

NEWS IN brief

Iran finally received Saudi hajj invite

Iran yesterday said it had finally received an official invitation from Saudi Arabia for its pilgrims to attend this year's hajj, two weeks after Riyadh announced it. There was no official Iranian delegation at last year's pilgrimage to the Muslim holy places after Sunni Saudi Arabia severed relations with Shia Iran following the torching of its missions in Tehran and Mashhad by protesters last January.

Another Palestinian knife attacker killed

Israeli troops in the occupied West Bank shot dead a Palestinian who attacked them with a knife during an overnight operation to arrest suspected militants, the army said yesterday. A Palestinian official said the man tried to prevent the soldiers from entering his home when he was shot. Since October 2015, 248 Palestinians, 40 Israelis, two Americans, a Jordanian, an Eritrean and a Sudanese have been killed, according to an AFP count.

Morocco bans burqas

Morocco has banned the production and sale of burqa full-face Muslim veils, apparently for security reasons, media reports said yesterday. While there was no official announcement by authorities in the North African nation, the reports said the interior ministry order would take effect this week.

Deep freeze claims six more lives in Poland

Six people died in Poland over a 24-hour period as temperatures plunged across Europe, bringing the toll of hypothermia deaths in the country to 71 since November, authorities said yesterday. A deep freeze sweeping across Europe has left at least 40 dead since the weekend, many of them migrants or homeless people.

Maritime kidnappings at 10-yr high: report

The number of maritime kidnappings hit a ten-year high in 2016, with waters off the southern Philippines becoming increasingly dangerous, the International Maritime Bureau said yesterday. While the overall number of pirate attacks has declined in recent years, the IMB said 62 people worldwide were kidnapped for ransom at sea last year compared to only 19 in 2015 and nine in 2014.



Iranians gather around a hearse carrying the coffin of former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani during his funeral ceremony in the capital Tehran, yesterday. Inset, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (2-R) and President Hassan Rouhani pay last respect to the deceased leader. Hundreds of thousands of mourners attended the funeral of Rafsanjani, whose death leaves a hole in the upper reaches of power for the country's moderates.

Raid on Yemen school kills 5

An air strike by the Saudi-led coalition on a primary school in rebel-held northern Yemen yesterday killed five people including two children, medical and military sources said. The headmaster and two other staff members were among those killed in the air raid in the district of Nihm, northeast of the capital Sanaa, which also left 13 wounded, the sources said. A medical source at Kuwait Hospital in Sanaa confirmed the casualty toll. A government military official said the school was hit by two missiles by mistake, accusing the Shia Huthi rebels of keeping armoured vehicles nearby. Rights groups have repeatedly criticised the coalition over the civilian casualties inflicted by its air strikes on rebel-held regions. In August, an air strike on a Koranic school in the northern Saada province killed 10 children and wounded 28 others, prompting a UN call for a swift investigation. More than 7,000 people have been killed so far in Yemen conflict.

Another step to sour ties

Says Russia as US seeks more sanctions over hacking, Ukraine, Syria

Alexander Bastrykin and Litvinenko's alleged assassins, lawmaker Andrei Lugovoi and Dmitri Kovtun, represented "further steps in the artificially created degradation of our relations". "We deeply regret the fact that a lingering period of unprecedented degradation in our bilateral ties occurred during (US President Barack) Obama's second presidential term," Peskov said. "We are convinced that this does not coincide with our interests or that of Washington." The US Treasury on Monday added Bastrykin, Lugovoi and Kovtun to the Magnitsky Act sanctions list in the latest spike of diplomatic tensions between Moscow and Washington. According to a preliminary summary of the legislation seen by Reuters, the bill would impose visa bans and freeze the assets of people "who engage in significant activities undermining the cybersecurity of public or private infrastructure and democratic institutions" or assist in such activities.

