

NEWSIN brief

Ex Panama dictator Noriega dies at 83

AFP, Panama City
Former Panamanian dictator Manuel Antonio Noriega, who was on the CIA payroll, ousted from power by US soldiers in 1989, and spent years in prison for drug trafficking and money laundering, has died. He was 83. Noriega died in Panama City's public Santo Tomas hospital where he had been recovering from surgery in early March to remove a brain tumor, and a subsequent operation to clean up cerebral bleeding.

IS shelling kills 14 civilians in Syria

AFP, Beirut
Fourteen civilians were killed late Monday when Islamic State jihadists shelled a government-controlled neighbourhood of Syria's Deir Ezzor city, a monitor said. Three children were among the dead in the regime-held Al-Joura district.

Violent storm kills 13 in Moscow area

AFP, Moscow
A violent storm swept through Moscow area Monday, leaving 13 people dead and dozens injured as freak winds toppled hundreds of trees, officials said. Sources told Russian agencies that wind speed reached 22 metres per second during the hurricane and that another storm could hit the capital overnight.

Egypt leader okays contentious NGO law

AFP, Cairo
Egypt's president has signed into law a contentious new bill to regulate non-governmental organisations, the official gazette said on Monday, triggering fears of an intensified crackdown on civil society. Sisi approved the law on May 24 after parliament approved it in November last year, the gazette said.



A Philippine Marines armoured personnel carrier speeds away as black smoke billows from burning houses after military helicopters fired rockets at militant positions in Marawi on the southern island of Mindanao yesterday, as fighting rages on the eighth day. Inset, A soldier fired at a target. PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS



Surrender or die

Philippines warns Islamist militants

AFP, Marawi
Philippine authorities yesterday warned Islamist militants occupying parts of a southern city to surrender or die, as attack helicopters pounded the gunmen's strongholds where up to 2,000 residents were feared trapped.
More than 100 people have been confirmed killed in the conflict, which began last week when gunmen waving black flags of the Islamic State (IS) group rampaged through the mostly Muslim-populated city of Marawi.
President Rodrigo Duterte declared martial law across the entire southern region of Mindanao, home to roughly 20 million people, in response to the crisis as he warned that local militant groups were uniting behind IS and becoming a major security threat.
But the militants, initially estimated by the nation's defence chief to number just 100, withstood eight days of intense air assaults and street-to-street combat, prompting the government's threats yesterday.
"We call on the remaining terrorists to surrender while there is an opportunity," military spokesman Brigadier-General Restituto Padilla said. "For the terrorists, not surrendering will mean their sure death."
Up to 2,000 residents were trapped in areas held by the militants, according to the local government, and the International Committee of the Red Cross voiced alarm they would be caught in the bombing raids or crossfire.
The militants also took a priest and up to 14 other people hostage at the start of the crisis.
The violence began when dozens of gunmen went on a rampage in response to an attempt by security forces to arrest Isnilon Hapilon, a veteran Filipino militant regarded as the local leader of IS.
Hapilon, a senior member of the Abu Sayyaf kidnap-for-ransom gang, is on the US government's list of most-wanted terrorists.

Trump-Merkel row escalates

AFP, Washington
Relations between the United States and Germany veered further toward crisis on Tuesday as President Donald Trump complained about the US trade deficit with Germany and said it must pay more for the Nato military alliance.
His censure follows a volley of criticism from Germany after the president concluded his first official tour abroad on Sunday, returning from Saudi Arabia, Israel, Brussels and then Italy for a G7 summit.
"We have a MASSIVE trade deficit with Germany, plus they pay FAR LESS than they should on Nato & military," Trump wrote on Twitter. "Very bad for US This will change."
German Chancellor Angela Merkel had made waves in Berlin on Sunday, warning that the United States and Britain may no longer be completely reliable partners.
"Transatlantic ties are of paramount importance to us... but the current situation gives more reasons for... us to take



The US president lashes out at Germany over trade, promises 'change' German chancellor again urges Europe to step up as global player

sighted" policies that have "weakened the West" and hurt European interests.
During his trip, Trump rejected pressure from G7 allies to commit to abiding by the 2015 Paris climate accord and berated 23 of Nato's 28 members -- including Germany -- for "still not paying what they should be paying" toward the funding of the alliance.
Gabriel said Monday that "anyone who accelerates climate change by weakening environmental protection, who sells more weapons in conflict zones and who does not want to politically resolve religious conflicts is putting peace in Europe at risk."
"The short-sighted policies of the American government stand against the interests of the European Union," he added, judging that "the West has become smaller, at least it has become weaker."
Germany's harsh words for Washington, traditionally a close ally, were highly unusual and came as relations have grown increasingly tenuous.

