

NEWSIN brief

23 killed as boat sinks in the Mediterranean

The bodies of 23 people were recovered from the Mediterranean on Friday after the dinghy they were travelling in sank, the EU's anti-migrant task force said. EU Navfor Med said 64 others were rescued after their inflatable vessel began taking on water. It said a total of 263 people had been rescued on Friday, including 146 "migrants in distress" saved by a Spanish ship as part of the European Union's anti-trafficking force.

Ex-hostage Bergdahl spared prison time

Bowe Bergdahl, the US soldier and former Taliban captive branded a "traitor" by President Donald Trump, will serve no time in prison for deserting his post in Afghanistan, a military judge decided Friday. Colonel Jeffery Nance ordered Bergdahl to be dishonorably discharged, have his rank slashed from sergeant to private and pay a \$10,000 fine. Bergdahl had faced up to life in prison after pleading guilty to charges of desertion and endangering his fellow troops when he abandoned his unit in a small camp in eastern Afghanistan in 2009. He was captured shortly thereafter by the Taliban. He was finally freed in a 2014 exchange for five Taliban fighters.

Italy seizes huge stash of IS 'fighter drug'

Italian police have seized 50 million euros worth of tablets of a synthetic opiate destined to be sold by the Islamic State (IS) group in Libya to raise funds for attacks, a court said Friday. Financial police discovered over 24 million Tramadol tablets being transported from India to Libya at the port of Gioia Tauro in southern Italy.



South Korean protestors hold up signs reading "No Trump, No War," during an anti-Trump rally in Seoul yesterday, ahead of US President Donald Trump's visit to South Korea. Inset, Trump and First Lady Melania Trump throw flowers during their visit to the USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor in Honolulu, Hawaii.

TRUMP'S MAMMOTH ASIA TOUR

N Korea rules out talks

AGENCIES

North Korea ruled out talks and threatened to increase its nuclear arsenal in a fresh warning to Donald Trump's administration yesterday as the US President set off on a tour of Asia.

Trump arrived in Hawaii on Friday as he set out on the longest trip to Asia by an American president in more than a quarter century.

Trump's 12-day trip to Japan, South Korea, China, Vietnam and the Philippines, ending on Nov 14, takes him out of Washington at a time when he has been beset by several issues.

These include an intensifying federal investigation into Russian meddling in last year's election, New York's recovery from an attack earlier this week that killed eight people, and debate over a Republican tax-cut plan that if approved by Congress would be Trump's first major legislative victory.

The North's state-run KCNA news agency said in a commentary that the US should be disabused of the "absurd idea" that Pyongyang would succumb to international sanctions and give up its nuclear weapons, adding that it is in "the final stage for completing nuclear deterrence".

"It had better stop daydreaming of denuclearisation talks with us", said the commentary titled "Stop dreaming a daydream".

"Our self-defensive nuclear treasure sword will be sharpened evermore unless the US hostile policy toward the DPRK is abolished once and for all", it said, using an acronym for the official name of North Korea.

The White House said Trump will deliver a speech at South Korea's National Assembly and urge "common resolve in the face of shared threat".

But there is widespread concern in South Korea that the US president's visit might worsen the situation if Trump fails to rein in his fierce rhetoric.

Trump and the North's leader Kim Jong-Un have traded insults and threats of war in recent months.

Trump, who dismissed direct talks with Pyongyang as "waste of time", will meet with President Moon Jae-In, who came to power early this year advocating for engagement with Pyongyang, a stance denounced as "appeasement" by Trump.

Professor Koh Yu-Hwan at Dongguk University, a leading policy advisor to the government, said Seoul expected Trump to avoid putting Moon in a quandary by renewing pugnacious threats against the North, particularly with South Korea hosting the Winter Olympics in February next year.

Moon has had to dial back his policy of engagement with the North in the face of Pyongyang's persistent nuclear and missile tests.



