

## NEWS IN brief

### Taliban propose brief Afghan ceasefire

AFP, Kabul

The Taliban have offered a brief ceasefire to the US, two insurgent sources said Thursday, a move which could allow for the resumption of talks seeking a deal for Washington to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. Washington has for weeks been calling on the militants to reduce violence, posing it as a condition for resuming formal negotiations on an agreement that would see US troops begin to leave the country in return for security guarantees.

### UN flags famine alarm signals in Yemen

AFP, United Nations

A senior UN official warned Thursday that certain key factors that threatened to trigger famine last year in Yemen were once again looming large, including a plunge in the value of the national currency. "With a rapidly depreciating rial and disrupted salary payments, we are again seeing some of the key conditions that brought Yemen to the brink of famine a year ago," Ramesh Rajasingham, who coordinates humanitarian aid told the UN Security Council.

### US warship transits Taiwan Strait

REUTERS, Taipei

A US warship sailed through the Taiwan Strait on Thursday, the island's defence ministry said, less than a week after Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen won re-election by a landslide on a platform of standing up to China which claims the island. The ship sailed in a northerly direction through the sensitive waterway and Taiwan's armed forces monitored it throughout, the ministry said in a brief statement yesterday.



Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg (C) holds a placard reading "School strike for Climate" during a climate strike against governmental inaction towards climate breakdown and environmental pollution in Lausanne, Switzerland yesterday. Greta issued a warning to world leaders days before the start of the Davos summit of the world's political and business elites.

PHOTO: AFP

## Xi vows 'new era' of ties

Chinese president is expected to sign a series of infrastructure deals as part of Belt and Road Initiative today

AFP, Naypyidaw

Chinese President Xi Jinping vowed to usher in a "new era" of ties with Myanmar after a red carpet welcome yesterday on a state visit aimed at buttressing the embattled government of Aung San Suu Kyi and driving through multi-billion-dollar infrastructure deals.

Myanmar fighter jets escorted Xi's plane as it touched down in Naypyidaw where children presented him with flowers, according to China's official Xinhua news agency, as he was whisked off to a greeting party.

In addition to being its largest investor, China has become an indispensable ally for Myanmar as it reels from Western isolation over the Rohingya crisis.

But widespread mistrust of Beijing's ambitions and its influence over armed insurgencies in areas bordering the two countries threaten to undermine the bond.

Xi told Myanmar leaders he was "convinced that the concerted efforts of our two sides will make this visit a success and take the bilateral ties to a new level and into a new era," Xinhua reported.

During the trip he is expected to sign a series of mammoth infrastructure deals as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative -- a global trade plan that promises to change the face of Myanmar.

The centrepiece of the so-called China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) is a \$1.3 billion deep-sea port at Kyaukphyu in central Rakhine state, giving Beijing a gateway to the Indian Ocean.

A high-speed rail link is also on the cards to connect the port and nearby planned industrial zone with the countries' shared border.

Bilateral trade was worth \$16.8 billion last year and Beijing holds the biggest share -- around \$4 billion or 40 percent -- of Myanmar's foreign debt.

Billions of cubic metres of gas and millions of barrels of oil from offshore rigs are pumped each year across the country into China.

"The next one, two, three decades will be defined by Myanmar's relationship with China," said Yangon-based analyst Richard Horsey.

Xi will sit down with Suu Kyi and army chief Min Aung Hlaing in separate meetings today.



MYANMAR VISIT

## 'We can't wait'

Maldives desperate for funds as islands risk going underwater due to impact of climate change

REUTERS, New Delhi

The tropical Maldives may lose entire islands unless it can quickly access cheap financing to fight the impact of climate change, its foreign minister said.

The archipelago's former president Mohamed Nasheed famously held a cabinet meeting underwater to draw attention to submerging land and global warming a decade ago.

Yet the Maldives, best known for its white sands and palm-fringed atolls that draw luxury holiday-makers, has struggled to find money to build critical infrastructure like sea-walls.

