

NEWS IN brief

At least 20 migrants drown off Libya coast

REUTERS, Rome
At least 20 migrants trying to reach Europe drowned yesterday in the Mediterranean off the coast of Libya, a Reuters photographer said. Photographer Darrin Zammit Lupi, who is aboard the rescue ship Phoenix, said he saw 20 bodies while a dinghy was being helped by the crew of the ship, run by Migrant Offshore Aid Station.

Sri Lanka garbage tragedy toll hits 23

AFP, Colombo
Hopes of finding anyone alive under a collapsed mountain of garbage in Sri Lanka's capital faded yesterday as the death toll reached 23 with another six reported missing, police said. Hundreds of soldiers were digging through the rubbish and the wreckage of some 145 homes that were destroyed when a side of the 300-foot high dump crashed on Friday.

Last survivor of the 19th century dies

AFP, Rome
Emma Morano, an Italian woman believed to have been the oldest person alive and the last survivor of the 19th century, died Saturday at the age of 117, Italian media reported. Morano, born on November 29 1899, died at her home in Verbania, in northern Italy, the reports said.

Philippines, US to hold military drills

AFP, Manila
The Philippine military yesterday said it would hold annual exercises with US troops next month, reaffirming its commitment to the alliance despite cooling relations under President Rodrigo Duterte. The 10-day exercises will be the first held under Duterte, who has suggested cancelling the drills and called for the withdrawal of American troops.



A man gets sprayed with a chemical irritant as multiple fights break out between Trump supporters and anti-Trump protesters in Berkeley, California on Saturday. Thousands of protesters gathered Saturday in cities across US to pressure President Donald Trump to release his tax returns. For decades, US presidents have released their returns voluntarily, although there is no legal obligation to do so. PHOTO: AFP

SYRIA BUS CONVOY ATTACK

At least 68 children among 126 killed

AFP, Rashidin
Nearly 70 children were among those killed when a suicide car bombing tore through buses carrying evacuees from besieged government-held towns in Syria, a monitor said yesterday.

Saturday's blast hit a convoy carrying residents from the northern towns of Fuua and Kafraya as they waited at a transit point in rebel-held Rashidin, west of Aleppo.

At least 68 children were among the 126 people killed in the attack, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said, updating a previous toll of 112 dead.

At least 109 of the dead were evacuees, the Britain-based monitoring group said, while the rest were aid workers and rebels guarding the convoy.

The evacuations were taking place under a deal between Syria's regime and rebels that is also seeing residents and rebels transported out of Madaya and Zabadani, towns near Damascus which are surrounded by pro-government forces.

The agreement is the latest in a string of evacuation deals, which the government of President Bashar al-Assad says are the best way to end the violence after more than six years of civil war.

Rebels say they amount to forced relocations after years of bombardment and crippling sieges.

Body parts and the belongings of evacuees -- including clothes, dishes and even televisions -- were still strewn at the scene of the attack yesterday, an AFP correspondent said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the bombing, though the key Ahrar al-Sham rebel group denied any involvement. The government blamed "terrorists" -- a catch-all term for its opponents.

N Korea behaviour 'can't continue'

Warns US after Pyongyang's latest 'failed' missile test

AFP, Washington

An international consensus that includes China has now emerged that North Korea's "threatening behavior" cannot go on, the US national security adviser said yesterday.

Speaking after North Korea's latest missile test, which US officials called a failure, HR McMaster said, "I think there's an international consensus now, including -- including the Chinese and the Chinese leadership -- that this is a situation that just can't continue."

Amid sharply heightened tension over North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, McMaster said the US and allies were studying all actions "short of a military option," though the Trump administration has taken pains never to completely rule that out.

Vice President Mike Pence, who arrived in Seoul yesterday, assailed the missile test as a "provocation" and assured South Korea of Washington's full support against the threat from its volatile neighbor. Pence is in Seoul for talks on curbing the North's weapons programs amid fears that it is planning another nuclear test.

"This morning's provocation from the

North is just the latest reminder of the risks each one of you face each and every day in the defense of the freedom of the people of South Korea and the defense of America in this part of the world," Pence told US military families at an Easter dinner, at the start of a 10-day Asia tour.

Some 28,500 US troops are stationed in the South.

Trump has ordered a naval strike group, led by aircraft carrier Carl Vinson, to the region as a deterrent against threatening North Korean behavior.

McMaster, speaking to ABC from the Afghan capital of Kabul, repeatedly stated that China -- North Korea's key ally -- is increasingly concerned about the reclusive communist state's behavior.

