

NEWS IN BRIEF

**Thai protest leaders charged with royal defamation**

Thai police charged five key leaders of the country's pro-democracy protest movement yesterday under the kingdom's tough royal defamation laws, the first such use of the controversial legislation in two years. Section 112 of the Thai penal code is one of the world's toughest lese majeste laws, shielding the ultra-powerful King Maha Vajiralongkorn from criticism. But in recent months leaders of the pro-democracy movement have called for reforms to the monarchy -- including for the law's abolition -- a move that has sent shockwaves through Thai society. Human rights activist Anon Numpu -- one of the most prominent faces rallying for royal reform -- and four others arrived at a Bangkok police station for questioning yesterday.

**Japan crown prince 'approves' daughter's wedding**

Japan's Crown Prince Akishino, the younger brother of Emperor Naruhito, has said he "approves" of his daughter Princess Mako marrying her university boyfriend, Kei Komuro, but reiterated that Komuro's mother must first solve an ongoing financial dispute. "I mean, I approve of them getting married. The Constitution says marriage shall be based only on the mutual consent of both sexes. If that is what they really want, then I think that is something I need to respect as a parent," the



crown prince told a news conference in Tokyo held ahead of his 55th birthday yesterday. In a statement issued earlier this month, Princess Mako, 29, expressed strong resolve to go ahead with her marriage, which was originally scheduled in 2018 but pushed back following reports of a dispute between Komuro's mother and her former fiancé over money.

**NZ files charges over White Island volcano disaster**

New Zealand's workplace safety watchdog yesterday handed down criminal charges over last year's White Island volcanic eruption that claimed 22 lives and left dozens more with horrific burns. WorkSafe had investigated why 47 people, mainly Australian tourists, were on the island in December 2019 when a column of burning ash and steam blasted from a volcanic vent. Chief executive Phil Parkes announced charges against 10 organisations and three individuals who took tourists to the country's most active volcano just weeks after the eruption threat alert level had been raised.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



A demonstrator argues with an Israeli settler as a trailer belonging to Israeli settlers burns after it was set on fire by Palestinians protesting against a Jewish settlement outpost, in Salfit in the Israeli-occupied West Bank yesterday.

**War unfinished**  
*Says Tigrayan leader as Ethiopia's Abiy relishes victory*

REUTERS, Addis Ababa

Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed lauded his troops yesterday for their victory over a rebellious northern movement, but the leader of Tigrayan forces said they were still resisting amid fears of a protracted guerrilla conflict. The nearly month-long war has killed hundreds and probably thousands of people, sent refugees into Sudan, enmeshed Eritrea, and stirred rivalries among Ethiopia's myriad ethnic groups.

Federal forces captured Tigray's capital Mekelle at the weekend and declared victory over the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a guerrilla movement-turned-political party that had dominated national government for nearly three decades until 2018.

"Our constitution was attacked but it didn't take us three years, it took us three weeks," Abiy told parliament, comparing his offensive with the American Civil War of the 1860s.

"Our army is disciplined and victorious."

Though the TPLF said Mekelle suffered heavy bombardment, Abiy said his troops had not destroyed the city nor killed a single civilian in the region since starting an offensive in response to an attack on a federal army base on Nov. 4.

Drones were used to watch the TPLF, but federal forces declined to use rockets in Tigray, Abiy said.

"Even though we have better capacity, we won't use it. We are not the junta," he said. "We conduct ourselves responsibly."

Though the highland city of 500,000 people eventually fell with little resistance, the TPLF later said it had shot down a plane and retaken one town.

**China to build a major dam on Brahmaputra**

*Proposals for dams evoke concerns in India, Bangladesh*

PTI, Beijing

China will build a major hydropower project on Brahmaputra river in Tibet and a proposal for this has been clearly put forward in the 14th Five-Year Plan to be implemented from next year, the official media yesterday quoted the head of a Chinese company tasked to build the dam as saying.

Yan Zhiyong, chairman of the Power Construction Corp of China, said China will "implement hydropower exploitation in the downstream of the Yarlung Zangbo River" (the Tibetan name for Brahmaputra) and the project could serve to maintain water resources and domestic security, the Global Times reported.

