

**China puts final satellite**

**into orbit to try to rival GPS**  
China yesterday successfully put into orbit its final Beidou satellite, completing a navigation network years in the making and setting the stage to challenge the US-owned Global Positioning System (GPS). The idea to develop Beidou, or the Big Dipper in Chinese, took shape in the 1990s as China's military sought to reduce its reliance on GPS, which is run by the US Air Force. Coverage was limited to China when the first Beidou-1 satellites were launched in 2000. Now Beidou-related services such as traffic monitoring have been exported to about 120 countries. The second generation of Beidou-2 satellites went into operation in 2012, covering the Asia-Pacific region. In 2015, China began deploying the third generation of Beidou-3 satellites aimed at global coverage. The one launched yesterday was the 35th Beidou-3 satellite - with analysts looking at the system's reliability and how it is rolled out.

**Trump to extend, expand US work visa freeze**

US President Donald Trump will prolong a ban on US employment permits to year-end and broaden it to include H-1B visas used widely in the tech industry, the White House said Monday. A senior administration official told journalists the move would affect 525,000 jobs in the US, which is currently reeling from a high unemployment rate caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The executive order, signed Monday afternoon, will extend and widen the 60-day freeze Trump placed on new work permits for non-US citizens two months ago. The administration official said the new order would extend to the end of 2020 and include H-1B visas provided to 85,000 workers each year with special skills, many of them joining the US technology industry. It will also cover most J visas, common for academics and researchers, and L visas used by companies to shift workers based overseas to their US offices.

**\$4 trillion fund holders tell Brazil to halt deforestation**

Investment funds managing close to \$4 trillion in assets called on Brazil yesterday to halt deforestation of the Amazon in an open letter warning that biodiversity loss and carbon emissions pose a "systemic risk" to their portfolios. The managers from countries across Europe, Asia and South America expressed their fears that the government in Brasilia was using the COVID-19 crisis to push through environmental deregulation that could "jeopardise the survival of the Amazon". Environmentalists warn 2020 is on track to be the most destructive year ever for the world's biggest rainforest. A total of 829 square kilometres in the Brazilian Amazon was lost to deforestation in May alone.

SOURCE: REUTERS, AFP

**INDIA-CHINA BORDER STAND-OFF****Rivals agree to reduce tensions***Analysts say Delhi's suspicion remains; India to press Russia for S-400 missile defence system*

AFP, New Delhi

China and India have agreed to reduce tensions a week after their deadliest clashes in over 50 years on the disputed Himalayan border left 20 Indian troops dead in brutal hand-to-hand fighting.

The June 15 battle, reportedly fought with fists, clubs and rocks, was the first time troops have been killed on their frontier since 1975 and marked a major deterioration in ties between the two Asian giants.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said that after talks between the top regional military commanders on Monday, both sides "agreed to take necessary measures to promote a cooling of the situation".

The Press Trust of India said the meeting was between Lieutenant General Harinder Singh, commander of the 14 Corps, and Major General Liu Lin, commander of the Tibet Military District.

"The holding of this meeting shows that both sides want to deal with their disagreement, manage the situation and de-escalate the situation through dialogue and consultations," Zhao told a regular news conference.

The two sides "exchanged frank and in-depth views" and "agreed to maintain dialogue and jointly committed to promoting peace and tranquillity in the border areas", Zhao added.

**Demonstrators burn products made in China during a protest against China, in New Delhi, on Monday.**

PHOTO: REUTERS

There was no official comment from New Delhi but an Indian army source said that after the meeting, reportedly lasting almost 11 hours, that there was a "mutual consensus to disengage".

He added that ways to reduce frictions in the Ladakh region opposite Tibet "were discussed and will be taken forward by both the sides".

The meeting came ahead of virtual talks between the foreign ministers of India, China and Russia later yesterday,

ostensibly to discuss the coronavirus and commemorate the end of World War II.

While Indian Foreign Minister S Jaishankar made no direct mention of the clashes in his opening remarks, Russia's Sergei Lavrov said that Moscow saw no need to mediate between the two countries. Russia is a major supplier of arms to both countries.

