

# NEWSIN brief

## Australians vote for same-sex marriage

REUTERS, Sydney

Australians have voted overwhelmingly for same-sex marriage, paving the way for legislation by the end of 2017 and sparking rainbow celebrations on Wednesday, with people wearing wedding dresses and sequined suits and declaring "our love is real". Australia will become the 26th nation to formalise the unions if the legislation is passed by parliament, which is expected despite some vocal opposition within the government's conservative right wing.

## Gunman kills four in US shooting spree

REUTERS, California

A gunman carrying a semi-automatic weapon and two handguns opened fire at multiple locations across a small Northern California community on Tuesday, killing four people before he was slain by police. At least 10 other people were wounded, including two children at an elementary school near the small town of Corning, about 100 miles north of Sacramento. Police did not give a motive for the shooting rampage.

## Singapore transit train mishap injures 28

REUTERS, Singapore

A Singapore mass transit train bumped into another at a station yesterday injuring 28 people, authorities said. Transit operator SMRT said 26 passengers and two staff suffered light to moderate injuries and had been taken to hospital. The accident happened at 8.20am, SMRT said in a statement.



## Mugabe Liberation hero turned despot

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe's veteran leader Robert Mugabe once quipped that he'd rule his country until he turned 100. But, aged 93, his grip on power seems to be ebbing as tensions erupt between his loyal ZANU-PF party and the military that has helped keep him in office. First heralded as a liberator who rid the former British colony Rhodesia of white minority rule, Robert Gabriel Mugabe was soon cast in the role of a despot who crushed political dissent and ruined the national economy. The former political prisoner turned guerrilla leader swept to power in 1980 elections after a violent insurgency and economic sanctions forced the Rhodesian government to the negotiating table. In office he initially won international plaudits for his declared policy of racial reconciliation and for extending improved education and health services to the black majority. But his lustre faded quickly. Mugabe took control of one wing in the guerrilla war for independence -- the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and its armed forces -- after his release from prison in 1974. His partner in the armed struggle -- the leader of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), Joshua Nkomo -- was one of the early casualties of Mugabe's crackdown on dissent. He allegedly killed many in early days to solidify power. But, it was the seizure of white-owned farms nearly two decades later that would complete Mugabe's transformation from darling of the West into international pariah -- though his status as a liberation hero still resonates in many parts of Africa.



Iranians react sitting next to the rubble of their homes two days after a 7.3-magnitude earthquake struck the Kouik village near to Sarpol-e Zahab in Iran's western Kermanshah province near the border with Iraq, leaving more than 450 killed and thousands homeless.

PHOTO: AFP

# Trump returns with 'America first' ringing in Asian ears

REUTERS, Manila

As Air Force One took off from Manila on Tuesday at the end of the longest trip to Asia by an American president in more than quarter of a century, at least two of the region's leaders had good reason to feel satisfied.

At a summit in the Philippines, Donald Trump forged a "great relationship" with President Rodrigo Duterte, who only a year ago had cursed "son of a bitch" Barack Obama for decrying his administration's bloody war on drug pushers and addicts.

"You are a great man to me," Cambodia's authoritarian prime minister Hun Sen said, addressing Trump at a meeting with other Southeast Asian leaders, and then referenced Trump's America First policy.

"I would like to inform you that if you follow your new policy in respect of the independence and sovereignty of other countries, the United States will have a lot of friends and you will



be much respected and loved."

For other leaders across Asia, however, Trump's go-it-alone instincts must have represented a puzzling departure from his predecessors, who were - to varying degrees - standard bearers of multilateralism, democracy and rights.

During a tour that took him to Japan, South Korea, China and Vietnam and the Philippines, Trump called for joint efforts to tighten the screws on North Korea and its development of nuclear weapons.

But at an Asia-Pacific summit in Vietnam, he declared that redressing

the uneven balance of trade between Asia and the United States was at the centre of his "America First" policy, which he says will protect US workers.

Trump's vision has up-ended a consensus favouring multinational trade pacts whose regional champion is now China. On the sidelines of the Vietnam meeting, 11 countries kept alive a Trans Pacific trade deal that Trump walked away from last year in the name of protecting American jobs.

