

NEWS IN brief

Israel shells Gaza after rocket fire
 AFP, Jerusalem
 A rocket fired by Palestinians in the Gaza Strip slammed into southern Israel yesterday, prompting retaliatory Israeli tank fire, sources on both sides said. Palestinian security officials said the Israeli tank fire targeted an observation post of Gaza's Hamas rulers. No casualties have been reported.

110-minister govt!
 AFP, Accra
 Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo on Friday defended his controversial decision to appoint a 110-minister government, calling it a "necessary investment" in the small west African country. The new government nominated Wednesday is a record for Ghana and has sparked a storm of commentary on social media and radio talk shows. The ministers are needed for the "rapid transformation of this country", he said.

Secret Service laptop stolen with Trump info
 AFP, Washington
 A laptop was stolen from a US Secret Service agent in New York and remains missing, the agency said in a statement Friday, amid reports that the device contained floor plans of Trump Tower. CNN -- citing law enforcement sources in New York -- said that though the computer was highly encrypted, it contained Trump Tower floor plans and other sensitive contents.

Erdogan for restoring death penalty
 AFP, Istanbul
 Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday said he expected parliament to approve restoring capital punishment after the April 16 referendum on expanding its powers, a move that could end Ankara's bid to join the EU. Turkey completely abolished the death penalty in 2004.



A man tries to help his neighbour to cross a flooded street in Huachipa, Peru after the Huaycoloro river overflooded its banks on Friday. Inset, A woman is being assisted while crossing a flooded street there. At least 62 people have died in rain-related events since December, many in recent days after a sudden warming of Pacific waters near Peru unleashed torrential downpours, landslides and flooding.
 PHOTO: REUTERS

