Drowning the sound of death with laughter

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

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

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

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

NEW EAST JERUSALEM SETTLEMENT

Israel plans to build

9,000 more homes

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

Peace Now said the housing ministry had a week ago

ministry approved a controversial proposal to extend a train

submitted plans to Jerusalem's Municipality to build the settlement units on the site of the former Atarot airport,

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

It would be the first new settlement in east Jerusalem

More than 600,000 Jewish settlers live in the occupied

Peace now said the Atarot plan "also includes the

A Middle East peace plan unveiled last month by US

The Trump proposal has been rejected by the Palestinians,

since a previous government of Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu built the Har Homa settlement near Bethlehem

West Bank and annexed east Jerusalem, in communities

demolition of dozens of Palestinian residential units that

were built in the area without permits throughout the years."

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.

Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem.

line from Tel Aviv into Jerusalem's flashpoint Old City.

between two Palestinian neighbourhoods.

considered illegal under international law.

in 1997, Peace Now said.

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

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.

Russia warns Turkey after Erdogan vows Idlib ops

Aid groups say tens of thousands of lives at stake as they have nowhere else to go

Turkey and Russia exchanged warnings yesterday after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened an "imminent" operation in Syria to end the regime's brutal assault on the last rebel enclave.

Syrian aid workers called urgently for a ceasefire and international help for nearly a million people fleeing the regime onslaught in the country's northwestern Idlib province -- the biggest wave of displaced civilians in the nine-year conflict.

Turkey, supporter of some rebel groups in Idlib, has been pushing for a renewed ceasefire in talks with Russia, which backs the Syrian regime. Ankara is eager to prevent another flood of refugees into its territory adding to the 3.7 million Syrians it already hosts.

The Syrian NGO Alliance said displaced people are "escaping in search of safety only to die from extreme weather conditions and lack of available resources".

Erdogan said talks with Moscow over the past fortnight had so far failed to achieve the desired result" and warned that Turkey would launch an offensive into Syria unless Damascus pulled its forces back by the end of the month.

He called for Syrian forces to retreat behind Turkey's military posts in Idlib, which were set up under a 2018 deal with Russia designed to hold off a regime advance.

The Kremlin quickly responded to Erdogan's threat, warning that any operation against Syrian

forces would be "the worst scenario". With the Russian-backed offensive, Syrian troops have reconquered swathes of Idlib and retaken the key M5 highway connecting the country's four largest cities as well as the entire surroundings of Aleppo city for the first time since 2012.

Iran reports first coronavirus cases

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-yearold 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, remaining in office.



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.

who demand east Jerusalem as the capital of their state.

POINT-BASED IMMIGRATION SYSTEM

UK eyes highskilled workers

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

China yesterday ordered three reporters from 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 Washington's slammed decision to tighten rules on Chinese state media organisations in the United States, calling the move unreasonable and unacceptable".

ministry foreign Chinese 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

situation told Reuters on Tuesday.

directly, the Washington Post

newspaper quoted one person

familiar with Barr's thinking as

"He has his limits," the

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

US Attorney General William Barr is considering resigning

over President Donald Trump's tweets about Justice

Department investigations, a source familiar with the

Barr has told people close to Trump about his concerns,

The White House and the Justice Department did not

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.

immediately respond to a request for comment on the

but it was not immediately clear if Barr had told Trump

REUTERS, Washington

added in a report.

saying.

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.

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 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

'He has his limits'

Report says US attorney gen may quit over Trump tweets

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

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

"I do make his job harder ... I do agree with that,"

Last week senior Justice Department officials

withdrew an earlier sentencing recommendation for

longtime Trump friend Roger Stone, who was found

guilty in November of seven counts of lying to Congress,

spoke enthusiastically about tweeting. "Social media for

me has been very important because it gives me a voice,"

department.

prompting upheaval within the

department officials have now

called for Barr to resign.

judge presiding over it.

More than 1,000 former

Trump has used Twitter to

attack the four prosecutors who

had argued the case as well as the

Barr said in an ABC Interview

Trump told reporters before boarding Air Force One. "The

attorney general is a man with great integrity."

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

The World Health hailed "tremendous progress" in the fight coronavirus since it emerged in China in December.

"We are making tremendous progress in trends are very encouraging but we are not at a turning Brennan, WHO's regional

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".

Lanka says will not honour **UN pledge on war probe**

Sri Lanka Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa SOURCE: AFP





a short period of time ... point yet," said Richard emergency director, at a

press conference in Cairo. on Thursday that he could not do his job "with a constant background commentary" and that it was "time to stop the tweeting about Department of Justice criminal While Trump offered words of support for Barr, he also



such as Facebook and Twitter to quickly remove the offending content. In future, the Silicon Valley giants will also have to report certain types of illegal posts to the federal police, who will be able to pass on actionable data to prosecutors. Neo-Nazi propaganda or plans to commit a terrorist attack, or other crimes would be covered under such rules. Social media platforms that refuse to cooperate will face fines of up to 50 million euros. Berlin also wants to toughen potential sentences.

Germany to tighten screws

on online hate speech With the danger growing from far-right

Libya's UN-backed govt halts participation in Geneva talks

Libya's unity government announced late Tuesday it would halt its participation in UN talks aimed at brokering a lasting ceasefire in the war-torn country where a fragile truce has been repeatedly violated. The pull-out came after a barrage of rocket fire hit a port in the capital Tripoli -- the target of a months-long operation by eastern military commander Khalifa Haftar to oust the Government of National Accord (GNA). The port strikes were the latest violation of a tenuous truce that came into effect in January, brokered by Haftarbacker Russia and Turkey, which supports the UN-recognised government in Tripoli.



yesterday said the country was withdrawing from a 2015 United Nations resolution investigating alleged war crimes. Rajapaksa was president when Sri Lankan troops defeated Tamil Tiger querrillas in 2009, but rights groups accused the army of killing at least 40,000 Tamil civilians in the final months of the conflict. His brother Gotabaya, who is now president, was defence secretary at the time. Rajapaksa said Washington's recent decision to ban current Sri Lanka army chief Shavendra Silva from visiting the US was because Colombo had signed up to the resolution. Before winning the presidency, Gotabaya had pledged he would not honour the previous government's commitments to