Lebanon PM quits citing threat to life and Iran

AFP, Beirut

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced his resignation yesterday, citing Iran's "grip" on the country and threats to his life.

"I announce my resignation from the post of prime minister," he said in a speech broadcast from Saudi Arabia by the Al-Arabiya news network.

"I felt what was being covertly plotted to target my life," Hariri said.

The two-time prime minister, whose father Rafik was assassinated when he held the same position in 2005, accused Iran and its powerful Lebanese Shiite ally Hezbollah of seeking hegemony in the region.

The 47-year-old Sunni politician's resignation comes less than a year after his government, to which Hezbollah's political wing belongs, was formed.

"Iran has a grip on the fate of the region's countries... Hezbollah is Iran's arm not just in Lebanon but in other Arab countries too," he said.

"In recent years, Hezbollah has used the

power of its weapons to impose a fait accompli," he said, reading a speech from behind a desk.

Hezbollah is a vital ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the war the Syrian regime is waging against the Islamic State group and armed opposition movements.

It enjoys broad support from Iran and is the only Lebanese party to have kept its weapons after the 1975-1990 civil war.

Its arsenal has since grown exponentially and now outstrips that of the nation's own armed forces.

It claims it is the only credible rampart against neighbouring Israel and its refusal to disarm is the main political crux in Lebanon.

Hezbollah members have been accused over the 2005 assassination in a massive car bomb blast of Rafik Hariri, the dominant figure of Lebanon's post-war political landscape.

He made his fortune in Saudi Arabia, where his son Saad was born. Riyadh is Iran's main regional rival and the two powers' tussle for influence has played out in ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Yemen.



Saad Hariri

Puigdemont urges separatists to unite for Catalan vote

REUTERS, Madrid/Barcelona

Ousted Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont yesterday called for a united political front in the Dec 21 election to continue the drive for independence from Spain and to protest the imprisonment of former members of the regional government.

Puigdemont, who went to Belgium after his government was fired following a unilateral declaration of independence, said on Friday he was considering standing in the election from Brussels.

In Spain's gravest political crisis since the return of democracy in the late 1970s, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy called the snap election after taking control of Catalonia a week ago.

Political parties that wish to run on a common platform have until Tuesday to register any potential coalition and until Nov 18 to put forward their candidates.

"It is time for all democrats to join together. For Catalonia, for the freedom of

political prisoners and for the republic," Puigdemont said in a tweet.

On Thursday, nine members of Puigdemont's sacked cabinet were ordered by Spain's High Court to be held on remand pending an investigation and potential trial. One member of the dismissed cabinet, Santi Vila, was released after paying bail of 50,000 euros (\$58,000) on Friday. The other eight could remain in custody for up to four years.

On Friday, Spain issued an arrest warrant for Puigdemont and four associates to answer charges of rebellion, sedition, misuse of public funds, disobedience and breach of trust relating to their secessionist campaign.

Puigdemont has said he would not return to Spain until he has been given unspecified "guarantees" by the Spanish government. Following the warrant, any extradition process could take up to 45 days according to the Belgian Federal Public Prosecutor's Office.



Iranian women take part in a demonstration outside the former US embassy in Tehran yesterday. Chanting "Death to America" and burning the US flag, thousands of Iranians protested yesterday against President Donald Trump's policies and to mark the anniversary of the 1979 US embassy siege. The storming of the embassy in Tehran by students, months after the Islamic revolution, led to a 444-day hostage crisis and a break in diplomatic relations that continues to this day.

ODDLY Enough

AI 'boy' granted residency in Tokyo

An AI character was made an official resident of a busy central Tokyo district yesterday, with the virtual newcomer resembling a chatty seven-year-old boy. The boy named "Shibuya Mirai" does not exist physically, but he can have text conversations with humans on the widely used LINE messaging app.

Tokyo's Shibuya Ward, an area popular with fashion-conscious young people, has given the character his own special residence certificate. This makes him Japan's first, and maybe the world's first, artificial intelligence bot to be granted a place on a real-life local registry.



