

NEWS IN
brief**No case against Anwar Ibrahim: Malaysia**

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's solicitor general yesterday ruled out new charges against prime minister-in-waiting Anwar Ibrahim over allegations that he sexually assaulted a former male aide, saying there was not enough evidence to proceed. The former aide accused the former deputy premier last month of trying to force him to have sex in September 2018. Anwar denied the accusation, describing it as "politics at its worst".

German police probe motorcycling 'Hitler'

AFP, Berlin

German police said they were investigating after a man dressed as Adolf Hitler rode around a weekend festival in a motorbike sidecar, although he provoked more amusement than outrage. "When people dress up as Adolf Hitler, an investigation is always necessary," a spokesman for Saxony police told news agency DPA on Monday. The fake Fuehrer appeared at a classic motorcycle gathering in Augustsburg, near Chemnitz, and was seen in videos of the event posted online.

US sends home 21 Saudi trainees

AFP, Washington

The United States will send home 21 Saudi military trainees after an investigation into the "jihadist" killing of three American sailors last month, the Justice Department announced Monday. Attorney General Bill Barr said the December 6 shootings by Royal Saudi Air Force 2nd Lieutenant Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani at the US Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida was an "act of terrorism."

Iran announces first arrests

Rouhani calls for a special court to probe crash as students keep up pressure of daily protests; Trudeau effectively blames Trump

AGENCIES

Iran said yesterday it had arrested people accused of a role in shooting down a Ukrainian airliner and had also detained 30 people involved in protests that have swept the nation since the military belatedly admitted its error.

Wednesday's shooting down of Ukraine International Airlines flight 752, killing all 176 people aboard, has led to one of the biggest public challenges to Iran's clerical rulers since they took power in the 1979 Islamic revolution.

In a step that would increase diplomatic pressure, Britain, France and Germany launched a dispute mechanism to challenge Iran for breaching limits on its nuclear programme under an agreement which Washington abandoned in 2018.

In the 10 days since the US killed Iran's most powerful military commander in a drone strike, Tehran has faced escalating confrontation with the West and unrest at home, both reaching levels with little precedent in its modern history.

Protesters, many of them students, have since held daily demonstrations chanting "Clerics get lost!" and called for the removal of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in power for more than 30 years.

The judiciary said 30 people had been detained in the unrest but said the authorities would show tolerance towards "legal protests".

President Hassan Rouhani promised a thorough investigation into the "unforgivable error" of shooting down the plane, in a television address yesterday, the latest in a series of apologies from a leadership that rarely admits mistakes, reports Reuters.

DOWNING OF UKRAINE PLANE

European powers put Iran nuclear deal into dispute

New Trump deal can replace the Iran nuclear pact: UK PM



He called for a special court to be set up with a ranking judge and dozens of experts to investigate the "tragic event".

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Monday night victims of the jetliner would still be alive if not for a recent escalation of tensions partly triggered by the US. "I think if there were no tensions, if there was no escalation recently in the region, those Canadians would be right now home with their families," Trudeau said in an interview with Global television, according to a transcript shared with other media.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said yesterday he would be willing to work on a "Trump deal" to replace an international accord designed to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons, reports AFP.

Surviving was a miracle

Top US commander reacts to Iran's attack against Iraqi base with 'disbelief'

AFP, Ain Al-Asad Air Base

Waves of ballistic missiles, soldiers hunkered down in bunkers for hours, intense shock waves -- a top US commander said he reacted to Iran's unprecedented attack against an Iraqi base with "disbelief".

In an exclusive interview with AFP at the Ain al-Asad airbase in western Iraq, Lt. Colonel Tim Garland said his superiors had given him "a couple hours of advance warning" last Tuesday night that an attack by Iran was coming.

"My first reaction was shock, initial disbelief," he said, sceptical that Iran would be capable, and willing, to conduct a bold attack on Ain al-Asad.

The airbase was targeted in retaliation for the US killing top Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in a drone strike in Baghdad on January 3.

The base is one of the largest in Iraq,

with 1,500 US troops making up the bulk of a coalition presence directly adjacent to thousands of Iraqi forces.

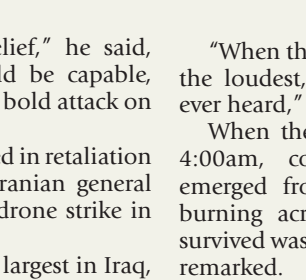
Getting those forces to safety was an act of quick thinking and coordination across the army and air force commanders at Ain al-Asad, Garland said.

