

NEWSIN
brief

Trump to visit India
on February 24-25

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump will visit India, with stops in the capital New Delhi and the western state of Gujarat, from February 24-25, the White House announced Monday. Trump and First Lady Melania Trump will make the trip to “strengthen the United States-India strategic partnership,” the announcement said. The White House said that Trump and Modi talked by telephone over the weekend.

N Korea still importing
oil, cars, alcohol: UN

AFP, United Nations

North Korea, which has been hit by a series of UN sanctions, is illegally importing more and more oil and continues to bring in luxury cars and alcohol, according to an annual report delivered Monday to the UN Security Council. “The DPRK violates the resolutions through illicit import of petroleum,” the report said. North Korea has “increased procurement including through a notable increase in the number of these larger foreign-flagged tankers directly delivering to the DPRK on multiple occasions,” the experts said, without identifying their origin.

Attack on Kabul army
site kills at least 5

AFP, Kabul

A suicide attack targeting a military academy in the Afghan capital killed at least five people early yesterday, the first major assault in the city in months. No group immediately claimed responsibility for the dawn attack. The interior ministry, however, said six people died -- two civilians and four military personnel -- after the suicide bomber detonated the device at around 7:00 am near the Marshal Fahim military academy.



Wounded Syrian children receive treatment at a makeshift hospital following a reported airstrike on the industrial area of Idlib, in Northern Syria, yesterday.

PHOTO:
AFP

Syria-Turkey tensions boil

Regime helicopter downed as Ankara threatens Damascus

AFP, Qaminas

Tensions escalated yesterday between Syria's regime and rebel-backer Turkey as a Syrian military helicopter was shot down and Ankara warned of a “heavy price” for any attacks on its forces. The new flare-up, a day after regime shelling killed five Turkish troops, came as government forces battling rebels in northwestern Syria took full control of a key highway linking the country's four largest cities.

The advance marked another step in President Bashar al-Assad's campaign to retake Syria's last rebel-held pocket, where nearly 700,000 civilians have fled violence since December in the largest exodus since the start of the war, according to UN.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the regime helicopter was hit by a rocket fired by Turkish forces, though Ankara did not claim responsibility. Two pilots were killed.

Erdogan said Turkish troops would continue to respond to Syrian regime

attacks.

“The more they attack... our soldiers, they will pay a very, very heavy price,” he told a televised ceremony in Ankara.

Ankara said on Monday it had “neutralised” 101 Syria regime troops in response to the deadly artillery attack on its position in Idlib, but

Regime force recaptures key M5 motorway

UN says Idlib displacement worst since start of war

that information could not be verified independently. Neither the Observatory nor Damascus reported any casualties among Syrian troops on Monday. Erdogan said he would reveal his next steps today.

He spoke after Syria regime forces retook full control of the key M5 highway from jihadists and allied rebels in the northwest of the country

for the first time since 2012, the Observatory said. That highway links the capital Damascus to the second city of Aleppo through the cities of Homs and Hama, and has been a key target for the government as it seeks to rekindle a moribund economy.

In Idlib city yesterday, Syrian air force strikes killed at least 12 civilians, the Observatory said. Half of those killed in the strikes were minors, according to the monitor.

Turkey, which already hosts more than three million refugees, fears a massive fresh influx from Syria and has kept its border closed to the newly displaced people in Idlib.

The Idlib region is a dead-end for hundreds of thousands of people who were forced to flee or were evacuated from formerly rebel-held territory elsewhere in Syria. Some have moved four times or more since the start of the war but there is nowhere for them to go after Idlib, with the Turkish border to the north and government forces in the other three directions.

CONSEQUENCES OF CLIMATE CHANGE

UN fund seeks 1.7b to tackle hunger, poverty

AFP, Paris

A major spending boost is needed to bolster agriculture in the fight against hunger, poverty, and other consequences of climate change, the head of the UN's International Fund for Agricultural Development told AFP.

“We are seeking a 1.7 billion dollar contribution,” from member states to cover 2022 to 2024, IFAD president Gilbert Houngbo told AFP on Monday.

