

NEWSIN brief

Saudi rounds up 20 people in crackdown
AFP, Doha

Saudi authorities have arrested at least 20 people, including prominent clerics Salman al-Awadh and Awad al-Qarni, in an apparent crackdown on dissent, activists and family members have said. The leading cleric was arrested after he welcomed the first contact between Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman and Qatar's emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani after a three-month boycott.

US ups ante against Russia broadcaster RT
AFP, Washington

The US Justice Department has asked Russian broadcaster RT to register its American operations as a "foreign agent," putting fresh pressure on a major media company that Washington regards as Moscow's propaganda arm. RT said late Monday that the company that supplies all the services for its RT America channel was told by the DOJ in a letter that it is obligated to register under the Foreign Agents Registration Act, an act aimed at lobbying and attorneys representing for-profit political interests. On its website, RT editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan condemned the move as part of a US "war" on Russian media.

Singapore gets first female president
AFP, Singapore

Singapore got its first female president yesterday, but the milestone was overshadowed by criticism that her selection was undemocratic after she was handed the job without a vote.

UNEP calls for 'stronger' EU trade deals
AFP, Strasbourg

Defying eurosceptics, the former Luxembourg premier called for more states to join the euro and the passport-free Schengen area and proposed a single EU president and finance minister.

UK and Germany
The French city of Strasbourg, in a speech that mixed English, French and German.

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A Syrian woman removes the niqab as she arrives with her family at the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) check point from Islamic State held areas in the eastern of Deir al Zor, Syria on Tuesday. PHOTO: AFP

HURRICANE IRMA Residents return to Florida Keys

Residents of the Florida Keys ravaged by Hurricane Irma, which has left at least 12 dead statewide, discovered scenes of desolation as they returned Tuesday amid a massive operation to restore electricity to millions of people still without power in three southern US states.

As emergency workers picked through the rubble, Irma's death toll in Florida rose from an earlier figure of two. The storm has now killed at least 50 people across the Caribbean and the United States.

Shattered mobile homes, grounded sailboats and jumbled mounds of debris greeted Keys residents as police began lifting roadblocks to the islands following the passage of Hurricane Irma.

European leaders visited the storm-ravaged Caribbean, meanwhile amid criticism over relief efforts and the White House announced that President Donald Trump and his wife, Melania, would visit Florida today.

The islands had been all but cut off since the storm struck early Sunday as a Category Four hurricane, and bore the brunt of Irma's damage while the rest of the Sunshine State fared relatively better.

With over 15 million people without electricity in Florida, one million in neighboring Georgia and 20,000 in South Carolina, authorities launched a massive effort to restore power.

French President Macron and Britain's Foreign Secretary Johnson meanwhile visited their nations' hurricane-hit Caribbean territories.

'Wind back in Europe's sails' EU president courts eastern states, predicts UK regret over Brexit

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, in a flagship speech yesterday, declared the "wind is back in Europe's sails" after last year's shock Brexit vote, an act he insisted Britain would regret.

In his annual State of the Union address, Juncker said the troubled bloc had become more united in the past 12 months and economic growth was picking up.

The EU should seize the momentum to deepen integration and a sign new trade deals around the world, Juncker told the European Parliament.

Defying eurosceptics, the former Luxembourg premier called for more states to join the euro and the passport-free Schengen area and proposed a single EU president and finance minister.

"The wind is back in Europe's sails," Juncker told MEPs in the French city of Strasbourg, in a speech that mixed English, French and German.

"We have now a window of opportunity but it will not stay open for us. Let us make the most of the momentum, catch the wind in our sails."

Junker did not utter the word "Brexit" until the very end of his 80-minute speech, saying that "we will regret it, but you will regret it too," earning jeers from British eurosceptics in the chamber.

"We will move forward - because Brexit is not everything, because Brexit is not the future of Europe," the veteran politician added.

British eurosceptic leader Nigel Farage, who is a Euro-MP, responded to Juncker: "Thank God we're leaving - you've learned nothing from Brexit!"