By 11:00pm (2000 GMT), US and coalition forces had evacuated from their sleeping quarters and offices, and were hiding out either in fortified bunkers or dispersed across the base.

They waited, tense, for over two hours. But not even their commander expected the strength of the blasts that came next.

"When the first round came in, it was the loudest, most powerful noise I've ever heard," Garland told AFP.

When the strikes quietened around 4:00am, commanders and soldiers emerged from their bunkers to fires burning across the base. "How they survived was a miracle of God," Garland remarked.



Pro-Hindu activists react as they paint to erase a graffiti condemning India's new citizenship law, drawn by anonymous artists on the shutters and walls of Church Street, in Bangalore yesterday. Inset, Protesters take part in a demonstration against the law in New Delhi.

PHOTO: AFP

**'Need to be frank'**

Malaysia PM on India palm oil curbs after CAA remark

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia is concerned about India's new curbs on imports of palm oil after a diplomatic row, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday, but indicated he would continue to speak out against "wrong things" even if it costs his country financially.

India, the world's biggest buyer of edible oils, last week changed rules that traders say effectively ban imports of refined palm oil from Malaysia, the world's second-biggest producer and exporter of palm oil after Indonesia.

The move came after New Delhi objected to Mahathir's criticism of India's new religion-based citizenship law. The 94-year-old premier, whose outspoken nature has soured ties with both India and Saudi Arabia in recent months, earlier accused India of invading the disputed Muslim-majority region of Kashmir.

As Malaysian palm refiners stare at a massive loss of business, Mahathir said his government would find a solution.

"We are concerned of course because we sell a lot of palm oil to India, but on the other hand we need to be frank and see that if something goes wrong, we will have to say it," he told reporters. "If we allow things to go wrong and think only about the money involved, then I think a lot of wrong things will be done, by us and by other people."

The benchmark palm oil contract for March delivery was down 0.9% in afternoon trade.

Reuters reported on Monday the Indian government had informally instructed traders to stay away from Malaysian palm oil. Indian traders are instead buying Indonesian crude palm oil at a premium of \$10 ton over Malaysian prices.

Harry, Meghan criticised after royal crisis summit

AFP, London

Prince Harry and his wife Meghan faced fresh criticism yesterday in the wake of an emergency royal meeting to discuss their shock announcement to step back from frontline royal duties.

British newspapers raked over Monday's meeting at which Queen Elizabeth II agreed to allow the young couple to split their time between Canada and the UK until a solution was found.

"It means only one thing -- Harry and Meghan have won!" royal commentator Philip Dampier wrote in the Daily Express. "They metaphorically held a gun to her head and she has given in."

The Sun tabloid's editorial said: "Our Queen's surrender to the petulant, selfish demands of Harry and Meghan may prove the biggest mistake of her reign."

"This couple have simply raised the bar for self-obsessed, arrogant entitlement."

The Daily Mirror said the monarch "displayed a selflessness sadly lacking from the way Harry and Meghan have disrespectfully treated her".

The Daily Telegraph called the decision "The Queen's reluctant farewell".

The final decisions on the couple's future will be thrashed out in the coming days.

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex, as they are formally known, unilaterally announced last week they were stepping back as senior royals and wanted financial independence from the monarchy.

The pair, who have a baby son, Archie, have hinted in recent months at their unhappiness about life in the public eye and Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he understood their concerns.

"I am a massive fan... of the queen and the royal family as a fantastic asset for our country," he told BBC television. "I'm absolutely confident that they are going to sort this out."

Queen Elizabeth, 93, summoned her eldest son and heir Prince Charles, and his two sons Princes William and Harry to her Sandringham estate in eastern England for crisis talks on Monday.

Meghan was in Canada after briefly returning to Britain last week.

Ready to act against Haftar

Erdogan warns Libyan strongman as rival leaders leave Moscow without signing peace deal

AFP, Ankara

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said yesterday he would "teach a lesson" to Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar if he resumed fighting after abandoning ceasefire talks in Moscow.

Haftar left Moscow yesterday without signing a peace deal aimed at ending nine months of fighting with the UN-backed government in Tripoli.

"We will not hesitate to teach a deserved lesson to the putschist Haftar if he continues his attacks on the country's legitimate administration and our brothers in Libya," Erdogan told a meeting of his party in Ankara in a televised speech.

