



China's President Xi Jinping drinks water before he gives a speech on the final day of the APEC CEO Summit, part of the broader APEC leaders' summit, in the central Vietnamese city of Danang yesterday; Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on the sidelines of the summit; Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi attends the APEC-Asean dialogue held in Danang.

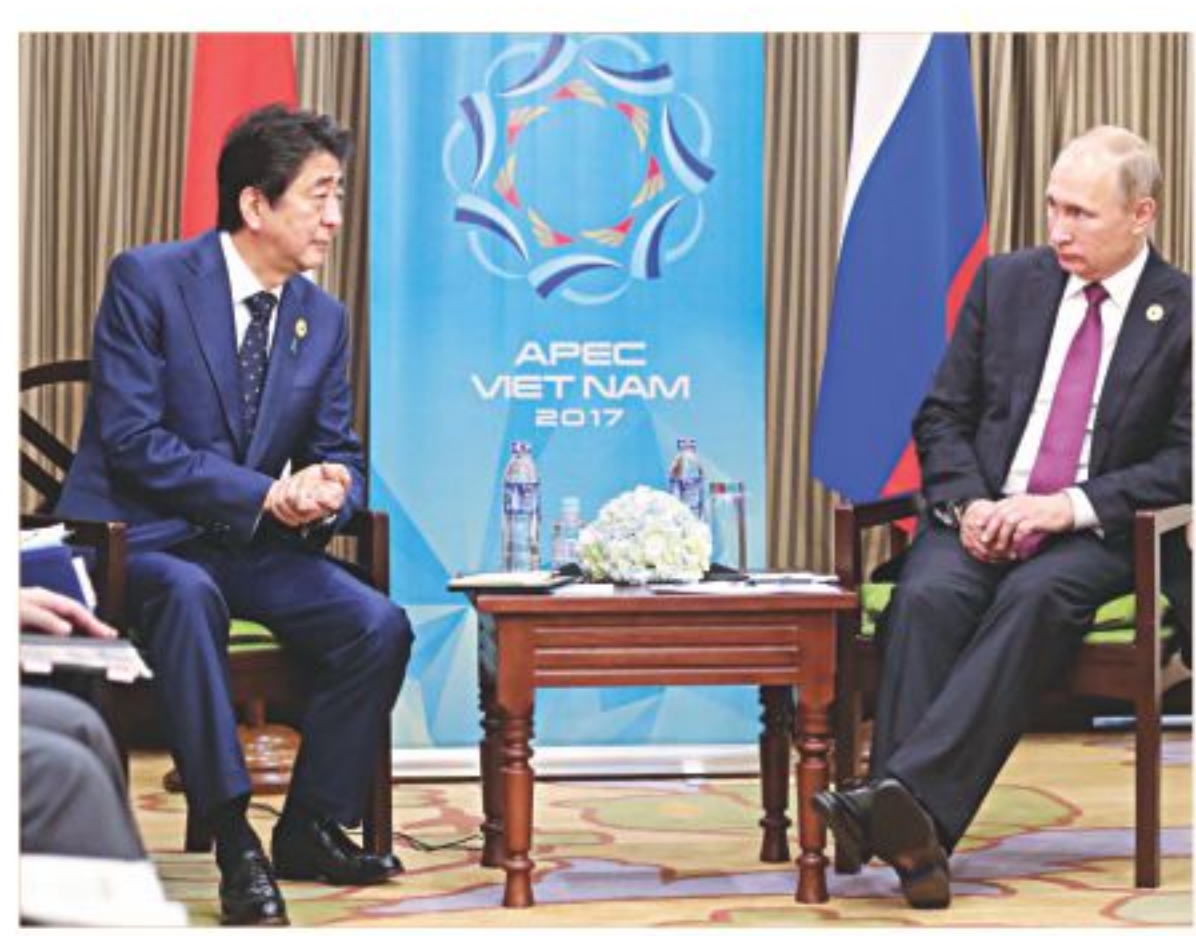


PHOTO: AFP

Will they, won't they?

