

NEWS IN brief

US breaks with G7 partners on climate

REUTERS, Bologna
The United States refused to sign up to the Group of Seven major industrialised economies' statement on climate change and plans to fund sustainable development, a statement from the group's environment ministers said yesterday. Earlier this month, Trump announced he would withdraw from the Paris climate change accord.

Indian state writes off loans to farmers

AFP, Mumbai
A western Indian state has agreed to write off loans to farmers estimated to be worth nearly \$5 billion after 11 days of protests that have strangled supplies to Mumbai. Maharashtra state's chief minister Devendra Fadnavis said his government would pay off the loans, bowing to the demands of thousands of farmers.

'Rohingya probe would increase tensions'

REUTERS, Stockholm
A United Nations probe into alleged human rights abuses by Myanmar's military against the minority Rohingya people last year would inflame ethnic tensions, the country's leader Aung San Suu Kyi said yesterday. Suu Kyi also said she would only accept recommendations from a separate advisory commission led by former UN chief Kofi Annan.

Obesity affects one in 10 worldwide: study

AFP, Washington
More than one in 10 people worldwide are now obese, with weight-related health problems claiming millions of lives every year, according to a major new global study released yesterday. Conducted in 195 countries over a 35-year period, the study published in the New England Journal of Medicine and presented at a



Members of the LGBT community and their supporters participate in a Resist March at the 47th annual LA Pride Festival in Hollywood, California on Sunday. Inspired by the huge women's marches that took place around the world following the inauguration of President Trump, LA Pride has replaced its decades-old parade with a protest march. PHOTO: REUTERS

NON-BINDING REFERENDUM Puerto Ricans back full US statehood

AFP, San Juan
Puerto Ricans voted overwhelmingly Sunday to become a US state in a non-binding referendum -- but the result was marred by an extremely low turnout after opposition parties called for a boycott of the poll. With virtually all results in, 97.2 percent backed statehood, 1.5 percent supported independence and 1.3 percent opted for no change, but just 23 percent of the 2.2 million-strong electorate cast a ballot. Despite the low turnout, Governor Ricardo Rossello vowed to push for the territory to become the 51st US state after casting his vote for statehood. "We will go before international forums to defend the argument of the importance of Puerto Rico being the first Hispanic state in the United States," Rossello said. An unincorporated US territory under American control since 1898, Puerto Rico lacks sovereign powers -- an urgent problem as it grapples with public debt of \$73 billion and its economy stumbles. Rossello, who heads the pro-statehood New Progressive Party, said his government would fight "in Washington and throughout the world" for the Caribbean island territory to be accepted as the 51st US state, and for Puerto Ricans to gain "all the same opportunities" as other American citizens. The US Congress would need to approve any upgrade to statehood. The opposition Popular Democratic Party had said "statehood will win by a landslide" because of the boycott by opposition parties, which supported the status quo as a US territory.

Trump faces new lawsuit

Two US Attorneys General to sue over foreign payments, benefits to his business empire

AFP, Washington
Officials in Maryland and the US capital Washington will sue President Donald Trump for accepting payments and benefits from foreign governments through his business empire, news reports said Sunday night. The suit set to be unveiled yesterday centers on the so-called emoluments clause, which bans US officials from taking gifts or other benefits from foreign governments. An NGO that centers on ethics issues filed a similar suit in January. But this is the first one presented by government entities. The announced lawsuit adds to Trump's woes as he grapples with congressional and a special prosecutor's probes into his campaign's alleged ties with Russia, which US intelligence agencies say meddled aggressively in the 2016 election to help Trump win. Since taking power in January, Trump has turned day to day control over his real estate empire and other assets to his adult sons, but not sold them off as many in America said he should to avoid conflicts of interest.

The lawsuit was set to be filed yesterday by the attorneys general of Maryland and Washington in the US District Court for the District of Maryland, the Washington Post reported. Maryland Attorney General Brian Frosh said the case is about Trump's failure to separate his personal interests from his presidential duties. Frosh told the Post that the emoluments clause mandates that "the president put the country first and not his own personal interest first." A key case in the dispute is a hotel that Trump opened last year by leasing a large, stately building that used to be a central post office, just down the road from the White House. Aside from the issue of the foreign payments ban, Maryland and Washington complain that the presence of a Trump hotel hurts competing hotels in their jurisdictions. The Post cited examples of foreign government showing preference for that hotel over others, at what neighboring Maryland and Washington say is their expense.