Although there were few weighty deliverables from Trump's tour, for Asian nations looking nervously at China's increasing assertiveness, it may be welcomed as a sign that his administration is still committed to the region.

"What regional countries wanted was for him to simply show up - to underscore that America remained at least notionally committed to Asia," said Shahriman Lockman, a senior analyst at the Institute of Strategic & International Studies in Malaysia.

## OPIUM CULTIVATION IN AFGHANISTAN Production hits record high: UN

REUTERS, Vienna

Opium production in Afghanistan reached a record high this year, rising 87 percent compared with last year, after a rapid expansion of the areas used to cultivate poppies, the United Nations said yesterday.

In the key findings of its annual Afghanistan opium survey, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said output of opium made from poppy seeds in Afghanistan, the world's main source of heroin, stands at around 9,000 metric tons this year.

"Increased insurgency and funding to terrorist groups is likely within Afghanistan while more high quality, low cost heroin will reach consumer markets across the world, leading to increased consumption," the UNODC said.

Last year's report warned that Kabul's weakening grip on security in many areas was contributing to a collapse in poppy eradication efforts, a method championed by the United States after it led an invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 when the country was under Taliban rule.

This year, provincial governors eradicated around 750 hectares used for poppy cultivation, more than twice as much as last year. But areas under cultivation also hit a record this year at 328,000 hectares, up over 60 percent from last year.



## Coup? What coup?

REUTERS, Harare

In the annals of missed stories, it ranks up there.

When yesterday's edition of The Herald, Zimbabwe's main state newspaper, hit the streets, Zimbabweans were surprised to learn that talk of ructions between President Robert Mugabe's ruling ZANU-PF party and military chief Constantino Chiwenga were unfounded.

"ZANU-PF unfazed by Chiwenga," the Herald declared on its front page, reporting on the party's denunciation of the military chief as a traitor the previous day.

Most people in Harare had spent the night glued to social media and the Internet for updates on a coup slowly unfolding against 93-year-old Mugabe, Zimbabwe's leader of the last 37 years.

Just after 4 am, an army spokesman in camouflage fatigues appeared on state media to announce that the army had seized power. The final line of his declaration: "To the media, we urge you report fairly and responsibly".



A woman gestures as a car is removed from the road in the town of Mandra, northwest of Athens yesterday, after heavy overnight rainfall in the area caused damage and left 14 people dead. The flooding struck the towns of Mandra, Nea Peramos and Megara, a semi-rural area west of Athens where many factories and warehouses are based.

PHOTO: AFP

# S Arabia 'detained' PM Hariri Accusations Lebanon president as pressure mounts on Hariri to return

REUTERS, Beirut

Pressure in Lebanon and abroad mounted yesterday for premier Saad Hariri to return to Beirut from Saudi Arabia, where he has stayed since his surprise resignation earlier this month.

Hardening his tone, Lebanon's President Michel Aoun accused Saudi Arabia of "detaining" Hariri, who is to meet in Riyadh on Thursday with France's chief diplomat.

Speculation has swirled around Hariri's prolonged stay in the kingdom since he announced in a televised statement on November 4 that he would be stepping down as Lebanon's prime minister.

"Nothing justifies the failure of Prime Minister Saad Hariri to return for 12 days, therefore we consider him to be held and detained, contrary to the Vienna Convention," Aoun said in a tweet on the official Lebanese presidential account.

"We will not accept that he remain a hostage and that we do not know the reasons for his detention," he added.



There have been rumours that Hariri, who is a Saudi citizen and grew up in the kingdom, had been detained along with dozens of Saudis in what Riyadh says is an anti-corruption campaign.

Shortly after Aoun's statement, Hariri also took to Twitter in an apparent bid to quell rumours of his detention.

"I want to repeat and confirm: I am totally, totally fine and I'll come back, God willing, to beloved Lebanon like I promised you all. You'll see," he wrote.

But he would be in Riyadh for at least one more day to meet with French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian.

Le Drian was due in Saudi Arabia later Wednesday and scheduled to meet with powerful Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman before holding talks with Hariri, according to an aide.