US, Russia fail to agree Trump-Putin meet on the sidelines of APEC summit

AFP, Danang
Russia and the US failed to agree on a meeting between their leaders on the sidelines of an Asia-Pacific summit yesterday, with the White House ruling out an encounter while Moscow's top diplomat slammed Washington "penpushers" for sending mixed messages.
Relations between Moscow and Washington have plummeted as a US probe has accused Trump's former campaign aides of secretly meeting Kremlin-connected officials -- a charge Russia denies.
Both leaders are attending the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in the Vietnamese city of Danang and there have been conflicting indications in recent days on whether a face-to-face was on the cards.
The issue appeared to be finally settled shortly before Trump's touchdown in Danang yesterday afternoon when press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders briefed reporters on board Air Force One that there was not enough time for the pair to meet.
"There was never a meeting confirmed, and there will not be one that takes place due to scheduling conflicts on both sides," she said.
But Putin's team said a tete-a-tete could still take place.
"There is contradictory information coming from our American colleagues," Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters after Sanders' comments.
"In any case, a meeting will take place on the sidelines," he added.
Pressed later by Russian reporters on the issue, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov swatted away the question.
"Why are you asking me? We are saying that we have heard President Trump's wish to meet President Putin, expressed by President Trump himself."
"I do not know what the rest of his penpushers are saying, I cannot answer that."
Trump's relationship with Moscow has haunted the first year of his administration.
His former campaign chairman Paul Manafort and an associate are under house arrest on charges including conspiracy to launder money, linked to the investigation by special counsel Robert Mueller into allegations that the campaign colluded with Russia.
Russia has denied allegations of interfering in the US election last year that brought Trump to power.

Saudi purge raises 'a few concerns' for US

Says Tillerson as Riyadh probes \$100b graft sweep

AFP, Riyadh
Saudi Arabia's mass purge of elite figures accused of corruption "raises a few concerns", US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said yesterday, as Washington's Gulf ally probes graft allegedly worth \$100 billion.
The unprecedented roundup has seen more than 200 princes, ministers and businessmen detained in what has widely been seen as a move by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to consolidate his power ahead of his accession to the throne.
The domestic upheaval has come as Riyadh is locked in an intensifying proxy war with regional rival Tehran that has triggered a crippling aid blockade of neighbouring Yemen which threatens what the United Nations has warned could be the world's worst famine in decades.
Tillerson, who is accompanying President Donald Trump on an Asian tour, said he believed the mass arrests ordered by a new anti-corruption commission headed by Prince Mohammed were "well intended".
But he cautioned that the lightning roundup "raises a few concerns until we see more clearly how these particular individuals are dealt with".
The top US diplomat's comments marked a step back from the fulsome support offered earlier this week by President Donald Trump, who said he had "great confidence" in what the crown prince and his father King Salman were doing.
"Some of those they are harshly treating have been 'milking' their country for years!" Trump had tweeted.
The Saudi authorities have frozen the bank accounts of those accused and warned that assets related to the alleged corruption cases will be seized as state property.
High-profile figures, including billionaire tycoon Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, are among those detained.
With the purge, which analysts describe as a bold but risky power play, the crown prince has centralised power to a degree that is unprecedented in recent Saudi history.



TOXIC SMOG EMERGENCY

India plans to spray water over its capital

REUTERS, New Delhi
India plans to spray water over its capital, New Delhi, to combat toxic smog that has triggered a pollution emergency, officials said yesterday, with conditions expected to worsen over the weekend.
Illegal crop burning in farm states surrounding New Delhi, vehicle exhaust in a city with limited public transport and swirling construction dust have caused the crisis, as they do every year.
"Sprinkling water is the only way to bring down the dangerous pollution levels," said Shruti Bhardwaj, an environmental official charged with monitoring air quality.
The government was finalising the plans to spray the water from a height of 100 metres, which would be unprecedented, she said, without saying how much of the city of 22 million people would be covered.
The thick blanket of grey air and pollutants has enveloped Delhi for the past four days. A US embassy measure of tiny particulate matter, called PM 2.5, showed a reading of 523 at 9 am yesterday - the outer limit of "good" air is 50.
PM 2.5 is about 30 times finer than a human hair. The particles can be inhaled deep into the lungs, causing heart attacks, strokes, cancer and respiratory diseases.
The air has remained consistently in the "hazardous" category or beyond those levels in recent days, despite a litany of government measures - ordering a halt to construction, restricting car use and raising parking charges fourfold to persuade residents to use public transport.

