

# NEWS IN brief

## France to ban oil, gas exploration

AFP, Paris

France is to stop granting new licences for oil and gas exploration on the mainland and in overseas territories, Environment Minister Nicolas Hulot said yesterday. "There will be no new exploration licences for hydrocarbons, we will pass the law this autumn," Hulot said on BFMTV. President Emmanuel Macron said during his election campaign in February that he was opposed to exploration for gas and shale gas in mainland France.

## Choi jailed for 3 years in S Korea

AFP, Seoul

The woman at the centre of South Korea's corruption scandal, Choi Soon-Sil, was handed a three-year jail term for bribery Friday in the first of a string of criminal cases against her. The scandal involving Choi and her longtime friend, disgraced ex-president Park Geun-Hye who was ousted in March, has rocked the political and business elite. Choi was found guilty of abusing her ties with the president to force professors at Seoul's Ewha Woman's University to admit her daughter to the prestigious school and attempting to bribe teachers into giving good grades.

## US halts Brazil beef imports again

AFP, New York

The United States announced Thursday a halt to all imports of fresh beef from Brazil, the world's second-largest producer, citing "recurring" concerns after large shipments failed food safety tests. The ban will remain in place until satisfactory corrective actions are taken, the US Department of Agriculture said in a statement that will again put the reputation of Brazil's industry under the spotlight.



Iraqi civilians, who were injured in a suicide attack as people were escaping the Old City of Mosul, sit on an Iraqi forces vehicle as they're being taken to a make-shift hospital, yesterday. 12 people were killed and at least 20 were wounded in the blast. PHOTO: AFP

## LONDON ANTI-MUSLIM VAN

# Suspect charged with 'terror-related murder'

AFP, London

The British van driver suspected of mowing down Muslim worshippers near a London mosque was charged with terrorism-related murder and attempted murder. Darren Osborne, 47, appeared at Westminster Magistrates Court in central London yesterday, speaking to confirm his name, age and that he had no fixed address. The Crown Prosecution Service said it would argue that Osborne, "motivated by extreme political views and a personal hatred of Muslims, acted to kill, maim, injure and terrify as many people as possible" during this week's attack. He will appear at London's Old Bailey criminal court for a preliminary hearing on Tuesday. One man died in the incident early Monday near Finsbury Park Mosque in north London, and another 11 people were injured. Immediately afterwards, an imam protected the suspect until police arrived, fearing a mob attack. Makram Ali, 51, died from multiple injuries following the attack. He had collapsed with a leg problem and was being attended to by fellow worshippers leaving late-night Ramadan prayers at the mosque when the hired van careered into them. Ali came to Britain from Bangladesh when he was 10. He was married with four daughters and two sons, and had two grandchildren. It was the fourth terror attack in Britain in three months, killing a total of 36 people and injuring around 200. The three previous attacks were all Islamist-linked.

# 'Below our expectations' Baghdadi death near 100pc certain: Russian senator

EU leaders slam UK's Brexit citizens plan, extend Russia sanctions

AFP, Brussels

EU leaders yesterday warned that Britain's plans to protect the rights of European citizens post-Brexit risked leaving them worse off, after Prime Minister Theresa May made what she insisted was a "fair" offer. "My first impression is the UK offer is below our expectations and this risks worsening the situation of our citizens in the UK," EU President Donald Tusk told a news conference after the second day of a Brussels summit. European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker told reporters that May's offer to EU leaders over dinner late Thursday was a "first step but this step is not sufficient". The fate of around three million European citizens living in Britain after Brexit is one of the most contentious issues in the negotiations on Britain's withdrawal from the 28-member bloc, which began on Monday. One year after Britain voted to leave in the June 23 referendum, May promised that nobody would be forced to leave after Brexit, offering permanent rights over healthcare, education, welfare and pensions to Europeans who arrive before a cut-off date.

But she declined to say when that date would fall, offering only a window between March 29, 2017, when Britain triggered the Brexit process, and its expected departure two years later. "It was a good start, but also not yet a breakthrough," said German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the EU's most powerful leader, adding that there was still a "long way to go".



Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel said the proposal was "particularly vague". But May defended the proposal, telling reporters at the end of the summit: "I remain of the view that this is a fair and serious offer. What we're saying is that those citizens from EU countries who have come to the United Kingdom, who have made their

lives and their homes in the UK, will be able to stay and we will guarantee their rights in the United Kingdom." Meanwhile EU leaders agreed to roll over damaging economic sanctions against Russia for another six months because Moscow has failed to meet its Ukraine ceasefire commitments, Tusk said. The decision will be formalised in July and become effective on July 31, when the current measures are to expire. The EU imposed the economic sanctions against Russia after the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 in July 2014 with heavy loss of life, blamed by the EU on pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine. Up to that point, many European Union member states, especially France and Germany, had been reluctant to make a move which would cost them as well as Russia. The decision, which was widely expected, came as newly-elected French President Emmanuel Macron and Merkel briefed their colleagues on Franco-German efforts to make the Minsk ceasefire agreement work.

REUTERS, Moscow

The likelihood that Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has been killed is close to 100 percent, Interfax news agency quoted the head of the defence committee in Russia's upper parliamentary house as saying yesterday. Russia's defence ministry said a week ago it believed it may have killed Baghdadi when one of its air strikes hit a gathering of senior Islamic State commanders on the outskirts of the Syrian city of Raqqa. But armed groups fighting in the region and US officials say they have no evidence that Baghdadi was killed, and many regional officials have said they are sceptical about the information from Moscow. Committee head Viktor Ozerov was quoted as saying the defence ministry would not have released information about Baghdadi's death if it believed it could be later proved incorrect. "I think this information is close to 100 percent," Interfax quoted Ozerov as saying. "The fact that Islamic State has still not

shown him anywhere also adds to our confidence that al-Baghdadi has been killed." Meanwhile, a suicide bomber blew himself up yesterday among civilians fleeing Mosul's Old City, where Iraqi forces are gaining ground against jihadists mounting a fierce but desperate defence. Ahmed Hashem, a major and medic in the Iraqi army speaking to AFP from a field hospital, said the attack took place in the Mashahda neighbourhood of the Old City. In Anbar, another suicide bomber blew himself up yesterday, killing at least eight civilians and a soldier, officers said. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said yesterday US-led coalition air strikes on two Syrian provinces targeting jihadists have killed 472 civilians over the past month, more than double a previous 30-day toll. The period between May 23 and June 23 saw the highest civilian death toll in coalition raids for a single month since they began on September 23, 2014.

**WAR ON IS IN SYRIA, IRAQ**

DOZENS KILLED IN BLASTS ACROSS IRAQ

472 CIVILIANS DEAD IN MONTH OF US-LED SYRIA STRIKES

# Trump questions impartiality of Russia probe chief

Admits he has no tapes of Comey meetings; CIA knew in August that Putin sought to boost Trump: report

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump has questioned the impartiality of special counsel Robert Mueller, who is leading the probe into Russia's meddling in the US election and possible collusion with the Trump campaign. In an interview with Fox News aired yesterday morning, Trump argued that Mueller, a former FBI director, is "good friends" with James Comey, Mueller's successor at the spy agency whom Trump fired on May 9. Trump later acknowledged he took this step with the Russia probe in mind. Trump also said that some of the staffers that Mueller has hired for his investigation "are all Hillary Clinton supporters." "Trump did say, however, that Mueller is an "honorable man." The report came as Trump on Thursday admitted he does not have recordings of his private meetings with fired FBI director James Comey, after fueling speculation for

weeks of secret Oval Office tapes. But Trump's belated admissions did little to quell allegations that he has sought to stifle investigations into possible collusion between his presidential campaign and Russian interference in last year's election. In a new development, the Washington Post yesterday reported that the CIA had top-level intelligence last August that Russian President Vladimir Putin personally ordered an operation to help Trump win the US presidential race. The intelligence shocked the White House and put US security chiefs on a top-secret crisis footing to figure out how to react. But amid confidence that Democrat Hillary Clinton still had the election in the bag and worries over president Barack Obama himself being seen as manipulating the election, the administration delivered warnings to Moscow but left countermeasures until after the vote, the Post reported.



