

NEWS IN brief

Saudi King to visit
White House in 2018
 AFP, Washington
 King Salman of Saudi Arabia will make an official visit to Washington early next year for talks with President Donald Trump, the White House said Wednesday. The two leaders held a telephone conversation and discussed how to advance shared goals in the Middle East.

Duterte honours Marcos on 100th b'day
 AFP, Manila
 Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte symbolically honoured Ferdinand Marcos yesterday by declaring the late dictator's 100th birth anniversary a public holiday in the ex-leader's home province. It marked another step in the rehabilitation of Marcos 31 years after he was chased into exile in the US.

Merkel vows to press on with rallies despite jeers
 AFP, Berlin
 German Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday vowed to press on with election campaign rallies in places where she has been greeted with choruses of jeers and whistles, saying she intended to do so until August 14.

Student backlash in HK independence row
 AFP, Hong Kong
 Hong Kong students have accused their universities of suppressing freedom of speech after banners and signs calling for the city's independence from China were taken down from campuses. The move has fuelled fears that freedoms and freedoms of expression in the semi-autonomous city and that Beijing is tightening its grip in a range of areas, from politics to media and education.



People react as members, who have contributed to the success of the hydrostatic test for intercontinental ballistic rockets, arrive in Pyongyang in this undated photo released by North Korea's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) in Pyongyang on Wednesday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Revoke Suu Kyi's Nobel peace prize

Thousands urge in online petition

Thousands of people have signed an online petition calling for the Nobel committee to revoke Aung San Suu Kyi's peace prize for the Myanmar government's treatment of its Rohingya Muslims. But the Norwegian Nobel committee has ruled out any such move, saying only that the work which led to the awarding of the prize was taken into account. The Change.Org petition has gathered over 365,000 signatures as of yesterday, reflecting growing outrage over a massive security sweep in Rakhine state by Myanmar forces after a series of deadly ambushes by Rohingya militants. "The de facto ruler of Myanmar Aung San Suu Kyi has done virtually nothing to stop this crime against humanity in her country," the petition says. Suu Kyi was awarded the prize in 1991, while under house arrest at the hands of Myanmar's military junta, from which she was released in 2010. She then went on to lead her party through the country's first credible elections since independence. But her government has faced international condemnation for the army's response to the crisis as refugees arrive in Bangladesh with stories of murder, rape and burned villages at the hands of soldiers. The United Nations said yesterday that more than 250,000 Rohingya refugees have escaped to Bangladesh in the past two weeks, meaning more than a quarter of a million have fled since fighting broke out in October. Suu Kyi lashed out this week at what she called "a huge iceberg of misinformation" over the crisis, "with the aim of promoting the interest of terrorists".

Myanmar trying to protect all citizens in Rakhine

Says Suu Kyi amid global concerns over Rohingya exodus

Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi said yesterday her government was doing its best to protect everyone in the strife-torn state of Rakhine, as the estimated number of Rohingya Muslims who have fled to Bangladesh leapt by 18,000 in one day, to 164,000. Suu Kyi did not refer specifically to the exodus of the minority Rohingya, which was sparked by insurgent attacks on Aug. 25 and an army counter-offensive, but said her administration was trying its best to take care of all citizens. Western critics have accused Suu Kyi of not speaking out for the Rohingya, some 1.1 million people who have long complained of persecution and are seen by many in Buddhist-majority Myanmar as illegal migrants from Bangladesh. Some have called for the Nobel Peace Prize she won in 1991 as a champion of democracy to be revoked. "We have to take care of our citizens, we have to take care of everybody who is in our country, whether or not they are our citizens," Suu Kyi said in comments to Reuters Television's Indian partner, Asian News International. "Of course, our resources are not as complete and adequate as we would like them to be but, still, we try our best and we want to make sure that everyone is entitled to the protection of the law," she said during a visit by Indian Prime Narendra Modi to Yangon. Suu Kyi on Tuesday blamed "terrorists" for "a huge iceberg of misinformation" on the strife in the northwestern state of Rakhine but made no mention of the Rohingya who have fled. She has come under increasing pressure from countries with Muslim populations and this week UN Security Council Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned there was a risk of ethnic cleansing in Myanmar that could destabilise the region. Myanmar has said it is negotiating with China and Russia to ensure they block any Security Council censure over the crisis. Suu Kyi said the situation in Rakhine has been difficult for many decades and so it was "a little unreasonable" to expect her administration, which has been in power for 18 months, to have resolved it already.

