

NEWSIN brief

Up to 40 feared dead in California fire

AFP, Oakland
Fire crews in California were yesterday searching the charred remains of a warehouse gutted by a blaze during a rave party, with officials saying the death toll could reach 40. Relatives of dozens of people missing in the Friday night blaze in Oakland endured an anxious wait for news. Nine people have been confirmed dead so far.

Austria far-right eyes presidency in vote

AFP, Vienna
Austrians returned to the polls yesterday in a bitterly fought election re-run which could see the European Union's first far-right president. Norbert Hofer of the hardline Freedom Party said he felt "calm and optimistic" as he cast his ballot in his hometown of Pinkafeld, south of Vienna.

US Greens take recount bid to upper court

REUTERS, Harrisburg
Green Party candidate Jill Stein late Saturday vowed to bring her fight for a recount of votes cast in Pennsylvania in the US presidential election to federal court, after a state judge ordered her campaign to post a \$1 million bond. "The Stein campaign will continue to fight for a statewide recount in Pennsylvania," Jonathan Abady, lead counsel to Stein's recount efforts, said in a statement.

Fake US embassy in Ghana shut down

REUTERS, Accra
Authorities in Ghana have busted a fake US embassy in the capital Accra run by a criminal network that for a decade issued illegally obtained authentic visas, the US State Department said. Until it was shut down, the sham embassy was housed in a run-down, pink two-storey building with a corrugated iron roof and flew a US flag outside.



FIDEL CASTRO'S ASHES INTERRED

View from a distance of the burial ceremony of Cuban leader Fidel Castro at the Santa Ifigenia cemetery in Santiago de Cuba, yesterday. Castro was laid to rest alongside the mausoleum of Cuban independence hero Jose Marti, ensuring that the polarising nature of Castro's life will continue in death.

PHOTO: AFP

Italy votes for change PM Renzi expected to resign if he loses reform referendum

AFP, Rome

Italians went to the polls yesterday in a constitutional referendum on which reformist Prime Minister Matteo Renzi has staked his future.

Whatever the outcome of a vote being anxiously watched in capitals across Europe and carefully scrutinised on trading floors around the world, it will lead to change.

If the centre-left Renzi's proposals to streamline a 68-year-old parliamentary system are voted down, he has vowed to resign.

That would usher in a period of political uncertainty and potential economic turmoil for the country and its European Union allies.

The most apocalyptic scenarios involve a crisis of investor confidence causing the failure of a rescue scheme for Italy's most indebted banks, triggering a broader crisis across the eurozone.

But markets last week, while jittery, appeared to have discounted that risk.

If Renzi wins, the country's youngest ever prime minister will be energised in his bid to transform Italy.

Critics say Italy will have been deprived of democratic checks and balances put in place in the aftermath of World War II following the disastrous rule of fascist dictator Benito Mussolini.

Victory for Renzi will mean a new mandate to pursue reforms he sees as key to unshackling Italy's creativity from the influence of a self-serving political caste that has exploited institutional weakness to stymie change.

Polls opened at 7am (0600 GMT) and were scheduled to close at 2200 GMT, with a reliable result not expected until



Stop Rohingya genocide

Malaysia PM strongly urges Suu Kyi, mocks the Nobel peace laureate for her inaction

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Aung San Suu Kyi must step in to prevent the "genocide" of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, Malaysia's prime minister said yesterday as he mocked the Nobel peace laureate for her inaction.

Addressing a 5,000-strong rally in Kuala Lumpur, Najib Razak said the Myanmar government must stop the bloody crackdown in its far west that has sent thousands of Rohingya fleeing, many with stories of rape, torture and murder.

"What's the use of Aung San Suu Kyi having a Nobel prize?" Najib asked a raucous crowd.

"We want to tell Aung San Suu Kyi, enough is enough... We must and we will defend Muslims and Islam," he said as supporters chanted "Allahu Akbar" ("God is greater").

"We want the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) to act.

"Please do something. The UN do something. The world cannot sit and watch genocide taking place," said Najib.

More than 10,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh in recent weeks, the United



A senior minister has called on Asean, the ten-country Southeast Asia bloc, to review Myanmar's membership, while a strongly worded statement from the foreign ministry Saturday accused Myanmar of engaging in "ethnic cleansing."

But analysts said yesterday the issue is a convenient smokescreen for Najib, who is fighting allegations he took part in the looting of billions of dollars of public cash

Nations said on Wednesday, escaping a bloody army crackdown in the north of Rakhine state. Arrivals in Bangladesh have told AFP horrifying stories of gang rape, torture and murder at the hands of Myanmar's security forces.

