

NEWSIN
brief

Australian train
derails killing two

AFP, Melbourne

A passenger train derailed killing two people in Australia yesterday, with medics saying many more were being assessed for injuries. Emergency services said the train travelling from Melbourne to Sydney came off the tracks near the town of Wallan. Police confirmed that two people had died at the scene and Ambulance Victoria said “one person is being airlifted to Melbourne.” The incident is believed to have occurred shortly before 7:45 pm.

19 children among
dead in Yemen raids

AFP, Sanaa

Nineteen children were among at least 31 civilians killed in Saudi-led coalition’s air strikes on rebel-held northern Yemen last week, the United Nations said yesterday. “UNICEF is sad to confirm that the recent attack in Al-Jawf, north of Yemen, on February 15, took the lives of 19 children (eight boys and 11 girls) and injured another 18 (nine boys and another nine girls),” the UN children’s agency said in a statement. Saturday’s air strikes came after the Iran-aligned rebels claimed to have shot down an aircraft of the Saudi-led coalition supporting the government.

China, Asean to meet
at coronavirus summit

AFP, Vientiane

China’s foreign minister was set to meet his Southeast Asian peers in Laos yesterday for crisis talks over the coronavirus which has seeded panic and constricted economies dependent on the flow of goods and tourists. Wang Yi will hold talks with counterparts from the 10 Southeast Asian (Asean) countries in Vientiane in a hastily-convened meeting over the health scare.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (C) announces the plan to build a new neighborhood in the Israeli settlement Har Homa (background), in Jerusalem, yesterday.

PHOTO:
AFP

EXPANSION OF EAST JERUSALEM SETTLEMENT

Israel plans to build
3,000 more homes

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced plans yesterday to build thousands of new homes for Jewish settlers in annexed east Jerusalem, a project unveiled less than two weeks before a general election.

“I have huge news today -- we’re adding another 2,200 units to Har Homa,” Netanyahu said in a video message posted by his office.

The contentious Har Homa community was first built in 1997, during a previous Netanyahu government.

The prime minister said he had approved that initial construction “despite objections from the entire world” and estimated that Har Homa’s population would grow from 40,000 to 50,000 when the new units were completed.

Netanyahu also announced approval to build a new settlement with several thousands homes in Givat Hamatos, next to the mainly Palestinian east Jerusalem neighbourhood of Beit Safafa.

The new community will include 3,000 homes for Jewish residents and 1,000 “for the Arab residents of Beit Safafa”, Netanyahu said.

Watchdog Peace Now called the Givat Hamatos project “a severe blow to the two-state solution,” as it would interrupt “territorial continuity between Bethlehem and east Jerusalem.”

Israel seized east Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Day War. It later annexed it in a move never recognised by the international community.

Jewish settlements in east Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank are also considered illegal by most foreign governments and the United Nations.

Kashmir journalist
wins Kate Webb Prize

AFP, Hong Kong

Freelance reporter Ahmer Khan was named the winner of the 2019 Agence France-Presse Kate Webb Prize yesterday for his coverage on the ground in India-controlled Kashmir during Delhi’s lockdown of the region.

The award, named after one of AFP’s finest correspondents, recognises journalism by locally hired reporters in Asia operating in risky or difficult conditions.

Khan, 27, was honoured for a series of video and written reports that vividly illustrated the impact on locals in the Muslim-majority area following India’s decision to strip Kashmir of its semi-autonomous status in August.

The country’s Hindu-nationalist government imposed restrictions on movement and a communications blackout, virtually cutting the Himalayan region off from the outside world.

India insisted the move was aimed at bringing prosperity and peace to a region where tens of thousands of people have died in a decades-old separatist rebellion that India blames on arch rival Pakistan.

Despite curfews and a heavy security presence, Khan took to the streets with his camera to document the tensions, concerns and frustrations among the residents of Srinagar and other cities in Kashmir.

Unable to skirt the communications shutdown, he flew in and out of Delhi to file his stories.

The Kate Webb Prize, with a 3,000 euro (\$3,400) purse, honours journalists working in perilous or difficult conditions in Asia, and is named after a crusading AFP reporter who died in 2007 at the age of 64, after a career covering the world’s troublespots.

Gunman kills 9 in migrant bars

Police say suspect killed himself; Merkel denounces ‘poison’ of racism

REUTERS, Hanau

A gunman with suspected far-right links shot dead nine people, some of them migrants from Turkey, in an overnight rampage through a German city before killing himself, officials said.

