

NEWS IN brief

China snubs US call to join arms talks

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday said it has "no intention to participate" in trilateral arms control negotiations, a day after Washington called on Beijing to join its nuclear arms talks with Moscow. The United States has held two rounds of talks with Russia. Washington has warned about a lack of transparency around China's growing nuclear arsenal, and US President Donald Trump has insisted that any new disarmament pact would need China to come on board.

Israel troops kill 3 Gaza 'attackers'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli troops shot dead three Palestinians late Tuesday who crossed into Israel from Gaza and hurled an explosive device at soldiers, the army said. Israeli public radio said the raiders penetrated 400 metres (yards) into Israel from central Gaza "under cover of stormy weather" before the troops stopped them. The nighttime incident came as world leaders were gathering in the Jewish state for a major international Holocaust commemoration.

Greece gets first female president



REUTERS, Athens

Top judge Katerina Sakellariopoulou became Greece's first woman president yesterday when lawmakers elected her head of state in a rare display of unity. Sakellariopoulou, 64, has been president of the Council of State, Greece's top administrative court. She will succeed Prokopis Pavlopoulos, whose five-year term expires in March. She was backed by 261 MPs in the 300-member parliament.



A man mourns over the body of his wife killed following an airstrike on the outskirts of the northern Syrian town of Atareb, yesterday. Russian air strikes killed at least 23 civilians Tuesday in northwestern Syria, as renewed violence tightened the noose around the country's last major rebel-held bastion and deepened an already dire humanitarian crisis.

PHOTO: AFP

India SC refuses to stay divisive citizenship law

Gives govt 4 weeks to respond to 144 petitions challenging the constitutional validity of CAA

AFP, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court declined calls to suspend the implementation of a new citizenship law yesterday, deciding that a constitutional bench of five judges was needed to hear all the challenges to legislation that critics say discriminates against Muslims.

The court gave Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government four weeks to respond to 144 petitions challenging the constitutional validity of the law which has ignited protests across the country.

The law, which came into effect on Jan. 10 after being passed by parliament in December, lays out a path for citizenship for six religious minorities in neighbouring mostly-Muslim countries - Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh.

Critics say that the omission of Muslims is discriminatory, and that basing the right to citizenship on religion violates the secular principles of India's constitution.

Opposition leaders, Muslim organisations and student groups had petitioned the court to hold off implementation of the law until the challenges to the legislation were settled.

But Chief Justice Sharad Arvind Bobde heading a three-bench panel told a packed courtroom that only a constitutional bench of five judges could rule on the matter and in the meantime gave the government more time to explain its stance.

"We will give you four weeks to file reply to all petitions," Bobde told the government's top lawyer, indicating that the next hearing will be held in late February.

The government says the law is for the benefit of religious minorities such as Hindus, Sikhs and Christians who face persecution in India's Muslim majority neighbours.

The biggest student organisation in the northeastern state of Assam, where some of the worst violence was seen last month during widespread protests against the law, said it would keep up its opposition.

Australia evacuates parts of capital as bushfires return

REUTERS, Sydney

Some residents of Australia's capital Canberra were evacuated briefly yesterday after a bushfire broke out near the airport as searing hot weather ended a few days of respite and the number of out-of-control blazes surged in the southeast of the country.

Roads were closed and the authorities told people to leave or stay away from suburbs east of Canberra, as photos posted on social media showed grey smoke billowing above the city's suburbs. There were no reports of injuries or damage, and the warning was downgraded an hour later.

In recent weeks, Canberra and the cities of Sydney and Melbourne experienced air quality rated among the worst in the world under thick clouds of bushfire smoke. The fire broke out as a huge dust storm crossed the country's south, leaving skies deep orange and engulfing some outback towns, the Bureau of Meteorology said.

Since September, hundreds of wildfires in Australia have killed 29 people as well as an estimated 1 billion native animals, while incinerating 2,500 homes and a total area of bushland larger than the size of Austria.

Firefighters had taken advantage of rain and milder temperatures in the past week to contain blazes, but the respite ended on Wednesday when high temperatures and winds returned.

The huge bushfires have cut through the country's east coast during the peak summer months when many businesses usually rake in earnings from both domestic and foreign tourists. Agricultural sectors, particularly the dairy industry, have also been hard hit.

