

NEWS IN brief

OIC to hold meeting on Rohingya crisis

Foreign ministers from the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation will meet to discuss the Rohingya Muslim crisis next week in Kuala Lumpur, a Malaysian official told AFP yesterday, as thousands continue to flee Myanmar. Fifty-six OIC representatives are expected to attend the January 19 meeting which will be led by Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, who recently called on Myanmar to stop the "genocide" of Rohingya Muslims.

Japan plans to have new emperor in 2019

Japan is planning for Emperor Akihito to retire and be replaced by his eldest son on January 1, 2019, reports said yesterday, as the country works on a legal framework for its first abdication in 200 years. Akihito, 83, expressed a desire in August to abdicate after nearly three decades on the Chrysanthemum Throne, citing his advancing age and weakening health.

Nepal sacks quake reconstruction chief

Nepal yesterday sacked the chief of its earthquake reconstruction body, a move seen by critics as politically motivated and likely to further delay rebuilding following the April 2015 disaster. Sushil Gyawali was appointed head of the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) a year ago after months of political wrangling over who should lead the agency.

Britain sets out legal basis for drone killings

Britain yesterday set out the legal basis for drone strikes against terror suspects overseas, saying new technology meant some terror attacks were developing too quickly for traditional law enforcement to react. Attorney General Jeremy Wright, the government's top legal officer, said international law must adapt to "changing times" where social media was used to inspire and train militants within a short space of time.

Pro-IS Indonesia group branded as 'terrorists'

The United States named Indonesia's most prominent pro-Islamic State group a "terrorist" organisation, imposing sanctions on the hundreds-strong network including freezing its U.S. assets. The State Department said termed Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) as a "specially designated global terrorist" organization.

'Fake news, it's phony stuff'

Trump assails US spy agencies, denies Russia has compromising info on him

President-elect Donald Trump yesterday flatly denied "phony" explosive allegations about ties with Russia and lurid behavior on a trip to Moscow that have tainted his election victory and threatened to engulf his presidency. Just over a week before Trump takes office, the United States has been rocked by unsubstantiated claims that his aides colluded with the Kremlin to win the election -- and that Russia has compromising sexual material on Trump. "I think it's a disgrace that information would be let out," Trump said, training fire on media outlets that published the allegations and the intelligence agencies who he suggested may have leaked it. "It's all fake news. It's phony stuff. It didn't happen," he said in his first press conference in nearly six months. "It was a group of opponents that got together, sick people, and they put that crap together."

page synopsis on the potentially embarrassing but unsubstantiated allegations involving Russia, according to CNN and The New York Times, who cited multiple unnamed US officials with knowledge of the meeting. The Kremlin has dismissed the dossier -- drawn up by a former British intelligence agent hired to do "opposition research" on Trump

"As far as hacking, I think it was Russia, but I also think we've been hacked by other countries, other people." "If Putin likes Donald Trump, I consider that an asset, not a liability, because we have a horrible relationship with Russia," Trump said. "I don't know that I'm going to get along with Vladimir Putin. I hope I do. But there's a good chance I won't."



Without corroborating its contents, BuzzFeed published a 35-page dossier of memos on which the synopsis presented to Trump is based. The memos, which had been circulating in Washington for months, describe sex videos involving prostitutes filmed during a 2013 visit by Trump to a luxury Moscow hotel, supposedly as a potential means for blackmail. They also suggest Russian officials proposed lucrative deals in order to win influence over the real estate magnate. Trump was reportedly informed of the existence of the dossier -- and its salacious details -- last Friday when he received a briefing from US intelligence chiefs on alleged Russian interference in the presidential election. The classified two-page synopsis reportedly included allegations that there was a regular flow of information during the campaign between Trump surrogates and Russian government intermediaries, which a Trump aide denied.

Sessions opposes ban on Muslims, waterboarding

AFP, Washington

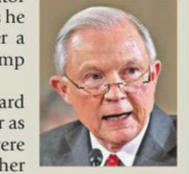
US President-elect Donald Trump's pick for attorney general, Jeff Sessions, promised on Tuesday to stand up to Trump, his close ally and future boss, saying he would oppose a ban on Muslims entering the country and enforce a law against waterboarding even though he voted against the measure.

Questioned for 10-1/2 hours by a US Senate committee responsible for confirming his appointment, Sessions, a US senator from Alabama, distanced himself from comments he had made defending Trump from criticism over a 2005 video that emerged in October showing Trump boasting about grabbing women's genitals.

