

NEWS IN brief

3 Spanish journos freed in Syria

Three Spanish freelance journalists who went missing in Syria last year and were believed to have been kidnapped have been released, the Spanish government said. The three men were working on an investigative report in Aleppo at the time of abduction. No details were immediately available on how the three were released, but Qatar said it had helped.

Clashes with militants kill soldier in Makkah

A Saudi soldier died in a gunbattle with militants in the western Taif region outside Makkah yesterday, state news agency SPA said. Saudi forces have been caught up in an escalating confrontation with Islamic State militants in the last week after troops shot dead two fighters and two others blew themselves up in a raid on their compound outside the holy city of Makkah on Thursday.

Afghanistan executes six Taliban inmates

Six Afghan Taliban inmates on death row were hanged yesterday, government sources said, in the first set of executions endorsed by President Ashraf Ghani since he came to power in 2014. The executions occurred despite a threat of reprisal attacks from the Taliban, which launched its annual spring offensive last month, widely expected to be the worst fighting season in 15 years.

India bus crash kills 14 after road collapse

An overcrowded minibus fell into a deep gorge in India's northern Himalayan region of Himachal Pradesh after a portion of the road caved in, killing 14 people, an official said yesterday. Another 41 people were injured.

41 missing after China landslide

More than 400 rescuers were mobilised to search for 41 people missing after a landslide engulfed workers at a construction site in southeastern China early yesterday, state media reported. Rocks and mud with a volume of 100,000 cubic meters buried an office building and the workers' living area at the site in mountainous Taining county in Fujian province around 5:00 am, according to a website run by the county's Communist Party's publicity department.

Xinhua earlier said 34 were missing, and reported President Xi Jinping had urged "maximum efforts" to find survivors, reports AFP. A Taining county official, who only gave his surname of Wei, said firefighters and police were attempting to reach the buried, who were working on a hydropower project.

An official at the department said by phone that the cause of the landslide was still unclear, but that the area had seen rainfall in the past few days. Heavy rain has affected much of southern China since Wednesday, triggering floods and landslides, reports AP.

The official Xinhua News Agency reported that a 75-year-old woman and her 3-year-old great-grandson were washed away in an overflowing river from Friday to Saturday in Hubei province.



Election posters of Philippine candidates are seen hanging above a jeepney driving along a main street in Pritil, Tondo city, metro Manila in the Philippines yesterday, ahead of the election today. The candidates for the election are shown here (from left) Davao city mayor Rodrigo "Digong" Duterte, Senator Grace Poe, former Interior Secretary Manuel "Mar" Roxas, Vice-President Jejomar Binay and Senator Miriam Santiago. Security forces fanned out across the Philippines yesterday following a vicious and deadly election campaign.

Afghan road crash inferno kills 73

At least 73 people were killed yesterday when two passenger buses and an oil tanker burst into flames in a head-on collision in eastern Afghanistan, health officials said, in one of the worst road accidents in the war-battered nation.

Many of the dead, including women and children, were burned beyond recognition and dozens of others were left badly injured in the accident in Ghazni province, near the Afghan capital, one of the areas worst affected by the Taliban insurgency.

The vehicles were completely gutted and clouds of acrid smoke shrouded the scene of the crash on the Kabul-Kandahar highway, a major roadway linking Afghanistan's two largest cities.

"The death toll has soared to 73," ministry spokesman Ismail Kawoosi told AFP, warning that the toll was expected to rise still further.

"Most of them are completely burned." Kawoosi gave a sharply higher toll than other officials. Ghazni's Governor Mohammad Aman Hamimi earlier reported seven fatalities but his own spokesman gave a death toll of 50.

Bloodied, dazed and badly burned, many of the survivors streamed into Ghazni's main provincial hospital, while many others were rushed in ambulances to health facilities in southern Kandahar city.

The Kabul-Kandahar highway passes through militancy prone areas and many bus drivers are known to drive recklessly at top speeds so as not to get caught in insurgent activity.

