

NEWS IN brief

Turkey ramps up Gulen crackdown

REUTERS, Istanbul

Turkish prosecutors yesterday ordered the arrest of nearly 700 people, including military and justice ministry personnel, state media said, intensifying moves against a network accused of orchestrating a 2016 coup attempt, in which about 250 people were killed. The latest operations marked an escalation by police against alleged supporters of Gulen, a one-time ally of President Tayyip Erdogan who subsequently became his arch foe.

Bushfire crisis hit 75pc of Australians: survey

AFP, Sydney

Three in four Australians -- almost 18 million people -- were affected by the country's deadly bushfire crisis, according to a survey released yesterday that also pointed to plummeting support for the government and for coal projects. The Australian National University study showed the vast human scale of the five-month crisis, which killed more than 30 people. Scientists say the fires were fuelled by drought and unfavourable weather conditions that were exacerbated by climate change.

Pak cop killed as blast hits polio vaccine team

AFP, Peshawar

A policeman was killed and two others wounded yesterday by a roadside bomb aimed at polio vaccination workers in Pakistan's restive northwestern city of Dera Ismail Khan. The attack came a day after Islamabad launched a nationwide anti-polio drive. There was no immediate claim of responsibility, but the Taliban and other militants have targeted polio vaccinators in the past.



A man who has displayed mild symptoms of the COVID-19 coronavirus uses a laptop at an exhibition centre converted into a hospital in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province. Photo was taken on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Why China detains Uighurs?

Leaked data show growing a beard or applying for a passport is enough to put someone behind bars

AGENCIES

Chinese authorities are monitoring the Uighur population's everyday movements and behaviour and sending people to internment camps over facial hair and having too many babies, leaked documents have revealed.

In one case, authorities sent a Uighur man to a "re-education camp" and monitored 15 of his relatives after he grew a long beard.

Officials concluded that the man's facial hair and his wife's use of a veil indicated they had been "infected with religious and extremist ideas", it is claimed.

The 137-page document handed to German news channel DW and the BBC is said to list 311 people who were sent off for "re-education" in the county of Karakax in 2017 and 2018.

Reasons given for detention include fasting, growing a beard, applying for a passport and breaching

CHINA'S 'WAR ON TERROR'



official birth policy by having too many children.

It lists personal details of more than 3,000 individuals from the far western region of Xinjiang, including the full names and identification numbers of more than 1,800 family members, neighbours and friends connected to the 311 sent to the Karakax camp.

Children are also said to feature on

the list.

It provides details of downloaded videos and internet chat messages, high-tech surveillance with facial recognition cameras and the widespread use of spies, house visits and interrogations.

"The level of detail is overwhelming," Rian Thum, an expert at the University of Nottingham, told DW. "I think it is interesting to imagine that these things

exist across Xinjiang. The data that is out there must be staggering."

While most of the detainees were later approved for release - albeit under constant surveillance - dozens were forced to work in factories, according to the documents.

Up to two million Uighur Muslims and other ethnic minorities have been detained in camps as part of a supposed counterterrorism campaign since 2014.

China has insisted it is running what it calls "vocational training" centres to combat extremism in the region. However, former detainees have alleged inmates are subjected to torture, medical experiments and gang rape.

Last month it emerged that more than 100 Uighur graveyards had been demolished by the authorities in what human rights groups described as an escalation of the communist regime's campaign to destroy the Muslim minority's culture.



Bezos launches \$10b fund to combat climate change

Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos has pledged \$10 billion to a new fund to tackle climate change but activists have urged the world's richest man to first clean up the e-commerce giant's own lacklustre environmental record. The e-commerce tycoon said the Bezos Earth Fund would "fund scientists, activists, NGOs -- any effort that offers a real possibility to help preserve and protect the natural world." Hundreds of Amazon employees last month signed a blog criticizing the online retail giant's climate policies and demanding it do more to tackle climate change. Amazon has been accused of creating vast amounts of waste from the packaging it uses for doorstep deliveries, as well as for the greenhouse gas emissions from huge vehicle fleets.