It would also impose secondary sanctions on those who engage with the Russian defense or intelligence sectors, which could affect international companies doing business with Russia. It also puts into law sanctions on Russia that President Barack Obama imposed via executive order late last month. US lawmakers have long called for a tougher response to Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region and intervention in the Syrian civil war on behalf of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Their impatience has increased since US intelligence agencies said Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a campaign to try to sway the 2016 presidential election in favor of Republican businessman Donald Trump. The bill also sets new sanctions over Ukraine and Syria, including putting into law four executive orders from the Obama administration sanctioning Russia over its actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

PAKISTAN'S MISSILE LAUNCH FROM SUBMARINE Arms race ramps up in S Asia

CNN ONLINE

The Pakistani army has successfully test-fired a nuclear-capable cruise missile from a submarine for the first time, less than a month after India launched its Agni-V missile. Inter-Services Public Relations, the media wing of Pakistan's military, says it will help bolster the country's defenses as its neighbors develop their own technology. ISPR called the test "a manifestation of the strategy of measured response to nuclear strategies and postures being adopted in Pakistan's neighborhood," which could be read as a veiled reference to India. Retired Pakistani army officer, Lt General Talat Masood told CNN this attempt by Pakistan to develop a genuine second-strike capability, is "only the beginning". But maintaining second-strike capability -- the ability to hit an adversary back after already being

attack -- with a submarine fleet is costly, both financially and diplomatically, Masood said. Pakistan's launch comes after India tested its intercontinental Agni-V ballistic missile in December. One expert says India likely won't lose sleep over this test. "It is a threat, but something the Indian navy is confident it can deal with," Bharat Karnad, a research professor at India's Centre for Policy Research told CNN. But India isn't overly worried about deterring Pakistan -- they've got their eye on China, and China in turn is focused on United States, according to Karnad. "It's a nuclear daisy chain to which there is really no solution," Karnad says. "It is the largest strategic problem for the region." While Karnad predicted a muted response from India, Jane's says the launch is likely to increase tensions between Pakistan and India due to the recent instability in Kashmir.



Blasts near Afghan parliament kill 30

Taliban claim responsibility; dozens wounded

Twin Taliban blasts struck near the Afghan parliament in Kabul yesterday, killing at least 30 people and wounding 80 in a rush-hour attack that shattered a relative lull in violence in the capital. The bombings came just hours after a Taliban suicide bomber killed seven people in Lashkar Gah, the capital of the volatile southern province of Helmand, as the militants ramp up attacks. The blasts in Kabul tore through employees exiting a parliament annex, which houses the offices of lawmakers, leaving the area littered with bloodied bodies. "A suicide bomber on foot caused the first explosion, leaving a number of innocent workers killed and wounded," Zabi, an injured parliament security guard, told AFP. "The second one was a car bomb. The vehicle was parked on the other side of the road and flung me back when it detonated," he said. The blasts left 30 people dead and 80 wounded, some of them in serious condition, health ministry spokesman Waheed Majroh told AFP, warning that the toll was expected to rise. The dead included at least four policemen who were killed in the second explosion when they rushed to help the victims of the first blast, a security official told AFP.



Detained farmers look on from a holding cell at a courthouse in Sintgaing in Mandalay region yesterday. Twenty-one farmers were granted bail by a Myanmar court yesterday after being jailed over a land-grab dispute with the military that has highlighted acute challenges faced by the rural poor. Land ownership is one of the most contentious issues in the formerly junta-run country, where the army stands accused of rampantly confiscating land during its 50-year rule.

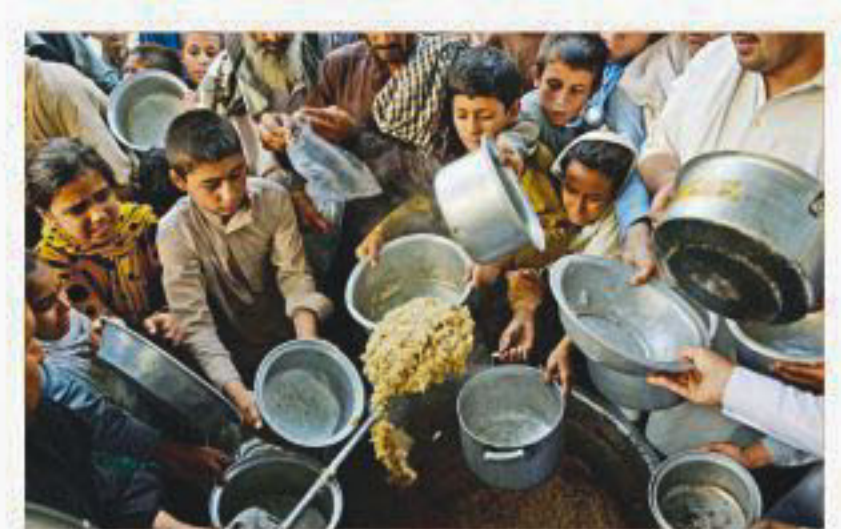
Thai king seeks changes to draft charter