In his sharply-worded resignation from Saudi Arabia, Hariri, 47, accused Iran and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah of destabilising his country and the broader region.

The statement sparked concern that tiny Lebanon would be caught in the crosshairs of rising tensions between Riyadh and Tehran.

Aoun, 82, has yet to formally accept Hariri's resignation and has said he will not do so before meeting him in person in Lebanon.

European nations and the US have not pointed the finger at Saudi authorities directly, but have expressed public concern about Hariri's absence and warned against attempts to interfere in Lebanon's fragile democracy.

## US MOVE AGAINST BROADCASTER RT Russia toughens law on foreign media

AFP, Moscow

Russian MPs yesterday backed new legislation that could force foreign media outlets to register as "foreign agents" in a reciprocal response to US pressure on Kremlin-backed TV channel RT.

Lawmakers approved amendments to broaden a 2012 law aimed at non-governmental organisations to include foreign media. Rights groups fear it could have a chilling effect on the ability of outlets to carry out independent reporting.

The existing regulations force NGOs that have international funding and whose activities are deemed "political" to undergo scrutiny of their finances and staffing, and label themselves as "foreign agents" on paperwork and statements.

The Kremlin praised parliament's vote as allowing it to offer a "very harsh" response to attacks on Russian media abroad.

The law could be used against US media such as Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, which receive funding from the US Congress. Members of parliament have given contradictory statements on whether the law could apply to commercial TV network CNN.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also referred to criticism from Britain and Spain as well as the US, complaining that "a whole number of our partners in Europe and across the ocean have nothing better to do than to accuse our media and declare them as foreign agents."

## Xi to send envoy to N Korea

REUTERS, Beijing

A senior Chinese diplomat will visit North Korea from tomorrow as a special envoy of Chinese President Xi Jinping, Beijing said, although it did not say he was planning to discuss North Korea's nuclear and ballistic programmes.

China has repeatedly pushed for a diplomatic solution to the crisis, but in recent months has had only limited high-level exchanges with North Korea. The last time China's special envoy for North Korea visited the country was in February last year.

In a brief dispatch, the official Xinhua news agency said Song Tao, who heads the ruling Communist Party's external affairs department, would leave for North Korea.

He will "inform the DPRK of the 19th CPC National Congress and visit the DPRK", Xinhua said yesterday, using the North's official name and referring to China's recently concluded Communist Party Congress at which Xi further cemented his power.

North Korea's KCNA news agency confirmed the visit, but said only that it would take place "soon".

The trip will come just a week after US President Donald Trump visited Beijing as part of a lengthy Asia tour, where he pressed for greater action to rein in North Korea, especially from China, with which North Korea does 90 percent of its trade.

It is not clear how long Song could stay, but he has already visited Vietnam and Laos to inform them of the results of the congress, a typical courtesy China extends other communist countries after such important meetings.

It is also unclear whether Song will meet North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un.

The two countries would also "exchange opinions on matters of mutual concern" during the visit, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang.



## Sessions vows Clinton probe on emails

AFP, Washington

US Attorney General Jeff Sessions told Congress Tuesday that the Justice Department could soon appoint a special prosecutor to investigate Hillary Clinton, a move repeatedly called for by President Donald Trump.

Sessions' comments indicated that Republicans were seeking to mount a counter-offensive to the probe into Russian election meddling -- and whether or not Trump's campaign colluded with Moscow to sway the 2016 contest.

Democrats lashed back that Sessions risked politicizing the Justice Department in reviving the probe into Clinton's use of a personal email server as secretary of state -- a case it decided last year not to prosecute -- in a bid to divert attention from the Russia probe.

In testimony before the House Judiciary Committee, Sessions insisted the decision whether to investigate Trump's former rival for the presidency was not political.

"We intend to do our work according to the established principals of the Department of Justice. We will not be infected by politics or bias," he told the committee.

Late Monday the department sent political shockwaves across Washington when it revealed it was reviewing the FBI's handling last year of the probe into the Democrat Clinton's use of a personal server for official and in some cases classified emails, in breach of government rules.