

NEWS IN brief

Iran floods kill 25

At least 25 people were killed and 16 declared missing as flash floods hit northwestern Iran, state media reported yesterday. Torrential rains that began on Friday lashed East Azerbaijan province, with state television showing images of rivers bursting their banks, flooded houses and cars being swept away by the surging water.

Mattis to travel next week to ME, Africa

US Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis is heading to the Middle East and Africa next week for a series of meetings with regional allies, the Pentagon said Friday. The trip will be Mattis's fourth overseas since he became President Donald Trump's defense secretary. The trip includes stops in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel, Qatar and Djibouti.

Fourth Mexico reporter shot dead since March

Gunmen shot dead a crime reporter in northeastern Mexico on Friday, his employers said, the fourth journalist to be murdered in the gang-plagued country since last month. Maximino Rodriguez Palacios "was shot and killed" outside a store as he arrived in his car with his wheelchair-bound wife, the Colectivo Perico news website said. Mexico ranks third in the world for the number of journalists killed, after Syria and Afghanistan.

Sri Lanka garbage dump toll hits 15

Sri Lankan soldiers dug through rubbish with their bare hands yesterday to pull out victims after a huge garbage mountain collapsed on their homes, killing at least 15 people including 4 children. The 300-foot (91-metre) high dump came crashing down on neighbouring 145 homes Friday as the country marked the traditional new year.



Still image from a video shows bodies lying near burnt out buses in a blast in what is said to be Aleppo's outskirts in Syria, yesterday. **Inset, Evacuees walk near buses before the blast.**



PHOTO: REUTERS

Assad still has chem weapons

Claims ex-Syrian weapons chief

Syria's president Bashar al-Assad deceived United Nations inspectors and still has "hundreds of tonnes" of lethal chemicals stockpiled, the country's former weapons research chief has said. In 2014, Syria said it had handed over all of its chemical weapons to the UN's Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). At the time, Barack Obama said the stockpile had been "100 percent eliminated". But Brigadier-General Zaher al-Sakat has told The Telegraph that Assad's regime did not declare large amounts of sarin and other toxic weapons. "They [the regime] admitted only to 1,300 tonnes, but we knew in reality they had nearly double that," said General Sakat, who had been one of the most senior figures in the country's chemical weapons programme. "They had at least 2,000 tonnes. At least." Assad's government has been blamed for a suspected sarin gas attack in Idlib province last week in which killed almost 90 people. The attack prompted a retaliatory attack by the US against a Syrian air base, which has sparked heightened tensions between Syria's Russian backers and the US. But Assad has said the allegation that his government was responsible for the attack was "100 per cent fabrication".



Blast kills 43 evacuees

Car bomb hits bus convoy in Syria, wounds dozens

A suicide car bomb attack on buses carrying Syrians evacuated from two besieged government-held towns killed 43 people yesterday, as US-backed fighters advanced in their push towards the Islamic State group's Raqa stronghold. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the blast targeted buses carrying residents evacuated from the northern towns of Fuaa and Kafraya under a deal reached between the regime and rebels. "The suicide bomber was driving a van supposedly carrying aid supplies and detonated near the buses," the monitoring group said. It said most of the dead in the explosion in rebel-held Rashidin, west of Aleppo, were evacuees, but the blast also killed several rebels who had been guarding the buses. Thousands of evacuees had been stuck on the road because of a disagreement over the number of rebels allowed to leave two other towns included in the deal. The evacuation process resumed following the blast, the Observatory said. AFP's reporter at the scene saw several bodies, body parts and blood scattered on the ground. The wounded including several children received treatment at a hospital in the government-held part of Aleppo. The bombing took place as thousands of evacuees from Fuaa and Kafraya waited to con-

tinued their journey to regime-controlled Aleppo, the coastal province of Latakia, or Damascus. The rebel group Ahrar al-Sham condemned the bombing. "We reject any accusations levelled at opposition for this heinous crime," a senior official tweeted. "Our role was to secure civilians not kill them." More than 5,000 people who had lived under crippling siege for more than two years left the two towns, along with 2,200 evacuated from rebel-held Madaya and Zabadani, on Friday. Syria's war has left more than 320,000 people dead since erupting in 2011, with more than half the population forced from their homes and hundreds of thousands trapped under siege. It has sucked in regional and international powers and allowed jihadist groups to seize vast areas of the country. **SDF ADVANCES** US-backed fighters reached the outskirts of a key jihadist-held town in northern Syria on Saturday as part of an offensive aimed at the IS bastion of Raqa. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an Arab-Kurdish alliance supported by a US-led coalition, surrounded Tabqa in early April and have cut its main supply routes. The town and a nearby dam are key prizes in the broader offensive for Raqa, the jihadists' de facto Syrian capital about 55 kilometres (35 miles) to the east.