Thousands protest in Russia

Opposition leader Navalny, supporters detained as Putin foe uses graft allegations to mobilise support for his presidential bid

AFP, Moscow
Authorities detained Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny and hundreds of his supporters yesterday, as they mounted demonstrations across the nation against government corruption. The protests are the second mass action since March 26 called by Navalny, who has announced his intention to run for president next year and has drawn a new generation to the streets through a relentless online campaign. Over 200 were detained in Moscow and Saint Petersburg an hour into the protest, according to an NGO that tracks arrests, with Navalny himself picked up by police in his building as he was headed to the event. On central Moscow's Tverskaya Street, a helicopter hovered overhead as riot police lined up and pushed back against the crowd, grabbing people and leading them to police vans as others shouted "Shame!", "Putin is a thief!" and "Freedom to Navalny!". The action also drew thousands to the streets in many other cities across Russia, with authorities sanctioning some gatherings and banning others. Some reports said authorities threatened university students with expulsion if they attended. The 41-year-old Navalny's anti-corruption videos have needled the country's most powerful and drawn to the streets crowds unseen since a wave of protests against President Vladimir Putin's reelection to a third term in 2012. The recent rallies were galvanised by a film released by



Russian riot police detain a man during an anti-graft protest in Moscow yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Navalny in early March which accused Russia's Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev of controlling vast personal wealth through a shadowy network of foundations, which has since been viewed over 22 million times. "Putin has been in power for 17 years and is not planning to leave. He has usurped all power," said protester Alexander Tyurin, 41. "Corruption is a system. I work in a construction company and everything is mired in corruption." Another protester Yevgeny, 19, said he was expelled from university after participating in a previous rally. "Our government shouts that enemies are everywhere and is becoming closed in on itself," he said. Navalny would be charged with administrative offences of resisting arrest and a second violation of demonstration organisation rules, Moscow police said.

Blasts rock Marawi city

500-1,000 civilians still trapped, being held hostage; China supports US-backed fight against Islamists

AGENCIES
Bomb blasts rocked Marawi City in the southern Philippines yesterday as the national flag was raised to mark independence day, almost three weeks after hundreds of Islamist militants overran the town and hunkered down with civilians as human shields. Rescue workers, soldiers and firemen sang the national anthem and listened to speeches as three OV-10 attack aircraft darted through the cloudy sky, taking it in turns to drop bombs on areas where fighters are still holed up. "To our Muslim brothers there, we want to tell them to stop their meaningless fight because we are all Muslims," Vice Provincial Governor Mamintal Adiong Jr. told the gathering. Almost the entire population of about 200,000 fled from the lakeside town on the Philippines' southernmost island of Mindanao, but beyond the checkpoints fencing it off there are still some 500-1,000 civilians trapped or being held hostage.

As of Saturday the number of security forces killed in the battle for Marawi stood at 58. The death toll for civilians was 20 and more than 100 had been killed overall, reported Reuters. Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte said on Sunday he had not expected the battle for Marawi to be as serious as it has turned out, adding it had now emerged "that Baghdadi himself, the leader of the ISIS, has specifically ordered terroristic activities here in the Philippines". China supports the Philippine government's "anti-terrorism" operations against Islamist militants, the Chinese foreign ministry said yesterday after US special forces provided support to Filipino troops, reported AFP. "Terrorism is the common enemy of mankind. China understands and firmly supports (Philippine President Rodrigo) Duterte's leadership and its government in fighting terrorism," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang told a regular press briefing.

IS IN PHILIPPINES



Indian police try to detain Kashmiri government employees as they shout anti-government slogans during a protest in Srinagar yesterday. Dozens of government employees were detained as they tried to stage a protest demanding the regularisation of contractual employment status. PHOTO: AFP

