

NEWSIN brief

Storm causes travel disruption in Europe

AFP, London

Hundreds of flights and train services were cancelled across northwest Europe yesterday as Storm Ciara swept in packing powerful winds after lashing Britain and Ireland, where tens of thousands of homes were left without power.

Sinai militants kill, wound 7 soldiers

AFP, Cairo

Militants killed and wounded seven Egyptian soldiers in restive North Sinai on Sunday, Egypt's military said. The army said it "foiled" an attack on security facilities, "killing 10 terrorists and destroying a four-wheel drive used by the terrorist elements."

10 killed as India bus hits power line

AFP, New Delhi

At least 10 people in India were killed when their bus made contact with a roadside power line and caught fire, officials said late Sunday. The accident occurred in the eastern state of Odisha, near Mandarajpur, when part of the bus carrying about 40 passengers ignited after touching an 11-kilovolt power line.



Demonstrators react as they are stopped by police during a protest against a new citizenship law outside the Jamia Millia Islamia university in New Delhi, yesterday.

Xi meets Wuhan patients

Urges more decisive measures to contain virus; 65 more infected aboard Japan cruise ship

AFP, Beijing

Chinese President Xi Jinping donned a face mask and had his temperature checked yesterday while visiting medical workers and patients affected by the deadly coronavirus that has killed more than 900 people.

The Chinese president, who has called the virus a "demon", made a rare visit Monday to meet frontline medical staff at a hospital treating infected patients.

Calling the situation at the virus epicentre "still very grave", Xi urged "more decisive measures" to contain the spread of the epidemic, said state broadcaster CCTV.

Xi has largely kept out of the public eye since the virus outbreak spiralled across the country from the epicentre in Hubei province to infect more than 40,000 people.

He appointed Premier Li Keqiang to lead a working group tackling the outbreak, and it was Li who visited ground zero in Wuhan last month.

The outbreak has prompted unprecedented action by the Chinese government, including

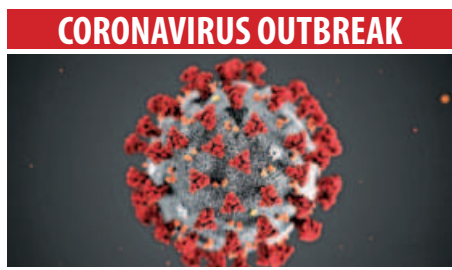
locking down entire cities in Hubei province as well as cutting transport links nationwide, closing tourist attractions and telling hundreds of millions of people to stay indoors.

The sweeping measures turned cities into ghost towns -- but there were some signs of normality returning yesterday.

Roads in Beijing and Shanghai had significantly more traffic and the southern city of Guangzhou said it would start to resume normal public transport. Many were encouraged to work from home and some employers simply delayed opening for another week.

Meanwhile, another 65 people aboard the quarantined Diamond Princess cruise ship moored off Japan have been diagnosed with novel coronavirus, the health ministry said yesterday, bringing the total number of known infections to 135.

The Diamond Princess has been in quarantine since arriving off the Japanese coast early last week after the virus was detected in a former passenger who got off the ship last month in Hong Kong.



CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

CLIMATE CHAOS IN AUSTRALIA

Heavy rain brings relief, new danger

REUTERS, Melbourne

Australian authorities issued evacuation orders as heavy rain lashed Sydney and the east coast of the state of New South Wales (NSW) yesterday, bringing chaos to the country's largest city while dousing bushfires that have raged since November.

Between 200 and 400 millimetres (7.9 to 15.8 inches) of rain drenched the Sydney area out to the Blue Mountains and farther south over the weekend, the Bureau of Meteorology said, which led to rivers flooding and forced more than 60 schools to shut yesterday.

The NSW State Emergency Service received over 2,700 calls for help overnight, with the number of calls since last Wednesday topping 10,000, SES spokesman Andrew Richards said.

The Bureau of Meteorology warned that heavy rain could lead to life-threatening flash flooding for the south coast of New South Wales and also said there could be wind gusts of more than 90 km per hour.

Thanks to the rain, the NSW Rural Fire Service on Sunday night declared that one of the state's worst bushfires, Currawon on the south coast, was finally out. There were still 33 fires burning as of yesterday morning in the state, but they were all at the lowest warning level of "advice" and mostly in southeastern areas where the rains were headed. The horrific fire season has killed 33 people and an estimated 1 billion native animals.

Mysterious bomb hoaxes plagues Russian cities

Moscovites are mystified by a flood of bomb hoaxes forcing the evacuation of courts, schools and malls while authorities appear unable to find the culprits even after months of disruption to public life. The warnings of planted bombs, all of them false, have been sent to numerous Russian cities, but particularly targeted the capital, where around 16 million live and work, with up to 1,000 threats per day.

'I'm here to assassinate President Donald Trump'

Police arrested a Brandon, Florida, man outside the White House on Saturday after he threatened to assassinate President Donald Trump. Roger Hedgpeth, 25, approached a US Secret Service police officer on patrol and said, "I am here to assassinate President Donald Trump," according to a DC Metropolitan Police Department arrest report obtained by CNN.

Iran satellite launch fails, a blow to space programme



Iran said it "successfully" launched a satellite but failed to put it into orbit, in a blow to its space programme that the US alleges is a cover for missile development. The attempted launch of the Zafar -- "Victory" in Farsi -- comes days before the 41st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution and crucial parliamentary elections in Iran. On Sunday, it launched the Zafar satellite at 7:15 pm (1545 GMT) but it fell short of reaching orbit, the defence ministry said.



