

NEWSIN  
brief

Syria death toll for  
2019 lowest in 9 yrs

AFP, Beirut

Syria's nearly nine-year-old conflict which has cost more than 370,000 lives recorded its lowest annual death toll in 2019, a war monitor said Tuesday. A total of 11,215 fighters and civilians were killed in the past year, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. Of those, 3,473 were civilians including 1,021 children, the Britain-based monitor said. The bloodiest year of the conflict was in 2014, when around 76,000 people lost their lives. That year saw the rise of IS across large swathes of the country and in neighbouring Iraq.

Jakarta flooding  
kills 9 people

AFP, Jakarta

Nine people died after Indonesia's capital was hit by its deadliest flooding in years, authorities said yesterday, as torrential rains on New Year's Eve left vast swathes of the megalopolis submerged. Electricity was switched off in hundreds of waterlogged neighbourhoods across greater Jakarta, home to about 30 million people, with some train lines and one of the city's airports also shut. Authorities said about 13,000 people were evacuated, but that figure did not include residents in Jakarta's satellite cities.

16 inmates killed in  
Mexican prison fight

REUTERS, Mexico City

Sixteen inmates were killed and five were wounded in a prison fight in the northern Mexican state of Zacatecas, authorities said, in one of the worst outbreaks of violence in the country's troubled penal system since President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador took power. The fight broke out around 2:30 pm on Tuesday afternoon at the Regional Center for Social Reintegration in the town of Cieneguillas, located on the western flank of state capital Zacatecas.



A handout picture received from the US embassy in Iraq yesterday, shows a US army apache helicopter dropping flares over Baghdad's high-security Green Zone on Tuesday, after Iraqi supporters of pro-Iran factions breached the outer wall of the US embassy over weekend air strikes that killed pro-Iran fighters in western Iraq.

PHOTO:  
AFP

# 'Not a warning, it is a threat'

Trump warns Iran would pay 'big price' for attack, rules out war

AGENCIES

US President Donald Trump warned Tehran it would "pay a very big price" after a mob of pro-Iranian demonstrators stormed the American embassy compound in Iraq, as his government said it is sending hundreds more troops to the Middle East.

Angered by US air strikes that killed two dozen paramilitary fighters on Sunday, hundreds of protesters spilled through checkpoints in the high-security Green Zone Tuesday, demanding the removal of American troops from Iraq and voicing loyalty to a powerful Iranian general, Qasem Soleimani of the



Revolutionary Guard Corps.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the attack was "orchestrated by terrorists," one of whom he named as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Muhandis has been identified as second-in-command of the Tehran-backed Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary group.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper said around 750 troops from a rapid response unit of the 82nd Airborne Division are prepared to deploy over

the next several days to the region.

Prior to the announcement, a US official told AFP that "up to 4,000 (troops) may ultimately be deployed".

The US had already flown a rapid response team of Marines into Baghdad to reinforce its embassy after the attack Tuesday, which left smoke and flames rising from the embassy entrance and further heightened tension between Tehran and Washington.

Trump blamed Tehran for the embassy attack and warned that it

would face punishment if Americans are killed.

"Iran will be held fully responsible for lives lost, or damage incurred, at any of our facilities," Trump said on Twitter.

"They will pay a very BIG PRICE! This is not a Warning, it is a Threat," wrote Trump, adding "Happy New Year!"

However, Trump later told reporters that he did not foresee war with Tehran.

Meanwhile, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei yesterday strongly condemned the US strikes on pro-Iran forces that killed at least 25 fighters and warned his country was ready to confront threats.

Live broadcasts showed the protesters battering down the high-security doors of the embassy reception building, smashing windows, burning a sentry box and chanting "Death to America!"

By yesterday afternoon, supporters of Iraq's pro-Iranian force Hashed al-Shaabi began leaving the encircled US embassy in Baghdad but hardliners insisted they would stay.



India targets new moon  
mission in 2020

India plans to make a fresh attempt to land an unmanned mission on the moon in 2020 after a failed bid last year, the head of the country's space programme said yesterday. Work is going "smoothly" on the Chandrayaan-3 mission to put a rover probe on the moon's surface, Indian Space Research Organisation chairman K Sivan told a press conference. "We are targeting the launch for this year but it may spill over to next year," Sivan said. Indian sources said authorities had set November as a provisional target for launch. India seeking to become only the fourth nation after Russia, the United States and China to put a mission on the moon's surface and boost its credentials as a low-cost space power. The country's Chandrayaan-2 module crash-landed on the moon's surface in September.

Taliban kill 23 in attacks  
on Afghan checkpoints

At least 23 Afghan security forces were killed in a series of Taliban attacks across the country, officials said yesterday, despite winter snowfall that usually leads to a lull in violence. The assaults targeted vulnerable checkpoints in at least three northern provinces. In Balkh, militants stormed a checkpoint early yesterday and killed at least seven policemen, according to provincial police chief Ajmal Fayez. Separate assaults by the Taliban killed at least nine members of Afghan security forces in northeastern Kunduz, and seven in neighbouring Takhar province, officials said.

Pope says sorry for  
slapping devotee



Pope Francis yesterday apologised for his widely-viewed slap of a woman who had grabbed his hand as he greeted Catholic faithful on New Year's Eve. Francis had greeted children before the Nativity scene on Saint Peter's square and was turning away when the woman who had crossed herself then cried out something, pulled on his hand and almost caused him to fall. The 83-year-old pope grimaced before managing to break free by slapping her hand twice. He continued his tour, walking with some difficulty while maintaining a slightly greater distance from visitors, and gradually relaxed again as he came into contact with other children. "We lose patience many times," Francis said in his apology. "It happens to me too. I apologise for the bad example given yesterday," the head of the Catholic church said. SOURCE: AFP

AUSTRALIA BUSHFIRES

## Death toll rises as fires ravage homes

AFP, Sydney

Relief supplies began reaching thousands of people stranded in fire-ravaged Australian towns yesterday after deadly bushfires ripped through popular tourist spots and rural areas leaving at least eight people dead.