Gunman kills ex-wife at Bangkok shopping mall

A man killed his ex-wife and wounded another person at a shopping centre in Bangkok yesterday, police said, just 10 days after a mass shooting at another mall in Thailand's northeast. The gunman fled the Century The Movie Plaza mall, near the Victory Monument in the capital and is still on the run, police said. He had gone into a beauty clinic at the mall where his ex-wife worked and opened fire, killing her and wounding a bystander, Colonel Kissan Pattanachareon said. On Feb. 8 and 9, a soldier killed at least a dozen people at the Terminal 21 shopping centre in the city of Nakhon Ratchasima. He had earlier killed his commanding officer, other soldiers at his base and several people at a Buddhist temple.

Ghani wins Afghan polls



Ashraf Ghani has secured a second term as president of Afghanistan, according to final results of the September 28, 2019 poll released yesterday by the country's election commission. Ashraf Ghani won 50.64 percent of the votes, election commission chief Hava Alam Nuristani told a press conference in Kabul. The results had been delayed for nearly five months after allegations of vote-rigging from Ghani's main rival, Afghanistan's Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, forced a recount. Earlier this week, Abdullah's team said they would not accept fraudulent results.

SOURCE: AFP

Voting in Iran's election 'a religious duty': Khamenei

REUTERS, Dubai

Voting in a parliamentary election this week is "a religious duty" for Iranians, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said yesterday, days before the vote seen as a referendum on the clerical establishment's popularity.

Iran's hardline Guardian Council vetting body has rejected some 6,850 moderate or conservative hopefuls in favour of hardliners from among the 14,000 applicants seeking to contest the Feb. 21 vote. About a third of lawmakers have also been barred from standing again.

"Today, voting is not only a revolutionary and national responsibility, but it is also a religious duty," Khamenei was quoted as saying by state television.

Due to the large number of disqualified candidates, hardliners loyal to Khamenei are likely to dominate the 290-seat parliament.

Friday's vote will have no major influence on foreign affairs or Iran's nuclear policy, which is determined by Khamenei.

"Elections are a means to strengthen the country ... A weak parliament will have long-term effects ... a weak parliament will negatively affect our fight against enemies," he said. "The election will neutralise American's ill intentions ... the vote is the Islamic Republic's prestige."

Tensions have been high between Iran and the United States since 2018, when US President Donald Trump exited a 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and world powers, reimposing sanctions that have battered the country's economy.

In retaliation, Iran has gradually rolled back its commitments under the deal.

Confrontation with America, economic hardship and an airline tragedy have battered Iranians' confidence in their leaders, posing a potential problem for the authorities in a parliamentary election this week.

Campaigning will end tomorrow, on the eve of the vote, for which 58 million Iranians are eligible to vote out of a population of 83 million.



United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres poses for a photograph while visiting the holy Sikh temple Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur, Pakistan, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

India's Trump fans gear up for his arrival

REUTERS, Konney/New Delhi

Bussa Krishna first began worshipping Donald Trump four years ago when the US president appeared to him a dream.

Since then, after a run of good fortune, the Indian real estate broker has transformed his modest home into a shrine to the US leader, who is due in India on Monday for a two-day visit.

"My love for him has transformed into reverence. That has given me immense happiness. Hence instead of praying to other gods, I started praying to him," Krishna told Reuters.

Krishna, who lives alone in a village in Telangana, has erected a life-size statue to Trump in his yard, while his walls are scrawled with the leader's name - to the annoyance of his extended family.

"I am facing difficulties because of my relatives," Krishna said. "They tell me that I am disgracing them in society. I told them that just like you believe and worship Shiva, I believe and worship Trump. Neither of us can stop the other from doing so."

Krishna is not the only Indian who reveres Trump.

In New Delhi, members of the Hindu Sena, a right-wing fringe group, have begun rehearsing a welcome song in his honour.

"We like Donald Trump because he openly spoke about India's feelings," Hindu Sena leader Vishnu Gupta told Reuters. "...He openly said that he would eliminate Islamic terrorism from its roots, that is why I am his fan."

Trump is making his first visit to India. Trump's itinerary starts on Feb 24 in the western city of Ahmedabad, where he will visit the former home of independence hero Mahatma and address an estimated 125,000 people at a rally. He is due in the capital the following day.

