

NEWS IN brief

US, allies vow to destroy IS

Duterte warns of martial law

46 killed in Nigeria in March ethnic clashes

At least 46 people were killed and almost 100 others wounded in clashes between rival ethnic groups in southwest Nigeria earlier this month, police said on Wednesday. Special forces were deployed to the city of Ile-Ife in Osun state after violence between local Yoruba and Hausa people erupted on March 7.

UN warns over North Korea food insecurity

Chronic food shortages and malnutrition are widespread in North Korea, a UN-led report said, as a senior official appealed to donors not to let political considerations get in the way of humanitarian assistance. Around 41 percent -- 10.5 million people -- were undernourished, it said, citing figures from the International Food Policy Research Institute's 2016 Global Hunger Index, which ranked it 98th out of 118 countries.

Blast kills 10 Egypt soldiers in Sinai

Ten Egyptian soldiers were killed in two roadside bombings as they clashed with Islamic State group jihadists in the Sinai Peninsula, the military said yesterday. Fifteen jihadists were also killed in the fighting, the military said in a statement, without saying when the incidents took place.

Mass trial for 'sorcery' killings in PNG

A "berserk" crowd used bows and arrows, knives and axes to hack to death seven people including two small children accused of sorcery, a trial in Papua New Guinea has heard. The frenzied killings happened in April 2014 after men from six villages met to plot the assault on Sakiko village where those suspected of sorcery had sought refuge, according to the PNG Post Courier.

Tillerson says focus is on 'elimination' of jihadists by military force

The US-led coalition against the Islamic State group vowed to crush the jihadists Wednesday at a meeting overshadowed by an attack in London and civilian deaths in Syria.



Secretary of State Rex Tillerson welcomed his counterparts from the mainly Western and Arab 68-nation alliance to Washington with a promise to hunt down IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

But he also warned the coalition is "not in the business of nation-building or reconstruction," amid concerns President Donald Trump is preparing to slash the US foreign aid budget. Meanwhile, even as the ministers gathered at the State Department, news was breaking of the latest coalition air strike to have reportedly killed dozens of civilians in northern Syria.

Then, as the delegates talked, reports came in from London about an attack on pedestrians and police outside the British parliament. Four people were killed and 40 injured in the assault that police attributed to "Islamist-related terrorism."

In a statement released after the meeting, the 68 partners underlined their "determination to intensify and accelerate... efforts to eliminate ISIS" in Iraq, Syria and beyond.

They hailed progress by US-backed local forces against the group's main strongholds in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul and the Syrian capital of its so-called "caliphate," Raqqa.

And, as they predicted victory on the battlefield, they vowed to prevent the group's fleeing fighters from spreading instability or from setting up a propaganda base in cyber space.

Tillerson said the US and its allies would help clear mines and establish stability in the aftermath of the fighting, but warned Iraq must lead its own reconstruction.

The strategy he outlined did not differ much from that in place under the previous US administration of president Barack Obama, but he did suggest a new plan for regional truces in Syria.

He admitted that "a more defined course of action in Syria is still coming together."

But he added: "The United States will

increase our pressure on ISIS and al-Qaeda and will work to establish interim zones of stability through ceasefires to allow refugees to go home."

Under Trump, the United States is seeking to ban refugees from Syria, which would increase pressure on Syria's neighbors, already all but overwhelmed by millions fleeing the carnage.

Some in Washington want "safe zones" to be set up to house those fleeing both the war against the IS group and the bloodier civil conflict between rebels and Bashar al-Assad's regime.

But little detail has emerged as to how these might work.

On the battlefield, things are clearer, for

now. As US-led special forces and planes, Iraqi forces and Syrian militia groups close in on Mosul and Raqqa, the talk is of tracking down the Islamic State's mysterious leader.

"Nearly all of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's deputies are now dead, including the mastermind behind the attacks in Brussels, Paris and elsewhere," Tillerson told delegates.

"It is only a matter of time before Baghdadi himself meets this same fate," he vowed.

This month, a US defense official told reporters that Baghdadi had fled Mosul -- which has been encircled by Iraqi forces -- and is cut off from day-to-day command of his fighters.

Shortly after taking office in late January, Trump gave the Pentagon 30 days to review progress in the anti-IS fight and develop a comprehensive plan to "totally obliterate" the group.

So far, he has largely stuck with the previous strategy of using US-led forces for surveillance and strikes on jihadist targets, while training and equipping local ground combat forces.

But Trump has made some tweaks, including granting commanders broader authority to make battlefield decisions.

