

NEWS IN brief

Indonesia won't bring home IS recruits

AFP, Bogor

Indonesia has said it will not bring home nearly 700 hundred nationals who joined the Islamic State group in the Middle East over security fears, but added it would still consider repatriating young children. The issue sharply divided the world's biggest Muslim majority nation with its president saying this week that he was not in favour of bringing back suspected militants and their families who went to Syria and other countries to fight for the group's now crumbled caliphate.

Guaido returns home

AFP, Caracas

Opposition leader Juan Guaido returned to Venezuela on Tuesday after an international support-building tour and called on the people in the crisis-wracked nation to keep pushing back against President Nicolas Maduro. After his trip abroad -- including a meeting with US President Donald Trump, who threatened to "smash" Maduro's regime -- Guaido promised new sanctions "against the dictatorship" would be coming soon, and called for renewed protests.

WHO to decide on Ebola

AFP, Geneva

UN health agency experts was to meet yesterday to decide whether the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo should still be considered a global health emergency, following a sharp decline in reported cases. The outbreak was first identified in August 2018 and has since killed more than 2,300 people in eastern DR Congo. WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on Tuesday said he was "encouraged" by an improvement in the situation, with only three cases reported in the past week.



An aerial view shows the village of Maaret al-Naasan in Syria's Idlib province yesterday following a weeks-long regime offensive against the country's last major rebel bastion. Syrian regime forces pushed on with their offensive in the country's northwest, securing areas along a key national highway they seized, as tensions spiralled with Turkey which supports rebel groups.

PHOTO: AFP

Trump's plan a gift to Israel

Abbas rejects ME proposal at UN, says US offers Palestinians 'Swiss cheese' state

REUTERS, New York

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, appearing before the United Nations Security Council, on Tuesday rejected US President Donald Trump's Middle East peace proposal as a gift to Israel and unacceptable to Palestinians.

Waving a copy of a map that the US plan envisions for a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine, Abbas said the state carved out for Palestinians looked like a fragmented "Swiss cheese."

In a setback for the Palestinians, a draft Security Council resolution circulated by Tunisia and Indonesia that would have implicitly criticized Trump's plan, including Israel's retention of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, was not put to a vote.

The text, which faced a near-certain US veto, did not go forward in part because it failed to garner the support needed by the Palestinians to isolate the



United States, two diplomats at the United Nations said. One said the draft, which the United States wanted to water down, attracted 11 or 12 votes in favor on the 15-member council.

Released on Jan 28, Trump's plan would recognize Israel's authority over West Bank Jewish settlements and require Palestinians meet a difficult series of conditions for a state, with its capital in a West Bank village east of Jerusalem.

"This is the state that they will give us," said Abbas. "It's like a Swiss cheese, really. Who among you will accept a similar state and similar conditions?"

Abbas urged Trump to disavow the plan and seek a return to negotiations based on existing UN

resolutions that call for a two-state solution based on pre-1967 border lines.

While Arab League foreign ministers on Feb 1 rejected the plan, three Gulf Arab states - Oman, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates - were represented at the White House announcement, suggesting they may be prioritizing ties with Washington and a shared hostility toward Iran over traditional Arab alliances.

Abbas said the deal is not an international partnership, but rather a proposal from one state supported by another state to be imposed on Palestinians.

In a show of support for Abbas, Ehud Olmert, a former Israeli prime minister who had claimed significant progress in talks with the Palestinians aimed at securing a final peace deal, later stood by him at a joint appearance.

A Feb 5-8 poll conducted in the West Bank and Gaza Strip by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found that 94% of Palestinians reject the plan.

Meanwhile, the UN has released a list of 112 companies with activities in Israeli settlements, which are considered illegal under international law, including Airbnb, Expedia and TripAdvisor.

Israeli officials fear the list could be used to boycott firms with ties to the Israeli settlements.

Israel ex-PM Olmert defiantly rallies behind Palestinian leader

UN identifies 112 firms linked to Israeli settlements

DEMOCRATIC RACE

Sanders wins in New Hampshire

AFP, Manchester

Bernie Sanders won New Hampshire's high-stakes Democratic primary on Tuesday, according to US network projections, leaving rivals including party stalwart Joe Biden in his wake as he staked his claim to challenge President Donald Trump in November.