The video grabs show a missile being fired from a Russian warship to hit, according to the Russian Defence Ministry, Islamic State targets in Syria's Hama province (inset), from the Mediterranean sea. Two Russian warships and a submarine in the Mediterranean have fired missiles at IS targets in Syria, the defence ministry said. The images were released yesterday by Russia's Defence Ministry. PHOTO: REUTERS

## KHMER ROUGE TR

# Top leader denies genocide charges

AFP, Phnom Penh

One of the top surviving leaders of Cambodia's ruthless Khmer Rouge regime yesterday denied genocide charges and rejected the label of "murderer" in forceful closing remarks at a lengthy UN-backed trial. The Khmer Rouge's former head of state, 85-year-old Khieu Samphan, spoke angrily to the Phnom Penh chamber trying him and another senior leader, 90-year-old Nuon Chea, for the regime's killing of ethnic Vietnamese and Muslim minorities, forced marriage and rape. The men are the two most senior living members of the radical Maoist group that seized control of Cambodia in 1975 and carried out some of the worst atrocities of the 20th



# 'Maybe it's time'

Actor Johnny Depp jokes about Trump assassination at Britain music festival

REUTERS, Glastonbury

Johnny Depp courted controversy at Britain's Glastonbury music festival with a joke about assassinating Donald Trump, pondering how long it had been since an actor had killed a US president. Depp, 54, was speaking to a crowd on Thursday evening as he introduced a screening of his 2004 film "The Libertine" at the music and performing arts festival. Discussion turned to the topic of US President Trump. "It is just a question, I'm not insinuating anything... When was the last time an actor assassinated a president?" Depp asked the audience, in a possible reference to actor John Wilkes Booth, who assassinated President Abraham Lincoln in 1865. "Now I want to clarify, I'm not an

actor. I lie for a living. However, it's been a while, and maybe it's time." Depp's comments came less than a month after comedian Kathy Griffin drew strong criticism for posing in photographs holding up the likeness of a bloody, severed head resembling Trump. CNN ultimately fired Griffin from its annual New Year's Eve broadcast over the controversy. Last week, a gunman shot at Republican lawmakers who were practising for a charity baseball game. The Secret Service said in a statement to ABC that it actively monitored open source reporting, including social media networks and evaluates potential threats. Depp, the face of the Pirates of the Caribbean movie franchise, seemed aware his comments might spur controversy.



## Mob beats cop to death in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

An angry mob beat a police officer to death outside a mosque in Indian-administered Kashmir, police said yesterday, as tensions ran high in the volatile Himalayan region. Witnesses said the mob attacked Mohammad Ayub Pandith late Thursday after he fired his pistol when confronted by worshippers at the mosque in the main city of Srinagar who suspected him of being a government spy. Violence between government forces and civilians has spiked in recent months in the disputed Muslim-majority region, where many oppose Indian rule. Rights groups say 196 people have been killed so far this year in violent incidents, among them 55 civilians.

## TENSIONS IN KOREAN PENINSULA

# North tests rocket engine

US believes trial likely part of ICBM program as South's Moon heads to Washington next week

AFP, Seoul

North Korea has tested a rocket engine that could be fitted to an intercontinental ballistic missile, a US official said, in an apparent provocation ahead of a summit between President Donald Trump and the leader of South Korea. President Moon Jae-In heads to Washington next week to meet Trump for the first time since taking office in May, as tensions soar on the Korean peninsula over Kim Jong-Un's nuclear weapons programme. The US official confirmed to AFP that Pyongyang tested a rocket engine on Thursday, on condition of anonymity and without providing further details. Political science professor Yoo Ho-Yeol at Korea University said the test was "a carefully calibrated act of provocation ahead of the summit". The North Korean regime will closely follow the meeting to gauge Seoul and Washington's future course of action concerning Pyongyang's pursuit of nuclear arsenal and missile development, he told AFP. Also yesterday, Moon oversaw the test-firing of a

home-grown missile with a range of 800 kilometres (500 miles). The presidential Blue House said the South's test was meant as a warning against the North's provocative acts over the past months. North Korea's last rocket engine test came in March and was apparently timed to coincide with the visit of US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to Beijing, where he warned that regional tensions had reached a "dangerous level". Rocket engines are easily re-purposed for use in missiles. Outside observers say Pyongyang's space programme is a fig leaf for weapons tests. The country's top newspaper Rodong Sinmun in May warned it was prepared to launch ICBMs at any time on orders from Kim. The North has carried out two atomic tests and dozens of missile launches since the beginning of last year in its quest to develop a missile capable of delivering a nuclear warhead to the continental United States -- something Trump has vowed "won't happen".

Up to two million people are believed to have been killed by the time the Khmer Rouge was overthrown in 1979. The pair were handed life sentences in 2014 after convictions over the forced evacuation of around two million Cambodians from Phnom Penh into rural labour camps and murders at one execution site. But Khieu Samphan claims he was not part of the killing machine that exterminated nearly a quarter of Cambodia's population from 1975-1979. "I didn't know about these issues," he said, adding that the "idea of Cambodian genocide" was