NEWS IN brief

Britain's phone hacking probe ends

AFP, *London*

Prosecutors yesterday announced they would take no further action in Britain's mammoth phone-hacking probe, ending a four-year investigation. The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) said it would take no further action against News Group Newspapers (NGN), global media baron Rupert Murdoch's British tabloid stable. The probes into voicemail interception and other alleged media crimes amounted to the biggest police investigation in British history. The scandal led to the demise of the expose-led News of the World weekly tabloid, which was Britain's biggest-selling newspaper.

Pakistan test-fires ballistic missile

AFP, *Islamabad*

Pakistan test-fired a nuclear-capable ballistic missile yesterday, the military said, two days after the government confirmed it would resume high-level peace talks with arch-rival India. The military said it had fired a Shaheen III surface-to-surface ballistic missile which can carry nuclear and conventional warheads within a range of 2,750 kilometres.

Koreas hold high-level talks in Kaesong

AFP, *Seoul*

North and South Korea yesterday agreed to extend rare, high-level talks into a second day, following an initial round of discussions aimed at building on an August agreement to ease cross-border tensions. The vice-minister level talks, held on the North Korean side of the border in the jointly-run Kaesong industrial zone, will resume Saturday morning, Seoul's Unification Ministry said.

New Zealand 'picks new national flag'

BBC ONLINE

New Zealanders have picked a blue and black design with the silver fern as the preliminary winner in a referendum on a possible new national flag. The final result will be announced on Tuesday after late and overseas votes are counted, and may change as the winning margin is narrow.A second referendum will be held in March to decide whether to adopt the new flag, or keep the existing one.

Deal could bar poor from seeking compensation

REUTERS, *Paris*

Poor countries could be barred from seeking compensation for losses and damages from rising seas, worsening storms and other climate impacts under a proposal in the latest draft of a new global climate change deal expected to be agreed today.

The "loss and damage" proposal, backed by the United States and other countries, could help vulnerable nations gain access to insurance and other support to cut their financial risks from climate stresses, experts said.

But the proposal, one of two, would explicitly rule out the prospect of poor countries that suffer devastating losses from climate change seeking compensation under the agreement from rich nations, whose emissions have been largely responsible for causing the problems, they said.

"This pretty clearly throws poor and vulnerable people under the bus, and it has really troubling legal implications," said Brandon Wu, a senior policy analyst for ActionAid USA and a longtime tracker of finance and justice issues at the talks.

His colleague Harjeet Singh, ActionAid's global lead on climate change, said the provision, if adopted,

could push climate-affected countries to sue for compensation under general international law, instead of dealing with loss and damage under the agreement.

But for island nations that may see their land disappear to rising seas, and other vulnerable countries that could face huge financial losses from climate change, "we are taking away their right forever to demand justice" under the new agreement, Singh said.

Without the threat of lawsuits to drive aggressive action on climate change, "the pressure is off" on wealthier polluting nations, he said.

Wu said one worry if the proposed language was adopted is that it could have implications for the success of climate lawsuits outside the UN climate deal, and could "narrow the scope of what loss and damage can do" even within the deal.

Early lawsuits or human rights complaints seeking damages from oil, gas and coal companies have recently been filed in countries from Germany to the Philippines. These could help drive divestment from fossil fuel companies, as investors fret over the implications for their reputations and profits, lawsuit backers say.

Any kind of legal precedent that polluters are not liable for climate damage could potentially threaten that divestment push, which would be "really unfortunate", Wu said.

Similarly, the provision - if included in the final deal - could have a "chilling effect" on discussions around ways to deal with loss and damage that could be seen as evoking liability or compensation.

"People will say, 'This is going to lead us down the path to (talking about) liability, so we can't have this conversation,'" he said.

Draft puts temperature limit out of reach: scientists

REUTERS, *Paris*

A deal to slow climate change being thrashed out in Paris fails to map out steep enough cuts in carbon dioxide emissions to limit global warming to the target of at least "well below" 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 Fahrenheit), scientists said yesterday.

