

NEWSIN brief

13 killed in Myanmar jade mine tragedy

REUTERS, Yangon

A collapse at an illegal mine killed at least 13 people in Myanmar's northern Kachin State, a resident involved in rescue efforts said yesterday, the latest in a series of deadly accidents to hit the jade-mining area. The wall of the pit in Weikha Village in Hpakant, the centre of the opaque jade industry, collapsed on Monday after heavy rain, according to Naw Li, who was assisting in rescue efforts. Only two people were officially listed as missing.

Clinton declines final debate with Sanders

AFP, Washington

Democratic presidential frontrunner Hillary Clinton on Monday rejected an invitation to take part in a final campaign debate against her rival Bernie Sanders, her campaign said. Clinton spokeswoman Jennifer Palmieri said that the former secretary of state would concentrate on campaigning against presumptive Republican nominee Donald Trump instead.



Professor Jolie!

AFP, London

Hollywood star Angelina Jolie is to become a visiting professor at Britain's prestigious London School of Economics, the university announced Monday. Jolie was named as one of four new "visiting professors in practice" who will contribute to a new master's programme on "women, peace and security".

Iran, Saudi in new round of hajj talks

AFP, Tehran

An Iranian delegation was travelling to Saudi Arabia yesterday for talks on the annual hajj pilgrimage after the first round of talks failed to bridge gap, the official IRNA news agency. The team is headed for talks at the invitation of the Saudi Minister of Hajj for negotiations, said head of Iran's Hajj Organisation.

Strongest El Nino in 20 years ends

REUTERS, Sydney

The strongest El Nino in nearly 20 years, which damaged crop production in Asia and caused food shortages, has ended, the Australian Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) said yesterday. Climate indicators associated with El Nino, which emerged in 2015, have now returned to neutral levels, the BOM said. El Nino sees in a warming of sea-surface temperatures in the Pacific which can lead to scorching weather across Asia and east Africa, but heavy rains



Canada PM takes leave for romance

AFP, Tokyo

Whoever said romance was dead has obviously not met Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The 44-year-old pinup premier yesterday said he would take a day off ahead of G7 talks in Japan to celebrate his wedding anniversary with spouse Sophie Gregoire Trudeau, calling it an essential "work-life balance". The couple, who arrived in Japan on Monday, are headed to a traditional inn called a ryokan today before the two-day meeting of the club of rich nations begins Thursday.



Members of the Iraqi pro-government forces drive their vehicles near the city of Fallujah yesterday, as part of a major assault to retake the city from Islamic State (IS) group. Inset, Shia fighters ride on a vehicle near Fallujah.

Pressure mounts on IS

AFP, Beirut

Pressure mounted on the Islamic State group yesterday as a Kurdish-Arab alliance launched a major assault north of the jihadists' Syrian bastion of Raqa and Iraqi forces advanced on their stronghold of Fallujah. The twin offensives marked some of the most serious ground efforts against IS since the group declared its self-styled "caliphate" straddling the Syrian-Iraqi border in 2014. Territory under IS control has been steadily shrinking for months but -- in a sign of its continued ability to mount attacks -- the group has carried out a wave of violence including bombings in the Syrian regime's coastal heartland Monday that killed more than 160 people.

Yesterday, Kurdish and Arab fighters announced their largest offensive to date against IS territory north of Raqa, the group's de facto Syrian capital.

The Syrian Democratic Forces -- a seven-month-old alliance between Kurdish and Arab forces -- said it would push IS from the province's north and secure other areas already seized from

the jihadists. Its statement, posted on Twitter, made no mention of the provincial capital, Raqa city.

Baghdad-based US military spokesman Colonel Steve Warren confirmed the assault, saying: "The SDF have begun operations to clear the northern countryside, so this is putting pressure on Raqa."

The Hashed al-Shaabi umbrella paramilitary organisation, dominated by Tehran-backed Shia militias that are heavily involved in the operation, said ground was also gained south of Fallujah. With forces converging on the city, concerns grew that the estimated 50,000 civilians believed to still be inside had nowhere to go.

A Fallujah resident reached by telephone told AFP there was heavy shelling on the northern edge of the city yesterday.

Iraqi and US-led coalition aircraft have been pounding Fallujah and its surroundings in recent days to support the operation.

WAR ON ISLAMIC STATE

Kurdish-Arab alliance launches offensive north of militants de-facto capital in Syria

Iraqi forces presses on with Fallujah offensive; concern grows for trapped civilians

The US military will conduct air strikes in support of the "several thousand" SDF fighters, some of whom have been trained and equipped by the United States, he said.

If Raqa falls, "it's the beginning of the end of their caliphate," Warren said. Just before the SDF announcement, Russia said it would be ready to coordi-

Sonowal sworn in as Assam CM

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

A Bharatiya Janata Party government was installed for the first time in northeastern India yesterday when Sarbananda Sonowal was sworn in as chief minister of Assam state bordering Bangladesh.

Sonowal, 53, and was sworn-in by Assam Governor Padmanabha Balakrishna Acharya, a veteran BJP leader, in the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other dignitaries at a huge public function in Guwahati, capital of Assam.

Along with him, ten ministers including from BJP's alliance partners Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and Bodo Peoples Front (BPF), also took their oath of office at the function which was also attended by BJP President Amit Shah.

Outgoing Congress chief minister Tarun Gogoi was also present at the function.

The installation of Assam's first BJP government was turned into a major show of force by the party whose top leaders including L K Advani, Rajnath Singh, Nitin Gadkari, were present on the occasion. All BJP chief ministers were also present at the function.