Sanders, the flag-bearer for the party's progressive wing, had 26 percent of votes with most of the count complete in the northeastern state, where he routed Hillary Clinton in 2016.

"Let me take this opportunity to thank the people of New Hampshire for a great victory tonight," Sanders told cheering supporters.

"This victory here is the beginning of the end for Donald Trump," the senator from neighboring Vermont added as he raised the roof with his rallying cry for fairer taxes and health care reform.

Indiana ex-mayor Pete Buttigieg finished in second place at 24 percent as he readied for the more difficult battlegrounds ahead.

Midwestern moderate Amy Klobuchar maintained a late surge to place third on about 20 percent, while liberal Elizabeth Warren finished in fourth at about nine percent. Biden languished in fifth with just over eight percent.

Buoied by his strong start, Sanders has emerged as the national Democratic frontrunner with 25 percent support, according to a new Quinnipiac University poll that described his surge as a "dramatic shift." Biden has skidded from 26 to 17 percent support since the end of January.



Democratic presidential hopeful Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders arrives to speak at a Primary Night event at the SNHU Field House in Manchester, New Hampshire on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan jails 'mastermind' of 2008 Mumbai terror attack

AFP, Lahore

The alleged mastermind of a deadly attack on India's financial capital over a decade ago has been jailed in Pakistan for nearly six years on separate terror charges, his lawyer said Wednesday.

Hafiz Saeed was found guilty of "being part of a banned terrorist outfit" and for "having illegal property", his lawyer Imran Gill told AFP.

He is wanted in India for allegedly planning the shocking 2008 attack in Mumbai, when 10 Islamist militants armed with assault rifles, hand grenades and other weapons killed 166 people and injured hundreds more.

It took the authorities three days to regain full control of the city.

Lawyer Gill gave no details about Saeed's conviction apart from saying he would be kept in prison in the eastern city of Lahore.

The firebrand cleric -- declared a global terrorist by the United States and United Nations, and with a \$10 million bounty on his head -- is the leader of the Jamaat-ud-Dawa Islamist charity.



Its militant wing Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) is believed by Washington and Delhi to be responsible for the Mumbai attacks.

India has long said there is evidence that "official agencies" in Pakistan were involved in plotting the attack -- a charge Islamabad denies.

Saeed has denied involvement, but has spent years in and out of varying forms of detention in Pakistan, sometimes under house arrest, on various charges.

For the most part he has been free to move at will around the country, enraging India which has repeatedly called for his prosecution.

The US Foreign Affairs Committee also noted then that Saeed had been arrested and released eight times since 2001.

Islamabad, which is widely believed to use jihadist groups such as LeT as proxies against India, has long been under international pressure to crack down on militancy.

Saeed's jailing comes as Pakistan faces potential blacklisting by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) -- an anti-money-laundering monitor based in Paris -- for failing to combat terror financing.

4 survive 32 days adrift in Pacific

AFP, Wellington

Four people survived a month adrift in the Pacific by eating coconuts and drinking rainwater in an ordeal that claimed the lives of eight of their companions, including a baby, reports said yesterday.

The group, from Papua New Guinea's Bougainville province, are believed to have spent 32 days at sea.

The Solomon Star News reported the group set off from Bougainville on December 22, intending to celebrate Christmas in the Carteret Islands, about 100 kilometres (62 miles) away.

But survivor Dominic Stally said their small boat capsized and a number of the group drowned.

The rest managed to right the vessel but there were further fatalities as they floated in the remote waters at the mercy of powerful ocean currents.

Stally said a number of fishing vessels passed nearby without noticing them until they were finally picked up on January 23 off New Caledonia after drifting some 2,000 kilometres.

The Star News said the survivors comprised two men, a woman and a girl aged about 12.

They were dropped off in Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands, last Saturday and were discharged into the care of Papua New Guinea's High Commissioner John Balavu after receiving treatment for dehydration.

Turkey will strike Syria forces 'everywhere'

Warns Erdogan, slams Moscow over Idlib 'massacre'

AFP, Istanbul

Turkey will strike Syrian regime forces "everywhere" if its soldiers come under renewed attack, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned yesterday, while also accusing Damascus ally Russia of committing "massacres" in Idlib.

