

## PORTS, TRAINS, TRADE

*Xi to offer Myanmar billion-dollar bounty this week for 5 main projects*

A high-speed rail line to the east, a deep-sea port to the west, and a makeover for commercial heart Yangon – Chinese leader Xi Jinping arrives in Myanmar on Friday laden with investment pledges worth billions which could reshape the country. Here are five of the main projects – and some of the issues plaguing them:

### THE BIG DEAL

The crown jewel of Xi's two-day visit will be a \$1.3 billion deep-sea port off Myanmar's troubled western Rakhine state. The Kyaukphyu port will serve as Beijing's gateway to the Indian Ocean. Myanmar has successfully hammered down the price from \$7.2 billion to swerve fears of a Chinese debt-trap, but will still pick up 30 percent of the bill. Alongside the port, swathes of paddy fields and teak forests are poised to be transformed into a vast industrial zone of garment and food processing factories. Officials insist ethnic Rakhine will be the first in line for some of the 400,000 jobs the zone is slated to bring – but many suspect the benefits will mainly be siphoned off outside the state. The port is the centrepiece of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) project – a key thread in China's global Belt and Road vision.

### THE \$8.9 BILLION TRAIN

The first segment of the proposed \$8.9 billion high-speed rail link from China's landlocked Yunnan province to Myanmar's west coast will cut through the border town of Muse to former capital Mandalay. But engineering challenges through Myanmar's hilly Shan State would likely be dwarfed by security concerns. The region is awash with weapons and a centre for meth production as armed rebels and militias jostle for a share of any potential windfall. They will first need to be appeased and reassured the rail link will not jeopardise their income or security.



### BORDER DISORDER

Also in discussion would be overhauling the border zone in Shan state with three special economic zones. This could raise the stakes for the two countries' traders – both above board and clandestine. The vast majority of pre-cursor chemicals used to fuel Myanmar's multi-billion-dollar illicit meth industry flood across the porous border. Expect trade barriers to be removed and factories to mushroom – but also an uptick in violence as militias and armed groups try to cash in on the spoils.

### YANGON MAKEOVER

Yangon authorities hope to revolutionise the sprawling, gridlocked commercial hub by creating a whole new town on the west bank of the city's river. They say the satellite city will help solve problems of congestion, overpopulation and the lack of electricity and water. But environmental concerns, a lack of transparency and corruption allegations are already dogging the planned \$1.7 billion scheme.

### ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

The \$3.6 billion, 6,000-megawatt Myitsone dam could eclipse the visit. Any move to revive the suspended project in Myanmar's northern Kachin state would provoke a huge outcry. But if it is left off the table, it will be the elephant in the room. As vice president in 2009, Xi personally signed off on the Myitsone dam with Myanmar's then-military junta. But public anger thwarted the project and it has remained in limbo since 2011. The dam would flood an area the size of Singapore and cause irreparable damage to the famed Ayeyarwady River, critics say.

SOURCE: AFP



Local residents search for the avalanche victims in the snow in Neelum Valley, in Pakistan-administered Kashmir yesterday. Avalanches, flooding and harsh winter weather killed more than 130 people across Pakistan and Afghanistan in recent days, leaving others stranded by heavy snowfall, officials said.

PHOTO: AFP

## Iran rejects idea of ‘Trump deal’

*Rouhani criticises US president for always breaking promises, urges military to explain downing of Ukraine plane*

AGENCIES

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani yesterday dismissed a proposal for a new “Trump deal” aimed at resolving a nuclear row, saying it was a “strange” offer and criticising US President Donald Trump for always breaking promises.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who has praised Trump as a great dealmaker, called on Tuesday for the president to replace Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with major powers with his own new pact to ensure Tehran does not get an atomic weapon.

Trump said he agreed with Johnson that a “Trump deal” should replace the Iran nuclear deal. In a televised speech, Rouhani told Washington to return to the nuclear pact, which Washington abandoned in 2018, under which Tehran curbed its nuclear work in return for the lifting of international sanctions on Iran.

Since quitting the agreement, Washington has re-imposed sanctions to throttle Iran's oil exports as part of a “maximum pressure” policy.

The United States says its aim is force Tehran to agree a broader deal that puts stricter limits on its nuclear work, curbs its ballistic missile program and ends its regional proxy wars. Iran says it will not negotiate as long as sanctions remain in place.

Tehran has gradually taken steps to reduce

its compliance with the deal, which prompted Britain, France and Germany to formally accuse it on Tuesday of violating the terms.

“This Mr. Prime Minister in London, I don't know how he thinks. He says let's put aside the nuclear deal and put the Trump plan in action,” Rouhani said.

“If you take the wrong step, it will be to your

### NUCLEAR ROW

Iran says its breaches of the deal would be reversed if Washington lifts sanctions

Rouhani appealed for ‘unity’ and flagged the need for radical changes to the way Iran is run



detriment. Pick the right path. The right path is to return to the nuclear deal.”

