

NEWS IN brief

Iran in military drills despite US warnings

AFP, Tehran
Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard is to conduct military drills next week, a senior commander announced Saturday, despite warnings from the United States and fresh sanctions over a ballistic missile test. "The manoeuvres called 'Grand Prophet 11' will start Monday and last three days," General Mohammad Pakpour, commander of the force's ground units, told a news conference. He said rockets would be used without specifying which kind.

Mattis in ME for first time as Pentagon chief

AFP, Abu Dhabi
US Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis arrived in the United Arab Emirates yesterday, his first trip to the Middle East since taking office last month. A retired Marine general who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, Mattis knows the region well and was a frequent visitor during his time heading up the US military's Central Command. He was scheduled to meet the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and Defence Minister Mohammed Al Bawardi.

Trump's environment pick sworn in

AFP, Washington
The US Senate on Friday confirmed fossil-fuel ally and global warming skeptic Scott Pruitt to head the Environmental Protection Agency, installing a legal expert at the helm of a department he has repeatedly sued. Pruitt was confirmed largely along party lines, 52 to 46 -- a clear relief for the White House two days after Trump's nominee for secretary of labor withdrew his nomination amid business and personal controversy.



Mexican students form a human chain in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, on Friday. Thousands of Mexicans linked arms Friday to form a "human wall" on their country's border with the United States, protesting President Donald Trump's plan to build a massive barrier between the countries. PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

China halts North Korea coal imports

AFP, Beijing
China will suspend all imports of coal from North Korea for the rest of the year, Beijing said yesterday, depriving Pyongyang of a crucial source of foreign exchange following its latest missile test.
"(China) will temporarily stop its imports of coal from North Korea for the rest of this year (including coal for which customs applications have been made but not yet processed)," the commerce ministry said in a statement posted on its website.
The statement said the suspension was in accordance with existing UN sanctions imposed on North Korea over its nuclear and missile programmes and would come in to force on Sunday and remain until the end of the year.
The decision came less than a week after North Korea's latest missile test, as tensions escalate over the reclusive state's defiance of UN resolutions.
North Korea's launch came just after a conciliatory phone chat between US President Donald Trump and his counterpart Xi Jinping of China -- the North's only major ally.
The United Nations Security Council, which includes China, sharply castigated Pyongyang last Monday for the missile test a day earlier, describing it as a "grave violation" of UN resolutions and threatening "further significant measures".
The rocket launch was the first since Trump came to power and was seen as a challenge to the new American leader, who has vowed a strong response.
US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on Friday used his first meeting with Chinese counterpart Wang Yi to urge Beijing "to use all available tools to moderate North Korea's destabilising behaviour".
Pyongyang is barred under UN resolutions from carrying out ballistic missile launches or nuclear tests.

TERRITORY LOSSES IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

IS 'business model' failing

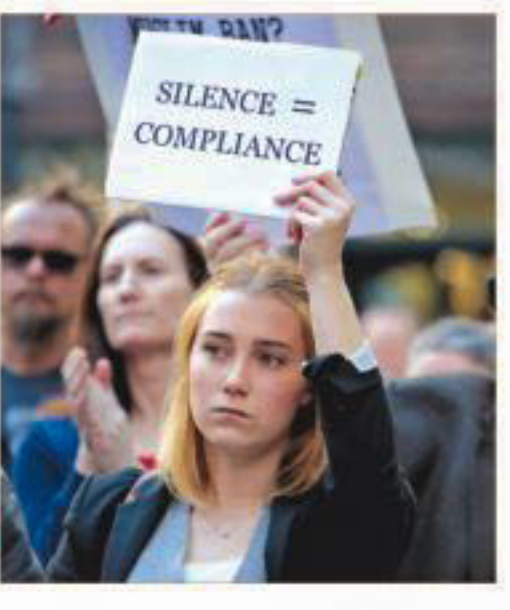
AGENCIES
IS' "business model" is failing as jihadists lose their grip on territory and the vital oil and tax revenue it brings, a new report has found.
The so-called Islamic State is believed to be the richest terrorist group in the world, exploiting natural resources and looting antiquities seized in its lightning advance across Syria and Iraq in 2014.
Civilians trapped under the militant group's brutal rule are subjected to punitive taxation, confiscations and fines, while millions of pounds are made in ransoms from kidnappings.
But research by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) at King's College London has found that as IS is driven out of swathes of its former territory and international air strikes target its oilfields, the revenue streams are starting to dry up.
The group's true wealth is difficult to determine, but its annual revenue has plummeted from an estimated \$1.9b (£1.5b) in 2014 to \$870m (£700m) last year.
Peter Neumann, director of ICSR said that while the exploitation of vast territories has been lucrative for IS, the bureaucracy entailed brings expenses.
"It needs to fix roads," he told the Associated Press. "It needs to pay teachers. It needs to run health services. It needs to pay for these things that al-Qaeda never had to."