'Drunk-driving' on a horse!

After one drink too many, a four-legged animal might seem a better option than a four-wheeled vehicle. But sadly for one Florida woman, the police did not agree -- arresting her Thursday for "drunk-driving" a horse.

Donna Byrne, 53, was arrested in Polk City, central Florida, for "DUI on a horse," the Polk County Sheriff's Office said Friday. Byrne is also accused of animal neglect for failing to provide proper protection for the horse, placing it at risk of injury or death while riding it along the busy road.

China's 'island maker'



China has unveiled a massive ship described as a "magic island maker" that is Asia's largest dredging vessel, state media reported yesterday.

The ship, capable of building artificial islands of the sort the country has constructed in the contested South China Sea, was launched Friday at a port in eastern Jiangsu province, according to the state-owned China Daily.

The boat named Tian Kun Hao is capable of digging 6,000 cubic meters an hour, the equivalent of three standard swimming pools, the newspaper said.

It is a larger version of the one China used to dredge sand, mud and coral for transforming reefs and islets in the South China Sea into artificial islands capable of hosting military installations.

When testing of the ship is completed next June, it will be the most powerful such vessel in Asia, the paper noted, nicknaming it the "magic island maker".

Forces eye very last IS bastion in Syria

Battered in Syria and Iraq, jihadists are thought to be gathered in the border town of Albu Kamal

AFP, Deir Ezzor

Syrian and allied forces yesterday converged on holdout Islamic State group fighters in the Syrian border town of Albu Kamal, the jihadists' very last urban bastion following a string of losses.

On Friday Russian-backed Syrian regime forces took full control of Deir Ezzor, which was the last city where IS still had a presence after being expelled from Hawija and Raqa.

The borders of a "caliphate" that three years ago spanned territory in Iraq and Syria roughly the size of Britain further shrank on the group's surviving fighters when Iraqi forces retook Al-Qaim Friday.

The town lies along the Euphrates river in western Iraq and faces Albu Kamal, which is where many of IS's remaining fighters are thought to have regrouped in their debacle.

They were still some 30 kilometres from Albu Kamal but Iraqi paramilitaries crossed the border to take on IS, a report said.

The Euphrates Valley border area was the heart of the "caliphate" IS proclaimed in 2014 and is now its last redoubt, where a US-led coalition supporting the military effort said around 1,500 jihadist fighters remained.

Iraqi forces made light work of Al-Qaim and while Albu Kamal is now the last urban bastion the jihadists have, it is unclear how much resistance they can or intend to put up.

The US-led coalition said anti-IS forces would hunt down jihadists to the last one. "The coalition must and will deny IS safe haven in Iraq and Syria," spokesman Ryan Dillon told AFP.

As their dream of a jihadist state continues to disintegrate, surviving jihadists are expected to hide in the desert area straddling the border and go dark for some time.

ROHINGYA ISSUE

No Glasgow honour for Aung San Suu Kyi

PTI, London

In the wake of the Rohingya crisis, the Glasgow City Council on Friday withdrew their offer to award Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The council had offered Suu Kyi the Freedom of Glasgow in 2009, when she was still under house arrest as Myanmar's pro-democracy leader, reports BBC.

"I and the Leader, Councillor Susan Aitken, recently wrote to Aung San Suu Kyi voicing the city's concerns about the human rights atrocities occurring under her watch and urging her to intervene. The response we received was disappointing and saddening," Indian news portal The Times of India quoted Glasgow's Lord Provost Eva Bolander as saying.

The Scottish council said that withdrawing such an honour was "unprecedented" and its decision had not been taken lightly.

According to an estimate, more than 623,000 refugees have crossed over into neighbouring Bangladesh and taken shelter in crowded settlements in Cox's Bazar since August 25, fleeing a brutal military crackdown in Myanmar's Rakhine State.

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