

MIGRANT TRAGEDY OFF LIBYA COAST 10 die, 100 missing

At least ten migrants have died after their Europe-bound boats sank off Libya's coast and some 100 people are missing, coastguard officials and aid groups said Saturday. Eight bodies were found on an inflatable craft that can carry up to 120 passengers, said Colonel Fathi al-Rayani, head of the coastguard in Garabulli, 60 kilometres (40 miles) east of Tripoli. He estimated that "at least 100" migrants were missing. The boat was spotted deflated off Garabulli, and the coastguard found the bodies inside, said an AFP reporter who accompanied them. The Italian coastguard meanwhile said it had coordinated the rescue of 1,650 migrants off the Libyan coast, with aid groups involved in the operations saying two dead bodies were found on a dinghy. Conflict-ravaged Libya has long been a stepping stone for migrants seeking a better life in Europe. The UN refugee agency has said around 61,250 migrants have reached Italy since the start of the year after crossing the Mediterranean, while nearly 1,800 more are dead or missing. The Italian coastguard has said that more than 900 migrants were rescued off Libya on Thursday and Friday. Libyan navy spokesman General Ayoub Qassem meanwhile told AFP that coastguards patrolling off Zawiya, west of Tripoli, on Friday intercepted five inflatables and two wooden boats with more than 570 migrants on board. He said the boats were being escorted by five Libyans on a jet ski and two outboards, and that three of the men were apprehended. "The migrants are Africans, Bangladeshi, Egyptians, Moroccans... and were delivered to the detention centre in Zawiya," Qassem said.



An Iraqi military tank rolls along a road during fighting with Islamic State militants in al-Zanji district in western Mosul, Iraq, yesterday. Iraq's paramilitary Hashed al-Shaabi forces said Saturday that they had retaken all areas west of Mosul from the Islamic State group except the town of Tal Afar.

Gaddafi's son Seif 'set free' in Libya

Seif al-Islam, the second son and heir apparent of the late deposed Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, is said to have been freed in Libya after more than five years in captivity. The Abu Bakr al-Sadiq Brigade, a militia that controls the town of Zintan in western Libya, said Seif al-Islam was freed late on Friday, under an amnesty law promulgated by the parliament based in the country's east during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. "He is now free and has left the city of Zintan," the group said in a statement on its Facebook page. There was no independent confirmation of Seif al-Islam's release, which could spark further instability in a country already wracked by divisions and violence. Seif al-Islam had been held in Zintan since November 2011, just days

FIRST ROUND OF PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN FRANCE Macron heads for majority

French President Emmanuel Macron's party topped the first round of voting in yesterday's parliamentary elections, putting him on course for an overwhelming majority to implement his programme of ambitious reforms. Estimates based on partial results showed Macron's year-old *Republic en Marche* (Republic on the Move, REM) and its ally *MoDem* on 32.2-32.9 percent, ahead of the right-wing Republicans on 20.9-21.5 percent. The far-right National Front (FN) was seen third with 13.1-14 percent. Seat projections showed Macron's camp going on to win between 390 and 445 seats in the 577-member National Assembly after next Sunday's second round -- continuing his centrist revolution which has left France's traditional parties in tatters. Both the Republicans -- who had hoped to upstage Macron in the parliamentary election -- and the Socialists of Macron's predecessor Francois Hollande appeared set for steep losses. Marine Le Pen's FN party was left disappointed as she struggled to rebound from her bruising defeat by Macron in the presidential run-off, with the party's result largely unchanged from the first round of the 2012 vote. Turnout was markedly down on Sunday compared with the last parliamentary election, reflecting a degree of fatal-



ism among Macron's opponents in the face of his advance as well as a degree of election fatigue, experts said. Around 49 percent of the electorate cast a ballot -- one of the lowest levels in such an election in decades. The results showed Macron continuing to impress the French, a month after being elected France's youngest-ever president on May 7. Since then he has won praise for appointing a balanced cabinet that straddles the left-right divide and taking a leading role in Europe's fight-back against US President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from a global climate accord. If the seat projections are confirmed next week he will have a strong mandate to push through the ambitious labour, economic and social reforms he promised on the campaign trail. Few MPs are expected to be elected outright on Sunday. If no candidate wins over 50 percent, the two top-placed contenders go into the second round -- along with any other candidate who gamers at least 12.5 percent of registered voters. More than 50,000 police were on patrol during the vote, with France still jittery after a wave of jihadist attacks across Europe. In the latest incident, a 40-year-old self-radicalised Algerian was shot and wounded after he attacked a policeman with a hammer outside Paris's Notre Dame cathedral on Tuesday.