Trump eyes to slash foreign aid by 21pc

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump was yesterday set to propose a 21% cut in foreign aid and slashes to social safety-net programs in his \$4.8 trillion budget proposal for fiscal 2021, according to senior administration officials.

The budget would spend money to fund infrastructure projects and defense, but would also raise funds by targeting \$2 trillion in savings from mandatory spending programs in the United States. It assumes revenues around \$3.7 trillion.

Trump's foreign aid proposal seeks \$44.1 billion in the upcoming fiscal year, compared with \$55.7 billion enacted in fiscal 2020, an administration official said.

The president's latest blueprint for administration spending proposals is unlikely to be passed by the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives, particularly in an election year.

Trump, who campaigned for the presidency in 2016 on a promise to build a wall along the US border with Mexico, will seek \$2 billion in funding for further construction on that project, substantially less than the \$8.6 billion he requested a year ago.

Thais mourn for shooting victims

AFP, Nakhon Ratchasima

Grieving relatives of 29 people murdered by a rogue soldier in Thailand held tearful Buddhist prayer ceremonies yesterday, as fresh details emerged of shoppers covering in terror while the gunman stalked the mall.

Holding portraits of their relatives and dabbing away tears, families of the victims arrived at a city morgue in Nakhon Ratchasima in the morning to carry home coffins bearing their dead.

The gunman Sergeant-Major Jakrapanth Thomma was shot dead by a commando unit Sunday morning, ending a rampage that left 29 dead and scores more wounded.

The killer started his killing spree on Saturday afternoon with weapons stolen from a barracks' arsenal, where he gunned down Mehta Letsiri, 22, who was guarding the depot.

After seizing the weapons, the shooter drove to a Buddhist temple, where blood splatters and bullet holes attested to the horrors that unfolded. The attacker then moved to the town centre mall, where a terrifying siege unfolded late Saturday.

Armed with automatic weapons, the gunman held out overnight as hundreds of shoppers sought refuge in toilets, storerooms and under tables -- staying silent or making a break for the exits when they could.

Flowers and messages of condolences piled up yesterday outside the bullet-riddled mall.



People attend a protest in support of broadcaster ABS-CBN in Manila, yesterday.

Philippines eyes shutting down top broadcaster

AFP, Manila

Philippine government lawyers yesterday moved to strip the nation's biggest media group of its operating franchise in what campaigners branded a fresh attack on press freedom under President Rodrigo Duterte.

Duterte has repeatedly pledged he would stop the broadcast operations of ABS-CBN, which drew his anger during his rise to power in the 2016 presidential election campaign.

The solicitor general's petition filed with the nation's top court alleges ABS-CBN violated provisions of its 25-year operating franchise.

The move comes as the broadcaster was working publicly and privately to convince lawmakers to renew its franchise, which expires March 30.

Early in his term Duterte accused the network of failing to air his 2016 campaign advertisements and not returning the payments, and has since singled it out for ire in his speeches.

ABS-CBN, whose news and entertainment shows reach tens of millions of Filipinos online and via TV and radio, said it has done nothing wrong.

Advocates said the government move was the latest attack on press freedom under Duterte, who has already tangled with a top newspaper and a website.

Journalist Maria Ressa faces years behind bars in a case that she and press advocates say was retaliation for the journalism of her website Rappler.

Rappler, which has published stories critical of Duterte's administration, is also battling a government closure effort.

RUSSIA-BACKED SYRIAN ASSAULT ON IDLIB

Tensions, death toll spike

Regime fires kill 5 Turkish soldiers, 29 civilians; nearly 700,000 displaced

AFP, Ankara

Tensions flared in Syria yesterday after five Turkish soldiers were killed by Syrian regime artillery fire in the northwestern province of Idlib, the last major rebel bastion.

Another five soldiers were wounded in the "intense assault that targeted our elements sent as reinforcement to the region with an aim to prevent clashes in Idlib, ensure our border security and stop migration and human tragedy," Turkey's defence ministry said in a statement.

The Turkish army retaliated, it added, "destroying targets."

This is the second such incident in a week after eight Turkish military personnel were killed in regime shelling in Idlib last Monday.

The latest attack is likely to further raise tensions between Ankara and Damascus. Ankara has previously warned Syria against any attacks on its posts.

It comes amid heightened bombardment by the regime and Russia which left 29 civilians dead in less than 24 hours. Six children were among nine civilians killed early yesterday in raids on the village of Abin Semaan, in Aleppo

province where Russian-backed regime forces have been waging a fierce offensive to retake a key highway, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Turkey and Russia have worked closely despite being on opposing sides of the war, and the two agreed previously on a deal to avert an offensive by Syrian government forces.

Under that deal, Turkey set up 12 observation posts in Idlib. Turkey has beefed up those positions in recent days by sending at least 350 vehicles with commandos backed by armoured vehicles.

But the regime supported by Moscow has intensified an assault against the last major rebel bastion, home to an estimated three million, for more than two months.

The UN yesterday said close to 700,000 people in northwest Syria have been displaced since December. Many of those have been forced to flee towards Turkey, which is already hosts over 3.5 million refugees.

Ankara fears a renewed surge of violence could cause a new flow to Turkey, which could be politically damaging to Erdogan at a time when Turks are facing economic hardship.