Negotiations on the draft agreement to curb greenhouse gas emissions, blamed for warming the planet and disrupting the climate, were extended by a day on Friday to Saturday to try to overcome stubborn divisions among the 195 countries taking part.

The draft text, released on Thursday and subject to revision, also proposes that emissions peak "as soon as possible", with rapid cuts thereafter towards achieving "greenhouse gas emissions neutrality in the second half of the century".

Neutrality refers to all greenhouse gases, not just carbon dioxide, and means net zero man-made emissions from all sectors.

Overall emissions would need to be reduced to as close to zero as possible and any remaining would have to be soaked up by forests and soils or buried underground by costly technology such as carbon capture and storage.

"This is wishful thinking. You might call it pie in the sky," Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, head of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, told Reuters.

He said emissions neutrality would have to be reached by 2050 to achieve the 1.5C goal, yet the text was too vague by talking about the second half of the century - up to 2099.

To meet a 2C limit, global emissions would have to peak by 2020 with net zero emissions of carbon dioxide by 2070, according to the UN panel of climate scientists.

Current national emissions cut plans put the planet on a far higher path, unless the world could abruptly shift to "negative emissions", such as soaking up greenhouse gases from nature after 2030 with new technologies, Schellnhuber said.

So far, more than 180 nations have put forward plans to cut emissions but they put the world on a path to warming anywhere from 2.7C to 3.7C, according to studies.

Scientists also said the language was weaker than in previous drafts.

Meeting a 1.5C limit would require higher energy prices to spur investment in cleaner energy sources, bioenergy and carbon capture and storage (CCS) technology, which captures carbon dioxide and stores it underground. CCS technology is still small scale and very costly. There are currently 15 projects in operation worldwide.

The International Energy Agency has said that by 2040, four billion tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions must be captured to keep global warming at bay, which is 100 times more than the total CCS projects expected to be online in the next 18 months.

Activists demonstrate in front of a giant polar beer puppet called Aurora by environmental organization Greenpeace during a demonstration at the venue of the COP21 United Nations climate change conference in Le Bourget, on the outskirts of Paris, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

HIGHLIGHTS OF DRAFT DEAL

CURB PLANETARY OVERHEATING: The purpose of the deal is to hold global warming to "well below" two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) compared to pre-Industrial Revolution levels and to try to cap it at 1.5C.

A LONG-TERM GOAL: The world will aim for climate-altering greenhouse gas emissions to peak "as soon as possible". Countries will then make rapid cuts to as to reach "greenhouse gas emissions neutrality" in the second half of this century. That means net emissions of the heat-trapping gases would be zero. But this could be achieved by, for example, planting more trees or using technology to soak up carbon dioxide. Many climate activists prefer a tougher option of banning human activities that produce greenhouse gases, such as burning coal, oil and gas.

A FIVE-YEAR REVIEW: In 2019, the year before the agreement enters into force, countries will take stock of the overall impact of what they are doing to rein in global warming, and revisit their plans in 2020. The collective impact of countries' efforts will then be reviewed at five-year intervals from 2023, after which pledges will be updated.

MONEY, MONEY, MONEY: Bowing to a demand of developing countries, rich nations will mobilise $100 billion (92 billion euros) to help them cope with the cost of climate change. That figure is a "floor" and must be periodically reviewed.

HARM DONE: Low-lying island nations and poor countries most at risk from climate change-induced sea level rise and other impacts, have won recognition in the draft of the need for help in dealing with losses suffered. While assistance is promised, rich countries will not accept liability.

'Trump no longer funny'

AGENCIES

Hillary Clinton took aim at fellow White House hopeful Donald Trump over his call to ban Muslims from entering the United States, saying: "I no longer think he is funny."

Appearing on NBC's "Late Night with Seth Meyers" later Thursday, the frontrunner for the Democratic presidential nomination said Trump had overstepped the mark with his latest comments.

"You know, I have to say, Seth, I no longer think he is funny," Clinton said, according to NBC News.

