

NEWS IN  
briefChechen gang guilty  
of Nemtsov's murder

AFP, Moscow

A Russian jury yesterday found five men guilty of organising and carrying out the contract killing of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, after a trial his allies say failed to unmask the masterminds. The jury ruled that defendants -- all ethnic Chechens from North Caucasus -- carried out the hit as part of an organised gang.

## US plans to sell Black Hawks to Thailand

REUTERS, Bangkok

The United States plans to sell four Black Hawk helicopters to Thailand after initially suspending their sale following a 2014 military coup. "The United States government has approved our purchase order for the four helicopters," army chief General Chalermchai Sitthisart told reporters yesterday.

## Ex-Israeli PM granted early prison release

AFP, Jerusalem

Former prime minister Ehud Olmert was granted early release yesterday from a 27-month prison sentence for corruption scandals that rocked Israeli politics and made him the first ex-premier to serve jail time. The 71-year-old Olmert, premier between 2006 and 2009, was convicted of graft and entered prison in February 2016.

## Vietnam blogger jailed for 10 years

AFP, Hanoi

A prominent Vietnamese blogger known as 'Mother Mushroom' was jailed for 10 years yesterday, her lawyer said. Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh, whose pen name derives from her daughter's nickname "mushroom", was arrested in October 2016 and later charged with anti-state propaganda over critical Facebook posts.



Smoke is seen following a Philippine Army airstrike as government troops continue their assault against IS militants in Marawi city, Philippines, yesterday. Inset, a member of the Philippine National Police closes a door after marking a house as clear.

## HK 'has a place in my heart'

Says China's Xi as he makes first visit in the former British colony, seeks far-reaching future for its autonomy

REUTERS, Hong Kong

Chinese President Xi Jinping said yesterday China would work to ensure a "far-reaching future" for Hong Kong's autonomy, but he faces a divided city with protesters angered by Beijing's perceived interference as it marks 20 years of Chinese rule.

Britain returned Hong Kong to Chinese rule on July 1, 1997, under a "one country, two systems" formula which guarantees wide-ranging freedoms and judicial independence unseen in mainland China.

Beijing has promised Hong Kong's capitalist system will remain unchanged for "at least" 50 years until 2047, but it has not clarified what happens after that.

"Hong Kong has always tugged at my heartstrings," Xi said on arrival at Hong Kong airport for the handover anniversary in front of flag-waving crowds at the start of a three-day visit.

"... We are willing, together with different sectors of Hong Kong society, to look back on Hong Kong's unusual course in the past 20 years, draw conclusions from the experience, look into the future and to ensure 'one country, two systems' is stable and has a far-reaching future."

Xi's message was consistent with those of other senior

Chinese leaders visiting Hong Kong in the past, that Beijing would safeguard the city's development, prosperity and people's livelihoods.

In reality, however, fears of the creeping influence of Communist Party leaders in Beijing have been starkly exposed in recent years by the abduction by mainland agents of some Hong Kong booksellers who specialised in politically sensitive material and Beijing's efforts in disqualifying two pro-independence lawmakers elected to the city legislature.

Xi did not respond to journalists, including one who asked whether Liu Xiaobo, China's Nobel Peace Laureate and jailed dissident, would be released and allowed to travel overseas to be treated for cancer.

Speaking later, Xi praised Hong Kong's outgoing leader, Leung Chun-ying, who cracked down hard on pro-democracy

Occupy protests in 2014, for his substantial contributions to the country, "especially safeguarding national security".

"These past five years have not been easy at all," Xi added.

An annual July 1 protest pressing social causes, including a call for full democracy, is expected to take place after Xi leaves on Saturday.



China's President shakes hands with outgoing HK Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Bhutan protests to China over road

AFP, New Delhi

The tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan has protested to its mighty neighbour China over road building in disputed territory that set off new frictions between Beijing and the Indian government yesterday.

China made a new demand yesterday that Indian troops return to their side of the border between India's Sikkim state and Tibet on the Chinese side.

Highlighting the widening tensions over the remote mountain zone, Bhutan's ambassador to New Delhi, Vetsop Namgyel, said his government had called on China's People's Liberation Army to stop building the road near where the Bhutan, Indian and Chinese borders meet.

