

NEWS IN brief

Palestinian killed by Israeli fire in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City
A Palestinian was killed and two others injured before dawn on Wednesday by Israeli artillery fire in Gaza, according to a Palestinian official. According to the Israeli army, the three men were in the border area between the Palestinian enclave and Israeli territory, where multiple exchanges of fire have taken place recently.

ICC jails ex-Congo VP for bribing witnesses

AFP, The Hague
Judges yesterday sentenced former Congolese vice president Jean-Pierre Bemba to a year in jail and fined him 300,000 euros for bribing witnesses during his war crimes trial in an unprecedented case before the International Criminal Court.

Prosecutors had asked for eight years for Bemba, who is already serving 18 years after being convicted of war crimes by his marauding troops, who he sent into the Central African Republic in 2002 to 2003 to put down a coup against the then president.



French minister quits over daughters' jobs

AFP, Paris
French Interior Minister Bruno Le Roux resigned on Tuesday after revelations that he hired his two teenage daughters as parliamentary aides. Le Roux denied wrongdoing but said he did not want the investigation into the contracts -- for which his daughters earned a total of 55,000 euros (\$59,500) as parliamentary aides -- to "undermine the work of the government".



BRUSSELS TERROR ATTACK ANNIVERSARY A woman pays her respects at a memorial near the European Union institutions as the country marks the first anniversary of the twin Brussels attacks by Islamic extremists, yesterday. Belgium marks the first anniversary of the Islamic State bombings in Brussels, one at the airport and the other in the metro, in which 32 people were killed and more than 320 wounded with ceremonies showing that the heart of Europe stands defiant. PHOTO: AFP

Donald Trump to attend Nato summit

AFP, Washington
The White House confirmed Tuesday that President Donald Trump will join fellow Nato leaders for a key May summit in Brussels, as the US administration seeks to quash questions about Trump's support for the alliance.
The Trump administration has been scrambling to reaffirm its commitment to Washington's military alliances -- including Nato -- after the Republican billionaire called into question their usefulness during the presidential race.
News that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson would skip a Nato meeting in April -- but travel to Russia the same month -- did little to allay concerns.
By confirming Trump's participation in the May 25 summit, the US administration -- the leading partner in the North Atlantic alliance -- moved to reset the narrative.
"The president looks forward to meeting with his Nato counterparts to reaffirm our strong commitment to Nato and to discuss issues critical to the alliance, especially allied responsibility-sharing and Nato's role in the fight against terrorism," said a White House statement.
The White House said the April 12 meeting would be a chance for Trump and Stoltenberg to "talk about how to strengthen the alliance to cope with challenges to national and international security."
The summit itself, NATO said, would focus on "the alliance's role in the fight against terrorism, and the importance of increased defense spending and fairer burden-sharing" -- language that appeared to acknowledge Trump's repeated complaint that US allies are not paying their way.

Europeans risk being 'unsafe' on streets

Warns Erdogan as feud rages with EU

AFP, Ankara

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday warned that Europeans risk being unsafe on the world's streets, as a crisis between Ankara and the EU showed no signs of abating.

"If you continue to behave like this, tomorrow in no part of the world, no European, no Westerner will be able to take steps on the street safely and peacefully," Erdogan said during a speech in Ankara.

Erdogan did not expand on what he meant by his comments but appeared to imply that Europeans risked receiving the same treatment that, he says, is endured by Turks and Muslims in Europe.

Relations between Turkey and Europe have been severely strained since Turkish ministers were thwarted from campaigning on the continent for a 'yes' vote in next month's referendum on expanding Erdogan's powers.

Ankara has said such behaviour was reminiscent of Nazi Germany and also raised alarm over what it sees as rising racism and Islamophobia on the continent.

Erdogan warned Europe that Turkey was "not a country to push, to prod, to play with its honour, to shove its ministers out of the door, drag its citizens on the floor."

He said the world was watching Europe's actions "very closely", adding: "We as Turkey urge Europe to respect democracy, human rights, freedoms."

His repeated comparisons with Nazi Germany have been strongly condemned by the European Union as well as Berlin and the Hague, precipitating a crisis that has raised doubts over the viability of Turkey's EU bid.

The ordeal of a terror attack victim

CNN ONLINE

Back in Brussels, one year on, Chaphekar is a far cry from the dazed woman slumped on an airport chair, bra and stomach exposed, her yellow Jet Airways blazer ripped away.

Recalling the deadliest terror attack in Belgian history, the flight attendant remembers preparing for a routine flight to Newark, New Jersey. She had flown in from Mumbai the day before.

"I saw the first human suicide bomb attack but I couldn't figure out what it was," she tells CNN. "It looked as if something exploded ... I always thought it had to be a wheelchair with lithium batteries."

Her immediate reaction was to offer help, but a colleague held her back.

Looking for an escape route, she turned towards the towering bird-like Olivier Strebelle statue in the departure hall's center. Then another blast hit.

