NEWS IN brief

Friendly fire raids kill 11 PH troops

AFP, *Marawi*

Philippine airstrikes aimed at Islamist militants who are holding hostages as human shields killed 11 soldiers, authorities said yesterday, as they conceded hundreds of gunmen may have escaped a blockade. The friendly fire deaths bring to 171 the number of people reported killed since IS-liked militants began rampaging through the Muslim city of Marawi last week.

Indian shelling kills two Pak civilians

AFP, *Muzaffarabad*

Pakistan yesterday said two of its civilians were killed and seven injured in Indian cross-border shelling in the disputed Kashmir region. A spokesman for Pakistan's foreign ministry confirmed the deaths in a press briefing in Islamabad and accused India of carrying out unprovoked ceasefire violations.

Japan, US conduct joint naval drill

AFP, *Tokyo*

A pair of US aircraft carriers and Japanese naval vessels conducted a joint drill in waters off the Korean peninsula yesterday, in an apparent show of force days after the latest North Korean ballistic missile test. The strike groups of USS Carl Vinson and USS Ronald Reagan joined Japanese destroyers for the exercise in the Sea of Japan, where Monday's missile landed.

Palestinian woman shot after stabbing

AFP, *Jerusalem*

A Palestinian woman stabbed an Israeli soldier outside a Jewish settlement in the northern West Bank yesterday before being shot and critically wounded, the army and medics said. The attack came just days before the 50th anniversary of the Six-Day War in which Israel occupied the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including east Jerusalem.

TRUMP PULLS US OUT

Seeks for a better deal; China, EU vow to adhere to treaty

REUTERS, *Washington*

President Donald Trump yesterday announced that the United States will withdraw from the landmark Paris climate agreement, following through on a pledge he made during the presidential campaign, according to a White House document seen by Reuters.

Trump said the Paris agreement "front loads costs on American people". He said the decision fulfills his promise to "put American workers first". He also said he hopes to seek "a better deal," the document said.

Trump made the official announcement at 3pm (1900 GMT) in the White House Rose Garden.

An American withdrawal, promised by Trump during the 2016 US presidential campaign, would deepen a rift with US allies and align the United States with Syria and Nicaragua as the world's only non-participants in the 195-nation accord agreed upon in Paris in 2015.

US supporters of the pact said any pullout by Trump would represent an abdication of American leadership on a leading issue of our time and would show that the United States cannot be trusted to follow through on international commitments.

Virtually every nation voluntarily committed to steps aimed at curbing global emissions of "greenhouse" gases. These include carbon dioxide generated from burning of fossil fuels that scientists blame for a warming planet, sea level rise, droughts and more frequent violent storms.

Scientists have said a US withdrawal from the deal could speed up the effects of global climate change, leading to heat waves, floods, droughts and more frequent violent storms.

During the campaign, Trump said the accord would cost the US economy trillions of dollars with no tangible benefit. Trump has expressed doubts about climate change, at times calling it a hoax to weaken US industry.

The Republican vowed at the time to "cancel" the Paris deal within 100 days of becoming president on Jan 20, part of an effort to bolster US oil and coal industries.

Hours ahead of his announcement, the world's biggest carbon emitter China pledged to stay the course on implementing the 2015 accord.

Premier Li Keqiang said it was in China's own interest to do so, and urged other countries to do likewise.

China and the US are responsible for some 40 percent of the world's emissions and experts have warned that it is vital for both to remain in the Paris agreement if it is to have any chance of succeeding.

The leader of Asia's other behemoth, Indian PM Narendra Modi, had said Tuesday, also in Berlin, that failing to act on climate change would be "morally criminal".

Last year was the warmest since records began in the 19th century, as global average temperatures continued a rise dating back decades that leading climate scientists attribute to man-made greenhouse gas emissions that trap heat in the atmosphere.

A US withdrawal would come less than 18 months after the historic 196-nation pact was adopted in the French capital, the fruit of a hard-fought agreement between Beijing and Washington under Barack Obama's leadership.

The Paris agreement commits signatories to vow to step up efforts to keep the worldwide rise in temperatures "well below" two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) from pre-industrial times and to "pursue efforts" to hold the increase under 1.5 degrees Celsius.

PARIS CLIMATE ACCORD

CLIMATE TALKS AND US ROLE

Donald Trump, who withdrew US from the Paris Agreement, is not the first American president to test international partners' patience by challenging a climate deal that took years to negotiate. Here is a brief history of America's chequered involvement in the two-decade-old process that yielded the 2015 Paris accord endorsed by 196 nations -- the first universal pact on curbing global warming.

