

NEWS IN brief

US slaps sanctions on Pak-based extremists

PTI, Washington

The US has imposed sanctions on Pakistan-based extremists and an organisation run by Mumbai attack mastermind Hafiz Saeed's JuD group as part of an effort to disrupt their leadership and fund-raising networks. The sanctions have been slapped to disrupt the funding of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and its front for charitable activities, the Jamaat-ud-Dawah, the Taliban, Jamaat-ul-Dawa al-Qur'an (JDQ), the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, and ISIS-Khorasan.

US approves \$2b arms sale to UAE

CNN ONLINE

The US government said Thursday that it had approved a \$2 billion arms sale to the United Arab Emirates. The State Department approved the sale of 60 Patriot Advanced Capability 3 missiles and 100 Patriot Guidance Enhanced-Tactical (GEM-T) missiles to the UAE, according to a statement released by the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, which oversees America's foreign arms sales.

Ebola outbreak declared in DR Congo: WHO

AFP, Kinshasa

An Ebola outbreak has been declared in northeast Democratic Republic of Congo, the World Health Organization said Friday, after the virus caused three deaths in the area since April 22. The WHO said the outbreak affects an equatorial forest region in Bas-Uele province, bordering Central African Republic. The last Ebola outbreak in Congo in 2014 was quickly contained and killed 49 people according to official figures.



Displaced Iraqis cross the Tigris River in western Mosul, yesterday. Inset, Iraqi forces advance in Mosul's northwestern al-Haramat neighbourhood during their ongoing offensive to retake the area from Islamic State (IS) group fighters. PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP

NEW SILK ROAD

Nepal signs up to China's plan

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal yesterday signed up to China's new Silk Road drive, a massive infrastructure project spanning some 65 countries at the centre of the Asian giant's push to expand its global influence.

The long discussed deal between impoverished Nepal and its much bigger neighbour comes just days before China hosts a summit for 28 leaders near Beijing, showcasing the ambitious plan.

The One Belt, One Road Initiative (OBOR) spearheaded by President Xi Jinping would see 60 percent of the global population and around a third of global GDP linked through a network of Chinese-bankrolled ports, railways, roads and industrial parks.

The deal will see China plough money into Nepal for a series of projects including boosting its road network, power grid and a new railway connecting the capital Kathmandu with Lhasa in Tibet.

"We believe China will bring more investment to Nepal, helping the country overcome its status as a landlocked and least developed nation," said Nepal Foreign Minister Prakash Saran Mahat at the signing of the deal on Friday.

Analysts have expressed concern over the Asian giant's attempt to take a lead in global commerce, cautioning that an integrated world trade system where China's Communist party sets the rules could come with serious risks and hidden costs.

Russia meddled in election

Trump's intel bosses reiterate after FBI chief's sacking

AFP, Washington

Six top US intelligence officials told Congress Thursday they agree with the conclusion that Russia acted to influence last year's election, countering President Donald Trump's assertions that the hacking remains an open question.

Asked whether they believed the intelligence community's January assessment that Russia was responsible for hacking and leaking information to influence the elections was accurate, all six spy and law enforcement bosses appearing before the panel said "yes."

They included Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, CIA director Mike Pompeo and acting FBI director Andrew McCabe, newly installed after Trump fired the agency's chief James Comey this week.

The acting chief of the FBI told the US Congress that Trump's shock firing of James Comey will not derail the investigation into alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 election.

The assessment comes amid a mushrooming crisis for the Trump team as questions swirl over why the president fired his FBI director, who was overseeing an investigation into Russian elec-

tion meddling and possible connections between Trump campaign associates and Russia last year.

Trump has repeatedly denounced as "fake news" the accusations that members of his circle coordinated or col-



Acting FBI chief: Comey firing won't stop Russia probe

White House fumes after Moscow releases Trump meeting photos

different groups."

Meanwhile, Donald Trump's administration was left red-faced Thursday after the Moscow surprised it by releasing pictures of a closed-door meeting between the US president and Russia's top diplomat.

The images -- issued by the Russian state news agency TASS, and subsequently published by much of the global media -- showed a grinning Trump shaking hands with Sergei Lavrov and the Russian ambassador in Washington, Sergei Kislyak, during an Oval Office meeting.

