

NEWS IN brief

Taliban kill 8 Afghan guards at Bagram

AFP, Kabul
Taliban gunmen have killed eight Afghan guards working at the largest American base in Afghanistan, officials said yesterday, as the US appears set to boost its troop presence in the country. The guards were ambushed near Bagram base north of Kabul as they were driving home in a convoy late Monday.

Google steps up efforts to block extremism

AFP, Washington
Google is stepping up its efforts to block "extremist and terrorism-related videos" over its platforms, using a combination of technology and human monitors. The measures announced Sunday come on the heels of similar efforts unveiled by Facebook last week.

French minister quits over fake jobs claims

AFP, Paris
French Defence Minister Sylvie Goulard announced her resignation yesterday over a fake jobs scandal that has hit her small centrist MoDem party, which has allied itself with President Emmanuel Macron's party. Goulard said she could not remain in the government while facing a possible investigation of alleged misuse of expenses at that parliament.

Pak separatists kill two naval officers

REUTERS, Quetta
Pakistani separatists riding motorcycles killed two naval officers in the restive province of Baluchistan, police officials said yesterday, near the site of a major Chinese-funded project. Police said four armed men on Monday attacked a vehicle taking food to a naval base in the coastal town of Jewani, about 80 km west of the port city of Gwadar.



Some locals watch a Canadair plane overflying smoke columns as wildfires burn close to Pedrogao Pequeno, Portugal yesterday. The huge forest fire that erupted on Saturday in central Portugal killed at least 64 people and injured 135 more, with many trapped in their cars by the flames.

PHOTO: AFP

MIGRANT SHIPWRECK IN MED

130 feared dead

AFP, Rome
Nearly 2,000 people are believed to have drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean this year, the UN's refugee agency said yesterday on World Refugee Day, as it reported fresh deaths.
"This is among the world's most dangerous routes -- a journey that no one takes lightly," it said, as witnesses described the horror of watching friends and loved ones drown.
After reports on Monday of a shipwreck off the Libya which claimed nearly 130 lives, the UNHCR said dozens of families with children were feared drowned in a separate incident after their boat snapped in two and sank off the North African coast.
"According to witnesses, a boat carrying at least 85 people broke in two and sank shortly after setting off from Sabratha on Thursday," spokesman Federico Fossi told AFP.
Three wooden boats had set sail together from the conflict-hit country that morning: those travelling on one of them were rescued at sea and brought to Italy, where they described the fate of the other two.
One was intercepted by the Libyan coastguard and towed back to shore, while they saw the other snap in half, throwing many of those onboard into the sea, Fossi said.
"Some survived, later calling people they knew on the first boat to say they had been rescued by the Libyans. We don't know how many others were lost to the waves," he said.
There were many families with children from Syria and North Africa among those feared dead.
Migrants brought to Sicily on Monday told aid workers of yet another shipwreck in which seven people had died after falling overboard, including the husband of a pregnant survivor from Cameroon.

Trump hints at more raids

REUTERS, Washington
President Donald Trump's administration appears ready to harden its approach toward Pakistan to crack down on Pakistan-based militants launching attacks in neighboring Afghanistan, US officials told news agency Reuters.
Potential Trump administration responses being discussed include expanding US drone strikes, redirecting or withholding some aid to Pakistan and perhaps eventually downgrading Pakistan's status as a major non-Nato ally, the officials said, speaking on condition of anonymity.
Some US officials, however, are skeptical of the prospects for success, arguing that years of previous US efforts to curb Pakistan's support for militant groups have failed, and that already strengthening US ties to India, Pakistan's arch-enemy, undermine chances of a breakthrough with Islamabad.
US officials say they seek greater cooperation with Pakistan, not a rupture in ties, once the administration finishes a regional review of the strategy guiding the 16-year-

old war in Afghanistan.
Precise actions have yet to be decided. The White House and Pentagon declined to comment on the review before its completion.
But the discussions alone suggest a shift toward a more assertive approach to address safe havens in Pakistan that have been blamed for in part helping turn Afghanistan's war into an intractable conflict.
The United States is again poised to deploy thousands more troops in Afghanistan, an acknowledgment that US-backed forces are not winning and Taliban militants are resurgent. Experts on America's longest war argue that militant safe havens in Pakistan have allowed Taliban-linked insurgents a place to plot deadly strikes in Afghanistan and regroup after ground offensives.
Although long mindful of Pakistan, the Trump administration in recent weeks has put more emphasis on the relationship with Islamabad in discussions as it hammers out a regional strategy to be presented to Trump by mid-July, nearly six months after he took office, one official said.

