

NEWSIN brief

Over 250 migrants rescued off Spain

AFP, Madrid

Over 250 migrants making the dangerous crossing to Europe were rescued Friday off Spain, with several other vessels still in need of rescue, authorities said. Spain is the third busiest gateway for migrants arriving in Europe, but far behind Italy and Greece. However, the number of people arriving by sea in Spain has nearly tripled over last year to 17,687.

Trump reverses on elephant trophy

WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump said Friday he will uphold a ban on importing trophies of elephants hunted and killed in Zimbabwe, pending further review, reversing his own administration's decision from just a day earlier after a public outcry. The move was met with a barrage of criticism from animal rights groups and activists.

Saudi Arabia recalls ambassador to Berlin

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia has recalled its ambassador to Berlin in protest over comments made by the German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel perceived as suggesting Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri had been held against his will in Riyadh, Saudi state media said yesterday. Riyadh's state news agency SPA released a statement protesting the comments.

Trump starts paying his own legal bills

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump has begun paying his own legal bills related to the Russia investigation and will no longer cover the costs using political donations to his re-election campaign or the Republican Party, his attorneys confirmed on Friday. The probe has hounded Trump's presidency.

CHINESE SPECIAL ENVOY IN N KOREA

Regional issues, bi-lateral ties discussed

AFP, Shanghai

A senior Chinese envoy discussed regional concerns with officials in Pyongyang yesterday, North Korean state media said, as the US presses China to help ease the standoff over the North's nuclear weapons. The visit by Song Tao, described by Pyongyang as a special envoy of President Xi Jinping, is the first by a senior Chinese envoy for more than a year. Relations are severely stressed over Pyongyang's nuclear sabre-rattling and Beijing's support for tough UN sanctions on its neighbor.

"The two sides exchanged their views on such matters of mutual concern as the situation of the Korean peninsula and region and bilateral relations," the official KCNA news agency said in describing Song's talks with Ri Su-Yong, a senior ruling party leader, and other officials.

Relations between the two communist neighbors, once said by Mao Zedong to be "as close as lips and teeth", are at their worst in decades over North Korea's actions, and Beijing faces pressure from US President Donald Trump to pile pressure on Pyongyang.

Song, who arrived on Friday, met that day with Choe Ryong-Hae, another senior official in North Korea's ruling party and a close aide to leader Kim Jong-Un.

Each side's account of the meeting with Choe mentioned that both sides stressed the importance of their longstanding ties.



People cheer a passing Zimbabwe Defense Force military vehicle during a demonstration demanding the resignation of Zimbabwe's president in Harare yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

CHEMICAL GAS ATTACKS IN SYRIA

UN probe to end as Russia vetoes again

REUTERS, United Nations

An international investigation into who is to blame for chemical weapons attacks in Syria will end on Friday after Russia blocked for the third time in a month attempts at the United Nations to renew the inquiry, which Moscow has slammed as flawed.

In the past two years, the joint UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) inquiry has found the Syrian government used the nerve agent sarin in an April 4 attack and has also several times used chlorine as a weapon. It blamed Islamic State militants for using mustard gas.

Russia vetoed on Friday a Japanese-drafted UN Security Council resolution to extend the inquiry for one month. It was an eleventh-hour bid to buy more time for negotiations after Russia blocked U.S.-drafted resolutions on Thursday and Oct 24 to renew the investigation, which the council created in 2015.

Syrian ally Russia has cast 11 vetoes on possible Security Council action on Syria since the country's civil war began in 2011. The Japanese draft received 12 votes in favor on Friday, while China abstained and Bolivia joined Russia to vote no.

After Friday's vote, the council moved to closed-door discussions at the request of Sweden's UN Ambassador Olof Skoog to "ensure we are absolutely convinced we have exhausted every avenue, every effort" to try and renew the investigation.

Russian UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia told the council earlier on Friday that the inquiry could only be extended if "fundamental flaws in its work" were fixed. He said that for the past two year the investigators had "rubber-stamped baseless accusations against Syria."

The council voted on a rival Russian-drafted resolution on Thursday to renew the inquiry, but it failed after only garnering four votes in favor.

Lanka deploys troops to stop communal riots

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka deployed troops and ordered a night-time curfew in a southern town to end violent clashes between two ethnic communities, the government said yesterday.

