

**NEWS IN**  
*brief*

**Saudi ends public sector pay cuts**

REUTERS, Riyadh  
Saudi Arabia's King Salman issued a royal decree on Saturday restoring financial allowances for civil servants and military personnel that had been cut under austerity measures. In September Saudi Arabia cut ministers' salaries by 20 percent and scaled back financial perks for public sector employees to save money at a time of low oil prices.

**Cow row: 3 men attacked in Delhi**

AFP, New Delhi  
Three men who were transporting buffaloes in their truck to a slaughterhouse were attacked by vigilantes in the heart of Indian capital New Delhi, the police said yesterday. The latest attack comes amidst a wave of rising tensions over cow slaughter in Hindu-majority India, where the animal is considered sacred.

**Top conservationist shot in Kenya**

REUTERS, Nairobi  
Gunmen wounded Italian-born conservationist Kuki Gallmann at her conservation park yesterday in the latest of a string of attacks during land invasions in drought-stricken northern Kenya. The 73-year-old author of the memoir "I Dreamed of Africa" was shot in the stomach after the vehicle she was driving in was ambushed by a group of gunmen, a family friend said.

**One OSCE staff killed by mine in Ukraine**

AFP, Kiev  
The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe yesterday said one of its staff was killed after an observer mission patrol vehicle hit a landmine in rebel-held east Ukraine. It marked the first loss for the security body's Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) in Ukraine since Europe's only war began more than three years ago.

**Blogger stabbed to death in Maldives**

AFP, Male  
A liberal blogger, Yameen Rasheed, was stabbed to death in the politically restive Maldivian capital Male, his family members and colleagues said Sunday. He was 29.

Rasheed was found in the stairwell of his apartment with multiple stab wounds to his neck and chest early yesterday and died shortly after being taken to hospital, family members said.

His blog, The Daily Panic, had a considerable following and was known for poking fun at politicians in the nation of some 340,000 Sunni Muslims.

"With The Daily Panic, I hope to cover and comment upon the news, satirise the frequently unsatisfactory politics of Maldives," he wrote on his blog.

Rasheed is the third media personality to be targeted in the Maldives in the past five years. Blogger Ismail Rasheed, also known as Hilath, was stabbed and wounded by an unidentified attacker in 2012.

A journalist with the independent Minivan News, Ahmed Rilwan, was likely abducted in August 2014 and has been missing ever since.

Exiled opposition leader and former president Mohamed Nasheed demanded action on the latest killing of the independent journalist.

Political tension has mounted in the Maldives after a failed bid by the opposition to impeach the country's parliamentary speaker late last month.

A coalition of opposition parties, led by exiled leader Nasheed, is trying to undermine Yameen before elections next year.



Displaced Iraqis flee fighting through a street covered in debris as the battle between the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service and Islamic State militants continues nearby, in western Mosul, Iraq, yesterday. Heavy two-way traffic of carts carrying children, clothes, and the elderly crowded the main Baghdad-Mosul road yesterday as hundreds of Iraqis fled heavy fighting or made their way back to areas seized back from Islamic State.

PHOTO: REUTERS

**NEARING 100 DAYS IN OFFICE**  
**Trump's approval at record low**

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK  
As Donald Trump approaches his 100th day in the White House, the Republican is suffering the lowest approval ratings than any President since 1945.

Compared to his Democrat and Republican predecessors since the Second World War, no President has dipped as low so early on in their first term as Trump, who has an approval rating of 42 percent.

When Barack Obama was approaching his first 100 days, he had 69 percent approval, exactly the same as the average approval rating for past Presidents at this stage in their first term.

Business tycoon Trump has significant challenges ahead. While six in 10 people surveyed doubt his honesty and trustworthiness, and see him out of touch with their problem, more than half of Americans (56 percent) believe he has not achieved a lot in his first 100 days.

The first 100 days is normally seen as a President's honeymoon period. Although Trump's low rating at 100 days is significant, it is not necessarily predictive of his ratings for the rest of his time in office or whether he will win a second term.

The ABC News / Washington Post poll, conducted between 17 and 20 April among a random, national sample of 1,004 adults, found that 96 percent of Trump supporters who voted for him in November would do so again today.



**TALIBAN ATTACK ON REGIONAL MILITARY HQ**  
**Furious Afghans observe day of nat'l mourning**

AGENCIES

Afghanistan yesterday observed a national day of mourning after nearly 140 soldiers were killed or wounded in a Taliban attack on a military base, prompting angry calls for ministers and army chiefs to resign.

