

NEWSIN
brief

11 dead as storms
sweep through US

AFP, Washington

Severe storms sweeping the southern US killed at least 11 people, authorities said, as tornadoes and high winds upturned cars, destroyed homes and left tens of thousands without power. The storms hit parts of the south on Friday and were expected to move east and north yesterday, according to the National Weather Service. Among the dead were a policeman and firefighter who were hit by a vehicle in Texas after being called out to respond to traffic accidents in icy conditions.

Five killed by jihadists
in northeast Nigeria

AFP, Kano

Jihadists linked with the Islamic State militant group killed five members of a militia in an offensive in Nigeria's northeastern Borno state, militia sources told AFP. Fighters from Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) -- travelling in pickup trucks fitted with machine guns -- attacked Gajiram town, 80 kilometres (50 miles) from the state capital Maiduguri, on Friday. They targeted hunters and vigilantes who were guarding the town against attacks.

Talks with Maduro
unlikely: Guaido

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela's opposition leader and self-declared acting president Juan Guaido said Saturday it is unlikely he will resume negotiations with President Nicolas Maduro. Guaido this week survived dramatic attempts to remove him as head of the National Assembly, and called new protests to try to drive out the leftist Maduro. Aides to Maduro and Guaido held negotiations last year under mediation by Norway but both sides accused each other of breaking terms, and the talks stopped in August.



Malta gets new
PM after journo
murder outcry

AFP, Valletta

Outsider Robert Abela was set to become Malta's new premier yesterday after Prime Minister Joseph Muscat's downfall over the murder of an investigative journalist.

Abela, who is seen as representing continuity, was elected leader of the Labour Party, meaning he automatically takes the role of prime minister.

In the election run-up, Abela did not criticise Muscat, who announced in December he would quit following widespread anger over his perceived efforts to protect friends and allies from a probe into the 2017 slaying of blogger Daphne Caruana Galizia.

Muscat, 45, was set to resign yesterday. Prior to the election result, activist groups cast doubt on whether his successor would bring about real change in the Mediterranean country, which they say has been taken over by "criminals".

Dubbed the "one woman WikiLeaks", Caruana Galizia exposed corruption at the highest levels. She was killed by a car bomb on October 16, 2017 in an attack that made world headlines.

Less than an hour before her death, she wrote on her blog: "There are crooks everywhere you look. The situation is desperate." It was expected that some 17,500 Labour voters would vote for the party's first mid-term prime minister in history.



Lt Col Staci Colemsan said it was a "miracle" there were no casualties. PHOTO: CNN

US troops knew Iran
would attack air base

Reveals exclusive tour in Al-Asad's devastated site

CNN ONLINE

United States troops at the Al-Asad air base in Iraq were aware that an Iranian attack was imminent, allowing them to take shelter two-and-a-half-hours before missiles struck on Wednesday, CNN has been told during an exclusive tour of the devastated site.

Most troops were either flown out of the base or sheltering in bunkers by 11:00 p.m. local time Tuesday -- shortly before the first of four volleys of missiles began at just after 1:30 a.m. on Wednesday, officers said during the first tour by journalists of the air base.

The attack lasted around two hours, only targeting the US areas of the air base, which comprise around a quarter of the Iraqi base.

Officers called it a "miracle" that there were no casualties at the blasted site, with missiles landing just a few meters from bunkers, and some essential personnel remaining outside throughout.

It is the first time troops at the base have spoken in detail of the moments before the attack, revealing that they were able to seek shelter in bunkers shortly before missiles struck.

US troops knew there was going to be an attack on their base -- they just didn't know what the nature of the attack would be.

The Iranian attack on the Al-Asad airbase was one of two on Iraqi military bases housing US troops on Wednesday. The attacks were in retaliation for a drone strike at a Baghdad airport that killed Iran's most powerful military commander, Qassem Soleimani, earlier in the week.

President Donald Trump said Soleimani was plotting "imminent and sinister attacks" on Americans, though he has been unable to offer a time frame on when this would be.



Iran's Revolutionary Guards chief briefed parliament yesterday over the killing of Qasem Soleimani by the US, Tehran's retaliation and the subsequent downing of an airliner, ISNA news agency said. Major General Hossein Salami addressed the members of the Majles in a closed session. Parliament speaker Ali Larijani asked the Majles' security and foreign policy commission to examine the "grave incident" and how to prevent such disasters from occurring again.

the next two hours.

At dawn, officers finally emerged from bunkers to discover the full scale of destruction.

The Al-Asad air base, which houses US troops, is one of the largest and oldest military bases in Iraq.

CAA not to snatch citizenship

Modi tells Howrah gathering some people creating 'misconceptions' for political reasons; anti-CAA demos rage in Kolkata

AFP, THE HINDU

Amidst the ongoing protest against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday said the Act was aimed at giving citizenship, not taking it away.

"We have only brought an amendment to the Citizenship Act and have made it more easier to those who have suffered persecution in Pakistan after the partition of the country, to get Indian citizenship," Modi said addressing youths at the Belur Math, the headquarters of Ramakrishna Mission in West Bengal's Howrah district.

The Prime Minister, who is on a two-day visit to West Bengal, spent last night at Belur Math and yesterday morning addressed youth on the occasion of the birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda, which is also observed as International Youth Day.

During his half-an-hour address, Modi said that many, including Gandhiji, had said such people who had suffered persecution in neighbouring countries should be granted citizenship.

Exhorting the youth to say whether people who faced religious persecution in neighbouring countries should be left to die or not the Prime Minister said, "We only implemented

what the great freedom fighters had wished to do".

Pointing out that the Centre was trying to resolve a decades-old problem, Modi said that any person irrespective of his or her religion could seek citizenship of the country as per laid down procedures.