Law and Order Minister Sagala Ratnayaka said the situation in Gintota in Galle province was under control, two days after a brawl degenerated into street violence between two groups -- one Sinhalese, the country's mainly Buddhist majority, the other from the Muslim minority.

Six people injured in the clashes were admitted to hospital in Galle city, according to local police who arrested 19 people.

It was not clear what triggered the clashes. The government relaxed the curfew yesterday morning with a warning that police would arrest any instigators.

Fighting leaves 7 dead in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Six suspected rebels and an air force commando were killed yesterday in a fierce gunfight in Indian-administered Kashmir which also injured another soldier, the Indian army said.

The shootout began when soldiers cordoned off a neighbourhood in the northern area of Hajin after a tip-off that armed militants were hiding there, said army spokesman Colonel Rajesh Kalia.

"Six terrorists have been killed in the encounter," Kalia told AFP.

"One IAF (India Air Force) soldier was martyred and another army soldier was injured."

On Friday a militant and a police officer were killed in the outskirts of the main city of Srinagar during a brief shootout.

Kashmir has been divided between India and Pakistan since the end of British colonial rule in 1947. Both claim the former Himalayan kingdom in full.

Rebel groups have for decades fought Indian soldiers and paramilitaries deployed in the disputed region, demanding independence or a merger of the territory with Pakistan.

The fighting has left tens of thousands, mostly civilians, dead.

India accuses Pakistan of sending fighters across their de facto border in Kashmir to launch attacks on its forces.

Islamabad denies the allegation, saying it only provides moral and diplomatic support for the Kashmiri struggle for the right to self-determination.

Germany risks new polls

Deadline looms as Merkel struggles to form coalition

AFP, Berlin

German Chancellor Angela Merkel resumed complex coalition talks yesterday in a last-ditch effort to forge a government and avert a political crisis in Europe's biggest economy.

The veteran leader, in power since 2005, won a September 24 vote without a clear majority for her conservative CDU/CSU bloc, largely because of the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), and must now build an unlikely alliance with the pro-business Free Democrats (FDP) and left-leaning Greens.

But their deep policy differences, especially on immigration and the environment, have hobbled the monthlong negotiating marathon, leading party leaders to miss a Thursday deadline and declare they will push on until Sunday evening.

Until and unless the motley crew of four parties, which spans the mainstream political spectrum, strikes a deal, Germany's government remains in effective limbo with Merkel serving as a caretaker chancellor.

If they fail, Germany would probably hold snap elections, which would leave Merkel increasingly exposed to a rising band of critics within her own ranks and could further bolster the anti-Islam AfD.

Albrecht von Luckem, a political scientist, told news channel NTV that already "the loser is Angela Merkel" because, rather than be seen as battling for ideas, she had "fought strategically to maintain power".

Looming over the political drama is the prickly issue of immigration, a hot-button topic since Merkel threw open German borders in 2015 to a mass influx of over one million asylum seekers.

While the CSU has been sharply critical and wants to cap future arrivals at 200,000 a year, the Greens argue that more refugees should be allowed to bring their families.

Deep differences also remain on climate policy, where the Greens want to phase out dirty coal and combustion-engine cars, while the conservatives and FDP emphasise the need to protect industry and jobs.



Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri confirmed he will return to Beirut in time for Independence Day celebrations Wednesday, as political turmoil rocks his country following his resignation announcement in Saudi Arabia. Hariri said he will return to Lebanon for Wednesday's Independence Day celebrations.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Climate talks becoming irrelevant!

AFP, Bonn

There was a telling moment at the 23rd edition of UN climate talks that underscored both the life-and-death stakes in the fight against global warming, and how hard it is for this belaboured forum to rise to the challenge.

Twelve-year-old Timoci Naulusala from Fiji, a nation disappearing under rising seas, was delivering a testimonial to ministers and heads of state with crisp English and irresistible charm.

Suddenly, describing the devastation wrought by Cyclone Winston last year, his words became measured, his voice hushed.

"My home, my school -- my source of food, water, money -- was totally destroyed," he said. "My life was in chaos. I asked myself: Why is this happening? What am I going to do?"

The answer to Timoci's first question has become frightening clear: climate change. But Timoci's second question remains open: What is he, and by extension the world, going to do?