Erdogan said the issue would now be discussed at talks in Berlin on Sunday attended by European, North African and Middle Eastern countries, as well as the UN, EU, Africa Union and Arab League.

"The putschist Haftar did not sign the ceasefire. He first said yes, but later unfortunately he left Moscow, he fled Moscow," Erdogan said.

"Despite this, we find the talks in Moscow

were positive as they showed the true face of the putschist Haftar to the international community."

Meanwhile, the UN said yesterday heavy clashes have spurred a growing exodus of migrants from Libya, but nearly 1,000 intercepted at sea have been forced to return to the war-ravaged country since January 1.

Since the start of the year, as many as 1,100 migrants have left Libya by sea, according to the International Organization for Migration, adding that a majority had been sent back to the country and detained.

"At least 953 migrants, among them 136 women and 85 children, have been returned to Libyan shores in the first two weeks of 2020," spokeswoman Safa Msehli told reporters in Geneva.

"Most were disembarked in Tripoli and all were taken to detention centres," she added.

At the behest of Italy, Libya's coastguard routinely blocks migrants from reaching Europe.

Rights groups charge that Libya picks up migrants in the Mediterranean and brings them back to overcrowded detention centres, where many have been victims of abuse and forced labour.



Local residents remove debris of a collapsed house following heavy snowfall that triggered an avalanche in Neelum Valley, in Pakistan-administered Kashmir yesterday. Avalanches, flooding and harsh winter weather has killed more than 130 people across Pakistan and Afghanistan in recent days, officials said.

PHOTO: AFP

INDO-PAK BORDER IN PUNJAB**BSF troops open fire at 'drone-like objects'**

PTI, Ferozepur

Some "drone-like objects" were seen along the Indo-Pak border in Punjab's Ferozepur, prompting BSF personnel to open fire at them, officials said here yesterday.

The objects were sighted at Tendiwala village near the Shameke border outpost twice around 8.48 pm and 11:00 pm on Monday night, BSF officials said.

The BSF personnel from the 136th Battalion fired to bring them down, they said. However, the objects could not be recovered in a joint search operation of the BSF and Punjab Police.

Deputy Inspector General of the BSF, Sandeep Chanan, said though some objects were seen in the sky, it could not be ascertained whether they were drones or something else.

SP Baljeet Singh Sidhu said police had received information regarding "some drones" following which they swung into action.

"Police asked villagers to report if they find something suspicious," he added.

On January 10, an Army jawan and two others were arrested by the Punjab Police for allegedly smuggling drugs and weapons from across the border using GPS-fitted drones in collusion with their Pakistani accomplices.

On October 7, BSF troops had spotted at least five sorties by drone originating from Pakistan along the Hussaniwala border in this sector. One of them had ventured almost a kilometre inside the Indian airspace.

Oceans were hottest on record in 2019

The world's oceans were the hottest in recorded history in 2019, scientists said yesterday, as manmade emissions warmed seas at an ever-increasing rate with potentially disastrous impacts on Earth's climate. Oceans absorb more than 90 percent of excess heat created by greenhouse gas emissions and quantifying how much they have warmed up in recent years gives scientists an accurate read on the rate of global warming. A team of experts from around the world looked at data compiled by China's Institute of Atmospheric Physics (IAP) to gain a clear picture of ocean warmth to a depth of 2,000 metres over several decades.

Filipino couple weds under volcanic cloud

A couple getting married in the Philippines over the weekend witnessed a surprise guest at their wedding. In what has made for dramatic shots that have since gone viral on social media, Chino and Kat Palomar exchanged vows in Cavite province on Sunday under a gigantic cloud of smoke and ash from Taal, one of the world's smallest active volcanoes. "The mood was surprisingly calm despite the large billows of smoke that were already prominently visible in the ceremony area," said Randolph Evan, the wedding photographer. Evan related how the volcano began spewing smoke an hour or two before the wedding started, and said ash began to fall on the party toward the end of the ceremony.

Trump considering visit to India next month

US President Donald Trump is considering visiting India next month, for what would be his first visit to the world's largest democracy since he took office three years ago, sources with knowledge of the matter said yesterday. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, seeking to build close ties with Washington, had previously invited Trump to attend India's annual Republic Day parade later this month, but the US officials said it would clash with the president's State of the Union address. "There has been an open invitation for him to visit, both sides are working out the dates," one of the sources said. Another source said Trump could come in the second half of February and that he may visit a second city besides the national capital Delhi.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS