

Iran reports first  
coronavirus cases

AFP, Tehran

Two people in Iran tested positive yesterday for the deadly new coronavirus, the health ministry said, in the Islamic republic's first cases of the disease. Kianoush Jahanpour, a ministry spokesman, said the cases were detected in the holy city of Qom, south of the Iranian capital. The United Arab Emirates was the first country in the Middle East to report cases of coronavirus last month.

Old is gold

AFP, Washington

A helmet used by French soldiers in World War I provided better protection from overhead blasts than a modern American model, according to a US university study. Biomedical engineers from North Carolina's Duke University tested the performance of several models of World War I helmet and the US Advanced Combat Helmet by subjecting them to shock waves. "We were surprised to find that the 100-year-old helmets performed just as well as modern ones," said study author Joost Op 't Eynde. "Indeed, some historical helmets performed better in some respects," Op 't Eynde said.

Netanyahu's trial  
to start March 17

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Benjamin Netanyahu's corruption trial will open on March 17, just two weeks after the embattled leader tries to secure re-election, officials said Tuesday. Netanyahu has been charged with bribery, fraud and breach of trust. Israeli law says that government ministers who are subject to criminal prosecution must resign. But this does not apply to the prime minister, meaning no legal barriers are likely to prevent Netanyahu, 70, from remaining in office.

# Drowning the sound of death with laughter

AFP, Sarmada

In Syria's Idlib, there's no escaping the war, so Abdullah al-Mohammed says the only way he found to reassure his daughter Salwa was to turn the shelling into a game.

A video in which she laughs every time an explosion goes off was widely shared on social media in recent days as a heartening but grim reminder of Idlib residents' daily lives.

"Is it a plane or is it a mortar?", he asks, as a whizzing sound grows in the background.

"A mortar," the three-year-old answers. "When it comes, we will laugh."

In another video, Salwa is standing on her father's lap in their living room and her hearty laugh is set off by the sinister thunder of a bomb dropped by a warplane.

"Tell me Salwa, what did the plane do," the father asks his daughter.

"The plane came and I laughed a lot. The plane just makes us laugh, it tells us: Laugh at me, laugh at me," she says.

Mohammed explains that when Salwa was still 12 months old, she started crying when she heard fireworks in the neighbourhood.

He had to explain that it was only the sound of children playing for the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr. "After that, whatever was coming to us from the air, I would take out my phone and tell her: 'Come, let's laugh together, these are children playing for Eid,'" he says.

"I try not to show her that what is happening as a bad thing but rather show it as something funny," he explains.

"One day, she will know that this is a sound of death but by then, she will have understood who we are and what our story is," Mohammed says.

The north of the province of Idlib is a dead end for hundreds of thousands of civilians displaced from other former rebel bastions across Syria.

It has been described by aid groups as the world's largest de facto open-air displacement camp.

Hundreds of people, many of them children, have been killed in recent weeks as pro-regime bombardment spares nothing, from homes to hospitals.

According to the United Nations, 900,000 people have been forced to flee their homes and shelters since December alone. More than half of the displaced are children and at least seven of them have died from the cold and the bad living conditions.



NEW EAST JERUSALEM SETTLEMENT

## Israel plans to build 9,000 more homes

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel has developed plans to build 9,000 settler homes in annexed east Jerusalem, the first such project in the city in more than 20 years, watchdog Peace Now said Tuesday.

Details of the plan emerged a day after Israel's transport ministry approved a controversial proposal to extend a train line from Tel Aviv into Jerusalem's flashpoint Old City.

Peace Now said the housing ministry had a week ago submitted plans to Jerusalem's Municipality to build the settlement units on the site of the former Atarot airport, between two Palestinian neighbourhoods.

It said final approval of the project could take years.

But if built, it would drive "a wedge in the heart of the Palestinian urban continuity between Ramallah and East Jerusalem, thus preventing the establishment of a viable Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem."

It would be the first new settlement in east Jerusalem since a previous government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu built the Har Homa settlement near Bethlehem in 1997, Peace Now said.

More than 600,000 Jewish settlers live in the occupied West Bank and annexed east Jerusalem, in communities considered illegal under international law.

Peace now said the Atarot plan "also includes the demolition of dozens of Palestinian residential units that were built in the area without permits throughout the years."

A Middle East peace plan unveiled last month by US President Donald Trump gave a green light for Israel to declare sovereignty over all of Jerusalem as well as settlements and other territory in the West Bank.

The Trump proposal has been rejected by the Palestinians, who demand east Jerusalem as the capital of their state.



Demonstrators hold placards as they wave Indian national flags during a protest organised by various Muslim organisations and opposition parties against India's new citizenship law, in Chennai, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



POINT-BASED IMMIGRATION SYSTEM

## UK eyes high-skilled workers

REUTERS, London

Britain will prioritise access for high-skilled workers from around the world in its post-Brexit points-based immigration system, the government said on Tuesday, setting out its plans to put an end to a reliance on "cheap labour from Europe".