"I flew a few meters maybe," 41-year-old Chaphekar says. "I landed on my legs and then I collapsed ... that's how I got a full cut behind my head."

She tried desperately to move but the trauma was too intense.

As a soldier ran past her, Chaphekar cried out for assistance. With his help, she flopped onto a plastic chair. Her face streaked with blood, she was badly burned and had a severe foot injury.

Two and a half hours later, she was wheeled into a hospital in Antwerp, where doctors conducted an initial assessment.

The following day on April 23, she was airlifted just over 50 kilometers south of Brussels to the Grande Hopital de Charleroi, where she would recuperate further before departing to India.

For nine hours after the blasts, her loved ones were clueless about

her condition or whereabouts. The only thing keeping them going: the photograph.

"In those nine hours only that picture gave hope to my kids," she says. "That picture doesn't show that I'm affected so much. The pictures shows that yes she's there. She's alive. She's sitting. She's fine. She'll be given bandages and she'll be back."

Chaphekar had suffered burns to her face and other parts of her body, a fractured foot and had embedded metal all over.

After this, her memory is a blur. Her husband flew out to be at her bedside but for the next 23 days she was placed into a medically induced coma.

In mid-April, she woke up for the first time since the explosions, but she didn't know who she was. A few days later on April 18, her memory had returned.

The photo had been captured on a phone by Georgian journalist Ketevan Kardava, who had also witnessed the explosions.

In the months since the attacks, the pair connected and when Chaphekar returned to Brussels ahead of the one-year anniversary, Kardava was there to greet her.

She says Kardava told her she had taken 11 pictures that day but had little idea of the impact her photo would have.

Originally it had been shared on social media platforms but by the next day it was plastered across newspapers and websites across the world. CNN, like many international outlets, used the photo.

It had become a defining image of the attacks, one that symbolized the shared trauma -- the confusion, the chaos and the helplessness -- of the situation.

She still has a few surgeries to go but Chaphekar is a determined woman hopeful that she will one day be cleared to return to the skies.



US-led raid kills 33 in Syria

68-nation coalition gathers in Washington to hear Trump IS plan

AFP, Beirut

A US-led coalition strike is reported to have killed 33 civilians in northern Syria ahead of a meeting yesterday of top officials in Washington focused on defeating the Islamic State group.

Rebels and jihadists pressed offensives inside the capital Damascus and the central province of Hama, just a day before new UN-brokered peace talks open in Geneva.

Years of diplomatic efforts have failed to end Syria's raging six-year conflict, which began with protests against President Bashar al-Assad.

The war has killed more than 320,000 people, sparked a major refugee crisis, and dragged in world powers including the US-led air coalition bombing Syria's jihadists since 2014.

A reported coalition strike in the northern province of Raqa early Tuesday has killed 33 civilians, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The monitor yesterday said that the



strike hit a school being used as a temporary shelter for displaced families, about 30 kilometres west of IS-held Raqa city.

The US-led coalition is backing twin offensives to defeat IS in Raqa -- the Syrian heart of the group's so-called "Islamic caliphate" -- and Mosul in neighbouring Iraq.

Top officials from the 68-nation

alliance are set to meet in Washington to hear more about a revised plan drafted by the Pentagon and presented to US President Donald Trump in February.

Earlier this month, the coalition said its campaign in Syria and Iraq had unintentionally killed at least 220 civilians, but monitors say the real number is far higher.

North Korea 'fails' in new missile test amid tensions

AFP, Seoul

A new North Korean missile test failed yesterday, the South and US said, two weeks after Pyongyang launched four rockets in what it called a drill for an attack on American bases in Japan.

The nuclear-armed North is under several sets of United Nations sanctions over its atomic and ballistic missile programmes.

It is on a quest to develop a long-range missile capable of hitting the US mainland with an atomic warhead, and staged two nuclear tests and multiple missile launches last year.

The North fired one missile from an air base in the eastern port of Wonsan yesterday morning, but the launch "is believed to have failed", Seoul's defence ministry said in a statement, adding it was analysing what type of missile was involved.

The US military said the missile exploded shortly after launch.

Earlier this month Pyongyang launched a flight of four ballistic missiles, with three landing provocatively close to Japan in what the North described as practice for attacks

on US military bases in Japan.

On Sunday, its leader Kim Jong-Un personally oversaw and hailed a "successful" test of what Pyongyang said was a new rocket engine -- which can be easily repurposed for use in missiles.

Seoul said that experiment showed "meaningful progress" in the North's missile capabilities.

The developments come as Seoul and Washington hold large-scale annual joint military exercises that always infuriate Pyongyang, which sees them as a rehearsal for invasion.

Sunday's engine test was apparently timed to coincide with a recent Asia trip by new US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who warned that regional tensions had reached a "dangerous level".