At first, the answer seemed straight-forward: humans must stop loading the atmosphere with the greenhouse gases that drive global warming. The successful repair of the ozone hole suggested a way forward: an international treaty.

But it took a quarter of a century to get one, in 2015, and even then it is woefully inadequate: voluntary national pledges to curb carbon pollution would still allow the global thermometer

to go up 3 C, a recipe for human misery on a vast scale.

Since Paris, the UN climate talks -- known to participants as "COPs", or Conferences of the Parties -- have focused on working out an operational handbook for the treaty, which goes into effect in 2020.

But as the years tick by, the byzantine bureaucracy -- where hundreds of diplomats can argue for days over whether a text will say "should" or "shall" -- has struggled to keep pace with "the real world".

A veteran EU climate diplomat, meanwhile, bemoaned the lack of dynamism in talks. "I've never seen a COP with so little adrenaline," he told AFP.

The UN climate process risks falling out of step in two key ways, experts suggest.

One is in relation to the unforgiving conclusions of science, which show that the window of opportunity for avoiding climate cataclysm is rapidly narrowing to a slit. This year's climate talks kicked off with negotiators learning that CO2 emissions -- after remaining stable for three years, raising hopes that they had peaked -- will rise by two percent in 2017, a development one scientist called "a giant step backwards for humankind".

Negotiations were also reeling from US President Donald Trump's decision to pull out from the Paris Agreement.

The UN's 12-day negotiations came to an end yesterday with an agreement to hold a stocktake in 2018 of national efforts to cut fossil fuel emissions.



Saudi Arabia 'swaps assets for freedom' after arrests

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Saudi authorities are striking agreements with some of those detained in an alleged anti-corruption crackdown, asking them to hand over assets and cash in return for their freedom, according to sources familiar with the matter.

The deals involve separating cash from assets, such as property and shares, and looking at bank accounts to assess cash values, one of the sources told the Reuters news agency.

Dozens of princes, senior officials and businessmen, including cabinet ministers and billionaires, have been detained in this month's sweeping crackdown, which is being seen as an attempt to strengthen the power of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Among those arrested was billionaire Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, one of the kingdom's most prominent businessmen.

The Saudi government earlier this week moved from freezing accounts to

issuing instructions for "expropriation of unencumbered assets" or seizure of assets, said a second source familiar with the situation.

There was no immediate comment from the Saudi government on the deals, and the sources declined to be identified because the agreements are not public.

Analysts say the deals could help to end uncertainty about the crackdown, but they could also have an impact on Saudi Arabia's risk perception among investors.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is trying to use the purge as a way of boosting his popularity with the Saudi population, said Jason Tuvey, a Middle East economist at Capital Economics.

"But he may have realised that by doing this, he's gone a step too far and ruffled too many feathers, and he is maybe trying to find a way out that means these people don't end up in prison forever and can carry on their business operations as before."



China mulling direct rail line with Nepal

IANS, Kathmandu

The Chinese ambassador to Nepal has said that China has taken the request of Kathmandu for building a cross-border railway line seriously and has begun a feasibility study, the media reported.

In an interaction with the media here on Friday, Ambassador Yu Hong also said Beijing is working towards fostering a new type of international relations and to build a community with a shared future for mankind, the Kathmandu Post reported.

Ambassador Yu expressed happiness over Nepal's move to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and said the initiative has given wider opening for countries, including Nepal, to integrate the economy and people-to-people contact. Nepal signed up to Chinese President Xi Jinping's flagship BRI in May.

Yu added that Nepal and China are working on several fronts like cross-border railway connectivity, highways and construction of a dry port. "China has taken the request of Nepal government of building cross-border railway line seriously. A team has begun preliminary feasibility study," Yu said.

Laying emphasis on Nepal-China relations, Yu said the two countries in 2009 forged a "comprehensive partnership of cooperation featuring ever-lasting friendship".

Likewise, expansion of the Rasuwagadhi-Syafrubeshi road link, resumption of Araniko Highway and construction of dry ports in Tatopani, Rasuwa and Yariot are also on Beijing's priority list.

The Chinese Ambassador's interaction with the media in Kathmandu comes weeks after the conclusion of the Chinese Communist Party Congress in China, enshrining "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" into the party constitution.