Concern over the impact of high levels of immigration from the European Union was one of the key drivers behind Britain's 2016 vote to leave the bloc and the government has said it plans to bring overall migration numbers down.

The new system, in place from Jan 1, 2021, will assign points for specific skills, qualifications, salaries or professions and only give visas to those who have enough points. It will treat EU and non-EU citizens the same.

It will mark a sea change for businesses who have grown used to having access to a large pool of EU workers, particularly since 2004 when the accession of several former communist states in central and eastern Europe saw a big influx of migrants coming to Britain to work.

"We have got a number of routes through the points-based immigration scheme that will enable people to come here with the right kind of skills that can support our country and our economy," interior minister Priti Patel said.

"We need to shift the focus of our economy away from reliance on cheap labour from Europe and instead concentrate on investment in technology and automation. Employers will need to adjust," the government said in a policy document.

The Home Office said it would follow a recommendation made last month by the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC), an independent body which advises the government, to lower the minimum general salary threshold for skilled migrants to 25,600 pounds (\$33,330) a year, from 30,000 pounds.

Skilled workers will need to meet criteria including the ability to speak English and will need to have a job offer.

# US, China escalate media spat

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday ordered three reporters from American newspaper the Wall Street Journal to leave the country over what Beijing deemed a racist headline, in one of the harshest moves against foreign media in years.

The expulsion came as Beijing also slammed Washington's decision to tighten rules on Chinese state media organisations in the United States, calling the move "unreasonable and unacceptable".

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said the Journal op-ed -- titled "China is the Real Sick Man of Asia" -- had a "racially discriminatory" and "sensational" headline, and slammed the newspaper for not issuing an official apology.

The Journal reported that deputy bureau chief Josh Chin and reporter Chao Deng, both US nationals, as well as reporter Philip Wen, an Australian, had been ordered to leave the country in five

Beijing expels WSJ reporters over 'racist' headline over coronavirus outbreak

US to tighten rules on China state media over 'propaganda'

Pompeo, in Africa, tells leaders not to fall for China's 'empty promises'



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo arrives in Saudi Arabia yesterday.

days.

The three journalists are in the Wall Street Journal's news section, which is not linked to the editorial and opinion section.

The op-ed, written by Bard College professor Walter Russell Mead, criticised the Chinese government's initial response to the new coronavirus outbreak -- calling the Wuhan city government at the virus epicentre "secretive and self-serving", while dismissing national efforts as ineffective.

The phrase "sick man of Asia" originally referred to China in the

late 19th and early 20th century, when it was exploited by foreign powers during a period sometimes called the country's "century of humiliation".

The February 3 piece "slandered the efforts of the Chinese government and the Chinese people to fight the epidemic", said Geng.

The new coronavirus epidemic has killed over 2,000 people in China and infected more than 74,000, and has spread to at least two dozen countries.

The expulsions come a day after

the United States angered China for classifying five state media outlets, including Xinhua news agency and the China Global Television Network, as foreign missions, with State Department officials saying they were part of Beijing's growing "propaganda" apparatus.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo yesterday closed a three-nation Africa tour with a thinly-veiled swipe at China as he talked up Washington's ability to stimulate growth and entrepreneurship on the continent.

"Countries should be wary of authoritarian regimes with empty promises. They breed corruption, dependency," Pompeo said in a speech to diplomats and business leaders at the UN's Economic Commission for Africa in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

"They run the risk that the prosperity and sovereignty and progress that Africa so needs and desperately wants won't happen."

CORONAVIRUS

## WHO declares 'progress'

AFP, Cairo

The World Health Organization yesterday hailed "tremendous progress" in the fight against the deadly new coronavirus since it emerged in China in December.

"We are making tremendous progress in a short period of time ... trends are very encouraging but we are not at a turning point yet," said Richard Brennan, WHO's regional emergency director, at a press conference in Cairo.

In response to Chinese efforts to contain the virus, he said that Beijing "has really thrown its weight behind the outbreak" and that reports of concealing the severity of the disease are "frankly unwarranted".

# 'He has his limits'

## Report says US attorney gen may quit over Trump tweets

REUTERS, Washington

US Attorney General William Barr is considering resigning over President Donald Trump's tweets about Justice Department investigations, a source familiar with the situation told Reuters on Tuesday.

Barr has told people close to Trump about his concerns, but it was not immediately clear if Barr had told Trump directly, the Washington Post added in a report.

"He has his limits," the newspaper quoted one person familiar with Barr's thinking as saying.

Barr may be sharing his position with people close to Trump in hopes the president gets the message and stops tweeting about the Justice Department's criminal investigations, the Post said.

The White House and the Justice Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the Post report.

Trump said on Tuesday he had total confidence in Barr, who last week said in an interview that Trump's tweeting habit had made it impossible for him to do his job.



background commentary" and that it was "time to stop the tweeting about Department of Justice criminal cases."

While Trump offered words of support for Barr, he also spoke enthusiastically about tweeting. "Social media for me has been very important because it gives me a voice," he said.