Myanmar has denied allegations of abuse, but has also banned foreign journalists and independent investigators from the area.

Muslim-majority Malaysia has recently upped its criticism of Myanmar for its handling of the crisis.

Last month it summoned the Myanmar ambassador, while around 500 Malaysians and Rohingyas marched to the embassy in the Malaysian capital carrying banners denouncing the "genocide."

Raul vows to defend Fidel's revolution

Cuban President Raul Castro pledged Saturday evening to uphold his brother Fidel's socialist revolution at a massive rally in honor of the communist icon before his burial. Tens of thousands of flag-waving supporters recited the oath with Raul Castro at the Revolution Plaza of Santiago de Cuba, the cradle of Fidel's guerrilla struggle. "He demonstrated that yes we could, yes we can, yes we will overcome any obstacle, threat, turbulence in our firm resolve to build socialism in Cuba," he said. "In front of Fidel's remains ... we swear to defend the fatherland and socialism," said Castro, who took over when his brother fell ill in 2006. "Fidel! Fidel! Until victory, always!" Castro said at the evening rally attended by a few foreign leaders **AFP**

CUBA'S POLITICAL HEAVYWEIGHTS

Raul Castro says he will step down from power after the next Communist Party congress in 2018



RAUL CASTRO RUZ
Aged 85
President and First Secretary of the Communist Party



MIGUEL DIAZ-CANEL
Aged 56
Raul Castro's designated successor. First Vice President of the cabinet



BRUNO RODRIGUEZ
Aged 58
Foreign Minister
Politburo member



MARINO MURILLO
Aged 55
Economy Minister



ESTEBAN LAZO
Aged 72
President of the National Assembly



RAMIRO VALDES
Aged 84
Vice President of the Council of State and Ministers



JOSE R. MACHADO VENTURA
Aged 86
Deputy Secretary of the Communist Party of Cuba



LEOPOLDO CINTRA FRIAS
Aged 75
Defense Minister and General in the Army



PHOTO: REUTERS

MOSUL OFFENSIVE

Displaced Iraqis, who fled the IS stronghold of Mosul, carry empty containers as they wait in line to fill them with fuel to be used for cooking and lighting at Khazer camp, Iraq yesterday. Forces from the Iraqi army retook four villages from the IS group northeast of the city of Mosul, the Joint Operations Command said.

Trump a clever man

Says Putin, predicts US president-elect will soon grasp new level of responsibility and act accordingly

AFP, Moscow

President Vladimir Putin in an interview aired yesterday called US President-elect Donald Trump intelligent and predicted he would quickly grasp his new level of responsibility and act accordingly.

"Since he managed to achieve success in business, that shows he is a clever person," the Russian strongman said in an interview with NTV television that has already aired in the country's far east, quoted by TASS news agency.

"If he's clever, that means he will fully and quite quickly grasp a different level of responsibility."

Putin said that Russia "expects that he will act precisely on this basis."

Speaking about Russia's relations with the West, Putin said attempts to create a bipolar world had failed: "The situation is changing. I think it is not a secret to anyone,

everyone sees it, that many of our partners already prefer to stick to principles of international law, because the world's balance is being gradually restored."

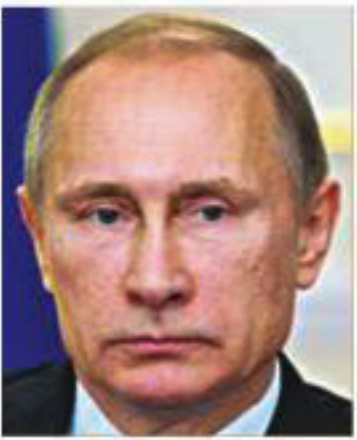
The Kremlin said last month that the two men agreed, in their first phone call after Trump's election win in November, on the need to "normalise" Russia-US relations.

Putin on Thursday reiterated Moscow's readiness to work with Trump's administration once the president-elect takes office in January.

"It is important to normalise and start to develop bilateral relations on an equal and mutually-beneficial basis," Putin said in his annual state of the nation address.

Trump has praised Putin's leadership and said he looks forward to "a strong and enduring relationship with Russia."

During the US election campaign, Putin praised him for appealing effectively to disenchanted American electors.



Leave or die

Syrian army tells rebels as fierce fighting shakes Aleppo

AGENCIES

Syria's army says it is offering rebel fighters in besieged eastern Aleppo an opportunity to leave the city with their lives.

Army spokesman Brig Gen Samir Suleiman said those who choose to stay will face "inevitable death."