"For small states, it is not easy," Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid told Reuters in New Delhi. "By the time the financing is obtained, we may be underwater."

At the UN climate talks in Madrid in December, the Maldives and other vulnerable countries pushed for

concrete progress on fresh funding to help them deal with disasters and longer-term damage linked to climate change -- but failed.

Shahid was hopeful the next round of talks, slated to take place in Glasgow in November, would yield better results.

One of the world's lowest-lying countries, more than 80% of the Maldives' land is less than one meter above mean sea levels. In 2004, the Indian Ocean tsunami ravaged the Muslim-majority state, causing financial losses of around \$470 million and hitting infrastructure.

In 2014, more than 100 of the archipelago's inhabited islands were already reporting erosion, and around 30 islands are identified as severely eroded. "In order to protect the islands, we need to start building sea walls," Shahid said. "It's expensive, but we need it. We can't wait until all of them are being taken away."



## China birth rate hits lowest level since 1949: report

AFP, Beijing

China's birth rate dropped last year to its lowest level since the Communist country was founded in 1949, adding to concerns that an ageing society and shrinking workforce will pile pressure on a slowing economy.

To avoid a demographic crisis, the government relaxed its one-child policy in 2016 to allow people to have two children, but the change has not resulted in an increase in pregnancies.

In 2019, the birth rate stood at 10.48 per 1,000 people, down slightly from the year before, according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) released yesterday.

The number of births has now fallen for three consecutive years, still, there were 14.65 million babies born in 2019.

He Yafu, an independent demographer based in southern Guangdong province, said the number of births was the lowest since 1961, the last year of a famine that left tens of millions dead. He said there were

around 11.8 million births that year.

US-based academic Yi Fuxian, senior scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, told AFP that even though China has abolished its one-child policy, there has been a shift in the mindset of the population, with people now used to smaller families.

He added that a higher cost of living is also a factor, noting that day care is expensive and inconvenient in China, posing another deterrent.

He believes that China's population is over-estimated, and according to his work, the real population "began to decline in 2018".

According to official figures, China's population stood at 1.4 billion by the end of 2019, increasing by 4.67 million from the year before.

While China's limit on family sizes could be removed altogether eventually, the demographer said citizens are still being punished for having 3 children, even though some areas reduced punitive measures.



A man walks between trees and buildings covered in ash from the eruption of the Taal volcano, in the village of Buso Buso near Laurel, Philippines yesterday. The threat of the Taal volcano unleashing a potentially catastrophic eruption remains high, authorities warned.

PHOTO: AFP

## 'Difficult' year ahead

Says acting head of UN Palestinian agency amid funding cuts

REUTERS, Gaza

The interim head of the UN agency that aids Palestinian refugees on Thursday accused pro-Israel groups of lobbying foreign parliaments to stop donations, even as it struggled to recover from losing United States funding in 2018.

Christian Saunders, in an interview with Reuters in his Gaza office, also said Israel was seeking to replace United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) services for Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem with those of its own.

UNRWA has faced budgetary difficulties since 2018, when the United States, its biggest donor, halted its annual aid of \$360 million. The United States and Israel have both accused UNRWA of mismanagement and anti-Israeli incitement.

Last November, UNRWA commissioner-general Pierre Krahenbuhl resigned amid an investigation into misconduct allegations.

In the interview, Saunders, now

acting commissioner-general, said the inquiry by the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services was complete and Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had confirmed there had been no corruption or misuse of funds.

Saunders said the investigation had uncovered mismanagement related

Trump admin halted funding to UNRWA in 2018

Washington accused agency of flawed ops



to human resources and abuse of authority, and that major donors, who had withheld funding while the inquiry was under way, have resumed contributions.

Saunders said he felt confident UNRWA had enough money for at least the first quarter of 2020, but he expected it to be an "even more difficult" year than last. He added that

they had not given up on persuading the United States to change its mind about funding.

