

## Deadly strikes hit Syria rebel bastion

10 civilians killed

AFP, Ariha

Air strikes killed 10 civilians near a bakery and a medical clinic in Syria's rebel-held Idlib region yesterday, as government forces kept up a ground offensive.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Russian warplanes hit the Idlib province town of Ariha, but the Russian defence ministry said its "aviation did not carry out any combat tasks in this area of Syria."

The government and its Russian allies have upped their deadly bombardment of Syria's last major rebel bastion, slowly chipping away at it from the south.

Rebel-held territory has shrunk to just over half of Idlib province, along with slivers of neighbouring Aleppo and Latakia, following a series of government gains.

The saw Damascus loyalists retaking the strategic northwestern town of Maaret al-Numan on Wednesday.

Earlier yesterday, Russian air strikes hit near a bakery and the Al-Shami clinic in Ariha which is now out of service, the Observatory said.

The monitor says it determines whose planes carried out strikes according to type, location, flight patterns and munitions.

A dust-covered doctor ran out of the clinic screaming following the strike, which partially damaged the facility's walls, an AFP correspondent reported.

Nearby, three entire buildings had collapsed and several vehicles were reduced to mangled wrecks.

The wailing of women and children rang out as rescue workers searched for corpses beneath the rubble.

Toufic Saado, a paramedic, said he was inside the medical facility when three air strikes ravaged the area.

"The wounded were lying on the floor outside the medical centre," he said.



In this handout photograph taken and released by India's Press Information Bureau (PIB) yesterday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi (L) pays homage at Raj Ghat, the memorial for Indian independence icon Mahatma Gandhi, on Martyrs' Day to mark the 72nd anniversary of Gandhi's assassination, in New Delhi.

PHOTO: AFP

### ANTI-CAA MOTION

## Vote in European Parliament delayed

Indian govt claims diplomatic victory

Toi, New Delhi

A joint motion, combining five different resolutions tabled by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) against India's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), has been placed on the final agenda for debate at the Plenary session in Brussels on Wednesday.

However, an expected vote on the motion has been postponed until the Parliament's Plenary session in March.

"Following a decision by MEPs at the opening of today's Plenary session in Brussels, the vote on the resolution on India's Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 has been postponed to the March session," said a statement from the European Parliament, as it confirmed that the debate on the motion is to go ahead as scheduled later on Wednesday evening.

The reason behind the postponement of the vote is unconfirmed but will come as a boost to the Indian government's efforts against such a motion being voted on by the European Parliament.

Responding to the deferment of voting, government sources said that "friends of India" prevailed over "friends of Pakistan" in the European Parliament.

"We expect that our perspectives on CAA will be understood by all objective and fair-minded EU parliamentarians," the sources said, reiterating that the citizenship law is India's internal matter which has been adopted after due processes.

The motion takes note of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) statement last month.

## Heatwave renews worries

Dangerous weather warnings issued as more than 80 fires still burning across NSW, Victoria

AFP, Sydney

Australia was bracing for a heatwave to sweep across the country's fire-ravaged southeast in the coming days, with the forecast stoking fears the soaring temperatures could inflame bushfires.

Temperatures reached above 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) yesterday in South Australia state, where dangerous fire weather warnings were issued in several bushfire-prone areas.

The heatwave is then expected to hit Melbourne and Canberra today before parts of Sydney reach 45 degrees Celsius on the weekend.

Authorities say the searing heat, accompanied by dry winds, would bring severe bushfire conditions to parts of New South Wales and Victoria -- where more than 80 fires are still burning across the two states.

"We've had the benefit of some suppressed, benign conditions over the last few days. However, as we've heard, it's going to be hot and dry," Victoria Emergency Services Commissioner Andrew Crisp said, urging residents to be prepared for bushfires to flare.

"If you're gonna wait until you see the smoke or the fire

at your doorstep, it's far too late. You've gotta get out early," he said.

Storms are forecast to follow the heatwave, bringing rain that could help dampen fires but also the potential for wild weather, including flash flooding.

Extreme weather has battered parts of Australia in recent weeks, bringing giant hail, floods and landslides.

The renewed fire threat came as worst-hit New South Wales announced an inquiry into the catastrophic bushfire season, which has left at least 32 people dead and devastated vast swathes of the country since September.

"The scale of these fires has been unprecedented and we must leave no stone unturned," Premier Gladys Berejiklian said. "This inquiry will allow NSW to learn from this season and the catastrophic conditions we've faced, and apply these

learnings for the future."

That comes on top of a Royal Commission inquiry announced by Prime Minister Scott Morrison earlier in January.

The months-long crisis has sparked renewed calls for Australia's conservative government to take immediate action on climate change, with street protests urging Morrison to reduce the country's reliance on coal.

### BUSHFIRES IN AUSTRALIA



## India's AYUSH ministry touts traditional remedies

AFP, New Delhi

As scientists race to find a vaccine for the deadly Wuhan virus, the Indian government said Wednesday that ancient homeopathy and Ayurveda remedies could hold an answer.

The ministry that promotes the country's booming yoga, naturopathy and homeopathy sectors released an advisory listing herbal oils to be rubbed into the scalp to purportedly ease the symptoms.

It also suggested ingesting Arsenicum album-30, a homeopathic treatment.

"The dose should be repeated after one month by following the same schedule in case coronavirus infections prevail," the Ministry of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, Sowa Rigpa and Homoeopathy) said in a statement.

The ministry also issued general advice on maintaining personal hygiene to

prevent the spread of the virus.