Qatar says Gulf citizens can stay despite crisis

Iran sends vegetables to Doha amid food shortage fears
Qatar yesterday moved to avoid an escalation of its feud with Gulf neighbours by telling their citizens they are welcome to stay, while boasting of "business as usual" for vital gas exports. Iran also announced it had sent tonnes of vegetables to Qatar, which has seen food imports threatened after its neighbours cut air, sea and land links with the country. Nearly a week after Saudi Arabia and several of its allies severed ties with Qatar in an unprecedented Gulf diplomatic crisis, there were no signs of the bitter dispute being resolved. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and others accused Qatar of supporting extremist groups, an assertion since backed by US President Donald Trump. The crisis has raised deep concerns of instability in the region and yesterday Kuwait's foreign minister said his country would continue efforts to mediate a solution to the crisis. Qatar strongly rejects the allegations and has said it is open to talks on ending the dispute, which also saw the three Gulf states order all Qatari citizens out of their countries within 14 days. Qatar said late on Saturday it would not retaliate with such measures of its own. The decision will come as a relief to the more than 11,000 people from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain living in Qatar. On Thursday, Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani said his country could last "forever" despite the sanctions. Qatar's rivals have also accused Doha of being too close to the Sunni Arab Gulf states' arch-rival -- Shia-dominated Iran -- in claims that Doha has also denied. Moscow on Saturday joined other nations in calling for a dialogue, after US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson urged Saudi Arabia and its allies to ease their "blockade" of Qatar. Washington has sent mixed signals on the crisis, despite Qatar's position as a key ally and host to the largest US airbase in the region. While Tillerson and others have called for an easing of tensions, Trump on Friday said Qatar had "historically been a funder of terrorism at a very high level".



after his father was killed in a Nato-backed uprising against his decades-long rule. The Zintan militia, which opposes Libya's UN-backed government of National Accord (GNA) based in the capital, had refused to hand him over to authorities despite several legal cases. Among them was an arrest warrant for Seif al-Islam issued by the International Criminal Court in The Hague for alleged crimes against humanity related to the bloody repression of the uprising. Previous reports of Seif al-Islam's release have proven false. It was unclear why the Zintan group may have decided to release Seif al-Islam now or what he may be planning.

NEWS IN brief

Iran arrests 50 after Tehran IS attacks
REUTERS, London
Iran has arrested almost 50 people in connection with twin attacks on Tehran that killed 17 people last week, officials said, as security forces stepped up efforts to crack down on suspected militants. Islamic State claimed responsibility for the suicide bombings and gun attacks on parliament and the mausoleum of the Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, on Wednesday. Iran also said its security forces killed the mastermind of the attacks on Saturday.

Britain denies that Trump visit delayed
REUTERS, London
Prime Minister Theresa May's office yesterday said there had been no change to plans for US President Donald Trump's to come to Britain on a state visit, after the Guardian newspaper reported the trip had been postponed. The paper, citing an unnamed adviser at May's Downing Street office, reported Trump had told May by telephone in recent weeks that he did not want to come if there were likely to be large-scale protests.

3 US soldiers killed in 'insider attack'
AFP, Jalalabad
Three US troops were killed and another wounded during a joint operation in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province Saturday, the Pentagon said, in the latest so-called insider attack on international forces. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the deaths in the volatile district of Achin.



A demonstrator throws a petrol bomb while clashing with riot security forces during a rally against Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro in Caracas, on Friday. Clashes at near daily protests by demonstrators calling for Maduro to quit have left 66 people dead since April 1, prosecutors say.

Trump accuses Comey of cowardice over 'leaks'

US President Donald Trump yesterday accused James Comey of cowardice by leaking accounts of his meetings with the president, days after the ex-FBI director testified that Trump sought to derail the Russian probe. "I believe the James Comey leaks will be far more prevalent than anyone ever thought possible," Trump wrote in an early morning tweet. "Totally illegal? Very 'cowardly!'" Sacked FBI chief Comey delivered his bombshell allegations at a Senate hearing Thursday, saying in his sworn testimony that he had asked a "friend" identified as a Columbia University law professor to release a memo of his conversations with the president to the press. Comey said he had hoped releasing the information via the media would prompt the appointment of a special counsel to handle the Russia probe, a ploy that ultimately proved successful.



