

NEWS IN
brief

Mugabe turns 93

AFP, Matobo

Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe yesterday celebrated his 93rd birthday with a lavish party attended by thousands of loyalists outside the second city of Bulawayo. The ruling ZANU-PF party hosted the event for Mugabe, who has held power since 1980. He is now the world's oldest national leader.

China hotel fire kills at least 10: Xinhua

AFP, Beijing

At least 10 people were killed in a huge fire at a hotel in eastern China, the official Xinhua news agency said yesterday. The blaze broke out at the four-storey HNA Platinum Mix Hotel Saturday morning in Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi province, and took nearly two hours to extinguish, Xinhua said.

Magistrates to probe Fillon over 'fake jobs'

AFP, Paris

Francois Fillon, the conservative candidate in France's presidential election, will face a probe by investigating magistrates into claims he gave members of his family fake jobs, prosecutors said Friday. Fillon, one of the frontrunners in the presidential race, will be investigated for alleged embezzlement of public funds and misappropriation of corporate assets, prosecutors said in a statement.

Saudi FM in landmark visit to Iraq: officials

AFP, Baghdad

Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir was in Baghdad for talks yesterday, the first such visit by a chief diplomat from the kingdom since 2003, Iraqi officials said. He met his Iraqi counterpart Ibrahim al-Jaafari, a foreign ministry official told AFP on condition of anonymity.



(From top, anti-clockwise) Displaced Iraqis flee their homes as Iraqi forces battle with Islamic State militants, in the district of Maamoun in western Mosul; troops advance towards Mosul's southern neighbourhood of Jawsaq; and an arrested man sits in an army vehicle in Jawsaq during the offensive. US-backed Iraqi forces yesterday pushed deeper into western Mosul yesterday after retaking the city's airport from Islamic State.

PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP

Iran complying with nuke deal: UN watchdog

AFP, Vienna

Iran is complying with the landmark nuclear deal it sealed with major world powers in 2015, according to a report from the UN watchdog seen by AFP on Friday.

The International Atomic Energy Agency addressed key limits set under the agreement, which is under intense scrutiny after the election of US President Donald Trump.

The report said Iran is not pursuing construction of its existing heavy water research reactor and has no enriched uranium above an agreed 3.67 percent limit.

And Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium -- which can be used for peaceful purposes, but when further processed for a nuclear weapon -- was 101.7 kilos (225 pounds), well below the agreed level of 300 kilos.

Another key condition concerns Iran's level of so-called heavy water, a modified form of water used in certain types of nuclear reactors. The IAEA's latest report said Iran has not exceeded the permitted level of 130 tonnes, as it did briefly during previous periods.

Suicide blasts kill dozens

Top intelligence chief killed casting doubts on Geneva talks

AFP, Geneva

UN efforts to launch a new round of Syria peace talks sputtered yesterday as suicide attacks killed dozens of people, raising the death toll from two days of violence to more than 80.

The blasts which targeted two security service bases in Homs, Syria's third city, killed a top intelligence chief and close confidant of President Bashar al-Assad, and were claimed by former al-Qaeda affiliate Fateh al-Sham Front.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said 42 people were killed, but the provincial governor put the figure at 30 dead in bloodshed which came just 24 hours after another suicide bombing in the northern town of Al-Bab that killed 51.

That attack was claimed by Islamic State (IS) group militants.

In Geneva, Syrian government and opposition negotiators were to con-

tinue meetings with United Nations mediator Staffan de Mistura through the weekend although there was little hope for a breakthrough.

After meeting de Mistura on Friday, regime delegation chief Bashar al-Jaafari said he would study a UN paper on the "format" of the talks, but gave no indication that the negotiations had any momentum.

SYRIA CRISIS

The main opposition High Negotiations Committee (HNC) described its meeting with de Mistura as "positive", without elaborating on a possible path forward.

During three previous rounds of talks in Geneva last year, the rivals never sat down at the same table, instead leaving de Mistura to shuttle between them.

The HNC has said it wants to meet the government face-to-face this time.

At the end of Friday's negotiations, de Mistura's acting chief of staff Michael Contet signalled there was no immediate prospect of direct talks.

Saturday's attack saw the bombers targeting the headquarters of state security and military intelligence in a spectacular attack which successfully targeted General Hassan Daabul, a top military intelligence official.

"There were at least six attackers and several of them blew themselves up near the headquarters of state security and military intelligence," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights director Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP.

Fateh al-Sham Front, however, said just five militants took part in the assault, the latest atrocity in a six-year war which has killed more than 310,000 people.

Suspect 'was paid \$90'

Official says attacker thought it was a reality show

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

An Indonesian woman being held over the assassination of Kim Jong-Nam yesterday said she had been paid just RM400 (\$90) for taking part in what she thought was a TV prank show, a senior diplomat reportedly told media.

Siti Aisyah, who was arrested soon after the half-brother of the North Korean leader was killed on February 13 with a lethal nerve agent, added she believed she was handling a liquid like "baby oil", Indonesia's deputy ambassador to Malaysia Andreano Erwin said according to reports.

Two women are seen showing something into Kim's face in leaked CCTV footage from Kuala Lumpur airport. He later suffered a seizure and was dead before he reached hospital.

Malaysia revealed Friday the 45-year-old was assassinated with a lethal nerve agent manufactured for chemical warfare and listed

by the UN as a weapon of mass destruction.

Siti, 25, "only said in general that somebody asked her to do this activity", according to Erwin, who was granted consular access to Siti in Kuala Lumpur Saturday.

The senior diplomat added it was too early to say what charges may be brought against her.

Another female suspect, Doan Thi Huong, 28, is also in custody over the murder, but Erwin said Siti had told Indonesian consular staff she did not know her.

Malaysian police have said one of the women arrested after the attack fell ill in custody, adding she had been vomiting. However, Erwin said Siti was physically healthy.

The fallout from the attack continued after US media reported unofficial talks in New York between North Korean and former American officials had been cancelled.

KIM JONG-NAM KILLING



'Are you Muslim?'

Son of boxer Muhammad Ali detained at Florida airport

AFP, Washington

A son of boxing legend Muhammad Ali was held for questioning for two hours at a Florida airport upon returning from Jamaica because of his Arabic-sounding name, US media reported late Friday.

Muhammad Ali Jr., 44, who was born in Philadelphia and has a US passport, was traveling with his mother Khalilah Camacho-Ali, the late sports icon's second wife, friend and lawyer Chris Mancini told the Louisville Courier-Journal.

Mancini told the newspaper that both were held for questioning on the Fort Lauderdale International Airport on February 7 because of their Arabic-sounding names.

Camacho-Ali however was released after she showed US Customs agents a photo of herself with her ex-husband.

Ali Jr however had no such photo -- and according to Mancini was held for nearly two hours and repeatedly asked

"Where did you get your name from?" and "Are you Muslim?"

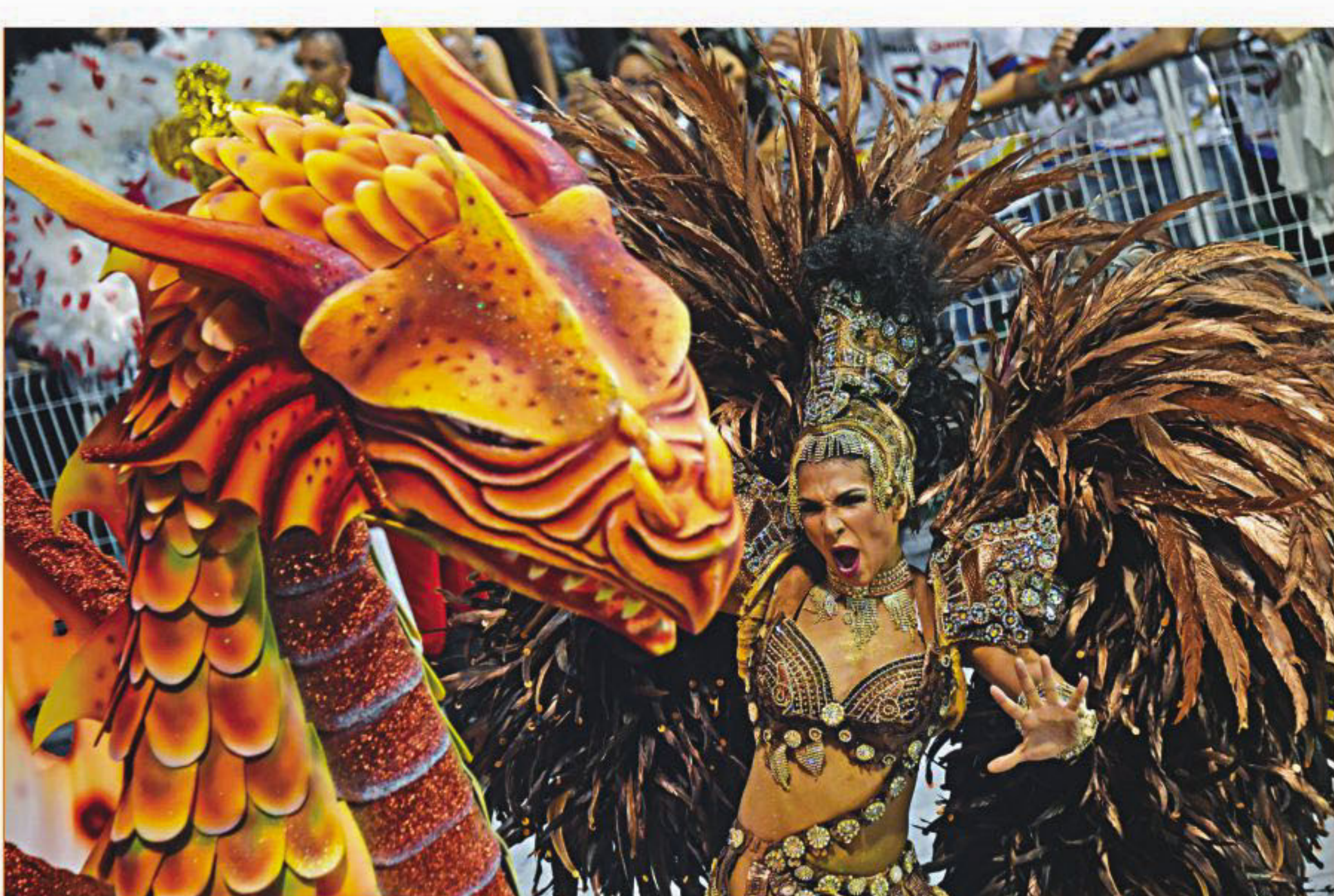
When he said that he - like his father - was a Muslim, the agents asked further probing questions.

"To the Ali family, it's crystal clear that this is directly linked to Mr. Trump's efforts to ban Muslims from the United States," Mancini told the Courier-Journal, a reference to President Donald Trump's late January executive order imposing a 90-day entry ban for citizens of seven Muslim majority countries.

The travel ban has since been halted by a US federal court.

Mancini said that he and the Ali family are trying to find out how many other people were stopped for similar questioning, and are considering a federal lawsuit.

Muhammad Ali, one of the iconic 20th century sports heroes, died after a long battle with Parkinson's Disease on June 3. He was 74.



A dancer of the Mocidade Alegre samba school performs during the first night of carnival parade at the Sambadrome in Sao Paulo, Brazil on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

TRUMP'S IMMIGRATION RULE

Melania Trump would have been a victim

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Melania Trump could have been deported and banned from the US if Donald Trump had been president when she was working as a model in the 1990s, immigration attorneys have said.