FOOD SHORTAGE FEARS Qatar opens channels with Oman ports

AFP, Doha
Qatar yesterday announced it had launched direct shipping services to ports in Oman, a move that bypasses a Gulf "blockade" on a country largely dependent on food imports. Qatar's port authority announced the launch of two new services from Hamad Port to Oman's Sohar and Salalah ports, circumventing the need for cargo to stop in the neighbouring United Arab Emirates. The UAE had for decades served as a central stopping point in cargo shipments. Qatar's Hamad Port is 420 nautical miles from Sohar Port and 1,131 nautical miles from Salalah. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain are among several countries which last week announced the suspension of all ties to Qatar over what they say is the state's support for extremist groups and its political proximity to Shia Iran. Qatar denies the allegations. The emirate is the world's largest producer and exporter of liquefied natural gas, but the wealthy emirate also relies heavily on imports for food staples and raw materials. Analysts estimate that at least 40 percent of all of Qatar's food supplies are transported across its land border with Saudi Arabia. Riyadh last week closed the Qatari peninsula's only land border, threatening the import of both fresh food and raw materials needed to complete a \$200-billion infrastructure project for the controversial 2022 football World Cup. Saudi Arabia's arch-rival Iran on Sunday announced it had sent five planes carrying produce to Qatar. Three ships carrying 350 tonnes of food are also set to leave Iran for the emirate.

Britons rush to self-defence classes

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
Self-defence classes have reportedly seen a surge in applications after Britain was hit with three terrorist attacks in three months. Many people have expressed interest in the classes to learn how to protect themselves in the event of another attack, according to The Times. One school said it had seen inquiries increase by 10 times following last Saturday's assault on London Bridge and Borough Market that killed eight people and left dozens more injured. Another instructor said its waiting lists were "backing up" as it struggled to find staff to teach the classes. Combat Academy UK's chief instructor Reece Coker told The Times: "With bombings or shootings, people tend to think that there's nothing much they could do. "But with the style of attack that we saw at London Bridge, killers roaming the streets with knives, there is a sense, rightly, that there is." The company said application inquiries had jumped by 70 percent since March, when terrorist Khalid Masood launched a deadly vehicle and knife rampage on Westminster.

FIRST ROUND OF FRENCH PARLIAMENTARY POLLS Low turnout a concern

Merkel lauds Macron's victory as strong vote for reforms

AFP, Paris
French voters have put President Emmanuel Macron's party on course for a crushing parliamentary majority, though a record low turnout in the first round of voting raised concerns yesterday over the strength of his future mandate. Projections showed Macron continuing his centrist revolution, with his *Republic on the Move* (REM) party and its ally *MoDem* tipped to win between 400 and 445 seats in the 577-member National Assembly in next Sunday's second round. Such a share would give Macron -- who founded his party just a year ago -- one of the biggest parliamentary majorities the modern French state has seen. "France is back," Prime Minister Edouard Philippe declared triumphantly, calling the result a vote for the president's "confidence, will and daring".

But government spokesman Christophe Castaner admitted the 49 percent turnout -- the lowest for six decades in such a vote -- was "a failure of this election" and that Macron's team would need to reach out to those who stayed away. Former prime minister Alain Juppe of the rightwing Republicans said the mass stayaway by voters was a sign of "deep malaise" in the electorate and that a clean sweep by Macron would be bad for democracy. Meanwhile, German Chancellor Angela Merkel called the victory of French President Emmanuel Macron's party in the first round of parliamentary elections a "strong vote for reforms". "Chancellor Merkel: My heartfelt congratulations to @EmmanuelMacron to the great success of his party in the first election round. Strong vote for reforms," the government tweeted.



Pak PM to be quizzed over family's wealth

REUTERS, Karachi
Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif will be questioned on Thursday by investigators probing how his family obtained its vast wealth, the first time a sitting Pakistani premier has appeared before any investigative agency. Sharif's office yesterday confirmed the prime minister had received a summons by the Joint Investigation Team (JIT), set up by the Supreme Court to investigate corruption claims that surfaced following the Panama Papers leak. It said he would be attending an interview on Thursday. Pakistan's stock market slumped 4 percent as the news sent shudders through investors, fearful that instability in its fragile democracy would undermine an economy that has shown stronger growth in recent years. Sharif has denied any wrongdoing over his family allegedly using offshore companies to buy luxury flats in a posh London neighbourhood, and said his family wealth was acquired legally. His spokesman did not respond to requests for comment over the latest development. In April, the Supreme Court ruled that there was insufficient evidence to remove Sharif from office on the back of Panama Papers leaks, but it ordered further investigations. The JIT team comprises members of civilian agencies, such as the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), as well as members of powerful military bodies, including the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency.