

# The Economist

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The right way to do Brexit

Who Cyril Ramaphosa should fire

Lead paint, still a poisonous problem

South Korea's fetish for fortune-telling

# The meddler

## How Russia menaces Western democracies



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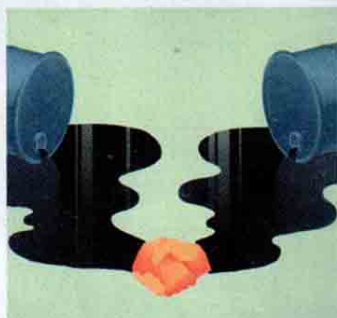
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### America's science jamboree

This year's meeting of the AAAS heard about a new gene, growing transplant organs, safer anaesthesia, quantum computing and tsunami detection, page 67

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Politics



The **Syrian** army bombarded Eastern Ghouta, a rebel-held suburb of Damascus, killing hundreds of people, according to observers. Meanwhile, pro-government militias moved into the Kurdish enclave of Afrin, where they attempted to join Kurdish forces defending the region from **Turkish** troops, who entered the area last month.

An aide to Binyamin Netanyahu turned state's witness in a case involving allegations of corruption at Bezeq, an **Israeli** telecoms giant. It is one of several investigations encircling Mr Netanyahu, who denies wrongdoing. Police also accused a former spokesman for the prime minister of trying to bribe a judge into dropping a fraud case against Mr Netanyahu's wife.

Cyril Ramaphosa was sworn in as president of **South Africa**. A new budget reminded voters just what a fiscal mess he has inherited from his predecessor, Jacob Zuma, under whom graft and cronyism thrived.

Dozens of schoolgirls were missing after an attack on a village in north-eastern **Nigeria** by jihadists from Boko Haram. The group's abduction of 270 girls in 2014 from a school in Chibok sparked international outrage; over 200 are still held captive.

The UN warned of a humanitarian disaster in the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, where millions of people have been displaced by

fighting between militias and government forces.

**Rusty armed forces**

A parliamentary report in **Germany** disclosed that much of the country's military equipment is defective. At the end of last year, it said, not one of the navy's six submarines was operational. Germany spends only 1.2% of its GDP on defence, far below the 2% to which NATO countries are committed.

Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, dubbed by some as the "mini-Merkel", was appointed secretary-general of Germany's ruling **Christian Democratic Union**, possibly a sign that she is being groomed as Angela Merkel's eventual successor.

**On the streets**



**Brazil's** president, Michel Temer, ordered the army to take control of security in the state of Rio de Janeiro after shoot-outs during Carnival festivities. Some say the military intervention, the first of this scale since Brazil's return to democracy in the 1980s, is a ploy to boost Mr Temer's rock-bottom popularity. It also halts a controversial pension-reform bill, as the constitutional changes it requires are forbidden during army interventions.

The head of an anti-corruption mission in **Honduras** sponsored by the Organisation of American States resigned. He complained of a lack of support from the Honduran government and from the OAS.

**Venezuela's** government launched an oil-backed digital currency, the petro, in an attempt to circumvent foreign

sanctions imposed by America and to raise cash during a dire economic crisis. Meanwhile, the main opposition coalition announced it would not take part in hastily scheduled presidential elections in April, claiming that the vote will be rigged.

A court in **Peru** ruled that Alberto Fujimori, a former president, could be tried for his alleged role in the death-squad killings of six people in 1992. Late last year Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, the current president, pardoned Mr Fujimori, who had been convicted of another crime.

**Nothing fake about this**

The **Russian** government denied that it had meddled in the American presidential election of 2016. Robert Mueller, the special counsel investigating Russian influence in the campaign, had earlier issued indictments against 13 Russian citizens, laying out in detail the extent to which they had tried to sway the election using social media.

Following the mass shooting at a school in Florida, Donald Trump issued an order to ban **bump-stocks**, devices that convert some weapons into fully automatic rifles.

Pennsylvania's highest court redrew the boundaries of the state's congressional districts, having ruled last month that the map drawn by the Republican legislature was a clear case of partisan **gerrymandering**. The new boundaries make a handful of seats in the state more competitive.

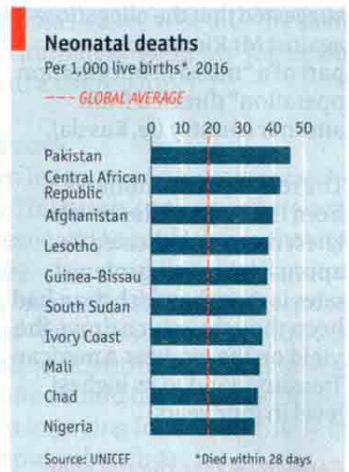
**Mitt Romney** announced that he would run for a Senate seat in Utah. The former Republican presidential candidate declared that Utah welcomes legal immigrants, in contrast to the "message of exclusion" sent from Washington. Mr Trump endorsed his candidacy, though their truce is unlikely to hold. In 2016 Mr Trump described Mr Romney as one of the "dumbest" candidates in Republican history. Mr Romney called Mr Trump a "fraud".

**So close, and yet so far**

The White House said that Mike Pence, America's vice-president, had planned to meet senior **North Korean** officials at the Winter Olympics in South Korea, but that the North Koreans had pulled out at the last minute.

The parliament of the **Maldives** voted to extend by 30 days the 15-day state of emergency declared earlier this month by Abdulla Yameen, the president. But not enough lawmakers were present to make a quorum. The prosecutor-general declared the vote illegal.

A **Malaysian** court declined to hear challenges to proposed new parliamentary constituencies, even though they would further skew elections in favour of the ruling coalition. The opposition won 51% of votes at the most recent election, but only 40% of seats.



Deaths of **newborn babies** in African and Asian countries are still distressingly common, according to a report from UNICEF. In some poor countries the neonatal death rate (when a child dies within 28 days of being born) is 50 times higher than it is in some rich countries. In Pakistan one in 20 newborn babies dies within a month; in Japan it is one in 1,000. Each year 2.6m infants do not survive a month. UNICEF says 80% of cases could be averted with better health-care provision and education. Some 1m babies draw their last breath on the same day as their first. ▶▶