SRI LANKA FLOODS

Govt appeals for help; toll hits 193

AFP, Colombo
Sri Lanka yesterday appealed for volunteers to help with a massive clean-up after landslides and floods left at least 193 dead and tens of thousands without safe drinking water.
The government sought help to purify wells contaminated by the floods, the worst in 14 years after record rainfall in the island's southwest.
The Disaster Management Centre said nearly 600,000 people had been forced from their homes. Just over 1,300 houses were completely destroyed in landslides, while nearly 7,000 suffered structural damage, according to official figures.
Water supply minister Rauf Hakeem said 40 percent of those affected had no access to piped drinking water, and there was an urgent need to purify contaminated wells in flood-hit areas.
He said 400 people had volunteered so far for a major clean-up of wells and appealed for donations of water pumps.
Government spokesman Rajitha Senarathne said many victims had started moving back into their homes as floodwaters receded but authorities remained concerned about the spread of disease. In addition to the official death toll of 193, another 94 people were listed as missing as of yesterday afternoon.



N Korea hails successful missile test

AFP, Seoul
North Korea yesterday said its test-firing of a precision-guided ballistic missile was a success, a day after the projectile landed in waters provocatively close to Japan.
The North's leader Kim Jong-Un had supervised the launch of the "new-type precision-guided ballistic rocket", the official KCNA news agency reported.
It was the third missile test by the nuclear-armed regime in less than three weeks, defying UN sanctions warnings and US threats of possible military action.
"The ballistic rocket flew toward the east sky where the day broke and correctly hit a planned target point... after flying over the middle shooting range," KCNA said.
South Korea's military has said the Scud-type missile travelled eastward for 450 km. Japan said it believed it had fallen into its exclusive economic zone.
The missile test triggered swift condemnation from Trump who said it showed "disrespect" for neighbouring China, the North's sole major ally, which has sought to ease tensions over Pyongyang's weapons programme.
Following North Korea's test-firing earlier this month of what analysts said was its longest-range rocket yet, the UN Security Council vowed to push all countries to tighten sanctions against Pyongyang.

Baghdad blasts kill 27

Dozens wounded; forces presses Mosul assault, UN warns of danger to civilians

AFP, Baghdad
Suicide bombings claimed by the Islamic State group killed at least 27 people in Baghdad, officials said yesterday, as Iraqi forces fight to retake the last jihadist-held areas in Mosul.
In the deadliest of the two attacks, a suicide bomber detonated an explosives-rigged vehicle at a popular ice cream shop at around midnight (2100 GMT Monday), killing at least 16 people and wounding 75.
The bomber struck just days after the start of the holy Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, during which Iraqis often stay out late shopping or socialising after breaking their daily fast.
IS issued statements claiming the ice cream shop blast and a later bombing, saying both were suicide car bombings targeting members of Iraq's Shiite Muslim majority, whom the group considers heretics.
Images and footage posted on social media showed the devastating impact of the first blast, which ripped through the crowded area around Al-Faqma ice cream

shop in the Karrada district of central Baghdad, scattering rubble across the street.
One photo showed cups of ice cream scattered on the blood-stained ground.
In the second attack, a suicide bomber blew up a bomb-rigged vehicle near the country's main pension office, which is close to one of the principal bridges over the River Tigris, the Baghdad Operations Command said in a statement.
The attack killed at least 11 people and wounding at least 40, officials said.
The attacks in Baghdad come as Iraqi forces fight to retake the last IS-held areas of Mosul, a city that was the jihadist group's most emblematic stronghold.
Iraqi forces are more than seven months into a massive operation to retake the city from IS, and have already recaptured its whole east side and much of the west.
Three neighbourhoods north of Mosul's Old City -- Al-Shifaa, Al-Saha and Al-Zinjili -- are now the target of a broad assault by Iraqi soldiers, police and special forces that was launched last week.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel (R) talks with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Mesberg palace near Berlin, on Monday. Germany is India's largest trading partner in the EU, and a top source of foreign direct investment. PHOTO: AFP

