

NEWS IN
briefAir raids kill 21 in
northern Syria

AFP, Beirut

Air strikes on a market killed at least 21 civilians, including children, in a town in northern Syria yesterday despite a "de-escalation zone" in place there, a monitor said. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said it was not immediately clear whether the strikes on rebel-held Atareb had been carried out by Syrian warplanes, or those of Damascus's ally Russia.

N Korean soldier shot
defecting to S Korea

AFP, Seoul

A North Korean soldier was shot and injured by his own side yesterday while defecting to South Korea at the border truce village of Panmunjom, the South's military said. The soldier, thought to be low ranking, was shot in the shoulder and elbow and was picked up bleeding on the South side of a portion of the border known as the Joint Security Area (JSA). It is rare for the North's troops to defect at the truce village.

Musician returns hon-
our in Suu Kyi protest

AFP, Dublin



Irish musician and Live Aid supremo Bob Geldof yesterday returned his Freedom of the City of Dublin scroll in a protest against Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who holds the same honour. The Boomtown Rats singer slammed the Nobel peace laureate over her country's treatment of its Rohingya Muslim minority, calling her a "handmaiden to genocide" and saying the city had "been duped" into bestowing the award.



A man rides a motorcycle past a damaged building following an earthquake in the town of Darbandikhan, near the city of Sulaimaniyah, in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region, Iraq yesterday.

PHOTO:
REUTERS

SAUDI-LED BLOCKADE

Thousands protest
in Yemen

AFP, Sanaa

Young and old, desk clerks and activists, Yemenis from all walks of life took to the streets yesterday to protest a Saudi-led blockade that has left thousands struggling to survive.

"This siege is oppressive, and the whole world is sleeping!" people chanted as thousands gathered outside the UN offices in the rebel-held capital Sanaa.

Their faces painted the colours of the Yemeni flag or in traditional dress, protesters marched to demand the end of a blockade on the country's ports, airports and border crossings, imposed last week by a Saudi-led military coalition battling the country's Houthi rebels.

A young girl had her face painted half black, half white -- her red flowered veil completing the colours of Yemen's national flag.

An elderly man had tucked a portrait of Shiite rebel leader Abdulmalik al-Houthi into his head wrap.

Saudi Arabia and its allies have said the tightening of restrictions on Yemen is a direct response to a missile attack against Riyadh earlier this month, claimed by the Iran-backed Houthis.

The United Nations last month blacklisted the Saudi-led coalition for the killing and maiming of children in Yemen.

March in
Hollywood
against abuse

AFP, Los Angeles

Hundreds of people marched yesterday in Hollywood, joining a growing movement against sexual harassment and abuse that emerged after movie mogul Harvey Weinstein and later a string of film personalities faced accusations of misconduct.

Demonstrators gathered at the iconic Dolby Theatre in Hollywood -- which hosts the Academy Awards ceremonies -- to draw attention to their cause.

Protesters carried placards that read "The way I dress is not a yes!!!", "#MeToo", and "Unite to fight patriarchy."

The protest comes on the heels of a surge in women and men who have gone public with the gory details of systemic sex abuse in Hollywood.

SOUTH CHINA SEA

China, Vietnam to avoid row

AFP, Hanoi

China and Vietnam agreed yesterday to avoid conflicts in the hotly contested South China Sea, as a new pathway to dialogue on easing tensions was opened with other Southeast Asian nations.

The communist neighbours have long sparred over the sea, through which \$5 trillion in shipping trade passes annually and which is believed to sit atop vast gas reserves.

Hanoi and Beijing agreed yesterday to keep the peace in the sea, the countries said in a joint statement during a state visit to Hanoi by Chinese President Xi Jinping.

They agreed to "well manage disputes at sea, make no moves that may complicate or expand disputes, (and) maintain peace and stability on the East Sea," the Vietnamese version of the statement said, using Hanoi's term for the waters.

China claims nearly all of the sea,

even approaching the coasts of its neighbours. It is also partly claimed by the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan in addition to Vietnam.

China has in recent years built artificial islands and airstrips capable of hosting military installations in contested areas to cement its claims,



Xi Jinping

Nguyen

inflaming tensions with its neighbours.

Relations between China and Vietnam hit a low in 2014 when Beijing moved an oil rig into waters claimed by Vietnam, sparking weeks of protests.

There have been two armed conflicts between China and Vietnam in the sea -- brief clashes in 1974 and 1988 that claimed the lives of dozens of Vietnamese troops.

On Sunday US President Donald Trump offered to help Vietnam resolve the long-simmering tensions.

"If I can help mediate or arbitrate, please let me know... I am a very good mediator," Trump said on his own state visit to Hanoi at the tail end of his marathon tour of Asia.

Vietnam offered no response.

And China, which has long insisted the United States has no role to play in the dispute, spoke out against what it deemed foreign interference.

"We hope non-regional countries can respect the regional countries' efforts in maintaining the regional stability of the South China Sea, and play a constructive role in this aspect," foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said at a regular press briefing in Beijing.

SMOG IN DELHI

Parents angry
as schools
reopen

AFP, New Delhi

Angry parents accused Delhi authorities yesterday of "playing with children's health" as schools reopened despite a fresh surge in pollution to emergency levels.

Doctors declared a public health emergency last week when choking smog descended on the capital and elsewhere in northern India, prompting authorities to close schools, ban construction and bar trucks from entering the city.

Yesterday, authorities reopened schools amid concerns over upcoming exams, angering some parents.

"There has been no let-up in the pollution levels. So if the situation is the same, action should be the same. Why open the schools now?" said Ashok Agrawal, president of the All India Parents Association.

"On one hand the government is saying there is a health emergency and on the other they are playing with children's health."

