

NEWSIN brief

Le Pen unveils her PM pick

Far-right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen yesterday announced that if she wins France's May 7 runoff she would name neurosurgeon Nicolas Dupont-Aignan as her prime minister. Le Pen says she wants to build up France's borders, take it out of the eurozone and hold a referendum on the nation's EU membership.

19 killed as Myanmar bus plunges into gorge

Nineteen people were killed and 21 injured after their bus toppled into a ravine in eastern Myanmar, police said yesterday. The bus was carrying around 40 passengers from central Bago province when it plunged off a highway near Myawaddy on Friday. Police believe the driver lost control of the bus because of a brake failure.

6.8 quake strikes the Philippines

A 6.8-magnitude earthquake struck off the Philippines early yesterday, triggering a tsunami warning that was later lifted, Philippine and US authorities said. It struck at a depth of 41 kilometres in Mindanao. There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage from the quake.

24 dead in Kyrgyz landslide: report

A landslide that swept over houses in a village in Kyrgyzstan early yesterday has killed 24 people, including nine children, the emergency ministry told AFP. The landslide hit the village of Ayu in the Osh region of the mountainous Central Asian country at around 0640 am and covered six houses with inhabitants inside.

N Korea defies world pressure

Test-fires new ballistic missile; US warns of 'catastrophic consequences'; China, Russia rebuke threat of military force; Trump says test a 'disrespect' to China leader

AFP, Seoul
North Korea test-fired a ballistic missile yesterday in apparent defiance of a concerted US push for tougher international sanctions to curb Pyongyang's nuclear weapons ambitions.

The latest launch, which South Korea said was a failure, came just hours after US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson warned the UN Security Council of "catastrophic consequences" if the international community -- most notably China -- failed to pressure the North into abandoning its weapons programme.

Military options for dealing with the North were still "on the table", Tillerson warned in his first address to the UN body.

The launch ratchets up tensions on the Korean peninsula, with Washington and Pyongyang locked in an ever-tighter spiral of threat, counter-threat and escalating military preparedness.

US President Donald Trump, who has warned of a "major conflict" with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un's regime, said the latest test was a pointed snub to China -- the North's main ally and economic lifeline.

"North Korea disrespected the wishes of China & its highly respected President when it launched, though unsuccessfully, a missile today. Bad!" Trump tweeted.

The US is deploying a naval strike group led by an aircraft carrier to the Korean peninsula, and a missile-defence system called Terminal High

Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) that officials say will be operational "within days".

North Korea recently conducted its biggest-ever firing drill and has threatened to "bury at sea" the US aircraft carrier, amid signs it could be preparing for a sixth nuclear test.

South Korea's defence ministry said it suspected the missile test had failed after a brief flight, while



Foreign Minister Wang Yi said. His country, he said, should not be "a focal point of the problem on the peninsula" and stressed that "the key to solving the nuclear issue on the peninsula does not lie in the hands of the Chinese side".

Russia joined China in appealing for a return to talks and de-escalation. Military action was "completely unacceptable", Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov told the council.

But Tillerson argued that diplomacy had to be backed with credible muscle. Tillerson called on all countries to downgrade or sever diplomatic relations with North Korea and impose targeted sanctions on entities and individuals supporting its missile and nuclear program.

The United States is ready to impose sanctions on third countries where companies or individuals are found to have helped North Korea's military programmes, he said.

China instead wants Pyongyang to freeze its military programmes in exchange for a halt to US-South Korean annual drills.

But Tillerson was blunt in saying it was up to North Korea to take the first concrete steps.

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'Saudis have not treated US fairly'

REUTERS, Washington

President Donald Trump has complained that US ally Saudi Arabia was not treating the United States fairly and Washington was losing a "tremendous amount of money" defending the kingdom.

"Frankly, Saudi Arabia has not treated us fairly, because we are losing a tremendous amount of money in defending Saudi Arabia," he said.

Trump's criticism of Riyadh was a return to his 2016 election campaign rhetoric. "Nobody's going to mess with Saudi Arabia because we're watching them," Trump told a campaign rally in Wisconsin a year ago. "They're not paying us a fair price. We're losing our shirt."

The United States is the main supplier for most Saudi military needs, from F-15 fighters to control and command systems worth tens of billions of dollars in recent years, while American contractors win major energy deals.

