

NEWSIN brief

Philippine defence chief visits Spratly island

Philippine Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana flew to a disputed South China Sea island yesterday, brushing off a challenge by the Chinese military while asserting Manila's territorial claim to the strategic region. China claims most of the South China Sea, including Thitu island which Lorenzana visited and the Philippines calls Pag-asa island.

Arkansas executes first inmate in 12 years

The US state of Arkansas has carried out its first execution in more than a decade despite criticism that its plan to put to death several prisoners this month is rushed. Ledell Lee, 51, was executed Thursday after the US Supreme Court rejected eleventh-hour requests to stay the move. He received a legal injection cocktail of three drugs, including one that has sparked sharp debate.



UK Queen celebrates 91st birthday

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II celebrates her 91st birthday yesterday, with the world's longest-reigning monarch taking a step back from royal duties to allow the younger generation to step forward. A gun salute at London's Tower Bridge and at Hyde Park will mark the Queen's birthday, a notably more low-key affair after a year of festivities to mark her hitting 90.



Police officers control a man on the Champs Elysees in Paris after a shooting on Thursday evening. One police officer was killed and another wounded in the shooting, police said, just days ahead of France's presidential election. Story on page 16.

Arrest of Assange a 'priority': US

The arrest of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is a US "priority," Attorney General Jeff Sessions said yesterday, as media reports indicated his office was preparing charges against the fugitive anti-hero. "We are going to step up our effort and already are stepping up our efforts on all leaks," Sessions, America's top cop, said at a news conference in response to a reporter's question about a US priority to arrest Assange. The Justice Department chief said a rash of leaks of sensitive secrets appeared unprecedented. Prosecutors in recent weeks have been drafting a memo that looks at charges against Assange and members of WikiLeaks that possibly include conspiracy, theft of government property and violations of the Espionage Act, the Washington Post reported, citing unnamed US officials familiar with the matter. Assange, 45, has been holed up at the Ecuadoran embassy in London since 2012 trying to avoid extradition to Sweden where he faces a rape allegation that he denies. He fears Sweden would extradite him to the United States to face trial for leaking hundreds of thousands of secret US military and diplomatic documents that first gained attention in 2010. Trump and his administration have put heat on WikiLeaks after it embarrassed the Central Intelligence Agency last month by releasing a large number of files and computer code from the spy agency's top-secret hacking operations. The documents showed how the CIA exploits vulnerabilities in popular computer and networking hardware and software to gather intelligence. Supporters of WikiLeaks say it's practicing the constitutional right of freedom of speech and the press.

Sharif lost moral grounds

Says Imran Khan as opposition vows to oust PM during graft probe

Pakistani opposition party lawmakers tore up the agenda and shouted in a parliament session yesterday as they demanded that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif step down during an investigation into his finances. Opposition leader Imran Khan said he would lead protests demanding Sharif's resignation, saying the prime minister had lost the moral authority to stay in office while being investigated. The Supreme Court ruled on Thursday there was insufficient evidence to order Sharif's removal from office but called for further investigation into corruption allegations in connection with the so-called Panama Papers leaks. A five-member bench was split three vote to two in favour of Sharif retaining his position. On Friday, opposition lawmakers chanted slogans demanding Sharif's resignation and tore up the assembly's agenda for the day, before the speaker suspended the session, television footage showed.

The Supreme Court, in its 549-page judgment, ordered a joint investigation team be formed to look into allegations around three of Sharif's four children using offshore companies to buy properties in London. The investigating team has two months to complete its inquiry, after which a special bench will decide what action to take, the court said.

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The prime minister and his children deny any wrongdoing. The joint investigation team will comprise members from six different government bodies including intelligence agencies and financial regulatory authorities. "At least three institutions are directly under the control of the prime minister and his ministers. I don't see how they would take a stand against the prime minister," legal expert Farogh Naseem told Reuters. While the court's decision has been celebrated by Sharif's ruling Pakistan Muslim League as a victory, legal experts and analysts say the extended investigation undermines his authority as he heads into an election due next year.

