

NEWS IN brief

California wildfires death toll hits 31

AFP, Santa Rosa
The death toll from raging California wildfires rose to 31 Thursday as body recovery teams used cadaver dogs to locate victims, making it the deadliest series of blazes in the state's history. The fires, which began on Sunday, have swept through California's wine country, leaving thousands of people homeless and burning over 190,000 acres of land.

French former minister to head UNESCO

AFP, Paris
Former French foreign minister Audrey Azoulay was selected to head the embattled UN cultural agency UNESCO after defeating her Qatari rival by two votes in a cliffhanger election yesterday. Azoulay, 49, came from behind after six rounds of voting to defeat Hamad bin Abdulaziz Al-Kawari, also a former culture minister, by 30 votes to 28 after he failed to pick up support from other Gulf states that are part of a Saudi-led coalition blockading Qatar.

Uber files appeal against London ban

AFP, London
Uber yesterday filed its appeal against a decision by London authorities not to renew its licence, the US ride-hailing company said. An initial court hearing is expected on December 11. London transport authorities last month said they would not renew Uber's licence to operate in the city owing to public safety concerns.

Gunfight in Darjeeling kills police officer

AFP, Kolkata
One police officer was killed and four others were injured yesterday in a gunfight with suspected separatists in Darjeeling. Police said the shootout followed a pre-dawn raid on a forest hide-out used by members of the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha, a regional party agitating for a separate state for the Gorkha ethnic minority.



A combination picture shows an opposition politician of the National Super Alliance coalition reacting after a gas canister fired by police hits his car during a protest along a street in Nairobi, Kenya, yesterday. Two protesters were shot dead yesterday as opposition supporters clashed with police in western Kenya, with hundreds defying a ban on rallies to express their anger over an increasingly uncertain presidential election.

IRAN NUCLEAR DEAL WASHINGTON'S CONCERNS

THE 'SUNSET CLAUSE'
For US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the relatively short timeframe of the accord is its most "glaring flaw." From 2025, technical controls on Iran's ability to refine nuclear fuel will begin to fall away. Deal critics fear that will leave Iran on the threshold of building a bomb. Even French President Emmanuel Macron, who wants the underlying deal preserved at all costs, admits that the "sunset" should be addressed in a supplemental accord.

LIMITED INSPECTIONS
Washington's outspoken ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, has pushed hard on the question of inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). So far, IAEA said Iran is complying. But Haley has suggested Iran is barring access to secret sites. Iran has refused to allow access to military bases not declared as part of its nuclear program, but the US has not provided evidence that Tehran has a covert operation.

BALLISTIC MISSILE TESTS
Architects of the accord insist today that it was only meant to halt Iran's nuclear program, even if some then sold it as part of a rebalancing of Middle East ties. So it does not tackle Iran's ballistic missile program, which continues apace, despite separate US Security Council sanctions and condemnations. UN Security Council resolution 2231 adopted the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) into international law, but went further, calling on Iran "not to undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons." Washington therefore argues that even if the JCPOA did not deal with the ballistic threat, UN members intended a missile ban to be within the "spirit" of the broader deal.

REGIONAL TROUBLEMAKER
The spirit of the deal, Trump's administration argues further, was that it would not only halt Iran's nuclear ambition but stop it from destabilizing its neighbors. The preamble says the signatories "anticipate that full implementation of this JCPOA will positively contribute to regional and international peace and security." Supporters of the deal insist the preamble is not legally enforceable, but Tillerson and other US officials have cited it to criticize Iran's ongoing subversive role.

Iraq moves to retake Kirkuk Catalan leader faces heat

Launches military operation; Kurds mobilise thousands of fighters to defend the oil-rich region 'at any cost'

AFP, Kirkuk
The Iraqi army launched an operation to retake Kurdish-held positions around the disputed oil city of Kirkuk on Friday amid a bitter row with the Kurds over a vote for independence last month.

A senior Kurdish official said thousands of heavily armed fighters had been deployed to resist the offensive "at any cost" and called for international intervention with the federal government in Baghdad to prevent the confrontation worsening.

But a Kurdish pullback, as reported by local media, appeared to have avoided a military confrontation.

The Iraqi army and the Kurdish peshmerga have been key allies of the US-led coalition in its fight against the Islamic State (IS) group and the threat of armed clashes between them poses a major challenge for Western governments.

Ethnically divided but historically Kurdish-majority Kirkuk is one of several regions that peshmerga fighters took over from the Iraqi army in 2014 when the jihadists swept through much of northern and western Iraq.