The Times of India reported that Indian Defence Minister Rajnath

**ESPIONAGE ROW****India to expel half of Pak embassy staff**

REUTERS, New Delhi

India yesterday said it intended to expel half the staff in Pakistan's embassy in New Delhi over what it said was spying by officials there.

"They have been engaged in acts of espionage and maintained dealings with terrorist organizations," the Indian foreign ministry said in a statement.

India will cut staff in its own embassy in Islamabad by the same amount, the statement added.

India expelled two Pakistani diplomats on May 31 after they were held for alleged spying, claims Islamabad said were "baseless".

Pakistan in turn, briefly detained two Indian embassy staff for alleged "hit and run" case. India alleged that the staff were harassed and tortured by Pakistan authorities.

Relations between the nuclear-armed rivals are strained and tit-for-tat expulsions of diplomats, often on charges of espionage, are common. Neither country has a permanent ambassador in place and in the last month, each has accused the other of the illegal detention and torture of diplomats.

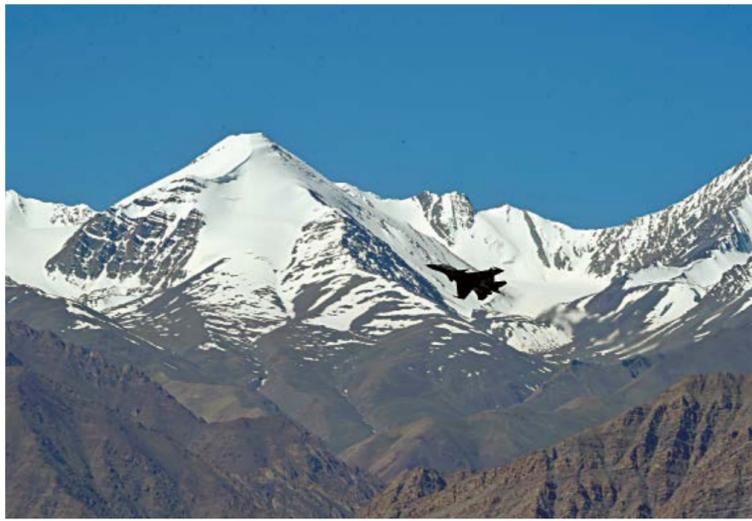
**An Indian fighter jet flies over a mountain range near Leh, the joint capital of the union territory of Ladakh, yesterday.**

PHOTO: AFP

**Virus pushing 120m children in South Asia into poverty****Warns UN**

AFP, Kathmandu

More than 100 million children in South Asia could slip into poverty as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, a UN report said yesterday of the long-term impact of the crisis.

Cases across the densely populated region -- home to almost a quarter of the world's population -- have risen in recent weeks even as the region lifts its lockdown to revive economies badly shattered by the virus.

"While they may be less susceptible to the virus itself, children are being profoundly affected by the fallout, including the economic and social consequences of the lockdown," the report by the UN children's agency UNICEF said.

South Asia -- which includes India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bhutan -- is home to some 600 million children, with around 240 million already living in poverty, the agency said.

In a worst-case scenario, the virus could push another 120 million into poverty and food insecurity within six months, it warned.

"Without urgent action now, COVID-19 could destroy the hopes and futures of an entire generation," UNICEF's South Asia regional director Jean Gough said in a statement.

Progress in healthcare -- such as immunisation, nutrition and other services -- were being "severely disrupted".

In Bangladesh, UNICEF said it found that some of the poorest families could not afford three meals a day, while in Sri Lanka its survey showed that 30 percent of families had cut their food intake.

**'This is Allah's will -- it's destiny'***Muslims disappointed, but accepting, as Saudi scales back hajj*

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Muslims expressed disappointment yesterday at Saudi Arabia's decision to scale back this year's hajj pilgrimage, but many accepted it was necessary as the kingdom battles a major coronavirus outbreak.

Around 1,000 pilgrims residing in Saudi Arabia will be allowed to perform the hajj this year, authorities announced -- compared to some 2.5 million from around the world last year.

