

# NEWS IN brief

## White nationalists back in Charlottesville

White nationalists briefly rallied on Saturday in Charlottesville, Virginia, where violent clashes in August led to the death of a woman who was run down by a car. A few dozen white nationalists gathered at Emancipation Park near a statue of Confederate general Robert E Lee.

## Ghana gas depot blast kills six

At least six people were killed and 35 injured, mostly suffering burns, after an explosion at a natural gas depot in Ghana's capital, fire service spokesman Billy Anaglate said yesterday. The explosion on Saturday evening at the state-owned GOIL liquefied natural gas station sent a giant fireball into the sky above the eastern part of Accra, causing frightened residents to flee their homes in large numbers. Others were forcibly evacuated.



## UK PM may demote FM Boris Johnson

The Sunday Times, British newspaper, said Prime Minister Theresa May had signalled in an interview that she might demote Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, after she faced an open rebellion from within her own party this week. Johnson, widely seen as a potential candidate for the Conservative leadership, wrote a newspaper article last month outlining his vision of Britain's exit from the EU just days before May was to give a major speech on the subject.

## WAR ON GRAFT 1.34m China officials punished since 2013

China's anti-graft watchdog said roughly 1.34 million lower-ranking officials have been punished since 2013 under President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption drive. Xi, who is preparing for a major Communist Party leadership conference later this month, has made an anti-graft campaign targeting "tigers and flies", both high and low ranking officials, a core policy priority during his five-year term. China is preparing for the 19th Congress later this month, a twice-a-decade leadership event where Xi is expected to consolidate power and promote his policy positions. Those punished for graft since 2013 include 648,000 village-level officials and most crimes were related to small scale corruption, said the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) yesterday. While much of the country's anti-graft drive has targeted lower ranking village and county officials, several high-ranking figures have been taken down. In August the head of the anti-graft committee for China's Ministry of Finance was himself put under investigation for suspected graft. In September a senior military officer who sits on China's powerful Central Military Commission, overseen by Xi, was detained and questioned over corruption-related offenses, Reuters reported. The CCDI said 155,000 country-level party bureaus have set up corruption policing mechanisms as of August, representing 94.8 percent of total bureaus.

# Spain may invoke 'article 155'

### PM warns Catalonia autonomy may be suspended amid unity rallies

Tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Catalonia's capital Barcelona yesterday to express their opposition to any declaration of independence from Spain, showing how divided the region is on the issue.

The protesters rallied in central Barcelona, waving Spanish and Catalan flags and banners saying "Catalonia is Spain" and "Together we are stronger", as politicians on both sides hardened their positions in the country's worst political crisis for decades.

Spain Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy said on Saturday he would not rule out removing Catalonia's government and calling a fresh local election if it claimed independence, as well as suspending the region's existing autonomous status.

Rajoy has remained vague on whether he would use article 155 of the constitution, the so-called nuclear option which enables him to sack the regional government and call a local election.

Asked if he was ready to trigger article 155, Rajoy told El Pais newspaper: "I don't rule out anything that is within the law ... Ideally, we shouldn't have to take drastic solutions but for that not to happen there would have to be changes."

The conservative prime minister ruled out using mediators to resolve the crisis - something Catalan leader Puigdemont has said he is open to - and said the issue would not force a snap national election.

Rajoy added the government would "prevent any declaration of independence from materialising in anything".



People wave Spanish and Catalan flags as they attend a pro-union demonstration organised by the Catalan Civil Society organisation in Barcelona, Spain, yesterday. Inset, A protester has a Spanish flag painted on her face before a pro-union demonstration.

"Spain will continue being Spain," he said.

The stark warning came days before Puigdemont is expected to address the region's parliament, on Tuesday, when he could unilaterally declare independence.

"We feel both Catalan and Spanish," Araceli Ponze, 72, said as she rallied in Barcelona. "We are facing a tremendous unknown. We will see what happens this week but we have to speak out very loudly so they know what we want."

The wealthy northeastern

region of 7.5 million people, which has its own language and culture, held an independence referendum on Oct 1 in defiance of a Spanish court ban.

More than 90 percent of the 2.3 million people who voted backed secession, according to Catalan officials. But that turnout represented only 43 percent of the region's 5.3 million eligible voters as many opponents of independence stayed away.