Erdogan's threats follow direct clashes between Turkish and the Syrian regime forces over the past 10 days, which have also strained his relations with Moscow, the key backer of President Bashar al-Assad.

Turkey has beefed up its positions in Idlib -- the last rebel bastion in Syria -- with hundreds of vehicles carrying commandos, howitzers, and soldiers crossing the border over the last few days.

"I hereby declare that we will strike regime forces everywhere from now on regardless of the Sochi deal if any tiny bit of harm comes to our soldiers at observation posts or elsewhere," Erdogan told a meeting of his ruling party in parliament.

He said 14 Turks have been killed and 45 wounded by regime shelling in Idlib since February 3.

Assad's forces, backed by Russian air strikes, have pressed ahead with an offensive to retake the province from rebel groups despite the 2018 Sochi ceasefire deal agreed between Turkey and Russia.

The offensive has killed hundreds of civilians since December, and sent hundreds of thousands fleeing for safety in harsh winter conditions.

'Notable progress' in US-Taliban talks

The US and the Taliban yesterday appeared closer to sealing a deal for an American troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, after Afghan President Ashraf Ghani reported "notable progress" in negotiations and a senior Taliban official said violence could be slashed in the coming days. Washington and the insurgents have been locked in grueling talks that have stretched over more than a year for an agreement that would see the US pull thousands of troops from Afghanistan in a bid to end America's longest war. In return, the Taliban would provide various security guarantees and launch eventual talks with the Kabul government. Citing Afghan and US officials, the New York Times reported that US President Donald Trump had given conditional approval to a deal with the Taliban.

Australia's 'national shame'

A pledge to close the health and wellbeing gap between Aboriginal and other Australians is failing, the government admitted yesterday, describing the situation as a source of "national shame". Prime Minister Scott Morrison said just two of seven key targets to improve the lives of Australia's indigenous people were on track -- unchanged from last year. More Aboriginal children were enrolled in early education and graduating from high school than ever before, he said, but attendance rates were still lagging behind other groups. Other targets to halve the gap in child mortality, literacy, life expectancy, and unemployment rates were not being met. Morrison called the failure to give indigenous children equal opportunities to other Australian kids "a national truth and a national shame".

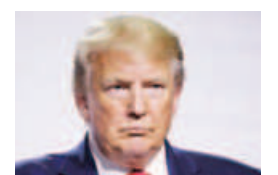
Pope voices 'outrage' over Amazon exploitation



Pope Francis yesterday pleaded for social justice and environmental respect for the Amazon basin, but failed to recommend the controversial idea of married priests. In a highly anticipated text, Francis exhorted the faithful to "feel outrage" over exploitation of the indigenous and destruction of land devastated by illegal mining and deforestation. Notably absent in his text, however, was mention of priestly marriage, a controversial suggestion made by Amazon bishops during a three-week synod on the region last October as a way to increase the number of priests who could perform Mass in remote areas. Francis' papacy has been marked by passionate defence of the world's marginalised people, whether the poor, migrants or prisoners, and his Amazon text focused on a "history of suffering" by the region's local populations.

SOURCE: AFP

ROGER STONE CASE



Up roar after Justice Dept's intervention

REUTERS, Washington

Under pressure from President Donald Trump, the US Justice Department on Tuesday abruptly moved to seek a shorter prison sentence for veteran Republican operative and long-time Trump adviser and friend Roger Stone, and all four prosecutors quit the case after the highly unusual reversal.

Senior department officials - hours after Trump complained on Twitter that Stone was being treated unfairly - overrode the sentencing recommendation of seven to nine years made on Monday by the federal prosecutors who secured Stone's conviction. Stone was found guilty in November on seven counts of lying to Congress, obstruction and witness tampering.

In a new court filing, a Justice Department official who had not previously worked on the case called that recommendation "excessive and unwarranted" and said the department would not make a formal sentencing recommendation.

Democrats blasted the department's shift in the high-profile case involving Stone, whose friendship with Trump dates back decades. Stone's trial arose from former Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation that detailed extensive Russian interference in the 2016 election to benefit Trump's candidacy.