The report found no evidence that rumoured donations from foreign supporters and governments "continue to be significant", while taxation has become IS' main revenue source after its ability to make money from looted antiquities in new territory faded.
Oil remains the group's second-largest money-maker but IS' trade has declined rapidly since the start of a targeted air campaign by the US-led coalition.
Operation Tidal Wave II, launched in October 2015, aims to destroy oil transport and infrastructure to cut funding, seeing oil wells and tankers repeatedly bombed despite concern for civilian workers.
The group has been forced to reduce salaries and perks for fighters, as well as increasing taxation and fees to make up the cash shortage, leaked documents from its Bayt Mal al-Muslimeen "treasury show."
IS LEADERS LEAVING RAQA
Leaders of the IS group are leaving their Syrian stronghold of Raqa, fleeing in the face of the Arab-Kurd offensive backed by the international coalition, the US Defense Department said Friday.
"We are starting to see now that a lot of senior ISIS leaders, a lot of their bureaucrats... are beginning the process of leaving Raqa," said Pentagon spokesman Jeff Davis.
"They have definitely taken note of the fact that the end is near in Raqa," he told reporters, describing a retreat that seems "very organized, orderly."



Media 'enemy of the American people'

AFP, Washington
Donald Trump ratcheted up his attacks on the media Friday, blasting the press as "the enemy of the American people!"
Shortly after landing at his holiday home in Mar-a-Lago, Florida -- where he is spending a third consecutive week-end -- the president lashed out in 140 characters.
"The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!" Trump wrote on Twitter.
Trump had tweeted an earlier post which targeted the New York Times, CNN, NBC "and many more" media -- and ended with the exclamation "SICK!"
But he swiftly deleted that missive before reposting the definitive version -- adding two more "enemies" to his blacklist.
The 70-year-old Trump built his campaign on criticizing the press as biased. In addition to regularly accusing the media of overstating his setbacks, he has also accused journalists of failing to show sufficient respect for his accomplishments.
On Thursday, he launched a long diatribe at a grievance-filled news conference, in which he blamed the media for his one-month-old administration's problems.
In four weeks, Trump has seen his national security advisor ousted, a cabinet nominee withdraw, a centerpiece immigration policy fail in the courts and a tidal wave of damaging leaks.
Many US presidents have criticized the press, but Trump's language has more closely echoed remarks leveled by authoritarian leaders around the world.
His comments had some observers declaring that the Republican was veering dangerously close to infringing on the constitutionally protected freedom of the press.



'Daddy, pick me up!'

AFP, Idlib
In the aftermath of a barrel bomb attack in Syria's Idlib, nine-year-old Abdel Basset Al-Satuf tries to sit up, his legs blown off, and screams "Daddy, pick me up!"
Abdel Basset was caught in a barrel bomb attack by regime forces on Thursday in the town of Al-Hbeit, in northwest Idlib province.
The harrowing footage of the young boy screaming for his father as he struggles to sit up, his legs turned to bloody stumps, quickly spread on social media.
The child was taken to a hospital in the provincial capital Idlib city for preliminary treatment, but on Friday he and his father were transferred to Turkey for specialised care.
In an ambulance about to head to the border, Abdel Basset recounted the incident as his father Taan tried to keep his composure.
"We were sitting having lunch when the barrel bombs started to fall on the town and my father told us to get in the house," he told AFP.
"But as we arrived at the door of the house a barrel fell on it and when it exploded fire blasted towards me and amputated my legs," he said.
"My father immediately picked me up and moved me and put me down on the ground (away from the house) and then an ambulance came and they treated me," he added.
In the video, Abdel Basset can be seen sitting stunned as desperate voices scream for an ambulance

Roadside bomb kills 8 Afghan school children

AFP, Kabul
The UN has condemned the killing of 12 Afghans, including eight children, returning from school, by a roadside bomb in the country's volatile east, the latest in a growing number of civilian casualties.
The blast occurred in Paktika province on Friday when their vehicle hit a pressure-plate improvised explosive device planted on a public road, the UN said, adding that four others were wounded.
Afghan civilian casualties in 2016 were the highest recorded by the UN, with nearly 11,500 non-combatants killed or wounded. More than 3,500 children were among the victims.



