

NEWSIN brief

EU top diplomat to visit Tehran today

AFP, Tehran

Top EU diplomat Josep Borrell is expected in Tehran today, Iran's foreign ministry announced a day ahead of the visit, amid new tensions over the Iranian nuclear issue. Iran gave no details on when Borrell would arrive or how long he would remain in the country. On January 24, Borrell called for a meeting of remaining states party to the 2015 nuclear deal in February in an effort to preserve the agreement, which has been crumbling since the United States unilaterally withdrew in 2018.

Drunk driver kills 4 kids in Sydney

AFP, Sydney

A drunk driver slammed his pickup truck into a group of children in Sydney, killing two sisters, their brother and a cousin and seriously injuring three others, police alleged yesterday. The 29-year-old driver was charged with manslaughter and high-range drink driving following the incident late Saturday in the Otlands suburb of western Sydney. The children, aged 8 to 13, were on a footpath when the four-wheel drive jumped the curb and ramed into them, police alleged.

Venice shuts down for WWII-era bomb

AFP, Rome

A Venice port area was evacuated yesterday morning as a World War II-era bomb was defused and set to be exploded in the sea. The operation in the port of Marghera, a mostly industrial area separated from the tourist city by water, required the evacuation of about 3,500 residents beginning in the early morning. The bomb, which weighed about 225 kilos (500 pounds) and contained about 129 kilos of TNT, was discovered during an excavation to fix sewer lines in January.



This aerial photo taken yesterday shows the Huoshenshan hospital in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province. Some 1,400 military medics will treat patients at the 1,000-bed hospital which will receive its first patients today-- just 10 days after construction began, according to state media. PHOTO: AFP

'Please take my daughter'

Mother of girl with cancer pleads at virus blockade

REUTERS, Jiujiang

Hours ticked by on Saturday as 50-year-old Lu Yuejin struggled to get past the police checkpoint on the bridge over the Yangtze river and out of Hubei province, which is on virtual lockdown as China scrambles to control a coronavirus outbreak.

Lu, a farmer from a village on the Hubei province side of the bridge, was trying to gain passage for her daughter, 26-year-old Hu Ping, who has leukaemia. She has been unable to receive a second round of chemotherapy treatment in the overwhelmed hospitals of provincial capital Wuhan, the epicentre of the virus outbreak.

"My daughter needs to go to hospital in Jiujiang," she said at the checkpoint. "She needs to have her treatment. But they won't let us through."

Her daughter sat on the ground wrapped in a blanket while Lu tearfully pleaded with police.

"Please, take my daughter. I don't need to go past ... please, just let my daughter go past," she asked.

Her pleas were almost drowned out by a

loudspeaker playing a pre-recorded message that residents would not be allowed into Jiujiang, the Jiangxi province city on the southern side of the Yangtze.

The bridge has been largely closed off in an attempt to halt the spread of the new disease, which has infected 14,380 people, the vast majority of them in China, and killed more than 300.

Dozens of people have attempted to cross the police checkpoint in recent days. Some had succeeded by holding the right train or plane ticket departing from Jiujiang and bought before January 24, but many had failed.

For much of Saturday morning, that was the case for Lu as she pleaded her daughter's case with authorities.

"All I want to do is save her life," she said. About an hour after she spoke to Reuters at the checkpoint, police began to move. Phone calls were made, an ambulance was called and Lu and Hu were both eventually allowed through.

Hu appeared to be limping as she walked through temperature checks at the checkpoint and towards the waiting ambulance.



Virus won't turn you into a 'zombie'

Says Malaysia as rumours swirl

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The deadly coronavirus will not cause victims to act like zombies, Malaysia's government said on social media, as officials act to correct the spread of misinformation surrounding the outbreak.

As medical authorities seek to contain the virus, some social media users in Malaysia made a connection between the disease and the walking dead.

Malaysia's health ministry dismissed the rumour in a tweet, however, saying: "The claim that individuals infected with this virus will behave like zombies is not true... Patients can recover."

A number of posts in Malaysia on social media wrongly claimed the number of deaths or infected people in the country.

Police have arrested six people for spreading misinformation about the virus, a Malaysian Communications and Multimedia statement said.

In the latest arrest, last Thursday, a 28-year-old woman was investigated for "improper use of network facilities".

If convicted, she can be fined up to 50,000 ringgit or be jailed for a year, or both.

