

# NEWSIN brief

## Eight students killed in Japan avalanche

AFP, Tokyo

An avalanche killed eight high school students on a mountain-climbing trip in Japan yesterday, with more than 30 people reportedly injured. More than 100 troops have been deployed in a major rescue effort after the avalanche hit ski slopes in Tochigi prefecture. A group of 52 students and 11 teachers from seven high schools were on a three-day mountaineering outing when disaster struck, according to authorities.

## HK targets activists a day after vote

AFP, Hong Kong

Police yesterday cracked down on Hong Kong democracy activists saying they would be charged over the Umbrella Movement mass protests, a day after a pro-Beijing candidate was chosen as the city's new leader. Carrie Lam was selected as the new chief executive Sunday by a committee dominated by pro-China voters, but promised to try to unify the deeply divided city. Rights group Amnesty International condemned the move.



## Navalny ordered jailed for 15 days after protest

AFP, Moscow

A Russian court yesterday sentenced Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny to 15 days behind bars after ruling he had resisted police during an anti-corruption protest Sunday in Moscow. He was also fined. The United States and the European Union voiced deep concern about the detention, with the State Department describing them as an "affront to democracy".



## S KOREA SCANDAL Arrest warrant of ex-president Park sought

AFP, Seoul

South Korean prosecutors yesterday sought an arrest warrant for ousted president Park Geun-Hye, days after questioning her over the corruption and abuse of power scandal that brought her down.

Park, 65, had her removal from office confirmed by the country's top court earlier this month, ending her executive immunity, and her prosecution has been a key demand of the millions of people who took to the streets to protest against her.

The former president is accused of multiple offences including bribery, leaking government information and abuse of power in the scandal.

"The accused abused her enormous power and status as president to receive bribes from companies or to infringe upon the rights to freedom of corporate management, and leaked important confidential information on state affairs. These are grave issues," the prosecutors said in a statement.

A large amount of evidence has been collected so far but the accused is denying most of the charges, and there is a risk of destroying evidence in the future," it said.

Choi Soon-Sil, Park's secret confidante at the heart of the scandal, is already on trial for forcing top local firms to "donate" nearly \$70 million to non-profit foundations which she allegedly used for personal gain.



Smoke rises from clashes during a battle between Iraqi forces and Islamic State militants, in Mosul, Iraq, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# UK PM holds crisis talks in Scotland on brink of Brexit

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday traveled to Scotland to try to avert its independence bid while also fighting a political crisis in Northern Ireland in the frantic final days before she launches Brexit.

With Britain still reeling from a terror attack at the gates of parliament, May is preparing to embark on a journey out of the European Union this week that will change Britain and the EU forever.

Ahead of her talks with Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, May said she wanted "a more united nation" and would fight for the interests of all parts of Britain once exit negotiations with Brussels begin.

But Sturgeon wants Scotland to remain in the European single market when the rest of Britain leaves and the Edinburgh parliament is expected to back her call for a new independence referendum with a vote today.

May will send a letter to EU President Donald Tusk with Britain's formal departure notification tomorrow, opening up a two-year negotiating win-

dow before Britain actually leaves the bloc in 2019.

The Sunday Times newspaper reported that the letter would run to eight pages and British media said it would be handed over in person by Britain's EU envoy Tim Barrow.

May will also address British MPs on Brexit, nine months after the country voted by 52 percent in June in favour of leaving the EU, the first country to do so.



The EU is expected to provide an initial response by Friday and an EU summit on April 29 will come up with a more detailed strategy but the talks themselves are not expected to start until May at the earliest.

In Northern Ireland, Britain is seeking an 11th-hour solution to the political deadlock in Belfast following the collapse in January of the British province's power-sharing executive.

Northern Ireland voted for the UK to stay in the European Union and the border with the Republic of Ireland, an EU member state, is a concern for negotiators.

Scotland also voted overwhelmingly for Britain to stay in the EU.

# UN to kick off talks on nuke arms ban

AFP, United Nations

More than 100 countries are set to launch the first UN talks on a global nuclear weapons ban yesterday over objections from the major nuclear powers.

Some 123 UN members announced in October that they would launch the UN conference to negotiate a legally binding nuclear ban treaty, even as most of the world's declared and undeclared nuclear powers voted against the talks.

Britain, France, Israel, Russia and the United States voted no, while China, India and Pakistan abstained.

Even Japan -- the only country to have suffered atomic attacks, in 1945 -- voted against the talks, saying the lack of consensus over the negotiations could undermine progress on effective nuclear disarmament.

The countries leading the effort include Austria, Ireland, Mexico, Brazil, South Africa and Sweden. Hundreds of NGOs back their efforts.

They say the threat of nuclear disaster is growing thanks to mounting tensions fanned by North Korea's nuclear weapons program and an unpredictable new administration in Washington.

Supporters point to successful grassroots movements that led to the prohibition of landmines in 1997 and cluster munitions in 2008.



Muslims participants in the Women's March, gather on Westminster Bridge to hold hands in silence, to remember victims of the attack in Westminster earlier in the week, in London, Britain on Sunday. People from a range of backgrounds joined the event, organised by Women's March.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# Merkel flies high in poll test as 'Schulz effect' fizzles

AFP, Berlin

German Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday welcomed a surprise state poll triumph by her party as "encouraging" for a September general election, as hype around her main rival fizzled in its first test.

With just six months to go until voters decide whether Merkel will have a fourth term, the election in the tiny southwestern state of Saarland Sunday took on outsized importance.

Voters returned Merkel's conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) to power with 41 percent of the vote, five points higher than at the last election in 2012.