ETHNIC CLEANSING OF ROHINGYAS

How Israel helping Myanmar army

Israel has refused to stop supplying arms to the Myanmar army, which human rights groups say is involved in the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims, saying, "the matter is clearly diplomatic", reported online news portal Middle East Eye (MEE). Not just that, Israeli arms companies like TAI, Elal Conkhe have even trained Myanmar's special forces in Rakhine state where most of the violence against the Rohingya has taken place, added MEE. The weapons Israel has sold Myanmar include more than a 100 tanks, and weapons and boats used to police its border, said human rights groups and Burmese officials. Notably, the US and the European Union (EU) have an arms embargo on Myanmar. The US cites the International Religious Freedom Act and uses the embargo on countries that have "engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom". The EU's embargo on Myanmar refers to the ban on sales of equipment which might be used for internal repression". In the latest bout of violence that began August 25, and that was triggered by an attack on Myanmar police posts, at least 400 Rohingya have been killed, and as many as 146,000 have made their way, starving and terrified, to Bangladesh, reported the Associated Press. Last December, Israeli lawyers and human rights activists wrote to their country's defence ministry urging it to suspend a military shipment ordered by the Myanmar Army. They said Myanmar still commits human rights abuses against minority groups, reported The Irrawaddy, a website run by exiles from Myanmar in Thailand.



"It is surprising that the State of Israel, while struggling for continued sanctions against Iran, has no qualms about ignoring the US and EU sanctions against Burma for the most severe crimes being committed there," read the letter. In January this year, following visits by Israeli officials to Myanmar and vice versa, to discuss arms deals, activists in Israel filed a petition urging their government to stop arms exports to Myanmar. The petition is expected to be heard later this month, but in March, in a preliminary reply, the Israeli defence ministry said the court had no jurisdiction over the issue. The ministry said arms sales to Myanmar were "clearly diplomatic", reported MEE. In fact, diplomatic and military ties between Israel and Myanmar flourished even during the military dictatorship in the latter, said Ofer Neiman, an Israeli human rights activist, to MEE. In September 2015, two months before the country's first election in 25 years, one of the heads of the then Myanmar junta, General Min Aung Hlaing, who's now chief of the army's defence, visited Israel on a "shopping trip" of Israeli military manufacturers, reported Israel's Haaretz. His delegation met President Reuven Rivlin and other military officials including the army's chief of staff. Hlaing also visited Military bases and defense contractors Elbit Systems and Elbit Systems, added Haaretz.

China testing limits

Says India's army chief after border stand-off in Doklam, sees war threats from Pakistan

India's army chief has said his country must be prepared for war and accused China of "testing our limits", days after the nuclear-armed neighbours ended one of their worst border stand-offs in decades. General Bipin Rawat said India could not afford to be complacent and should be prepared for the possibility of an all-out war. "As far as our northern adversary is concerned, the flexing of military muscles has started," Rawat said late Wednesday at a Delhi-based think-tank, in reference to China. "The salami slicing, taking over territory in a very gradual manner... testing our limits of the border is something we have to be wary about and remain prepared for situations which could gradually emerge into conflict." "Whether these conflicts will be confined or extended in space and time or whether they will lead to an all-out war, along the entire front (remains to be seen)," the Army chief said. India and China went to war in 1962 over the state of Arunachal Pradesh. In the 2013 traditions withdrew their troops to resolve a tense deadlock over part of a Himalayan plateau in Doklam claimed by both China and India, an ally of India. Rawat also said India's arch rival Pakistan - an ally of China - was likely to take advantage of the tensions. "The western adversary taking advantage of the situation developing along the northern border is very much likely," he said. India fought a war with China in 1962 and three wars with Pakistan, two of them over Kashmir. "Nuclear weapons are weapons of deterrence. Yes, they are. But to say that they can deter war or they will not allow nations to go to war, in our context that may also not be true," he told the seminar organised by defence think-tank Centre for Land Warfare Studies.



