

NEWSIN brief

Indian soldiers kill 4 militants in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian soldiers killed four militants during a two-day gun battle near the heavily militarised de facto border in Kashmir that divides the disputed territory with Pakistan, officials said yesterday. Police said civilians tipped them off about the movement of armed militants near the LoC, prompting a search.

Australia to create nat'l space agency

AFP, Sydney

Australia yesterday committed to creating a national space agency as it looks to cash in on the lucrative and fast-evolving astronautical sector. The announcement came at a week-long Adelaide space conference attended by the world's top scientists and experts including SpaceX chief Elon Musk.

World's heaviest woman dies

AFP, Abu Dhabi

An Egyptian believed to be the world's heaviest woman died yesterday of heart and kidney failure at an Abu Dhabi hospital, following months of treatment to help her lose weight. A team of more than 20 doctors had been caring for Eman Ahmed Abd El Aty, 37, since her arrival at Burjeel Hospital in May.

Sri Lanka arrests man with gold-filled bottom

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka customs arrested an India-bound air passenger attempting with "difficulty" to smuggle nearly one kilogram (2.2 pounds) of gold stuffed in his rectum, a spokesman said yesterday. Officials were alerted when the 45-year-old Sri Lankan behaved "suspiciously" at Colombo airport's departure lounge on Sunday, spokesman Sunil Jayaratne said.



Iraqi Kurds celebrate with the Kurdish flag in the streets of the northern city of Kirkuk yesterday as they vote in a referendum on independence. Inset, Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government Nechirvan Barzani (C) and his wife Nabila (L), cast their vote at a hotel in Erbil.

PHOTO: AFP

Iraq Kurds defy Baghdad in independence vote

AGENCIES

Kurds voted in an independence referendum in northern Iraq yesterday, ignoring pressure from Baghdad, threats from Turkey, and international warnings that the vote may ignite yet more regional conflict.

The vote organised by Kurdish authorities is expected to deliver a comfortable "yes" for independence, but is not binding. However, it is designed to give Masoud Barzani, who heads the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), a mandate to negotiate the secession of the oil-producing region.

For Iraqi Kurds - the largest ethnic group left stateless when the Ottoman empire collapsed a century ago - the referendum offers a historic opportunity despite intense international pressure to call it off.

"We have seen worse, we have seen injustice, killings and blockades," said Talat, waiting to vote in the regional capital of Erbil, as a group of smiling women, in colourful Kurdish dress, emerged from the school showing their fingers stained with ink, a sign that they voted.

At Sheikh Amir village, near the

Peshmerga front lines west of Erbil, long lines of Kurdish fighters waited to vote outside a former school. Most emerged smiling, holding up ink-marked fingers.

In Baghdad, lawyer Adil Salman said the referendum resulted from the weakness of the Iraqi government. "The scenario we're seeing now is of state disintegration," he said.

The Kurds also say the vote acknowledges their contribution in confronting Islamic

State after it overwhelmed the Iraqi army in 2014 and seized control of a third of Iraq, reported Reuters.

President Tayyip Erdogan said Turkey could cut off the pipeline that carries oil from northern Iraq to the outside

world, piling more pressure on the Kurds.

Meanwhile, Iran's foreign ministry said yesterday that its border with Iraqi Kurdistan remained open despite its independence referendum, reversing an earlier statement.

A statement by the ministry said: "The land border between Iran and the Kurdistan region of Iraq is open."

"For now, only air borders between Iran and this region are closed," it added.

Turkey: Iraqi Kurds would face sanctions over vote

Iran: land border with Kurdistan remains open

WAR IN SYRIA

Russian air strikes in Idlib kill 27

AFP, Beirut

Air strikes by Russian warplanes in Syria's mainly jihadist-controlled north-west province of Idlib yesterday killed at least 27 civilians including two children, a Britain-based monitor said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said it was the highest civilian toll in Idlib since the region was designated in May as one of Syria's "de-escalation" zones agreed in a deal between regime allies Russia and Iran, and rebel backer Turkey.