“The needs have considerably increased,” with the rise in hunger around the world, he added, explaining what would amount to a 54 percent jump in the budget for the UN agency tackling poverty and hunger in rural areas of developing countries.

The appeal would be made at the fund's board meeting in Rome this week. The fund solicited \$1.2 billion in voluntary contributions from member states in 2017 and received \$1.1 billion.

G7 and Nordic countries have been

the main donors, stumping up three-quarters of the budget, followed by China, the Netherlands, India, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, Ireland and Austria.

IFAD hopes to double its impact by 2030 and help more than 250 million people living in rural areas to increase their income by at least 20 percent.

The number of people suffering from malnutrition has been on the increase since 2015 and reached 820 million in 2018.

Hunger and small-scale agriculture are intricately linked as 80 percent of the poor live in rural areas and small farmers account for half of the food by calories produced in the world. With climate change making it more difficult to farm in some areas, there is added pressure for migration.

The World Bank estimates that climate change could push more than 100 million people into poverty, with half of that due to its impact on agriculture such as inadequate rain and lower yields.

Half-a-million insect species face extinction

AFP, Paris

Half of the one million animal and plant species on Earth facing extinction are insects, and their disappearance could be catastrophic for humankind, scientists have said in a “warning to humanity”.

“The current insect extinction crisis is deeply worrying,” said Pedro Cardoso, a biologist at the Finnish Museum of Natural History and lead author of a review study published Monday.

“Yet, what we know is only the tip of the iceberg,” he told AFP.

The disappearance of bugs that fly, crawl, burrow, jump and walk on water is part of a gathering mass extinction event, only the sixth in the last half-billion years. The last one was 66 million years ago, when an errant space rock wiped out land-based dinosaurs and most other life forms.

This time we are to blame.

“Human activity is responsible for almost all insect population declines and extinctions,” Cardoso told AFP. The main drivers are dwindling and degraded habitat, followed by pollutants -- especially insecticides -- and invasive species. Over-exploitation -- more than 2,000 species of insects are part of the human diet -- and climate change are also taking a toll.

The decline of butterflies, beetles, ants, bees, wasps, flies, crickets and dragonflies has consequences far beyond their own demise.

“With insect extinction, we lose much more than species,” Cardoso said. “Many insect species are vital providers of services that are irreplaceable,” including pollination, nutrient cycling and pest control.

These “ecosystem services” are worth \$57 billion (52 billion euros) a year in the United States alone, earlier research has found. Globally, crops that require insect pollination have an economic value of at least \$235-577 billion annually, according to the UN biodiversity science panel, known as IPBES.



An Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) supporter wears a mask of party chief Arvind Kejriwal while celebrating with others at the party headquarters in New Delhi, yesterday. According to election commission, AAP is set to win 63 seats out of 70 seats in Delhi assembly polls.

PHOTO: AFP

UK PM Johnson plans post-Brexit reshuffle

Prime Minister Boris Johnson will shake up his top team tomorrow in his first cabinet reshuffle since taking Britain out of the European Union, his office said yesterday. The Conservative leader had held off from a ministerial revamp in the wake of the December election, preferring instead to wait until Brexit was delivered on January 31. After his comfortable election win, Johnson was said to be preparing a major reorganisation of government departments and to slash the number of ministers at his top table to try to streamline decision-making. But something more modest is expected this week, with key figures expected to stay.

Over 100 US troops suffered brain injury in Iran attack

More than 100 US troops sustained “mild” traumatic brain injury, far more than originally announced, when Iran launched missiles at their base in Iraq last month, the Department of Defense said Monday. “As of today, 109 US service members have been diagnosed with mild traumatic brain injury, or mTBI, an increase of 45 since the previous report,” the Pentagon said in a statement. Of them, 76 have returned to duty while most of the rest are still undergoing evaluation and treatment. President Donald Trump had initially said that no Americans were injured in the strike on the Ain al-Asad base in western Iraq on the night of January 7-8. Iran fired ballistic missiles at the base to retaliate for the January 3 US drone strike that killed top Iranian general Qasem Soleimani while he was in Baghdad.

