

CLIMATE MEETING IN BONN

US hesitates as talks hit limbo

China vows to defend Paris deal

AFP, Bonn

UN climate negotiators in Bonn were left frustrated yesterday as the White House postponed a meeting to determine whether America will stay in the 196-nation Paris Agreement to curb planet-harming fossil fuel.

As uncertainty mounted over the hard-fought pact's future under US President Donald Trump, China's leader Xi Jinping vowed to protect it.

China and France "should protect the achievements of global governance, including the Paris Agreement," the foreign ministry in Beijing quoted Xi as telling his newly-elected counterpart, Emmanuel Macron, in a phone call.

Trump has yet to announce whether he intends keeping a campaign promise to withdraw Washington from the hard-fought agreement in whose birth his predecessor, Barack Obama, and Xi were instrumental.

Negotiators in Bonn had their eyes firmly on a White House meeting called to discuss the topic yesterday, but a senior administration official confirmed: "It's been postponed."

No new date was given.

The May 8-18 Bonn meeting is meant to start designing a "rulebook" for implementing the global deal to limit average global warming to two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) over pre-industrial levels.

A total of 196 countries are now parties to the climate deal clinched in 2015 after years of tough bartering.



Remains of destroyed cars are seen at a blast site outside a supermarket in Pattani, Thailand. More than 50 people including children were injured yesterday when a car bomb exploded outside a supermarket in Thailand's insurgency-plagued south, police said, the largest attack for months on a civilian target there.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Ex-French PM seeks to join Macron team

AFP, Paris

Incoming French president Emmanuel Macron was starting to build his centrist government yesterday, with his former Socialist boss jockeying for position in a radically changed political landscape.

Macron, 39, was elected France's youngest-ever president on Sunday, crushing far-right leader Marine Le Pen after a bruising campaign that left France's traditional parties by the wayside.

He faces a huge task to unite a fractured, anxious country and to win a parliamentary majority in June's general election, without which he could struggle to implement his ambitious reform agenda.

His victory at the head of a year-old pro-EU move-



Nearly 250 feared dead

AGENCIES

Up to 250 migrants are feared drowned after two refugee boats sunk in the Mediterranean Sea, the United Nations has said.

A baby was among the bodies washed up on beaches in Libya following the latest disasters, which push the record death toll above 1,300 so far in 2017.

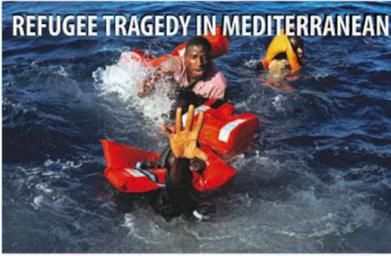
The country's coastguard picked up seven migrants who said they had been on an overloaded dinghy packed with 170 people, which sank on Sunday.

Omar Koko, a coastguard commander in the western city of Zawiya, said more than 30 women and nine children were among those feared drowned.

At least 11 bodies washed up on nearby beaches and were recovered by the Red Crescent, while at least 7,500 migrants have been rescued since Thursday.

Survivors of a second shipwreck were rescued by the Italian coastguard, telling authorities their boat started deflating under the weight of 130 people.

Based on its interviews with survivors in Sicily, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimated the number of dead at more than 80, with around 50 people rescued.



REFUGEE TRAGEDY IN MEDITERRANEAN

Migrant arrivals to Italy by sea are up about 30 per cent this year on 2016, when a record 181,000 people were rescued and taken ashore.

As well as drowning, refugees have been killed by suffocation and hypothermia in sea crossings, as well as on land by being run over, electrocuted, shot and hit by trains.

Boat crossings between Libya and Italy - now the deadliest sea passage in the world - have increased since the controversial EU-Turkey deal shut the comparatively shorter and safer crossing over the Aegean Sea.

The EU is increasing cooperation with the fragile Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) in attempts to combat people smuggling, but efforts have been hampered by the country's ongoing civil war and grave human rights abuses.

Migrants are routinely detained, tortured, extorted or forced into labour and prostitution by gangs, who operate with impunity in the chaos following the British-backed ousting of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The International Criminal Court is collecting information on the imprisonment of an estimated 20,000 migrants and their treatment, amid reports of "slave markets".

