

NEWSINbrief

Philippines to extend martial law in south

AFP, Manila

The Philippine Congress yesterday voted to extend President Rodrigo Duterte's declaration of martial law in the south until the end of the year to defeat Islamist gunmen. In a special joint session of the House and the Senate, legislators overwhelmingly backed Duterte's bid to have martial law remain in force in the Mindanao region until December 31.

Poland's senate okays top court reform

AFP, Warsaw

Poland's senate approved a controversial reform of the Supreme Court early yesterday, despite warnings from EU, appeals from US and massive street protests against the measure. The legislation, approved by 55 senators, with 23 opposed and two abstentions, reinforces political control over the Supreme Court.

30 extremists killed in Sinai: Egypt army

AFP, Cairo

Egyptian forces have killed 30 extremists during several days of security operations in the Sinai Peninsula, the military said yesterday. The Egyptian authorities are battling an insurgency by IS militants in North Sinai that has killed hundreds of security forces.

Int'l talks on Ukraine conflict today

AFP, Kiev

The leaders of Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France will hold telephone talks yesterday, officials said, amid a fresh flare up in fighting in eastern Ukraine between government troops and Russian-backed rebels. The violence in eastern Ukraine flared several days after a top rebel leader announced a plan to form a new "state" that Kiev warned could put a peace plan in jeopardy.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan girl Shazia, 10, receives treatment at a hospital in Jalalabad Province after stepping on a landmine planted by insurgents. Shazia was injured while collecting firewood with other children before school in Chaparhar district of Nangarhar province on July 19. The new report by UN highlights that 40 percent of civilian casualties during the recent six-month period were killed or injured by anti-government forces using improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The picture was taken on Saturday.

SLAYING OF AUSTRALIAN WOMAN IN US State top cop quits

AFP, Chicago

Fallout intensified Friday from the fatal police shooting of an unarmed Australian woman, as Minneapolis's police chief resigned, an angry crowd shouted down the mayor, and protesters filled streets for the second day in a row.

Police chief Janee Harteau resigned at the request of the Midwestern US city's mayor, who herself faced calls to stepped down by an angry crowd that brought her Friday evening news conference to an abrupt end.

Meanwhile, protesters filled the streets of downtown Minneapolis, demanding - among other things - greater police accountability and reform. Some celebrated news of the police chief's resignation.

Mayor Betsy Hodges promised to remain in her post, but said she understood the frustration of residents following the police shooting of Justine Damond last Saturday night, which has ignited an international outcry.

The 40-year-old Australian native had moved to the United States to marry her fiancé. She called police to report a possible assault near her home and was shot to death by one of two responding officers as she walked up to their police car -- reportedly still in her pajamas.

Investigators probing the shooting have said little about the case, but on Friday announced notable progress in their effort to piece together what happened without the benefit of video evidence.



More pressure on Trump

AGENCIES

The special counsel investigating possible collusion between Trump's 2016 campaign and Russia has asked White House officials to preserve any records of a meeting last year between the president's eldest son and a Russian lawyer, according to a source with knowledge of the request.

Special counsel Robert Mueller sent a document preservation request to the White House, saying the June 2016 meeting that Donald Trump Jr had at Trump Tower in New York is relevant to his investigation, the source said on Friday.

News earlier this month of the meeting between Trump Jr and a Russian lawyer whom he was told had damaging information about his father's presidential rival, Democrat Hillary Clinton, fueled questions about the campaign's dealings with Moscow. The Republican president has defended his son's meeting as simple politics.

Trump's son-in-law and White House senior adviser Jared Kushner and former Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort also attended the meeting.

The Senate Judiciary Committee has called for Trump Jr and Manafort to testify next Wednesday at a public hearing in its Russia probe. The House of Representatives Intelligence Committee said it would interview Kushner on Tuesday.

Mueller, appointed by the Justice Department in May, is probing allegations of Russian interference in the election

and potential collusion by Trump's campaign, an issue that has engulfed the six-month-old administration.