Saudi officials could not immediately be reached for comment on Trump's latest comments.

Meanwhile, ninety-nine days into office President Donald Trump rallied his "friends" from the National Rifle Association on Friday, telling the hugely powerful US gun lobby the "assault" on their right to bear arms is over.

"I will never, ever infringe on the right of the people to keep and bear arms," Trump vowed in Atlanta, Georgia at the annual convention of the NRA, which pumped cash into his maverick election campaign in 2016.



SE Asia faces huge drugs crisis: Duterte

Urges Asean to unite to combat crisis

AFP, Manila
Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte yesterday warned Southeast Asian leaders they were facing a "massive" illegal drug menace that could destroy their societies, as he called for a united response.

Duterte, who has faced international condemnation for his own crackdown on drugs that has claimed thousands of lives, also insisted that outsiders should not interfere in Southeast Asia's affairs.

"The illegal drug trade is massive but it is not impregnable," Duterte said in a speech to open an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) leaders summit.

"With political will and cooperation, it can be dismantled. It can be destroyed before it destroys our societies," Duterte urged the leaders to be "resolute in realising a drug-free Asean".

Duterte was elected last year largely on a law-and-order platform in which he promised to eradicate illegal drugs in the Philippines by killing tens of thousands of people.

His pledge proved wildly popular with millions of Filipinos looking for a quick solution to crime and corruption. Since Duterte took office 10 months ago, police have reported killing 2,724 people as part of his anti-drug campaign.

Many thousands of others have been killed by shadowy vigilantes, according to rights groups.

In his speech to Asean leaders, Duterte highlighted the bloc's tradition of "non-interference".

He did this while talking about relations with the United States and the European Union, which have expressed concern about alleged extrajudicial killings in his drug war.



Asean leaders link arms during the opening ceremony of the 30th Asean Summit in Manila, Philippines, yesterday. L-R: Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei Darussalam, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, Indonesian President Joko Widodo and Laos' Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith. PHOTO: REUTERS



EU adopts tough Brexit strategy

French president says Britain must pay price for leaving EU

AFP, Brussels
European Union leaders unanimously adopted their Brexit strategy at a special summit in Brussels yesterday, in a show of unity ahead of two years of tough talks with Britain.

The 27 leaders quickly agreed on the negotiating guidelines as they met without Britain for the first time since Prime Minister Theresa May triggered the divorce process a month ago.

They say talks on a future trade deal with Britain can only start once London agrees divorce terms on citizens' rights, its exit bill and Northern Ireland.

"Guidelines adopted unanimously. EU27 firm and fair political mandate for the Brexit talks is ready," EU President Donald Tusk said on Twitter, shortly after the summit began.

Leaders adopted the guidelines, unchanged, within one minute, an EU source said.

May this week accused the EU of ganging up on London, in a war of words with German Chancellor Angela Merkel who said Britain had "illusions" about the talks.

French President Francois Hollande said as he arrived that "the aim of the summit is unity", adding that "there will inevitably be a price and a cost for Britain."

In a further move that will rile London, the EU is also set to back automatic membership for Northern Ireland if it reunifies with Ireland, and call for Spain to have a say over any deal that affects Gibraltar.

While the EU says citizens' rights is a priority, the most touchy issue of all is likely to be Britain's exit bill. This is estimated at around 60 billion euros, which mainly covers financial commitments made by the bloc while UK was a member.

The bill is politically toxic for Britain but also risks causing divisions among EU states as they debate how to plug any holes in the EU's budget.

May's decision to call a general election in Britain on June 8, in a bid to shore up her mandate and strengthen her negotiating position, has only stiffened their resolve.

Actual Brexit talks are not expected to begin until after the British election, although the EU is set to give an official mandate to Barnier on May 22.

300 US Marines return to volatile Helmand

Infamous Afghan warlord urges Taliban to lay down arms

AFP, Lashkar Gah

US Marines returned to Afghanistan's volatile Helmand yesterday, where American troops faced heated fighting until NATO's combat mission ended in 2014, as embattled Afghan security forces struggle to beat back the resurgent Taliban.

The deployment of some 300 Marines to the poppy-growing southern province came one day after the militants announced the launch of their "spring offensive", and as the Trump administration seeks to craft a new strategy in Afghanistan.