A child looks at damaged apartments on which Turkish flags are displayed, at the blast site yesterday at Viransehir in Sanliurfa, after an explosion struck the district of Viransehir overnight, killing a 10-year-old and a neighbourhood watch guard. Turkish authorities blamed Kurdish militants for the attack and detained 26 people in connection with the attack. PHOTO: AFP

Germany bans 'spying' doll

AFP, Berlin
German regulators have banned an internet-connected doll called "My Friend Cayla" that can chat with children, warning Friday that it was a de facto "spying device".
Parents were urged to disable the interactive toy by the Federal Network Agency which enforces bans on surveillance devices.
"Items that conceal cameras or microphones and that are capable of transmitting a signal, and therefore can transmit data without detection, compromise people's privacy," said the agency's head, Jochen Homann.
"This applies in particular to children's toys. The Cayla doll has been banned in Germany. This is also to protect the most vulnerable in our society."
The doll works by sending a child's audio question wirelessly to an app on a digital device, which trans-



UN COURT'S CLEAN CHEAT TO SERBIA ON GENOCIDE

Bosnia to appeal ruling

AFP, Sarajevo
Bosnia will ask the United Nations' top court to review its 2007 ruling which cleared Serbia of genocide during the country's civil war, Bosnia's Muslim leader said Friday.
The move announced by Bakir Izetbegovic, the Muslim member of Bosnia's tripartite presidency, could spark a new political crisis in the Balkans country which remains deeply divided along ethnic lines since the 1992-1995 war.
Serb presidency member Mladen Ivanic said Tuesday that such a decision by Muslim officials would "threaten peace and stability in Bosnia."
Izetbegovic said the request for revision would be forwarded to the Hague-based International Court of Justice (ICJ) next week -- just a few days before a 10-year deadline expires.
Bosnian Serb officials say such a request cannot be made without consensus within the tripartite presidency.
But Izetbegovic insists it can and said it would be done by a lawyer the presidency appointed in 2002.
In the original case launched in 1993 by Bosnia's then Muslim-dominated government, Sarajevo accused Belgrade of masterminding a genocide through widespread "ethnic cleansing" during the war which killed more than 100,000.
On February 26, 2007, the ICJ found only one act of genocide -- the massacre of nearly 8,000 Muslim males by Bosnian Serb forces in Srebrenica -- and said there was not enough evidence to suggest Belgrade was directly responsible.
But it did find Serbia, which politically and militarily backed the Bosnian Serbs, had breached international law over the Srebrenica slaughter.
Serb forces captured the eastern town in July 1995, in the final months of the war, then summarily killed its men and boys in Europe's worst single atrocity since World War II.
Since the war ended Bosnia has consisted of two semi-independent entities -- the Serbs' Republika Srpska and the Muslim-Croat Federation.
The two are linked by weak joint institutions.

Malaysia arrests North Korean in Kim killing

AFP, Kuala Lumpur
Malaysian police yesterday said they had arrested a North Korean man over the assassination of Kim Jong-Un's brother, as relations between Pyongyang and Kuala Lumpur nosedived in a battle for his body.
A 46-year-old was arrested on Friday evening with documents that identified him as North Korean citizen Ri Jong Chol, a police statement said, making him the first person from the North to be detained over the case.
Kim Jong-Nam died after an unidentified liquid was sprayed in his face at Kuala Lumpur international airport on Monday, in an attack Seoul says was carried out by female agents on the orders of Pyongyang.
Local officers have already arrested a woman with a Vietnamese passport and a Malaysian man, as well as an Indonesian woman who foreign police said could have got involved in the murder thinking it was a reality TV prank.
Jong-Nam's body has been held in a Kuala Lumpur morgue since an autopsy on Wednesday, the results of which could take up to two weeks to come through, Malaysia's health minister told AFP.
After Malaysia ignored demands to return the remains, Pyongyang accused Kuala Lumpur of conspiring with its enemies and said it would reject whatever results came from the post-mortem.



Abdel Basset Al-Satuf and paramedics. His father had run back to the house to search for the rest of the family, three of whom were killed in the attack which included Basset's mother and sister. The neighbour said the family had arrived in Idlib less than two years ago from Latamneh in neighbouring Hama, displaced by war like more than half of Syria's population. The video of Abdel Basset is just the latest footage to refocus attention on the plight of Syria's civilians, particularly children. In August 2016, haunting images of a four-year-old called Omran, shell-shocked and covered in dust after an air strike, reverberated around the world. More than 310,000 people have been killed in the conflict that began with anti-government protests in March 2011.