

NEWSIN brief

ANC backs Zuma in reshuffle dispute

South Africa's embattled President Jacob Zuma yesterday won the backing of the ruling ANC party, which rejected calls for him to resign over a controversial cabinet reshuffle. The African National Congress acknowledged growing calls for Zuma to step down, admitting to "serious and difficult disagreement" over the president's sacking of respected finance minister.

India probes 'cow vigilante killing'

A Muslim man has died after he was attacked by hundreds of vigilantes while transporting cows in India, police said yesterday. No arrests have yet been made, but police said they registered a murder case over 55-year-old Pehlu Khan's death in hospital on Monday, two days after a mob attacked his cattle truck on a highway in Rajasthan.

Emirates lends tablet to cope with US ban

Dubai's Emirates airline yesterday began loaning tablet computers to premium passengers on US-bound flights in response to an American ban on electronic devices larger than a standard smartphone. The Middle East's largest carrier said in a statement that the measure aims to "mitigate the inconvenience of the recent ban on electronic devices" inside the cabin.

Coastal air strikes kill 13 Yemen rebels

Thirteen rebels were killed as air raids by the Saudi-led Arab coalition struck their positions on the coast of western Yemen yesterday. Warplanes and Apache helicopters took part in the raids that targeted rebel positions in Taif and Nakhliya, a military official said.

FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

Macron targets Le Pen

Criticises the far-right leader over her economic policy

French presidential frontrunner Emmanuel Macron attacked far-right leader Marine Le Pen over her economic policy and plans to scrap the euro on Tuesday in an unprecedented debate between all 11 contenders ahead of this month's election.

The discussion was at times chaotic and dominated by the anti-capitalist and virulently anti-EU smaller candidates who made their first major appearance ahead of the first round of the two-stage vote on April 23.

The most telling clash between the frontrunners came at the end of the first section when 39-year-old Macron took on what is considered one of Le Pen's vulnerabilities -- her plans to scrap the euro and revert to the franc.

"What you are proposing, Madame Le Pen, is a reduction in French people's spending power because, by withdrawing from the euro, for savers, workers, it's a reduction in spending power," he said.

Polls show only a third of French voters support scrapping the euro, many

of them anxious about the impact of a devaluation which would hit their savings and spur inflation.

The clash and Macron's more combative performance could point to the tone and shape of the campaign ahead, with Macron and Le Pen having



All 11 candidates go head to head ahead of first round of voting on 23 April. Macron holds his position as election favourite after debate

emerged as the clear frontrunners.

Macron accused her of wanting to start an "economic war" with France's neighbours and denounced her nationalist stance, which he said had torn the continent apart in the past and filled graveyards near his hometown

Amiens in northeast France. With just 19 days until the first round of voting in a rollercoaster contest, the debate could influence the momentum of the campaign, with around a third of voters still unsure of how they will vote.

Polls show far-right candidate Le Pen and centrist independent Macron in a dead heat at around 25 percent heading into the first round on April 23. Macron is seen easily winning the second round on May 7.

Le Pen put in a steady performance under fire, warning about the closure of factories, and the danger of Islamists and immigrants eroding France's national identity.

"I consider that in this election our civilisation is at stake," she said at the start of the debate, promising to restore order and combat "unfettered globalisation".

When questioned about legal problems surrounding her National Front party including campaign financing and the use of expenses at the European parliament, she said she considered herself to be "politically persecuted".

N Korea fires missile into Sea of Japan

Launch comes as Xi, Trump prepare to meet in Florida

North Korea test-fired a ballistic missile into the sea off its east coast yesterday, South Korea's military said, ahead of a summit between US and Chinese leaders who are set to discuss Pyongyang's increasingly defiant arms programme.

The missile flew about 60 km from its launch site at Sinpo, a port city on North Korea's east coast, the South Korean Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement. Sinpo is home to a North Korean submarine base.

The launch comes just a day before the start of a summit between US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Florida, where talks about adding pressure on the North to drop its arms development will take centre stage.

"The launch took place possibly in consideration of the US-China summit, while at the same time it was to check its missile capability," a South Korean official told Reuters about the military's initial assessment of the launch. The missile was fired at a high angle and reached an altitude of 189 km, the official said.

Any launch of objects using ballistic missile technology is a violation of UN Security Council resolutions. The North has

defied the ban, saying it infringes on its sovereign rights to self-defence and the pursuit of space exploration.

The launch drew swift condemnation from Japan, with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe saying further provocative action was possible.

Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga described the launch as "extremely problematic" and said Tokyo had lodged a strong protest.



