

NEWSIN brief

Trump taps Kelly to lead Homeland Security

AFP, New York

Donald Trump announced yesterday he will nominate retired general John Kelly to head the Department of Homeland Security. "General John Kelly's decades of military service and deep commitment to fighting the threat of terrorism inside our borders makes him the ideal choice to serve as our Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security," Trump said in a statement.

Greek police detonate bomb outside ministry

AFP, Athens

Greek police yesterday detonated a bomb outside the labour ministry in Athens following a warning phone call, a police source said. Bomb specialists blew up a backpack found outside the ministry building entrance in central Athens. Nobody was hurt. "It was a time bomb," a police source told AFP, adding the device was "faulty" as it had failed to explode at the time set.

Pak names new military intelligence chief

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan has named a new head of its powerful military Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI), two weeks after replacing the chief of army staff in a significant shift for the military that wields huge influence. Lt Gen Naveed Mukhtar was appointed as director-general of the ISI, replacing Lt Gen Rizwan Akhtar, who is being moved to the post of president of the National Defence University.

Bill English sworn in as NZ PM

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand's socially conservative finance chief Bill English was sworn in as the country's new prime minister yesterday following last week's shock resignation of his popular predecessor John Key.

The centre-right National Party caucus unanimously backed English at a meeting yesterday morning and he travelled to Government House in Wellington a few hours later to officially take over.

State Services Minister Paula Bennett was named as deputy leader.

IMF chief Lagarde on trial in France

AFP, Paris

IMF chief Christine Lagarde went on trial in France yesterday over a massive state payout to a flamboyant tycoon when she was finance minister in a case that risks tarnishing her stellar career. Lagarde denies the charges of negligence, arguing she was acting "in the state's interest" in making the payment to Bernard Tapie, the former owner of sportswear giant Adidas.



PHOTO: REUTERS

VARDHA BATTERS SOUTH INDIA COAST

Rescue members cut a tree that fell on a road after it was uprooted by strong winds in Chennai, India, yesterday. Cyclone Vardah barreled into the southeast coast of India, killing at least two people and bringing down trees and power lines as authorities moved tens of thousands of people from low-lying areas.

Aleppo battle in 'final phase'

10,000 more civilians flee as regime forces take major district

AFP, Aleppo

The Syrian army recaptured a major district of Aleppo yesterday, leaving rebel fighters cornered in a small pocket as the battle for the city entered its "final phase".

President Bashar al-Assad's forces held more than 90 percent of the one-time opposition stronghold of east Aleppo, a monitor and military official said, and appeared on the verge of retaking the entire city.

A Syrian military official in Aleppo told AFP the "operation in eastern neighbourhoods is entering its final phase", as fierce clashes were reported in the few districts of the city left under rebel control.

The fall of Aleppo would deal the rebels their worst defeat since the beginning of Syria's conflict in 2011, and leave the government in control of the country's five major cities.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group reported early yesterday that the army had captured the large Sheikh Saeed district in

southeast Aleppo.

More than 10,000 civilians have fled eastern parts of Aleppo in the past 24 hours for districts of the city under the control of Syria's government, the monitors said.

Overnight and into yesterday morning, government warplanes and artillery pounded the remaining rebel-held

SYRIA WAR

Kremlin blames lack of US cooperation for Palmyra blow

Russia guilty of 'constant lies' over ceasefire: France

Raids kill 34 civilians in IS-held villages

territory in the east of the city.

The Kremlin yesterday deplored the lack of cooperation with the United States in Palmyra after Islamic State jihadists re-entered the ancient Syrian city at the weekend.

"We regret that we have yet to completely neutralise their offensive," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov

said of the fighters return to the fabled city after an eight-month absence.

France yesterday accused Russia of constantly lying over its role in Syria, saying it was claiming to battle IS group militants when it was only interested in backing Bashar al-Assad.

Another round of Russia-US talks on ending the bloody conflict made no progress at the weekend as the Syrian president's forces closed in on the last pockets of rebel resistance in Syria's second city, Aleppo.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault said the talks failed "because there is double-talk and a sort of permanent lie" on the part of Russia.

Meanwhile, at least 34 civilians, including 11 children, were killed yesterday in a series of air strikes on villages held by the Islamic State group in central Syria, a monitor said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said a barrage of air raids hit Oqayrabat and other nearby villages in the central province of Hama at dawn.

Turkey arrests 200 Kurds

Hits militants in Iraq after twin bombings in Istanbul

AFP, Ankara

Turkey arrested nearly 200 officials from a pro-Kurdish party and struck Kurdish militants in Iraq yesterday in response to this weekend's twin bombings claimed by a radical Kurd separatist group.

The toll from Saturday's attacks, which struck an Istanbul football stadium and a nearby park, rose to 44 yesterday, Health Minister Recep Akdag said.

Turkish jets pounded targets in northern Iraq, with the military saying it had hit "separatist terrorist organisation members", referring to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The armed forces said it struck targets in the Zap region of northern Iraq destroying the militants' headquarters as well as nearby shelters and gun positions.

And Turkish police detained 198 pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) officials over alleged links to Kurdish militants in a countrywide operation, state news agency Anadolu reported.

ANNUAL MESSAGE OF PEACE

Revenge is a dish best binned: Pope

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis is asking the world's political, economic, religious and media leaders to swap aggression, mudslinging and revenge for "non-violence" in his annual message of peace published yesterday.

His slogan? "Non-violence as a style of politics for peace". And those with clout in an increasingly poisonous society should be "refusing to discard people, harm the environment, or seek to win at any cost".