CRACKDOWN ON PAK TERROR HAVENS
Washington plans to withhold some aid to Islamabad
US to deploy more troops in Afghanistan

IS encircled in Old City

REUTERS, Erbil
Iraq's army said it encircled Islamic State's stronghold in the Old City of Mosul yesterday after taking over an area to the north of the densely populated historic district.
The army's 9th armored division seized al-Shifaa district, which includes the city's main hospitals, alongside the western bank of the Tigris river, a military statement said.
The fall of Shifaa means the Old City in the eastern half of Mosul is now surrounded by US-backed government forces, deployed north, west, south and east, across the river.
The battle for the Old City is becoming the deadliest in the eight-month old US-backed offensive to capture Mosul, Islamic State's de facto capital in Iraq and the largest city the group came to control in the country.
Aid organisations are expressing alarm at the situation of more than 100,000 civilians, of whom half are children, trapped in its old fragile houses with little food, water and medicine and no electricity.
The International Committee of the Red Cross on Monday said sick and wounded civilians escaping through Islamic State lines are dying in "high numbers."

OFFENSIVE TO LIBERATE MOSUL



The militants are moving stealthily in the Old City's maze of alleyways and narrow streets, through holes dug between houses, fighting back the advancing troops with sniper and mortar fire, booby traps and suicide bombers.
They have also covered many streets with cloths to obstruct air surveillance, making it difficult for the advancing troops to hit them without a risk to civilians.
The Iraqi army estimates the number of Islamic State fighters at no more than 300, down from nearly 6,000 in the city when the battle of Mosul started on Oct 17.
A US-led international coalition is providing air and ground support.
The fall of Mosul would, in effect, mark the end of the Iraqi half of the "caliphate" that Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared three years ago and which once covered swathes of Iraq and Syria.
The Iraqi government initially hoped to take Mosul by the end of 2016, but the campaign took longer as militants reinforced positions in civilian areas to fight back.
About 850,000 people, more than a third of the pre-war population of the northern Iraqi city, have fled, seeking refuge with relatives or in camps, according to aid groups.

US-RUSSIA FEUD OVER DOWNING OF SYRIA PLANE

Australia suspends air ops as crisis escalates

AFP, Sydney
Australia's military yesterday said it was temporarily halting air missions over Syria, following the shooting down of a Syrian jet by US forces.
The decision came amid increasing tension between the US and Russia, which warned it would track coalition aircraft in Syria as potential "targets", and halted a military hotline with Washington over the incident.
"As a precautionary measure, Australian Defence Force (ADF) strike operations into Syria have temporarily ceased," a defence spokeswoman said in a statement.
No reason for the suspension was given, but The Australian newspaper said it was implemented as a precaution after the jet's downing.
The United States has moved quickly to contain an escalation of the situation after the jet was downed on Sunday evening

when regime forces targeted the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, an alliance of Arab and Kurdish fighters battling IS.
A top US general said the country would work to relaunch the "deconfliction" hotline established in 2015, after Russia said Washington had failed to use the line -- a vital incident-prevention tool -- before targeting the plane near Raqa.
"Any flying objects, including planes and drones of the international coalition, discovered west of the Euphrates River will be tracked as aerial targets by Russia's air defences on and above ground," said Russia's defence ministry.
It said Washington had failed to use the hotline -- a vital incident-prevention tool -- before downing the plane near Raqa.
Australia is part of the coalition fighting the Islamic State group in Iraq and in late 2015 extended air operations into Syria, with a total of 780 defence personnel based in the Middle East.



Opposition activist stand in front of a riot police vehicle during clashes in a demonstration against the government of President Nicolas Maduro along the Francisco Fajardo highway in Caracas on Monday.

