

NEWS IN brief

Turkish shelling kills 9 in IS-held Syria town

AFP, Beirut
Nine civilians were killed in overnight Turkish bombardment of a jihadist-held town in northern Syria, a monitor said yesterday, but Ankara said the shelling killed 13 "terrorists". Three women were among those killed in the artillery fire on Al-Bab, which Turkish-backed Syrian rebels have been fighting to take from the IS group.

500 migrants enter Spain from Morocco

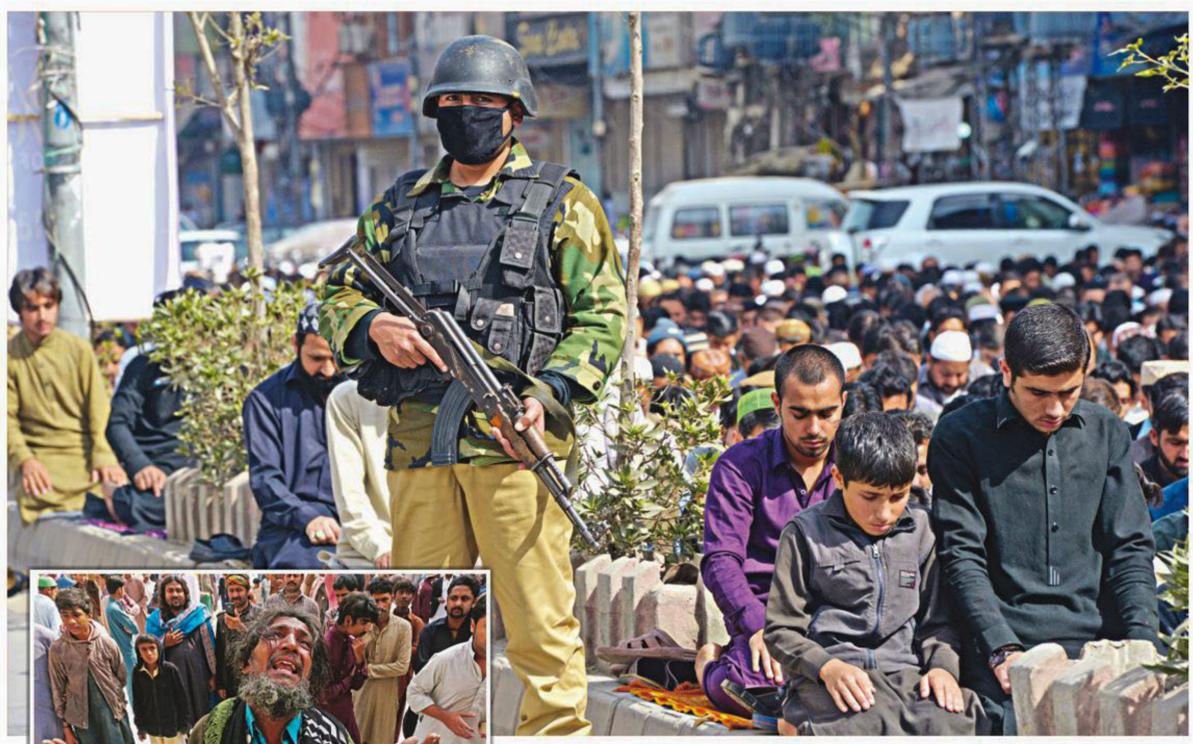
REUTERS, Madrid
Around 500 sub-Saharan African migrants crossed the fenced border surrounding Spain's North African enclave of Ceuta from Morocco early yesterday. Dozens of migrants, many with wounds from climbing over the 6-metre barbed wire fence, celebrated in the streets in the early hours of the day with some shouting "freedom".

HK ex-leader guilty of misconduct

AFP, Hong Kong
Former Hong Kong leader Donald Tsang was yesterday found guilty of misconduct during his time at the helm of the city in a high-profile corruption trial, but escaped conviction for bribery. Tsang, 72, held the leadership post of chief executive for seven years from 2005 and is the most senior city official ever to be convicted in a criminal trial.

Amnesty: more murder in Philippine drug war

AFP, Manila
Shadowy assassins are still killing poor Filipinos, despite a police withdrawal from Rodrigo Duterte's deadly drug war, Philippine branch of Amnesty International said. The latest tally showed an extra 146 people had died since the January 31 stand-down was ordered, which rights groups said showed extrajudicial killings were continuing.



A Pakistani policeman stands guard as Muslim offer Friday prayers on a street in Peshawar yesterday, following a deadly bomb attack on a shrine of 13th century Muslim Sufi saint Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in the town of Sehwan in Sindh province. Inset, A man mourns the death of a relative. Story on page 01. PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

TWO-STATE SOLUTION TO ISRAEL-PALESTINIAN CRISIS

US 'absolutely' backs it

Says it's UN envoy; 100,000 Palestinians write to Trump

AGENCIES
US Ambassador Nikki Haley on Thursday rejected suggestions that the United States was abandoning the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, saying Washington "absolutely" supports the policy but wants fresh ideas on how to move forward.

"Anybody that wants to say the United States does not support the two-state solution, that would be an error," Haley told reporters at the United Nations.

"We absolutely support a two-state solution, but we are thinking out-of-the-box as well," Haley said following a Security Council meeting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Her remarks appeared to temper those of President Donald Trump, who on Wednesday announced that the United States would not insist on a two-state solution to the conflict.

"I'm looking at two-state and one-state, and I like the one that both parties like," Trump said at the White House with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

That statement was seen as a break from previous US policy and from the international consensus on recognition of a Palestinian state as part of a final Middle East peace deal.

Haley said the United States wants to help bring Israelis

and Palestinians "at the table to have them talk through this in a fresh way, to say 'okay we're going back to the drawing board: what can we agree on?'".

Haley repeated her statement of US support to the two-state solution three times in response to questions from journalists and said the US administration would be unbiased in its peace efforts.

Meanwhile, more than 100,000 Palestinians have written letters to US President Donald Trump urging him not to end the US' support for the establishment of a Palestinian state.

The mass letter writing campaign, organised by the independent Youth Centre for Development and Innovation in Nablus, ran for 11 days in the run up to January 20 - Trump's inauguration day, reported Independent.

It collected notes for the president from young Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, those displaced from Syria to Lebanon and the diaspora to draw Trump's attention to their desire to cooperate with the US in the peace process, centre director Mohammed Abu Ras told Al-Monitor.

The letters have been summarised and are now ready to be delivered to Trump via official channels.



Nikki Haley

'Press is out of control'

Says Trump in his first solo press conference

AGENCIES
US President Donald Trump insisted there was "zero chaos" in his crisis-buffed White House and railed against enemies in the media, politics and the courts Thursday, in a meandering first solo news conference.

The 70-year-old US president vented frustrations, insisted he is "not a bad person" and wondered out loud about a "nuclear holocaust," in a remarkable one hour, 16 minute ask-me-anything appearance.

From there, the president's criticism of the media went from barbed to personal in a cutting assessment of what he viewed as unfair coverage of his first few weeks in office - a period that has seen a succession of crises.

On a day when he ceded a loss over a signature policy in a federal appeals court, had to replace his labor secretary pick and faced questions over the resignation of his national security adviser, Trump chose to make the media a central focus of an unusually long and combative presidential news conference.

When asked by journalists of contacts between his presidential campaign and Russian operatives, he deflected the questions and put the focus instead on what he

described as "illegal" government leaks and "dishonest" media coverage.

"The press is out of control," he said. "The level of dishonesty is out of control."

After weeks of disclosures in newspapers over turmoil in his administration, he told one reporter to "sit down" for a rambling question.

"Tomorrow, they will say: 'Donald Trump rants and raves at the press,'" Trump said. "I'm not ranting and raving. I'm just telling you. You know, you're dishonest people. But I'm not ranting and raving. I love this. I'm having a good time doing it."

He sought to cast problems buffeting the White House as "the mess" he inherited from former Democratic President Barack Obama, and boasted about the "fine-tuned administration" he is running.

Trump also signaled a new approach to how America talks about its defense and foreign policy.

"I don't have to tell you. I don't want to be one of these guys that say, 'Yes, here's what we're going to do.' I don't have to do that. I don't have to tell you what I'm going to do in North Korea."

"I'm not going to tell you anything about what response I do."



Help rein in N Korea

Tillerson urges Wang in highest-level US-China meet under Trump after Pyongyang's series of ballistic missile tests

AFP, Bonn
US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson yesterday used his first meeting with Chinese counterpart Wang Yi to urge Beijing to help rein in North Korea after its series of nuclear and ballistic missile tests.

Their talks, the highest level Sino-US encounter since President Donald Trump was elected, had appeared unlikely after he infuriated Beijing by calling into question Washington's long-standing "One China" policy.

Trump however reaffirmed the position in a conciliatory phone call to Chinese President Xi Jinping, mending fences enough for Wang to come to Bonn for a G20 foreign ministers meeting.

"Secretary Tillerson and Minister Wang noted the recent call between leaders and discussed efforts to advance bilateral cooperation while addressing differences in a constructive manner," Mark Toner, acting US State Department spokesman, said.



Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

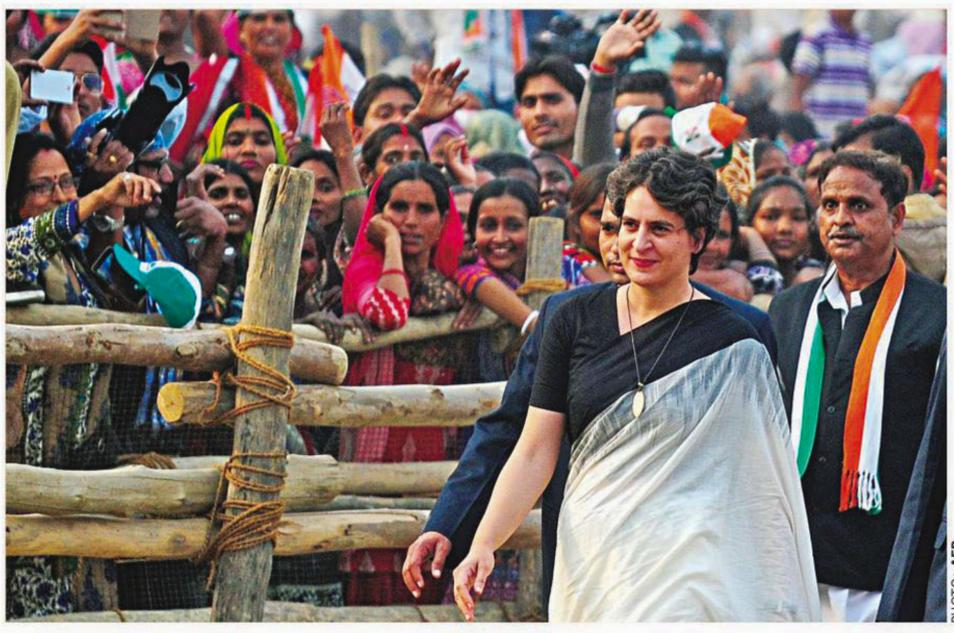
"Secretary Tillerson also highlighted the increasing threat posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and urged China to use all available tools to moderate North Korea's destabilising behaviour," Toner said.

China is North Korea's last major ally and has shown itself reluctant to put too much pressure on Pyongyang.

In the meantime, reclusive North Korea has made huge strides in both its missile and nuclear weapons programme to the point where it could acquire the capability to hit the US mainland.

Washington has led international efforts to get Pyongyang to reverse course, including imposing sanctions, but all to no avail as its regional allies take fright at North Korea's ambitions.

On Thursday, Tillerson pledged that Washington would use the full range of its arsenal, including nuclear weapons, to defend Japan and South Korea against North Korea, which conducted another ballistic missile test on Sunday.



Congress Party leader Priyanka Gandhi arrives at a rally held to support party candidates during the ongoing Uttar Pradesh state assembly elections at Rae Bareilly yesterday. Millions of voters in India's most populous state are casting their ballots in the polls seen as a key test for Narendra Modi halfway through his first term as prime minister.



Time to rise up against Brexit: Blair

AFP, London
Former British prime minister Tony Blair yesterday urged Britons who support the European Union to "rise up" and persuade Brexit voters to change their mind about leaving the bloc in a high-profile speech.

"This is not the time for retreat, indifference or despair but the time to rise up in defence of what we believe," he said at an event organised by Open Britain, a campaign group lobbying for Britain to retain close ties with the EU.

"I don't know if we can succeed. But I do know we will suffer a rancorous verdict from future generations if we do not try," he said.

"We have to build a movement that will stretch across party lines," he said, announcing that he was creating an institute that would also develop arguments against Brexit and keep ties with the EU.

Britain voted to leave the European Union last year and Prime Minister Theresa May has said she will trigger Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty by the end of March, starting a two-year exit process.

Experts are divided on whether the government could change its mind about leaving the EU at some point in the future, even after invoking Article 50.

Brexit supporters quickly criticised Blair's comments. "The EU referendum was democratic, fair and free and the British people voted for Brexit," said Richard Tice, co-chair of the Leave Means Leave group.

Crossing lights for smartphone zombies

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
A town in the Netherlands is trialling special pavement lights designed to help smartphone users cross the road safely.

The LED strips have been embedded into the ground at a pedestrian crossing in Bodegraven, close to three schools. The hope is that they'll catch the eye of pedestrians who are too distracted by their smartphones to bother looking at the road, telling them when to cross and when not to cross by either glowing green or red, depending on the traffic light signals.

"Social media, games, WhatsApp and music are major distractions in traffic," said councillor Kees Oskam. "We may not be able to change this trend, but we can anticipate problems." The system, called +Lichtlijn (+Lightline), was developed by local firm HIC Traffic Systems, and has attracted criticism from the Dutch Traffic Safety Association, VVN.

"It's not a good idea to help mobile phone users look at their phones," said VVN's Jose de Jong.

"We don't want people to use phones when they're dealing with traffic, even when walking around. People must always look around them, to check if cars are actually stopping at the red signals."

Nato to boost naval presence in Black Sea

AFP, Brussels
Nato will step up naval war games and surveillance in the Black Sea to complement its increased presence of land and air forces near a more assertive Russia, the alliance said Thursday.

Nato chief Jens Stoltenberg said the decision taken by alliance defence ministers in Brussels was not designed to be a provocation at a time of heightened tension with Russia, which annexed the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014.

"We agreed on... an increased NATO naval presence in the Black Sea for enhanced training, exercises and situational awareness," Stoltenberg said at a press conference.

Russia swiftly condemned the move. This is "another step towards increasing tension in the regions that touch on Russia's vital interests," Russia's ambassador to Nato Alexander Grushko told Russian news agencies.

"Of course all the necessary measures will be taken to ensure Russia's security interests in this region," he added.

A Nato official told AFP, on condition of anonymity, that the decision was taken to counter Russia's military buildup in the Black Sea and bolster the alliance's southeast flank after it sent troop reinforcements to the Baltic States and Poland in the northeast.

TENSIONS WITH RUSSIA

ASSASSINATION KIM JONG-NAM

'No release of body without DNA test'

AFP, Kuala Lumpur
The body of Kim Jong-Nam, the assassinated half-brother of North Korea's leader, will not be released until his family have provided DNA samples, Malaysia said yesterday, despite a request from Pyongyang.

Detectives in Kuala Lumpur are trying to get to the bottom of the cloak-and-dagger murder that South Korea says was carried out by poison-wielding female agents working for their secretive northern neighbour.

Forensic specialists yesterday began testing samples from the dead man's body to try to determine the toxin that was apparently sprayed in his face as he readied to board a plane earlier this week.

North Korean diplomats objected to the post-mortem examination, Malaysian officials say, but Kuala Lumpur has stood firm, and said yesterday it would not release the body until procedures were complete.

"So far no family member or next of kin has come to identify or claim the body. We need a DNA sample of a family member to match the profile of the dead person," Selangor state police chief Abdul Samah Mat told AFP.

"North Korea has submitted a request to claim the body, but before we release the body we have to identify who the body belongs to," he said.