South Korea's foreign ministry also condemned the launch as a blunt challenge to a series of UN Security Council resolutions targeting North Korea's nuclear and missile programme. Seoul called a National Security Council meeting and vowed to respond strongly in case of further provocations.

In a terse statement, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said: "The United States has spoken enough about North Korea. We have



Migrants on board a rubber dinghy await rescue by the Malta-based NGO Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) in the central Mediterranean Sea, north of Sabratha, on the Libyan coast, yesterday.

IS suicide blasts kill 31 in Iraq

Militants attack police outpost, house of a colonel after entering Tikrit

At least 31 people were killed, including 14 police officers, and more than 40 wounded in attacks overnight by Islamic State militants in the northern Iraqi city of Tikrit, security and medical sources said yesterday.

The militants wore police uniforms and used a police vehicle to enter the city, 175 km (110 miles) north of Baghdad, police colonel Khalid Mahmoud told Reuters. He said there were around 10 attackers, including two suicide bombers.

Islamic State's Amaq news agency said seven suicide fighters attacked a police position and the home of the head of the city's counter-terrorism service, who was killed. The assailants blew themselves up when they ran out of ammunition, it said.

A total of 31 bodies were taken to hospital, including 14 policemen, said Nawfal Mustafa, a doctor at the city's main hospital. The death toll rose during the morning as the bodies of civilians killed in their shops were found.

The attacks targeted a police checkpoint and the house of a police colonel, who was killed with four members of his family, officers said.

Two suicide attackers detonated their vests when surrounded by police, and three others were killed in separate clashes.

Five militants are thought to be hiding and Mahmoud said Tikrit authorities had declared a curfew yesterday. Sporadic gunfire could be heard in the morning.

US Senate clashes over Trump SC pick

US Senate Republicans and Democrats clashed bitterly over President Donald Trump's Supreme Court pick, with no signs that a potentially damaging showdown will be averted today.

The Senate began formal debate Tuesday on federal Judge Neil Gorsuch, as opposition Democrats insisted they have the necessary votes to block his nomination through use of a tactic known as a filibuster.

Sixty votes are needed to overcome a filibuster and end debate in the 100-seat Senate. Republicans hold 52 seats.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell tweeted that "due to an unprecedented filibuster threat," he was setting up the crucial test vote for this morning.

A confirmation vote follows on Friday, after which Congress shutters for a two-week recess.

The expected failure of the test vote sets the stage for Republican leaders to employ the "nuclear option," which would change Senate rules in order to advance the nomination -- and all subsequent Supreme Court nominees -- by a simple majority vote.

McConnell warned that the Democrats' filibuster could do something "truly detrimental to this body and to our country."

Democrats were "hurtling toward the abyss," he said, "and trying to take the Senate with them. They need to reconsider."

Xi extends famed 'panda diplomacy' to Finland

China's President Xi Jinping, on the way to his eagerly awaited first encounter with Donald Trump, met his Finnish counterpart in Helsinki yesterday, extending Beijing's famed "panda diplomacy" to Finland.

The two sides agreed to carry out "cooperative panda research" and "make the pandas messengers of friendship between our two countries," Xi said at a joint press conference in Helsinki.

The first visit by a Chinese leader to Finland since 1995 marks the 100th anniversary of the Nordic country's independence and Finns were pleased to learn that a pair of giant pandas were expected in Finland before the end of the year.

Finnish and Chinese officials have been in lengthy talks over China leasing a pair of

giant pandas to Ahtari zoo in central Finland, where the construction of a new panda cage costing more than eight million euros (over \$8.5 million) is well underway.

"We know that pandas are a national treasure for China and we will honour and value them," President Sauli Niinisto told Xi.

China is Finland's fifth largest trading partner and Xi said the two sides would "expand cooperation in such areas as innovation-driven development, green development and coordinated development."

Xi said China appreciated "Finland's firm commitment to the one-China policy", which Niinisto confirmed in his own address to the media.

After Helsinki, Xi was due to continue his journey across the Atlantic to Florida, where US President Trump awaits him today with a much tougher stance on trade and China's



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FIRST WORLD SURVEY

9,600 tree species risk extinction

The first ever global database of trees yesterday revealed that 9,600 tree species are threatened with extinction and identified a total of 60,065 in existence.

Brazil is the country with the most diverse tree population, with 8,715 species, according to the Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) report.

It also has the largest number of tree species -- 4,333 -- that only exist there.

In total 58 percent of trees are so-called single country endemics, with 2,991 species only found in Madagascar and 2,584 only found in Australia.

After Brazil, Colombia is the second most diverse country, with 5,776 different tree species, followed by Indonesia, with 5,142.