BJP won simple majority along with its allies in the 126-member Assam legislature in recent elections ending 15 years of unbroken Congress party rule in the state.



Slain Taliban chief travelled on Pak passport: officials

Militants struggle to select his successor

AFP, Quetta

Slain Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour used a Pakistani passport in a false name to make dozens of foreign trips over a ten-year period, mainly to the United Arab Emirates, officials told AFP yesterday.

The revelation casts further light on the degree of assistance likely given by Islamabad to him and other senior Taliban figures as they orchestrated a deadly insurgency against Afghan and US-led troops.

Mansour, who was killed in a US drone strike deep inside Pakistani territory on Saturday along with a driver, was travelling with a passport and ID card bearing the name "Muhammad Wali".

Three investigation officials said Mansour used the passport for extensive travel, mainly between the southern Pakistani city of Karachi and Dubai in the UAE but also to Iran.

He travelled 37 times, mostly to Dubai from Karachi, during the last 10 years, a senior investigating official told AFP. The official said he last left for Iran on April 25 and returned on the morning of May 21, the day he fell victim to the drone strike.

Iran has denied Mansour entered and left on those dates. Mansour was appointed head of the Taliban in July 2015. His death has been confirmed by US President Barack Obama.

Meanwhile reports said the Afghan Taliban are struggling to find a successor to Mansour, with one saying the two main contenders have backed out of the leadership race.

That development will complicate the job of the Taliban's supreme council, which has been holding emergency meetings since Sunday at an undisclosed location in Pakistan to find a unifying figure for the leadership post.



A migrant family carries their belongings during an evacuation operation by police forces of a makeshift migrant camp at the border at the Greek-Macedonian border near the village of Idomeni, yesterday. Greek police yesterday moved hundreds of migrants out of the overcrowded camp of Idomeni, launching a major operation to clear up the squalid tent city where thousands fleeing war and poverty had lived for months.

IS attack 'destroyed Syria airbase'

Report says base was used by Russia; powers scramble to save truce after deadly attacks

AFP, London

Satellite imagery appears to show extensive damage to an air base in Syria used by Russian forces following an attack by fighters from the Islamic State group, US intelligence company Stratfor said yesterday.

The claim was immediately denied by Russia's defence ministry which said that the damage had been there for months and was due to fighting between Syrian government forces and "militants from terror groups".

The report came as Washington and Moscow scrambled to salvage Syria's shaky ceasefire yesterday as the country reeled from jihadist bombings that killed more than 160 people in President Bashar al-Assad's coastal heartland.

The latest attempts to salvage the truce come after at least 161 people were killed in car bombings and suicide attacks on Monday in the northwestern cities of Jableh and Tartus that were claimed by the Islamic State group.

Stratfor released satellite images dated from May 14 and May 17, implying that the damage to the T-4 base, also known as Tiyas, was caused in that time.

The images suggest four helicopters and 20 lorries were destroyed by fire inside the base, which strategically located in central Syria between war-ravaged Palmyra and Homs. "The T4 air base was severely damaged by an Islamic State artillery attack. In particular, four Russian Mi-24 attack helicopters appear to have been destroyed," Stratfor said on their website.

Obama stuns Vietnam street shop owner

AFP, Hanoi

She has ladled out countless bowls of her pork noodle soup, but the owner of a Hanoi street-side restaurant says she was stunned when Barack Obama strolled in, pulled up a plastic stool and slurped down Vietnam's famed "bun cha" delicacy.

The US president slipped away from his hectic Vietnam visit on Monday night to sample the dish with Anthony Bourdain, a chef and food critic who fronts a travel show about hidden culinary gems around the world.

While 54-year-old restaurant owner Nguyen Thi Lien knew a foreign television crew was on the way, she had no idea they would be bringing a very special guest.

"His presence in our restaurant was a great surprise for my whole family, who could never have imagined it, even in our dreams," she told AFP yesterday. She regretted not posing for a picture with the president.

Bourdain posted a picture of the dinner on his Instagram feed with the caption "The President's chopstick skills are on point". "Total cost of bun cha dinner with the President: \$6.00. I picked up the check," Bourdain, who is renowned for his love of cheap street-side food, later tweeted.

Vietnam is known for its fresh ingredients and healthy cuisine but Obama's choice of bun cha, which with its fatty pork and sweet broth is at the more gluttonous end of the country's culinary spectrum, might have raised the eyebrows of his wife Michelle who has long campaigned for healthy eating.

UK grants refugee status to Nasheed

AFP, London

Former Maldives president Mohamed Nasheed says he has been granted refugee status in Britain, after being toppled from power and jailed in a "slide towards authoritarianism" that has forced him into exile.

"President Yameen has jailed every opposition leader and cracked down on anyone who dares to oppose or criticise him," Nasheed, 49, said in a statement Monday proclaiming his refugee status.

"Given the slide towards authoritarianism in the Maldives, myself and other opposition politicians feel we have no choice but to work from exile -- for now."

The Maldives government reacted swiftly, accusing Nasheed of trying to avoid serving his prison sentence.

"The government of the Maldives is disappointed, if confirmed, that the UK government is allowing itself to be part of this charade, and further, is enabling an individual to circumvent his obligations under the law," it said in a statement.

Last month, President Yameen stripped Nasheed of his pension and medical insurance benefits granted by the constitution to former leaders. Nasheed, the country's first democratically elected leader, was sentenced to 13 years imprisonment on controversial terrorism charges last year, but was allowed to travel to Britain in January for spinal cord surgery after he fell ill.

