

NEWSIN
brief

15 killed in Haiti orphanage fire

AFP, Kenscoff

Fifteen children were killed when a fire swept through an unlicensed orphanage outside Haiti’s capital Port-au-Prince, a judge told AFP on Friday. Two children died in the blaze and 13 others died at a hospital as a result of smoke inhalation. The building housed about 66 children, she said. According to one of the children, the fire was ignited around 9:00pm by candles that the young occupants had lit in their rooms because the electricity was out. An investigation is underway to determine the exact cause of the fire and identify the people responsible for the orphanage.

Saudi fighter jet crashes in Yemen

AFP, Riyadh

A Saudi fighter jet crashed in conflict-torn Yemen, the Riyadh-led military coalition said yesterday, as the Huthi rebels said they downed the plane. The Tornado aircraft came down on Friday in northern Al-Jawf province during an operation to support Yemeni government forces, the coalition said in a statement carried by the official Saudi Press Agency. The coalition did not specify the fate of the crew or the cause of the crash.

Protester shot dead in Iraqi capital

AFP, Baghdad

A demonstrator was shot dead near the Iraqi capital’s main protest camp by unidentified attackers using a gun silencer, medics said yesterday, as police reported a spate of activist abductions. Around 550 people have been killed since the anti-government movement erupted in October and around 30,000 more have been wounded.

Pompeo tells China, Russia as Europe, US spar over direction of Western policy

REUTERS, Munich

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo yesterday defended his nation’s global role despite misgivings in Europe, vowing that Western values would prevail over Russian and Chinese desires for “empire”.

Seeking to reassure Europeans troubled by US President Donald Trump’s “America first” rhetoric, his ambivalence over the Nato military alliance and tariffs on European goods, Pompeo said there was no crisis in Western leadership.

“I’m happy to report that the death of the transatlantic alliance is grossly exaggerated. The West is winning, and we’re winning together,” he said in a speech at the Munich Security Conference, listing US steps to protect liberal democracies.

Pompeo was, in part, responding to German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who on Friday accused the United States, Russia and China of making the world more dangerous.

French President Emmanuel Macron told the conference of international leaders, lawmakers and diplomats he was not surprised by Steinmeier’s speech and had liked it.

Pompeo rejects claims that US has quit global role

Macron says Europe can’t be US’s junior partner

China foreign minister says US criticism ‘lies’



“There is a weakening of the West,” the French leader said.

“There’s an American policy that started several years ago and not just under this administration that includes a certain kind of withdrawal, of a rethink of its relationship with Europe.”

“We cannot be the United States’ junior partner,” Macron said, adding that while he supported Nato, Europe needed to be able to tackle threats in its neighbourhood and at times act independently of Washington.

“I’m impatient for European solutions,” Macron said.

Taking the stage later, China’s State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi dismissed US criticism of his country as

“lies”.

“All these accusations against China are lies, not based on facts,” Wang told the Munich Security Conference. “But if we replace the subject of the lie from China to America, maybe those lies become facts.”

Trump’s decision to pull out of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, as well as the Paris climate accord, have undermined European priorities, while moves such as recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital have weakened European diplomacy, envoys say.

Pompeo defended the US strategy, saying Europe, Japan and other American allies were united on China, Iran and Russia, despite “tactical differences.”

Citing Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, cyber threats in Iran and economic coercion by China, Pompeo said those countries were still “desiring empires” and destabilising the rules-based international system.

Noting that Russian intervention in Western democracies is on the rise, Macron said the West’s policy of defiance towards Moscow in recent years had failed and, as nobody wanted to confront it directly, the only option was to have a closer dialogue to resolve differences.

US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, speaking immediately after Pompeo, focused his remarks solely on China, accusing Beijing of a “nefarious strategy” through telecommunications firm Huawei.

“It is essential that we as an international community wake up to the challenges presented by Chinese manipulation of the long-standing international rules-based order,” Esper said.

He said it was not too late for Britain, which last month said it would allow Huawei a limited role in building its 5G networks, to take “two steps back,” but added he still needed to asses London’s decision.



A man holds a poster during a protest against a new citizenship law in Mumbai, India. Thousands of people, including a large number of women, yesterday protested against the contentious citizenship law CAA, the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the National Population Register (NPR) at Mumbai’s iconic Azad Maidan.

AIR STRIKE IN AFGHANISTAN
8 civilians killed

AFP, Jalalabad

An air strike in Afghanistan has killed at least eight civilians, officials said yesterday, as the war-torn country prepares for a “reduction in violence” under a deal between Taliban militants and the United States.