"Our driver was at fault -- he was driving too rashly," said Esmatullah, one of the few lucky passengers who survived yesterday's crash with minor injuries.

"Most bus drivers on the highways are known to smoke hashish, opium and other drugs. They are completely out of control."

Afghanistan has some of the world's most dangerous roads, often in dilapidated condition and traffic rules are seldom enforced. Many in the country rely on old and rickety passenger vehicles, meaning that high casualty road traffic accidents are common.

Turkey kills 55 IS militants in Syria

Turkish forces launched a salvo of artillery strikes on northern Syria that killed 55 members of the Islamic State group, Turkish news agencies reported yesterday.

Artillery units stationed near the border struck IS group targets near Aleppo on Saturday evening, destroying three missile launchers and three vehicles according to the state-run Anadolu news agency and the Dogan news service.

The reports could not immediately be independently verified. Since the start of the year, the Turkish border town of Kilis has come under frequent attack from rockets fired across the border from Syria that have killed at least 21 people, prompting the army to respond with howitzer fire.

Kilis is about 60 kilometres north of Aleppo, Syria's embattled, biggest city and the biggest strategic prize in a more than five-year-old civil war.

Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said this week that Turkey is ready to send troops into Syria "if necessary". Turkey has previously discussed a land invasion but ruled out intervening alone.

Turkey, which has been hit by attacks blamed on jihadists including two deadly suicide bombings in Istanbul that targeted foreign tourists, began to carry out air strikes against the IS group in Syria last summer.

Ankara also allows US jets to use its air base in southern Turkey for air strikes on the extremist group in Syria.

Earlier on Saturday, US-led coalition air strikes in Syria killed 48 Islamic State militants, according to a report from state-run Anadolu Agency.

N Korea a responsible nuke state

Kim Jong-un says he will only use nuke if attacked, unveils 5-year economic plan

North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un told a rare ruling party congress that his country was a "responsible" nuclear weapons state, with a no first-use policy and a commitment to non-proliferation, state media reported yesterday.

Speaking to thousands of delegates gathered for the first Workers' Party congress in more than 35 years, Kim also announced a new five-year plan to boost the impoverished country's moribund economy and "revitalise" people's lifestyles.

His remarks on Saturday, the second day of the congress, came amid growing concerns that the North might be on the verge of conducting a fifth nuclear test.

Kim had opened the congress with a defiant defence of the nuclear weapons programme, praising the "magnificent... and thrilling" test of what Pyongyang claimed was a powerful hydrogen bomb on January 6.

But his report to the conclave on Saturday stressed that North Korea was also a "responsible nuclear weapons state" with an arsenal built for deterrence.

"Our republic will not use a nuclear weapon unless its sovereignty is encroached upon by any aggressive hostile forces with nukes," he said, according to an English translation of his speech by the North's official KCNA news agency.

That formula would appear to allow for the use of nuclear weapons against a conventional attack by a nuclear power, but the Korean-language version made it clear that the scenario involved an actual nuclear attack.

Kim also vowed that Pyongyang would "faithfully fulfil" its non-proliferation obligations and push for global denuclearisation.



North Korea withdrew from the global Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003 -- the first signatory country to ever do so.

Pyongyang's nuclear weapons doctrine has always been a complex mix of self-defence, deterrence and threat.

At the time of its first nuclear test in 2006, North Korea stressed that it would "never use

nuclear weapons first".

And when it codified its nuclear programme in North Korea law in April 2013, it stated that nuclear weapons could only be used to repel invasion or attack by another nuclear power.

But in recent years, and especially in the wake of tough UN sanctions imposed over its fourth test in January, it has issued repeated warnings of pre-emptive nuclear strikes against South Korea and the United States.

The party congress is widely seen as Kim's formal "coronation" as supreme leader, more than four years after he took power following the death of his father, late ruler Kim Jong-Il, in December 2011.

