

NEWSIN brief

Pakistan frees 78 Indian fishermen

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan yesterday released 78 Indian fishermen held for trespassing into its territorial waters, officials said. The fishermen were released from Karachi's Landhi jail. The freed fishermen are expected to cross over into India today.

Japan floods death toll rises to 18

AFP, Tokyo

The death toll from heavy rains and flooding in Japan's south has risen to 18, officials said yesterday, as rescue teams continued their search for survivors. Swathes of Kyushu -- the southernmost of Japan's four main islands -- have been left devastated after overflooding rivers and torrential downpours swept away roads, houses and schools this week.

Egypt raid kills IS suspects in Sinai

AFP, Cairo

Egyptian police said they killed 14 alleged Islamic State group members Saturday in a raid on a training camp, a day after the jihadists conducted a deadly attack on soldiers. Funerals were held across the country for at least 21 soldiers killed in Friday's attack in the north of the Sinai Peninsula, one of deadliest against the military in years.

WWII bomb forces evacuations in Poland

AFP, Warsaw

Authorities in Bialystok, Poland, evacuated about 10,000 people from their homes yesterday morning after a 500-kilogramme World War II-era bomb was found during construction work. Such bombs are often found at construction sites in Poland, in particular in Warsaw, where about 90 percent of the city centre was destroyed by German bombing before the war's end.



An Indian supporter of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) holds a placard during protest rally in New Delhi, yesterday. Fresh violence erupted in Darjeeling on Saturday after a separatist group accused police of killing a supporter. The region's Nepali-speaking Gorkha community has since last month held protests demanding a separate state, Gorkhaland, within India to protect their Himalayan culture. Seven civilians have died while dozens of security personnel have been injured in clashes.

PHOTO: AFP

Time to work 'constructively' Says Trump, rules out easing of sanctions; Putin upbeat

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump yesterday said it was time to work "constructively" with Russia but ruled out easing sanctions while the countries remained at odds over the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine.

In a series of tweets on his return from Europe, Trump said he had confronted his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin over evidence from the US intelligence agencies that Moscow meddled in the 2016 election when the two leaders met for the first time in Germany on Friday.

And while he welcomed an agreement for the start of a ceasefire in Syria, Trump said it was too early to consider any easing of US sanctions on Russia "until the Ukrainian & Syrian problems are solved."

"I strongly pressed President Putin twice about Russian meddling in our election," Trump said of their meeting on the sidelines of the G20 summit. "He vehemently denied it. I've already given my opinion....."

Trump said he and Putin had talked about the idea of setting up what he

called "an impenetrable cyber security unit" to prevent hacking in future elections, without giving details.

Putin said he was positive about repairing US-Russian relations, which plunged to depths not seen since the Cold War under Trump's predecessor Barack Obama.

Moscow has warned that a program



of sanctions imposed by the US, which was tightened last month, threatens their whole relationship.

Obama ordered the seizure of two Russian diplomatic compounds in the United States last December after accusing Russia of trying to influence the outcome of the 2016 presidential election.

And last month, the United States added 38 individuals and entities to its sanctions list targeting the Russians and pro-Russian rebels it blames for the fighting in Ukraine.

"Sanctions were not discussed at my meeting with President Putin. Nothing will be done until the Ukrainian & Syrian problems are solved," said Trump.

The US and Russian sides have issued sharply conflicting accounts of the meeting, with Putin saying on Saturday that Trump had been "satisfied" by his denials of any Russian interference in the polls.

Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the United Nations, said the Russian denials had been expected but cut no ice.

"This is Russia trying to save face," she told CNN. "And they can't. They can't."

"Everybody knows that Russia meddled in our elections."

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson yesterday urged Russia to take the "first step" to ease the bloody separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine, which Kiev and the West believe is being fuelled by Moscow.

476 cops hurt in G20 clashes

AFP, Hamburg

Nearly 500 police officers were injured in clashes with protesters during the G20 summit, officials said yesterday, after fresh riots broke out overnight.

Violence continued to rage after G20 leaders returned home Saturday, with far-left protesters setting fire to a number of vehicles into the early morning hours, police said.

At a news conference, the head of operations for Hamburg police, Hartmut Dudde, said 476 officers had been injured since Thursday in a deployment of more than 20,000 officers, and 186 people were detained. No accurate number for protesters injured was available.