At the time, Sessions told The Weekly Standard magazine he would not characterize the behavior as sexual assault. He later said the comments were taken out of context. Asked on Tuesday whether "grabbing a woman by her genitals without consent is ... sexual assault," he replied: "Clearly, it would be."

As attorney general, Sessions would serve as the top US law enforcement officer and be responsible for giving unbiased legal advice to the president and executive agencies.

Sessions said he would not support banning anyone from the United States on the basis of religion and that Trump's intentions were to restrict people from countries harboring terrorists, not all Muslims.



Russia today poses danger for US, world: Tillerson

AFP, Washington

President-elect Donald Trump's nominee to be secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, yesterday acknowledged that Russia poses an international danger and that its recent actions had "disregarded" US interests, as he faced a Senate grilling.

The former ExxonMobil chief executive's remark in his opening statement came against a backdrop of controversy over alleged Russian interference in the US presidential election and his own close ties to President Vladimir Putin.

"While Russia seeks respect and relevance on the global stage, its recent activities have disregarded American interests," Tillerson told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, without offering specifics.

Tillerson, whose entire professional career has been in the energy industry, has faced criticism for negotiating with several authoritarian leaders around the globe in his decades with Exxon.

But he stressed that as Washington's top diplomat, he will conduct a more robust US foreign policy than in recent years.

"Our NATO allies are right to be alarmed at a resurgent Russia," he said, adding that the United States "must also be clear-eyed about our relationship with Russia."

"Russia today poses a danger, but it is not unpredictable in advancing its own interests," he said.



US SANCTIONS EXTENSION

Iran decides not to upset nuclear deal

REUTERS, Vienna

Iran decided not to escalate a stand-off over the extension of US sanctions at a meeting of diplomats overseeing the nuclear deal it reached with world powers in 2015, senior Russian and Iranian diplomats said after the session on Tuesday.

Tehran threatened last month to retaliate against a US Senate vote to extend the Iran Sanctions Act (ISA), saying it violated the landmark agreement reached with six major powers under which the Islamic Republic curbed its disputed nuclear programme in exchange for relief from international sanctions.

"Iran explained its concern on the extension of the Iran Sanctions Act ... as being an reintroduction of sanctions. I think the joint commission took Iran's concern very seriously," Abbas Araqchi, Iran's top nuclear negotiator, told reporters.

When asked whether Iran used the meeting of the so-called Joint Commission to trigger a dispute resolution mechanism set out in the accord for cases where one participating country feels there is a breach of the deal, Araqchi said, "No."

The bill extending US sanctions against Iran for 10 years became law in December without President Barack Obama's signature, but US officials said its passage would not affect implementation of the nuclear accord. The European Union lifted all nuclear-related economic and financial sanctions on Iran.

The regular commission meeting on the nuclear deal took place 10 days before US President-elect Donald Trump enters the White House amid great uncertainty about how he, as a fierce critic of a deal that Obama counts as a significant diplomatic achievement, will handle any future difficulties with Iran.



Migrants stand in line for food distributed by volunteers outside of derelict warehouses which they use as a makeshift shelter in Belgrade yesterday, as temperatures dropped to -15 degrees Celsius overnight. Sub-freezing temperatures across swathes of Europe have claimed over 60 victims in recent days -- notably in Poland, Romania and the Balkans -- with migrants and the homeless among the most vulnerable, officials said on Tuesday. PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP

Charleston church shooter gets death

AFP, Charleston

A US jury on Tuesday condemned self-described white supremacist Dylann Roof to death over the massacre of nine black worshippers in a South Carolina church in June 2015 - a crime that shocked the nation.

Roof, 22, was convicted last month of 33 federal charges - including hate crimes resulting in death -- in connection with the shooting spree at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston.

A Bible study group at "Mother Emanuel," which had welcomed Roof, was just beginning its closing prayer when the self-avowed Nazi and Ku Klux Klan sympathizer opened fire, killing nine people ranging in age from 26 to 87.

Roof showed little reaction to the decision, delivered just hours after the 12-member jury retired to deliberate, though he occasionally seemed to be slightly smiling.

Federal judge Richard Gergel was set to formally deliver Roof's sentence yesterday morning at the Charleston courthouse. The verdict unanimously reached by the jury is binding. "I still feel like I had to do it," Roof told jurors earlier in a semi-coherent closing argument.