Baghdad is bitterly opposed to Kurdish ambitions to incorporate the oil-rich province in its autonomous region

in the north and has voiced determination to take it back. "The Iraqi armed forces are advancing to retake their military positions that were taken over during the events of June 2014," an army general told AFP by telephone, asking not to be identified.

He said federal troops had already taken one base west of Kirkuk on Friday morning after peshmerga fighters with drew during the night without a fight.

The peshmerga's Kirkuk commander, Sheikh Jaafar Mustafa, said his forces had withdrawn but will fight if Iraqi forces advance more.

The tensions come as Kurdish voters on September 25 overwhelmingly backed independence in a non-binding referendum that the federal government condemned as illegal.

A top aide to Iraqi Kurdish leader Massud Barzani vowed that peshmerga forces would defend their positions "at any cost".

"Thousands of heavily armed peshmerga units are now completely in their positions around Kirkuk," Hemin Hawrami said. "Their order is to defend at any cost."

Hawrami urged the international community to intervene and call on the Iraqi prime minister to "order PMF to pull back if he can or if they listen to him".

Allies call on Puigdemont to make declaration of independence in defiance of Madrid deadline

REUTERS, Madrid
Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont came under pressure from one of his key allies yesterday to declare full independence and ignore a threat of direct rule from the Spanish government.

Puigdemont made a symbolic declaration of independence on Tuesday night, only to suspend it seconds later and call for negotiations with Madrid.

Spain's Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has given him until Monday to clarify his position - and then until Thursday to change his mind if he insists on a split - threatening to suspend Catalonia's autonomy if he chooses independence.

But far-left Catalan political group CUP called on Puigdemont to make an unequivocal declaration of independence in defiance of the deadlines.

"If (the central Madrid government) wants to continue to threaten and gag us, they should do it to the Republic that has already been claimed," the party said.

The CUP only holds 10 seats in the 135-seat Catalan parliament. But Puigdemont's minority government relies on its support to push through legislation and cannot win a

majority vote in the regional parliament without its backing.

The wealthy region's intention to break away after a referendum has plunged Spain into its worst political crisis since an attempted military coup in 1981 and could hurt economic growth targets for next year, the deputy prime minister said.

"If there were no quick solution to this issue we should be forced to lower expectations of economic growth for the year 2018," Soraya Sainz de Santamaria said yesterday.

The CUP statement echoes the position expressed late on Thursday by influential pro-independence civic group Asamblea Nacional Catalana which said: "Given the negative position of Spain toward dialogue, we ask the regional parliament to raise the suspension (on the declaration of independence)."

But the leader of Puigdemont's party, Artur Mas, who served as the region's president until 2016 and is still believed to influence key decisions, said yesterday declaring independence was not the only way forward.

The European Union, the United States and most other world powers have made it clear they wanted Catalonia to remain within Spain.

Obamacare bombshell

Trump scraps key subsidies to private health insurers, urges Democrats to fix 'broken mess'

REUTERS, Washington
President Donald Trump yesterday urged Democrats to make a deal with him on healthcare after he scrapped billions of dollars in Obamacare subsidies to private health insurers for low-income Americans in a move that raised concerns about chaos in insurance markets and could face legal challenges.

The Trump administration yesterday disclosed the date of the subsidies cutoff after announcing late on Thursday the most dramatic action the president has taken to undercut Democratic former President Barack Obama's signature 2010 healthcare law.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions said the administration will not make the next payment to insurers scheduled for next Wednesday. The payments cost \$7 billion this year and were estimated to be \$10 billion in 2018, according to congressional analysts.



Trump has made the payments, guaranteed to insurers under Obamacare to help lower out-of-pocket medical expenses for low-income consumers, each month since taking office in January. But he has repeatedly threatened to cut them off and disparaged them as a "bailout" for insurance companies.

The move drew swift condemnation from congressional Democrats, who accused Trump of sabotaging the law, and threats from Democratic state attorneys general in New York and California to take legal action.

Trump, a Republican who promise as a candidate last year to dismantle the law formally called the Affordable Care Act, urged opponents to reach out to him to make a deal.

"The Democrats ObamaCare is imploding. Massive subsidy payments to their pet insurance companies has stopped. Dems should call me to fix!" Trump said in a post on Twitter early yesterday, calling the law "a broken mess."



People display images of the late Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej during a ceremony marking one year since his death, in a field in Ayutthaya, yesterday. Monks led sombre ceremonies across Thailand yesterday on the occasion, as the grieving nation prepares to bid a final farewell to the beloved monarch in a spectacular cremation ceremony later this month.