The move had looked inevitable for some time and several countries had already pulled out, but the announcement nevertheless added to disappointment for Muslims who invest huge sums and face long waits to go on hajj.

"My hopes of going to (the holy Saudi city of Mecca) were so high," said Kamariah Yahya, 68, from Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, which had already barred its citizens from the hajj earlier this month.

"I've been preparing for years. But what can I do? This is Allah's will -- it's destiny."

Shahid Rafique, chairman of a Pakistani hajj tour operators' group, said it was "a moment of sorrow for all the Muslims, especially for those who were making plans for years and years".



In Bangladesh, head of a hajj travel agencies' group, Shahadat Hossain Taslim, said that "many people will be shattered" by the decision but accepted it was for the best.

"Unlike other countries, the majority of Bangladeshi pilgrims are elderly people, and they are vulnerable to COVID-19," he said.

A must for able-bodied Muslims at least once in their lifetime, the pilgrimage sees millions of people pack into congested religious sites and could have become a major source of virus transmission.

The minister for minority affairs in India said

more than 200,000 people from the country had applied to go on the five-day event, scheduled for the end of July, and they would receive a full refund of any money deposited for the pilgrimage.

The decision has prompted renewed questions about Saudi Arabia's custodianship of Islam's holiest sites -- the kingdom's most powerful source of political legitimacy.

Mohamad Azmi Abdul Hamid, from charity the Malaysian Consultative Council of Islamic Organizations, said Muslim nations should have been allowed to take a "collective decision", rather than it being left to Riyadh.

"It's high time (the holy cities of Makkah and Medina) are managed by an international board represented by Muslim countries," he told AFP.

The decision also risks annoying headline Muslims, for whom religion may trump health concerns.

Despite the disappointment, some Muslims were already looking ahead to 2021 and hoping they would be able to perform the pilgrimage then.

"I'm still hoping to go on hajj next year, and pray that I'll stay healthy until then," said Yahya in Indonesia.

**US CURBS ON MAJOR CHINESE MEDIA****Beijing threatens fitting response**

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday threatened to retaliate against new US restrictions on Chinese state media, escalating tensions between the two superpowers as they crack down on each other's news outlets.

The US State Department said Monday it was reclassifying four organisations -- China Central Television, China News Service, the People's Daily and the Global Times -- as foreign missions rather than media outlets in the United States, adding to five others designated in February.

China has already expelled more than a dozen American journalists as part of the row.

Yesterday, Beijing decried the latest US move as "bare-faced political suppression of Chinese media" that "further exposes the hypocrisy of the so-called freedom of speech and press which the US likes to flaunt".

"We strongly urge the US to reject this Cold War mindset and ideological bias... otherwise China will have no choice but to make an appropriate response," said foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian at a routine briefing.

All nine Chinese state-run news organisations will be required to report details of their US-based staff and real estate transactions to the State Department. Their news reporting will not be restricted, officials said.

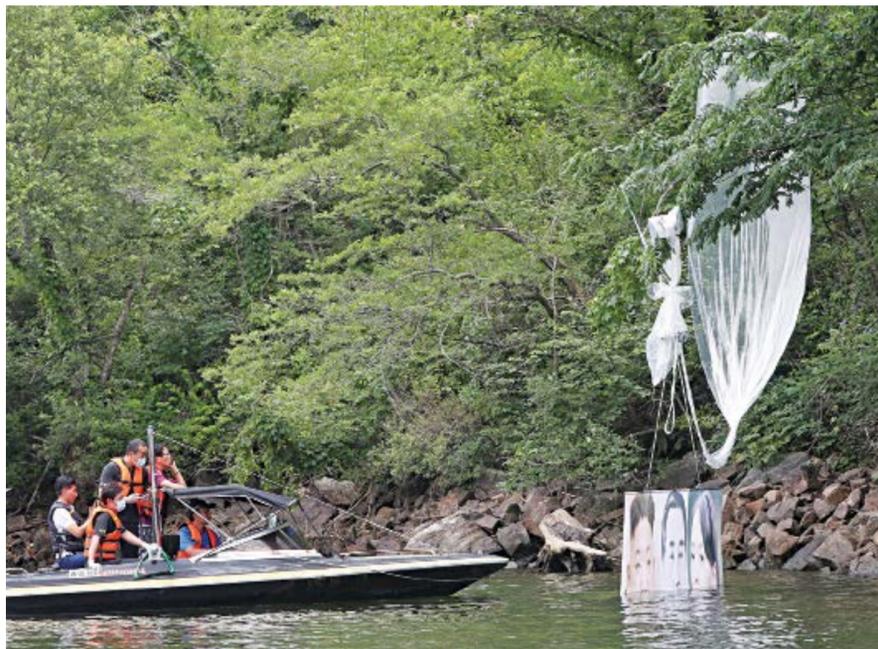
**A balloon containing leaflets denouncing North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, released by a North Korean defector group on Monday, is seen found at a hill in Hongcheon, South Korea, yesterday.**