The London-based BGCI, which represents an estimated 2,500 botanic gardens around the world, used data from more than 500 published sources to create the list.

Of the 60,065 tree species, only around 20,000 have been assessed for their conservation status -- of which 9,600 are threatened with extinction.

"BGCI's main reason for publishing the list is to provide a tool for people trying to conserve rare and

BREXIT TRANSITION

EU Parliament adopts its 'red lines'

The European Parliament overwhelmingly adopted its "red lines" for tough Brexit negotiations, insisting Britain first agree divorce terms before striking a new trade deal.

The parliament, which will have the final say on any Brexit deal, became the first EU body to take a formal stand on the talks, just a week after British Prime Minister Theresa May formally triggered the process for leaving the bloc.

The vote was 516 for, 133 against and 50 abstentions.

"You will set the tone for Britain," the bloc's Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier told MEPs in Strasbourg, France, just before the vote.

He said the message on phased negotiations should be that "the sooner we agree the principles of an orderly withdrawal, the sooner we can prepare our future relations in trade."

The EU has rejected May's call in her letter for talks on the terms of the divorce and on a future trade deal to be held in parallel.

The resolution won the backing of all the major groups in the parliament, from the conservative European People's Party (EPP), the biggest bloc, to the Socialists and Democrats alliance, as well as the ALDE liberals, the Greens and the leftist parliamentary group GUE.

"It's key to have a united European parliament together with the EU negotiator and the European Council," Guy Verhofstadt, the Liberal leader and parliament's Brexit negotiator, told MEPs.

The EPP's German leader Manfred Weber told the assembly "we want a fair and constructive atmosphere," but warned Britain cannot get a better deal leaving than staying inside the bloc.



Demonstrators scuffle with security forces during an opposition rally in Caracas, Venezuela, on Tuesday. An estimated 1,000 people tried to march to the National Assembly to demand the Maduro-led government restore powers to its opposition majority.

China: Dalai Lama's visit damages ties with India

Enraged by the Dalai Lama's visit to Arunachal Pradesh, China has said that the trip has "severely damaged China-India relations."

Hours before China's Foreign Ministry issued this statement, China's official state media published an article in which it wrote, "Unlike his predecessors, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi seems to have taken a different stance on the Dalai issue, raising public engagements with the monk and challenging Beijing's bottom line."

Amid the escalating tension, the Dalai Lama told NDTV, "India has never used me against China."

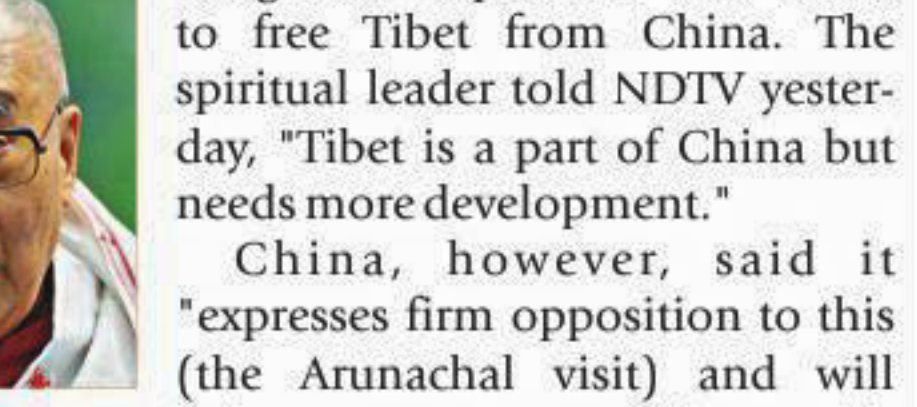
China claims Arunachal Pradesh as "South Tibet"; India has repeatedly said the border state is an integral part of its territory. India yesterday made it clear that China is creating "an artificial controversy" over the Dalai Lama's week-long visit to Arunachal Pradesh, which began yesterday.

Junior Home Minister Kiren Rijiju, who is from the state, said, "Arunachal Pradesh is an inseparable part of India, and China should not object to his visit and interfere in India's internal affairs."

India has stressed that the Dalai Lama's visit to the state is religious, not political. China considers the Dalai Lama a dangerous "separatist" who wants to free Tibet from China.

The spiritual leader told NDTV yesterday, "Tibet is a part of China but needs more development."

China, however, said it "expresses firm opposition to this (the Arunachal visit) and will lodge stern representations with the Indian side," Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying told a regular briefing in the Chinese capital. By ignoring China's concerns and persisting in arranging the trip, India had "severely damaged China's interests and China-India relations," she said.



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