Chancellor Angela Merkel condemned the attack on two shisha bars in Hanau, near Frankfurt. She told reporters it appeared to have been motivated by the “poison” of racism that was to blame for “too many crimes”, as Turkish officials called on her government to respond robustly.

The presumed killer was a 43-year-old German man who held a firearms licence and was a member of a gun club.

Police chased a car used to leave the scene of one shooting to its owner’s address, where they found his body and that of his 72-year-old mother, said Peter Beuth, interior minister of Hesse state, where Hanau is located.

Federal prosecutors said they had taken charge of the case due to its likely extremist motive, and newspaper Bild said the suspect had expressed far-right views in a written confession.

In shisha bars, customers share flavored tobacco from a communal hookah, or water pipe. In Western countries, they are often owned and operated by people from the Middle East or South Asia, where use of the hookah is a centuries-old tradition.

Turkey’s ambassador in Berlin, Ali Kemal Aydin, told state broadcaster TRT Haber that five Turkish nationals were among the dead.

The Confederation of the Communities of Kurdistan in Germany said several victims were Kurdish, expressing anger that Germany’s political leaders “are not resolutely opposing right-wing networks and right-wing terrorism.”

‘EXTREMIST’ ATTACK IN GERMANY



Germany, which is home to three million people of Turkish origin including one million ethnic Kurds, has seen its political landscape polarised in recent years, with a wave of immigration and a slowing economy helping to fuel support for extremist groups at both ends of the spectrum.

In October, an anti-Semitic gunman opened fire outside a German synagogue on Yom Kippur,

the holiest day of the Jewish year, and killed two people as he livestreamed his attack.

Authorities have banned some far-right groups endorsing violence, while Germany’s post-war centrist political consensus has been undermined by growing support for the anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, notably in the former-Communist eastern states.

Social Democrat Vice Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that, 75 years after the Nazi dictatorship, right-wing “terror” had returned. “We must defend our liberal democracy,” he posted on Twitter.

Police said there were no indications that other suspects were involved in the Hanau attack.

They said investigations into the identity of gunman and victims were ongoing and, Beuth said, whether any letters of confession had been written.

The minister said the suspect was in legal possession of weapons and belonged to a shooting club, and Bild said ammunition and gun magazines were found in the suspect’s vehicle.

French President Emmanuel Macron expressed his immense sadness over the attack and his support for Germany, according to a Twitter posting.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who is German, said in a tweet that she was deeply shocked by the shooting and that she mourned with the families and friends of the victims.

Trump conditionally ‘offered
pardon’ to Assange: report

AFP, London

US President Donald Trump promised to pardon WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange if he denied Russia leaked emails of his 2016 election rival’s campaign, a London court was told on Wednesday.

Assange’s lawyer Jennifer Robinson said in a document that Trump relayed the offer through former US Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, the UK’s domestic Press Association news agency reported.

The White House quickly issued a denial that Trump had dangled a pardon in exchange for help in the Russia controversy, which has cast a shadow over his first term in office.

“The president barely knows Dana Rohrabacher other than he’s an ex-congressman. He’s never spoken to him on this subject or almost any subject. It is a complete fabrication and a total lie,” Trump press secretary Stephanie Grisham said in a statement.

The revelation came at a case management hearing at Westminster Magistrates’ Court before Monday’s formal start of Washington’s

extradition request for him to face espionage charges. If found guilty in the United States, he could be jailed for 175 years.

Assange’s defence cited a statement from Robinson in which she said that Rohrabacher had been to see Assange and said “on instructions from the president, he was offering a pardon or some other way out, if Mr Assange... said Russia had nothing to do with the DNC leaks”.

District Judge Vanessa Baraitser said the evidence was admissible. Rohrabacher on Tuesday evening denied the allegations that he had offered Assange a deal.

US intelligence agencies have concluded Russia hacked into the computer servers of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) during Trump’s campaign against Democratic rival Hillary Clinton. WikiLeaks later published the emails, which proved politically damaging to Clinton, before the November 2016 vote.

Australian national Assange, 48, is facing 18 counts in the US -- 17 of them under the Espionage Act.



Restaurant workers wear protective clothing as they prepare food to sell on the street outside their restaurant in Beijing, yesterday. China yesterday touted a big drop in new virus infections as proof its epidemic control efforts are working, but the toll grew abroad with deaths in Japan and South Korea.

