

NEWSIN brief

Macron visits French troops in Mali

President Emmanuel Macron arrived yesterday in conflict-torn Mali to visit French troops fighting jihadists on his first official trip outside Europe since taking power. At the end of his first week in office, Macron flew into Gao, where he will hold talks with his Malian counterpart Ibrahim Boubacar Keita.

Duterte imposes public smoking ban

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has signed an executive order that will impose a wide-ranging ban on smoking in public, reinforcing some of the toughest anti-tobacco measures in Asia. Smoking cigarettes will be banned in many public places, while selling tobacco within 100 metres of schools and other areas where children gather could attract jail terms.

Chinese jets intercept US aircraft: reports

Two Chinese fighter jets intercepted an American military plane over the East China Sea, media in the United States have reported, citing US officials. NBC News said the US aircraft was conducting a routine mission in international airspace Wednesday when it was intercepted over the East China Sea.

Sudan's Bashir to skip Trump-Muslim summit

Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court, will not join an Islamic summit in Saudi Arabia with US President Donald Trump, his office said yesterday. Bashir has evaded arrest since his indictment by the ICC for alleged genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.



An opposition supporter throws a petrol bomb while clashing with riot security forces during a rally against President Nicolas Maduro in Caracas, Venezuela, on Thursday. US President Donald Trump on Thursday called the situation in Venezuela a "disgrace to humanity". Shortly thereafter the US Treasury slapped sanctions on eight members of Venezuela's Supreme Court for supporting Maduro. PHOTO: REUTERS

TRUMP'S MIDDLE EAST VISIT

What to expect

AGENCIES
Donald Trump heads to Saudi Arabia yesterday on his first foreign trip as president to repair relations with the United States' closest Arab ally, restart the Arab-Israeli peace process and, potentially, reassert the US security role in the region.
Going to Saudi Arabia first is a highly symbolic move for President Trump who is struggling with political troubles at home, but is drawing optimism from Arab leaders despite his deep unpopularity in Arab public opinion for his anti-Muslim commentary during the 2016 US election campaign.
The president will hold a series of meetings starting today with Saudi rulers, including King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.
The Saudis want more US help confronting Iran and armed groups, as well as private investment in Saudi companies.
Trump will hold a separate session with leaders of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council to discuss the civil war in Syria and potential "de-escalation zones" to provide safe areas for civilians.
The US president will lunch with 56 invited Arab and Muslim leaders to discuss combating "extremism" and cracking down on illicit financing of armed groups, according to the White House.
Trump will not come away empty-handed. The president expects to ink a \$100bn arms sale with Saudi Arabia. Several leading American CEOs from companies will be meeting with Saudi counterparts to discuss potential investments in the kingdom's privatisation drive, Saudi Vision 2030.
After visiting Saudi Arabia, Trump will fly to Israel for meetings with Prime Minister Netanyahu and then to the Vatican in Rome, where he will seek an audience with Pope Francis before heading to Brussels for a Nato

Rivals agree to draft charter

US-led warplanes hit pro-regime convoy in Badia region

AGENCIES
Syria's warring sides entered a final day of UN-backed talks yesterday with little sign of progress towards ending the conflict and with negotiations overshadowed by swelling tensions on the ground.
In the first concrete results from talks this week, the United Nations said the warring sides had agreed to set up expert committees to discuss "constitutional issues."

in the HNC's delegation, expressing dissatisfaction with the decision-making process at the talks.
The statement, published by rebel group Faylaq al-Sham, came on the eve of the last day of talks.
A new constitution for Syria is one of four separate topics or "baskets" on the agenda at the talks, alongside governance, elections and combating

US officials told Reuters that the US military carried out the air strike on Thursday against militia supported by the Syrian government that posed a threat to US forces and US-backed Syrian fighters in the country's south.
Ja'afari said he had raised the incident with UN mediator Staffan de Mistura at peace talks in Geneva.
"We discussed the massacre that the US aggressor committed yesterday in our country. This subject was widely discussed," Ja'afari told reporters.
"The important thing is that our political ambition is higher because we want to focus on fighting terrorism represented by armed groups and the state and government terrorism happening against our country.
"This includes the American aggression, French aggression and British aggression, whether on civilian or military targets."