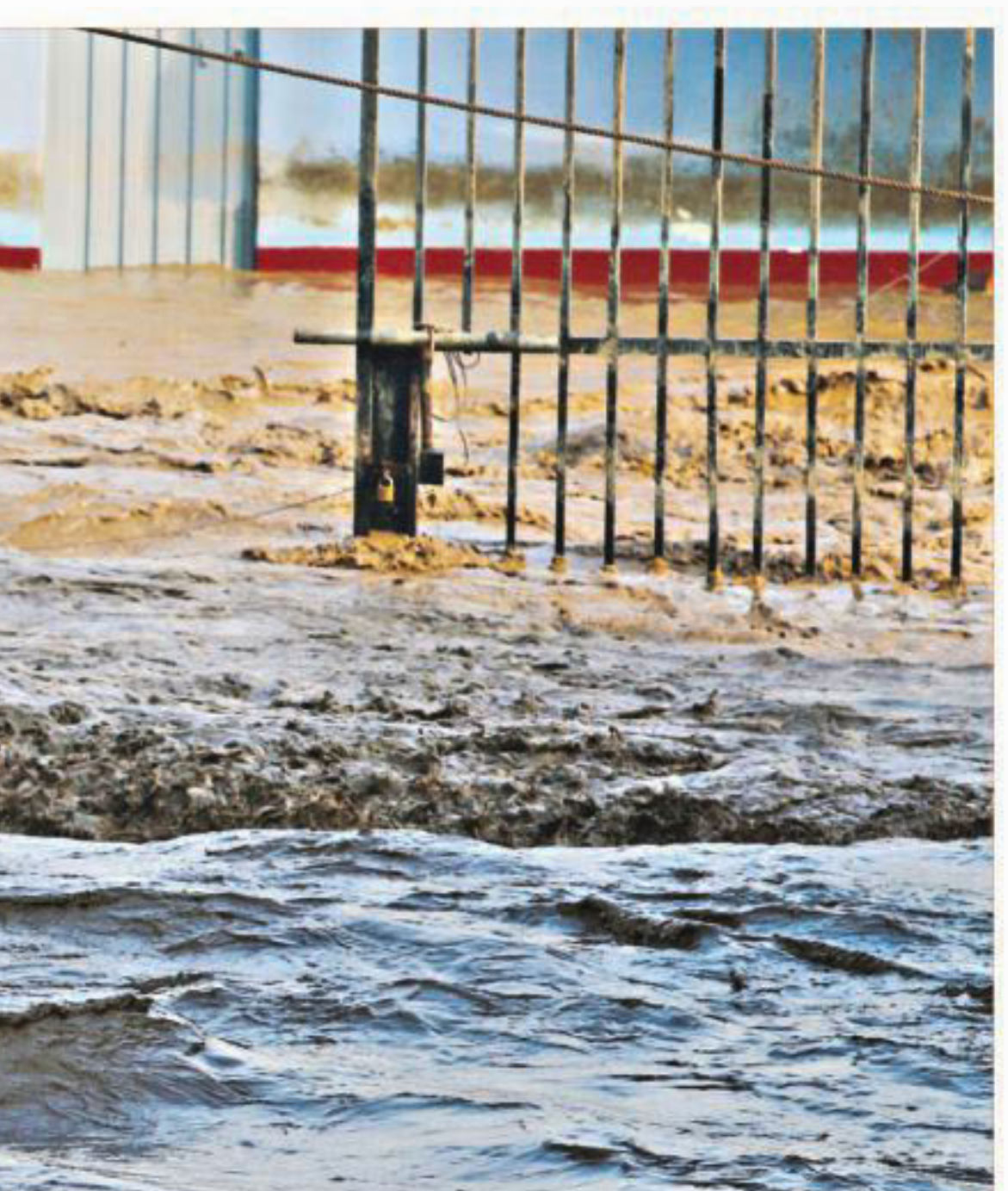


PHOTO: REUTERS

US, China soften tone Say will cooperate on 'dangerous' N Korea situation

AFP, Beijing
 The US and China pledged yesterday to work together in addressing the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear programme, as US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson warned the situation had reached a "dangerous level."
 The language from Tillerson and his Chinese counterpart after talks in Beijing was notably conciliatory after a run-up in which US President Donald Trump accused China of doing nothing to control its rogue neighbour while Beijing blamed Washington for fuelling hostilities.
 "I think we share a common view and a sense that tensions in the peninsula are quite high right now and that things have reached a rather dangerous level," Tillerson said after talks with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.
 "We will work together to see if we cannot bring the government in Pyongyang to a place where they want to make a different course, make a course correction, and move away from the development of nuclear weapons."
 Tillerson arrived in Beijing earlier yesterday after visits to US allies Japan and South Korea where he said the US would no longer observe the "failed" approach of patient diplomacy favoured by Beijing and followed by the Obama administration.
 Trump upped the pressure in a Friday Twitter blast accusing Beijing of failing to use its leverage as North Korea's key

diplomatic and trade partner.
 "North Korea is behaving very badly. They have been 'playing' the United States for years. China has done little to help!" Trump said.
 The tougher US talk followed two North Korean nuclear tests last year and recent missile launches, including a salvo earlier this month that Pyongyang described as practice for an attack on US bases in Japan.
 Beijing shares US concerns over Pyongyang's nuclearisation but is careful not to provoke North Korea.
 Beijing is deeply reluctant to put harsh pressure on the unpredictable North lest it trigger a confrontation or a messy regime collapse.
 China has hit back at the US, angrily accusing it of escalating the situation by holding military exercises with its ally Seoul and deploying an anti-missile system in South Korea.
 But it took one of its toughest steps yet in February, halting all imports of North Korean coal -- a key source of income for the impoverished state -- for the rest of this year.
 Wang Dong, a North Korea expert at Peking University, said it was wrong to think Beijing can control the unpredictable and head-strong Pyongyang.
 "It is unreasonable for the United States to accuse China of doing nothing on the DPRK (North Korea)," Wang said.
 "This is an extremely complex and sensitive issue. There is no one magic formula."



