

NEWS IN
brief

Somali pirates stages first attack since 2012

AFP, Nairobi
Suspected pirates boarded a Sri Lankan-flagged tanker and forced its crew to change course towards the northeastern Somali coast, an expert on piracy in Somalia said yesterday. If the hijackers' identity is confirmed, the attack would be the first by Somali pirates on a commercial ship since 2012.

17 killed in China coal mine accident

AFP, Beijing
Seventeen Chinese coal miners were killed when a lift used to move workers fell down a shaft, state media reported, the latest deadly mishap in the country's accident-prone coal-mining industry. The accident occurred Thursday when a cable supporting a mining cage caught fire, causing the rig to tumble down into a state-operated coal mine in northeast China's Heilongjiang province, Xinhua news agency said.



Men plow snow at the Times Square during a snowstorm in New York, yesterday. Winter Storm Stella unleashed its fury on much of the northeastern United States yesterday dropping snow and sleet across the region and leading to school closures and thousands of flight cancellations. The storm also postponed a meeting between President Donald Trump and German Chancellor Angela Merkel from Tuesday until Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

US deploys attack drones to S Korea

Trump gives CIA authority to conduct drone strikes: WSJ

AGENCIES
The US Army is permanently stationing an attack drone system and its support personnel in South Korea amid ongoing tensions with the North, a Defense Department spokesman said Monday.
An official said the deployment, due by next year, was not unique to South Korea and was being conducted across the Army to provide infantry divisions with better intelligence.
But the announcement comes just one week after Pyongyang launched four ballistic missiles in its latest provocative test.
The sensor-rich MQ-1C Gray Eagle is capable of carrying Stinger and Hellfire missiles, as well as other armaments.
The United States has about 50,000 troops in Japan, and another 28,000 in South Korea.
Meanwhile, President Donald Trump has given the Central Intelligence Agency new authority to conduct drone attacks against suspected militants, the Wall Street Journal reported on Monday, citing US officials.
The move would be a change from the policy of former President Barack Obama's administration of limiting the CIA's paramilitary role, the newspaper reported.
Critics of the targeted killing program question whether the strikes create more militants than they kill. They cite the spread of jihadist organizations and militant attacks throughout the world as evidence that targeted killings may be exacerbating the problem.

Women's rights under assault: UN

AFP, United Nations

Women's rights are under fresh assault worldwide, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned Monday as a two-week conference kicked off at the United Nations to take stock of the fight for gender equality.

President Donald Trump's "global gag rule" cutting US funding to groups that offer abortion services and Russia's decision to ease punishment for domestic violence are casting a long shadow on the annual gathering of the Commission on the Status of Women.

"Globally, women are suffering new assaults on their safety and dignity," Guterres told the opening session of the conference at UN headquarters in New York.

"Some governments are enacting laws that curtail women's freedoms. Others are rolling back legal protections against domestic violence."

Trump, who declared himself opposed to abortion during his campaign, signed a decree just days into his presidency barring US funding for foreign non-governmental groups if their work touches on abortion.

A few weeks later, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a bill that reduces penalties for domestic violence to a fine instead of a jail term, if the assault is a first offence and does not cause serious injury.

This year's gathering focuses on women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work, with attention turning to pay inequality and paid parental leave.

The United Nations has set a global goal of achieving gender equality by 2030. A recent study by the International Labour Organization warned that without stronger measures, it will take 70 years to close the gender wage gap.



Hosni Mubarak to be released

REUTERS, Cairo
Hosni Mubarak, overthrown as president of Egypt in 2011 and the first leader to go on trial in the wake of the Arab Spring, will walk free this week for the first time in six years. The 88-year-old was cleared of murder charges this month in his final court appearance, having stood trial on charges ranging from corruption to ordering the killing of some of the protesters who ended his 30-year rule.



Park summoned for questioning

AFP, Seoul
South Korean prosecutors will summon former president Park Geun-hye, whose impeachment was confirmed by the country's highest court last week, for questioning as a criminal suspect, a spokesman said yesterday. Park has been named as an accomplice to the secret confidante at the heart of a corruption and influence-peddling scandal that triggered her dramatic downfall. She is now stripped of immunity from criminal prosecution.