"I think for weeks you and everybody else were just bringing folks to hysterical laughter, but now he has gone way over the line. ... And what he is saying now is not only shameful and wrong, it is dangerous."

According to the first survey conveyed after Trump's comment on Monday, a majority of Americans opposed the controversial plan. Fifty-seven percent of adults in the US are against the idea, while 25 percent are for it, according to the survey by NBC News and the Wall Street Journal on Thursday.

Among Republicans the views are mixed: 42 percent of respondents back Trump's Muslim ban, while 36 percent oppose it. Three-quarters of Democrats stand opposed. The poll also found that 41 percent of Americans believe Trump's bombastic campaign statements in general are insulting.

Burundi army base attacks kill 'dozens'

AFP, *Nairobi*

Heavily-armed gunmen yesterday launched coordinated assaults on two army barracks in the Burundi capital leaving dozens dead, mostly attackers, in the worst unrest since a failed May coup, a senior military officer said.

The fighting began at around 4:00am when the attackers attacked a base at Ngagara in the north of Bujumbura as well as a military training college in the south, according to the officer, who spoke to AFP on condition of anonymity.

"After more than two hours of clashes, the army repulsed the southern attack, while virtually all the attackers were killed in Ngagara base," the officer said.

"There are dozens of deaths among the attackers, and we also have losses," he said, adding the situation would soon be brought "completely" under control.

Clashes continued throughout the morning in different parts of the capital.

Months of street protests have devolved into regular armed attacks with gunfire disrupting the nights and dead bodies appearing on city streets almost every day.

Referring to the gunmen as "Sindumuja" -- meaning "I am not a slave", a name sometimes used for the insurgents -- presidential media advisor Willy Nyamitwe wrote, "Tonight the #Sindumuja tried to attack military camps but they failed."

3 Palestinians killed in West Bank, Gaza

AFP, *Halhul*

Three Palestinians were killed yesterday in the occupied West Bank and in the Gaza Strip, one after allegedly attempting to run down Israeli soldiers and two in clashes with troops.

Palestinian youths clashed with Israeli forces near the northern entrance of the West Bank city of Hebron, and the soldiers responded with live fire killing one, witnesses said.

On the Gaza border , a Palestinian was shot dead and 12 wounded in clashes with Israeli forces.

Since October 1, near daily attacks and clashes between Palestinians and security forces have killed 116 on the Palestinian side, 17 on the Israelis.

Canada greets in first Syrian refugees

AGENCIES

Canada welcomed 163 Syrian refugees late Thursday, taking in the first of a planned 25,000 in a matter of months and promising them a better life as they flee their country's horrific war.

The refugees arrived just weeks after Canada's newly elected Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said his country would pull its fighter jets from a US-led coalition targeting Islamic State fighters in Iraq and Syria.

"Tonight they step off the plane as refugees. But they walk out of this terminal as permanent residents of Canada with social insurance numbers, with health cards and with an opportunity to become full Canadians," Trudeau said.

ALL MIGRANTS REGISTERED

Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras yesterday admitted Greek border controls had been overwhelmed by the mass arrival of refugees earlier this year, but insisted all migrants were now being properly documented, reports AFP.

Tsipras also said the government had initially been "taken by surprise" by the sheer number of migrants, "but since September there has not been a single arrival who has not been registered."

ARRIVALS FALL SHARPLY

The number of irregular migrants arriving in Greece fell sharply last month, with probably fewer than 100,000 people recorded by the EU border agency, less than half the number in October, a Frontex said yesterday.

Stressing that the data was not yet fully compiled, she said more than 200,000 people had arrived in October and that worsening weather appeared to be reducing flows.

It was too early to establish any trend following an EU-Turkish accord in late November to try and limit the numbers of migrants leaving Turkey, the spokeswoman said.

Putin talks tough on Syria threat

Orders military to take hard action as diplomacy to end crisis escalates

AGENCIES

President Vladimir Putin yesterday ordered his forces in Syria to take tough action against any threats, speaking two weeks after Turkey shot down a Russian warplane in the war-torn country.