"Yesterday was a great day and thus an encouraging day," she said, after presenting Saarland's victorious CDU premier Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer with a bouquet of daisies.

The centre-left Social Democrats (SPD), who had been enjoying a surge in the polls thanks to their freshly-anointed standard bearer, Martin Schulz, came in a distant second with 30 percent.

Schulz, the former president of the

European Parliament, admitted Monday that the result had been a bitter disappointment just a week after SPD delegates unanimously elected him party chairman.

Saarland is governed by a "grand coalition" government, the same right-left alliance that Merkel leads in Berlin.

For Schulz to take her job from her, he would likely need to win a majority for a leftist coalition with the far-left Die Linke and the ecologist Greens party known as Red-Red-Green.

Commentators said the Saarland result indicated voters may be getting cold feet about that prospect.

Germany's top-selling daily Bild said Merkel clearly had the wind in her sails after the Saarland vote, noting the dilemma faced by Schulz and the SPD.

"It's a small state, but a big signal," it said of Saarland, the first of three German state polls scheduled in the run-up to the national election on September 24.

"If Martin Schulz wants to become chancellor, he is going to have to put all his eggs in the Red-Red-Green basket -- a big risk."



# Kenyan forces kill 31 Shabaab militants in raid

REUTERS, Nairobi

Kenyan troops in Somalia killed 31 Islamist al Shabaab militants in a raid on two of their bases in the southern Somali region of Jubbland, the Kenyan military said yesterday.

The East African nation has thousands of its forces in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) to help curb al Shabaab and improve security as part of a reconstruction drive after two decades of civil war that shattered the country.

"Ground troops were supported by attack helicopters and artillery fire," the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) said in a statement about Sunday's raid on al Shabaab bases in the Baadhade district of Jubbland.

# Erdogan: Turkey could end EU membership bid now

AGENCIES

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said that Turkey could hold another referendum on whether to continue talks on accession to the EU after the nationwide vote on constitutional reform next month which could give him sweeping new powers.

"Right now we are holding a referendum on April 16, and after that we could choose to do a second one on the [EU] accession talks, and we would abide by whatever our people would say there," Erdogan told reporters in the southern city of Antalya on Saturday.

The suggestion comes amid highly strained relations with several EU member states.

The prime minister is at loggerheads with both Germany and The Netherlands, countries which cancelled planned 'yes' campaign rallies on their soil for dual nationalities.

Both Berlin and Amsterdam said the rallies were cancelled due to security concerns, but Mr Erdogan accused them of impeding free speech and using "Nazi methods."

Mr Erdogan commented last week that

all non-financial ties with the bloc, including the landmark 2015 refugee deal, will be on the table for renegotiating regardless of the outcome of the April vote on extending his executive power.

"Turkey has waited at the door [of the EU] for 54 years," he said on Saturday, referring to the 1963 trade deal between Ankara and the then purely economic union.

"What? If a 'yes' comes out on April 16, they would not take us into the European Union? Oh, if only they could give this decision! They would make our work easier," he continued.

"We will put this [EU-Turkey] business on the table because Turkey is no one's whipping boy."

No EU leader has said that a 'yes' vote - which would give Mr Erdogan the power to appoint and dismiss government ministers and possibly stay in office until 2029 - will spell the end of Turkey's accession to the bloc.

However, concerns over Turkey's human rights record, as well as the fate of Cyprus, have been contributing factors to the snail's pace at which talks have progressed since 2005.

## RAQA OFFENSIVE

# Fighters battle IS around key town

AFP, Beirut

US-backed forces battled the Islamic State group around a key Syrian town yesterday, hours after the capture of an airbase brought them closer to besieging the jihadists in their stronghold Raqa.

Backed by air power from the US-led coalition that has been bombing IS since 2014, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are laying the groundwork for an assault on the heart of the jihadists' so-called "caliphate."

Operations are currently focused on the strategically important town of Tabqa on the Euphrates River, and the adjacent dam and military airport.

Late Sunday, Arab and Kurdish fighters from the SDF seized Tabqa airbase and pressed north towards the town itself.

The base is approximately 2.7 kilometres south of Tabqa.

Bolstered by air strikes and military advisers from the US-led coalition, SDF units are approaching Tabqa from the south via the airport and the north near the dam.

Abdel Rahman said the SDF was locked in fierce clashes on Monday near the northeastern entrance of the dam.

The SDF launched its offensive for Raqa city in November, seizing around two thirds of the surrounding province, according to the Britain-based Observatory.

At their closest point, they are just eight kilometres (five miles) from the city, to the northeast.

But they are mostly further away, between 18 and 29 kilometres from Raqa.



## BUREAUCRACY OVERHAUL

# Trump taps Kushner to head key body

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump has tapped son-in-law Jared Kushner to lead a new White House office, that aims to apply ideas from the business world to help streamline the government, the Washington Post reported Sunday.

The White House Office of Innovation is to be unveiled Monday with sweeping authority to overhaul the bureaucracy and fulfill key campaign promises like reforming care for veterans and fighting opioid addiction, the Post said.

"I promised the American people I would produce results, and apply my 'ahead of schedule, under budget' mentality to the government," Trump was quoted as saying.

It is conceived as a sort of SWAT team made up of former private sector executives charged with bringing fresh ideas to the business of government, according to the report.

"The government should be run like a great American company. Our hope is that we can achieve successes and efficiencies for our customers, who are the citizens," Kushner told the Post.

The 36-year-old is a senior adviser to Trump with far-reaching influence over domestic and foreign policy.

Top Trump strategist Stephen Bannon, who has called for "deconstruction of the administrative state," will not be part of the new group, the Post said.