The assault, the deadliest-ever by the Taliban on a military base, underscores their growing strength more than 15 years after they were ousted from power.

Flags flew at half-mast throughout the country and special prayers were said for the dead.

The defence ministry gave a figure of at least 100 soldiers killed or wounded. It ignored media calls for a complete breakdown of casualties following the five-hour attack near the provincial capital of Mazar-i-Sharif.

But local officials including, Mohammad Ibrahim Khairandish the head of the provincial council, put the death toll as high as 130 and said about 60 were wounded.

Ten gunmen dressed in soldiers' uniforms and armed with suicide vests entered the base in army trucks and opened fire at unarmed troops at close range in the base's

mosque and dining hall.

Ordinary Afghans vented their anger at the government for its inability to counter a series of brazen Taliban assaults, including a raid on the country's largest military hospital in Kabul in March that left dozens dead.

"Mothers lost their sons, sisters lost their brothers and wives lost their husbands. What is the government doing to prevent such atrocities, only condemning? I am so tired, I can't do anything but to cry," a user called Zabiullah posted on Facebook.

Many called for the resignation of Defence Minister Abdullah Habibi and the commander of the 209th Corps stationed at the base.

A military source at the base indicated the assault was an insider attack, and the militants were "young recruits who had come for training".

Afghan troops and police, beset by killings and desertions, have been struggling to beat back insurgents since US-led NATO troops ended their combat mission in December 2014.

Afghan security force casualties soared by 35 percent in 2016, with 6,800 soldiers and police killed, according to US watchdog SIGAR.

**FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

**The candidates**



**MARINE LE PEN**

Since becoming party leader in 2011, Le Pen has been on a drive to clean up the anti-EU, anti-immigration National Front's (FN) racist image and reposition it as a party perceived as putting French interests first. Tipped to come first or second in the election's opening round, polls show the 48-year-old would however struggle to win a run-off against her main rival on May 7, where she would need to garner more than 50 percent. The former lawyer and twice-divorced mother of three faces allegations of illegal campaign financing, expenses fraud and undervaluing her assets, but dismisses them as a plot to bar her path to power. She has presented the election as a battle between the "patriots" ready to defend France and its values and "globalists" whose support for immigration and open borders she claims has caused economic and social calamity.



**EMMANUEL MACRON**

The telegenic former investment banker hoping to become the youngest president in France's post-war history was an advisor to current Socialist President Francois Hollande and later became his economy minister. The 39-year-old quit the government last year and launched his own centrist political movement, "En Marche" ("On the Move"). Polls show him running neck-and-neck with Le Pen in the first round and easily beating her in the run-off. Macron has never stood for election before and has been accused of being short on substance, but he argues he can rejuvenate France with an unabashedly pro-European, pro-business platform.

**FRANCOIS FILLON**

Ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy's former prime minister is a political veteran who has spent a lifetime preparing for his shot at the Elysee Palace. He was the clear frontrunner at the start of the year, but has been embroiled in scandal after scandal since January. Fillon has been charged over accusations he paid his wife Penelope hundreds of thousands of euros from public funds for a fictional job as his parliamentary assistant. The 63-year-old devout Catholic wants to slash state spending and cut 500,000 public-sector jobs over the five-year presidential term. Polls currently show him running third or fourth.

**JEAN-LUC MELENCHON**

Communist-backed firebrand Melancon has challenged the leaders in the campaign, employing fiery rhetoric, sharp wit and campaign appearances by hologram. One of the harshest critics of Francois Hollande's presidency, he wants the EU to be revamped if France is to remain a member. Melancon, who came in fourth in the 2012 election behind Le Pen, wants to dump France's presidential system for a parliamentary system. The 65-year-old nationalist promises a 100-billion-euro stimulus package and a greener economy.

PHOTO: AFP



Gagged with red cloths and dressed in white, protesters opposed to President Nicolas Maduro marched in silence in several cities on Saturday to pay respects to 20 people killed in three weeks of unrest.

PHOTO: AFP

**Germany's anti-immigration AfD pick election duo**

AFP, Cologne

Germany's anti-immigration AfD yesterday wrapped up a fractious party congress by choosing a new team to lead it into a September general election.

Capping two days of often bitter debate on its platform and personnel, the Alternative for Germany appointed two chief candidates: 76-year-old Alexander Gauland, a hardline defector from Chancellor Angela Merkel's CDU, and Alice Weidel, 38, an openly lesbian former investment banker.