Thailand's new king has ordered sections of the country's draft constitution to be rewritten, the junta chief said yesterday, a rare public intervention by the monarch in the kingdom's politics. King Maha Vajiralongkorn, 64, ascended the throne after the October death of his much loved father King Bhumibol Adulyadej, a unifying figure whose reign spanned seven politically turbulent decades. Yesterday, junta chief Prayut Chan-O-Cha said the king had declined to sign off on the new charter because of clauses concerning royal powers. The document was drafted by the junta after its

LACK OF INTERNATIONAL AID

Children starving to death in Afghanistan, warns UN

Afghan children are dying of hunger with a total of 9.3 million people in the country are in need of aid, the United Nations' humanitarian arm has warned. The latest news about the dire situation in the conflict-hit country comes amid pressure on the British government from Tory backbenchers and right-wing newspapers to slash international aid spending. Priti Patel, the International Development Secretary, has laid out measures to spread the aid budget according to "core Conservative principles" which aid charities have warned may mean compromising on assistance. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs issued a Humanitarian Needs Overview for Afghanistan, noting a 13 per cent increase in people in need of aid in the last year. "Afghanistan remains one of the most dangerous, and most violent, crisis ridden countries in the world," the report stated. The fighting killed a record 8,397 civilians in the first nine months of 2016, and displaced half a million by November. More than a quarter of all Afghan provinces have rates of malnutrition above 15 per cent, officially classifying them as emergencies. Most of the people who require assistance for malnutrition in the country are children under the age of five -- 1.3 million out of 1.8 million.



World powers meet for Iran nuke talks

Iran and major powers yesterday took stock of their 2015 nuclear deal, with Donald Trump's imminent inauguration and the death of a moderate former Iranian president raising worries about its future. Trump, who takes office on January 20, has vowed to dismantle the "disastrous" accord, which saw Iran drastically reduce its atomic activities in exchange for the lifting of painful sanctions. The death of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani on Sunday removed a widely respected backer in Iran of the deal at a time when frustration about the slow pace of sanctions relief is growing.

Civilian toll mounts

Iraq forces advance, accuse IS of using human shields

Iraqi forces fought their way into more districts of Mosul but advances in the city's southeast were being slowed by Islamic State's use of civilians for cover, military officials said yesterday. The United Nations said civilian casualties had streamed into nearby hospitals in the last two weeks as fighting intensified in the jihadist group's last major stronghold in Iraq. Advances by elite forces in the city's east and northeast have picked up speed in a new push since the turn of the year, and US-backed forces have for the first time reached the Tigris river, which bisects the city. Recapturing Mosul after more than two years of Islamic State rule would probably spell the end of the Iraqi side of the group's self-declared caliphate, which spans areas of Iraq and Syria. Forces in the city's eastern and northeastern districts, and in particular the elite Counter Terrorism Service (CTS), have made rapid gains in past days. Better defenses against militant car bombs and improved coordination among the advancing troops had helped put Islamic State on the back foot, US and Iraqi military officers said. But fighting in neighbourhoods in the southeast has been tougher. "The challenge is that they (IS) are hiding among civilian families, that's why our advances are slow and very cautious," Lieutenant-Colonel Abdel Amir al-Mohammedawi, a spokesman for the rapid response units of Iraq's federal police, told Reuters. He said militant fighters were hiding in mosques, schools and hospitals, using civilians as human shields. The United Nations' humanitarian coordination office (OCHA) said nearly 700 people had been taken to hospitals in cities in Kurdish-controlled areas outside Mosul in the last week, and more than 817 had required hospital treatment a week earlier. The US-backed operation to drive the militants from Mosul began in October and has recaptured villages and towns surrounding the city, and most of Mosul's eastern half.



2014 power grab and approved in a controversial referendum last year in which independent campaigning was banned. "There are three or four points that need to be amended concerning his authority (as king)," Prayut said, without elaborating on which specific clauses would be altered. The revision process would take several months, he added. It is an unusually assertive move by the palace -- an institution long portrayed as staunchly "above politics" despite several key interventions by Bhumibol during times of political crisis.