

NEWS IN
brief

Syria summit set for March 5

AFP, Istanbul
Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Saturday said he would hold a summit with the leaders of Russia, France and Germany on March 5 to discuss the escalating violence in Syria's last rebel enclave of Idlib. The announcement comes a day after two European Union heavyweights France and Germany called for a four-party summit involving the Turkish and Russian leaders.

Palestinian killed near Gaza fence

AFP, Jerusalem
Israeli forces yesterday shot dead a Palestinian suspected of placing a bomb near the Gaza border, before extracting his body with a bulldozer, the army said. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad movement identified Sunday's fatality as Mohammed Al-Naem, 27, a member of their armed Al-Quds Brigade forces. The Israeli army meanwhile distributed footage of "the explosive device the terror squad placed this morning".

Clint Eastwood backs Bloomberg: report

AFP, Washington
Clint Eastwood, the iconic actor and director who famously delivered a speech to an empty chair at the 2012 Republican convention, is endorsing Michael Bloomberg for president and not Donald Trump, whom he supported four years ago. In a wide-ranging interview, the 89-year-old multiple Oscar winner told The Wall Street Journal that while he appreciates some of the good that Trump has done, he laments the bad and the ugly nature of today's "ornery" politics in America.

Global spread of virus strikes fear

South Korea on 'highest' alert, Italy and Iran take drastic steps to curb spread

AFP, Codogno/Shanghai

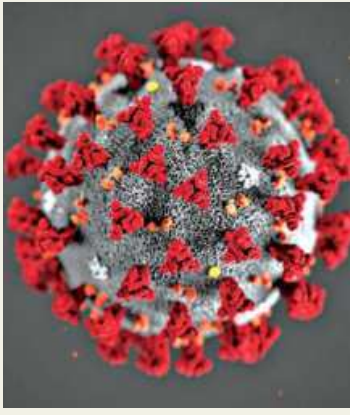
South Korea went on high alert yesterday following a sharp jump in coronavirus cases, while Italy and Iran took their own drastic containment steps as an epidemic that has killed nearly 2,500 people in China continued a relentless global expansion. The World Health Organization (WHO) also warned Africa's poor health systems left it vulnerable to the COVID-19 disease, which has spilled out of China to more than 25 countries. South Korea is raising the nation's alert to its "highest" level, President Moon Jae-in said yesterday after the number of infections nearly tripled over the weekend to 602.

"The next few days will be crucial," Moon said following a government meeting on the virus.

South Korea reported 169 new cases and three deaths yesterday, taking the countrywide fatality toll to five. Yonhap news agency later reported a sixth death. More than 300 cases have been linked to the Shincheonji Church of Jesus sect in Daegu with some 9,300 members

CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

- South Korea reports 3 more deaths and 169 new infections
- Cases in Italy passes 100
- Iran reports eighth death, 43 cases
- Third person from Japan cruise ship dies
- 97 more deaths, 650 cases reported in China
- Outbreak communist China's 'biggest health emergency': Xi



either quarantined or asked to stay at home, according to the Korean Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Some 1,240 have reported symptoms. Elsewhere, Italy and Iran began introducing the sort of containment measures previously seen only in China, which has put tens of millions

of people under lockdown in the epicentre province of Hubei. More than 50,000 people in about a dozen northern Italian towns near the business hub of Milan were told to stay home, while shops and schools were shuttered. The number of cases in the country

rose to more than 100. Italy became the first European country to report one of its nationals had died from the virus on Friday, followed by a second death on Saturday. Both were elderly.

China reported another 97 deaths in its daily update yesterday, taking its total to 2,442, plus 648 new infections. Nearly 80,000 people have been infected worldwide, the vast majority in China.

President Xi Jinping described the epidemic as the country's "largest public health emergency" since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949.

Japan yesterday reported that a third passenger from Diamond Princess cruise ship died, the health ministry said.

Iran ordered the closure of schools, universities and cultural centres across 14 provinces from yesterday following eight deaths in the Islamic Republic -- the most outside East Asia. Iran's outbreak surfaced Wednesday and quickly grew to 43 confirmed infections.

Iran neighbors, including Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, clamped down on travel to and from Iran.