Trump's comms director resigns

AGENCIES
US President Donald Trump's communications director, Mike Dubke, is set to leave after three months in his White House post, White House adviser Kellyanne Conway said yesterday.
"He has expressed his desire to leave the White House and made very clear that he would see through the president's international trip," White House adviser Kellyanne Conway said in an interview on Fox News, referring to Trump's first overseas trip to the Middle East and Europe that ended on Saturday.
Dubke resigned May 18 though he has not set a last day on the job and is leaving on good terms, according to Axios News.
His departure comes amid White House plans for a larger strategic shake-up to tackle head-on allegations involving communication between Russia and Trump's presidential campaign, including a "war room" to combat mounting questions and multiple probes, reported Reuters.
Meanwhile, US Senator John McCain said Russian President Vladimir Putin is a bigger threat to world security than the so-called Islamic State group and also admitted that Donald Trump makes him "nervous".



Failing to act on climate 'morally criminal': Modi

India PM praises Merkel's 'vision', urges climate action

AFP, Berlin
Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday said that failing to act on climate change would be "morally criminal" and voiced strong support for the "vision" of German Chancellor Angela Merkel.
His comments came as Merkel is emerging as the world leader most openly at odds with US President Donald Trump, saying days ago that Europe could no longer completely rely on traditional ally the United States and needed to find its own way.
Modi, on a Berlin visit kicked off a four-nation Europe tour, pledging India's commitment to democracy and a strong European Union, and argued that failing to act against global warming would be "a morally criminal act."
"We do not have the right to despoil the environment for future generations," he said in Hindi, at a joint press conference with Merkel.
Many of Modi's comments contrasted

sharply with positions of Trump, who has denied climate change, criticised the EU, predicted more countries will leave the EU and spoken out against free trade while pushing an "America First" policy.
He added that "the international community really needs the chancellor's vision ... in terms of the great challenges," also including terrorism.
Standing beside Modi, Merkel said "India with its 1.25 billion people is a partner ... and of highest importance" and that "to work together with such a diverse country" also offered opportunities for German businesses.
Modi's tour also leads him to Spain, France and Russia -- but not to former colonial power Britain.
Modi and Merkel led a joint cabinet meeting grouping foreign, economy, environment and other ministers in their fourth intergovernmental consultations -- a format Germany has only with a few countries, also including China, Israel and France.

Indian court halts cow slaughter ban

AFP, New Delhi
An Indian court yesterday temporarily suspended a ban imposed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government on the sale of cattle for slaughter, dealing the first legal blow to the controversial measure.
The Madras High Court in the southern state of Tamil Nadu stayed the federal ban yesterday. The government last week prohibited the sale and purchase of cows -- an animal considered sacred for Hindus -- for slaughter across India.
The sudden ruling sparked protests against what many saw as an overreach by the Hindu-right BJP. Kerala, West Bengal, Meghalaya and Puducherry have said they will resist the ban.

MEDITERRANEAN BOAT SINKING

30 migrants from Libya feared dead

REUTERS, Rome
Migrants rescued from a rubber boat that left Libya last week said as many as 30 people were trampled or drowned during their voyage as this year's Mediterranean death toll climbed to more than 1,700, the UN said yesterday.
They arrived in Pozzallo, Italy, on Monday and said their boat lost its motor and took on water hours after leaving Libya.
Some fell in the sea and drowned and others were trampled during the panic, including a small child, leaving between 20 and 30 dead. Two bodies were recovered.
Migrant arrivals by sea to Italy are up about a third this year to roughly 60,000, and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has recorded more than 1,700 dead or missing. More than 50 bodies have been brought to Italy over the past few days and dozens more are feared dead, the agency said.
A second group of survivors from a rubber boat told the UNHCR that 82 were feared dead after falling into the water when their boat deflated last Wednesday.
On the same day, 33 bodies were retrieved, including 13 women and 7 children, when a wooden boat nearly capsized and dumped some 200 into the water as rescue operations began.