The advisory came as the Dalai Lama, in exile in Dharamsala in India, said on Facebook that followers concerned about the virus should chant a mantra that would be "helpful" in dealing with the situation.

India claims to have natural remedies for everything from cancer to the common cold.

The government in recent years has launched a drive to promote traditional remedies as it seeks to cash in on the multi-billion dollar global market for holistic medicine.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a yoga practitioner, has said he wants the world to make Ayurveda "a way of life".

Ayurvedic medicine -- which means the "science of life" in Sanskrit -- treats the physical and mental sources of illness through, for example, prescribing herbs in conjunction with yoga or massage.

### CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

The ministry suggested ingesting Arsenicum album-30 for treatment

It issued general advice on maintaining hygiene to prevent spread of virus



An official of Pakistan-based Chinese company (R) uses a thermo gun to check the temperature of the company's drivers, in Islamabad yesterday, after instructions from Pakistani authorities to take preventive measures against the coronavirus.

PHOTO: AFP

## NEWS IN brief

### Iranian factory makes US, Israeli flags to burn

REUTERS, Khomein

Business is booming at Iran's largest flag factory which makes US, British and Israeli flags for Iranian protesters to burn. At the factory in the town of Khomein, southwest of the capital Tehran, young men and women print the flags by hand then hang them up to dry. The factory produces about 2,000 US and Israeli flags a month in its busiest periods, and more than 1.5 million square feet of flags a year.

### Japan's ex-emperor loses consciousness

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's former emperor Akihito, who abdicated last year, temporarily lost consciousness and collapsed at his residence this week, but medical checkups found "no abnormalities", the government said yesterday. The 86-year-old was examined by court doctors after Wednesday's incident, an official at the Imperial Household Agency told AFP.

### Flash floods kill nine in Indonesia

AFP, Medan

Flash floods and landslides have killed at least nine people and forced thousands into temporary shelters on Indonesia's Sumatra island, the local disaster agency said yesterday. Torrential rain in North Sumatra this week sparked the disaster, with most victims drowning or hit by logs swept away in the current, the agency added. Rampant illegal logging in the area may have contributed to the disaster by loosening the soil and making it susceptible to landslides.

## 'Prisoner of fanaticism'

Pakistani Christian Asia Bibi recounts hellish condition inside Pak prison, pain of exile in Canada

AFP, Paris

Recounting the hellish conditions of eight years spent on death row on blasphemy charges but also the pain of exile, Pakistani Christian Asia Bibi has broken her silence to give her first personal insight into an ordeal that caused international outrage.

Bibi was sentenced to death on blasphemy charges by a Pakistani court in 2010 but then dramatically acquitted in 2018. She now lives in Canada at an undisclosed location.

French journalist Anne-Isabelle Tillet, who has co-written a book about her, was once based in the country where she led a support campaign for her.

She is the only reporter to have met Bibi during her stay in Canada.

In the book "Enfin libre!" ("Finally Free") -- published in French on Wednesday with an English version due out in September -- Bibi recounts her arrest, the conditions of prison, the relief of her release but also the difficulty of adjusting to a new life.

"You already know my story through the media," she said in the book.



"But you are far from understanding my daily life in prison or my new life," she said. "I became a prisoner of fanaticism."

In prison, "tears were the only companions in the cell". She described the horrendous conditions in squalid jails in Pakistan where she was kept chained and jeered at by other detainees.

"My wrists are burning me, it is hard to breathe. My neck... is encased in an iron collar that the guard can tighten with a huge nut," she wrote.

"A long chain drags along on the filthy ground. This connects my neck to the handcuffed hand who pulls me like a dog on a lead.

"Deep within me, a dull fear takes me towards the depths of darkness. A lacerating fear that will never leave me."

Many other prisoners showed her no pity. "I am startled by the cry of a woman. 'To death!' The other women join in. 'Hanged!' Hanged!'"

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.

## Greece plans floating sea barriers to block migrants

REUTERS, Athens

Greece wants to install a floating barrier in the Aegean Sea to deter migrants arriving at its islands' shores through Turkey, government officials said yesterday.

Greece served as the gateway to the European Union for more than one million Syrian refugees and other migrants in recent years. While an agreement with Turkey sharply reduced the number attempting the voyage since 2016, Greek islands still struggle with overcrowded camps operating far beyond their capacity.

The 2.7 kilometre long (1.68 miles) net-like barrier that Greece wants to buy will be set up in the sea off the island of Lesbos, where the overcrowded Moria camp operates.

It will rise 50 centimetres above sea level and carry light marks that will make it visible at night, a government document inviting vendors to submit offers said, adding that it was "aimed at containing the increasing inflows of migrants".

"The invitation for floating barriers is in the right direction," Defence Minister Nikos Panagiotopoulos told Skai Radio. "We will see what the result, what its effect as a deterrent will be in practice."

"It will be a natural barrier. If it works like the one in Evros... it can be effective," he said, referring to a cement and barbed-wire fence Greece set up in 2012 along its northern border with Turkey to stop a rise in migrants crossing there.

Aid groups, which have described the living conditions at migrant camps as appalling, said fences in Europe had not deterred arrivals and that Greece should focus on speeding up the processing of asylum requests instead.

"We see, in recent years, a surge in the number of barriers that are being erected but yet people continue to flee," Boris Cheshirkov, spokesman in Greece for UN refugee agency UNHCR, told Reuters. "Greece has to have fast procedures to ensure that people have access to asylum quickly when they need it."