Commander of US and Nato forces in Afghanistan General John Nicholson attended a handover ceremony marking the return of the prestigious force, the first Marines in Afghanistan since 2014, an AFP photographer said.

The Taliban effectively control or contest 10 of Helmand's 14 districts, blighted by a

huge opium harvest that helps fund the insurgency.

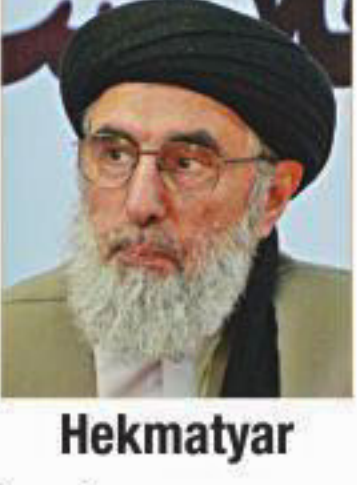
The US has some 8,400 troops in Afghanistan with about another 5,000 from NATO allies, mostly taking part in the training mission.

The Helmand ceremony came as one of Afghanistan's most notorious warlords, ex-prime minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, returned to public life Saturday after more than 20 years in exile.

Hekmatyar, white-bearded and clad in his trademark black turban, called on the Taliban to lay down their weapons and join a "caravan of peace" as he spoke at a rally in

Laghman province.

Known widely as the "Butcher of Kabul", Hekmatyar is chiefly remembered for his role in the bloody civil war of the 1990s, in which he stands accused of killing thousands of people in the capital Kabul. He is set to return there on Sunday.



Hekmatyar

NSA halts notorious spying technique

AFP, Washington

The National Security Agency announced Friday it would end its controversial practice of sweeping up any email or text message an American exchanges with someone overseas that makes reference to a real target of NSA surveillance.

The powerful US spy agency said that although it has the legal power to continue scooping up such communications, it would halt the practice to protect the privacy of US citizens.

"NSA will no longer collect certain internet communications that merely mention a foreign intelligence target," it said in a statement.

The NSA, the country's premier signals intelligence body, is permitted to collect communications of any foreign target, but not that of Americans except in certain situations, or if it gains a warrant to do so.

Under Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, it is allowed to scoop up a US citizen's emails or texts with someone outside the country if those merely mention a specific NSA surveillance target -- so-called "about" collection.

The practice has sparked heavy criticism from civil liberties advocates, who say it violates constitutional protections. Many have threatened to try to block the renewal of Section 702 at the end of this year if the law is not tightened.

But the country's intelligence community wants the law to be renewed unchanged.



Turkey blocks access to Wikipedia

AFP, Istanbul

Turkey yesterday blocked all access inside the country to the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, the communications agency said, in the latest restriction on a popular website to hit Turkish users.

Turkey's Information and Communication Technologies Authority (BTK) said it had implemented the ban on wikipedia.org but the reason for the move was not immediately clear.

A block affecting all language editions of the website in Turkey was detected from 0500 GMT after an administrative order by the Turkish authorities, the Turkey Blocks monitoring group, which watches internet restrictions in the country, said in a statement.

Residents in Istanbul were unable to access any pages of Wikipedia without using a Virtual Private Network (VPN), AFP correspondents said.

No reason was given for the order to block Wikipedia. Other websites, including leading social media, appeared to be working normally.

Turkey has become notorious over the last years for temporarily blocking access to popular sites, including Facebook and Twitter, in the wake of major events such as mass protests or terror attacks.

Savvy internet users frequently resort to the use of VPNs to get around these bans although there have been complaints that the use of VPNs has now also started to be blocked.

IS's Afghan leader likely killed: US

AFP, Washington

US and Afghan troops likely killed the leader of the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate in a raid this week, the Pentagon said Friday.

The raid, which occurred overnight Wednesday-Thursday in Nangarhar province, targeted Abdul Hasib, whom the Pentagon called the IS leader in Afghanistan.

"The thought is we got him, but we are not certain," Pentagon spokesman Captain Jeff Davis said.

Davis said about 50 US special forces and 40 Afghan commandos had been choppered in to the Mohmand Valley late Wednesday near the compound used by Hasib.



Buses burn during clashes between demonstrators and riot police in a protest against President Michel Temer's proposed reform of Brazil's social security system, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on Friday. PHOTO: REUTERS