CROSS-BORDER ATTACKS

Iran warns of hitting Pak 'terror safe heavens'

Islamabad furious, summons Tehran's envoy

AGENCIES

The head of the Iranian armed forces warned Islamabad on Monday that Tehran would hit bases inside Pakistan if the government does not confront Sunni militants who carry out cross-border attacks.

Ten Iranian border guards were killed by militants last month. Iran said Jaish al Adl, a Sunni militant group, had shot the guards with long-range guns, fired from inside Pakistan.

The border area has long been plagued by unrest from both drug smuggling gangs and separatist militants.

"We cannot accept the continuation of this situation," Major General Mohammad Baqeri, the head of the Iranian armed forces was quoted as saying by state news agency IRNA.

"We expect the Pakistani officials to control the borders, arrest the terrorists and shut down their bases."

"If the terrorist attacks continue, we will hit their safe havens and cells, wherever they are," he said.

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif visited Pakistan last week and asked Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to improve the border security. Pakistan assured Iran it would deploy additional troops along its border, reported Reuters.

Meanwhile, Pakistan yesterday summoned Iranian ambassador to express its concern over Iran army chief's remarks that Tehran will hit "safe havens" of terrorists in Pakistan until Islamabad takes steps to stop militants from carrying out cross-border attacks, reported TOI.

In 2014 Iran warned it would send troops to Pakistan to retrieve five Iranian border guards kidnapped by Jaish al Adl. Pakistan said at the time that such action would be violation of the international law and warned Iranian forces not to cross the border.

Jakarta governor found guilty of blasphemy

Court sentences Purnama to two years in jail; HRW dubs verdict 'huge setback' for minorities

REUTERS, Jakarta

Jakarta's Christian governor was sentenced to two years in jail for blasphemy, a harsher-than-expected ruling that critics fear will embolden hardline Islamist forces to challenge secularism in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation.

Yesterday's guilty verdict comes amid concern about the growing influence of Islamist groups, who organised mass rallies during a tumultuous election campaign that ended with Basuki Tjahaja Purnama losing his bid for another term as governor.

President Joko Widodo was an ally of Purnama, an ethnic-Chinese Christian who is popularly known as "Ahok", and the verdict will be a setback for a government that has sought to quell radical groups and soothe investors' concerns that the country's secular values were at risk.

As thousands of supporters and oppo-

nents waited outside, the head judge of the Jakarta court, Dwiarso Budi Santiaro, said Purnama was "found to have legitimately and convincingly conducted a criminal act of blasphemy, and because of that we have imposed two years of imprisonment".

Purnama told the court he would appeal.

Andreas Harsono of Human Rights Watch (HRW) described the verdict as "a huge setback" for Indonesia's record of tolerance and for minorities.

Purnama was taken to an East Jakarta prison after the verdict and his lawyer Tommy Sihatang said he would remain there despite his appeal process unless a higher court suspended it.

President Widodo yesterday urged all parties to respect the court verdict as well as Purnama's decision to appeal.

Home affairs minister Tjahjo Kumolo said Purnama's deputy would take over in the interim.



Supporters of presidential candidate Moon Jae-in, inset, react as they watch a television broadcast of the presidential election exit polls result in Seoul, South Korea, yesterday. Story on page 16.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWSIN brief

'IS beheads' Russian officer in Syria

REUTERS, Dubai

Islamic State has issued a video showing the beheading of what it described as a Russian intelligence officer captured in Syria, the U-based SITE monitoring website reported yesterday. The 12-minute Russian-language video showed the man dressed in a black jumpsuit kneeling in a desert scene and urging other Russian agents to surrender.

UN: 90,000 Afghans displaced in 2017

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

The ongoing conflict in Afghanistan has forced 88,481 people to leave their homes since the beginning of 2017, according to a UN report. Displacements occurred in 29 of the country's 34 provinces, stated the report yesterday. It noted that the security situation across all regions had grown more volatile.

Corbyn: I won't quit if I lose election

REUTERS, Manchester

Jeremy Corbyn vowed to carry on leading Britain's opposition Labour Party if he loses a national election on June 8, defying polls showing he is on course for defeat. Corbyn has pledged higher taxes on the wealthy and a crackdown on powerful corporations since he took control of the centre-left Labour Party in 2015.