'MOTHER OF ALL BOMBS'

92 IS militants killed in blast

Says Afghanistan; no civilian casualties reported; criticisms follow Thursday's bombing close to Pak border targeting IS tunnel network

Afghan authorities yesterday reported a jump in fatalities from the American military's largest non-nuclear bomb, declaring some 90 Islamic State fighters dead, as US-led forces conducted clean-up operations over their mountain hideouts. Dubbed the "Mother Of All Bombs", the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast was unleashed in combat for the first time Thursday, hitting IS positions in a remote area of eastern Nangarhar province. The unprecedented attack triggered global shock waves, with some condemning the use of Afghanistan as what they called a testing ground for the weapon, and against a militant group that is not considered a threat as big as the resurgent Taliban. The bomb smashed IS's hideouts, a tunnel-and-cave complex that had been mined against conventional ground attacks, engulfing the remote area in a huge mushroom cloud and towering flames. "At least 92 Daesh (IS) fighters were killed in the bombing," Achin district governor Esmail Shinwari told AFP yesterday. Nangarhar provincial spokesman Attaullah Khogyani gave a toll of 90, far higher than the initial toll of 36 IS fighters given by Afghan officials. Shinwari insisted there were "no military and civilian casualties at all", adding that Afghan commandos and American troops are carrying out clean-up operations in the area. Security experts say IS has built their redoubts close to civilian homes, but the government said thousands of local families had already fled the area in recent months of fighting. An elderly man who lives close to the bombing site in Achin's Momand Dara area said the blast was so piercingly loud that his infant granddaughter was experiencing hearing loss. The massive bomb was dropped after fighting intensified over the past week and US-backed ground forces struggled to advance on the area. An American special forces soldier was killed last Saturday in Nangarhar while conducting anti-IS operations. "The enemy had created bunkers, tunnels and extensive mine fields, and this weapon was used to reduce those obstacles so that we could continue our offensive in Nangarhar," General John Nicholson, the top US commander in Afghanistan, said on Friday. President Ashraf Ghani threw his support behind the bombardment, saying it was "designed to support the efforts of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and US forces conducting clearance operations in the region."



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Pakistan arrests '3 RAW spies targeting CPEC'

Even as Indo-Pak relations are on the boil over the death sentence to Kulbhushan Jadhav, Pakistan said it has arrested three suspected Indian spies who were allegedly targeting "Chinese engineers, sensitive installations and (the) China Pakistan Economic Corridor", The Express Tribune reported yesterday. "We have arrested three terrorists - Khalil, Imtiaz, and Rashid. All three individuals were paid agents of the Indian intelligence agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW)," police told another Pakistani news outlet Geo News. Police claimed RAW "assigned them (the 3 suspects) new targets such as the Combined Military Hospital Rawalakot, CPEC projects, Chinese engineers and sensitive installations in Azad Kashmir." The three men were booked under the Anti-Terrorism Act and Explosives Act and will be produced before Pakistan's anti-terrorism court. "The terrorists disclosed that Indian army officers and RAW officers Major Ranjeet, Major Sultan, and another officer were in touch with the arrested individuals," police said. The arrested men crossed the Line of Control several times to attend meetings with the Indian Army and RAW officers regarding potential targets, police said. They are also accused of a bomb blast in Abbaspur last year. India reiterated that Jadhav isn't a spy, that his treatment by Pakistan violated the Geneva Convention and that the death sentence is essentially "premeditated murder."



Migrants on a rubber dinghy await rescue by the Malta-based NGO Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) at dawn in the central Mediterranean in international waters off the coast of Sabratha in Libya, yesterday. **PHOTO: REUTERS**

Over 2,000 migrants saved in a day

Rescue vessels in the Mediterranean worked flat out Friday to rescue over 2,000 people from flimsy dinghies as exhausted saviours accused the EU of turning a blind eye to the crisis. The Italian coast guard and five privately-run rescue boats plucked migrants from 16 overcrowded dinghies and three wooden vessels. After non-stop back-to-back rescues, a total of 2,074 people were brought to safety, the coastguard said, a day after a shipwreck left at least 97 migrants feared drowned off Libya. The Doctors Without Borders (MSF) boats Prudence and Aquarius rescued some 1,145 people from nine different dinghies in exhausting operations it said proved their presence off the North African coast was needed. The rest were picked up by the coastguard, the Phoenix -- run by the Maltese organisation Moas -- the German NGO Sea Eye and the German Jugend's Juventa. Since the beginning of this year, at least 590 migrants have died or gone missing along the Libyan coast, the International Organization for Migration said in late March.