But Trump's plan to slash more than a quarter from the US budgets for diplomacy and foreign aid has raised eyebrows, suggesting fewer resources for post-conflict stabilization.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte yesterday warned he may impose martial law and suspend elections for tens of thousands of local posts, fuelling concerns about democracy under his rule.

Duterte said he was considering both measures as part of his controversial campaign to eradicate illegal drugs in society, and that martial law would solve a range of other security threats.

"If I declare martial law, I will finish all the problems, not just drugs," Duterte told reporters in a pre-dawn briefing after returning from neighbouring Thailand which is under military rule.

Duterte said that, as part of martial law, he may create military courts to hear cases against terrorists.

"I will allow the military to try you and put you to death by hanging," he said, referring to Islamic militants in the south of the country.

Since easily winning presidential elections last year and taking office nine months ago, Duterte has given conflicting statements on whether he intended to impose military rule.



This aerial image shows part of the damaged Sewol ferry between two barges after being raised during a salvage operation at sea off the southwestern island of Jindo, yesterday. South Korea's sunken Sewol ferry emerged from the waters yesterday, nearly three years after it went down with the loss of more than 300 lives and dealt a crushing blow to now-oust president Park Geun-Hye. PHOTO: REUTERS

HYPOCRISY OF ARMS SALE AND AID Amnesty condemns US, UK on Yemen

Amnesty International yesterday condemned the United States and Britain for transferring arms to Saudi Arabia to use in its war in Yemen.

The rights group said the two countries had together sent more than five billion dollars (4.6 billion euros) worth of arms to Riyadh since a Saudi-led coalition intervened in Yemen in March 2015.

That was more than 10 times their humanitarian aid to Yemen during the same period, it said.

The London-based watchdog described the alleged arms transfers as a "shameful contradiction" of aid efforts by the United States and Britain.

"These governments have continued to authorise such arms transfers at the same time as providing aid to alleviate the very crisis they have helped to create," said Lynn Maalouf, Amnesty's deputy director of research for the Middle East and North Africa.

"Yemeni civilians continue to pay the price of these brazenly hypocritical arms supplies."

In March 2015, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies launched an air campaign to support Yemen's president against Shiite Huthi rebels who had seized control of northern Yemen and the capital Sanaa.

More than 7,700 civilians have since been killed and a further 40,000 wounded, according to the United Nations. Seven million Yemenis now face starvation, it says.

The United States has become increasingly involved in the conflict since Donald Trump took office in January.

The Pentagon says it has carried out 40 air raids this month against Yemen-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

China, Nepal to discuss joint military exercises

China's defence minister was to arrive in Nepal later yesterday for talks on joint military exercises, a meeting that will be closely watched by India as Beijing boosts its influence in the region.

Chang Wanquan will be in Kathmandu for a three-day visit -- the first by a Chinese defence minister in 15 years -- that will include talks with his Nepali counterpart and Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal.

"Both sides are working out some agreements for assistance for the Nepalese Army," defence ministry spokesman Uttam Prasad Nagila told AFP.

"The ministry expects there might be some progress on talks over joint military exercises, but [it is] not confirmed yet."

The prospect of the first army drills ever between China and Nepal will rattle India, which is often accused of playing "big brother" to its tiny neighbour.

An army source, who asked not to be named, said the exercises may be dubbed "Sagarmatha Friendship" -- referring to the Nepali name for Mount Everest -- and would focus on disaster response.

Sandwiched between China and India, impoverished Nepal has in recent years ping-ponged between the sphere of influence of Delhi and Beijing as the Asian giants jostle for regional supremacy.

Landlocked Nepal remains dependent on India for the majority of its imports, but the previous administration aggressively courted China as part of a nationalist drive to decrease the country's reliance on Delhi.

China has responded with grand infrastructure promises, including recently pledging \$8.3 billion in investment to Nepal -- equivalent to nearly 40 percent of its entire GDP.

SHARP RISE IN ISRAELI SETTLEMENT PROJECTS IN 2016 2,630 units built in WB

Construction on new Israeli settlement homes in the occupied West Bank rose by 40 percent in 2016 compared with the previous year, official figures showed Wednesday.

Ground was broken on 2,630 housing units last year compared with 1,884 in 2015, figures from Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics showed.

Anti-settlement NGO Peace Now called it "the second highest number of construction starts in the past 15 years".

The highest number during that time was 2,874 in 2013.

Israeli settlement building is seen as illegal under international law and a major obstacle to peace as they are built on land the Palestinians see as part of their future state.