"I order you to act as tough as possible," he told a defence meeting.

"Any targets threatening the Russian grouping or our land infrastructure should be immediately destroyed."

"I would like to warn those who would once again try to organise some sort of provocations against our servicemen," he said in a thinly veiled threat to Ankara.

Putin also claimed Russia was backing the Free Syrian Army (FSA) with arms in joint operations with regime forces.

His statement appeared to be the first time Moscow said it was actually supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's opponents in the fight against Islamic State forces. Putin said last month the Russian air force had hit several "terrorist" targets provided by the Free Syrian Army.

"We are supporting them (the FSA) from the air as well as the Syrian army, assisting them with weapons, munition and materiel."

It was not immediately clear what rebel groups Putin was referring to. Syria's rebel forces have regularly rejected the possibility of cooperating with the regime or Russia and there has been no evidence of such cooperation.

Last month, Turkey shot down a Russian warplane on the Syrian border, claiming it violated Turkish airspace.

After the downing of the jet, Russia introduced economic sanctions against Turkey and beefed up its firepower at its airbase in Syria.

In Riyadh, Syria's main opposition groups agreed at unprecedented talks to negotiate with President Bashar al-Assad's regime but insisted he step down at the start of any political transition. But yesterday Secretary of State John Kerry said that some problems remain to be resolved in the pact without specifying any points.

On the ground, a triple truck bomb attack carried out by Islamic State in northeastern Syria killed at least 50 people and wounded 80 others, a spokesman for the Kurdish militia that controls the area said yesterday. The three blasts, carried out by at least two suicide bombers, hit outside a hospital, at a market and in a residential area in the town of Tel Tamer late on Thursday, the YPG's Redur Xelil said via internet messaging service.

DEVELOPMENTS

Russia says backs moderate FSA rebels alongside Assad

Oppositions agree for talks with regime in January

IS truck bombs kill dozens in Kurdish-held town

IS oil trade 'worth more than $500m'

AGENCIES

The so-call said militants had looteed Islamic State (IS) has made more than $500m trading oil, a US treasury official has said.

Its "primary customer" has been the government of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, despite its ongoing battle to overthrow the regime, Adam Szubin told the BBC. IS had also looted up to $1bn from banks in territory it held, he said.

After Turkey downed a Russian fighter jet last month, Russian President Vladimir Putin said he had intelligence that large amounts of oil and petroleum products were moving across the border from Islamic State territories to Turkey. Turkey has denied the accusation furiously.

US 'planner' of Mumbai attacks turns witness

BBC ONLINE

A US man sentenced to 35 years in jail for his role in the 2008 Mumbai attacks has been pardoned by an Indian court after he agreed to be a witness.

David Headley appeared before a court in Mumbai via video conference and agreed to give full details of the planning and execution of the attacks.

Headley, 52, pleaded guilty and co-operated with the US to avoid the death penalty and extradition to India. More than 160 people were killed by gunmen in the November 2008 attack.

The Mumbai court told Headley that his pardon was conditional and it expected him to fully disclose all the information he had on the attacks. He appeared before the court through a video link from an undisclosed location in the US.

"He has become a government witness. The court decided to pardon him because his testimony will give more details of the attacks. He will testify on 8 February," Indian prosecutor Ujjwal Nikam told journalists in Mumbai.

Headley was sentenced in the US in 2013 on 12 counts, including conspiracy to aid militants from the Pakistani group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) which India blames for carrying out the attacks.

Headley's US lawyer John Theis told BBC Hindi that he did not "expect anything substantially different from what he (Headley) has already said and it will be consistent with his testimony in Chicago".

"It [Headley's pardon in India] also doesn't affect the 35 year jail term that he's serving in the US," Theis added.

Headley was sentenced in the US in 2013 on 12 counts, including conspiracy to aid militants from the Pakistani group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) which India blames for carrying out the attacks.