Lebanon's Hariri 'free to move around': France

AGENCIES
Lebanon's Saad Hariri, who resigned as prime minister at the weekend, is "free to move around", French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said yesterday amid rumours he was being held against his will in Saudi Arabia.
"He went to Abu Dhabi the day before the President (Emmanuel) Macron's visit (on Wednesday) so we think he's free to move around," Le Drian told Europe 1 radio.
Lebanese Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil on Thursday demanded the return of Hariri from Saudi Arabia, where he announced his plans to step down in a shock decision on Saturday.
In his televised speech made from Saudi Arabia, Hariri said he was stepping down because of Iran's "grip" on Lebanon and threats to his life, but the comments led to immediate speculation about Saudi pressure.
Al-Akhabr newspaper, which is close to Iranian-backed movement Hezbollah, suggested that Hariri, who holds Saudi national-ity, was being held "hostage" in Riyadh.
French President Emmanuel Macron, whose country was the colonial power in Lebanon, made a surprise visit to Riyadh late on Thursday to discuss the crisis with the Saudi crown prince, reported AFP.
"The Lebanese situation is the most worrying subject of the moment," Le Drian added in his interview yesterday morning.
Hariri's announcement raised fears that Lebanon -- split into rival camps led by Hariri and Hezbollah -- could once again descend into violence.
Meanwhile, three Gulf states advised their citizens against travelling to Lebanon on Thursday and asked those already there to leave as soon as possible, amid rising tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran over Lebanon and Yemen, reported Reuters.
The official Saudi Press Agency, citing an official Foreign Ministry source, said the kingdom was asking citizens who were visiting or residing in Lebanon to leave as soon as possible.

Macron visits Riyadh as tensions between Saudi, Iran soar
Gulf states advise their citizens against travelling to Lebanon

NEWS IN brief

Catalonia parliament speaker freed on bail

REUTERS, Madrid
The Catalan parliament's speaker was released from prison yesterday, but the terms she agreed to in exchange for being granted bail seem likely to prevent her from campaigning on a pro-independence ticket for regional elections next month.

Pak asks MSF to shut tribal ops

AFP, Islamabad
Pakistan has asked French medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF) to shut its operations in the country's restive northwest, leaving a "major gap" in healthcare for thousands of local people, the humanitarian organisation said.

Myanmar jails filming crew over drone use

AFP, Yangon
A Myanmar court sentenced a foreign filming crew and their local colleagues to two months in prison yesterday for flying a drone over parliament. Lau Hon Meng from Singapore, Mok Choy Lin from Malaysia were arrested last month when shooting a documentary in the capital.

Pope warns of nuke terror threat

AFP, Vatican City
Pope Francis yesterday renewed calls for global nuclear disarmament, warning that new technology had increased the risk of deadly weapons falling into the hands of terrorists. Francis was addressing a Vatican conference on disarmament that was attended by Nobel peace prize winners.

Rich nations shirking on climate pledges

Says developing world at UN climate talks in Bonn

AFP, Paris
The failure of wealthy nations to deliver on short-term climate commitments could hinder the rollout of a landmark treaty, a bloc of 134 developing countries, including India and China, warned at UN negotiations in Bonn.
The diplomatic spat has underscored the difficulty of reaching a consensus at the 196-nation talks.
"If we do not respect decisions that we have made, then how can we build trust among the parties?" said Chen Zhihua, China's senior negotiator, referring to long-standing pledges by rich nations to enhance financial support and "revisit" targets for curbing greenhouse gas emissions before 2020.
"And how can we lay a good foundation for the implementation of the Paris Agreement?" he added at a press conference Thursday, flanked by diplomats from India, Iran, Nicaragua and Ecuador.
The treaty, inked outside the French capital in 2015, calls on the world to cap global warming at "well below" two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit), and even 1.5 C if possible.
With one degree of warming so far, the planet has already seen an increase in drought, deadly heatwaves and superstorms engorged by rising seas.
The pact rests on voluntary carbon-cutting pledges from virtually every country in the world.
But those pledges are not enough to keep Earth in the safe zone.
Moreover, they don't kick in until 2020, and developing nations say that's too long to wait to ramp up action.
"The science is clear: if we don't get our act together before 2020, you can forget about the 2 C and 1.5 C targets," said Paul Oquist, Nicaragua's chief negotiator at the talks.