The explosion of violence at the meeting had sparked pointed questions over how Hamburg could descend into "mob rule" and why Chancellor Angela Merkel chose a hotbed of leftist militancy as the venue.

LIBERATION OF MOSUL

Huge loss but not fatal blow to IS

AFP, Baghdad

Mosul was the largest city in the "caliphate" proclaimed by the Islamic State group and its loss is a huge blow to the jihadists' statehood experiment -- but not a fatal one.

The northern Iraqi city was where IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made his only known public appearance in July 2014, announcing himself to the world as "caliph" during a Friday sermon at a mosque in the Old City.

It took tens of thousands of Iraqi forces backed by Western warplanes and special forces nearly nine months to defeat the jihadists, who leave behind them a heavily damaged city and exhausted security forces.

With Mosul, a city that had a population of around two million three years ago, the "caliphate" loses one of the main pillars of its administration and IS one of the most potent symbols of its might.

The recapture of Mosul, hailed as a decisive step towards ending this unprecedented episode in the history of modern jihad, is the latest in a long string of setbacks for IS.

At its peak, the jihadist group controlled a territory roughly the size of South Korea or Jordan and with a population of more than 10 million. It has now lost more than half of the land and three quarters of the population.

And a major offensive on its other de facto capital, the Syrian city of Raqa, is gathering momentum.

The group has not conquered new areas around the core of its "caliphate" since 2015, has lost thousands of fighters and is less attractive to foreign jihadists than it once was.

The fall of Mosul further reduces the so-called caliphate's territorial contiguity, leaving more pockets of IS-held land completely isolated.



An official greets Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi upon his arrival in Mosul, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Yet analysts warn it is too early to declare final victory. "We should not view the recapture of Mosul as the death knell for IS," said Patrick Martin, Iraq analyst at the Institute for the Study of War, adding the group "still holds significant urban terrain," notably in Syria.

Even in Iraq, where the jihadists lost more ground and only retain seven percent of the territory they once had, it can resurface gain, he warned.

Experts have said IS will switch to terrorism and insurgency instead of trying to openly control major areas.

The deadliest ever bomb attack in Baghdad, in which more than 320 people were killed last year, came after the jihadists lost their emblematic bastion of Fallujah.

The group also staged a major commando attack on the Kurdish-controlled city of Kirkuk days after the launch of the assault on Mosul.

With its dreams of statehood on hold, IS is expected to revert to those types of attack and do everything it can to deny the Iraqi government any claim it has been eliminated.

"It is very easy to see this coming, and Iraq will likely be plagued by insecurity for years to come," Witty said.

Peninsula closer to war

Says N Korea after US bombers hold drills with South

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday lashed out at a live-fire drill the US and South Korea staged in a show of force against Pyongyang, accusing Washington of pushing the peninsula to the "tipping point" of nuclear war.

The allies held the rare live-fire drill as tensions grew over the peninsula following the North's first intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test held last week.

The test sparked global alarm as it suggested North Korea now possessed an ICBM capable of reaching Alaska, a major milestone for the reclusive, nuclear-armed state.

Saturday's drill, designed to "sternly respond" to potential missile launches by the North, saw two US bombers destroy "enemy" missile batteries and South Korean jets mount precision strikes against underground command posts.

The North's state-run Rodong newspaper accused Washington and Seoul of ratcheting up tensions with the drill, in an editorial titled "Don't play with fire on a powder keg."

"The US, with its dangerous military provocation, is pushing the risk of a nuclear war on the peninsula to a tipping point," it

said, describing the peninsula as the "world's biggest tinderbox."

During Saturday's drill, long-range B-1B Lancer bombers reportedly flew close to the heavily-fortified border between two Koreas and dropped 2,000-pound bombs.

Pyongyang described the joint drill as a "dangerous military gambit of warmongers who are trying to ignite the fuse of a nuclear war on the peninsula."

"A small misjudgment or error can immediately lead to the beginning of a nuclear war, which will inevitably lead to another world war," it said.

Tension has been high as the US administration under President Donald Trump and the North's regime under leader Kim Jong-Un have exchanged hostile rhetoric for months.

Tension further escalated after Tuesday's ICBM test, a milestone in the North's decades-long quest for weapons capable of reaching the US.

The impoverished, isolated country has staged five nuclear tests -- including two last year -- and has made a significant progress in its missile capability under Kim, who took power in 2011.