He branded the president a liar and said Trump urged him to abandon the investigation into the former national security adviser Michael Flynn, an allegation Trump has denied. On Friday, Trump's former campaign manager Corey Lewandowski criticized Comey as not "man enough" for having leaked the memo via his friend rather than doing it himself. "He gave his notes to Columbia law professor because he wasn't man enough to give the notes directly to the media when he wanted them out to the media," Lewandowski told NBC's morning show "Today." Though Trump has lambasted Comey as a "leaker," he also claimed "total and complete vindication" following the ex-FBI chief's testimony, focusing on Comey's confirmation that Trump was not personally being probed.

G7 CLIMATE SUMMIT Rift remains

The United States' partners in the G7 club of wealthy democracies yesterday vowed to pursue efforts to curb climate change despite a rift caused by the United States' withdrawal from the Paris accord. "G7 countries have crucial roles and responsibilities to our own public opinion, to developing countries and to the planet," Italy's Environment Minister Gian Luca Galletti said at the start of a two-day meeting of G7 environmental chiefs. "The international community awaits our message." Scott Pruitt, a friend of the oil industry who is sceptical about man-made climate change and was Trump's controversial choice to head the US Environmental Protection Agency, attended the meeting but was due to fly home after the first day. With Germany's environment minister, Barbara Hendricks, also departing early and France's Nicolas Hulot not arriving until Monday because of legislative elections, there appeared little prospect of substantial dialogue on an issue which has caused significant tensions between Donald Trump's administration and key US allies. Adding to the frustration of the Italian hosts, Britain was represented by a junior minister as efforts to form a new government in London continued. Trump announced at the start of this month that the US would not abide by the 2015 Paris agreement and would seek to renegotiate terms he denounced as unfairly damaging to the American economy and overly generous to India and China.

Forces seize second district

US-backed Syrian fighters yesterday seized a second district of Raqa and launched a renewed assault on a base north of the city, as they pursued an offensive against the Islamic State group. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) broke into Raqa earlier this week after announcing the start of a final assault on the IS-held city. Yesterday, the Arab-Kurdish alliance said its fighters had "liberated the neighbourhood of Al-Romaniya on the western front of Raqa, after two days of continued clashes". It was the first time the SDF was reported to have taken a western district of Raqa, after seizing control of the Al-Meshleb district in the east. The western approach to the city was littered with mangled motorcycles and unexploded mortar rounds fired by IS, AFP's correspondent there said. Inside the city, SDF commanders took up positions on the rooftops of modest one-storey homes that were eerily empty of civilians. Artillery, sniper fire and air strikes rang out throughout yesterday, and pillars of thick

black smoke snaked up from the city skyline. Bombardment had taken chunks out of the white dome of a neighbourhood mosque, and the notorious black IS flag hung limply from a roof. After its capture by IS in 2014, Raqa city emerged as a key hub for IS's operations in Syria, neighbouring Iraq, and beyond. The SDF -- an Arab-Kurdish alliance formed in 2015 -- spent seven months tightening the noose on Raqa city from the north, east, and west. While it has advanced steadily against IS inside east and west Raqa, it has made less progress on the northern front, where jihadists are using a military base and adjacent sugar factory to defend the approach into the city. An estimated 300,000 civilians were believed to have been living under IS rule in Raqa, including 80,000 displaced from other parts of Syria. Thousands have fled in recent months, and the UN humanitarian office estimates about 160,000 people remain in the city. They have no electricity and were facing severe water shortages, according to the activist collective known as Raqa is Being Slaughtered Silently.



FACEBOOK BLASPHEMY CASE Pakistani man gets death sentence

A Pakistani man has been sentenced to death for committing blasphemy on Facebook, lawyers said Saturday, the first conviction on charges arising from social media. Judge Shabbir Ahmad Awan handed down the verdict in Bahawalpur, around 600 kilometres south of capital Islamabad, finding Taimoor Raza guilty of insulting the prophet Mohammed, prosecutor Shafiq Qureshi told AFP. Raza had a Facebook argument about Islam with someone who turned out to be a counter-terrorism department official, defence lawyer Rana Fida Hussain told AFP. The official brought charges against Raza based on the comments made on the social networking site. Hussain said his client was innocent and that he would appeal the conviction. Blasphemy is a sensitive charge in Pakistan, where even unproven allegations can trigger mob lynchings and violence. Millions of Pakistanis have been receiving text messages from the government warning them against sharing "blasphemous" content online, a move rights activists said would encourage more vigilante attacks.