Iran denies any intent to acquire nuclear weapons and says its breaches of the deal would be reversed if Washington lifts sanctions. “All of our activities are under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA),” said Rouhani.

He appealed for “unity” and flagged the need

for radical changes to the way Iran is run, after a wave of angry protests over the accidental downing of a Ukrainian airliner, reports AFP.

The president also urged the military forces “to explain to people what sessions and meetings were held since the moment that the incident happened”.

“The first thing is to inform people honestly. People's grief will alleviate when they know that we feel responsible for what happened and talk with them honestly,” he said.

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told Reuters that the nuclear deal was still alive: “No, it's not dead. It's not dead,” Zarif said on the sidelines of a conference in New Delhi.

But he told the conference Trump's withdrawal from the earlier deal made new negotiations with Washington pointless: “I had a US deal and the US broke it. If I have a Trump deal, how long will it last?”

In its biggest step away from the agreement yet, Iran announced on January 5 it would abandon all limitations on enriching uranium set down in the pact.

Britain, France and Germany reacted by activating a dispute mechanism in the deal on Tuesday, which eventually could lead to the re-imposing of UN sanctions. Iran called this step a “strategic mistake”.

## Israeli jets attack air base in Syria's Homs, 3 killed

AFP, Beirut

A missile strike on a Syrian airbase that Damascus blamed on Israel killed at least three Iran-backed militiamen, a monitor said yesterday.

Four missiles hit the T4 base in Homs province, north of the capital, at around 10:00 pm (2000 GMT) on Tuesday, state news agency SANA reported, blaming the attack on Israel.

It said the strike caused damage but no casualties.

But the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least three Iran-backed militiamen were killed.

It said the strike damaged an Iranian arms depot, two military vehicles and a building still under construction.

Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman said the dead were all non-Syrians, adding that Israel was likely behind the attack.

He said both Iranian forces and Russian military advisers were stationed at the base, which has been hit by Israeli forces in the past.

An Israeli army spokeswoman made no

comment when contacted by AFP.

The missile strike adds to the growing tension in the Middle East after a US drone killed senior Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani in a targeted strike in Baghdad on January 3.

Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Israel has carried out many raids against forces of the Syrian government and its allies, Iran and Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.

Israel insists it will not allow Syria to become a bridgehead for Iranian intervention in the region.

The Iraqi side of the border had seen the deployment in large numbers of Iran-allied Iraqi Shia militias who now de facto control large stretches of the frontier, with posts not far from military bases housing US troops.

Israel, which previously has rarely acknowledged strikes in Syria, has become more vocal in pledging it will do what is needed to thwart the entrenchment of Iranian forces or arms transfers to Hezbollah.



Smoke fills the sky from the back burning in the Nowra region of New South Wales yesterday. The confirmed death toll rose to 28, as the fires have already destroyed more than 2,000 homes and burnt 10 million hectares of land -- an area larger than South Korea or Portugal.

PHOTO: AFP

## NEWSIN brief

### Trump trial likely to begin next Tuesday

AFP, Washington

The Senate impeachment trial of US President Donald Trump is likely to begin in seven days with key players sworn in later this week. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said Tuesday. McConnell said he expected the House of Representatives to deliver the articles of impeachment against Trump to the upper chamber yesterday. Trump faces charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress, and the 100 senators will be his judge.

### Five killed as Sudan crushes revolt

AFP, Khartoum

Five people, including two soldiers, were killed as Sudanese troops crushed a rebellion launched by agents of the country's long-feared security agency against a restructuring plan, officials and medics said yesterday. On Tuesday, heavy gunfire broke out at several Khartoum bases of the Directorate of General Intelligence Service, formerly known as the National Intelligence and Security Service, after some of its agents rejected a retirement plan proposed by the country's new authorities.

### US slaps sanctions over N Korea workers

AFP, Washington

The United States on Tuesday imposed sanctions on two companies for exploiting North Korean overseas labor but joined allies Japan and South Korea in appealing for diplomacy to ease tensions with Pyongyang. Showing a united front, Japan's defense and foreign ministers and South Korea's foreign minister all held talks with American counterparts Tuesday on both coasts, two weeks after North Korean leader Kim Jong Un threatened to launch a new weapon.

### Japan envoy denounced for comments on Rohingya

Tokyo-based human rights activists yesterday decried recent remarks by Japan's ambassador to Yangon, who told local media he did not think the Myanmar military committed genocide on the Rohingya Muslim minority in the country. Zaw Min Htut, vice president of an advocacy group, Burmese Rohingya Association in Japan, said the ambassador's remarks were “disturbing”. Ichiro Maruyama, the Japanese ambassador to Myanmar, told local news website the Irrawaddy in December that he did not think the Myanmar military “committed genocide or (had the) intent of genocide”. He was previously quoted by the same outlet as saying that potential trade sanctions on Myanmar over the Rohingya crisis would be “utter nonsense”.

