



Opposition activists protest against the deaths of 43 people in clashes with the police during weeks of demonstrations against the government of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, in Caracas, on Wednesday. The United States warned on Wednesday at the United Nations that Venezuela's crisis was worsening and could escalate into a major conflict similar to Syria or South Sudan.

UN: 200,000 more could flee Mosul

REUTERS, Erbil
The United Nations yesterday said up to 200,000 more people could flee Mosul as Iraqi forces push into the last districts held by Islamic State militants.
Iraqi authorities and aid agencies are already struggling to cope with a surge in displacement since security forces opened a new front against the militants in Mosul earlier this month.
Backed by a US-led coalition, Iraqi forces have dislodged Islamic State from all but about 12 square km (5 square miles) of the city and are seeking to claim victory before the holy month of Ramadan in less than two weeks.
The militants, however, still control the Old City, where they are expected to make their last stand in the densely populated, narrow streets that are impassible for armored vehicles.
"As military operations intensify and move closer to Mosul's Old City area, we expect that up to 200,000 more people will flee," Lise Grande, the UN's Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq said in a statement, describing the figures as "alarming".
"The numbers of people who are moving are now so large, it's becoming more and more difficult to ensure civilians receive the assistance and protection they need."
Nearly 700,000 people have fled Mosul since the start of the campaign to retake the city last October, seeking refuge either with friends and relatives or in camps.
Human Rights Watch yesterday said the Iraqi army and other local security forces had forced over 300 displaced families to return to districts of Mosul that are still at risk of attack by Islamic State.
"These families should not be forcibly returned to unsafe areas and areas that lack adequate water, food, electricity, or health facilities," said Lama Fakih, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch.

PHOTO: AFP

SOUTH CHINA SEA CODE OF CONDUCT

China, Asean agree framework

AFP, Beijing
China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) took a step towards easing tensions in the South China Sea, state media reported yesterday, agreeing to a framework for a "code of conduct" to prevent incidents in the disputed waters.
The competing claims to the sea, which is believed to sit atop vast oil and gas deposits, have for decades made it one of Asia's potential military flashpoints.
The issue has come to a head in recent years as China has pursued a strategy of building artificial islands capable of supporting military facilities in the region, provoking strong reactions from other claimants as well as the US, which argues Beijing's actions threaten freedom of navigation and overflight through the strategically vital waters.
The framework, which was agreed upon during a meeting of senior officials from Asean and China in the country's southwestern province of



DISPUTED CLAIMS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA
Guizhou, sets the parameters for a final, more detailed agreement yet to come.
A draft of the text obtained by AFP describes the envisioned agreement as "a set of norms to guide the conduct of parties and promote maritime cooperation in the South China Sea," adding that it is "not an instrument to settle territorial disputes."

Negotiations for an actual code have already taken 15 years.
The 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations and China adopted a non-binding "declaration of conduct" in 2002 to discourage hostile acts. All sides agreed not to use threats or force to assert claims. But China refused to turn it into a legally binding "code of conduct", using the intervening time to build its artificial islands.
Beijing claims nearly all of the South China Sea, despite partial counter-claims from Taiwan and several Asean members including the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, and Vietnam.
Under former President Benigno Aquino, the Philippines had adopted a tough stance on China's claims, but the country's anger at the world's second largest economy has become a warm embrace following the election last year of President Rodrigo Duterte, who has declined to push China on territorial issues in hopes of being rewarded with investment and aid.

Trump willing to engage with N Korea, on conditions: Seoul

REUTERS, Seoul
US President Donald Trump told South Korea's presidential envoy that Washington was willing to try to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis through engagement, but under the right conditions, South Korea's foreign ministry said yesterday.
Trump has said "a major, major conflict" with North Korea is possible and all options are on the table but that he wanted to resolve the crisis diplomatically, possibly through the extended use of economic sanctions.
South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who took office last week, has campaigned on a more moderate approach towards the North but he has said it must change its attitude of insisting on arms development before dialogue can be possible.
Moon's envoy to Washington, South Korean media mogul Hong Seok-hyun, said Trump spoke of being willing to use engagement to ensure peace, Hong said in comments carried by television.
"The fact that Trump said he will not have

talks for the sake of talks reiterated our joint stance that we are open to dialogue but the right situation must be formed," Foreign Ministry spokesman Cho June-hyuck told a regular briefing.
The North has vowed to develop a missile mounted with a nuclear warhead that can strike the mainland United States, saying the programme is necessary to counter US aggression.
The United States has called on China to do more to rein in its neighbour. China for its part has been infuriated by the US deployment of an advanced Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system in South Korea, saying it was a threat to its security and would do nothing to ease tension with Pyongyang.
North Korea conducted its latest ballistic missile test on Sunday in defiance of UN Security Council resolutions, saying it was a test of its capability to carry a "large-size heavy nuclear warhead".
But a senior North Korean diplomat has said Pyongyang is also open to having talks with Washington under the right conditions.



Brazil leader in trouble

AFP, Brasilia
Brazil's President Michel Temer yesterday reeled from a report that he authorized payment of hush money to a jailed politician in a scandal threatening to plunge Latin America's biggest country into political meltdown.
Demands for his impeachment and new elections sprang up overnight from opposition lawmakers, while small crowds appeared in Sao Paulo and Brasilia shouting: "Temer out."
Temer, who took over after the impeachment last year of Dilma Rousseff, was reported late Wednesday by O Globo newspaper to have been secretly recorded agreeing to payments of hush money to Eduardo Cunha, the disgraced former speaker of the lower house of Congress.
According to the report the president discussed the matter with Joesley Batista, an executive from the meatpacking giant JBS, on March 7.
Batista told Temer that he was paying money to make sure that Cunha -- thought to have encyclopedic knowledge of Brazil's notoriously dirty political world -- would keep quiet while serving his sentence for taking bribes.
Globo did not say how it got the information about the recording, which it said was offered in a plea bargain between Batista and his brother Wesley with prosecutors.