The incident took place in the eastern province of Nangarhar on Friday when a vehicle carrying civilians was struck, according to Ataullah Khogyani, a spokesman for the provincial governor.

“The target of the attack was Taliban militants who wanted to establish checkpoints on the road, but unfortunately civilians were hit,” he told AFP, putting the death toll at eight.

Talib Khan, a relative of the dead, told AFP the victims had been driving home from a picnic when their truck was hit, killing everyone inside.

Another relative, Shah Mir, 70, said: “No other breadwinner is left in my house, all my three sons were killed. I have a dozen grandchildren, I don’t know how to bring them up.”

It was not immediately clear who bombed the vehicle, but the US and Afghan militaries are the only forces in Afghanistan conducting air strikes.

A US military spokesman said they were “looking into the incident” and an Afghan defence ministry spokesman said they had launched an investigation.

The strike comes after US Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Thursday an agreement with the Taliban was in place for a “conditions-based” seven-day reduction in violence.

The move is part of a long quest to forge a deal that could eventually lead to a comprehensive ceasefire.

Reversal of nuke breaches possible if Europe acts

Says Iran FM

AFP, Munich

Iran would be willing to move back towards the 2015 nuclear deal if Europe provides “meaningful” economic benefits, the country’s foreign minister said Friday.

The European parties to the Iran nuclear deal -- Britain, France and Germany -- have been battling to save it since US President Donald Trump withdrew from it and reimposed tough sanctions on Tehran.

Iran has responded to the US pullout with a series of steps back from its own commitments under the deal, including by increasing uranium enrichment.

But Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said the Islamic republic could be willing to move back towards compliance -- under certain circumstances. “We have said that we are prepared to slow down



or reverse these measures commensurate with what Europe does,” Zarif told reporters at the Munich Security Conference.

“We will decide whether what Europe does is sufficient to slow down or to reverse some steps -- we have not even ruled out reversing some of the steps that we have taken.”

Europe has set up a special trading mechanism called Instex to try to enable legitimate humanitarian trade with Iran to offset some of the effects of US sanctions.

But it has yet to complete any transactions and the Iranian side does not think it is sufficient.

“We’re not talking about charity. We’re talking about Iranian rights and the rights of the Iranian people to receive the economic benefits,” Zarif said.

‘Dissent is a safety valve of democracy’

Indian judge warns against labelling dissent as anti-national

NDTV ONLINE

Calling dissent the “safety valve” of democracy, Indian Supreme Court judge Justice DY Chandrachud yesterday said “blanket labelling” of defiance as anti-national or anti-democratic strikes at the heart of the country’s commitment to protect constitutional values.

Justice Chandrachud added that use of state machinery to curb dissent instills fear, which violates the rule of law.

“The blanket labelling of dissent as anti-national or anti-democratic strikes at the heart of our commitment to protect constitutional values and the promotion of deliberative democracy,” Justice Chandrachud said during a lecture in Ahmedabad.

“Protecting dissent is but a reminder that while a democratically elected government offers us a legitimate tool for development

and social coordination, they can never claim a monopoly over the values and identities that define our plural society,” Justice Chandrachud added.

Justice Chandrachud’s comments came amid protests across the country over the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC).

“The destruction of spaces for questioning and dissent destroys the basis of all growth--political, economic, cultural and social. In this sense, dissent is a safety valve of democracy,” he said.

Justice Chandrachud said the “true test” of a democracy is its ability to ensure the creation and protection of spaces where every individual can voice their opinion without the fear of retribution.

“Suppression of intellect is the suppression of the conscience or the nation,” he said.

Convict the ‘predator’

Weinstein prosecutors urge jurors as trial nears end

AFP, New York

Harvey Weinstein was a “predator” who used his status as a powerful Hollywood producer to take advantage of the women he attacked, prosecutors said Friday as his sex crimes trial drew to a close.

The disgraced movie mogul, 67, faces life in prison if convicted of predatory sexual assault charges in the high-profile trial that marks a watershed moment in the #MeToo global reckoning against men abusing positions of power.

Weinstein believed he was “the master of his universe, and the witnesses here were really ants who he could step on without consequences,” said assistant district attorney Joan Illuzzi-Orbon in the final day of closing arguments.

“He had a surefire insurance policy: the witnesses were standing in line to get into his universe,” she added.

Weinstein, the first man accused of abuse in the #MeToo movement to

face a criminal trial, has been accused of sexual misconduct by more than 80 women. He denies the allegations against him.

