

NEWS IN brief

Controversial rape law scrapped in Jordan

AFP, Amman
Jordan's parliament yesterday scrapped a controversial article in the penal code that allowed a rapist to escape punishment if he married his victim. Activists had campaigned for years to abolish Article 308, which allowed rape charges to be dropped if the rapist married his victim and did not divorce her for five years.

Eight migrants found dead off Libya coast

AFP, Rome
The bodies of eight migrants have been found at sea off the coast of Libya by rescuers coming to the aid of four rubber dinghies, the Italian coastguard said yesterday. Some 500 survivors in total were being pulled to safety, the coastguard told AFP. Spanish NGO Proactiva Open Arms, which was taking part in the rescues, said the bodies had been recovered by the Santa Lucia merchant ship.

2,531 Afghan forces killed since Jan 1

REUTERS, Kabul
A total of 2,531 Afghan security forces were killed and 4,238 wounded in the first four months of the year, according to figures released in a report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan, a US Congressional watchdog. The figures, from Jan 1-May 8, were provided to US military authorities by the Afghan government, the report said.

China opens first overseas base

AFP, Beijing
China has officially opened its first overseas naval base in Djibouti, state media said yesterday, a major step for the country's expansion of its military presence abroad. Home to only around 800,000 people, Djibouti also hosts troops from France and Japan.



Defendants are pictured accompanied by gendarmerie as they arrive for their trial at Sincan Penal Institution at the 4th Heavy Penal Court near Ankara, yesterday.

Turkey puts 500 on trial over coup

AFP, Sincan
Nearly 500 people appeared in court yesterday in the biggest trial yet of suspects from Turkey's failed coup, facing charges of conspiring to oust the government from an air base seen as the plotters' hub.
Forty-one of those held were marched into the court outside Ankara one-by-one in a long line in front of television cameras and the public, with each suspect held by two members of the Turkish gendarmerie and flanked by an armed soldier.
Among the main suspects named in the indictment but still on the run is US-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, who is accused of ordering the attempted July 15, 2016 putsch.
People chanted "we want the death penalty!" and some threw nooses towards the suspects. The death penalty has been abolished in Turkey since 2004.
There were also chants of "martyrs don't die, the nation won't be divided". Some people threw water bottles, an AFP reporter said.
Nazan Aytop, who came to court to make sure the blood of the 249 victims of the coup "was not given in vain" said she hoped the "accused will be given the sentence they deserve."
A total of 486 suspects have been indicted in the case and almost all -- a total of 461 -- are held in custody while seven are still on the run and the remainder charged but not in jail.
During the tense opening hearing, veterans and relatives of those killed on the night of the coup had booed the suspects' lawyers, Dogan news agency reported.

US slaps sanctions on dictator Maduro

EU criticises arrest of two opposition leaders

AFP, Caracas
The United States hit Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro with direct sanctions on Monday over a disputed and deadly weekend vote, calling him a "dictator," while the leader refused to heed what he slammed as "imperial orders."
The measures were unusual in that they targeted a sitting head of state, but their reach was mostly symbolic, freezing any US assets Maduro might have and banning people under US jurisdiction from dealing with him.
"Yesterday's illegitimate elections confirm that Maduro is a dictator who disregards the will of the Venezuelan people," US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin told reporters.
Maduro lashed out at the move, saying it smacked of American imperialism. "I will not obey imperial orders," he said.
"I am so proud, Mr Donald Trump," Maduro joked in English, before switching to slang in Spanish: "Go for it, already. I am being targeted with sanctions because I do not obey the orders of foreign governments."
Meanwhile, the European Union, US criticised the arrest of two Venezuelan opposition leaders yesterday following a controversial vote on a new assembly, saying it was a "step in the wrong direction".
Leopoldo Lopez and Antonio Ledezma, the South American nation's highest profile leaders of the opposition to President Nicolas Maduro, were both already under house arrest when they were picked up by the Venezuelan intelligence service.