The new consensus is "that this problem is coming to a head. And so it's time for us to undertake all actions we can, short of a military option, to try to resolve this peacefully," McMaster said.

McMaster said President Donald Trump has made clear he will not allow the nuclear-armed Pyongyang regime to put the US and its regional allies, led by South Korea and Japan, under threat.

Trump turned to Twitter over the weekend to underscore the importance of cooperation with China on

the Korean problem.

Having blasted Beijing throughout his presidential campaign for unfairly manipulating its currency, he tweeted yesterday: "Why would I call China a currency manipulator when they are working with us on the North Korean problem? We will see what happens!"

McMaster told ABC that Trump had directed US military, diplomatic and intelligence officials to provide him with options -- in concertation with regional allies including China -- that could be used "if the North Korea regime refuses to denuclearise."

He called North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un "a threat to all people in the region, and globally as well," but cautioned that Trump "is clearly comfortable making tough decisions."

A White House foreign policy adviser, briefing reporters on the plane that carried Pence to Seoul, was asked what steps China had committed to when President Xi Jinping met recently with Trump in Florida.

"There were a number of steps that were discussed," the adviser said, adding that when China recently turned back ships bringing North Korean coal, it was a "good first step."

WAR ON IS IN WEST MOSUL

Forces launch new attack for Old City

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraqi forces launched a new attack on Islamic State in Mosul's Old City yesterday, military officials said, trying to break the stalemate in attempts to seize the militants' last stronghold.

Mosul, Iraq's second biggest city, was captured by the Sunni Muslim fighters in 2014, but government forces have retaken much of it during a six-month operation.

The advance has hardly moved for more than a month, though, as the militants are holding out in the densely populated Old City in western Mosul, where tanks and heavy vehicles are not able to operate because of its narrow streets.

Iraq's federal police moved forces 200 metres deeper into the Old City, getting closer to al-Nuri mosque, a statement said.

The mosque is highly symbolic because it was there that Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself head of a self-proclaimed caliphate.

Troops have had the centuries-old mosque with its leaning minaret in their sights since last month.

A captain in the federal police said yesterday's advance had started in the early morning with troops fighting the militants house to house.

"Daesh suicide motorcycles now are their favourite weapon inside the Old City," he said, using a derogatory name for Islamic State. "We have to watch every single house to avoid attackers on motorcycles packed with explosives."

Iraqi government forces, backed by US advisers, artillery and air support, have cleared the east and half of western Mosul and are now focused on the Old City.



'Triple talaq without valid reasons not allowed'

Says All India Muslim Personal Law Board AGENCIES

"Those who give triple talaq without reasons prescribed by the Sharia (religious law) will face social boycott," said the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) yesterday, reported PTI.

The Indian Supreme Court (SC) is currently hearing a case on the constitutional validity of triple talaq, the Islamic practice some Muslims follow of divorcing their wife by pronouncing the word 'talaq' three times.

The AIMPLB working committee decided to not allow any "outside interference" on an issue that was described as part of the Sharia, or religious law, and thus a fundamental right. The Board, however, decided to put in place a mechanism to ensure that the option of triple talaq is exercised in the rarest of the rare case. It said it could exercise restraint on oral divorce by socially boycotting and fining those who resort to the practice wantonly.

The Centre and some NGOs, who are a party in the case in the SC, have submitted that triple talaq violates the right to gender equality.

The Allahabad HC ruled last December that triple talaq violates the equality of women as provided by the Constitution.

The Indian SC said it would hold daily sittings between May 11 and May 19 to decide pleas by Muslim women to declare the practice of oral talaq illegal.

Trump: Is he world's policeman, or not?

CNN ONLINE

President Donald Trump's launch of two major military strikes in the last two weeks raises a question about his 2016 declaration that the US can no longer be the world's policeman: Has Trump changed his mind?

Eighty-six days into the new administration, the President seems to be pivoting away from the "America First" doctrine that drove his campaign and foreshadowed a withdrawal from the world stage. Some of Trump's foreign policy decisions still seem to reflect that protectionist view -- in particular his decision to slash the budget for US diplomacy.

But Trump's recent use of military force in Syria and Afghanistan points to a possible evolution in his thinking about the use of American power and how best to wield it on the world stage.

While his embrace of military action is raising concerns in some quarters, others say Trump's shift takes the White House closer to a traditional US foreign policy.

"It's too early to suggest that we're seeing a doctrine, I don't think any president had a doctrine at this point, but certainly we're seeing more military force," said Barry Pavel, vice president at the Atlantic Council. "They are showing some evidence of an ability to learn and move toward the mainstream."