Climate change included in G20 final communique

Finance officials from the world's 20 biggest economies (G20) meeting in Riyadh yesterday reached agreement on the wording of a final communique that includes for the first time a reference to climate change, G20 diplomatic sources said. Compromise language hammered out to overcome US objections retained a reference to the Financial Stability Board's work examining the implications of climate change for financial stability, although it dropped climate change from its list of downside risks to global economic growth. One of the sources said it was the first time a reference to climate change had been included in a G20 finance communique, even though it was removed from the top of the joint statement.

Cell phone services restored as Afghan truce holds

Mobile phone services were restored across swathes of Taliban-contested areas of Afghanistan over the weekend as a partial truce with the militants held for a second day. The Taliban, US and Afghan forces are currently overseeing a week-long "reduction in violence" that kicked off on Saturday. The commitment has seen fighting drop dramatically and is set to pave the way for an American withdrawal deal to be signed later this week. There have been reports of small clashes in rural areas, but no major attacks that have long defined the conflict have erupted, allowing telecoms operators to restore networks in provinces like Kunduz, Badghis. "Around 730 cell towers have restarted," said Naqeebullah Saibab, vice chairman of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of Afghanistan. "There are towers which started operating after almost five years." Two separate officials with knowledge of the country's telecoms industry in northern Afghanistan also confirmed that mobile networks were being restored in insurgent-hit areas.



Pak ex-PM Nawaz was also a 'selected' PM: Bilawal

Belying his earlier claim that mainstream Pakistan opposition parties are on the same page, Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari on Saturday targeted the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, saying that like Imran Khan PML-N supreme leader Nawaz Sharif had also been 'selected' (by the establishment) for the post of premier. "Before Imran Khan, Nawaz Sharif was a selected premier," he said while talking to reporters at Bilawal House in Bahria Town here. When contacted for the PML-N's reaction, a couple of its parliamentarians said they could give a befitting reply to the PPP chairman's tirade against the Sharif brothers but this was not an appropriate time. SOURCE: AFP, DAWN



Revellers of the Agua de Ouro samba school performs during the second night of carnival in Sao Paulo, Brazil, at the city's Sambadrome early yesterday. Inset, A reveller dances during the second of carnival.

PHOTO: AFP

'America First' vs 'Make in India'

Trump to get grand reception from Modi, but a trade deal unlikely

AFP, New Delhi

The bonhomie between the two leaders of the world's largest democracies are well known. But apart from the optics and their mutual enmity to China, the ground reality is different.

Trade ties between the United States and India have long been problematic but under "America First" President Donald Trump and "Make in India" Prime Minister Narendra Modi, they have worsened.

While eclipsed by his trade war with China, Trump's tussle with India, and New Delhi's prickly reaction, has made a major pact unlikely during the American president's visit to the world's fifth-largest economy from today.

"They've been hitting us very, very hard for many, many years," Trump said in India ahead of the 36-hour trip to Ahmedabad, Agra and New Delhi accompanied by Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross and others.

Trade between two countries hit almost \$145 billion in 2018, with the US deficit of \$25 billion.

Modi's "Make in India" drive is aimed at getting foreign companies to manufacture in the South Asian country and so reduce imports -- mirroring Trump's "America First" mantra.

India has long had a penchant for



protectionism. Its import tariffs are among the world's highest. Under Modi, facing slowing growth, accelerating inflation and a widening budget deficit, this hasn't changed.

In recent months, Modi's government has hiked duties on US imports, including on \$600 million worth of Californian almonds as well as apples, steel and chemicals coming into Asia's third-largest economy.

In its recent budget, the right-wing government raised tariffs on items such as shoes, children's tricycles and furniture, irking Washington which cancelled a visit by trade envoy Robert Lighthizer, reports said.

It has also slapped e-commerce regulations which hit firms like Amazon and Walmart.

However, many of India's recent moves have been in response to actions by the Trump administration, starting with its 2018 decision to impose tariffs on steel and aluminium from India and other countries.

India is the world's third-largest steelmaker, and its exports of steel products have tumbled 46 percent according to the Peterson Institute for International Economics. Exporters of mechanical and electrical machinery and auto parts have also suffered.

Last year, Trump added to the pain by suspending India's privileges under the decades-old US Generalized System of Preferences programme that had allowed it to ship \$6 billion in goods duty-free.

United by mistrust of China, Trump's visit will see deals in defence and other areas, including potentially the supply of six nuclear reactors, the fruit of a landmark atomic accord in 2008.