The 62-year-old Juncker has two years left in office as head of the EU's powerful executive to ensure that his legacy is not limited to the departure of one of the European Union's largest states.

He struck a far more optimistic tone than when he stood at the podium in September 2016.

Juncker had admitted then that "it was plain for all to see that our union was not in a good state, battered and bruised by a year that shook our very foundations."

With all 28 EU countries back in growth after years of economic crisis, and the rise of populism - after Brexit and the election of US President Donald Trump - apparently at bay for now, Juncker said there were reasons to be cheerful.

He called for the EU to hold a special summit, in Romania, and while after Britain's departure on March 29, 2019.

The day after EU-UK trade deals remains a distant prospect, Juncker called on the bloc to seal trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand by the end of his mandate, and push for pacts with Mexico and South American countries.

CHAKMA-HAJONG REFUGEE ISSUE India to grant citizenship

India will soon grant citizenship to nearly one lakh Chakma and Hajong refugees, who came from the erstwhile East Pakistan five decades ago and are living in camps in the northeast, officials said yesterday.

The Chakma-Hajong refugee issue was discussed three days yesterday at a high-level meeting convened by Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh and attended by Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu, Union Minister of State for Home Kiren Rijiju and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval among others.

In 2015, the Supreme Court had directed the Central government to grant citizenship to the Chakmas and Hajongs refugees, mostly staying in Arunachal Pradesh.

"The Supreme Court order on Chakmas and Hajongs was discussed in the meeting. We need to implement the order as early as possible," a home ministry official said.

Several organisations and civil society in Arunachal Pradesh have been opposing citizenship to the refugees saying it would change the demography of the state.

"The Centre is trying to find a workable solution to the issue by proposing that Chakma and Hajong refugees will not be given rights, including ownership of land, offered by Scheduled Tribes Inclusion Acts, the official said.

However, they may be given Inner Line permits, required for non-locals in Arunachal Pradesh to travel and work.



Great progress in fight on global poverty says Bill Gates

Great progress has been made since 1990 in alleviating global poverty, but much remains to be done, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation said in a report yesterday.

The foundation set up by the billionaire Microsoft co-founder plans to issue annual reports monitoring progress toward reaching a series of global sustainable development goals established by the United Nations in 2015.

These goals, to be reached by 2030, include eliminating poverty and hunger, providing clean water and affordable energy, and fighting gender inequalities and climate change.

"The first Gates Foundation 'Goalkeepers' report appears as the UN General Assembly prepares to meet in New York this month."

The Gates report focused on 18 of the development indicators set by the United Nations.

"We're trying to document the incredible progress" made around the world "including on key things like poverty and different disease areas," Bill Gates said in a statement.

Childhood mortality under the age of five has dropped considerably, from 11.2 million in 1990 to just over 6 million in 2016 thanks to vaccinations and improved living conditions, the report said.

The goal is to further cut this number to 2.5 million by 2030.

The report highlights the establishment of a Kurdish state in Iraq, which one in four children died before reaching five years of age in 1990 - but today that figure is down to one in 16.

Suicide blast kills 3 near Kabul stadium

A suicide bomber blew himself up near a cricket stadium in the Afghan capital Kabul yesterday, killing three people including a policeman and wounding five others, police said.

The attacker detonated the bomb after he was stopped at a security checkpoint by suspicious police as he walked towards Kabul's main cricket ground where a match was under way.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack, the latest in a series of deadly assaults in the city.

"The security forces by sacrificing themselves have prevented the attacker from reaching the crowd (inside the stadium) and creating a catastrophe," police spokesman Basir Mujahid told AFP.

Two of the wounded were police officers. Scores of police blocked the road leading to the stadium where the sixth match of the Shpagez Cricket League, a domestic T20 tournament, between the Boost Defenders and Mis Ainak Knights was under way.

A handful of foreign players are also taking part in the competition which started Monday.