The virus has killed more than 300 people in China and infected thousands. Eight people in Malaysia have been found with the virus -- all Chinese nationals.



Nat'l emergency in Pakistan over locust attack

The Pakistan government has declared a national emergency to eliminate the attacking swarms of desert locusts which are destroying crops on a large scale in Punjab after wiping it out in Sindh, the media reported. The decision was taken at a meeting on Friday convened by Prime Minister Imran Khan, reports Dawn news. The meeting also approved a National Action Plan (NAP) that requires a sum of 7.3 billion Pakistani rupees to overcome the crisis. The locust attack was first spotted in the country in March 2019 and swarms later spread over 900,000 hectares in Sindh, South Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, damaging standing crops and trees worth millions of rupees, reports The Express Tribune.

Israel strikes Gaza Strip after rocket fires

Israel launched air strikes on the Gaza Strip early yesterday in retaliation for projectiles fired from the Palestinian enclave into southern Israel, the army said. Military jets and helicopters struck targets linked to Hamas, the Islamist group that controls Gaza, shortly after midnight, with no reported casualties. Israel also suspended cement deliveries to the enclave and cancelled 500 commercial entry permits into Israel "until further notice". Since the announcement Tuesday by US President Donald Trump of his plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, rockets, shells and explosive balloons have been fired almost daily from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel, provoking Israeli retaliation. Palestinians strongly reject the US plan, seen as heavily favouring Israel.

Canberra fire downgraded as heatwave eases



A fire that threatened Canberra's southern suburbs was downgraded early yesterday, allowing firefighters to strengthen containment lines and protect residents. A state of emergency declared on Thursday was the first in the Australian Capital Territory, which includes Canberra and some surrounding townships, since 2003, when fires destroyed almost 500 homes. More than 80 fires are still burning across the New South Wales and Victoria. Storms are forecast to follow the heatwave, bringing rain that could help dampen fires but also carry the potential for wild weather, including flash flooding. At least 33 people have died and vast swaths of the country have been burned since September. SOURCE: AFP

Sovereignty comes first

Britain lays out tough stance for EU trade talks

REUTERS, London

Britain laid out a tough opening stance for future talks with the European Union yesterday, saying it would set its own agenda rather than meeting the bloc's rules to ensure frictionless trade.

After officially leaving the EU on Friday, Britain now must negotiate future trade relations with the bloc, to take effect when a standstill transition period expires at the end of the year.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government has been quick to send Brussels a message before trade talks begin in March: Brexit, for him, means sovereignty trumps the economy.

The EU has repeatedly told Britain the level of access to its lucrative single market will depend on how far London agrees to adhere to a "level playing field" -- shorthand for rules on environmental standards, labour regulations and state aid.

But despite the appeals of many

businesses for the government to ensure goods can trade across borders freely, ministers have been briefing companies that they should adjust to a new future when Britain will not adhere to EU rules.

Johnson, according to sources close to him, has taken last year's election, which handed him a large majority in parliament, as approval for his policy of putting Britain's right to set its own rules above the demands of businesses. He will outline that approach in a speech today.

"We are taking back control of our laws, so we are not going to have high alignment with the EU, legislative alignment with their rules," foreign minister Dominic Raab told Sky News. "But we'll want to cooperate and we expect the EU to follow through on their commitment to a Canada-style free trade agreement."

"There are only two likely outcomes in negotiation - a free trade deal like Canada or a looser arrangement like Australia - and we are happy to pursue both," a government source in London said.



University students carry posters depicting the newly appointed Prime Minister of Iraq, Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi, to express their rejection of him, during ongoing anti-government protests in Baghdad, Iraq, yesterday. Despite appeal from the new PM, protesters have rejected him as a stooge of the political elite. PHOTO: REUTERS

Stampede at Tanzania church kills 20

AFP, Dar Es Salaam

At least 20 people in Tanzania were trampled to death at an open-air evangelical Christian church service in the north of the country, officials said yesterday.

Government official Kipki Warioba, District Commissioner in the northern town of Moshi, said he feared the number of dead could still rise from the accident, which took place on Saturday afternoon.

"So far, 20 people have died, but the death toll could increase as there were also wounded," Warioba told AFP.

At least 16 others were injured in the crush, he said.