Scores of fires were burning in the states of New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria on Wednesday. Temperatures in Victoria were expected to top 32 degrees Celsius on Wednesday, leading officials to declare "extreme fire danger" in some areas. Temperatures in NSW were forecast to hit 40C (104F) on Thursday.

Myanmar among countries to face US travel ban: report

US President Donald Trump said his administration was preparing to add a "couple of countries" to the controversial list of states whose citizens are subject to travel bans or severe restrictions on entry to the United States. The Wall Street Journal reported earlier that the administration planned to add seven countries including Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, and others in Africa and Asia. It said the other nations being considered for new rules were Belarus, Eritrea, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Sudan and Tanzania.

Pollution chokes Thai capital

Authorities in the Thai capital ordered nearly 450 schools to close yesterday as pollution levels reached dangerously unhealthy levels. Bangkok, the world's most visited city, saw levels of PM 2.5 particles at 78.3 µg/m3. A level above 35 is considered unhealthy, according to independent air quality monitor AirVisual. PM 2.5 particles can include dust, soot and smoke and are so small they can lodge deep in the lungs and enter the bloodstream. The schools will be closed for one day. Last January, the city closed schools for a week because of pollution.

UN Security Council urges quick ceasefire in Libya

The UN Security Council called Tuesday on Libya's warring sides to quickly reach a ceasefire that would pave the way for a political process aimed at ending conflict in the oil-rich state. The United Nations meeting followed up on a weekend Libya summit held in Berlin, which saw the formation of a military commission that is supposed to define ways of consolidating a cessation of hostilities. It is to comprise five members each from the UN-recognized government in Tripoli and its opponents loyal to military strongman Khalifa Haftar.

Weinstein rape trial set for opening arguments



Opening arguments in Harvey Weinstein's rape and sexual assault trial were due yesterday, with the defense expected to detail "loving" emails between the once-mighty movie producer and his accusers. Weinstein, 67, faces life in prison if convicted of predatory sexual assault charges related to two women in the high-profile New York proceedings seen as key to the #MeToo movement. Prosecutors will argue that the former Miramax Films boss was a sexual predator. Weinstein's attorneys will try to convince the court that his two accusers engaged in consensual relationships with the defendant and only claimed the incidents were forced years later. More than 80 women have accused Weinstein of sexual misconduct since claims against him ignited the #MeToo movement in October 2017. SOURCE: AFP

IMPEACHMENT TRIAL OF TRUMP

WHAT'S NEXT



The US Senate voted along party lines to set the rules for President Donald Trump's historic impeachment trial. These are the next phases in Trump's impeachment trial, just the third of a president in US history:

OPENING ARGUMENTS: The Democratic members of the House of Representatives chosen to present the impeachment case against Trump will deliver opening arguments to the Senate beginning on Wednesday. They will have a total of 24 hours over three days to present their case that Trump should be impeached for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress over his attempt to get Ukraine to investigate political rival Joe Biden. Following the House presentation, Trump's defense team, led by White House counsel Pat Cipollone, will have 24 hours over three days to present their rebuttal.

WRITTEN QUESTIONS: Following opening arguments, senators will have a total of 16 hours to ask questions in writing to House prosecutors or the White House defense team. The written questions from the senators will be read out loud in the chamber by US Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts, who is presiding over the trial.

WITNESSES AND DOCUMENTS: Following the question period, House prosecutors and the White House defense team will have two hours each to argue for or against subpoenaing witnesses or documents. The Senate will then vote on whether any witnesses or documents should be subpoenaed. A simple majority vote of 51 senators will decide the issue. House Democrats have said they want former National Security Advisor John Bolton and White House chief of staff Mick Mulvaney and two others to testify. If there is an agreement to hear witnesses, they will first be deposed behind closed doors. The Senate will then decide whether they will be allowed to testify publicly.

SENATE VOTE: Following the conclusion of deliberations, the Senate will vote on each of the two articles of impeachment. A two-thirds majority of the senators present is required for conviction. Conviction on just a single article is enough to remove Trump from office. With Republicans holding a 53 to 47 majority in the Senate, Trump -- barring the unexpected -- is likely to be acquitted. The Senate vote could possibly be held late next week -- ahead of Trump's planned February 4 appearance before a joint session of Congress for the annual State of the Union speech. SOURCE: AFP

Putin forms new govt, keeps key ministers

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin has appointed a new government, less than a week after he announced sweeping constitutional reforms and his longtime prime minister resigned.