The party's telegenic co-leader Frauke Petry had already announced last week she would not join the campaign squad, following weeks of bitter infighting between populists and more radical, hard-right forces.

Weidel told cheering delegates that the AfD was the only party that could protect Germany's borders and ensure public security.

Earlier the party, now represented in 11 of Germany's 16 states, signed off on a programme that it hopes will pave the way

for it to enter the national parliament for the first time in its four-year history.

It included calls to stop family unification of refugees already in Germany, strip immigrants convicted of "significant crimes" of their German passports, and declare Islam incompatible with German culture.

The AfD has seen its support plummet as the refugee influx to Germany has slowed in recent months, after Merkel let in more than one million asylum seekers since 2015.

Commentators said the party's unresolved power struggle further undermined its bid to surf the momentum of France's far-right presidential frontrunner Marine Le Pen, Donald Trump in the United States and the Brexit movement in Britain to electoral success in the September 24 vote.

Spiegel Online journalist Severin Weiland said it was now even "doubtful" whether the AfD would clear the five-percent hurdle to representation in the national parliament.

**Israeli attack on Syria military camp kills 3**

AFP, Damascus

An Israeli attack on a Syrian training camp near the Golan Heights killed three members of a pro-government militia yesterday, an official from the forces said.

The Al-Fawwar camp in Syria's southwestern Quneitra province is used by the National Defence Forces (NDF), which command some 90,000 fighters across Syria.

The NDF official told AFP that two fighters were also wounded in the Israeli attack, but said it was unclear whether the damage was inflicted by an air strike or shelling.

The source also said that they were "Israeli rockets" but could not specify what kind of missiles may have been used.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group said the attack had targeted a "weapons warehouse" in the camp.

Israel's army declined to comment Sunday on the attack. On Friday, the Israeli army said it targeted positions inside Syria in retaliation for mortar fire that hit the northern part of the Golan Heights.

Israel seized 1,200 square kilometres (460 square miles) of the Golan from Syria in the Six-Day War of 1967 and later annexed it in a move never recognised by the international community. Around 510 square kilometres of the Golan are under Syrian control.

The two countries are still technically at war, although the border remained largely quiet for decades until 2011, when the Syrian conflict broke out.

**EUROPE'S MIGRANT CRISIS**  
**Pope likens refugee centres to 'concentration camps'**

AFP, Rome

Pope Francis on Saturday described some of Europe's refugee centres as "concentration camps", as he paid tribute to an unknown Christian woman slain for her faith in front of her Muslim husband.

"These refugee camps -- so many are concentration camps, crowded with people... because international accords seem more important than human rights," Francis said in impromptu remarks at a ceremony in memory of modern-day Christian martyrs.

Departing from his prepared script and appearing unusually emotional as he spoke, the 80-year-old pontiff said he wanted the woman to be remembered along with all the other martyrs commemorated in Rome's Basilica of St Bartholomew.

He revealed that he had met the woman's husband and their three children during his

visit to a refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos last year.

"I do not know what happened to him, if he managed to get out of his concentration camp, and get to somewhere else" Francis said.

"He looked at me and said 'Father, I am a Muslim and my wife was a Christian. In our country we were terrorised ... they saw her crucifix and they asked her to throw it away."

"When she refused they cut her throat in front of my eyes. We loved each other so much."

Francis did not reveal the man's nationality but most of the migrants in Lesbos at the time of his visit were refugees from the conflict in Syria.

He told them all that Europe needed to be infected by the generous spirit towards migrants that has been shown by the people of Lesbos and the Italian islands of Lampedusa and Sicily.



**UK SNAP ELECTION**  
**May on course for sweeping win: poll**

REUTERS, London

Britain's Theresa May appeared on course to win a crushing election victory in June after opinion polls put support for her ruling Conservative party at around 50 percent, double that of the opposition Labour party.

May's decision to call a June 8 election stunned her political rivals this week and a string of polls released late on Saturday suggested the gamble had paid off, with one from ComRes showing the party of Margaret Thatcher enjoying levels of support not seen since 1991.

May said she needed the election to secure her own mandate and strengthen her hand for the Brexit negotiations ahead.

In two other polls, May's Conservatives also gained ground in Scotland at the expense of the Scottish National Party, potentially weakening the nationalists' demand for another independence referendum.

According to polls by Opinium, ComRes and YouGov, May's Conservatives held a lead of between 19 and 25 percentage points, with the party's support ranging from 45 percent to 50 percent.