Anti-IS coalition meets in Denmark

AFP, Copenhagen

Key members of the US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria met in Copenhagen yesterday to assess the campaign's next steps as the jihadists' "caliphate" collapses. Officials say they are generally upbeat about the progress and quickening momentum of the fight.

No evidence of collusion

Insists US president after a senate hearing

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump insisted there is no evidence he colluded with Russia after a Senate hearing that highlighted warnings that his former national security advisor was vulnerable to Russian blackmail.

With the issue of the president's ties to Moscow back in the spotlight, Trump took to Twitter to dismiss as "old news" the Senate testimony Monday by former acting attorney general Sally Yates about his former national security advisor Michael Flynn.

Instead, Trump chose to play up former director of national intelligence James Clapper's acknowledgement during the same hearing that he was not aware of any evidence of collusion between the president and Russia, which American intelligence has concluded tried to sway the US election in Trump's favor.

"Director Clapper reiterated what everybody, including the fake media already knows - there is 'no evidence'

of collusion w/ Russia and Trump," Trump said.

Clapper, however, had added that he had not been aware that the issue was under investigation by the FBI until it was publicly revealed in March, suggesting the agency might have evidence he wasn't privy to.

Asked about it, Yates said answering the question would require revealing

ALLEGED TRUMP-RUSSIA TIES

White House warned aide Flynn a blackmail risk

Trump administration insists travel ban not anti-Muslim

classified information. But she noted that "you should not draw from that an assumption that that means that the answer is yes."

Yates, a Barack Obama appointee sacked by Trump early in his presidency, took the stand alongside Clapper during the hotly-anticipated three-hour hearing of the Senate

Judiciary Committee.

Yates confirmed reports that she had told the White House, six days into Trump's administration, that Flynn, a former military intelligence chief, had not been honest with Vice President Mike Pence about his discussions with the Russian ambassador to Washington, leaving him vulnerable to leverage from Moscow.

Yates' comments came after former Obama officials revealed that the outgoing president himself firmly warned Trump against naming Flynn as national security advisor, just two days after the November 8 election.

Meanwhile, the US administration fiercely denied Trump's contested travel ban deliberately single out Muslims during an appeals court hearing Monday -- despite the president's campaign call for a blanket Muslim ban.

The hearing came as Trump seeks to bounce back from a series of stinging judicial defeats over his controversial effort to bar travelers from half a dozen mainly Muslim countries.

GRAFT ALLEGATION

CBI complaint filed against Kejriwal

PTI, New Delhi

The war within AAP intensified yesterday with sacked Delhi minister Kapil Mishra submitting three sets of complaints against Arvind Kejriwal and other party leaders to the CBI.

"I've registered three complaints. The first in connection with Rs 50 crore land deal of Arvind Kejriwal's relative. The second against the cash exchange of Rs 2 crore between Kejriwal and Satyendra Jain, and third against five AAP leaders who misused funds for foreign trips," Mishra said after meeting CBI officials.

The bombshell prompted calls from the BJP and Congress for Kejriwal's ouster, but AAP stood solidly behind its leader, insisting there was no merit in the allegation.

TRUMP'S MIDEAST PEACE EFFORTS

Abbas says ready to meet Israel PM

AFP, Ramallah

Mahmud Abbas said yesterday Donald Trump was expected to visit the Palestinian territories "soon" and that he was ready to meet Israel's prime minister as part of the US president's peace efforts.

Trump is expected in Israel later this month as part of his first foreign trip and the Palestinian president said "we are looking forward to his visit soon to Bethlehem" in the occupied West Bank, with speculation it will occur on May 23.

"We told him that we were ready to collaborate with him and meet the Israeli PM (Benjamin Netanyahu) under his auspices to build peace," Abbas told reporters during talks with German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

Abbas met Trump in Washington last week for their first face-to-face talks.

Trump announced last week that his first foreign trip as president will include stops in Saudi Arabia, Israel and the Vatican -- the spiritual centres of Islam, Judaism and Catholicism.

The stop in Israel is expected on May 22, though it has not been officially confirmed. Trump has been seeking ways to restart moribund Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts.

As he hosted Abbas in Washington, Trump confidently predicted that a peace agreement was within grasp, brushing aside the complexities of a decades-old conflict that has bedevilled successive US leaders.