Trump: Iran not 'living up to spirit' of nuke deal

Iran is "not living up to the spirit" of the nuclear deal struck with world powers, US President Donald Trump said Thursday, warning America would set out its position on that soon. Trump's administration has been publicly tightening the noose on Iran over the deal, which was negotiated by the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany to roll back Tehran's nuclear program in return for the easing of sanctions. "It was a terrible agreement," said Trump, who has regularly blamed his predecessor Barack Obama for securing it. "That was a bad one, as bad as I've ever seen negotiated." "Iran has not lived up to the spirit of the agreement, and they have to do that," Trump said in a joint news conference in the White House with Italy's visiting Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni. "We're analyzing it very, very carefully and will have something to say about it in the not-too-distant future." Trump on Tuesday ordered a review of the deal led by his National Security Council. It will decide whether suspending sanctions "is vital to the national security interests of the United States." Although the State Department admits Iran has so far stuck to its side of the bargain, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on Wednesday called the pact a failure and warned Iran risked becoming another North Korea: a hostile, nuclear-armed state. "Iran's provocative actions threaten the United States, the region, and the world," Tillerson said. Iran has long insisted its nuclear program has no military purpose. But world powers were not convinced and the accord provided for regular inspections of facilities.



Ahmadinejad barred from Iran polls

Campaigning began yesterday for Iran's presidential election with incumbent Hassan Rouhani facing a tough battle against hardliners, though not from former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who was barred from standing. Ahmadinejad's disqualification by the conservative-run Guardian Council was no surprise -- he had been advised not to run by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who said it would "polarise" the nation. Ahmadinejad's populist economics and defiant attitude to the establishment had alienated even his hard-line backers during his tenure between 2005 and 2013. The mood in Tehran has been subdued -- many are disillusioned with Rouhani's failure to kick-start the economy despite broad support for his efforts to rebuild ties with the West, notably through a nuclear deal with world powers that ended many sanctions. The election commission ruled on Thursday that live TV debates would be banned, without giving a reason -- a decision criticised by Rouhani and other candidates. Campaigning, which the Guardian Council announced could begin immediately, had not been supposed to start for another week. Iran's elections are tightly controlled, with the Guardian Council allowing just six people -- and no women -- to stand for the May 19 vote out of 1,636 hopefuls that registered last week. If no candidate wins more than 50 percent, a run-off between the top two is held a week later.

'No doubt' Syria retained chem weapons: Mattis

Evacuees on move again after 48-hour delay

US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis yesterday said in Israel that there can be "no doubt" Syria has retained some chemical weapons and warned President Bashar al-Assad's regime not to use them. Mattis made the comments during a one-day visit for talks with Israeli leaders, who strongly supported a recent US strike against a Syrian airbase in retaliation for an alleged chemical attack on a rebel-held town. "The bottom line is there can be no doubt in the international community's mind that Syria has retained chemical weapons in violation of its agreement and its statement that it had removed them all," Mattis said during a press conference with Israeli counterpart Avigdor Lieberman. An Israeli military assessment has found that Assad's regime was still in possession of "a few tonnes" of chemical weapons, an army official confirmed. Some Israeli media reports put the number at between one and three tonnes. Assad, backed by his ally Russia, has strongly denied the allegation that his forces used chemical weapons against the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhun on April 4, describing it as a "100 percent fabrication". Meanwhile, hundreds of frightened Syrian evacuees were on the move again yesterday after being stuck for 48 hours at a transit point where a bomber killed dozens of their fellow townspeople. By yesterday afternoon, most of the 45 buses carrying civilians and loyalist fighters from the besieged government-held towns of Fuua and Kafraaya had left the marshalling area in rebel-held Rashidin, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. All of the 11 buses evacuating civilians and fighters from Zabadani and two other rebel-held areas around Damascus were also on the move.