Parenthood linked to longer life: study

AFP, Paris

Parents, take courage. If you survive the sleep deprivation, toddler tantrums and teenage angst, you may be rewarded with a longer life than your childless peers, researchers said yesterday.

Fathers gained more in life expectancy than mothers, a team wrote in the Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health -- and particularly in older age.

"By the age of 60, the difference in life expectancy... may be as much as two years" between people with, and those without, children, they concluded.

Researchers tracked the lifespan of men and women born between 1911 and 1925 and living in Sweden -- more than 1.4 million people in total.

They also gathered data on whether the participants were married and had children.

Men and women with at least one child had "lower death risks" than childless ones, the team concluded.

By age 80, men who fathered children had a remaining life expectancy of seven years and eight months, compared to seven years for childless men, said the team.

For mothers, life expectancy at 80 was nine years and six months, while for childless women it was eight years and 11 months.

EU court rules workplace headscarf ban legal

AFP, Luxembourg

European companies can ban employees from wearing religious or political symbols including the Islamic headscarf, the EU's top court ruled yesterday in a landmark case.

The European Court of Justice (ECJ) said it does not constitute "direct discrimination" if a firm has an internal rule banning the wearing of "any political, philosophical or religious sign."

The Luxembourg-based court was ruling on the case of a Muslim woman fired by the security company G4S in Belgium after she insisted on wearing a headscarf.

The wearing of religious symbols, and especially Islamic symbols such as the headscarf, has become a hot button issue with the rise of populist sentiment across Europe, with some countries such as Austria considering a complete ban on the full-face



veil in public.

The ECJ was ruling on a case dating to 2003 when Samira Achbita, a Muslim, was employed as a receptionist by G4S security services in Belgium.

At the time, the company had an "unwritten rule" that employees should not wear any political, religious or philosophical symbols at work, the ECJ said.

In 2006, Achbita told G4S she wanted to wear the Islamic headscarf at work but was told this would not be allowed.

Subsequently, the company introduced a formal ban. Achbita was dismissed and she went to court claiming discrimination.

The ECJ said European Union law does bar discrimination on religious grounds, but G4S's actions were based on treating all employees the same, meaning no one person was singled out for application of the ban.

Ankara downgrades ties

Says EU criticism 'has no value'; Erdogan accuses Merkel of 'supporting terrorists'

AFP, Ankara

Turkey yesterday rejected EU criticism of its stance in the intensifying crisis with the Netherlands as having "no value", after Ankara downgraded relations with The Hague and banned its ambassador from returning.

In a dramatic escalation after the Netherlands prevented two Turkish ministers from holding rallies ahead of a referendum on strengthening President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's powers, Ankara said it was suspending high-level relations with the Hague in a raft of diplomatic sanctions.

Erdogan also lashed out at German Chancellor Angela Merkel for "supporting terrorists" as she backed the Netherlands in the increasingly acrimonious standoff, prompting an exasperated response from Berlin.

And he warned that the Netherlands would face more retaliation from Ankara as he made a new jibe against the country over the 1995 Srebrenica massacre.

He said the Dutch character had been "broken" after Netherlands peacekeepers had failed to prevent the 1995 Srebrenica massacre, in comments described as "repugnant" by The Hague.

The dispute risks harming Turkey's entire relationship with the European Union, which it has sought to join for the last half century in an

agonisingly process.

Tensions have increased between Berlin and the Hague with Turkey after Erdogan repeatedly described the actions against Turkish officials as reminiscent of the Nazis.

His comments sparked particular outrage in the Netherlands, a country bombed and occupied by German forces in World War II.

The United States urged the NATO allies to resolve their row, with a State Department official

NETHERLANDS-TURKEY ROW
Turkey blocks return of Dutch envoy, suspends high-level ties
The Turkey president steps up attacks, makes Srebrenica jibe

saying "we'd just ask that they not escalate the situation any further and work together to resolve it."

EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini and EU Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn called on Turkey to "refrain from excessive statements and actions that risk further exacerbating the situation."

But the Turkish foreign ministry hit back by saying: "The EU's short-sighted statement has no value for our country."