Trump has long expressed frustration with a probe that he has called a political witch hunt, and he has denied any collusion. Moscow has denied it interfered in the election campaign to try to tilt the November 2016 vote in Trump's favour.

Russia's ambassador to Washington was overheard by US spy agencies telling his bosses that he had discussed campaign-related matters with Trump adviser Jeff Sessions last year, the Washington Post reported on Friday, citing current and former US officials.

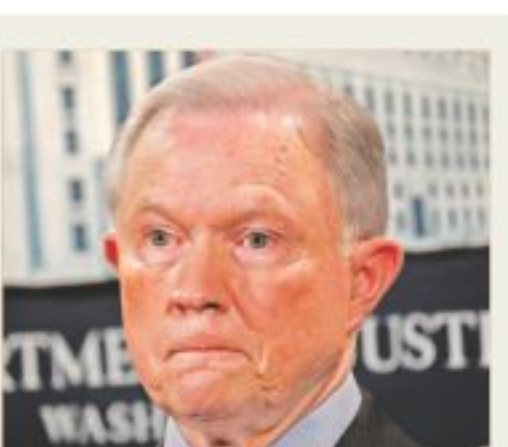
Sessions, who was a US senator at the time and is now the attorney general, initially failed to disclose the contacts with Ambassador Sergei Kislyak and then said they were not about the campaign. Under pressure over having not disclosed the meetings with Kislyak, Sessions recused himself from the Russia probe in March. The recusal angered Trump, who said in a New York Times interview this week that he would not have chosen Sessions for attorney general if he had known Sessions would recuse himself.

Newspaper reports said Trump's lawyers are reviewing ways to limit or undermine the special counsel. According to the Post, Trump has asked his advisers about his power to pardon aides, family members and even himself in connection with the Russia probe. Trump's lawyers have been discussing the president's pardoning powers, a second person told the newspaper.

ALLEGED RUSSIA COLLUSION

Mueller asks White House to save Trump Jr, Russian meeting documents

Report says Sessions discusses polls campaign with Russia envoy



Qatar emir says ready for talks to solve Gulf crisis

Urges for negotiations, but not at the cost of sovereignty

AFP, Doha

Qatar's ruler said Friday that the Gulf emirate is ready for talks to resolve a diplomatic crisis with a Saudi-led bloc so long as his country's sovereignty is respected.

"We are open to dialogue to resolve the outstanding problems," so long as Qatar's "sovereignty is respected," Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani said in his first public comments since Saudi Arabia and its allies severed ties with the gas-rich emirate.

"Any settlement of the crisis must be based on two principles," he said in a televised speech.

Sheikh Tamim insisted that any deal "must not take effect in the form of diktats but rather through mutual commitments undertaken by all the parties".

"We are open to dialogue to find solutions to lingering problems within the framework of respect for the sovereignty and will of each state as mutual undertakings and joint commitments binding all," he said.

On June 5, Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt cut ties with Qatar accusing it of back-

ing extremism and fostering ties with their Shiite rival Iran. Doha denies the claim.

In his speech delivered on Friday night, the emir said Qatar was "fighting terrorism relentlessly and without compromises, and the international community recognises this".

The crisis between the regional allies is the worst to hit the Gulf in decades.

OPEC kingpin Saudi Arabia and its allies also imposed sanctions on Doha, including closing its only land border, refusing Qatar access to their airspace and ordering their citizens back from Qatar.

And on June 22, they went on to present the emirate with a list of 13 demands with which to comply to resolve the crisis.

In a sign of progress, an Emirati state minister on Friday welcomed changes to Qatar's anti-terror legislation as a "positive" step.

Qatar announced an emiri decree on Thursday establishing two nominal lists of individuals and terrorist entities, and the requirements for being included in them.

The decree follows the signing on July 11 of a US-Qatar agreement to combat terror funding during a visit to Doha by Tillerson.



US air strike kills 16 Afghan cops

AFP, Kandahar

A US airstrike has killed 16 policemen in Afghanistan, officials said yesterday, the latest setback to Washington's efforts to bring peace to the war-torn country.