Police fire tear gas towards opposition supporters during clashes while rallying against Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro in Caracas, Venezuela, on Thursday. A man was fatally shot during the clashes, an official said, as deadly unrest continued to roil the oil-rich nation.

What's in a name? Canada civil service tests name-blind hiring

Canada announced a pilot test Thursday that would see names removed from applications to work in its civil service, hoping this will eliminate any biases in the hiring process. The aim would be to have a more diverse and inclusive civil service, the government said in a statement. The so-called name-blind technique -- in which managers are not told applicants' names -- is already practiced by a number of European organizations including the British civil service. In Canada, the departments of defense, foreign affairs, immigration, procurement, the environment, and the treasury board will participate in the test. Screening will see recruiters remove any information on a resume that could be used to identify a person's gender or ethnicity, including name, birthplace, or association memberships. Ottawa's decision followed the release of a University of Toronto study that found job candidates with Asian names were less likely to be called for interviews than others with Anglo-Canadian names, regardless of qualifications.

20 killed as truck ploughs into Indian protesters

At least 20 people were killed yesterday after a lorry rammed into a group of farmers staging a protest in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. The farmers were outside a police station in Chittoor district, protesting against illegal sand mining. Police said the driver of the truck appeared to have lost control of his vehicle, but locals alleged that he deliberately drove into the crowd. State officials have ordered an investigation into the incident. Seventeen people were hurt in the incident. Police ruled out terror link to the accident.

Dortmund blast was 'for money not terror'

German police yesterday arrested a man suspected of detonating three bombs that targeted the Borussia Dortmund soccer team bus in the hope of sending the club's shares plummeting and making a profit on an investment, prosecutors said. In a statement, the federal chief prosecutor said the 28-year old man, a dual German and Russian national identified as Sergei V, had bought options on Borussia Dortmund's stock before the attack. The team bus was heading to the club's stadium for a Champions League match against AS Monaco on April 11 when the explosions went off, wounding Spanish defender Marc Bartra and delaying the match by a day. Prosecutors last week expressed doubts about the authenticity of three letters left at the site of the attack that suggested that Islamist militants had carried it out. The prosecutor's office said the suspect had bought 15,000 put options, or contracts giving him the right to sell Borussia Dortmund's shares at a pre-determined price, on the day of the attack, using a consumer loan he had signed a week earlier. Police detained the suspect in the city of Tuebingen. He faces charges of attempted murder, inflicting serious bodily harm and causing an explosion, the prosecutor's office said.

Mediterranean migrant death toll for 2017 tops 1,000: UN

Around 100 migrants have drowned in the Mediterranean according to shipwreck survivors, raising the death toll for the perilous crossing to Italy to over 1,000 victims in 2017, the UN's refugee agency said yesterday. "This latest tragedy pushes the number of people dead or missing in the central Mediterranean to 1,073 so far this year," the UNHCR told AFP. Among the 8,000 or so migrants plucked from flimsy dinghies over Easter weekend were survivors who told the agency about 100 of their fellow passengers had been claimed by the waves. At this point last year, 853 people had lost their lives or were feared drowned. Overstretched migrant aid groups describing "unprecedented mass rescues" of people fleeing horrors in conflict-torn Libya over Easter had warned more people risked drowning without EU action. Italian tugboat Asso 29 disembarked 1,170 of those rescued in Vibo Valentia in Calabria on Tuesday, including families from Syria, Tunisia, Bangladesh and Sub-Saharan Africa. More than 36,700 people have been pulled to safety and brought to Italy so far this year according to the International Organization for Migration, an increase of nearly 45 percent compared with the same period last year. Several days of calm weather off the coast of Libya saw traffickers set dozens of dinghies or boats out to sea together. Italy has hopes of shutting down the route, though a deal signed with Libya in February -- fiercely criticised by rescue groups and human rights campaigners -- is in doubt after it was suspended in March by Tripoli's Court of Appeal.