That Wednesday meeting was already being seen as a major diplomatic coup for the Kremlin, a red carpet welcome just months after being hit with US sanctions for meddling in the 2016 presidential election.

Veteran diplomats questioned why Trump agreed to host the diplomats -- a rare honor for non-heads of state, much less for those at the center of major US political scandal.

US administrations often treat Oval Office meetings as a type of currency, dangling the prospect of a high-profile sit-down to gain leverage or concessions in negotiations.

China, US seal trade deal as relationship warms

AFP, Beijing

Beijing and Washington yesterday announced an agreement giving US beef, natural gas and certain financial services access to China's massive market in a deal highlighting the warm ties nurtured by their presidents.

The US in exchange will allow cooked Chinese poultry to enter US markets.

The agreement marked one of the first concrete results of trade discussions that began a month ago, when Chinese President Xi Jinping and Donald Trump launched a 100-day action plan on economic cooperation during their meeting at the US leader's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida.

Trump lashed out at Beijing throughout his presidential campaign, vowing to crack down on trade policies that he deemed hurt American workers.

But relations between the two governments have been friendlier than expected since his inauguration, and the president trumpeted the new deal Friday on twitter.

"China just agreed that the US will be allowed to sell beef, and other major products, into China once again. This is REAL news!" Trump said.

The US administration was "excited" about Washington's trade policies, said US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin as he arrived for a meeting of G7 finance ministers in Italy.

"I think we're very happy with how we're proceeding with the Chinese," he added.

US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross told reporters at the White House that the deal will help reduce the US trade deficit with China, which reached nearly \$350 billion last year.

During last year's campaign, Trump had threatened to impose trade tariffs and label Beijing a currency manipulator, neither of which he has done.

The deal will also allow Chinese companies to buy US liquefied natural gas.

The joint statement said the United States would send a delegation to China's One Belt, One Road summit -- Xi's signature project -- on Sunday and Monday.



Brazil announces end of Zika virus emergency

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Brazil has declared an end to its public health emergency over the Zika virus, but doctors have warned that victims of the disease must not be forgotten.

It was not considered a major health threat until the 2015 outbreak revealed it can cause birth defects.

Thousands of babies have been born with microcephaly, leaving them with reduced head size and symptoms including stunted development, seizures and delayed speech skills.

"The end of the emergency doesn't mean the end of surveillance or assistance" to affected families, said Adeilson Cavalcante, the secretary for surveillance at Brazil's health ministry.

"The health ministry and other organizations involved in this area will maintain a policy of fighting Zika, dengue and chikungunya."

All three diseases are carried by the Aedes

egypti mosquito, which Brazil has been battling to eradicate to stop the spread of Zika.

From January through to mid-April, the health ministry recorded 95 per cent fewer cases than during the same period last year, with the incidence of microcephaly also falling.

Brazil was at the epicentre of the public health emergency declared in 2015, which caused a global alert to be issued by the WHO as cases were found around the world, arriving in the US and Europe.

Travel warnings issued by governments including the UK caused travellers, particularly pregnant women most at risk, to cancel trips to affected countries, while revelations Zika could be sexually transmitted heightened concern.

Zika, first recorded in humans in the 1950s, is transmitted by the Aedes aegypti mosquito and spread from Uganda through Africa, Asia, the Pacific and onwards to South America.



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi (C) joins hands with Sri Lanka President Maithripala Sirisena (L) and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe (R) after addressing a public rally in the tea-growing town of Norwood, some 80kms east of Colombo, yesterday. Modi declared that his desire for a "quantum jump" in relations with Sri Lanka, as New Delhi jostles with regional rival Beijing for influence in the island nation. PHOTO: AFP

S Korea urges 'parallel' talks, sanctions

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korea's new president launched international efforts to defuse tension over North Korea's weapons development on Thursday, urging both dialogue and sanctions while also aiming to ease China's anger about a US anti-missile system.

Moon Jae-in, a liberal former human rights lawyer, was sworn in on Wednesday and said in his first speech as president he would immediately address security tensions that have raised fears of war on the Korean Peninsula.

Moon first spoke to Chinese President Xi Jinping and later to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The conversations were dominated by how to respond to North Korea's rapidly developing nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, which are in violation of UN Security Council resolutions.