BREXIT TIMETABLE

UK bows to EU pressure

AFP, Brussels
Britain accepted the European Union's timetable for Brexit talks on Monday, in an apparent climbdown on the first day of formal negotiations in Brussels.
EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier said the talks with Brexit minister David Davis, which are starting a full year after Britain's seismic vote to leave, had started "on the right foot".
In carefully choreographed talks that even saw the two men exchange mementoes, they agreed to discuss divorce issues before negotiations on a future trade deal can start.
These include the thorny issues of Britain's estimated 100-billion-euro (\$112 billion) exit bill, the rights of EU citizens living in Britain, and the fate of the border in Northern Ireland.
But the agreement appeared at odds with British Prime Minister Theresa May's earlier insistence that the divorce and the future relationship should be discussed in parallel.
Frenchman Barnier struck a firm tone as he said the timetable for Britain's divorce after four troubled decades of membership made sense.
"If you ask me are we going to make concessions, I must tell you that it is the UK that is leaving the EU, the single market, the customs union and not the other way around," the former European commissioner and French foreign minister told a joint press conference with Davis.
Davis said the talks were off to a "promising start" and denied that Britain had caved in on the sequencing of the talks.
"That position hasn't changed, it's the same as it was before," said Davis, a tough-talking figure in the "Leave" campaign in last year's Brexit referendum.

Terrorism or an act of violence?

AGENCIES
When is terrorism simply a hate crime or an act of violence? Only when it involves Muslims, some have complained.
That's the sentiment after the Finsbury Park attack, where many questioned why media were not referring to it as an act of terrorism.
Prominent UK writer JK Rowling led the way, asking on Twitter why the attacker was referred to as a "white van driver" instead of a "terrorist" in one headline.
But she later deleted the tweet, saying she accepted the headline had been written before charges had been brought against him.
Authorities waited hours before confirming that a van attack that targeted pedestrians near two Muslim places of worship was being treated as a terrorist attack. By then the pressure had already been mounting.
Mohammed Kozbar, chairman of the Finsbury Park Mosque was one of the first to describe it as a terrorist attack, in an interview with The Sun within hours of the incident.
The mosque later released a statement on its Facebook page saying: "We are extremely unhappy with the mainstream media not reporting this as a terrorist attack, whereas they are very swift in describing attacks involving individuals professing to be Muslims and acting in the name of Islam."

A hate crime is defined as a crime motivated by prejudice, whether it's racial, sexual or otherwise. Terrorism is defined as the unlawful use of violence to intimidate in the pursuit of political aims.
Darren Osborne from Cardiff, 47, who is believed to be a father of four, has been identified as the attacker.
Witnesses said the suspect was shouting "I'm going to kill Muslims", and was waving and smiling after he brought carnage to Seven Sisters Road.
The man was initially arrested on suspicion of attempted murder but Scotland Yard said he was later arrested for the commission, preparation or instigation of terrorism including murder and attempted murder.
Prime Minister Theresa May has condemned the incident as "every bit as sickening" as the recent atrocities in London and Manchester. She originally labelled it "a terrible incident" but firmed her wording later.
London Mayor Sadiq Khan didn't shy away from labeling the act "terror".
"One of the things that all these terrorists share is a perverse ideology that wants to fuel division and divide our communities. We're not going to let them," he said, speaking after prayers at the Muslim Welfare House on Monday evening.

LONDON ANTI-MUSLIM VAN ATTACK



MYANMAR REFUGEES

Suicide rate 'alarming' in Thai camp

REUTERS, London
The number of recorded suicides and attempted suicides has soared at Thailand's largest camp for refugees from Myanmar, the International Organization for Migration said on Monday as it called for urgent action to treat high levels of distress.
Twenty-eight refugees in Mae La camp have killed themselves and 66 have attempted suicide in the last two years, more than three times the global suicide rate, according to an IOM study published on the eve of World Refugee Day.
"The number of suicides is very alarming, and we urgently need to address this," said Harry Smith, IOM's project officer in Thailand.

Israel starts work on settlement

AFP, Jerusalem
Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday announced the start of work on a new settlement in the occupied West Bank as US envoys prepared to discuss a new peace push.
"Today, the work on the ground has begun, as I promised, to establish a new settlement for the Amona settlers," Netanyahu tweeted over a picture of a small bulldozer and a digger working on a rocky hill overlooking a vineyard.
The Amichai settlement, in the northern West Bank, is earmarked for some 40 families evicted from the wildcat outpost of Amona in February under a high court order which ruled their homes had been built illegally on private Palestinian land. It is the first new Jewish settlement in the West Bank in some 25 years. The extensive construction in the meantime has focused on expanding existing settlements.
His announcement comes a day after Trump's special representative Jason Greenblatt arrived for talks with Israeli and Palestinian officials on relaunching peace talks that collapsed in 2014.
Greenblatt is to be joined by Trump's son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner today. Together they will "spearhead the peace effort" the US administration believes is possible, a White House official said.
Jewish settlements in the West Bank, including Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, are illegal under international law and are considered one of the main obstacles to peace.