### Broadband, 2G internet partially restored in J&K



The Jammu and Kashmir administration on Tuesday evening allowed mobile Internet in parts of Jammu region and broadband in establishments providing essential services, days after the Supreme Court ordered a review of the curbs imposed in the Union Territory. The order comes into effect from January 15 and shall remain in force for seven days, a government communication said. In a three-page order, the administration asked Internet service providers to offer broadband facility (with Mac binding) to all institutions dealing with essential services such as hospitals, banks and government offices. In order to facilitate tourism, the broadband internet services would be provided to hotels and tour and travel establishments, the order said.

### Delta jet dumps fuel on US school playground

A Delta airliner experiencing mechanical trouble on Tuesday dumped jet fuel onto a school playground in the Los Angeles area, leaving 20 students and several adults with minor injuries. Delta Flight 89 took off from Los Angeles en route to Shanghai and was forced to turn back due to engine trouble, a Delta spokesperson said. The plane landed safely around noon after dumping its fuel, which fell onto a wide area, including Park Avenue Elementary School, located about 16 miles (25 kilometers) east of the airport. Fire officials said about 20 children and 11 adults complaining of skin irritation or minor respiratory problems at the elementary school were treated on the spot.

SOURCE: AFP, PTI

## Democrats lock horns over gender

AFP, Des Moines

Leftist Bernie Sanders attacked frontrunner Joe Biden on foreign policy Tuesday but found himself fighting accusations of sexism in the final presidential debate before Democrats begin choosing who challenges incumbent Donald Trump in November's election.

With no candidate yet to carve out a clear lead less than three weeks to go before the first votes in the nominations battle, the stakes were high for the six presidential hopefuls on stage in Iowa.

The largely civilized showdown defied earlier expectations of fireworks, with tensions largely held in check during the two-hour debate.

But a rift between Sanders and fellow Senator Elizabeth Warren appeared to widen afterwards when Warren declined to shake hands with her long-time friend and fellow progressive.

The candidates tangled over everything from troop deployments and foreign policy to health care, international trade, climate change and a woman's chance of winning the

White House.

Sanders, 78, assailed former vice president Biden, 77, over his vote in support of the 2003 Iraq war as the modern-day tensions in the Middle East dominated the opening exchanges.

With Washington's conflict

### DEBATE BEFORE IOWA CAUCUSES



with Iran as the backdrop, non-interventionist Sanders drew a sharp contrast, saying that while he opposed an Iraq war that was “based on lies,” former vice president Biden trumpeted the effort.

“I thought they were lying,” Sanders said of the Bush administration's justifications for war in 2002. “I didn't

believe them for a moment. Joe saw it differently.”

Biden said he had long acknowledged the war was “a mistake” but refrained from sparring with Sanders over Iraq. Instead, Biden appealed for unity in preventing Trump from winning a second term.

Each candidate is desperate for a breakout moment that could give them the vital momentum heading into the Iowa caucuses on February 3 which begins the presidential primary season.

The four candidates in the top tier -- Biden, Sanders, Warren and former South Bend, Indiana mayor Pete Buttigieg -- are bunched together in polling. Senator Amy Klobuchar and billionaire activist Tom Steyer rounded out the debate participants in Iowa's capital Des Moines.

For months, Sanders and Warren have battled peacefully for the right to wave the campaign's progressive flag. But their non-aggression pact unravelled in recent days, with Warren endorsing a report that Sanders privately told her he believed a woman could not defeat Trump.

### HONDURAN MIGRANTS

## 1,000 preparing new US-bound caravan

AFP, San Pedro Sula

Close to 1,000 people have gathered in Honduras' second city forming a migrant caravan that will soon head for the United States, a human rights activist told AFP.

Thousands of Central American migrants have been braving the risk of extortion, kidnap and even murder as they flee poverty and gang violence in their homelands in a bid to reach the American dream, much to the annoyance of US President Donald Trump.

“Right now we're close to 1,000 people but there are buses arriving from different parts of the country,” Bartolo Fuentes, a journalist, human rights defender and former lawmaker told AFP on Tuesday night.

The government accused him of organizing the first such caravan in October 2018, a charge he denies.

Under a light drizzle, men women and children congregated in parks and the central metro station in the city of San Pedro Sula, around 180 kilometers (110 miles) north of the capital Tegucigalpa.

Would be migrants, “mostly from rural areas,” according to Fuentes, were alerted to the caravan through social media, which was then picked up by television channels.

“Here there's no work for anyone. I was studying ... but for nothing because there are many graduates with the diploma under their arm but without finding work,” Yoly Sabillon, 28, told AFP.