Putin, who said there was a "demand for change" in his announcements last week, kept on key allies. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu -- both staunch Putin supporters and major policy figures -- held on to their positions, as well as the finance and energy ministers, Anton Siluanov and Alexander Novak.

But he replaced several officials in charge of social affairs, including the ministers of health, education, labour and economic development.

Meeting the cabinet of new Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin for the first time, Putin said its most important task was to "increase the welfare of our citizens and strengthen our state".

The government of Putin's longtime ally Dmitry Medvedev resigned last week, a few hours after the president announced the constitutional reforms.

The reforms will transfer some authority to parliament, including the power to choose the prime minister, and beef up the role of an advisory body called the State Council, potentially headed by Putin.

Critics say Putin, 67, could use that position to continue to shape domestic and foreign policy after his fourth Kremlin term expires in 2024.

'Nobody likes' Bernie: Hillary

AFP, New York

Hillary Clinton launched a scathing attack on presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders, her rival for the 2016 Democratic nomination, telling a documentary that "nobody likes him."

The former US secretary of state also refused to say whether she would endorse and campaign for Sanders if he becomes the Democrats' choice to take on President Donald Trump in November's election.

"He was in Congress for years. He had one senator support him," Clinton says in a four-part series due to air on streaming site Hulu in March.

"Nobody likes him, nobody wants to work with him, he got nothing done. He was a career politician.

"It's all just baloney and I feel so bad that people got sucked into it," she adds.

Sanders, a leftist senator from Vermont, is among the leaders in the race for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination. He sits second in national polls behind centrist Joe Biden and ahead of Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren, two weeks before the first nomination vote in Iowa.

Sanders, 78, pushed 72-year-old Clinton to the wire four years ago in an acrimonious, months-long battle for the party's nomination. Clinton won that race but lost to Trump. She has criticized Sanders and his supporters for not sufficiently backing her in the presidential vote.

Sanders played down the attack in the documentary, telling reporters that he was focused on Trump's impeachment trial.



N Korea says may seek 'new path' of weapons build-up

AFP, Geneva

Pyongyang on Tuesday warned that it could seek a "new path" and accelerate its weapons programme, after Washington imposed fresh sanctions on North Korean companies amid stalled nuclear talks.

North Korean representative Ju Yong Chol told the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva that his country's efforts to improve relations with Washington had been met with hostility.

"Although the US is talking about the resumption of dialogue, it has no intention at all from the beginning to drop its hostile policy towards the DPRK (Democratic Republic of Korea)," he said.

He said DPRK will steadily develop strategic weapons until the US abandons its hostile policy.

North Korea declared in December an end to moratoriums on nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile tests, which had been a centrepiece of two years of diplomacy with US.

Harry, Meghan in new media spat

AFP, Victoria

Prince Harry and his wife Meghan started their new life in Canada on Tuesday by launching a legal warning to media over photographs of the duchess near their seaside bolthole.

Following their shock exit from life as working royals, Harry jettied out from Britain to join Meghan late Monday at a luxury house outside Victoria on Vancouver Island.

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex have temporarily set up base at the wooded home, having spent six weeks there over Christmas with their baby son Archie.

The couple, who married in May 2018, admitted last year that they were struggling with media scrutiny and have regularly hit out at the press in statements and in the courts.

Their lawyers issued a legal warning after various outlets on Tuesday published photographs of a smiling Meghan out walking her dogs with Archie.

In Britain, the pictures were used by The Sun and the Daily Mail newspapers. Lawyers claimed the images were taken by photographers hiding in bushes and spying on the US former television actress, the BBC reported, and that she did not consent to the photos. The couple were prepared to take legal action, according to the BBC.

The lawyers claim there had been attempts to photograph inside their new home using long lenses, and say paparazzi are camped outside the property.



A protester walks through the smoke of burning tyres in the capital Beirut, yesterday. Lebanon ended a painful wait by unveiling a new cabinet line-up, but the government was promptly scorned by protesters and faces the Herculean task of saving a collapsing economy.

PHOTO: AFP