Forces seize ground in Mosul Old City Fighting rages near mosque where IS declared 'caliphate'

AFP, Mosul
 Elite Iraqi forces battled house by house in the Old City of Mosul yesterday, inching towards the mosque where the Islamic State group proclaimed its "caliphate" in 2014, a spokesman said.
 Commanders said that progress in the densely populated warren of alleyways was slow but that government forces had made new gains from IS in the heart of their last major urban bastion in Iraq.
 "Our forces are 800 metres (yards) from the mosque," said Captain Firas al-Zuwaidi, spokesman for the interior ministry's elite Rapid Response Force.
 He was referring to the Al-Nuri Mosque, where IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the cross-border "caliphate" spanning jihadist-controlled territory in Iraq and Syria in his sole public appearance in July 2014.
 The battle for the Old City was always expected to be the toughest of the campaign to retake Mosul from IS, further complicated by the presence of hundreds of thousands of civilians believed to have stayed on under jihadist rule.
 Iraqi forces launched the huge operation last October, retaking the east of the city in January before setting their sights on the smaller but more densely populated west.
 Iraqi forces had already taken a string of key targets in west Mosul, including the airport, the train station, Mosul Museum and the provincial government headquarters.

'Healthiest hearts in the world'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
 An indigenous group living in the Amazon rainforest have the healthiest arteries of any population ever studied, it has been discovered.
 It's often warned that unhealthy, sedentary lifestyles common in many countries can lead to clogged-up arteries, increasing the risk of heart disease.
 Now scientists are looking to the habits of the Tsimane people in Bolivia, who lead a highly active way of life based on hunting, foraging and fishing, for clues on how other populations can improve their heart health.
 People from the Tsimane (pronounced chee-mah-nay) community are five times less likely to develop a condition known as coronary atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries, than people in the US, according to a new study.
 The research, published in The Lancet, found the arteries of an 80-year-old member of the Tsimane people resembled that of an American in their mid-50s.
 "Our study shows that the Tsimane indigenous South Americans have the lowest prevalence of coronary atherosclerosis of any population yet studied," said Hillard Kaplan, the study's senior anthropology author from the University of New Mexico.
 "Their lifestyle suggests that a diet low in saturated fats and high in non-processed fibre-rich carbohydrates, along with wild game and fish, not smoking and being active throughout the day could help prevent hardening in the arteries of the heart."
 The Tsimane diet largely consists of rice, plantain, cassava root, corn, nuts and fruits, with protein, mostly from animal meat, accounting for 14 per cent of their diet, with and fat accounting for the same proportion.
 It is estimated that members of the group are inactive for only 10 per cent of the day, unlike many people in industrialised societies who are often sedentary for more than half their waking hours.



Travellers are evacuated from Paris' Orly airport yesterday following the shooting of a man by French security forces. Inset, Security forces on action after the incident. Story on page 16.
 PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

'ISRAEL APARTHEID' REPORT UN official quits amid pressure

AFP, Beirut
 UN official Rima Khalaf announced her resignation on Friday, saying the secretary general had asked her to withdraw a report in which she accused Israel of being an "apartheid state".
 UN chief Antonio Guterres accepted the resignation of Khalaf, a Jordanian national, his spokesman Stephane Dujaric told reporters in New York, while denying that the secretary general had acted under US pressure.
 Khalaf, under-secretary general and executive secretary at the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), told a news conference: "The secretary general asked me yesterday morning to withdraw (the report)."
 "I asked him to rethink his decision, he insisted, so I submitted my resignation from the UN."
 On Wednesday, the United States demanded that Guterres withdraw an ESCWA report entitled "Israeli Practices towards the Palestinian People and the Question of Apartheid".
 The report concluded that "available evidence established beyond a reasonable doubt that Israel is guilty of policies and practices that constitute the crime of apartheid".
 Israel's UN envoy Danny Danon and Washington's ambassador to the world body, Nikki Haley, welcomed Khalaf's resignation.
 "Anti-Israel activists do not belong in the UN," Danon said.
 "Her removal from the UN is long overdue," he added.
 Haley in a statement said: "When someone issues a false and defamatory report in the name of the UN, it is appropriate that the person resign."