The Spanish government sent thousands of national police into the region to prevent the vote.

About 900 people were injured when officers fired rubber bullets and charged crowds with truncheons in scenes that shocked Spain and the world, and dramatically escalated the dispute.

Losing Catalonia is almost unthinkable for the Spanish government.

It would deprive Spain of about 16 percent of its people, a fifth of its economic output and more than a quarter of its exports. Catalonia is also the top destination for foreign tourists, attracting about a quarter of Spain's total.

# Merkel takes first step for coalition

### Refugee issue upsets talks

Two weeks after winning elections with a reduced majority, German Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday took a first step toward forming a government by trying to unite her bitterly divided conservative camp.

Merkel met for closed-door talks with her Bavarian CSU allies led by Horst Seehofer, who blames her open-door refugee policy for the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party.

Seehofer -- who faces internal challengers, and state elections next year -- has revived his calls to cap refugee numbers at 200,000 a year, a demand Merkel has consistently rejected as unconstitutional.

In an opening salvo Sunday, the CSU published a 10-point list of demands, including a refugee "upper limit", a broad return to the conservative roots of the centre-right alliance, and a commitment to "healthy patriotism".

"We must fight the AfD head-on -- and fight to get their voters back," said the text published in mass-circulation Bild am Sonntag, which suggested that "conservatism is sexy again".

The emergence of the anti-immigration AfD, which scored 12.6 percent, has stunned Germany by breaking a long-standing taboo on hard-right parties sitting in the Bundestag.

Its success came at the expense of the mainstream parties, making it harder for Merkel to form a working majority.

Her best shot now -- if she wants to avoid fresh elections that could further boost the AfD -- is an alliance with two other parties that make for odd bedfellows, the pro-business Free Democrats (FDP) and the left-leaning Greens.

Such a power pact -- dubbed a "Jamaica coalition" because the three party colours match those of the Caribbean nation's flag -- would be a first at the national level in Germany.

In the talks to come, likely to take weeks, all players will fight for ministerial posts and issues from EU relations to climate policy.

All must give a little to reach a compromise -- but not too much, to avoid charges from their own party bases that they are selling out in a grab for power.



# 'Only one thing will work' on N Korea

### Threatens Trump, says diplomacy has failed; Kim Jong-Un promotes sister, reaffirms nuke drive

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump said that diplomatic efforts with North Korea have consistently failed, adding that "only one thing will work."

Trump has engaged in an escalating war of words with North Korean strongman Kim Jong-Un, trading insults amid rising tensions between the two nuclear-armed rivals.

"Presidents and their administrations have been talking to North Korea for 25 years, agreements made and massive amounts of money paid," Trump tweeted on Saturday.

It "hasn't worked, agreements violated before the ink was dry, makings fools of US negotiators. Sorry, but only one thing will work!"

Trump returned to the theme when he appeared on former governor Mike Huckabee's show on Trinity Broadcasting Network television on Saturday, blaming previous administrations for not having adequately addressed the issue before.

This "should have been handled 25 years ago, it should have been handled 10 years ago, it should have been handled during the Obama administration," the president said, referring to his Democratic predecessor Barack Obama.

The US has not ruled out the use of force to compel Pyongyang to halt missile and nuclear tests, and Trump has threatened to destroy the country.

The mercurial American president also told journalists at a recent gathering with military leaders to discuss Iran, North Korea and the Islamic State group that the current period "could be the calm before the storm," declining to clarify his remarks.

In recent days, as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson flew home from meeting with top Chinese officials, Trump tweeted that his envoy was "wasting his time" in trying to probe North Korea's willingness to talk.

The message came after Tillerson had revealed there were backchannels between US and North Korean officials.

Secretary of Defence James Mattis later expressed support for the diplomatic track in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee.



A member of the Syrian Civil Defence, also known as White Helmets, carries a victim following a reported air strike on a vegetable market in Maaret al-Numan in Syria's northern province of Idlib, yesterday.

## DEVELOPMENTS

- Final assault on IS in Raqa starts
- Turkish military vehicles enter Syria's Idlib
- Syrian army encircles IS in al-Mayadin



PHOTO: AFP

# Fighting escalates in Syria

REUTERS, Raqa

A final assault on Islamic State's last line of defence in its former Syrian capital Raqa should begin yesterday night, a field commander for the US-backed forces operating there said as fight against jihadists intensifies across Syria.