A masked Palestinian holds a burning tyre during clashes with Israeli troops near the Jewish settlement of Qadomem, in the West Bank village of Kofr Qadom near Nablus yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Duterte says he killed someone as a teen

AFP, Danang
Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said he stabbed a person to death as a teenager, in a defiant speech to promote his drug war ahead of a summit of world leaders in Manila.
Speaking to the local Filipino community in the Vietnamese city of Danang on Thursday, Duterte also threatened to slap a UN rights rapporteur if he met her, and used obscene language to hit back at critics of his deadly drugs crackdown.
"When I was a teenager, I would go in and out of jail. I'd have rumbles here, rumbles there," said Duterte, who is in Danang for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit.
"At the age of 16, I already killed someone. A real person, a rumble, a stabbing. I was just 16 years old. It was just over a look. How much more now that I am president?"
Duterte won last year's presidential elections after promising to eradicate illegal drugs with an unprecedented crackdown that would see up to 100,000 people killed.
Since he took office 16 months ago, police say they have killed 3,967 people in the crackdown. Another 2,290 people were murdered in drug-related crimes, while thousands of other deaths remain unsolved, according to government data.
Duterte, 72, remains popular with many Filipinos who believe he is making society safer.
But critics at home and abroad warn that he is orchestrating a campaign of extrajudicial mass murder, carried out by corrupt police and hired vigilantes.

Antarctica is being rapidly melted from below: Nasa

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
There is something mysterious and hot lurking beneath the surface of the Antarctic ice.
Now Nasa says that it might have found the source of that strange heating -- a "mantle plume" -- or upwelling of abnormally hot rock, that lies deep beneath the surface.
The heat is causing the surface of the ice to melt and crack, resulting in rivers and other disruption to Antarctica.
Around 30 years ago, a scientist at the University of Colorado Denver said that there might be a mantle plume under a region of the continent known as Marie Byrd Land. That hypothesis helped explain some strange features seen on the ice, like volcanic activity and a dome.
Mantle plumes are narrow streams through which hot rock rises up from the Earth's mantle, and then spreads out under the crust. Because the material itself is hot and buoyant, it makes the crust bulge upwards.
They explain how some places -- like Hawaii and Yellowstone -- have huge amounts of geothermal activity despite being far from the edge of a tectonic plate.
But it was also an idea that was hard to believe, since the ice above the plume is still there. "I thought it was crazy," said Helene Seroussi of Nasa's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, who helped the lead work. "I didn't see how we could have that amount of heat and still have ice on top of it."
Now scientists have used the latest techniques to support the idea. The team developed a mantle plume numerical model to look at how much geothermal heat would be needed to explain what is seen at Marie Byrd Land, including the dome and the giant subsurface rivers and lakes present on Antarctica's bedrock.



WAR IN SYRIA

IS counter-attack to save last bastion

AFP, Beirut
Islamic State group fighters conducted a blistering counter-attack on Albu Kamal in eastern Syria yesterday in a desperate bid to cling to the last urban bastion of their imploding "caliphate".
The jihadists punched back into the town they had lost a day earlier and swiftly retook several northern neighbourhoods, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor said.
"IS started counter-attacking on Thursday night and retook more than 40 percent of the town of Albu Kamal," Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Britain-based Observatory, told AFP.
Syrian regime forces and allied fighters had retaken the town, which lies on the border with Iraq in the eastern Deir Ezzor province, from the jihadists on Thursday.
Albu Kamal was the last significant town to have been under full IS control and lies at the heart of what used to be the sprawling "caliphate" the group declared in 2014 over swathes of Iraq and Syria.
"The jihadists went back in and retook several neighbourhoods in the north, northeast and northwest," Abdel Rahman said. "IS is trying to defend its last bastion."
The jihadist organisation has in the space of a few weeks seen its caliphate shrink to a small rump and lost major cities such as Mosul, Raqa and Deir Ezzor.