PHOTO: AFP

Australia
launches nat’l
inquiry into
bushfires

AFP, Sydney

Australia set up a national inquiry Thursday into its month-long bushfire crisis that affected three in four Australians and prompted widespread criticism of the government for its sluggish response to the blazes.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the vast scale of the fires -- which killed more than 30 people and destroyed thousands of homes -- required a new response from the bushfire-prone nation.

The Royal Commission inquiry will be tasked with finding ways to improve Australia’s preparedness, resilience and response to natural disasters, but has been criticised as an effort to put off tackling the problem.

Australia has seen dozens of inequests into the causes of bushfires and steps that could be taken to mitigate them, with mixed results.

Many measures from the dozens of inequests going back to the 1930s have still not been implemented.

The opposition Labor party accused Morrison of trying to “shift attention to the things that he thinks are politically convenient to talk about” rather than “actually fixing climate change and getting emissions under control.”

Morrison said panel would be asked to consider establishing new powers for the federal government to declare a national state of emergency, which he argued would allow a faster response to fires.

The conservative leader, who was criticised for his sluggish reaction to the months-long crisis, has defended his actions by pointing to regulations requiring states to formally request federal assistance.

Climate change could kill all
of Earth’s coral reefs by 2100

CNN ONLINE

Climate change could destroy almost all of Earth’s coral reef habitats by 2100, according to new research.

About 70-90% of all existing coral reefs are expected to disappear in the next 20 years due to warming oceans, acidic water and pollution, said scientists from the University of Hawaii Manoa, who presented their findings Monday at an ocean sciences conference.

“By 2100, it’s looking quite grim,” said Renee Setter, one of the University of Hawaii Manoa researchers, in a press release.

Some environmental activists and coral reef researchers have been working on coral restoration -- growing live corals in a lab, then placing them back into marine environments to try and revive dying reefs. But this may not be enough to save Earth’s reefs, the researchers warned.

The new study mapped areas of the ocean that would be best suited to this type of coral restoration, taking into consideration factors like acidity, water temperature, human population density and fishing frequency.

After examining the world’s oceans, they reached a somber conclusion: “By 2100, few to zero suitable coral

habitats will remain.”

Most parts of the ocean where coral reefs live today won’t be suitable by 2045 -- and the health and condition of these environments are only likely to get worse by 2100, according to the team’s simulations.

“Honestly, most sites are out,” Setter said in the press release. “With the way the world is changing, most of the coral reefs that we have today by 2100, like portions of Baja California and the Red Sea -- but even these aren’t ideal reef habitats because they’re close to rivers.”

The researchers warned that climate change was the big killer -- human pollution, while a problem, is only a small part of the larger threat.

“Trying to clean up the beaches is great and trying to combat pollution is fantastic. We need to continue those efforts,” Setter said.

With Iran facing growing isolation on the global stage and discontent at home over economic hardships, analysts have said the turnout will amount to a referendum on the leaders’ handling of the Islamic Republic’s political and economic crises.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has said voting is “a religious duty” but some prominent pro-reform politicians in Iran and activists abroad have called for a boycott of the election.

“We need to launch a strong boycott campaign to respond to the repressive policies of the system,” jailed human rights

Iran votes today in litmus
test for establishment

REUTERS, Dubai

Campaigning officially ended yesterday for Iran’s parliamentary election, a day before a vote seen as a litmus test of the popularity of the clerical establishment.

Street cleaners were out early stripping posters and banners off walls to clear the way for Iran’s first poll since US President Donald Trump pulled out of a nuclear deal with Tehran in 2018 and reimposed punishing sanctions.

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“We need to launch a strong boycott campaign to respond to the repressive policies of the system,” jailed human rights

activist Narges Mohammadi said from her cell in Zanjan city in a message posted on her husband’s Facebook page this week.

Iranian activists and opposition groups are distributing the Twitter hashtags #BoycottIranShamElections and #VOTENoVote widely on social media.

The vote to pick 290 lawmakers will have no major influence on foreign affairs or Iran’s nuclear policy, which is determined by Khamenei, whose hardline loyalists are likely to dominate the parliament.

The Guardian Council, which must approve candidates, has rejected about 6,850 moderate or leading conservative hopefuls in favor of hardliners from among 14,000 applicants seeking to contest Friday’s vote.

“We anticipate 50% of people will participate in the election,” Abbasali Kadkhodai, the spokesman for the Guardian Council, told a televised news conference on Wednesday.

Turnout was 62% in the 2016 parliamentary vote and 66% of people voted in 2012. About 58 million Iranians are eligible to vote.