A fighting cow jumps into the water during the traditional running of bulls "Bous a la mar" (Bulls in the sea) on Denia's harbour near Alicante, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Guns fall silent in Syria

Says monitor as US-Russian ceasefire takes effect ahead of fresh round of peace talks in Geneva

AFP, Beirut

A US-Russian brokered ceasefire for southwest Syria was holding hours after it took effect yesterday, a monitor and two rebel officials said, in the latest international attempt at peace-making in the six-year war.

Clashes and shelling had halted in the three southern provinces covered by the truce, Daraa, Quneitra, and Sweida, as it went into effect at noon local time.

The ceasefire deal was announced Friday by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, and comes as Syrian government and opposition delegations are due to attend a new round of talks in Geneva from today.

"The main fronts in the three provinces between regime forces and opposition factions have seen a cessation of hostilities and shelling since this morning, with the exception of a few scattered shells fired on Daraa city before noon," said Rami Abdel Rahman, the head of the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.



ceasefire on Monday but fighting had continued on frontlines in the three provinces.

The ceasefire deal comes after regime allies Russia and Iran and rebel backer Turkey agreed during talks in May in the Kazakh capital Astana to set up four "de-escalation" zones in Syria.

Implementation of that deal has been delayed as the three sides try to agree who will monitor the zones, one of which is located in southern Syria.

There has been no official comment from Syria's government on the announcement, and there was no mention of the ceasefire on state television's noon news bulletin.

The Al-Watan newspaper, which is close to the regime, quoted the head of Syria's parliamentary Foreign Relations Committee suggesting that the agreement was negotiated in consultation with Damascus.

"No details on the agreement were presented, but the Syrian state has background on it," Boutros Marjana told the newspaper.

Trump Jr, Kushner met with Russian lawyer

Says report amid alleged meddling in US polls

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump's eldest son, son-in-law and former election campaign manager met with a Russian lawyer linked to the Kremlin soon after Trump clinched the Republican presidential nomination last year, the New York Times reported on Saturday.

The meeting at Trump Tower in Manhattan on June 9, 2016, was the first confirmed private meeting between members of the president's inner circle and a Russian national, the newspaper reported, citing confidential government records and interviews with people familiar with the documents.

Donald Trump Jr. confirmed the get-together in a statement, describing it as "a short introductory meeting" that focused mainly on the issue of child adoption. He said he also asked Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and then-campaign manager Paul

Manafort to take part in the meeting. A lawyer for Kushner said Trump's son-in-law "briefly attended" the meeting.

A federal special counsel and several congressional committees are investigating possible contacts between the Trump campaign and Russian representatives, as part of a larger probe into allegations that Moscow meddled in the 2016 presidential election.

The Times article appeared a day after Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed the allegations of election meddling during the summit of leaders from the Group of 20 major economies in Hamburg, Germany.

Donald Trump Jr. said the meeting was held primarily to discuss a popular program to help Americans adopt Russian children, which the Russian government had ended.

"But it was not a campaign issue at that time and there was no follow up," he said in the statement.



Venezuela hits its 100th day of protest

Opposition leader released from jail

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela hit its 100th day of anti-government protests yesterday, one day after its most prominent political prisoner, Leopoldo Lopez, vowed to continue his fight for freedom after being released from jail and placed under house arrest.

Lopez's surprise prison release triggered speculation over the prospect of negotiations between the opposition and Venezuela's embattled leftist government of Nicolas Maduro, with a rising toll of death and destruction from three months of non-stop street protests.

Lopez, leader of the Voluntad Popular (Popular Will) party and a symbol of resistance to the Maduro government, emerged hours after his release from prison looking fit and happy.

He pumped his fist in the air, unfurled the Venezuelan flag and told a crowd of supporters who had gathered outside: "Yes, we can!"

"I maintain my firm opposition to this regime," Lopez said in a statement read by a leader of his party. "I reiterate my commitment to fight until conquering Venezuela's freedom."

President Maduro, in televised remarks later Saturday, called for a message of "peace and rectification" from Lopez.

Maduro said he hoped the statement from Lopez could provide the basis for reconciliation "because the nation wants peace."

Lopez, a 46-year-old Harvard-trained politician, was held for more than three-and-a-half years in a military prison outside Caracas for allegedly "inciting violence" by calling for anti-government protests.