The visit will be big on optics, with Modi and Trump appearing at a rally at the world's largest cricket stadium and the US president and First Lady Melania watching the sunset at the Taj Mahal.

But the main "deliverable" that both strongmen want is a big trade deal, and in its absence they might instead strike a smaller agreement, according to press reports.

Quake in Iran kills nine in Turkey

AFP, Istanbul

A magnitude 5.7 earthquake in northwestern Iran yesterday killed at least nine people in neighbouring Turkey and injured dozens more on both sides of the border, authorities said.

The epicentre of the quake, which struck at 9:23 am (05:53 GMT), was near the Iranian village of Habash-e Olya, less than 10 kilometres (six miles) from the border, according to the US Geological Survey.

The earthquake had a depth of six kilometres, said Tehran University's Seismological Centre.

In Turkey, it was felt mostly in the eastern district of Baskale in Van province on the Iran border. Turkish broadcaster NTV showed images of collapsed adobe houses in several snow-covered villages in Van province.

Interior Minister Suleyman Soyulu said nine people were killed, speaking to reporters from the quake scene in Van. Four of the dead were children. Turkish officials said some schools were also damaged in several villages.

"We have right now no citizens trapped under the rubble," he said.

Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said 37 people were injured and nine of them were in critical condition.

The impact of the quake in Iran was less severe, according to latest reports. It injured at least 40 people in Iran's West Azerbaijan province, 17 of whom had been hospitalised, the country's emergency services said.

The same source also said there was damage to buildings in 43 villages.



Trump departs for India to see big crowds

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump yesterday departed on quick trip to India, where he is to see crowds so large that they will make the much ballyhooed turnout for his campaign rallies pale in comparison.

With a travel time of 17 hours, Trump and his wife, Melania, were headed first to Germany for a refueling stop at Ramstein military base before heading on to Ahmedabad, India, which is Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's hometown. There, hundreds of thousands of people are expected to gather to greet Trump today for a road show leading to a rally in a cricket stadium with a capacity of over 100,000.

It will be a larger version of the "Howdy Modi" rally that they jointly appeared at in Houston to a jubilant crowd of 50,000 Indian Americans last year.

After addressing the stadium crowd, Trump and his entourage will travel to Agra for a picturesque visit to the Taj Mahal. Then it will be on to New Delhi, where he and Modi are to have a day of talks and attend an evening banquet on Tuesday. The Trumps get back to Washington on Wednesday.

US officials say Trump will raise the sensitive subject of religious freedom during his meetings.

Modi's government has faced protests at home and criticism abroad for enacting a citizenship law that is seen as discriminating against Muslims.

Sanders wins big in Nevada

Consolidates frontrunner role in Democratic race

AFP, Las Vegas

Progressive firebrand Bernie Sanders earned a decisive victory Saturday in the Nevada caucuses, solidifying his frontrunner status in the race to choose the Democratic nominee who faces President Donald Trump in November's election.

His win is a substantial accomplishment in a state seen as an important bellwether because it is the first diverse electorate to weigh in on the 2020 presidential race.

It also shows that Sanders has been able to broaden a coalition beyond the narrow limits of leftist voters, refuting the argument used by several moderates in the race that he would not be able to bridge the divide between progressives and centrists.

By late Saturday Sanders was comfortably ahead with half of all precincts reporting.

The 78-year-old senator from Vermont was leading with about 46 percent,

followed by former vice president Joe Biden at 19 percent.

South Bend, Indiana's former mayor Pete Buttigieg, who scored a shock narrow win in Iowa to start the race nearly three weeks ago, stood in third at 15 percent.

The two female US senators in the running, progressive Elizabeth Warren and pragmatist Amy Klobuchar, were on 10 and four percent respectively.

Sanders was quick to claim victory, saying his "multi-generational, multi-racial coalition" that won Nevada was "going to sweep this country."

His progressive policies, including universal health care, higher taxes on the wealthy and corporations, and raising the minimum wage have struck a chord with millions of Americans.

Sanders was speaking in El Paso, Texas, one of the 14 states that votes on "Super Tuesday" on March 3.



Syrians salvage some of their belongings from the rubble of houses as they prepare to flee the town of Atareb in the rebel-held western countryside of Syria's Aleppo province, on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP