



A displaced Iraqi woman and her daughter cry while fleeing their homes, as Iraqi forces battle with Islamic State militants in western Mosul, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

'Chemical attack' reported in Mosul

Red Cross says 12 including children hospitalised as thousands flee fighting

CNN ONLINE
Twelve residents of the war-torn Iraqi city of Mosul were treated for injuries from a suspected chemical attack this week, an official with the International Committee of the Red Cross said. The patients, who are being treated in hospital in nearby Irbil, are "showing clinical symptoms consistent with an exposure to a blistering chemical agent," the organization's regional director for the Middle East, Robert Mardini, said. The five children, three women and four men have symptoms that include blisters, coughing, redness in the eyes, irritation, and vomiting. "The use of chemical weapons is absolutely prohibited under international humanitarian law. We are deeply alarmed by what our colleagues have seen, and we strongly condemn any use of chemical weapons, by any party, anywhere," ICRC's Mardini said. Lawan Miwan, head of Emergency Hospital in Irbil, told CNN his hospital is treating two cases with symptoms consistent with exposure to a toxic chemical agent. CNN talked with two residents of east Mosul who reported smelling "something strange," "like a chemical agent," or "mustard gas" following mortar attacks on eastern Mosul on Wednesday and Thursday. The residents said the attacks came across the Tigris River from western Mosul. ICRC spokeswoman Sara Alzawqari said the first three cases were brought to the hospital on Wednesday, followed by another four Thursday. Five victims arrived in somewhat better medical condition on Friday. All are victims of the same attack, Alzawqari said.

Unease hits White House, agencies

Trump aides' bid to plug leaks creates unease among civil servants

REUTERS, Washington
President Donald Trump's Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin used his first senior staff meeting last month to tell his new aides he would not tolerate leaks to the news media, three sources familiar with the matter said. Current and former officials said that in a department from past practice, access to a classified computer system at the White House has been tightened by political appointees to prevent some professional staffers from seeing memos being prepared for the new president. And at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), some officials told Reuters they believe a search is under way for the leaker of a draft intelligence report which found little evidence that citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries covered by Trump's now-suspended travel ban pose a threat to the United States. Washington career civil servants say the clampdown appears designed to try to limit the flow of information inside and outside government agencies charged with foreign policy and national security and to deter officials from talking to the media about topics that could result in negative stories. The White House did not immediately comment on Friday about why it is trying to crack down on leaks.

KILLING OF KIM JONG-NAM

Malaysia to expel N Korea ambassador

Pyongyang slams US over possible terror listing

AFP, Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia yesterday said it would expel the North Korean ambassador in a deepening diplomatic row over the assassination of the half-brother of Pyongyang's leader at Kuala Lumpur International Airport. "The ambassador has been declared persona non grata," Malaysia's foreign ministry said in a statement, adding it had demanded but not received an apology over Pyongyang's attack on its investigation of the case. "The expulsion of the DPRK (North Korea) Ambassador is... an indication of the government's concern that Malaysia may have been used for illegal activities," the statement added. Kim Jong-Nam, 45, was poisoned last month with VX, a nerve agent so deadly that it is classed as a weapon of mass destruction. The dramatic killing at Kuala Lumpur airport prompted an international probe and lurid stories of North Korea's Cold War-style tradecraft. South Korea has blamed the North for the murder, citing what they say was a standing order from leader Kim Jong-Un to kill his exiled half-brother who may have been seen as a potential rival. In response, Malaysia has cancelled a rare visa-free travel deal with North Korea -- a key conduit to the outside world -- and recalled its envoy to Pyongyang, putting the skids under once cozy ties. Earlier, North Korea warned the US will "pay dearly" if it puts Pyongyang on a terror list over the killing of its leader's half-brother, as a suspect in the murder claimed he was the victim of a conspiracy.



The World Health Organization has responded to the reported use of chemical weapons agents in eastern Mosul, activating an emergency response plan to treat those who may be exposed to the highly toxic chemicals, the WHO said Friday. IS has used chemical weapons on numerous occasions in Iraq and Syria, including in the battlefield in northern Iraq, according to Iraqi and US officials. This is believed to be the first such attack in Mosul since the October start of the offensive to retake Iraq's second most populous city from ISIS control. Meanwhile, the number of Iraqi refugees fleeing western Mosul shot up to more than 46,000 by Friday morning, the Ministry of Migration and Displaced in Iraq said. At least 14,000 civilians fled Mosul on Thursday alone, the ministry said. The number of refugees is expected to increase as the battle for western Mosul closes in on the heart of that side of the city, migration ministry head Saif Sabah said. A source told CNN that officials have seen "greater and higher numbers" of civilians fleeing western Mosul than from the eastern side of Mosul.