Moon has taken a more conciliatory line with North Korea than his conservative predecessors and advocates engagement. He has said he would be prepared to go to Pyongyang "if the conditions are right."

Moon's advocacy of engagement with North Korea contrasts with the approach of the United States, South Korea's main ally, which is seeking to step up pressure on Pyongyang through further isolation and sanctions.

On Thursday, the US director of National Intelligence, Dan Coats, told the Senate Intelligence Committee that North Korea posed "a very significant, potentially existential threat to the United States that has to be addressed."

Regional experts have believed for months that North Korea is preparing for its sixth nuclear test. It has also been working to develop a nuclear-tipped missile capable of reaching the United States, presenting Trump with perhaps his most pressing security issue.

World first 'drone-diving'

AFP, Taurene

A Latvian tech company is claiming a world first after successfully test-flying a super-powered drone which lifted a daredevil skydiver aloft, from where he parachuted safely back down to earth.

Manufacturer Aerones performed the feat this week in a secret "drone-diving" operation in a wild, isolated central region of the Baltic state to which AFP had exclusive access.

The powerful drone measuring 3.2 square metres sports 16 rotors. Weighing 70 kilogrammes, it can lift up to 200 kilos.

The drone took the man from the top of a tower and lifted him some 330 metres (360 yards) into the air.

After testing the drone by lifting and dropping a dead weight of 90 kilogrammes, it was the turn of daredevil skydiver Ingus Augstkalns to literally take the plunge as what is believed to be the world's first "drone-diver".

Aerones CEO Janis Putrams, who was in charge of the drone controls, told AFP "You no longer need a helicopter" to skydive.



US ON CLIMATE CHANGE

We'll take 'right decision for US', not for world

AGENCIES

Arctic nations have renewed calls for the world to address climate warming, but US secretary of state Rex Tillerson says Washington will not rush to make a decision on its policies.

Tillerson spoke in Fairbanks, Alaska, at a meeting of the Arctic Council, an advisory group made up of the eight Arctic nations and indigenous groups.

The council adopted a nine-page Fairbanks Declaration 2017, which noted that the Arctic is warming at more than twice the rate of the global average.

The document noted the importance of reducing soot and methane emissions and said climate change is the most serious threat to Arctic biodiversity.

Tillerson signed the document, but in opening remarks, he cautioned that the US is reviewing several important policies, including how the Trump administration will approach climate change.

"We are appreciative that each of you has an important point of view, and you should know that we are taking the time to under-

stand your concerns," Tillerson told other representatives on the council.

"We're not going to rush to make a decision. We're going to work to make the right decision for the United States."

The Arctic Council, he said, will continue to be an important platform as the Trump administration deliberates.

The president has said little about Arctic policy, but has taken steps to put US Arctic Ocean waters back in play for petroleum drilling.

The Arctic Council's goals are sustainable development and environmental protection of the Arctic. The council does not make policy or allocate resources, and its decisions must be unanimous.

Swedish foreign minister Margot Wallstrom said she walked away from a private conversation with Tillerson hopeful of US intent in the region. "He said, well, you know, we ought to first establish our climate policy and then decide on the Paris Agreement and how it relates," she said. "And I think that sounds reasonable to do so."

Indian EC to hold EVM challenge

PTI, New Delhi

The Election Commission yesterday said it will offer political parties an opportunity to prove that electronic voting machines used in the recent assembly polls were tampered with.

A "challenge" is on the cards, Chief Election Commissioner Nasim Zaidi told a meeting of political parties here, going on record for the first time regarding the EC's proposed move to counter allegations of EVM tampering.

"Although use of VVPAT (voter verifiable paper audit trail system) with EVMs will ensure total credibility and transparency and put to rest all controversy, the Commission will, after today's meeting, hold a challenge," he said.

It will offer opportunity to political parties to demonstrate that EVM used in recent elections were tampered with or that EVMs can be tampered with even under strict technical and administrative safeguards as applicable during elections, Zaidi said.

He, however, did not give any date for the proposed challenge which he announced in his opening remarks at the meeting.

His remarks come against the backdrop of Delhi Chief Minister and AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal reportedly questioning the independence of two Election Commissioners A K Joti and O P Rawat.

He had claimed in an interview that the two ECs were close to the BJP governments in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh respectively.