The tragedy happened when a crowd of worshippers was attending a prayer ceremony on Saturday led by the popular preacher, Boniface Mwamposa, who heads the Arise and Shine Ministry Tanzania.

The stampede occurred when Mwamposa, who calls himself the "Apostle", poured what he said was holy oil on the ground and the crowd surged toward to touch it in the hope of being cured of sickness, witnesses said.

"It was horrible, people trampled on mercilessly, jostling each other with elbows," said a witness, Peter Kilewo.

"It was like the preacher had thrown bundles of dollars about... and there were all these deaths!"

Mwamposa, the preacher, fled the scene after the stampede. Tanzanian police chief Simon Sirro, who confirmed the toll of 20 dead, spoke on national television yesterday morning in an appeal to Mwamposa to hand himself in for questioning.

'Only Hindus will prevail'

Man held after another firing at anti-CAA protest site in India

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Two days after a teenager shot a protester in the Indian capital, another firing has been reported Saturday at an all-women sit-in site in the city against a controversial new citizenship law.

Police said no protester was wounded after a man fired a gun at New Delhi's Shaheen Bagh, the epicentre of nationwide protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which critics say violates India's secular constitution and is anti-Muslim.

Witnesses told Al Jazeera the suspect shouted "Jai Shri Ram" (Hail Lord Ram, a Hindu deity) as he fired "two to three shots" in the Muslim-dominated area where hundreds of women have been protesting since mid-December.

Mobile videos shot after the arrest of the suspect, identified by the police as Kapil Gujjar, showed him shouting: "Only Hindus will prevail in this country. This country is ours."

Mohammad Akhlaq, who was present at Shaheen Bagh when the shooting happened, told Al Jazeera: "We first thought it was a tyre burst. But later some women came running and said a man fired towards the protest site."



Other witnesses at Shaheen Bagh told Al Jazeera the firing created panic, with some women leaving the protest site after they heard the gunshots. They later returned to continue their sit-in.

A similar incident happened on Thursday when a 17-year-old attacker fired at a protest rally outside New Delhi's Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) university as police officers stood behind him.

Thursday's shooting, which took place barely two kilometres (1.24 miles) from Shaheen Bagh, wounded a JMI student from Indian-administered Kashmir. Dramatic photos and videos of the man brandishing a single-barrel gun and shouting slogans at the protesters went viral on Indian social media.

The teenage suspect was arrested and is being interrogated by New Delhi's police.

The two shootings came just days after India's minister of state for finance, Anurag Thakur, encouraged supporters at a state election rally in New Delhi to chant slogans, calling for "traitors to be shot".

Thakur's statement drew a reprimand from India's election commission ahead of state assembly elections in the capital.

Two jawans, 7 people hurt in attack in J&K

PTI, Srinagar

Two Indian security force jawans and seven civilians were injured in a grenade attack by militants on CRPF personnel in Lal Chowk area of Srinagar yesterday, police said.

The militants hurled a grenade on the CRPF personnel posted on duty near Pratap Park in busy Lal Chowk area of the city. The nine injured persons were shifted to a hospital.

The loud explosion caused panic among the people, especially those who had come to the weekly flea market, the official said.

In a similar incident, a 16-year-old boy was injured last month when terrorists threw a grenade at CRPF troops in old Srinagar, news agency ANI had reported.

Offer asylum to China Uighurs

Pompeo to Central Asian countries

AFP, Nur-Sultan

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo yesterday called on countries to offer asylum to ethnic minorities fleeing China's troubled Xinjiang region during a visit to oil-rich Kazakhstan -- a country that borders the region.

"We ask simply for them to provide safe refuge and asylum for those seeking to flee China," Pompeo said at a press appearance with Kazakh foreign minister Mukhtar Tleuberdi.

"Protect human dignity, just do what is right," Pompeo said.

Pompeo was meeting top officials in ex-Soviet Kazakhstan as he rounds off a five-nation tour in two countries where Russia and China enjoy privileged interests.

His visit to the Kazakh capital Nur-Sultan also saw him meet with Kazakhs who say their family members are detained in Xinjiang, where over a million ethnic Uighurs, Kazakhs and other minorities are believed to have been incarcerated as part of an unprecedented security crackdown in the region.

Kazakhstan has allowed several ethnic Kazakhs of Chinese citizenship who fled the region to stay in the country, but has not given any of them asylum -- a reluctance local activists attribute to Chinese pressure.