Six women took the stand to say the ex-Miramax Films boss had sexually assaulted them, but the jury is considering charges related to just



two: ex-actress Jessica Mann and former production assistant Mimi Haley.

Mann says Weinstein raped her in March 2013, while Haley alleges he forcibly performed oral sex on her in July 2006.

On Thursday, defense attorney Donna Rotunno argued the women

had used sex with Weinstein to advance their careers, saying they only decided they had been assaulted after Weinstein became a global pariah when allegations against him ignited #MeToo in October 2017.

The trial has raised complicated issues surrounding consent and abuse of power for the jury of seven men and five women.

Under cross-examination, both Mann and Haley acknowledged at least one consensual sexual encounter with Weinstein after the alleged assaults.

The defense has also presented emails that appear to show Mann on friendly terms with Weinstein.

Jurors will begin deliberating Weinstein’s fate on Tuesday and must reach unanimous verdicts on each count. If they are unable, the judge may be forced to declare a mistrial. A split verdict is possible, where Weinstein is convicted of some charges and cleared of others.



I’m number 1 on Facebook, Modi number 2

Says Trump

THE STATESMAN/ANN

US President Donald Trump, ahead of his visit to India, claimed that Facebook has ranked him number one and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi number two, adding that it is a “great honour”.

“Great honor, I think? Mark Zuckerberg recently stated that ‘Donald J Trump is Number 1 on Facebook. Number 2 is Prime Minister Modi of India’. Actually, I am going to India in two weeks. Looking forward to it!” the tweet reads.

President Trump along with his wife Melania Trump will be on a two-day visit in India on February 24 and 25, during which they will visit Ahmedabad and New Delhi.

As per the reports, President Trump along with PM Modi are expected to give speeches at the newly built Motera stadium. Trump would inaugurate the stadium which is billed as the largest cricket stadium in the world.

The event is set to be witnessed by thousands of people in Ahmedabad.

There are multiple agreements and deals set to be tabled during the two days’ meeting between the two world leaders.

One of the notable agreements between the two leaders is of the poultry and dairy markets. As reported by news agency Reuters, India has offered to partially open its poultry and dairy markets in a bid for a limited trade deal during President Trump’s visit.

However, industry analysts are keeping a close watch on whether the trade disputes between the world’s largest democracies would be resolved during Trump’s visit or not.

TOUGH LAW AGAINST MISINFORMATION IN SINGAPORE

Anti-govt website ordered to warn readers of falsehoods

AFP, Singapore

Singapore yesterday ordered the Facebook page of an anti-government website to warn readers it regularly posts falsehoods, the first time authorities have taken such action under a tough law against misinformation.

The law gives ministers in the tightly-regulated city powers to order internet platforms to put warnings next to posts they deem false, but activists and tech giants like Facebook fear it could be used to curb free speech.

Authorities have used it several times to force corrections on individual online posts, but this is the first time since the law came into effect in October that an entity is being directed to warn its readers that it is a regular promoter of falsehoods.

A government statement said the information minister had invoked the law to name the Facebook page of The States Times Review (STR) as a “declared online location” with effect from Sunday.

This means it is required to carry a notice warning readers that it “has a history of communicating falsehoods”, the statement said.

The notice aims to prompt readers to do additional fact-checking when accessing the page.

According to the statement, STR “has repeatedly conveyed numerous falsehoods” since November last year, three of which had been ordered corrected under the law.

And in the past weeks, its Facebook page also spread falsehoods about the coronavirus situation in Singapore, it said.

The website is run by Alex Tan, who says he is an Australian citizen based overseas.

He has defied the correction orders, prompting the Singapore government to ask Facebook to do so. Facebook has complied.

In a statement in November after posting a correction, Facebook said: “As it is early days of the law coming into effect, we hope the Singapore Government’s assurances that it will not impact free expression will lead to a measured and transparent approach to implementation.”

The increased use of the law comes as speculation mounts that elections could be called within months, although a weak opposition is seen as no match for the long-ruling People’s Action Party.



Syrian regime forces remove land mines on the highway connecting the northern city of Aleppo and the capital Damascus in an area formerly held by rebel fighters, at about 20kms from Aleppo, yesterday. Turkey yesterday said it had fulfilled its responsibilities in Syria’s Idlib region in line with de-escalation agreements with Russia and Iran, warning it would take military action in the area if diplomatic efforts with Moscow fail.

PHOTO: AFP