reported.

Nepal Prez endorses key ordinance for formation of new govt

KATHMANDU, DEC 31 /-/ Nepal President Bidya Bhandari today endorsed a key ordinance relating to the election of Upper House members, that paves the way for formation of a new government after recent provincial and parliamentary polls. There were disputes among the ruling Nepali Congress party and main opposition CPN-UML as to which voting system to be adopted for the election of the 59 members of Upper House. Without the formation of the Upper House the formation of the bicameral Parliament could not be completed, which was crucial for convening a full parliamentary session which is essential to form a new government. (PTI)

enges it needs its friends in the Saudi royal family to reach a deal with the establishment in Pakistan. Opposition leader in the National Assembly Syed Khuram Shiekh objected to the Sharif's Saudi visit. "It looks like the matter is towards seeking forgiveness and that an National Reconciliation Order (NRO) may be on the horizon. If such a situation arises, I think we will have to shut our courts and go home," he said. "I feel sorry to see that foreigners are being involved in local matters. If Saudi Arabia intervenes for reconciliation between the Sharifs and the establishment it will be shameful that Pakistan, a nuclear power, cannot make its own decisions," Shah said. Pakistan's former chief of staff and cricket-turned-politician Imran Khan said his party would launch a movement if the Sharifs were given any relief. "If the Sharifs are given any relief after a deal we will be on the roads," he said. Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif rejected the opposition's charges, arguing that the Sharifs had spent eight long years in exile in Saudi Arabia and ended their relations with the royal family. Saudi Arabia had brokered a deal with former army chief Gen Pervez Musharraf in 2006 to provide safe passage to the Sharif family to live in exile in the kingdom after Musharraf had toppled Sharif's government in 1999. (PTI)