It has also forced US adversaries to "have a different calculus," Pavel said. As a comparison, he pointed to President Barack Obama's 2013 declaration that chemical weapons use in Syria would cross a "red line" -- and decision not to attack after President Bashar al-Assad gassed and killed more than 1,400 people.

Trump's decision to strike Syria "startled the Russians, and also certainly startled the Chinese and the North Koreans," Pavel said.

Figuring out Trump's approach is perhaps more difficult than with previous presidents because of the speed with which he has done U-turns on core campaign positions.

Trump has changed his mind about the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, a core US alliance that he had dismissed on the campaign trail. "I said it was obsolete. It is no longer obsolete," he said at a Wednesday appearance with Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.

He's gone from blasting China to apparently warming up with the Asian giant. I think he wants to help us with North Korea." He's cooled on his goal of warmer ties with Russia.

And after suggesting Asian allies handle their own defense, he's reaffirmed the US commitment to Asian security, particularly in the face of growing North Korean belligerence.

Those reversed positions now seem to include his September 2016 declaration that "I want to help all of our allies, but we are losing billions and billions of dollars. We cannot be the policemen of the world."

Trump offered an explanation for the apparent change in his approach in an April 5 appearance with Jordan's King Abdullah. "I like to think of myself as a very flexible person," Trump said. "I don't have to have one specific way, and if the world changes, I go the same way, I don't change, well, I do change, and I am flexible, and I'm proud of that flexibility."



Pope Francis delivers the "Urbi et Orbi" blessing for Rome and the world from the central loggia of St Peter's basilica following the Easter Sunday mass in Vatican, yesterday. The Pope denounced "oppressive regimes" in his Easter message as Christians around the world are marking the Holy Week, commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, leading up to his resurrection on Easter.

PHOTO: AFP



Candidates begin final push

Opinion polls show one in three voters still undecided about who to back on April 23 vote

AFP, Paris

A week before France's high-stakes presidential election, the four top candidates began a final push yesterday to woo undecided voters who will determine the outcome of the tight race between the hard left, centre, right and far right.

On April 23, the French go to the polls in the most unpredictable vote in the country's post-war history to choose two candidates from a field of 11 who will go through to a run-off two weeks later.

With a duel between far-right leader Marine Le Pen and Communist-backed radical Jean-Luc Melenchon, both eurosceptics, among one of six possible outcomes the election is being closely watched in Brussels and around the world.

Opinion polls show one in three voters still undecided about who to back after a campaign characterised by scandals and upsets.

In an interview in Le Parisien newspaper yesterday, 65-year-old Melenchon, who is threatening to quit the euro and massively increase public spending, vowed he would be a safe pair of hands on the eurozone's second-largest economy.

"I am not from the far left," the leader of the La France Insoumise (Unbowed France) movement said, insisting he was "ready to govern".

Melenchon's surge has shaken up the race, with many hesitating between voting with their hearts and a tactical

vote for whichever candidate they see as best placed to keep Le Pen or Melenchon out of power.

Le Pen, whom polls show leading the first round with centrist Emmanuel Macron on around 22-24 percent each, returned to her party's core themes of immigration and Islam Saturday to try to mobilise her base.

FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL RACE



The opinion polls had shown her virtually assured of a place in the May 7 runoff but Melenchon and the conservative Francois Fillon have narrowed the gap with her and Macron to about three points, blowing the race wide open.

In a speech in the southern city of Perpignan the 48-year-old National Front (FN) leader lashed out at Macron and Fillon, accusing them of being soft on radical Islam.

Nepal, China hold first military drill

AFP, Kathmandu

China and Nepal began their first-ever joint military exercises yesterday, a move likely to rattle India as Beijing boosts its influence in the region.

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

The 10-day drill in Kathmandu, dubbed "Sagarmatha Friendship 2017" referring to the Nepali name for Mount Everest, will focus on counter-terrorism, according to Nepal's army.

"This is in line with our efforts to hold joint exercises with countries that have diplomatic relations with Nepal," military spokesman Jhankar Bahadur Kadayat told AFP.

The drills will likely be watched closely by India, which is often accused of playing "big brother" to its tiny neighbour. 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 New Delhi.

"Nepal and China share a multi-faceted tie and a joint military exercise broadens that relationship," said Tanka Karki, former Nepali ambassador to China.

Last month China's defence minister Chang Wanquan visited Nepal -- the first by a Chinese defence minister in 15 years -- to discuss the joint military exercise.