"We are not taking anyone's citizenship. A person irrespective of his or her religion, whether he/ she believes in God or not but has faith



in the Constitution of India can seek citizenship under already laid down procedure," he said.

The Prime Minister added that had his government not brought the CAA, the world would not have taken note of the atrocities committed by Pakistan on its minorities.

"It is the result of our initiative that Pakistan has to answer how they treated their minorities in the past 70 years."



People take photos of a phreatic explosion from the Taal volcano as seen from the town of Tagaytay in Cavite province, southwest of Manila yesterday. The volcano spewed a massive cloud of ash into the sky on Sunday, forcing the precautionary evacuation of thousands of residents, authorities said.

PHOTO: AFP

Top UK royals set
for crisis summit

AFP, London

Queen Elizabeth II will host a showdown meeting with Prince Harry today in an attempt to solve the crisis triggered by his bombshell announcement that he and wife Meghan were stepping back from the royal frontline.

Other senior royals including Harry's father Prince Charles and brother Prince William, with whom he has strained relations, will join the monarch at her private Sandringham estate in eastern England, according to British media.

Meghan will join the meeting via conference call from Canada as they attempt to work out the "next steps" towards a compromise and nip the growing crisis in the bud.

Issues up for debate include how much money the couple will still receive from Charles's estate, their royal titles and what commercial deals they can strike, according to the Sunday Times.

The newspaper reported that William believes he and Harry are now "separate entities", breaking the bonds forged following their mother's tragic death.

"I've put my arm around my brother all our lives and I can't do that any more; we're separate entities," the Times reported he told a friend.

Harry, Meghan and son Archie spent Christmas in Canada, with the American former actress returning there this week.

Saudi military trainees to be
expelled from US: report

AFP, Washington

The United States will expel at least a dozen Saudi military students accused of extremist links and child pornography, after an investigation into a shooting rampage by a Saudi officer in Florida, media reported Saturday.

In December, Mohammed Alshamrani, who was in the United States as part of a Saudi military training program, opened fire in a classroom at the Pensacola Naval Air Station, killing three sailors and wounding eight other people before being shot dead by police.

While the dozen or more trainees are not accused of aiding Alshamrani, some were found to have connections to extremist movements or be in possession of child pornography, CNN reported.

The probe, which was carried out by the FBI, also found that several had not reported the assailant's disturbing behaviour before the attack, according to The Washington Post.

In mid-December the Pentagon said it had conducted background checks on all Saudi military personnel currently training in the United States and found no

"immediate threat scenario."

Defense Department officials halted operational training for Saudi Arabian military students in the United States following the attack, though classroom instruction continued.

"In the wake of the Pensacola tragedy, the Department of Defense restricted to classroom training programs foreign military students from Saudi Arabia while we conducted a review and enhancement of our foreign student vetting procedures," said Lt. Col. Robert Carver, a spokesman for the Department of Defense. "That training pause is still in place while we implement new screening and security measures."

The 21-year-old gunman, a lieutenant in the Saudi Royal Air Force, was armed with a lawfully purchased Glock 9mm handgun, and is reported to have posted a manifesto on Twitter before the shooting denouncing America as "a nation of evil."

According to the Washington Post, the FBI asked Apple to help access Alshamrani's two iPhones, but the company is resisting governmental requests to alter encryption.

PENSACOLA SHOOTING



J&K cop arrested for
helping militants

AFP, Srinagar

A decorated Indian officer has been arrested for helping to transport rebel militants in Kashmir, the police chief of the restive and highly-militarised Himalayan province said yesterday.

Deputy superintendent Davinder Singh had worked for the police for decades and was a member of an elite counter-insurgency force in the disputed territory, which both India and Pakistan claim in full.

He was apprehended late on Saturday when his vehicle was pulled over at a police checkpoint south of Srinagar, the region's main city.

"The fast moving car was stopped and searched. Two wanted militants and our officer... and a third person were arrested in the operation," Kashmir police chief Vijay Kumar told reporters.

Kumar said police and intelligence agencies were questioning Singh, accusing the officer of a "heinous crime".

Security forces recovered guns and ammunition from several locations in the follow up to the arrests, including from Singh's residence in Srinagar.

Hours after the four men were detained, police killed three alleged rebels during a gunfight in southern Kashmir's Tral district, where the arrested militants were based.

One of those arrested was Naveed Baba, the deputy commander of the local rebel outfit Hizbul Mujahideen.



BUSHFIRE CRISIS

Aussie PM
expresses
regret

REUTERS, Melbourne

After weeks of criticism over the handling of the bushfires scorching Australia, Prime Minister Scott Morrison yesterday expressed regret over his handling of the bushfire crisis.

"There are things I could have handled on the ground much better," he said in an interview with ABC television. "These are sensitive environments, there are very emotional environments; prime ministers are flesh and blood too in how they engage with people."

He also said he will propose a national review into the response to the disaster, as the fires claimed another firefighter's life.

The Australian bush has been burning for nearly three months and the fires have killed 28 people, claimed 2,000 homes and consumed millions of acres of land and wildlife. The crisis is becoming increasingly political as the country looks at the causes and the government's response.

"There is obviously a need for a national review of the response," Morrison said.

Asked whether it should be a Royal Commission, a powerful judicial inquiry, Morrison said, "I think that is what would be necessary and I will be taking a proposal through the cabinet to that end, but it must be done with consultations with the states and territories."



A man dressed as the Grim Reaper warms up before a "run against dictatorship" in Bangkok yesterday. Around ten thousand Thais joined the run, shouting anti-army slogans and wielding three-finger salutes from the Hunger Games films in the largest show of political defiance since the 2014 coup.

PHOTO: AFP