Washington would drop the "failed" approach of "strategic patience" with Pyongyang, Tillerson said, warning that US military action was an "option on the table" if necessary -- a sharp divergence from China's insistence on a diplomatic approach to its neighbour, which it has long protected.

Suicide blasts rock Nigeria migrant camp

3 killed; 20 wounded

AFP, Kano

At least four suicide bomb blasts rocked a camp for migrants fleeing Boko Haram insurgents in restive northeastern Nigeria yesterday, killing at least three people and wounding 20, officials said.

The blasts triggered fires which burned down tents in the vast Muna camp on the outskirts of the city of Maiduguri, camp coordinator Tijjani Lumani told AFP.

"There were four explosions inside the camp. The bombers struck at different locations around 4:30 am." The emergency services put the number of bombings at five.

"A total of five suicide bombers, all male adults, were involved in the incidents, killing three persons," Abdulkadir Ibrahim of the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) in the region told AFP.

He said 20 people were wounded and taken to hospital.

Muna camp is home to tens of thousands of people who have fled the Boko Haram insurgency.

The Islamist group has continued to target the internally displaced people (IDPs) and there have been several attempted suicide bomb attacks near the Muna camp, which is not fenced off and is easily accessible.

Aid workers said last week that the camp residents are facing a severe lack of water, compounding widespread food shortages and security fears.

Scottish House set to back new independence vote

AFP, Edinburgh

The Scottish parliament was expected to vote for a second independence referendum yesterday -- amid dire warnings about the damage that ongoing constitutional wrangling was having on Scotland's economy.

Lawmakers were set to back First Minister Nicola Sturgeon's call for a second referendum when they vote following a two-day debate in the semi-autonomous assembly in Edinburgh.

British Prime Minister Theresa May has suggested she will rebuff Sturgeon's demand for a referendum re-match before Britain leaves the European Union.

May insists "now is not the time" while she spends the next two years striving to secure a good deal on Brexit, once the EU Lisbon Treaty's Article 50 departure process is triggered on March 29.

But Sturgeon said on Tuesday it would "wrong, unfair and utterly unsustainable" for

May to stand in the Scottish Parliament's way.

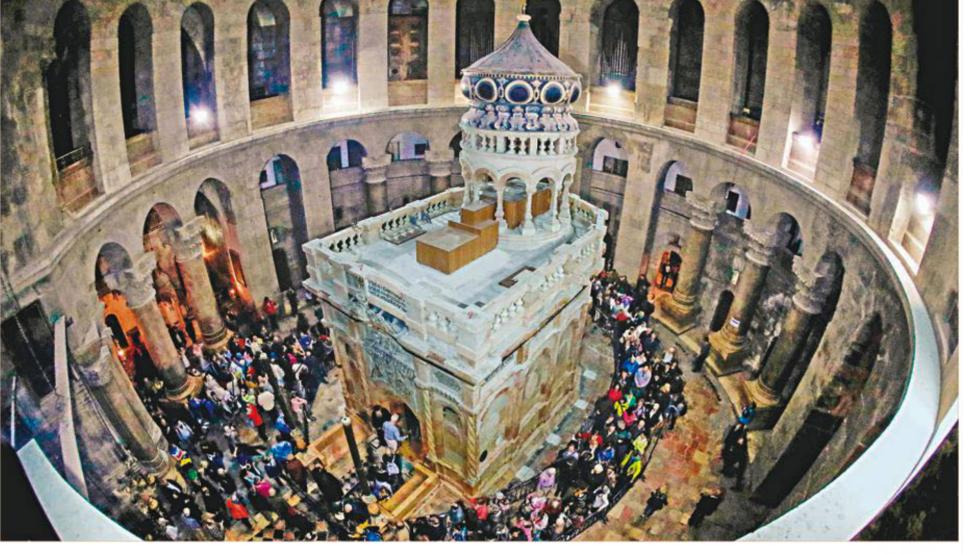
As leader of the governing, pro-secession Scottish National Party (SNP), Sturgeon has been a champion of independence although she needs the green light from London for a legally-binding referendum.

Winning the Scottish parliament's approval would pave the way for her to ask the British government for the powers to call another vote.

Scotland rejected independence in 2014, although the SNP argues Britain's decision last June to leave the EU warrants a fresh referendum as a majority in Scotland voted for Britain to remain within the bloc.

May accused the SNP of "divisive and obsessive nationalism" on Friday.

The premier has said she aims to get the best divorce package from Brussels for Scotland and the wider United Kingdom, with formal Brexit proceedings to be started by the government on March 29.



JESUS TOMB REOPENED

Guests attend a ceremony next to the Edicule surrounding the Tomb of Jesus (where his body is believed to have been laid) at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem's Old City, yesterday. The ornate shrine surrounding what is believed to be Jesus's tomb was reopened at a ceremony in Jerusalem following months of delicate restoration work. PHOTO: AFP