GRAFT CHARGES

S Africa court clears way for Zuma trial

AFP, Johannesburg
South Africa's Supreme Court of Appeal yesterday ruled that President Jacob Zuma can face prosecution on almost 800 charges of corruption relating to a 1990s arms deal.

Zuma had lodged a challenge at the court in Bloemfontein after a lower court decided in 2016 to reinstate charges that were previously dropped by prosecutors. The National Prosecuting Authority must now decide whether to pursue a prosecution.

"The reasons for discontinuing the prosecution... do not bear scrutiny," said Supreme Court judge Eric Leach, delivering a ruling that the presidency described as "disappointing".

The opposition Democratic Alliance party has fought since 2009 to reactivate 783 charges relating to controversial post-apartheid military contracts that have dogged Zuma for much of his time in government.

The president, who is accused of corruption, fraud, money-laundering and racketeering, has always insisted he is innocent of the allegations that date back to when he was rising through the African National Congress (ANC) party.

Zuma, who is on an official visit to Zambia, could now contest the ruling by appeal to the Constitutional Court.

MIGRANT CRISIS

241 minors rescued

AFP, Palermo
A migrant rescue ship in the Mediterranean carried hundreds of children and unaccompanied minors from over 15 countries to safety in Italy yesterday.

The Aquarius, a boat operated by charity group SOS Mediterranee along with Doctors Without Borders (MSF), brought 606 people including 241 minors to Palermo after a series of rescues at sea on Tuesday and Wednesday.

Nearly 180 of the youngsters were unaccompanied, the group said.

"The many rescue operations carried out by Aquarius in recent days over a very wide geographical area show that the humanitarian crisis is still underway or even worsening in the central Mediterranean," SOS Mediterranee said.

Among the women pulled to safety from unseaworthy dinghies, 11 were pregnant, two in their ninth month.

The migrants, who set sail from Libya for Italy, came from countries including Benin, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Syria, Somalia and Yemen. Numerous migrants told aid workers they had been victims of sexual violence and torture in conflict-hit Libya, where they were held prisoner for months.

Turkey deploys troops to Syria's Idlib province

Aims to enforce de-escalation zone, prevent Kurdish militia

AGENCIES
Turkey announced yesterday it had deployed dozens of soldiers in the Syrian province of Idlib as part of its efforts to establish a de-escalation zone to stop fighting in the largely jihadist-controlled northwestern region.

The deployment also appeared to be aimed at preventing the expansion of Syrian Kurdish militia backed by the United States, but considered by Ankara to be "terrorists".

Over 100 soldiers, including special forces, and 30 armoured vehicles entered Idlib, Turkey's Hurriyet daily reported yesterday, as it speculated more troops could be sent to the province over the next few days.

In a statement the military said that it had begun "activities to establish observation

posts on October 12 (Thursday)".

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said yesterday that Turkish armed forces had entered Syria with the Free Syrian Army, the name Ankara uses when referring to rebels seeking President Bashar al-Assad's ouster, reported AFP.

Meanwhile, Islamic State suicide attackers killed at least 50 people in a triple car bomb attack on Thursday among a group of refugees in northeast Syria, a medical source in the Kurdish Red Crescent said. A large number of people were also injured, reported Reuters.

In Raqa, talks on securing safe passage for civilians from the besieged city have stopped, a city official close to the discussions said. City officials and tribal leaders had been working this week to negotiate the safe exit of people trapped inside jihadist-held areas.

IS suicide attacks kill 50 in east Syria
Talks on Raqa civilian exit halted: city official

FLOODS AND LANDSLIDES IN VIETNAM

Death toll hits 54

AFP, Hanoi
The death toll from devastating floods and landslides in north and central Vietnam has jumped to 54, officials said yesterday, in one of the deadliest weather disasters to hit the country in years.

Rescuers were desperately searching for 39 people still missing after heavy rains pounded several provinces this week, with forecasters warning of another major storm heading toward the country.

Villages, roads and homes across several provinces remained submerged yesterday, as authorities tried to clear roads and reach isolated residents in the mountainous north, which was hit by deadly landslides.

Entire families were killed in some areas as rivers tore a destructive path through villages and towns.

In recent days floods submerged or destroyed 33,000 houses, wiped out swathes of farmland, and left several dikes badly damaged, Vietnam's Disaster Management Authority said.

Northern Hoa Binh province -- where a state of emergency was declared this week -- was the hardest hit with 17 dead and 15 missing, followed by central Thanh Hoa province where 14 were killed, the disaster agency added.

And the country is bracing for yet more adverse weather, with forecasters predicting that tropical storm Khanun will intensify over the South China Sea and could hit Vietnam early next week.