KYOTO: Right from the start, when the UN climate convention was signed in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the United States resisted any notion of greenhouse gas limits being imposed on countries "top-down". Instead, Washington has consistently insisted on national sovereignty when it comes to determining which gases to reduce, how, by how much, and by when. In 1997, the US joined most of the rest of the world in agreeing to the Kyoto Protocol, which listed binding emissions-curbing targets only for rich nations -- those most responsible for carbon pollution blamed for global warming. The US agreed to the deal after extracting several concessions from negotiating partners. Bill Clinton's vice president Al Gore signed the treaty on America's behalf in 1998, but the Democrat administration could never muster the two-thirds support required from the Senate to officially ratify it. And when Clinton was replaced by oilman George W. Bush in 2001, the writing was on the wall. Bush -- like his father before him -- objected to a pact he said gave developing countries free rein to burn fossil fuels and grow their economies while rich nations' hands were tied by emissions restrictions. The pact entered into force without America in 2005 after Russia signed on, tipping the agreement over the legal threshold of 55 ratifiers required. Canada later withdrew from the deal, and New Zealand, Japan and Russia failed to take on a second round of carbon-cutting pledges.

COPENHAGEN: In 2009 the world's nations gathered with the task of replacing the Kyoto Protocol with a new pact requiring action from all countries -- including China and India, the world's first- and third-biggest carbon polluters, and second-placed US. But talks in the Danish capital ended in near-failure amid bickering between rich and poor countries over how to share responsibility for cuts. The US, with backing from others, insisted that any deal not be termed a "treaty" that would require Senate ratification, or contain emissions limits that are binding under international law. In the end, the meeting yielded a non-formal "accord", which enshrined the target of limiting average global warming to two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) over pre-industrial levels, but listed no emissions targets or cutoff dates.

PARIS: The next deadline, set at talks in Durban in 2011, was for a global deal to be finalised by 2015. US president Barack Obama led with China's Xi Jinping to rally 195 countries around the common goal. But with a Republican-dominated Senate back home, he could do only so much. The end product was a compromise: a legally-binding core agreement that sets out the overarching goals and objectives of limiting warming. Countries' intended emissions cuts to this end are listed in a separate non-legally binding register, and are termed "contributions" rather than "commitments". This allowed Obama to ratify the agreement without Senate approval. But it also means there will be no repercussions apart from a diplomatic cold shoulder for Washington withdrawing from the hard-fought pact and breaking its pledge to cut emissions by 26-28 percent over 2005 levels by 2025.

SOURCE: AFP

CYBER ATTACKS IN US, GERMANY

Putin points finger at patriotic Russians

REUTERS, *St Petersburg*

President Vladimir Putin said yesterday that patriotic Russian hackers may have staged cyber attacks against countries that had strained relations with Moscow on their own initiative, but said the Russian state had never been involved in such hacking.

Putin, speaking to international media at an economic forum in St Petersburg, was answering a question about allegations Moscow might try to interfere in this year's German elections.

Moscow's attitude towards cyber crime is under intense scrutiny after US intelligence officials alleged that Russian hackers had tried to help Republican Donald Trump win the White House, something Russia has flatly denied.

"If they (hackers) are patriotically-minded, they start to make their own contribution to what they believe is the good fight against those who speak badly about Russia. Is that possible? Theoretically it is possible," said Putin.

Likening hackers to free-spirited artists acting according to their moods, he said cyber attacks could be made to look like they had come from Russia when they had not.

Putin also said he was personally convinced that hackers could not materially alter election campaigns in Europe, America or elsewhere.

Trump admin approves tougher visa vetting

REUTERS, *Washington*

The Trump administration has rolled out a new questionnaire for US visa applicants worldwide that asks for social media handles for the last five years and biographical information going back 15 years.

The new questions, part of an effort to tighten vetting of would-be visitors to US, was approved on May 23 by the Office of Management and Budget despite criticism from a range of education officials and academic groups during a public comment period.

> New questionnaire seeks applicants' social media info for last 5 yrs
>
> Applicants have to submit biographical info going back 15 yrs

Critics argued that the new questions would be overly burdensome, lead to long delays in processing and discourage international students and scientists from coming to the United States.

Under the new procedures, consular officials can request all prior passport numbers, five years' worth of social media handles, email addresses and phone numbers and 15 years of biographical information including addresses, employment and travel history.

Officials will request the additional information when they determine "that such information is required to confirm identity or conduct more rigorous national security vetting," a State Department official said on Wednesday.

The State Department said earlier the tighter vetting would apply to visa applicants "who have been determined to warrant additional scrutiny in connection with terrorism or other national security-related visa ineligibilities."

President Donald Trump has vowed to increase national security and border protections, proposing to give more money to the military and make Mexico pay to build a wall along the southern US border.

He has tried to implement a temporary travel ban on people from six Muslim-majority nations that a US appeals court refused to reinstate, calling it discriminatory.

PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP

Displaced Iraqis walk in ruins in western Mosul's Zanjili neighbourhood, yesterday. Inset, A displaced family reacts after reaching government-held area after fleeing the conflict zone. According to military sources more than 140 civilians have been killed by IS militants in less than a week while trying to flee western Mosul.

44 migrants die of 'thirst' in Niger

AFP, *Niamey*

At least 44 migrants, including women and babies, were found dead after their vehicle broke down in the desert of northern Niger while on the way to Libya, local officials said yesterday.

"The number of migrants who died in the desert is 44 for now," said Rhissa Feltou, the mayor of Agadez, a remote town on the edge of the Sahara that has become the smuggling capital of Africa.