The Argentine's message -- which will be read out in Catholic churches on January 1, 2017 -- was published after a particularly intense weekend of violence, from a deadly bombing in Turkey to an attack on a Coptic church in Egypt.

It also comes amid debate about the growth of fake and malicious online news, and its possible influence on the US presidential election and Britain's vote to leave the European Union.

The pope cited Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King as models of non-violent peacemakers and said: "Violence is not the cure for our broken world. Countering violence with violence leads at best to forced migrations and enormous suffering."

The 79-year old said non-violence "is sometimes taken to mean surrender, lack of involvement and passivity, but this is not the case".

"When victims of violence are able to resist the temptation to retaliate, they become the most credible promoters of nonviolent peacemaking," he said.



The actions are likely to raise fears Ankara is going further in its crackdown and acting out of revenge against pro-Kurdish politicians who stand accused of links to the PKK - a charge that the HDP denies.

The weekend's bloodshed was claimed by the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), seen as a radical offshoot of the PKK.

TAK has claimed three major strikes this year in Istanbul and Ankara, killing a total of at least 73 people.

In the aftermath, a defiant President Recep Tayyip Erdogan vowed to fight terror "to the end."

Since the collapse of a ceasefire in July last year, Ankara has vowed to wipe out the PKK and has conducted several military operations against the group.

There have been frequent clashes between security forces and PKK militants and almost daily attacks on the military carried out by the group's fighters in the southeast.

Senior diplomats from various European countries paid their respects outside the Besiktas stadium yesterday, laying wreaths that added to the sea of flowers left by mourners.

ONE CHINA POLICY

Beijing warns Trump

AFP, Beijing

Beijing issued its first clear warning yesterday over Donald Trump's fiery rhetoric, as state media said the Asian giant could back "forces hostile to the US" if the president-elect follows through with threats to drop Washington's One China policy.

It was the strongest signal yet from Chinese authorities that abandoning the One China policy, which guides relations with self-ruling Taiwan, would upset decades of carefully managed Sino-US relations and end cooperation between the world's top two economies.

Beijing has not controlled Taiwan for more than 60 years but foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said it considered the island a "core interest" that affected China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The One China policy was the "political bedrock" for relations with the US, he added, and if it was "compromised or disrupted", sound and steady growth in China-US relations and cooperation in major fields would be "out of the question", he told reporters.

The comments came in response to Trump's remarks in an interview Sunday that he did not see why Washington must "be bound by a One China policy unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade".

He vehemently defended taking a call earlier this month from Tsai Ing-wen, the democratically elected president of Taiwan, which Beijing regards as a rogue province awaiting unification.

Although the United States is Taiwan's main ally and arms supplier, Washington has not had official diplomatic relations with Taipei since 1979.



MOSUL OFFENSIVE

A member of the Iraqi Army fires during clashes with Islamic State militants in the south of Mosul, Iraq, yesterday. Several thousand Iraqi federal police are ready to join the assault against Islamic State in east Mosul, reinforcing troops who have faced weeks of fierce counter-attacks from the militants.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Myanmar calls Asean talks over Rohingya

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar has called an emergency Asean meeting to discuss the Rohingya crisis, a diplomat said yesterday, as regional tensions deepen over a bloody military crackdown on the country's Muslim minority.

More than 20,000 Rohingya have flooded into Bangladesh over the past two months, fleeing a military campaign in Myanmar's western Rakhine state.

Their stories of mass rape and murder at the hands of security forces have galvanised protests in Muslim nations around the region, with Buddhist-majority Myanmar facing diplomatic pressure from its neighbours.

Last week Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak lashed out at Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi for allowing "genocide" on her watch, speaking before thousands of angry protesters in Kuala Lumpur. Myanmar, which has vehemently denied the accusations, responded by angrily summoning Malaysia's ambassador and banning its workers from going to the country.

A diplomatic source in the Philippines confirmed Myanmar had invited them for an emergency Asean meeting to discuss "the Rohingya issue".

The source declined to give more details on the meeting, which the Nikkei reported would be held in Yangon on December 19. Myanmar officials could not be reached for comment.

The bloodshed presents the biggest challenge to Nobel Peace prize winner Suu Kyi since her party won the country's first democratic elections in a generation last year.

FIRST SHOW OF MERCY

New Thai king pardons thousands of prisoners

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's new King Maha Vajiralongkorn has pardoned tens of thousands of prisoners, a first act of "mercy" as monarch as he reaches out to his subjects following the death of his beloved father.

Revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej died in October aged 88 after a seven-decade reign, leaving the politically febrile nation without its unifying figure.

His only son, 64-year-old Vajiralongkorn, was proclaimed king in early December.

But the thrice-divorced monarch is yet to draw the same level of devotion from a public well-versed in rumours over his private life even if any criticism of him is illegal.

The prisoner pardon was Vajiralongkorn's "first chance since he succeeded the throne to show the king's mercy", according to a state-

ment published Sunday in palace mouthpiece the Royal Gazette.

Pardons were annual events under Bhumibol.

Women jailed for first offences, some inmates who have served one third of their sentences, and prisoners with disabilities or serious illness were among those pardoned.

The decree did not say how many prisoners will be freed.

However the Bangkok Post, quoting Corrections Department chief Kobkai Kasiwat, said as many as 30,000 qualified for release, with another 70,000 expected to have their sentences reduced.

Ritual, propaganda and law underpin the status of Thailand's monarchy.

Thai schoolchildren are taught the primacy of the institution, while huge portraits of key royals adorn virtually every main street.