The loss of Islamic State's remaining streets and buildings in Raqa following its defeat in Iraq's Mosul this year and its retreat from swathes of territory in both countries, would mark a big moment in the battle to destroy the jihadist group.

At the height of its power two years ago Islamic State ruled over millions of people, from northern Syria to the outskirts of Iraq's capital Baghdad, but it has since endured a series of losses under attack from many sides.

For three years Raqa was the de facto Syrian capital of Islamic State's self-declared caliphate, a centre of operations where it oversaw the management of much of eastern, central and northern Syria and planned attacks abroad.

Meanwhile, Turkish military vehicles crossed the Syrian border

into Idlib yesterday, a local resident and a local rebel said, after Ankara announced an operation by rebel groups in the area, which is controlled by rival jihadist alliance Tahrir-al-Sham.

The operation follows a deal between Turkey and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's allies Russia and Iran to impose a "de-escalation" zone in Idlib and surrounding areas to reduce warfare there, an agreement that did not include Tahrir-al-Sham.

In another front, Syria's army and its allies have encircled Islamic State in the city of al-Mayadin,

southeast of Deir al-Zor, in eastern Syria, a Syrian military source said yesterday.

Al-Mayadin is one of the last strongholds of Islamic State as it falls back upon the fertile area downstream of Deir al-Zor in the Euphrates valley and launches counter attacks in the central desert after losing swathes of territory this year.

US officials have previously said that Islamic State had relocated some of its diminished command and propaganda structures to al-Mayadin as it was forced from territory elsewhere.

# Nate lashes US Gulf Coast

### Triggers widespread flooding, power outages in Alabama

AFP, New Orleans

Tropical storm Nate moved quickly inland from the US Gulf Coast yesterday after making landfall twice as a powerful hurricane, triggering widespread flooding and power outages.

After leaving a trail of death and destruction in Central America, the storm hit the southern United States -- the third hurricane to hit the region in less than two months as part of an especially active hurricane season.

More than 100,000 people were without power. Ahead of the storm, officials urged residents to evacuate some vulnerable areas before the storm first made landfall on the southeastern tip of Louisiana on Saturday evening and later hit along the Mississippi coast.

At 5:00 am, the storm had top winds of 70 miles per hour and was moving north-northeast at 23 miles per hour, according to the National Hurricane Center.

"Rapid weakening anticipated," the NHC said as the storm moved further



inland over Mississippi and Alabama. It was expected to track further north through today.

It has since been downgraded to a tropical storm and hurricane warnings were discontinued.

"This is a life-threatening situation. Persons located within these areas should take all necessary actions to protect life and property from rising water and the potential for other dangerous conditions," the NHC said.

# No more talks if more sanctions: Iran

### Issues threat against US regional military bases

REUTERS, Beirut

Iran warned the United States against designating its Revolutionary Guards Corp as a terrorist group and said US regional military bases would be at risk if further sanctions were passed.

The warning came after the White House said on Friday that President Donald Trump would announce new US responses to Iran's missile tests, support for "terrorism" and cyber operations as part of his new Iran strategy.

"As we've announced in the past, if America's new law for sanctions is passed, this country will have to move their regional bases outside the 2,000 km range of Iran's missiles," Guards' commander Mohammad Ali Jafari said, according to state media.

Jafari also said that additional sanctions would end the chances for future dialogue with the United States, according to state media, and issued a stark warning to American troops.

"If the news is correct about the stupidity of the American government in considering the Revolutionary Guards a terrorist group, then the Revolutionary Guards will consider the American army to be like Islamic State all around the world particularly in the Middle East," Jafari said.

The Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) are Iran's most powerful internal and external security force. The Quds Force, the IRGC's foreign espionage and paramilitary wing, and individuals and entities associated with the IRGC are on the US list of foreign terrorist organisations.

Iran sees the Sunni Muslim militants of IS as an existential threat to the country where the majority of the population are Shias.

Meanwhile, a dual national member of Iran's nuclear negotiating team has been jailed for five years for spying, news agency Tasnim said yesterday, citing a spokesman for the judiciary.