Paying no heed to the EU's warning, Erdogan had bluntly told the German chancellor on Turkish television late Monday: "Mrs Merkel, you are supporting terrorists."

In an interview with A-Haber television, he accused Berlin of not responding to 4,500 dossiers sent by Ankara on terror suspects, including those linked to Kurdish militants and the failed coup in Turkey last year.

"Mrs Merkel, why are you hiding terrorists in your country?... Why are you not doing anything?"

The move by the Netherlands to block the rallies by Turkish minister comes as Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte prepares to face the far-right populist Geert Wilders in a general election on Wednesday.

Turkey is also gearing up for a key April 16 poll to decide whether to approve constitutional changes that would create an executive presidency, boosting Erdogan's powers.

In a bid to woo support, Turkish officials have sought to address to their citizens living in Europe, where a majority have traditionally supported the ruling party.

In Germany, there are over 1.4 million Turkish citizens eligible to vote while there are nearly 250,000 in the Netherlands based on official figures from November 2015.



Displaced Iraqis who had fled their homes stop for a check by Iraqi forces, as Iraqi forces battle with Islamic State militants, in western Mosul, yesterday. Iraqi forces yesterday said that they recaptured Mosul's train station, once one of the country's main rail hubs and the latest in a series of key sites retaken from jihadists.

PHOTO: REUTERS



MIDDLE EAST PEACE Trump envoy meets Abbas

AFP, Ramallah

US President Donald Trump's administration waded into the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict yesterday as one of his top advisers held his first meeting with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.

After five hours of talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem on Monday night, Jason Greenblatt met Abbas in Ramallah in the occupied West Bank.

Details of their talks were not yet clear.

US officials have described the visit by Greenblatt, Trump's special representative for international negotiations, as a fact-finding mission as the White House seeks a way forward in restarting long-deadlocked peace efforts.

But it comes after Trump cast uncertainty over years of international efforts to foster a two-state solution to the conflict when he met Netanyahu at the White House last month.

At that meeting, Trump broke with decades of US policy by saying he was not bound to a two-state solution to the conflict and would be open to one state if it meant peace.

He has also sparked concern among Palestinians and others by pledging during his campaign to move the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the status of which is one of the thorniest issues of the conflict.

YEMEN WAR More than 1,500 children killed in two years

AFP, Aden

The conflict in Yemen has killed nearly 7,700 people, including at least 1,564 children, since a Saudi-led coalition intervened on the government's side two years ago, UN agencies said Monday.

The UN children's agency UNICEF said that by March 10, at least 1,546 children were killed and 2,450 others maimed in Yemen.

Of those killed, 1,022 were boys and 478 were girls, UNICEF said in a statement. During that same period 1,801 boys and 649 girls were wounded while 1,572 boys were recruited to serve as child soldiers, said UNICEF.

Trump didn't mean wiretapping when he tweeted about it

Says White House press secretary Sean Spicer

CNN ONLINE

The White House on Monday walked back a key point of President Donald Trump's unsubstantiated allegation that Barack Obama wiretapped his phones in Trump Tower during the 2016 election.

White House press secretary Sean Spicer said Trump wasn't referring to wiretapping when he tweeted about wiretapping.

"I think there's no question that the Obama administration, that there were actions about surveillance and other activities that occurred in the 2016 election," Spicer said. "The president used the word wiretaps in quotes to mean, broadly, surveillance and other activities."

Wiretapping is a narrowly defined surveillance activity that involves tapping into "a telephone or telegram wire in order to get information," according to Merriam-Webster dictionary.



Spicer also said that Trump was referring to the Obama administration broadly -- and not accusing Obama of personal involvement -- when he tweeted that "Obama had my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower" and accused Obama of being a "bad" or "sick guy."

Spicer's comments came on the same day as the deadline for the Justice Department to provide evidence to the House Intelligence Committee to back up Trump's claim. The White House has so far refused to provide any evidence, and numerous former officials have denied the existence of any warrant to wiretap Trump Tower.

A week earlier, Spicer said Trump's tweet "speaks for itself". But Monday, Spicer was open to providing an interpretation for Trump's tweet, saying the President told Spicer he was referring to means of surveillance beyond wiretapping in his tweets accusing Obama of doing just that.