PHOTO: REUTERS

**260m children getting no education: UN**

AFP, Paris

Nearly 260 million children had no access to schooling in 2018, a United Nations agency said in a report Tuesday that blamed poverty and discrimination for educational inequalities that are being exacerbated by the coronavirus outbreak.

Children from poorer communities as well as girls, the disabled, immigrants and ethnic minorities were at a distinct educational disadvantage in many countries, the UN's Paris-based education body UNESCO said.

In 2018, "258 million children and youth were entirely excluded from education, with poverty as the main obstacle to access," the report found.

This represented 17 percent of all school-age children, most of them in south and central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

The disparities worsened with the arrival of the coronavirus crisis, which saw over 90 percent of the global student population affected by school closures, the report said.

And while children from families with means could continue schooling from a home using laptops, mobile phones and the internet, millions of others were cut off entirely.

"Lessons from the past -- such as with Ebola -- have shown that health crises can leave many behind, in particular the poorest girls, many of whom may never return to school," UNESCO's director general Audrey Azoulay wrote in a foreword.

The report noted that in low- and middle-income countries, adolescents from the richest 20 percent of households were three times more likely to complete the first portion of secondary school -- up to age 15 -- than those from poor homes.

Children with disabilities were 19 percent less likely to achieve minimum reading proficiency in 10 of these nations.

In 20 poor countries, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, hardly any rural girls complete secondary school, UNESCO said.

Two African countries still ban pregnant girls from school, 117 countries allow child marriages, and 20 have yet to ratify an international convention that bans child labour. Some 335 million girls attended schools that did not provide them with the water, sanitation and hygiene services they need to stay in class while menstruating.

"To rise to the challenges of our time, a move towards more inclusive education is imperative," Azoulay said. "Failure to act will hinder the progress of societies."

**Singapore PM calls for July 10 polls**

REUTERS, Singapore

Singapore will head to the polls on July 10 after its prime minister said he was satisfied a ballot could be held safely despite criticism that such a move might endanger voters during the coronavirus pandemic.

The tiny city-state, which has one of Asia's highest tallies of COVID-19, largely fuelled by mass outbreaks in migrant workers' dormitories, eased strict lockdown rules last week that had been in place for more than two months.

**Taliban kill at least 8 Afghan forces**

AFP, Kunduz

Dozens of Taliban fighters stormed three checkpoints in pre-dawn raids in northern Afghanistan yesterday, killing at least eight security personnel, in the latest attack on government forces ahead of expected peace talks. On Monday, the National Security Council said the Taliban had killed at least 291 Afghan security personnel over the past week, saying it was the "deadliest" week in the 19-year conflict.

**Saudi coalition foils Huthi missile attack**

AFP, Riyadh

The Saudi-led military coalition yesterday said it had intercepted and destroyed drones and missiles launched against the kingdom by Huthi rebels in Yemen, including one fired towards the capital Riyadh. Saudi Arabia was targeted with dozens of attacks using ballistic missiles or drones last year, including a devastating strike on oil giant Aramco's facilities which temporarily knocked out half the kingdom's crude output. The attack was claimed by the Huthis, but the United States said it involved cruise missiles from Iran.