Much of the international community has raised increasing alarm over settlement expansion, saying it is gradually eating away at prospects for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"On average, since 2001, 1,790 housing units begin to be constructed in West Bank settlements each year," Peace Now said.

Citing Israeli official data, it said 14,017 units were started since Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

returned to office in 2009, though settlement construction has continued under successive Israeli leaders.

The figures exclude east Jerusalem, occupied by Israel in 1967 and later annexed in a move never recognised by the international community.

Some 200,000 Israeli settlers live in east Jerusalem, in addition to about 400,000 in the West Bank.

Around three million Palestinians live in the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

"The sharp increase in settlement construction sends a clear message to the Palestinians and to the international community that Israel is not interested in a two-state solution," Peace Now said.

Netanyahu has been in discussions with US President Donald Trump's administration on how to move forward with settlement building.

When meeting Netanyahu at the White House in February, Trump called for Israel to "hold back on settlements for a little bit".

At that meeting, Trump also 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.

But one of his top advisers, Jason Greenblatt, visited Israel and the Palestinian territories last week, holding a range of meetings on both sides, including with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and Netanyahu.

UN condemns Sri Lanka over war probe

The United Nations has condemned Sri Lanka's government for failing to investigate civil war-era atrocities, suggesting the government was afraid of punishing soldiers who committed abuses during the conflict.

The world body had previously accused the Sri Lankan military of killing thousands of civilians, mostly ethnic Tamils, in the last weeks of a 26-year civil war that ended in 2009.

Government troops were accused of deliberately shelling civilians, hospitals, and blocking food and medical aid to hundreds of thousands of people boxed inside a tiny strip of land as the now-defeated Tamil Tiger rebels mounted their last stand.

"The consistent failure to effectively investigate, prosecute and punish serious crimes appears to reflect a broader reluctance or fear to take action against members of the security forces," Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, told the UN rights council on Wednesday.

"At the centre of all this are the victims," he said. "There can never be sustainable peace without justice for them."

Zeid and the council have repeatedly called for international judges to help investigate possible war crimes in efforts to guarantee impartiality.

But earlier this month, Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena rejected the appeal.

And although Sirisena's government agreed to the terms of an October 2015 UN resolution calling for an inquiry to be formed within 18 months, Sri Lanka has so far failed to begin an inquiry.



Indian MP hits air steward with slipper

An Indian politician brazenly yesterday admitted that he hit a steward on an Air India flight 25 times with his slipper during a row over a seat.

Ravindra Gaikwad, an MP in India's lower house for the Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena party, claimed that the attendant had insulted him first on the Pune to New Delhi flight.

"What did he say, that I hit him with my hand? I hit him 25 times with a slipper," an unrepentant Gaikwad told ANI news agency in video footage posted on its Twitter page and aired on Indian news channels.

Indian media reports said Gaikwad claimed he had a business class ticket but that Air India put him in an economy seat for the Thursday morning flight to India's capital.

After first complaining to an air hostess Gaikwad, who represents a constituency in the western state of Maharashtra, then got into a heated argument with the senior flight attendant.

"(The steward) said 'I will complain to (Indian Prime Minister Narendra) Modi', so I hit him," said Gaikwad.

"Should I have to listen to this abuse?" he added. Politicians from other political parties roundly condemned Gaikwad's actions while a spokesman for Air India told AFP the airline was investigating the incident.

1,100 Afghan children a day 'to drop out'

Hundreds of thousands of Afghan children are expected to drop out of school this year, leaving them exposed to significant risks, an international aid group has warned.

In a report published yesterday, Save the Children said that more than 400,000 children in Afghanistan, over 1,100 per day, might not attend classes, citing a growing instability in the country and a spike in forced returns from Pakistan.

The projection comes on the first day of the Afghan new school year, when almost a third of all children across the country - 3.7 million - are unable to go to school, leaving them at increased risk of child labour, recruitment by armed groups, trafficking, early marriage and other forms of exploitation.

"Today should be a happy day in Afghanistan as children go back to class for the first time after a long winter. Instead it is a day cloaked in tragedy for the millions who can't access education and are struggling to survive," Ana Locsin, the charity's Afghanistan director, said in a statement.

More than 900 children were killed last year amid major flare-ups in fighting across the country, making 2016 the deadliest year on record for minors in a country that has suffered through decades of war and conflict.



People carry an unconscious teacher after he was injured in clashes with the Indian police during a protest by teachers demanding the regularization of their contractual jobs and hike in salaries, protesters said, in Srinagar, yesterday.