'Babies freezing to death'

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Out in the open in freezing weather, Mustafa Hamadi and his family settled into their makeshift tent in the village of Killi, in the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib - their second displacement in less than a year. The sub-zero temperatures on the night of February 11 kept them awake so, just before midnight, Mustafa moved the gas heater inside the tent.

By morning, Mustafa, his wife Amoun, their 12-year-old daughter Huda and their granddaughter Hoor, who was just three years old, were all found dead of carbon monoxide poisoning.

According to Nizar Hamadi, the tent - constructed of metal pipes and nylon sheets - had no proper ventilation and did little to insulate Mustafa's family from the cold.

This is one of the many stories that are becoming common in the refugee camps in Syria.

Since intensifying a major Russia-backed offensive in December, regime air strikes have hit targets indiscriminately. Hospitals and displaced persons camps were

not spared. UN officials said relief agencies were overwhelmed by the humanitarian crisis as nearly one million civilians, most of them women and children, had fled towards the Turkish border in bitter winter conditions to escape the onslaught.

In addition to the indiscriminate bombing of civilians, the lack of adequate shelter has resulted in

RUSSIA-BACKED SYRIA OFFENSIVE IN IDLIB



82,000 people living in the freezing open air, settling under trees or in snowy fields, the UN said.

According to figures from the UN humanitarian body OCHA, 36 percent of newly displaced families are housed by relatives or find rental accommodation, while 17 percent found refuge in already overcrowded camps. At least 15 percent sought shelter in unfinished buildings and 12 percent are still "looking for shelter".

Women and children - who comprise more than 80 percent of the newly displaced people - are again among those who suffer most.

Describing the situation in Syria as having reached a "horrifying new level", Mark Lowcock, the UN head of humanitarian affairs and emergency relief, said in a statement on Monday that the displaced are "traumatised" and "babies and small children are dying because of the cold."

In Kalbeet camp a few days ago, a five-month-old baby, Areej Majid al-Hmeidi, froze to death, according to Abu Anwar, an official and resident of the facility near the Syrian-Turkish border

CORONAVIRUS LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

Nearly 1,900 dead. More than 500 infected on a cruise ship. An activist arrested for criticising the handling of the epidemic. Here are the latest developments in China's coronavirus crisis:

NEARLY 1,900 DEAD

Mainland China's official death toll hits 1,868. More than 72,300 people have now been infected there and 900 cases recorded around the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) however, says that epidemic outside China is only affecting a "tiny" proportion of the population and the virus has a mortality rate of around two percent. With drugmakers racing to develop a vaccine, Chinese health officials urge patients who have recovered from the coronavirus to donate blood so that plasma can be extracted to treat others who are critically ill.

CRUISE SHIP OFF JAPAN

The number of people infected aboard a cruise ship quarantined off Japan since February 3 leaps to 542 - by far the biggest cluster outside the epicentre in China. Australia, Britain, Canada, Hong Kong and South Korea have said they will follow the United States in evacuating their citizens from the ship.

APPLE PESSIMISTIC

The iPhone maker Apple announces it will miss its March quarter revenue forecast and global iPhone supplies will

fall, triggering a fall in Asian stock markets. Dependent on Chinese components and with a big Chinese market, Apple has been hit by travel bans and mass quarantines inside China forcing factories to suspend operations and shops to close.

ACTIVIST ARRESTED

Amnesty International says Chinese police have arrested a prominent activist who criticised President Xi Jinping's handling of the coronavirus epidemic while in hiding. "Medical supplies are tight, hospitals are filled with patients, and a large number of infected people have no way to be diagnosed," activist Xu Zhiyong wrote in a February 4 article. "It's a mess."

INDIA BARS CHINESE WRESTLERS

India bans Chinese wrestlers from this week's Asian Championships in New Delhi because of the coronavirus outbreak. The International Exhibition of Inventions in Geneva is also postponed until September due to travel restrictions, as a third of the inventions were to come from mainland China and another third from Hong Kong.

SOURCE: AFP