In 1996, Ms Trump--then Knauss--was paid for modelling work undertaken in the United States while travelling on a visitor--or tourist--visa, violating the terms of entry, according to documents obtained by the Associated Press.

The first lady allegedly earned more than \$20,000 (£16,000) in the seven weeks before she acquired legal permission to work in the country.

She went on to apply for a green card in 2001 and



REFUGEE CRISIS AND PEOPLE SMUGGLING

Europe hails 'success'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A new report claiming European operations to combat people smuggling in the ongoing refugee crisis are a success has been lambasted by aid workers as more migrants die than ever before.

Almost 14,000 asylum seekers have arrived by boat in Europe in the first weeks of 2017, with at least 366 dying at sea and others freezing to death while stranded by border closures.

But a report by EU-wide security agency Europol claimed a year of efforts by the new European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC) was seeing progress.

Dimitris Avramopoulos, the European Commissioner for migration, said the initiative was "successfully fighting, disrupting and apprehending criminal migrant smuggling networks".

Rob Wainwright, the director of Europol said more than 90 per cent of migrants entering the EU have used smugglers.

"These organised crime networks are taking mass profits from mass migration, and making migrant smuggling the fastest growing criminal sector," he added.

"To tackle this, we have brought together some of the best investigators in Europe in the EMSC."

Almost 17,500 suspected migrant smugglers were identified in 2016 according to Europol's report, which said that 1,150 social media accounts linked to the trade had been flagged alongside 12,000 "operational messages", as well as 2,500 forged or stolen documents.

Media 'a great danger to our country': Trump

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Donald Trump followed up his attack on the media at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) by branding it "a great danger to the country" on social media.

After a number of major news organisations including CNN, the BBC, the New York Times, The Los Angeles Times were barred from a White House press briefing, the President took to Twitter to lambast the media again.

He said that "fake news media knowingly doesn't tell the truth" and that news organisations like CNN and the "failing" New York Times had become a "joke" in a tweet.

It comes just hours after White House Press Secretary prevented some outlets from attending an off camera press briefing.

The comments follow a speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Maryland where Trump called the press, "enemies of the people".

He claimed they were inventing damaging

stories about him and his administration.

"A few days ago, I called the fake news 'the enemy of the people', and they are," he said. "Because they have no sources. They just make them up where there are none."

He insisted that he did not object to critical reporting but claimed he was the victim of constant misreporting.

He said: "I'm not against the media, I'm not against the press. I don't mind bad stories if I deserve them. And I tell you, I love good stories, but we don't get too many of them."

"But I'm only against the fake news media or press. Fake. Fake... I'm against the people who make up stories and make up sources. They shouldn't be allowed to use sources unless they use somebody's name."

Trump has repeatedly attacked CNN for revealing the existence of an intelligence report which suggested Russia may have damaging information about Trump's private life which could be used to blackmail him.



JAILING OF TOP CRITIC AGAINST DRUG WAR

Thousands protest against Duterte

AFP, Manila

Ex-Philippine leader Benigno Aquino joined thousands of people on the streets of Manila yesterday as protests broke out against President Rodrigo Duterte's brutal war on drugs.

Demonstrators amassed near the national police headquarters, with some warning the Duterte crackdown foreshadowed a repeat of the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship, which was toppled in a bloodless "People Power" revolution 31 years ago.

"We are taking the matter seriously. We are warning our people about the threat of rising fascism," protest leader Bonifacio Ilagan told AFP after leading more than 1,000 protesters at a morning rally.

Ilagan, a playwright who was tortured over two years in a police prison under Marcos' martial rule in the 1970s, cited the "culture of impunity" arising from Duterte's crackdown.

Duterte, 71, won the presidential election last year after promising during the campaign to eradicate drugs in society by killing tens of thousands of people.

He launched the crackdown after taking office in June and police have reported killing 2,555 drug suspects since then, with about 4,000 other people murdered in unexplained circumstances.