The incident took place in Helmand province on Friday as Afghan security forces attempted to clear a village of Taliban militants, Salam Afghan, a police spokesman, told AFP.

"In the strike, 16 Afghan policemen were killed including two commanders. Two other policemen were wounded," he said.

The strike hit a compound in Gereshk district in Helmand, large parts of which are under Taliban control.

"A US-supported (Afghan security) operation...resulted in the deaths of... friendly Afghan forces who were gathered in a compound," Nato's mission in Afghanistan said in a statement.

"We would like to express our deepest condolences to the families affected by this unfortunate incident," the statement said, adding there would be a probe into what happened.

An interior ministry spokesman, Najeeb Danish, said a ministry delegation had been sent to the area to investigate and help families of the victims.

The development came as Pentagon chief Jim Mattis finalised plans to present a new Afghanistan strategy to President Donald Trump in a bid to reverse what US generals call a "stalemate" at best.

In February, a US airstrike in Sangin killed at least 18 civilians, mostly women and children.



Indian supporters of Gorkhaland Movement chant slogans during the 38th day of an indefinite strike at Milanmore village in Darjeeling district on the outskirts of Siliguri, yesterday. Bouts of clashes and arson attacks have rattled the picturesque hill station for more than five weeks, causing schools and shops to shut down as thousands of mostly Indian tourists pack their bags and flee.

PHOTO: AFP

Russia, rebels agree deal on safe zone mechanism

AFP, Moscow

Russia's defence ministry said Saturday that its officials had signed a deal with moderate Syrian rebels at peace talks in Cairo on how a safe zone near Damascus will function.

"As a result of talks held in Cairo between Russian defence ministry officials and moderate Syrian opposition brokered by the Egyptian side... agreements have been signed on how the Eastern Ghouta de-escalation zone will function," the defence ministry said in a statement sent to AFP.

Syria's army yesterday announced a halt in fighting in parts of Eastern Ghouta.

The rebel stronghold of Eastern Ghouta is in one of four proposed "de-escalation zones" designated in an agreement reached by government allies Iran and Russia and rebel backer Turkey in May.

the safe zones.

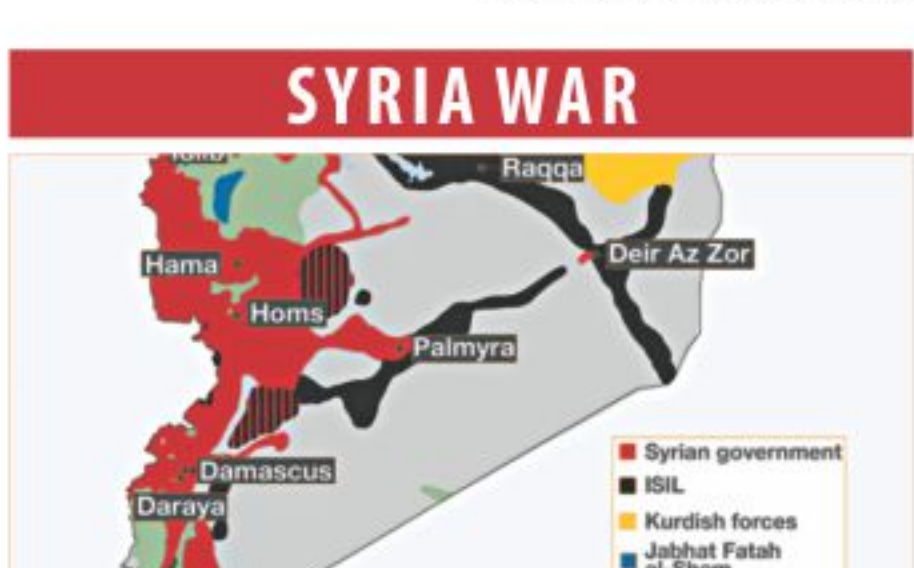
The most recent talks in Kazakhstan this month between Russia, Turkey and Iran failed to iron out of the details of the four safe zones.