Meanwhile, US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces militia yesterday accused Russia of killing one of its fighters and wounding others in strikes on a gas facility it captured two days earlier from the Islamic State group in eastern Syria.

North Korea accuses US of declaring war

Says it can take countermeasures against US bombers

REUTERS, New York

North Korea's foreign minister said yesterday that US President Donald Trump had declared war on North Korea and that Pyongyang reserves the right to take countermeasures, including shooting down US strategic bombers even if they are not in the country's airspace.

"The whole world should clearly remember it was the US who first declared war on our country," Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho told reporters in New York.

"Since the United States declared war on our country, we will have every right to make countermeasures, including the right to shoot down United States strategic bombers even when they are not inside the airspace border of our country."

Ri, who made the remarks before leaving New York where he had attended last week's UN General Assembly, made the statement then returned from his car to the press microphones to add: "In light of

the declaration of war by Trump, all options will be on the operations table of the supreme leadership of the DPRK (Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea)."

His words echoed warnings from the Trump administration that all options were on the table in dealing with North Korea's nuclear and missile development and its threats to have a weapon capable of reaching the continental United States.

On Saturday, Ri told the UN General Assembly that targeting the US mainland with its rockets was inevitable after "Mr Evil President" Trump called Pyongyang's leader a "rocket man" on a suicide mission.

"Just heard Foreign Minister of North Korea speak at UN. If he echoes thoughts of Little Rocket Man, they won't be around much longer!" Trump said on Twitter late on Saturday.

North Korea has pursued its missile and nuclear programs in defiance of international condemnation and sanctions.



Ri Yong Ho

'Clear Buddhist terror'

Erdogan accuses Myanmar of carrying out 'genocide' against Rohingya Muslims

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday accused the security forces in Myanmar of waging a "Buddhist terror" against the Rohingya Muslim minority in the country, hundreds of thousands of whom have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh.

Erdogan, who has repeatedly highlighted the plight of the Rohingya, again accused the "Yangon government of carrying out a "genocide" against the people in Rakhine state.

In a speech in Istanbul, Erdogan lamented the failure of the international community to lay sanctions against the Myanmar government over its campaign.

"There is a very clear genocide over there," Erdogan said.

Erdogan, who has held talks by phone with Myanmar's key leader the Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung Sang Suu Kyi, added: "Buddhists always get represented as envoys of goodwill."



"At the moment, there is a clear Buddhist terror in Myanmar... I don't know how you can gloss over this with yoga, schmog. This is a fact here. And all humanity needs to know this."

More than 430,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled across the border to Bangladesh from a military campaign which the UN says likely amounts to ethnic cleansing of the stateless minority.

Before the most recent surge of violence, there were over one million Rohingyas in Myanmar's restive Rakhine state in the west of the overwhelmingly Buddhist country.

Erdogan, himself a pious Muslim, takes a sharp interest in the fate of Muslim communities across the world and notably sees himself as a champion of the Palestinian cause.

Returning for a key personal theme, he lambasted the international community for being quick to denounce "Islamic terror" but not "Christian terror", "Jewish terror" or "Buddhist terror".



People are seen with an American flag and a placard in support of the Rohingya during the annual Muslim Day Parade in New York City, US, on Sunday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Trump wants to fix Gulf crisis with dialogue

Says Qatar FM

REUTERS, Paris

Qatar's foreign minister said yesterday that US President Donald Trump was stepping up efforts for a diplomatic solution to the crisis in the Gulf.

Trump initially took a hard line against Qatar, calling it a "high level" sponsor of terrorism after Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt shook the region by cutting political and trade ties with the small state in June.

The action suspended air and shipping routes with the world's biggest exporter of liquefied natural gas, which is home to the region's biggest US military base.

Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani told reporters in Paris that he had seen a "greater desire" from Trump to fix the stand-off through discussion.

"He has stated very clearly that he doesn't want to see conflict among friends. So there is a determination by the US to solve this by dialogue."