Last year, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) recorded 335,000 migrants heading northwards out of Niger.

The Red Cross, which said "at least 44 migrants have died", has dispatched a team to the site "to gather information" on the circumstances.

A security source who asked not to be named said "the sub-Saharan migrants, including babies and women, died of thirst because their vehicle broke down".

In early May, eight migrants from Niger, five of them children, were found dead in the desert while on their way to Algeria.

Also in May, soldiers on patrol in northern Niger rescued around 40 migrants from various west African countries who had been abandoned in the desert by people-smugglers they had paid to get to Libya.

'IS lonewolf' attacks casino in Manila

No casualties

AFP, *Manila*

Gunfire was heard at a hotel and a casino resort in the Philippine capital early today, and the Islamic State group (IS) quickly claimed responsibility.

People ran screaming out of Resorts World Manila, which is across a road from one of the main terminals of the Philippines' international airport, according to television footage.

"Resorts World Manila is currently on lockdown following reports of gunfire from unidentified men," the company said on its Twitter account.

"The company is working closely with the Philippine National Police to ensure that all guests and employees are safe."

IS said "lonewolf soldiers" from its group carried out the attack, according to the SITE Intelligence Group that monitors terrorist organisations.

There were no immediate reports of fatalities or injuries.

Police surrounded the complex following the reports of the gunfire, which occurred just after midnight.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte imposed martial law last week across the southern region of Mindanao to crush what he said was a rising threat of Islamic State there.

He declared martial law shortly after militants went on a rampage through the southern city of Marawi, which is about 800 kilometres south of Manila. Security forces are still battling the militants in Marawi, and the clashes there have left at least 171 people dead.

Duterte said last week he may need to declare martial law across the rest of the country if the terrorism threat spread.

PROMISED US EMBASSY MOVE TO JERUSALEM

Trump avoids confrontation

AFP, *Washington*

President Donald Trump postponed moving the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem yesterday, avoiding what would be a provocative decision as he tries to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

On the campaign trail Trump repeatedly pledged that he would shift the embassy from Tel Aviv to the city claimed as capital by both Israel and its Palestinian neighbors, and he appointed a US ambassador who shares this goal.

But since coming to office in January, Trump has met both Israeli and Palestinian leaders in Washington and in a visit to the region last week and has committed himself to seeking a long-elusive final peace deal between them.

Congress passed a law in 1995 making it US policy to move the embassy to Jerusalem, symbolically endorsing Israel's claim on the city as its capital.

But the law contained a clause that has allowed each president since to issue and renew a six-month waiver on carrying out the move.

On Thursday, the waiver came up for renewal for the first time on Trump's watch, and he followed the example of Bill Clinton, George W Bush and Barack Obama before him in instructing his secretary of state to hold off on the move.

"No one should consider this step to be in any way a retreat from the president's strong support for Israel and for the United States-Israel alliance," the White House said, in a written statement.

"President Trump made this decision to maximize the chances of successfully negotiating a deal between Israel and the Palestinians, fulfilling his solemn obligation to defend America's national security interests," it explained.

"But, as he has repeatedly stated his intention to move the embassy, the question is not if that move happens, but only when."

A US official, speaking on condition of anonymity stressed to AFP that "it's a question of when, not if," and added that "he doesn't think the timing is right, right now."

"In timing such a move he will seek to maximize the chances of successfully negotiating a deal between Israel and the Palestinians."

Trump's closest advisors are reported to be divided about the wisdom of quickly making good on the pledge, a move that would delight many Israelis but dismay Palestinians and raise concerns among Israel's Arab neighbors.

Jerusalem was divided between Israeli rule in the west and Jordanian in the east until 1967, when Israel was attacked by allied Arab armies.

Israel fought back and its victory left it in control of East Jerusalem and the wider West Bank beyond.

Palestinians want East Jerusalem -- including the Old City and its sites holy to Muslims, Jews and Christians -- to become the capital of an eventual state.

Indo-Russia ties won't be diluted for Pakistan

Says Putin after meeting Modi, avoids Kashmir issue

PTI, *St Petersburg*

President Vladimir Putin asserted yesterday that Russia's "trust-based" relations with India - which he described as one of its "closest friends" - will not be diluted by Moscow's growing ties with Pakistan and other countries.

During an interaction with PTI, Putin said that India is the only country with which Russia has "deep cooperation" in delicate areas such as missiles.

The Russian president, however, sidestepped a question on Kashmir, and said that "it is up to you" to assess whether Pakistan is fuelling terrorism in the Indian state.

"But no matter where the threat comes from, it is unacceptable and we will always support India in its fight against terrorism," he added.

The Russian leader said that it is ridiculous that Delhi should be restricted in maintaining contacts with other partnering countries just because Russia has a "special relationship" with India.

"Both Russia and India share mutual interests. We are respectful towards all Indian interests," he said, citing the deep defence relations between the two countries.

"I don't think we should push figures here in our military cooperation because it has an unprecedented level in its volume and quality. (But) there is no other country in the world that we have such deep cooperation (with) in delicate areas such as missiles, and we benefit with cooperation with India. And this results from our trust-based relations with India," he said.