60 killed in Libya factional clashes

REUTERS, Benghazi

At least 60 people were killed as rival Libyan forces clashed at a southern air base on Thursday, medical and military officials said, dimming hopes that tensions in the area can be calmed.
The violence erupted after a brigade from the western city of Misrata attacked Brak Al-Shati base, which they had previously ceded to an opposing faction aligned with the eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA).
The two sides are attached to loose and shifting alliances based in the east and west of Libya that have vied for power over the past three years, deepening the divisions that surfaced with the country's 2011 uprising.
A medical source in Brak Al-Shati said 60 bodies had been brought to a hospital there, including members of militias and civilians who appeared to have been summarily killed.

Representatives of Syria's government and opposition High Negotiations Committee (HNC) are in Switzerland for the sixth round of UN-backed peace negotiations, but there has been no sign of progress.
On Thursday, UN mediator Staffan de Mistura's office declared a first tangible step: a series of separate meetings with the government and HNC delegations to discuss "legal and constitutional issues of relevance to the intra-Syrian talks".
The announcement appeared to be a watered-down version of a previous UN proposal towards a new constitution.
But late Thursday, eight rebel groups suspended their participation

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SYRIA CRISIS

Syria calls air strike on govt troops 'terrorism'

Russia says unacceptable breach of sovereignty

summit, talks with EU leaders, and then a meeting of the G-7 industrial nations in Sicily.
"The Middle East leaders, particularly in the Gulf and Jordan, were not pleased with the way Obama handled Middle East policy from their point of view and, as a consequence, just because they have a different president leading foreign policy, that is welcomed," Shibley Telhami, a professor and pollster at the University of Maryland, told Al Jazeera.
Expectations among most analysts in Washington are fairly low for the Middle East leg of Trump's trip. Some analysts, such as Danielle Pletka - vice president for foreign and defence policy studies at the conservative American Enterprise Institute - see a broad opportunity for Trump to reshape US policy in the Middle East.
Others such as Michael O'Hanlon, a former fellow in foreign policy at the left-leaning Brookings Institution, see Trump's options in the Middle East constrained by realities of regional politics and power positions on the ground in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.
"On all of these things, there is no possibility of great breakthroughs, of policy options that were avoided by Obama and are still available to us, or have somehow been created in the four months that Trump has been president," O'Hanlon told Al Jazeera. "Don't expect much to change."



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Iran decides in key polls

Huge turnout as Rouhani faces hardliner Raisi

AGENCIES
Iranians poured into polling stations yesterday to deliver their verdict on President Hassan Rouhani and his troubled efforts to rebuild ties with the world and kickstart the struggling economy.
There was a festive atmosphere in Tehran where Rouhani, a 68-year-old moderate cleric who spearheaded a 2015 nuclear deal with world powers, was mobbed by cheering supporters as he voted in a city centre mosque.
"The enthusiastic participation of Iranians in the election reinforces our national power and security," he said, as polling stations reported morning queues were far longer than usual.
Rouhani, who has framed the vote as a choice between greater civil liberties and "extremism", faces stiff competition from hard-line cleric Ebrahim Raisi, 56, who has positioned himself as a defender of the poor and called for a much tougher line with the West.
"We must all respect the vote of the peo-

ple," Raisi said as he cast his ballot in southern Tehran.
But his campaign had already started to complain about the conduct of the vote even before polls closed, saying there had been hundreds of "propaganda actions" by Rouhani supporters at voting booths, which are banned under election laws.
Raisi has targeted working-class voters hit by high unemployment and austerity measures, as well as those who worry that the values of the 1979 revolution are under threat.
Rouhani's central achievement was a deal with six powers led by the United States that eased crippling economic sanctions in exchange for curbs to Iran's nuclear programme -- efforts which he said must be protected from hardliners.
Ballot counting was expected to start at midnight and final results are expected within 24 hours of polls closing. TV reported. The elections are also for city and village councils.