Russia said that the sides have now signed agreements under which "the borders of the de-escalation zone are defined as well as the deployment locations and powers of the forces monitoring the de-escalation."

Meanwhile, the head of the US military's special operations confirmed Friday that the Central Intelligence Agency is shutting down its program to support rebels fighting against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

General Tony Thomas denied that the four-year-old operation was brought to an end as a way to placate Russia and earn its support for a ceasefire in southwestern Syria.

It was a "tough, tough decision" but "absolutely not a sop to the Russians," Thomas said at a forum in Aspen, Colorado.



US presses Myanmar to cease ties with N Korea

REUTERS, Washington

Myanmar's military has maintained ties with North Korea, even though the civilian-led government denies any cooperation, and the Trump administration is pressing for a complete break-off of remaining links, current and former US officials said.

Washington made its case to Myanmar's de facto leader, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and the army chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing during a visit to the country this week by the US special envoy for North Korea.

US Ambassador Joseph Yun's trip to Myanmar underlined continuing US worries over North Korean links that date back to Myanmar's decades of military rule, according to a senior State Department official on Friday.

"It was an opportunity to message that any engagement with North Korea, particularly military engagement, is counterproductive to trying to end this threat that North Korea poses to the region and to the globe," the official told Reuters, speaking on condition of anonymity.

He declined to specify what kind of military cooperation had continued between North Korea and Myanmar.

The official said US sanctions leveled this year against the Myanmar army's procurement body were meant to "reflect long-standing concerns" about the military's dealings with Pyongyang.

Myanmar insists that arms deals and other military relations with North Korea stopped before Myanmar's transition to a nominally civilian government in 2011.

Myanmar's military was believed in the past to have imported North Korean-made weapons and North Korean personnel also worked in Myanmar, two former US officials said.

US warns Iran over detained Americans

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump warned that Iran would face "new and serious consequences" unless all unjustly detained American citizens were released and returned, the White House said in a statement on Friday.

Trump urged Iran to return Robert Levinson, an American former law enforcement officer who disappeared more than 10 years ago in Iran, and demanded that Tehran release businessman Siamak Namazi and his father, Baquer.

The statement capped a week of rhetoric against Tehran. On Tuesday, Washington slapped new economic sanctions against Iran over its ballistic missile program and said Tehran's "malign activities" in the Middle East undercut any "positive contributions" coming from the 2015 nuclear accord.

Those measures signaled that the Trump administration was seeking to put more pressure on Iran while keeping in place an agreement between Tehran and six world powers to curb its nuclear program in return for lifting international oil and financial sanctions.

Iran on Friday vented frustration over the sanctions which it says "violate" the terms of the nuclear deal, raising its concerns at a meeting with major world powers in Vienna.

The regular quarterly meeting to review the deal heard, as Washington already confirmed earlier this week, that Iran is sticking to its side of the pact with the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany.

The parties said in a statement they welcomed "Iran's continued adherence to its nuclear-related commitments".



Baghdadi may be alive: Mattis

AFP, Washington

Pentagon chief Jim Mattis said Friday that he believes Islamic State chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is still alive, following various claims he was dead.

"I think Baghdadi's alive... and I'll believe otherwise when we know we've killed him," Mattis told Pentagon reporters.

"We are going after him, but we assume he is alive." There have been persistent rumors that Baghdadi has died in recent months.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a longtime conflict monitor, last week said it had heard from senior IS leaders in Syria's Deir Ezzor province that Baghdadi was dead.

Russia's army said in mid-June that it was seeking to verify whether it had killed the IS chief in a May air strike in Syria.

With a \$25 million US bounty on his head, Baghdadi has kept a low profile but was rumored to move regularly throughout IS-held territory in Iraq and Syria.

The Iraqi native has not been seen since making his only known public appearance as "caliph" in 2014 at the Grand Mosque of Al-Nuri in Mosul, which was destroyed in the battle for Iraq's second city.

Meanwhile, President Donald Trump yesterday attacked The New York Times and its "sick agenda," alleging that one of the paper's reports thwarted a US bid to take out Baghdadi.