Turkey to vote on Erdogan's power today

Turkey's top politicians yesterday made a final effort to sway undecided voters in a frenetic end to a bitterly-contested campaign in the referendum on expanding President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's powers. Campaigning must end at 1500 GMT but both the 'Yes' and 'No' camps were squeezing in a flurry of rallies as the clock ticked down to today's landmark poll. Analysts see the poll as a historic choice on the direction of the Nato member which will shape its future political system and determining relations with the West. If passed, the new presidential system will implement the most radical political shake-up since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, dispensing with the office of the prime minister and centralising the entire executive bureaucracy under the presidency. Erdogan in a late night interview with TRT state television confidently predicted victory, saying surveys showed a 'Yes' vote of 55-60 percent. Opinion polls have predicted drastically different outcomes and victories for both sides. But the ruling party and presidency are widely believed to conduct their own confidential polling. The opposition has cried foul that the referendum has been conducted on unfair terms, with 'Yes' posters ubiquitous on the streets and opposition voices squeezed from the media.

Court weighs blocking Trump order on sanctuary cities

A US judge on Friday heard arguments from lawyers representing two so-called sanctuary cities that are challenging President Donald Trump's executive order stripping such jurisdictions of federal funds. The outcome of the high-profile case in US District Court in San Francisco could impact more than 300 cities and counties across the United States that have denounced as unconstitutional Trump's order to withhold funds from cities that refuse to cooperate with federal immigration agents. The federal judge in the case, William Orrick, said he would issue his decision "as soon as I can" after he heard arguments from lawyers representing San Francisco and Santa Clara County. Both jurisdictions have sued the administration and are seeking an injunction against Trump's order which calls for money to be taken away from local governments that refuse to share information with federal authorities about undocumented immigrants. The case bears similarities to the court challenges faced by the Trump administration over its two travel bans targeting Muslim-majority countries. Santa Clara officials say the county stands to lose nearly \$1.7 billion in federal funds because of the executive order aimed at sanctuary jurisdictions. San Francisco receives up to \$2 billion a year in federal funding. Lawyers for the Trump administration told the judge on Friday that neither jurisdiction was at immediate risk of losing the federal funding, adding that the order was simply aimed at coercing them to comply with immigration laws. However attorneys representing Santa Clara and San Francisco in their landmark lawsuits urged Orrick to block the order nationwide on grounds it is unconstitutional.

'Pakistanis themselves give a bad name to Pakistan, Islam'

This incident was not just about the death of Mashaal. It was also the death knell of the message of Islam. We have forgotten our religion...we have forgotten our values and decency," the young Nobel Laureate said, not mincing any words. Yousafzai said Pakistanis need to study their religion carefully because it preaches tolerance and peace. Yousafzai concluded by urging Pakistani lawmakers and all political parties to not allow such incidents to happen and to bring justice to Mashaal's surviving family. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said Saturday that he was "shocked and saddened", his first statement on Thursday's killing. Eight Pakistanis involved in the mob lynching were charged with murder and terrorism yesterday, court officials said. So far a total of 12 people have been arrested over the incident and police are hunting for more suspects. Blasphemy is a hugely sensitive charge in conservative Muslim Pakistan, and can carry the death penalty. Even unproven allegations can cause mob lynchings and violence. At least 65 people have been murdered by vigilantes over blasphemy allegations since 1990.



Referring to the recent mob-lynching of a university student for 'blasphemy', Pakistani Nobel Laureate Malala Yousafzai, in a strongly-worded video message, said no one but Pakistan is to blame for the poor image it has in the world. "We talk about Islamophobia and how people give a bad name to our country and our religion. No one is giving a bad name to our country or our religion. We are doing that all by ourselves. We are enough for that," Yousafzai said in the video message. On Thursday, Mashaal Khan, a 23-year-old journalism student in Pakistan was murdered by a screaming lynch mob on his university premises. The mob said Mashaal posted 'blasphemous' content on his Facebook account. Not only did the lynch mob beat to a pulp and then shoot dead Mashaal, it then continued to pound the boy's lifeless body with sticks - all of this in the clear light of day. Yousafzai said that she spoke to the murdered student's father and said his message was that peace and tolerance should prevail despite the horrific incident.