"We have issued a demarche to China through its diplomatic mission here," Namgyel told the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency.

He said the road was "in violation of an agreement between the two countries." Bhutan, which has a population of less than 800,000, and China do not have formal relations but maintain contacts through their missions in New Delhi.

"Doklam is a disputed territory and Bhutan has a written agreement with China that pending the final resolution of the boundary issue, peace and tranquility should be maintained," the ambassador said.

There is a dispute over the sovereignty of the district, which China calls Donglang. The showdown is, however, part of a wider dispute between India and China over the 4,057 kilometer (2,520 mile) border through mountain passes.

## Killing people over cows 'not acceptable': Modi

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday condemned a string of murders targeting minorities under the pretext of protecting cows, which are considered sacred by many Hindus, after critics accused the government of turning a blind eye.

Modi's remarks -- his first on vigilantism in nearly a year -- come just days after a Muslim teenager was stabbed to death on a train after being accused of carrying beef.

"Killing people in the name of Gau Bhakti (cow worship) is not acceptable. This not something Mahatma Gandhi would approve," Modi said.

India has been reeling from a spate of vigilante murders in recent months, targeting Muslims and low caste Hindus accused of killing cows or consuming beef.

In the latest high-profile incident, 15-year-old Junaid Khan and three of his brothers were attacked last week in an apparent row over seats as they travelled home by train from New Delhi.

Police have arrested four men over the



attack.

One of Khan's brothers said the attackers accused them of carrying beef, a meat popular among many Indian Muslims and low caste Dalits, but shunned by most upper caste Hindus.

Khan's murder drew thousands to the streets across Indian cities on Wednesday, with demonstrators calling for an end to the wave of mob violence under the slogan "not in my name".

Modi expressed his "pain and anguish at the current environment" in India, listing incidents of vigilante violence.

"No person in this nation has the right to take the law in his or her own hands in this country. Violence never has and never will solve any problem," he said.

Rights groups have warned of a culture of impunity for crimes committed against Muslims and urged Modi's Hindu nationalist government to act.

"The pattern of hate crimes committed against Muslims with seeming impunity... is deeply worrying," said Aakar Patel, executive director of Amnesty International India, in a statement this week.

## FIGHT AGAINST TALIBAN

Nato agrees Afghanistan troop boost

AFP, Brussels

Nato will increase troop numbers in Afghanistan to help train local forces facing a resurgent Taliban but will not return to a combat role, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said yesterday.

The alliance ended its longest-ever military operation in 2014 when it handed over post-9/11 frontline duties to the Afghan military and took on an advice and training mission.

But Nato commanders have asked for more troops following recent Taliban gains, stoking fears that Nato could get sucked back into the conflict just as it faces a host of new threats including Russia, terrorism and cyberattacks.

"I can confirm we will increase our presence in Afghanistan," Stoltenberg said as he arrived for a defence ministers meeting at the 29-nation alliance's headquarters in Brussels.

An increase of up to 3,000 troops from the current figure of 13,500 soldiers is under consideration, diplomatic sources said, though Stoltenberg did not give a precise figure.

He said 15 countries had already pledged more contributions and he hoped for more.

"We have to understand this is about training, assistance, advice... It is not to conduct combat operations but to help the Afghans fight," Stoltenberg said.

The extra troops could help bolster Afghan special forces, improve Kabul's air force to provide ground support and evacuations, and step up officer training headed.

About half of the soldiers in what is known as the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan are currently from the US.



Demonstrators clash with riot security forces while rallying against Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro's government in Caracas, Venezuela, on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## VENEZUELA POLITICAL CRISIS

## Maduro vows to fend off coup after grenade attack

AFP, Caracas

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro vowed Wednesday to fend off what he called a coup attempt after a rogue cop allegedly dropped grenades from a helicopter in an attack the opposition and analysts said could be a hoax.

The socialist president put the military on alert after the attack, a potentially dramatic escalation of the violence gripping the oil-rich South American country.

The death toll rose by two more Wednesday to 79 in three months of daily street protests against Maduro, blamed for a crisis marked by shortages of food, medicine and other basics.

Maduro blamed the chopper attack on Oscar Perez, a police pilot-turned-actor who appeared in a video online claiming that he and other officers were launching an "aerial deployment" to push Maduro to quit.