Navy ships and military aircraft were deployed alongside emergency crews to provide humanitarian relief and assess the damage from the deadliest spate of blazes yet in a months-long bushfire crisis.

Police said three more bodies were discovered yesterday, bringing the confirmed death toll since late Monday to eight, including a volunteer firefighter who died when a "fire tornado" flipped his 10-tonne truck. The latest deaths take to at least 17 the number of people killed in one of Australia's most devastating bushfire seasons of recent years.

The fires encircled seaside communities to trap thousands of holidaymakers and locals, cutting electricity and communication services that in many areas remained down late yesterday.

Cooler temperatures and easing winds provided a window of opportunity for relief efforts yesterday. Authorities however warned the fire danger would spike on Saturday as temperatures soar again. This season's blazes destroyed more than 1,000 homes and scorched about 5.5 million hectares -- an area bigger than Denmark or the Netherlands.

People take part in a pro-democracy march in Hong Kong, yesterday. A huge New Year's Day pro-democracy rally in Hong Kong ended with clashes between police and hardcore protesters, as demonstrators sought to carry their movement's momentum into 2020.

PHOTO:  
REUTERS



## Taiwan leader rejects 'one country, two systems'

REUTERS, Taipei

Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen yesterday said the island would not accept a "one country, two systems" political formula Beijing has suggested could be used to unify the democratic island, saying such an arrangement had failed in Hong Kong.

China claims Taiwan as its territory, to be brought under Beijing's control by force if necessary. Taiwan says it is an independent country called the Republic of China, its official name.

Tsai, who's seeking reelection in a Jan 11 vote, also vowed in a New Year's speech to defend Taiwan's sovereignty, saying her government would build a mechanism to safeguard freedom and democracy as Beijing ramps up pressure on the island.

"Hong Kong people have showed us that 'one country, two systems' is definitely not feasible," Tsai said, referring to the political arrangement that guaranteed certain freedoms in the former British colony of Hong Kong after it was returned to China in 1997.

Taiwan's parliament passed an anti-infiltration law on Tuesday to combat perceived threats from China, further straining ties between Taiwan and Beijing.

China suspects Tsai and her independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party of pushing for the island's formal independence, and has threatened it with war if there was any such move.

# Kim ends moratorium on nuke testing

Threatens to demonstrate new strategic weapon soon as US misses deadline for talks

AFP, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has declared an end to moratoriums on nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile tests and threatened a demonstration of a "new strategic weapon" soon.

Analysts said the announcement, reported by state media yesterday, amounted to Kim putting a missile "to Donald Trump's head" -- but warned that escalation by Pyongyang would probably backfire.

Washington was swift to respond, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urging Kim to "take a different course" and stressing that the US wanted "peace not confrontation" with the North, while Trump played down the development.

Speaking to Fox News and CBS after Kim's announcement, Pompeo said a resumption of nuclear and missile tests would be "deeply disappointing".

"We hope that Chairman Kim will take a different course... that he'll choose peace and prosperity over conflict and war," Pompeo said.

Pyongyang has previously fired missiles capable of reaching the entire US mainland, and has carried out six nuclear tests, the last of them 16 times more powerful than the Hiroshima blast, according to the highest estimates.

A self-imposed ban on such tests -- Kim declared they were no longer needed -- has been a centrepiece of the nuclear diplomacy between Pyongyang and Washington over the past two years, which has seen three meetings between Kim and US President Donald Trump, but little tangible progress.



Any actual test is likely to infuriate Trump, who has repeatedly referred to Kim's "promise" to him not to carry them out, and has downplayed launches of shorter-range weapons.

Negotiations between the two sides have been largely deadlocked since the breakup of their Hanoi summit in February, and the North set the US an end-of-year deadline for it to offer fresh concessions on sanctions relief, or it would adopt a "new way".

"There is no ground for us to get unilaterally bound to the commitment any longer," the official KCNA news agency cited Kim as telling top ruling party officials.

"The world will witness a new strategic weapon to be possessed by the DPRK in the near future," he added, referring to the North by its

official name.

The full meeting of the central committee of the ruling Workers' Party was an indication of a major policy shift.

State television showed veteran newsreader Ri Chun Hee reading out the KCNA dispatch over footage of Kim addressing the officials and general imagery of the country.

The broadcast appeared to stand in place of Kim's usual New Year speech -- normally a key moment in the North Korean political calendar.

Kim acknowledged the impact of international sanctions imposed on Pyongyang over its weapons programmes, but made clear that the North was willing to pay the price to preserve its nuclear capability.

For months, Pyongyang has been demanding the easing of international sanctions imposed over its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, while Washington has insisted it takes more tangible steps towards giving them up.

The US has already indicated that it will react if the North carries out a long-range missile test.

"We want peace, not confrontation," he added, with Seoul's unification ministry adding that a strategic weapon test "would not help denuclearisation negotiations".

Trump himself was emollient, saying that he thought Kim was "a man of his word" and that at their Singapore summit "We did sign a contract, talking about denuclearisation".

An ICBM launch would be likely to frustrate China, the North's key diplomatic backer and provider of trade and aid, which always stresses stability in a region it regards as its own back yard.