US begins Russia drawdown

REUTERS, Moscow
The United States began removing furniture and equipment from a diplomatic property in Moscow on Tuesday in the first sign of compliance with a Kremlin order to slash its presence in Russia as retaliation for new US sanctions.
President Vladimir Putin has ordered the United States to cut around 60 percent of its diplomatic staff in Russia by Sept 1, and said Moscow will seize two US diplomatic properties in response to sanctions approved by Congress last week.
The White House has said US President Donald Trump will sign the sanctions bill, meant as a response to alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 US presidential election and to further punish Moscow for its 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine.
On Tuesday, removal men began dismantling play equipment and barbecues at a U.S.-owned dacha (country villa) on the outskirts of Moscow, after being refused access the day before, according to a Reuters journalist at the scene.
The dacha, which is being confiscated along with a US warehouse in the south of the Russian capital, was used by US diplomatic staff at the weekends and to host parties for students, journalists and other diplomats.
The removal men said they arrived at around 7 a.m. (0400 GMT) and were seen packing furniture, including beds and lamps, into three white removal vans before leaving the property three hours later. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said U.S. staff had to leave the dacha and warehouse by mid-day on Tuesday, TASS news agency reported. Ryabkov and the Kremlin said no one had obstructed U.S. employees trying to access the property.
Putin said on Sunday Russia had ordered the United States to cut 755 of its 1,200 diplomatic staff in its embassy and consular operations, though many of those let go will be Russian citizens, with the United States allowed to choose who leaves.
The ultimatum issued by the Russian leader is a display to voters at home that he is prepared to stand up to Washington - but is also carefully calibrated to avoid directly affecting the US investment he needs, or burning his bridges with Trump.
One person at the embassy, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they are not authorised to talk to the media, said staff there were feeling depressed and despondent as they came to terms with the Kremlin's order.

DIPLOMATIC SPAT
Putin ordered 60 percent cutback of US diplomatic mission
Kremlin hitting back for new US sanctions legislation
Embassy retrieves its property from seized compound



Xi: China will protect its sovereignty

AFP, Beijing
China will fiercely protect its sovereignty against "any people, organisation or political party", President Xi Jinping warned yesterday, as the country celebrated the 90th anniversary of its military.
The message comes as the ruling Communist Party (CCP) faces political resistance in semi-autonomous Hong Kong, where many locals fear Beijing is tightening its grip, and in self-ruled Taiwan, which China views as a rebel province awaiting reunification.
The Asian giant is also mired in several bitter border disputes with its neighbours, including an ongoing stand-off with India over territory on China's border with Bhutan.
"We will never allow any people, organisation or political party to split any part of Chinese territory out of the country at any time, in any form," Xi told an audience of CCP and People's Liberation Army (PLA) officials gathered at Beijing's Great Hall of the People, who broke out into applause.
"No one should expect us to swallow the bitter fruit that is harmful to our sovereignty, security or development interests," he said.
While China formerly followed a strategy of "hide your strength", it has begun to indulge in more frequent, pointed demonstrations of its power.
Since coming to power in 2012, Xi has trumpeted the need to build a stronger combat-ready military, while leading efforts to centralise the Communist Party's control over it.

FLOODS IN NORTHEAST INDIA

Modi announces fund to study Brahmaputra course

TNN, Guwahati
In an attempt to find a permanent solution to the bi-annual flood problem in Assam, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced Rs 100 crore to fund a study on the course of the Brahmaputra river and its devastating effects. A high-powered team comprising bureaucrats and technocrats will conduct the study.
Modi also announced Rs 2,000 crore as an immediate aid for flood-hit Assam, Arunachal, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram.
Modi arrived in Guwahati at 10:00 am for a day-long review of the flood and landslide problems that crippled the five northeastern states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland.
State Finance Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, who briefed on the PM's visit, said, "The PM has also ordered release of an additional Rs 250 crore to Assam to meet the immediate need for relief and rehabilitation. Last month, he had ordered release of Rs 300 crore."
"He stressed on finding a permanent solution to flood in Assam and said that a high-powered committee will be formed to study the course of the Brahmaputra river and a corpus fund of Rs 100 cr would be set up for the study," Sarma said.
On Monday, Modi has announced an ex gratia of Rs 2 lakh each for the next of kin of those who have lost their lives in the floods and Rs 50,000 each for those seriously injured.
Modi did not make any aerial survey of the flood-affected areas as flood waters have receded in almost all the areas.
The ruling BJP in Assam has been criticized for the PM not visiting the state when the flood was at its peak throughout June till mid-week of July.
Modi had deputed minister of state for home Kiren Rijiju to visit the flood-affected state last month and assess the situation. A central team has also visited the affected areas to study the extent of damage done by the flood.