On the economic front, Kim unveiled a five-year economic plan to improve efficiency and output across key sectors, with a particular emphasis on energy. But his report offered little in the way of specific policy initiatives or numerical targets.

Kim's rule has been associated with his "byungjin" policy of pursuing nuclear weapons in tandem with economic development.

Some analysts had suggested Kim might use the congress to signal a tilt towards the economic side of the equation.

In his address, Kim also said North Korea would seek to improve and normalise relations with previously "hostile" countries.



New London mayor blasts Tory smear campaign

London's new Muslim mayor Sadiq Khan yesterday accused Prime Minister David Cameron of using "Donald Trump playbook" tactics to try to divide communities in a bid to prevent his election.

The day after being sworn in with a promise to be "mayor for all Londoners", the Labour lawmaker condemned Cameron's Conservatives for trying to link him to Islamic extremists during the election campaign.

"They used fear and innuendo to try to turn different ethnic and religious groups against each other -- something straight out of the Donald Trump playbook," Khan wrote in The Observer newspaper.

"Londoners deserved better and I hope it's something the Conservative party will never try to repeat." Khan won 57 percent of the vote in Thursday's mayoral election, securing 1.3 million votes to see off multi-



millionaire Tory Zac Goldsmith and making history as the first Muslim mayor of a major Western capital.

The 45-year-old, the son of a Pakistani immigrant bus driver, hailed his victory as a triumph of "unity over division" after weeks of Tory criticism over his past appearances at public events alongside radical Muslims.

A number of Conservative politicians criticised the tone of the campaign, but Defence Secretary Michael Fallon said the questions raised had been legitimate.



A flotilla of small water craft form a blockade preventing shipping access to Australia's largest coal port in Newcastle, north of Sydney, Australia, yesterday. (Right) Girls from the Pacific islands, who are bearing the brunt of climate change, pose for pictures by the shoreline. Hundreds of protesters gathered in Newcastle Harbour calling for urgent action to end the use of fossil fuels and move to one hundred percent renewable energy in 2016.

UN calls for reforms in Sri Lanka judiciary

United Nations human rights experts on Saturday urged Sri Lanka, which is under scrutiny for its human rights record during the 26-year Tamil insurgency, to implement judicial reforms to speed up prosecutions.

Sri Lanka agreed last year to establish a judicial process involving foreign judges and prosecutors to investigate alleged war crimes during the conflict in line with UN recommendations.

The government has promised an impartial investigation into human rights violations by both sides in the final phase of the war, which ended with the military defeat of the Tamil Tigers separatist guerrillas in 2009.

Canada wildfire out of control: officials

A ferocious wildfire wreaking havoc in Canada doubled in size Saturday and officials warned that the situation in the parched Alberta oil sands region was "unpredictable and dangerous."

"This remains a big, out of control, dangerous fire," Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale said of the raging inferno bigger than London that forced the evacuation of the city of Fort McMurray.

Winds were pushing the flames east of the epicenter around the oil city late Saturday, as nearly all 25,000 people who were still trapped to the north finally left town, either via airlift or convoys on the roads.

Saudi Arabia sacks oil minister

Saudi King Salman replaced his long-serving oil minister on Saturday as part of a major government overhaul which comes as the kingdom grapples with a slump in energy revenues.

The revamp follows last month's announcement of an ambitious plan to transform Saudi Arabia's economy to reduce its dependence on oil.

Ali al-Naimi, who held the post of oil minister for more

than two decades, was one of the most powerful figures within the OPEC oil cartel.

Naimi has been replaced by Khaled al-Falih, the longtime chief of state oil giant Saudi Aramco, who was previously health minister.

Falih takes on the enlarged portfolio of energy, industry and mineral resources, according to a royal decree announced Saturday by state media.

The government restructuring comes after Saudi Arabia last week unveiled a long-term reform programme dubbed "Vision 2030" to overhaul its economy that has been long-dependent on oil.