Hundreds of spectators could be heard from outside the stadium as firefighters washed down the road where the bomber had blown himself up.

Afghanistan Cricket Board spokesman Farid Hotaik told AFP the match was briefly interrupted and "all players and cricket board officials are safe."



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (C) and his wife Akie Abe pay their respects to Mahatma Gandhi along with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (R) during their visit to Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, yesterday. The leaders are set to inaugurate India's first bullet train project today. PHOTO: AFP

VENEZUELA CRISIS Maduro accepts talks offer with opposition

Maduro accepted to undertake talks brokered by Dominican Republic President Danilo Medina and ex-Spanish premier Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero.

"Zapatero very well that I have been a promoter of this dialogue and I accept this new day of dialogue," Maduro said.

Maduro appointed influential Caracas politician Juan Guaido as his representative at the talks, and said he would leave for the Dominican Republic "in the next few hours."

The opposition announced in a statement that it would hold an exploratory meeting with the Dominican president.

However, it insisted it did not mean it was the beginning of formal talks with the government.

"The time for symbolic gestures is over," the opposition said in a statement. The UN Security Council is set to meet on Tuesday.

"To enter into serious negotiations, we demand immediate actions that demonstrate a real willingness to resolve the national problems and not to win time," it said.

CRITICISM OVER DUTERTE'S WAR ON DRUGS Philippine MPs vote to impeach chief justice

Philippine lawmakers have moved to cut the budget of the nation's human rights commission to \$20 and impeach the Supreme Court chief justice in what critics yesterday labelled part of a slide towards dictatorship under President Rodrigo Duterte.

The twin votes in the House of Representatives added to a growing climate of fear that Duterte is critical of silence about his order of his war on drugs, which has claimed thousands of lives and led rights groups to warn of a crime against humanity.

Duterte's allies in the lower house's justice committee yesterday also voted to impeach his chief justice after determining corruption allegations against her had substance.

"He had it coming," Duterte told reporters late Tuesday, referring to commission chairman Jose Gascon.

"They only gave him 1,000 pesos (about \$20) because Congress is angry."

The commission is one of several independent government bodies set up by the constitution to check the power of the executive branch, which controls the country's police and military forces.

Cancel Iran nuclear deal Says Netanyahu; Israel endorses independent Kurdish state

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said that the nuclear deal between world powers and Iran should be amended or canceled.

Speaking in Buenos Aires alongside Argentine President Mauricio Macri, Netanyahu said he wanted to correct the impression in recent media reports that Israel's position on the 2015 deal had softened.

"So let me take this opportunity and clarify, our position is straightforward. This is a bad deal - either fix it or cancel it. This is Israel's position."

Netanyahu has repeatedly taken aim at Iran since arriving in Argentina on Monday as the first sitting Israeli prime minister to visit Latin America.

He accused Tehran of operating "a terror machine that encompasses the entire world, operating terror cells in many continents, including Latin America."

"In the case of Iran, it's not only merely terror, it's also about the quest for nuclear weapons that concerns us and should concern the entire international community."

In a veiled reference to the US and world powers' preoccupation with North Korea, he said: "We understand the danger of a rogue nation having atomic bombs."

As the Israeli government seeks partners and alliances, doz-

ens of left-wing activists waving Palestinian flags protested Netanyahu's presence in Buenos Aires last Tuesday over his "bellicose and repressive policies" against the Palestinians.

During his stay in Buenos Aires, the Israeli premier was also to meet Paraguayan President Horacio Cartes, who traveled expressly to the Argentine capital for the meeting.

Following the two-day visit, Netanyahu will visit Colombia and Mexico before heading to New York for the United Nations General Assembly.

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On Tuesday, Iraq's Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani said he would press ahead with the Sept 25 referendum despite a vote by Iraq's parliament rejecting it.

Western powers are concerned a plebiscite in Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish region - including the oil-rich city of Kirkuk - could divert attention from Iraq against Islamic State militants.