The pregnant wife (C) of Kashmiri civilian Firdous Ahmed mourns during his funeral at Begum Bagh Pulwama, south of Srinagar, yesterday. Indian forces killed a top militant commander in Kashmir yesterday, triggering clashes in which one protester was killed and dozens injured.

Climate change leads to extra suicides in India

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
Scorching temperatures, drought, storms and famine triggered by climate change have led to a thousands of extra suicides in India, a report has found.
During the south Asian nation's growing season, every one degree Celsius of warming above 20 degrees C sees an average of 67 more people take their own lives, according to the study.
Experts said the findings, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), are particularly alarming as India's average temperatures are expected to rise another three degrees Celsius by 2050, meaning hundreds of extra deaths.
India's farmers are already regularly hit by extreme weather events, including strong storms and heat waves, and some still rely on natural rainfall to water their crops.
University of California Berkeley researcher Tamma Carleton said nearly 60,000 suicides over the past 30 years may be linked to climate change.
Looking at suicide data from India's National Crime Records Bureau between 1967 and 2013, along with data on agricultural crop yields and on temperature change, she estimated that "warming temperature trends over the last three decades have already been responsible for over 59,000 suicides throughout India."

'Democracy' not in menu!

Trump's State Dept may drop it from mission statement

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
The US State Department is considering dropping "democracy" from its key mission statement as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson orders his department to redefine its purpose to the world.
The draft statements under review right now are similar to the old mission statement, except for one thing - any mention of promoting democracy is being eliminated.
According to an internal email that went out on Friday, the State Department's Executive Steering Committee convened a meeting of leaders to draft new statements on the department's purpose, mission and ambition, as part of the overall reorganisation of the State Department.
The State Department's draft statement on its purpose is: "We promote the security, prosperity and interests of the American people globally."
--The State Department's draft statement on its mission is: "Lead America's foreign policy through global advocacy, action and assistance to shape a safer, more prosperous world."
--The State Department's draft statement on its ambition is: "The American people thrive in a peaceful and interconnected world that is free, resilient and prosperous."
Compare that to the State Department Mission Statement that is currently on the books, as laid out in the department's fiscal year 2016 financial report:
"The Department's mission is to shape and sustain a peaceful, prosperous, just, and democratic world and foster conditions for stability and progress for the benefit of the American people and people everywhere. This mission is shared with the USAID, ensuring we have a common path forward in partnership as we invest in the shared security and prosperity that will ultimately better prepare us for the challenges of tomorrow."
Former senior State Department officials from both parties said eliminating "just" and "democratic" from the State Department's list of desired outcomes is neither accidental nor inconsequential.



GULF TRADE 'SIEGE'

Qatar files complaint with WTO

AFP, Doha
Qatar has filed a complaint with the World Trade Organization over an "illegal siege" imposed by its Gulf neighbours, the commerce ministry said Monday.
The gas-rich emirate has been slapped with sanctions and demands after four countries including regional kingpin Saudi Arabia cut ties with it on June 5, accusing Doha of fostering Islamist groups and of links to Riyadh's arch-rival Iran. Qatar denies the allegations.
The Ministry of Economy and Commerce said a complaint had been lodged with the WTO's Dispute Settlement Body against the "siege countries"

JERUSALEM HOLY SITE STANDOFF

OIC accuses Israel of 'provocative' actions

AFP, Ankara
The main grouping of the world's Muslim nations on Tuesday accused Israel of staging provocative actions and inflaming tensions with the Palestinians in a crisis over security measures at a key holy site in Jerusalem.
Turkey hosted an extraordinary meeting in Istanbul of foreign ministers from the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) that Ankara called to discuss the tensions in its current capacity as chairman of the body.
The meeting brought together foreign ministers and top officials from key Muslim nations, including Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeiri and Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif, whose rival nations are locked in a bitter feud.
Israel angered the Islamic world by installing metal detectors and security cameras at the Haram al-Sharif holy site in Jerusalem, known to Jews as the Temple Mount, following a July 14 attack in which gunmen killed two policemen. The move sparked Muslim protests and deadly unrest, and last week the Israeli government removed the detectors and cameras. The site includes the Al-Aqsa Mosque, one of the holiest sites in Islam.
It urged world powers not to support or encourage Israel's "illegal colonisation and annexation" of East Jerusalem, which Israel occupied in 1967.