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Brazil's Temer refuses to quit

AFP, Brasilia

Brazil's President Michel Temer defiantly refused to step down Thursday after being put under investigation for allegedly authorizing payment of hush money to a politician imprisoned for corruption.
"I will not resign. I repeat. I will not resign," he announced angrily, wagging his finger, in a brief televised statement to the nation.
Several thousand people demonstrated in Rio de Janeiro, shouting "Temer out!" while about 2,000 held a similar rally in the capital Brasilia. Both protests ended in minor clashes with riot police.
Around 24 hours after a report in O Globo newspaper revealed that Temer had been caught on tape allegedly agreeing to bribe former speaker of the lower house Eduardo Cunha, he already faced eight formal requests for his impeachment.
There were also signs that his ruling center-right coalition was in danger, with some allies calling for his resignation. The culture minister, Roberto Freire, resigned and there were indications that the urban affairs minister would follow.
The Supreme Court piled on the pressure by greenlighting a formal investigation into Temer.
Despite all the calls for his head, the veteran center-right politician -- who took over last year after the impeachment of leftist president Dilma Rousseff -- came out swinging.
Temer highlighted signs this week that Brazil's two-year recession is coming to an end and claimed that "optimism was returning" thanks to a program of austerity reforms that he is trying to pass in Congress.

Japan clears way for emperor's abdication

AFP, Tokyo

The Japanese government yesterday approved a one-off bill allowing ageing Emperor Akihito to step down from the Chrysanthemum Throne, in the first such abdication in two centuries.
The bill is likely to receive swift final approval in parliament, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said after Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's cabinet signed off on the legislation.
Abdication must take place within three years of the bill becoming law. Earlier this year reports suggested that 83-year-old Akihito could step down at the end of December 2018 and be replaced by Crown Prince Naruhito on January 1, 2019.
But current Japanese law has no provision for abdication, thus requiring politicians to craft legislation to make it possible.

Trump says Russia probe 'divides' the country

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump charged Thursday that the stepped-up probe into whether his campaign colluded with Russia to tilt last year's election was dividing the country.
"I respect the move, but the entire thing has been a witch hunt," the US leader said when asked about the nomination of a high-powered special counsel to investigate suspected Russian meddling.
"I think it divides the country," he told a joint press conference with Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos. "There is no collusion between certainly myself and my campaign, but I can always speak for myself, and the Russians -- zero."
US intelligence suspect that Russian President Vladimir Putin orchestrated a sweeping campaign to tilt last November's vote in the Republican's favor.
Wednesday's nomination by the Justice Department of ex-FBI chief Robert Mueller to head the federal probe into the

matter comes as the president stands accused of seeking to stall the investigation.
Those concerns were fuelled by the shock sacking of Mueller's successor as FBI director, James Comey, and by allegations that Trump previously pressured Comey over the probe.
Asked outright whether he had asked Comey -- as reported -- to drop the investigation into the Russia connections of his sacked national security advisor, Michael Flynn, Trump fired back: "No. Next question."
Trump went on to dismiss as "totally ridiculous" the notion that he himself may have committed a prosecutable -- or even impeachable -- offense in recent months, as argued by some critics who suspect him of obstructing the FBI's probe.
"We look forward to getting this whole situation behind us," he said, vowing to focus his administration's resources instead on creating jobs, strengthening the military and reforming health care.

TURKISH MEDIA CRACKDOWN

Warrants issued for four at critical daily

REUTERS, Istanbul

Turkish authorities have issued arrest warrants for the owner and three employees of an opposition newspaper, a police source and the paper said yesterday, part of a continuing media crackdown that has alarmed rights groups and Turkey's Western allies.
The four are accused of committing crimes on behalf of the network of US-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, they said. Gulen is blamed by Ankara for masterminding last July's failed coup against President Tayyip Erdogan, a charge he denies.
Turkish police carried out searches at the homes of the owner and the three employees of Sozcuk newspaper, which is fiercely critical of Erdogan and his ruling AK Party, and also detained the paper's internet editor, the police source said.
The paper's owner is currently abroad, he added.
The state-run Anadolu news agency said the charges against the four suspects included planning "the assassination of the President and physical assault" and "armed rebellion against the government of the Turkish Republic".
Metin Yilmaz, editor-in-chief of the secularist, nationalist Sozcuk, confirmed the police raids but denied the accusations, saying his paper had long criticised Gulen and his supporters.