FRENCH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

Macron's new centrist party stretches lead

AFP, Paris
French President Emmanuel Macron's new centrist party has stretched its lead in the polls ahead of parliamentary elections next month, new survey data showed yesterday, adding to the positive momentum for the 39-year-old leader.
A survey from the Harris Interactive group showed that 32 percent of people planned to vote for Macron's *Republique en Marche* (REM) in the first round of parliamentary elections on June 11.
That was a three-point gain from the week before and a six-point gain from 10 days ago, with the rightwing Republicans and far-right National Front down slightly over the last week at 19 percent.
Macron faces a crucial four weeks having named his first 22-member cross-party government which held its inaugural meeting

yesterday morning at the presidential palace.
Led by rightwing Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, it includes a mix of Socialist, centrist and Republicans figures as well as newcomers including an Olympic fencing champion and an environmentalist. Half are women.
Another survey published Thursday by the Elabe polling group showed that 61 percent of French people approved of the new faces, many of whom were taking their first steps into public life.
France's youngest ever president, who defeated far-right leader Marine Le Pen on May 7, is hoping to sink the traditional parties in June's parliamentary elections by building a new centrist force.
His aim is to win a majority with REM and its allies which would enable him to push through his ambitious plans to overhaul labour regulations, social security, schools and pensions.



French President Emmanuel Macron (4-L) and Prime Minister Edouard Philippe (3-L) pose for a family photo after the first cabinet meeting at the Elysee Palace in Paris, France, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

CONSERVATIVE MANIFESTO FOR GENERAL ELECTION

May to cut immigration

Urges voters to strengthen her hand in Brexit talks
AFP, Halifax
British Prime Minister Theresa May urged voters to "strengthen my hand" in Brexit talks and vowed to cut immigration as she unveiled the Conservative manifesto yesterday ahead of a general election.
May reiterated that Britain would be leaving the European single market and the customs union and warned of tricky battles over the next two years as the country negotiates its departure from the European Union.
"Every vote for me and my team will strengthen my hand in the negotiations to come," May said at the launch in Halifax in northern England, calling it "a manifesto to see us through Brexit and beyond."
An Ipsos MORI poll put the Conservatives on 49 percent -- unchanged



since April -- and Labour on 34 percent -- a jump of eight percentage points.
The latest YouGov poll put the Conservatives on 45 percent -- down four points from May 11-12 -- and Labour on 32 percent, an increase of one point.
The manifesto renews a pledge to reduce net migration to under 100,000 a year, a promise that is popular with voters. It pledges to double to £2,000 a charge on companies hiring foreign workers, and cut immigration from outside the EU.
Immigrants will be required to pay more for healthcare, with foreign workers required to pay £600 a year, or £450 for international students. The party also aims to reduce asylum claims made in Britain, while promising to help people in "the most troubled regions".

IS kills more than 50 in central Syria

AFP, Beirut
The Islamic State group killed more than 50 people in an attack on two government-held villages in central Syria's Hama province yesterday, a monitor said.
The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the attack on the villages of Aqareb and Al-Mabujeh killed at least 15 civilians and 27 pro-government fighters.
It said another 10 bodies were yet to be identified as government fighters or local residents.
IS also lost 15 fighters in the dawn attack on the two villages in the east of the province, the monitor said.
State news agency SANA said most of the civilians had been beheaded and mutilated.
IS has attacked Al-Mabujeh before with devastating effect.
In March 2015, it executed at least 37 civilians in the village, whose population includes Sunni Muslims as well as those from the Ismaili sect and the Alawite community to which President Bashar al-Assad belongs.
During the same assault the group kidnapped at least 50 civilians, half of them women.
Meanwhile, Turkey yesterday called for the removal of the US diplomat coordinating the international coalition fighting the Islamic State group, accusing him of backing Syrian Kurdish militias.
"Brett McGurk is definitely giving support to the PKK and YPG. It would be useful if this person was replaced," Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu told NTV television.

UN climate talks wrap up under threat of US exit

AFP, Bonn
UN climate negotiations conclude in Bonn yesterday with delegates putting on a brave face despite the threat of an American exit global pact to stem global warming.
Envoys from nearly 200 country signatories to the Paris Agreement kept a close eye on Washington throughout their 10-day huddle for any signal about President Donald Trump's intentions.
On the campaign trail, Trump had threatened to "cancel" the hard-fought pact in which his predecessor, Barack Obama, played an instrumental role in dragging it over the finish line in 2015.
On the second day of the Bonn talks, the White House announced the postponement of a meeting to discuss America's future in the deal, compounding the uncertainty.
A historically small US delegation at the

annual round of technical negotiations was thus also left in the dark.
"I personally have met with the head of the (US) delegation a couple of times and... he's just very open in repeating: 'Our position is under review,'" UN climate chief Patricia Espinosa said on Thursday.
But delegates insisted that work continued on outlining a nuts-and-bolts "rule book" for implementing the agreement's goals, despite the ever-present "sword of Damocles", as one put it.
Observers pointed to the importance of coming meetings of the G7 and G20, strategic country groupings of which the US is a member, in putting pressure on Trump, who has described climate change as a "hoax" perpetrated by China.
The Paris Agreement commits signatories to limiting average global warming to two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) over pre-Industrial Revolution levels.