There was no immediate comment from the White House. In Trump's initial comments in June, he suggested he had helped plan the Qatar action with Arab leaders, though last week he said he expected the dispute to be solved quickly.

The nations say Doha supports regional foe Iran and Islamists, charges Qatar's leaders deny.

Al-Thani said Qatar was doing well economically despite the sanctions, but said the Arab action was actually driving Qatar closer to Tehran, something Doha has acknowledged in the past.

"They said Qatar was now closer to Iran. By their measures they are pushing Qatar to Iran. They are giving Iran, or any regional force, Qatar like a gift," he said.

Dubai starts tests of flying taxis

REUTERS, Dubai

Dubai yesterday showcased a flight for what it said would soon be the world's first drone taxi service under an ambitious plan by the United Arab Emirates city to lead the Arab world in innovation.

The flying taxi developed by German drone firm Volocopter resembles a small, two-seater helicopter cabin topped by a wide hoop studded with 18 propellers. It was unmanned for its test flight.

Meant to run without remote control guidance and with a maximum flight duration of 30 minutes, it comes with plenty of fail-safes in case of trouble: back-up batteries, rotors and, for a worst case scenario, a couple of parachutes.

Volocopter is in a race with more than a dozen well-funded European and U.S. firms, each with its own science fiction-inspired vision for creating a new form of urban transport that is a cross between a driverless electric car and a short-hop, vertical takeoff-and-landing aircraft.

These include aerospace giant Airbus, Kitty Hawk, and Uber.

The company performed its maiden test run in a ceremony staged for Dubai Crown Prince Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed.

Russia violating int'l law in Crimea: UN

Report says people are forced to renounce citizenship

AP, Geneva

The UN human rights office said in a report yesterday that Russia is violating international law in Crimea, including by imposing Russian citizenship on its people and deliberately transferring hundreds of prisoners and detainees to prisons in Russia.

The report, drawn up under an existing request from Ukraine's government, chronicles alleged rights violations and abuses in Crimea since Russia annexed the peninsula from Ukraine in 2014. Russia has refused to budge despite international outrage and biting US and European Union sanctions against Moscow.

A Russian diplomat in Geneva insisted that the UN rights mission didn't have competency

to examine the situation in Crimea, insisting that the peninsula was part of Russia now.

"It is strange that the human rights mission in Ukraine assesses the situation in the Russian Federation," the diplomat said on condition of anonymity because any official declaration can only come from Moscow. "This is un-mandated work."

The report urges Russia to "effectively investigate" alleged torture, abductions and killings in the peninsula, while decrying denials of access to its own team.

"A key finding of the report is the grave deterioration of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in Crimea over the past 3-1/2 years," said Fiona Frazer, head of the UN human rights monitoring mission in Ukraine.



IMMINENT ERUPTION IN BALI

Nearly 50,000 flee

AFP, Karangasem

Nearly 50,000 people have evacuated their homes for fear of an imminent volcanic eruption on the Indonesian resort island of Bali, disaster officials said yesterday.

Mount Agung, 75 kilometres (47 miles) from the tourist hub of Kuta, has been shaking since August and threatening to erupt for the first time in more than 50 years.

The disaster mitigation agency said 48,540 people had fled and the number was expected to rise because more than 60,000 people lived in the danger zone.

"There are still people who don't want to be evacuated," Sutopo Purwo Nugroho, an agency spokesman, told a press conference.

"The reason is firstly, the mountain hasn't erupted yet. Secondly, they are worried about their livestock."

Officials announced the highest possible alert level on Friday following the increasing volcanic activity, and told people to stay at least nine kilometres (5.6 miles) from the crater.

Trekking tours on the mountain have been banned but officials have otherwise been at pains to assure tourists the island is safe.

Dozens of anxious visitors, worried their vacation plans may be ruined, have taken to social media to ask for updates.

Others have adopted a more philosophical view, determined not to let the warning disrupt their holiday.