"We are engaged with the US, we will continue to engage with them in the hopes that they will see UNRWA as a reliable partner and worth supporting," Saunders said in the interview.

Saunders initially said that Israel and the United States were "advocating against funding UNRWA in the European parliaments and elsewhere," but later clarified in a statement that he was referring to pro-Israel groups.

He said UNRWA was feeling "the pressure in East Jerusalem in particular", saying that Israel was in the process of building schools and institutions "to compete" with the agency and stop it from operating there.

"The important thing to remember here is that UNRWA has a mandate from the (UN) General Assembly, from the rest of the world, the member states, to provide services to Palestinian refugees in East Jerusalem," Saunders said.

### ASIA BIBI PROTESTS

## Pakistan court jails dozens of Islamists

AFP, Islamabad

A Pakistani court has sentenced more than 80 Islamists to 55 years in prison each after protests linked to the 2018 acquittal of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman accused of blasphemy, one of their senior leaders told AFP.

The sentence -- an unusually harsh one in Pakistan, where blasphemy is an extremely sensitive issue -- was announced by a lower court in the garrison town of Rawalpindi on Thursday, said Pir Ejaz Ashrafi, a senior leader of the Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP).

Bibi now lives in Canada with her family. The Islamists were members of the radical TLP, an anti-blasphemy party which had spearheaded violent protests across Pakistan in the wake of Bibi's acquittal in late 2018.

At the time Pakistan took its leader, Khadim Hussain Rizvi, into custody as part of a broad effort to quell the unrest.

Ashrafi said 86 members of the TLP were convicted after a trial which lasted for more than a year but he argued that the protests had been against Rizvi's arrest, not Bibi's acquittal.

"This is murder of justice and the sentences given are quite ruthless and harsh," he told AFP.

Ashrafi said the party would challenge the verdict in the Lahore High Court. Blasphemy is an incendiary charge in Muslim-majority Pakistan, where even the whiff of an unsubstantiated allegation of insulting Islam can spark death at the hands of mobs.

TLP -- or the Movement at the Service of the Prophet -- has in recent years become one of the most powerful groups in Pakistan weaponising the ultra-sensitive issue, including at the ballot box.

### Storms bring joy for Australian firefighters

Drought-breaking storms dumped desperately needed rain on some bushfire-ravaged parts of eastern Australia yesterday, while giving joy to many farmers who have faced losing precious livestock and crops. The rains gave exhausted firefighters a boost in battling some of the blazes, with more relief expected over the weekend as the wet weather is forecast to hit other hotspots. The unprecedented fires, fuelled by climate change and a years-long drought, have claimed 28 lives over the past five months. They have scorched massive tracts of pristine forests in eastern and southern Australia, decimated livestock on already barren farms and destroyed 2,000 homes.

### Ukraine PM offers to quit in audiotape furore



Ukraine's prime minister offered his resignation yesterday after audio was leaked of him questioning President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's grasp of economics, in the first major political test for the inexperienced leader. It was unclear whether Zelenskyy would accept Oleksiy Goncharuk's offer, which came after a recording emerged of him reportedly saying the president had a "primitive understanding" of the economy. Zelenskyy, a comedian with no previous political experience, came to power after a landslide election win last year and his "Servant of the People" party later won a strong majority in parliament.

### Sepsis linked to 1-in-5 deaths worldwide: study

Sepsis played a direct role in the deaths of 11 million people in 2017, almost twice as many as previously estimated, according to a study published Thursday. That represents one death for every five cases of the condition, and one-in-five deaths from all causes worldwide, researchers reported in The Lancet medical journal. Sepsis occurs when a person's organs cease to function properly as the result of an out-of-control immune response to infection. Even if the condition doesn't kill, it can create lifelong disabilities. Hardest hit were children under five years old, who accounted for more than 40 percent of all cases. Some 85 percent of cases in 2017 were in low- or middle-income countries, with the highest burden in sub-Saharan Africa, the South Pacific, and Asia.

SOURCE: AFP