Speaking at a conference on Thursday, Yan said the project was clearly put forward in the proposals for formulating the country's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25) and its long-term goals through 2035 made by the Central Committee of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC), it quoted an article on the WeChat account of the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China yesterday.

"There is no parallel in history... it will be a historic opportunity for the Chinese hydropower industry," Yan told the conference organised to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the founding of

the China Society for Hydropower Engineering.

The 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) and National Economic and Social Development and the Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035 were adopted by Plenum - a key policy body of the CPC - last month.

Details of the plan were expected to be released after the formal ratification by National People's Congress (NPC) early next year.

Proposals for dams on the Brahmaputra have evoked concerns in India and Bangladesh, the riparian states, and China has downplayed such anxieties saying it would keep their interests in mind.

As a lower riparian State with considerable established user rights to the waters of the trans-border rivers, the Indian government has consistently conveyed its views and concerns to the Chinese authorities and has urged them to ensure that the interests of downstream States are not harmed by any activities in upstream areas. China has already operationalised the USD 1.5 billion Zam Hydropower Station, the largest in Tibet in 2015.

About the new dam, the Global Times report said that speculation about China planning to build a "super hydropower station" in Medog county, where the Yarlung Zangbo Grand Canyon is located, have circulated for years.

**Biden unveils diverse economic team**

*Receives his first presidential daily briefing*

REUTERS, Wilmington

President-elect Joe Biden unveiled his picks for several top economic positions yesterday, including former Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen as his nominee for Treasury Secretary, setting the stage for a more diverse White House.

While Biden's transition to the White House appeared to be hitting its stride, the president-elect was hobbling after fracturing his foot while playing with his dog on Saturday.

Biden named leading members of an economic team that will have to combat the crushing blows to US workers and businesses from the coronavirus pandemic.

In contrast to Trump, who largely picked white men for key positions, Biden's early appointments were shaping up to be highly diverse, including an all-women communications team unveiled on Sunday night.

Biden nominated Janet Yellen, who was the first woman to chair the Federal Reserve, as his Treasury secretary, and Adewale Adeyemo, who would be the first Black deputy Treasury secretary.

Other members of his economics team include Neera Tanden, chief executive of the progressive Center for American Progress think tank, as director of the



White House Budget Office, who would be the first woman of color to lead that agency.

Earlier, Biden also tapped campaign staff and advisers to lead an all-woman communications team, naming campaign spokeswoman Kate Bedingfield as White House communications director and veteran Democratic spokeswoman Jen Psaki as press secretary.

"I am proud to announce today the first senior White House communications team comprised entirely of women," Biden said.

He and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris also began receiving classified briefings that are an essential step toward taking control of national security.



Iran's high-ranking commanders and mourners gather around the coffin of Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh during a funeral ceremony in Tehran, Iran yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

**'Truly repugnant'**

*Aussie PM slams Chinese official's tweet on fake image*

AFP, Sydney

Australia's prime minister angrily denounced a "repugnant", "outrageous" and "appalling" tweet from a top Chinese government spokesman yesterday and demanded Beijing formally apologise.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian sparked the outrage when he posted a staged image of a man dressed as an Australian soldier holding a bloody knife to an Afghan child's throat.

Australian prosecutors are currently investigating 19 members of the military in connection with alleged war crimes committed by special forces in Afghanistan between 2005 and 2016.

Morrison called the tweet -- from an



official Chinese government account -- an "outrageous and disgusting slur" against the Australian armed forces and called on Twitter to take it down.

"It is utterly outrageous and it cannot be justified on any basis whatsoever. The Chinese government should be totally ashamed of this post," Morrison said of the tweet. "It diminishes them in the world's eyes."

Asked about the tweet at a regular press briefing, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying replied: "With Australian soldiers committing such atrocious crimes, shouldn't the Australian government feel ashamed?"

She said Australia should "make a formal apology to the Afghan people".

**WHO warns malaria fight flat-lining**

AFP, Geneva

Progress in eliminating malaria has stalled in recent years, the World Health Organization said yesterday, with more than 400,000 people once again estimated to have died from the disease last year.

In its World Malaria Report 2020, the WHO said progress against the mosquito-borne disease was plateauing, particularly in African countries bearing the brunt of cases and deaths.

In 2019, the global tally of malaria cases was estimated at 229 million.

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