"It is so disturbing to see children coughing and struggling to breathe all the way to the school."

Yesterday, levels of PM2.5 topped 500. The smallest and most dangerous particulates penetrate deep into the lungs, increasing the risk of heart attacks and strokes.

The World Health Organization says 25 is the most anyone can safely be exposed to over a 24-hour period, and levels over 300 are considered hazardous.

Doctors say children are particularly vulnerable to air pollution and this can cause long-term damage to their lungs.

One 2015 study found that four in 10 Delhi children were suffering from severe lung problems.

Paris victims
remembered

AFP, Paris

France marked two years yesterday since its worst ever terror attacks, releasing colourful balloons into the sky to remember the 130 people killed on a Friday night out in Paris.

President Emmanuel Macron laid wreaths at the six locations where gunmen and suicide bombers struck on November 13, 2015, targeting the national stadium as well as bars, restaurants and the Bataclan concert hall.

Two members of Eagles of Death Metal -- the Californian band who were on stage at the Bataclan when the carnage began -- performed a surprise mini-concert near the venue where 90 people were massacred.

Lead singer Jesse Hughes was visibly moved as he handed white roses to families of the victims after singing "Save a Prayer", the song the band had just finished playing when the gunfire began.

"It is difficult to not to remember the people who were taken from us like our friend Nick Alexander (the band's merchandise manager) and so many others," Hughes told reporters.

"We watched people give their lives for their friends and we were able to bear witness to that," he added.

"We have a burden of responsibility to make certain that everyone knows that is the kind of love that exists in this world."

Macron and his wife Brigitte joined relatives of the victims as they released dozens of multi-coloured balloons in honour of the dead.



French President Emmanuel Macron and Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo (L) stand in front of a commemorative plaque in Paris.

PHOTO: AFP

5th ASEAN-U.S. SUMMIT
TO COMMEMORATE THE
40th ANNIVERSARY OF
ASEAN-U.S. DIALOGUE RELATIONS

13 November 2017 | Manila, Philippines



(From L-R) Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak, Myanmar's State Councillor Aung San Suu Kyi, Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, US President Donald Trump, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, Laos Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith, Indonesia's President Joko Widodo and Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen pose for a photo in Manila yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

EU signs defense pact
in decades-long quest

REUTERS, Brussels

France and Germany edged toward achieving a 70-year-old ambition to integrate European defenses yesterday, signing a pact with 21 other EU governments to fund, develop and deploy armed forces after Britain's decision to quit the bloc.

First proposed in the 1950s and long resisted by Britain, European defense planning, operations and weapons development now stands its best chance in years as London steps aside and the United States pushes Europe to pay more for its security.

Foreign and defense ministers gathered at a signing ceremony in Brussels to represent 23 EU governments joining the pact, paving the way for EU leaders to sign it in December.

Those governments will for the first time legally bind themselves into joint projects as well as pledging to increase defense spending and contribute to rapid deployments.

"Today we are taking a historic step," Germany's Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel told reporters. "We are agreeing on the future cooperation on security and defense issues... it's really a milestone in European development," he said.

The pact includes all EU governments except Britain, which is leaving the bloc, Denmark, Ireland, Portugal and Malta. Traditionally neutral Austria was a late addition to the pact.

Paris originally wanted vanguard of EU countries to bring money and assets to French-led military missions and projects, while Berlin has sought to be more inclusive, which could reduce effectiveness.

Its backers say that if successful, the formal club of 23 members will give the European Union a more coherent role in tackling international crises and end the kind of shortcomings seen in Libya in 2011, when European allies relied on the United States for air power and munitions.

Zimbabwe military
threatens to 'step in'

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe's army chief yesterday demanded a "stop" to the purge in the ruling ZANU-PF party after the sacking of vice president Emmerson Mnangagwa, and warned the military could intervene.

"The current purging which is clearly targeting members of the party with a liberation background must stop forthwith," General Constantino Chiwenga told a media conference attended by about 90 senior army officers at army HQ.

In an unprecedented warning, he said in a statement: "We must remind those behind the current treacherous shenanigans that when it comes to matters of protecting our revolution, the military will not hesitate to step in."

Mnangagwa was dismissed and humiliated a week earlier after clashing with veteran President Robert Mugabe's wife Grace, who is now in prime position to succeed her 93-year-old husband.

Analysts had warned that the sacking would spark repercussions beyond Mugabe's control.

Horror as quake
leaves trail of death

AFP, Iraq

Nizar Abdullah spent the night sifting through the ruins of the two-storey house next door in the mountainous town of Darbandikhan in Iraqi Kurdistan after a killer quake hit the region.

"There were eight people inside," Abdullah, an Iraqi Kurd, told AFP yesterday, outside the pile of concrete debris where the house once stood.

Some family members managed to escape, but "neighbours and rescue workers pulled out the mother and the children dead from the rubble", said the 34-year-old.

The 7.3-magnitude quake hit on the Iraq-Iran border area on Sunday night, killing hundreds of people and injuring thousands of others.

Most people were at home when the quake struck.

"All at once the electricity went out and I felt a strong tremor," said Loqman Hussein.

"I immediately ran out of the house with my family," he added.

Iraqi health ministry spokesman Seif al-Nadr said that the quake injured 321 people in Iraqi Kurdistan, 170 others in Diyala province and 44 in the disputed northern province of Kirkuk.

Most of them were treated for shock, he said in a statement.

"The Iraqi government must help the victims," said Yassin Qassem, whose house was badly damaged by the quake.

"We are Kurds but also Iraqis," he added.

Sunday's quake was also felt in southeastern Turkey.

Ankara has sent humanitarian assistance to Iraq, including tents and blankets, as well as a medical team, a Turkish government spokesman said.