Rouhani taunts US



Iran yesterday taunted the United States on the 41st anniversary of the ouster of its ally the shah, as huge crowds gathered to mark the historic occasion. Waving national and Shia flags and holding portraits of the founder of the Islamic republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the crowds braved sub-zero temperatures in Tehran's iconic Azadi Square. “It is unbearable for the United States to accept the victory of a great nation and that a superpower has been driven out of this land,” President Hassan Rouhani told the gathering. “It is natural for them to have dreamed, for 41 years, of returning to this land, because they know that we are one of the most powerful countries” in the Middle East, he added. The countries have been enemies since 1979, when the government of the US-backed shah was toppled and the Islamic republic was established.

Outbreak may be over by April

Govt advisor sees outbreak in China peaking in Feb, then easing

REUTERS, GUANGZHOU

The coronavirus outbreak is hitting a peak in China this month and may be over by April, the government's senior medical adviser said yesterday, in the latest assessment of an epidemic that has rattled the world.

In an interview with Reuters, Zhong Nanshan, an 83-year-old epidemiologist who won fame for combating the SARS epidemic in 2003, shed tears about the doctor Li Wenliang who died last week after being reprimanded for raising the alarm.

But Zhong was optimistic the new outbreak would soon slow, with the number of new cases already declining in some places. The peak should come in middle or late February, followed by a plateau and decrease, Zhong said, basing the forecast on mathematical modelling, recent events and government action.

“I hope this outbreak or this event may be over in something like April,” he said in a hospital run by Guangzhou Medical University, where 11 coronavirus patients were being treated.

Though his comments may soothe some global anxiety over the coronavirus - which has killed more than 1,000 people and seen more than 40,000 cases, almost all in China - Zhong's previous forecast of an earlier peak turned

out to be premature.

“We don't know why it's so contagious, so that's a big problem,” he said, and the United States' and others' entry ban on Chinese was an over-reaction. Global, apolitical cooperation was crucial, Zhong said.

He said there was a gradual reduction in new cases in the southern province of Guangdong where he is based, and also in Zhejiang and elsewhere. “So that's good news for us.”

With China taking unprecedented measures to seal infected regions and limit transmission routes, Zhong applauded the government for locking down Wuhan, the city at the epicentre which he said lost control of the virus at an early stage.

Zhong said uncertainties remained about how the coronavirus was infecting patients, if it can spread via faeces and whether so-called “superspreaders” were helping transmit the disease.

Wearing masks outside contagion zones was not always necessary, he said, and the United States' and others' entry ban on Chinese was an over-reaction. Global, apolitical cooperation was crucial, Zhong said.

“I think maybe we should be going closer, I mean in particular our colleagues and scientists, and have more cooperation,” he said. “We're just dealing with the disease - nothing to do with the political, nothing.”

CORONAVIRUS



US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2020: DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY

All at stake as New Hampshire votes

AFP, Durham

US Democrats braced for a volatile, consequential primary yesterday in New Hampshire as leftist Bernie Sanders and youthful challenger Pete Buttigieg fight for pole position in the race for who faces Donald Trump in November's presidential election.

Tensions have risen steadily as Granite Staters, notoriously independent-minded and astute voters, headed to polls across the northeastern battleground with just 1.3 million people -- but plays a hugely influential role in the American political landscape.

New Hampshire hosts the nation's first primary, eight days after Iowa kicked off the nomination process, and it could narrow the Democratic field of 11 current candidates.

Firing up his supporters with promises to slash inequalities and overhaul the US healthcare system, the 78-year-old Sanders maintained a healthy lead in New Hampshire, where he won the 2016 primary by a landslide. The RealClearPolitics polling average showed Sanders at 28.8 percent in New Hampshire, trailed on 22.3 percent by moderate rival Buttigieg, whose Iowa win boosted his presidential bid.

A late surge also lifted the fortunes of Amy Klobuchar, with two new polls showing the senator from Minnesota jumping past heavyweights Biden and Elizabeth Warren to notch 14 percent support.

Calling it a “dramatic shift,” a new Quinnipiac University poll showed Sanders overtaking Biden for the first time in the national nomination race, attracting 25 percent support against 17 percent for Biden -- shaken by a fourth-place finish in Iowa.