SECOND INDEPENDENCE VOTE Ignoring call would shatter UK: Sturgeon

REUTERS, Aberdeen
 A continued refusal by Britain's prime minister to discuss an independence referendum authorised by the Scottish parliament would "shatter beyond repair" the United Kingdom's constitutional structure, Nicola Sturgeon told the Scottish National Party yesterday.
 Sturgeon pressed on with plans to hold a new Scottish independence referendum as announced earlier this week, and expected to get authorisation from the devolved parliament on Wednesday to seek a new vote once the terms for Brexit are clear but before Britain leaves the EU.
 But Prime Minister Theresa May needs to sign off on any legally binding vote in Scotland under the UK's constitutional arrangements, and she told Sturgeon this week that "now is not the time" for a new choice on independence.
 "To stand in defiance of (Scottish parliamentary authorisation) would be for the Prime Minister to shatter beyond repair any notion of the UK as a respectful partnership of equals," Sturgeon, who is also Scotland's First Minister, said.
 The two sides are in a standoff just days before Britain is expected to trigger Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty and start the extremely complicated divorce procedure.
 Scottish voters rejected independence in 2014 by a 10 percentage point margin.

Trump repeats wiretap claim against Obama His administration appeals block of revised travel ban

AFP, Washington
 US President Donald Trump on Friday repeated his charge that predecessor Barack Obama had ordered a wiretap against him, rejecting rising calls from Republicans and Democrats to withdraw the charge and apologise.
 Speaking at a joint press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Trump answered a question on the wiretap allegation by referring to the US National Security Agency's reported tapping of Merkel's phone several years ago.
 "As far as wiretapping, I guess, by this past administration, at least we have something in common perhaps," Trump said.
 But Trump also said he did not endorse a Fox News claim that Britain's GCHQ spy agency did the wiretapping for Obama -- an allegation repeated by Trump's spokesman Thursday, sparking a sharp rebuke from London.
 Trump has accused Obama of ordering wiretaps at his Trump Tower in New York, but two weeks after the extraordinary claim, he has not delivered any evidence.
 The claim has led to investigations in Congress and by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, but so far no one has provided any evidence to substantiate it.
 Meanwhile, the Trump administration on Friday appealed a Maryland court's block of its revised travel ban, aiming to reinstate the temporary halt to immigrants and visitor arrivals from six majority Muslim countries.
 The Justice Department filed a notice of appeal with the district court in Greenbelt, Maryland, two days after that court and one in Hawaii dealt a new blow to the White House's travel ban, both ruling that it discriminated against Muslims.



COLONIAL-ERA GENOCIDE BY GERMANY Namibia claims \$30b

AFP, Windhoek
 Namibia is to launch a 30-billion-dollar (28-billion-euro) lawsuit against Germany over genocide committed during colonial rule, when tens of thousands of people were killed, according to documents seen by AFP on Friday.
 The Namibian government has previously avoided demanding financial compensation, but it changed its stance as two indigenous groups filed a class-action suit in New York against Germany.
 Legal documents provided to AFP and The Namibian newspaper show that the government has engaged lawyers in London to pursue a case of violation of human rights and a "consequent apology and reparations process."
 Over 65,000 people are believed to have been killed when colonial Germany massacred Namibian tribes such as the Herero and Nama between 1904 and 1908.
 While some German officials have acknowledged a genocide occurred, the government has refused to pay reparations, saying aid worth hundreds of millions of dollars over the last 25 years was "for the benefit of all Namibians".
 Germany seized the territory of modern-day Namibia in the late 19th century under Otto von Bismarck, as part of the so-called Scramble for Africa by European colonisers.
 It was called German South West Africa during Germany's 1884-1915 rule, and then passed under South Africa rule for 75 years, finally gaining independence in 1990.