In this photograph released by The Osservatore Romano yesterday, Pope Francis looks on as children perform traditional dances at The Apostolic Nunciature of Bogota on September 6, 2017. Pope Francis has arrived in Colombia for a five-day tour to plead for a "stable and lasting" peace in a divided country just emerging from a 50-year war that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. PHOTO: AFP

GULF DIPLOMATIC ROW

Saudi singers pour scorn on Qatar

Seven Arab singers, mostly Saudis, have poured scorn on Qatar in a song that has gone viral, prompting fresh rancour between the Gulf rivals as their three-month-old diplomatic spat drags on. The five-minute music video titled "Teach Qatar", featuring five leading Saudi singers including Mohammad Abdullah and Abdulmajeed Abdullah as well as two Iraqi artists, has so far attracted more than two million views. "Our stabbing is in the face, not in the back," one of the artists sings, in an apparent swipe at Qatar's foreign policy. "Teach Qatar and everyone who stood by Qatar that our country is very patient. But when issues reach a dangerous state, then by God you will see the actions of its men." Regional kingpin Saudi Arabia as well as the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain cut ties with Qatar in June, accusing it of bankrolling Islamist extremist groups. Doha denies the charges. The four Arab states have since issued an embargo on Qatar, recalling their diplomats and banning the emirate from using their airspace or ports. An advisor to the Saudi royal court composed the song, which was released by Rotana, an entertainment firm primarily owned by Saudi billionaire Prince Alwaleed bin Talal. Qatar officially dismissed the video as defamatory. "We stick to our ethics and stay away from the minor acts, and let them slander using their media to disgrace us," said the foreign ministry official Ahmed bin Saad al-Rumaihi tweeted.

MUMBAI 1993 BLASTS

Court sentences two men to death

An Indian court yesterday sentenced two men to death over bomb blasts in Mumbai two decades ago that killed more than 250 people. Firoz Abdul Rashid Khan and Tahir Merchant were convicted of conspiring in the 1993 blasts and sentenced to death. "So far as the two death sentences are concerned, I am satisfied," said special prosecutor Deepak Salve after the closing hearing. A key figure in the attacks, Abu Salem, was sentenced to life imprisonment. India had agreed that Salem would not receive the death penalty when Salem was extradited from Portugal. Public prosecutor Ujjwal announced life terms against Salem and Karimullah Khan, and a 10-year term against a fifth defendant. The sentences come after a special court in Mumbai convicted six men in June on a range of offences in the attacks. One accused, Mustafa Doss, died of a heart attack shortly after the conviction. The court acquitted a seventh man, Abdul Quayyum, for lack of evidence. A key figure of involvement in coordinated bomb attacks on the Mumbai stock exchange, the head quarters of Air India and a shopping centre in March 1993 that killed 257 people and injured hundreds more.

Climate change will hit the Pacific harder: World Bank

Climate change will hit the Pacific harder than anywhere else on Earth and the region's tiny island nations need major international aid to deal with the challenge, the World Bank said yesterday. A World Bank report, "Pacific Possible", draws on research from numerous island states that they are on the frontline of global warming. "(It) could have more dire impacts on the Pacific islands than any other country in the world," warned the report, released yesterday at the Pacific Islands Summit in Samoa. The worst-case outcome - waters up 126 centimetres by 2100 - would swamp large areas of habitable land in low-lying nations such as Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu. "There is little prospect that the high costs of building sea walls could be financed by the countries themselves," the report said. "Accordingly, the international community will have to assess the trade-off between large initial expenditures on construction... versus emergency relief and recovery programmes when disasters occur." It said climate change's impact was already being seen through coastal erosion, saltwater contamination of farmland and drinking water, as well as unpredictable rainfall causing more droughts and floods. The Pacific has always been lashed by cyclones but the report said the most destructive category five storms were set to become more frequent, straining the region's already scarce economic resources. The report said Kiribati and Tuvalu, which are both only a few metres above sea level, may not only need to consider wholesale migration.

GRAFT CHARGES

Sri Lanka's HC jails Rajapakse top aide

Sri Lanka's High Court yesterday jailed a top civil servant for three years in the first corruption sanction against a member of former president Mahinda Rajapakse's government. Lalith Weeraratna was also fined two million rupees and ordered to pay 50 million in damages for spending 600 million rupees (\$4 million) of state cash on Rajapakse's failed re-election bid in 2015. Weeraratna, then head of the civil service and Rajapakse's most senior aide, was found guilty of misappropriating money belonging to the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC), which he chaired. The TRC director-general of the time Anusha Palpita was also jailed for three years for allowing its cash to be diverted to promote Rajapakse's election bid. The court was told that 600 million rupees in gifts of textiles was given to Buddhist devotees along with Rajapakse's official propaganda material. Election officials told the court they were aware of the distribution of parcels of cloth to voters and ruled it a violation of election laws. The charges against the two accused had been proved beyond reasonable doubt," High Court judge Gihan Kulatunga said.