A mother reacts as her daughter Ranmea is treated for possible exposure to chemical weapons agents in a hospital west of Erbil in Mosul, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

China hikes defence spending

AFP, Beijing
China will raise defence spending "around seven percent" this year as it guards against "outside meddling" in its disputed territorial claims, a top official said yesterday, in an apparent reference to Washington. Just days after US President Donald Trump outlined plans to raise American military spending by around 10 percent, a spokeswoman for China's parliament told reporters that future Chinese expenditures will depend on US actions in the region. "We call for a peaceful settlement through dialogue and consultation. At the same time we need the ability to safeguard our sovereignty and interests and rights," spokeswoman Fu Ying told a press conference.



Syrian musicians play at the site of the damaged Roman amphitheatre in the ancient city of Palmyra in central Syria, during a tour organised by the Syrian army for journalists, yesterday. Syrian troops backed by Russian jets completed the recapture of the historic city of Palmyra from Islamic State (IS) group fighters on March 2, 2017, the Kremlin and the army said. PHOTO: AFP

Uproar as US quietly releases rights report

REUTERS, Washington
The US State Department released its annual report on human rights around the world on Friday but the release was overshadowed by criticism that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson gave the report little of the traditional attention or fanfare. Tillerson declined to unveil the report in person, breaking with precedent established during both Democratic and Republican administrations. A senior US official answered reporters' questions by phone on condition of anonymity rather than appearing on camera, also a break with precedent. "The report speaks for itself," the official said in response to a question about why Tillerson did not unveil it. "We're very, very proud of it. The facts should really be the story here." The report, mandated by Congress, documents human rights conditions in nearly 200 countries and territories and is put together by staff in US embassies. This year's report was largely completed during former President Barack Obama's tenure. Traditionally, the secretary of state unveils the report with public comments emphasizing the centrality of human rights in US foreign policy and highlighting specific findings.

NEWSIN brief

- Jordan hangs 15 in mass execution**
REUTERS, Amman
Jordan hanged 15 death row prisoners including convicted "terrorists" at dawn yesterday, its information minister said, in a further break with a moratorium on executions it observed between 2006 and 2014. Ten of those put to death had been convicted of terrorism offences and five of "heinous" crimes including rape, Mahmud al-Momani told the official Petra news agency.
- S-300 defence system now 'operational': Iran**
AFP, Tehran
Iran's advanced S-300 air defence system, delivered by Russia following a July 2015 nuclear deal after years of delay, is now operational, state television reported yesterday. The deal to buy the S-300 system was originally signed in 2007 but Russia suspended it in 2010 citing a UN ban on arms sales to Iran. It was revived after the nuclear deal between Iran and major powers went into effect in January last year.

Tens of thousands flee clashes in Syria's north

AFP, Manbij
Tens of thousands of Syrian civilians have fled ferocious fighting between Russian-backed regime forces and Islamic State group jihadists over the past week in the country's ravaged north. Supported by Russian air power and artillery, Syrian government forces have waged a fierce offensive against IS, seizing around 90 villages since mid-January. They took eight yesterday alone, a military source told state news agency SANA, "expanding our control in northeast parts of Aleppo province". Their aim, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, is IS-held Khafsa, the main station pumping water into Aleppo. Residents of Syria's second city have been without mains water for 47 days after the jihadists cut the supply. The fighting over the past week has sparked an exodus of "more than 30,000

Indian-origin man shot dead in US again

PTI, New York
A 43-year-old Indian-origin store owner in the US has been shot dead outside his home, just days after an Indian engineer was killed in Kansas in a hate crime shooting that had sent shockwaves across the country. Harnish Patel, 43, the owner of a convenience store in Lancaster County, South Carolina, was found dead of gunshot wounds in the front yard of his home on Thursday, police officials said. Local Sheriff Barry Faile said the Indian ethnicity of Patel does not appear to be a factor in the crime. "I don't have any reason to believe that this was racially motivated," Faile said.

More than 100m at risk of starvation globally: UN

REUTERS, Rome
The number of people facing severe hunger worldwide has surpassed 100 million and will grow if humanitarian aid is not paired with more support for farmers, a senior United Nations official said. Dominique Burgeon, director of the emergency division at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said latest studies showed 102 million people faced acute malnutrition - meaning they were on the brink of starvation - in 2016, up almost 30 percent from 80 million in 2015. The hike was mainly driven by deepening crises in Yemen, South Sudan, Nigeria and Somalia, where conflict and drought have crippled food production, he said. "Humanitarian assistance has kept many



people alive so far but their food security situation has continued to deteriorate," Burgeon told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in an interview. More investment is needed to help people feed themselves by farming crops and livestock, he added. "We come with airplanes, we provide food assistance and we manage to keep them alive but we do not invest enough in the livelihood of these people," he said. "We avoid them falling into famine but we are not good at taking them off the cliff, away from food insecurity." The UN World Food Programme said last month more than 20 million people - greater than the population of Romania or Florida - risk dying from starvation within six months in four separate famines.

Hundreds of migrants rescued in Med ops

AFP, Rome
Rescuers plucked around 900 migrants from boats in the Mediterranean on Friday while hundreds more were brought to Sicily, as Italian figures showed far more people are braving the crossing from North Africa this year than last. Since the beginning of the year, 14,319 migrants have been brought to Italy, according to the Interior Ministry.