Beyond his police work, Perez has acted in a Venezuelan action film, "Suspended



Death," and has posted photographs on social media of himself posing with weapons.

"We are a coalition of military, police and civilian public servants... opposed to this transitional, criminal government," said Perez, flanked by four masked figures in black, two of them holding rifles.

Maduro has for months been fending off calls for elections to replace him, from opponents who blame him for a desperate economic crisis that has sparked hunger and deadly violence.

He so far retains the public backing of the military high command -- a factor that analysts say is decisive if he is to remain in power.

Venezuela has seen three attempted military coups since 1992.

Maduro said no one was hurt in the helicopter attack, but branded it a "terrorist attack," part of an "escalation" by right-wing "coup" plotters.

"I have activated the entire armed forces to defend the peace," he said in remarks broadcast from the presidential palace.

## China: Pak base talk pure speculation

AGENCIES

China said yesterday that talk the country was building a military base in Pakistan was pure speculation, after a Pentagon report earlier this month singled out Pakistan as a possible location for a future Chinese military base.

The Pentagon forecast that Beijing would likely build more bases overseas after establishing a facility in the African nation of Djibouti.

Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Wu Qian was asked at a regular monthly news briefing if China would build a naval base in the Chinese-invested Pakistani port city of Gwadar.

"Talk that China is building a military base in Pakistan is pure guesswork," Wu said, without elaborating.

Djibouti's position on the northwestern edge of the Indian Ocean has fuelled worries in India that it would become another of China's "string of pearls" of military alliances and assets ringing India, including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

China has repeatedly downplayed expectations it could be about to embark on a plan to build military bases around the world, even as it ramps up an impressive military modernisation programme, reported Reuters.

China has become increasingly assertive militarily in recent years, especially in territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas, where it frequently challenges US warships and planes.

## REPORTS OF AUSTRALIAN SPYING

## China 'highly alarmed'

AFP, Beijing

China said yesterday it was "highly alarmed" over threats to its national security, after a state-run newspaper accused Australia of spying on the country and stealing its technology.

An employee of China's national security department told the Global Times that Australian intelligence agents "in disguise" collect information from Chinese people overseas or "even encourage them to subvert China".

The report, published on the nationalistic newspaper's front page, comes weeks after Beijing rejected allegations of interference in Australian politics.

"We are highly alarmed and remain alert on other countries' actions to endanger China's national security and state interests," foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang said at a regular briefing.

"(The report) reminds me that recently the Australian media also played up reports on so-called Chinese spying."

According to the Global Times,

Australian agents closely monitor Chinese people and the embassy in Australia to foil "Chinese spy threats".

"In global covert struggles, Australia had never played the role of victim," the unidentified staffer was quoted as saying.

"However, they are wantonly working on intelligence about China and groundlessly accusing China of spying on them. The logic is ridiculous."

The Australian government did not immediately respond to the allegations.

The article followed an Australian media report this month that the country's intelligence agencies had major concerns China was interfering with Australian institutions and using political donations to gain access.

An investigation by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Fairfax Media found the country's political elite had been warned two years ago about taking donations from two billionaires with links to the Chinese Communist Party.

## S Korea to seek peace treaty with N Korea

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's new government will seek to sign a peace treaty with the North if it abandons its nuclear weapons, a minister said yesterday.

Vice Unification Minister Chun Hae-Sung's comments came hours before South Korea's new leader Moon Jae-In -- who backs engagement with Pyongyang -- was set to hold his first summit with US President Donald Trump, with the North's growing nuclear and missile threats casting a long shadow.

The two Koreas are still technically at war because a peace treaty was never agreed to replace the 1953 armistice that ended the conflict on the peninsula.

The US -- the South's security guarantor -- has 28,500 troops stationed in the country to protect it from its neighbour, and a treaty could entail their withdrawal, which has long been demanded by Pyongyang.

"We have to get over the current unstable system of armistice and put an end to the war on the Korean peninsula that has not yet ended," Chun said in a keynote speech at a seminar.

But a treaty could only be signed "at the stage of complete denuclearisation of the North", he added at the event organised by the Yonhap news agency.

The previous conservative governments of ousted president Park Geun-Hye and her predecessor Lee Myung-Bak shied away from referring to a peace treaty.