He spoke to The Associated Press in Aleppo, where government forces and allied militias are seeking to collapse an opposition pocket on the city's eastern side.

"We will continue fighting until we restore stability and security to all neighborhoods" of Aleppo, Suleiman said.

Meanwhile, rebels in Aleppo have told the US they will not leave their besieged enclave in the city after Moscow called for talks with Washington over their withdrawal, signaling they will fight on even as their top commander was wounded.

Speaking to Reuters from Turkey, senior rebel official Zakaria Malahifji said groups fighting in Aleppo told US officials on

Saturday they would not leave the city.

The US officials had asked the rebels "do you want to leave, (or) do you want to be steadfast", Malahifji said.

"Our response to the Americans was as follows: 'we cannot leave our city, our homes, to the mercenary militias that the regime has mobilized in Aleppo'," said Malahifji, the head of the political office of an Aleppo rebel group.

Fierce fighting shook east Aleppo yesterday as Syrian government forces pressed an assault that has seen them retake control of more than half of the former rebel stronghold.

Syrian state television showed what it said was live footage from the front line, with its correspondent crouched by a building as explosions were heard in the distance and warplanes screeched overhead.

The Syrian army holds more than 60 percent of east Aleppo after seizing the Tariq al-Bab neighbourhood on Friday night and making additional advances on Saturday, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a monitor.

WAR IN SYRIA

Pak wages undeclared war

Says Afghan president; claims Taliban won't last without Islamabad's support

AFP, New Delhi

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani yesterday accused Pakistan of waging an "undeclared war" and said Taliban insurgents battling his government would not last a month without sanctuary in the neighbouring state.

Ghani also urged Pakistan to spend around \$500 million pledged in aid for Afghanistan to tackle extremism instead.

"Despite our intense engagement with Pakistan on bilateral and multilateral basis, the undeclared war... not only has not abated but also intensified during 2016 with special intensity," Ghani said.

"One of the key figures in the Taliban movement recently said if they didn't have a sanctuary in Pakistan, they wouldn't last a month," he added.

The Taliban were toppled from power by a US-led invasion in 2001 and have battled the Kabul government and its foreign allies since then.

Afghan officials accuse Pakistan of supporting the Taliban and continuing to

provide sanctuaries on its soil in hopes of maintaining influence in Afghanistan.

The Afghan leader was speaking at the sixth ministerial conference of the Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process, a dialogue on ways to encourage security, political and economic cooperation

HEART OF ASIA CONFERENCE



among Afghanistan and its neighbours.

Delegations from more than a dozen countries including Pakistan, China, Russia, Turkey and Iran attended the conference in the northern Indian city of Amritsar yesterday.

They discussed challenges to the long-term growth and stability of the war-torn country.

India, the fifth largest bilateral donor to Afghanistan, has been a key supporter of Kabul's government and has poured more than \$2 billion into the country since the Taliban were toppled.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday promised his country's support for peace while also indirectly criticising Pakistan's role in the region.

"Terrorism and externally-induced instability pose the gravest threat to Afghanistan's peace, stability and prosperity," he said.

"(Support for peace) must be backed by resolute action. Not just against forces of terrorism, but also against those who support, shelter, train and finance them," Modi added, hinting at Pakistan.

Both the Indian and Afghan leaders in recent months have vocally blamed Pakistan for its support for groups and individuals behind attacks in their countries.

TAIWAN CALL

Chinese media blame Trump 'inexperience'

AFP, Beijing

Chinese state media said yesterday that US President-elect Donald Trump's "inexperience" led him to accept a phone call from Taiwan's leader but warned that any breach of the One China policy would "destroy" Sino-US relations.

The call "exposed nothing but (Trump's) and his transition team's inexperience in dealing with foreign affairs," said an editorial in the English-language China Daily newspaper, adding there was "no need to over-interpret" it.

But it hinted at the possible economic impact of any breakdown in ties, saying that China held \$1.19 trillion in US treasury bonds and had bilateral trade worth \$558 billion with the country last year.

"If Trump wants to overstep the One China principle, he will destroy Sino-US ties," it said.

Trump's call with Tsai Ing-wen Friday broke with decades of US foreign policy precedent, raising questions on whether it marked a deliberate pivot away from Washington's official "One China" stance.

Washington cut formal diplomatic relations with the island in 1979 and recognises Beijing as the sole government of "One China" -- while keeping friendly, non-official ties with Taipei.

China regards self-ruling Taiwan as part of its own territory awaiting reunification under Beijing's rule, and any US move that would imply support for independence would likely trigger fury.

Trump congratulated Tsai on her election as president this year and discussed the "close economic, political and security ties" of the US and