CHINA AIRCRAFT CARRIER IN TAIWAN STRAIT

Taipei scrambles jets, navy

REUTERS, Taipei

Taiwan scrambled jets and navy ships yesterday as a group of Chinese warships, led by its sole aircraft carrier, sailed through the Taiwan Strait, the latest sign of heightened tension between Beijing and the self-ruled island.

China's Soviet-built Liaoning aircraft carrier, returning from exercises in the South China Sea, was not encroaching in Taiwan's territorial waters but entered its air defence identification zone in the southwest, Taiwan's defence ministry said.

As a result, Taiwan scrambled jets and navy ships to "surveil and control" the passage of the Chinese ships north through the body of water separating Taiwan and China, Taiwan defence ministry spokesman Chen Chung-chi said.

Taiwan military aircraft and ships have been deployed to follow the carrier group, which is sailing up the west side of the median line of the strait, he said.

Taiwan's top policymaker for China affairs urged Beijing to resume dialogue, after official communication channels were suspended by Beijing from June.

"I want to emphasise our government has sufficient capability to protect our national security. It's not necessary to overly panic," said Chang Hsiao-yueh, minister for Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council, during a news briefing in response to reporters' questions on the Liaoning.

The latest Chinese exercises have unnerved Beijing's neighbours, especially Taiwan which Beijing claims as its own, given long-running territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin said China's ships "couldn't always remain in port" and the navy had to hone its capabilities.

Meanwhile, The Philippines, seeking to improve relations with China, hopes a framework for a code of conduct in the disputed South China Sea will be completed by the middle of this year, its foreign minister said yesterday.

Foreign Secretary Perfecto Yasay said the code would help de-escalate tension in the waters, where China has started militarising artificial islands built after the Philippines filed an arbitration case against Beijing in The Hague.



Rescuers search for survivors amid the rubble of a building following a reported air strike on the town of Taftanaz, in the northern province of Idlib, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Air strikes hit Aleppo, Idlib

AGENCIES

Syrian warplanes launched strikes in several parts of the country yesterday despite a fragile truce, a monitor said, as Russia confirmed a January 23 date for new peace talks.

The negotiations, to be held in the Kazakh capital Astana, are intended to build on a ceasefire in effect since late December, brokered by regime ally Russia and rebel backer Turkey.

The truce has brought quiet to large parts of the country, but has been threatened by continuing violence, particularly near the capital Damascus.

Overnight and into yesterday, government warplanes hit opposition areas in the provinces of Aleppo and Idlib, as well as the Eastern Ghouta region near the capital, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The overnight strikes in Idlib, in the northwest of the country, targeted positions belonging to former Al-Qaeda affiliate Fateh al-Sham Front, which is not party to the ceasefire, the Observatory said.

SYRIA CRISIS
Regime says deal reached to fix Damascus water supply

The strikes on the town of from an Islamist group allied based monitor said.

An AFP correspondent in the town saw a building that had totally collapsed in the attack. The White Helmets, a rescue service operating in rebel areas, spent hours clearing debris with picks and hammers.

Yesterday morning, government air strikes also hit Eastern Ghouta, the Observatory said.

The Observatory also reported clashes and air strikes in the Wadi Barada region, which has seen some of the most serious violence since the truce went into effect on December 30.

A Syrian provincial governor said yesterday the government and rebels had agreed on a plan to repair damage to a spring in the Wadi Barada area in Damascus that supplies water to the capital, state television reported.

The spring was knocked out of service in late December, reducing water supplies to the 70 percent of residents of Damascus and surrounding areas that it serves.



Nearly 1,400 kids killed in Yemen

AFP, Sanaa

Nearly 1,400 children have been killed, hundreds more injured and many schools closed by the war in Yemen, the UN children's fund said yesterday.

"Attacks on civilian areas continue to kill and injure scores of children in Yemen," said Unicef's representative in Yemen, Meritxell Relano.

"Instead of learning, children are witnessing death, war and destruction," she added, warning that the actual casualty toll was likely to be much higher than the verified figures.

More than 7,300 people have been killed in Yemen since a Saudi-led coalition intervened against Iran-backed Huthi rebels in March 2015 in support of the government.

Relano called on all parties in the conflict to protect children and stop attacks on schools. The plea follows a coalition air strike near a school in rebel-held northern Yemen on Tuesday that medics and a local official said killed five people, including two children. Unicef said that it had confirmed the death of one child in the strike. "Schools have to be zones of peace at all times, a sanctuary where children can learn, grow, play and be safe," Relano said. "Children should never risk their lives only to attend school."