

NEWSIN brief

Israel to shut migrant centre, deport Africans

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's cabinet yesterday voted to close a migrant detention centre, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced an agreement to deport 40,000 Africans who entered the country illegally. Ministers unanimously approved plans to shutter the Holot centre in southern Israel and gave migrants a three-month deadline to leave the country or face deportation, said the interior and public security ministries.

Deadly Beijing fire prompts probe

AFP, Beijing

Chinese authorities yesterday launched an investigation into a fire in a low-income Beijing housing block that killed 19 people, as workers evacuated hundreds from nearby apartments and demolished other buildings. Authorities are still probing the cause of the Saturday night blaze that also injured eight people, according to a statement from the Beijing city government.

Dozens freed from Taliban prison

AFP, Kandahar

Dozens of prisoners were freed by Afghan special forces during a raid on a Taliban jail in southern Afghanistan, officials said yesterday. Up to 30 civilians and police were rescued from the prison in Helman province, where the militants have a large presence, during the operation late Saturday.

N Korea FM to visit Cuba

AFP, Havana

North Korea's foreign minister is to visit Cuba on Monday in a trip that comes at a time when both Pyongyang and Havana have strained relations with Washington. Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho will meet with his Cuban counterpart Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla.



Pope Francis has lunch with the poor following a special mass to mark the new World Day of the Poor in Paul VI's hall at the Vatican, yesterday. Celebrating the event in Rome at a mass attended by about 7,000 poor people at St. Peter's Basilica, the Pope urged people not to ignore poverty by believing that "it's not my business, it's the fault of society". He has called on to fight indifference to poverty on the occasion.

PHOTO: AFP

EMERGENCY TALKS ON IRAN, HEZBOLLAH THREAT

Saudi, allies meet in Cairo

REUTERS, Cairo

Saudi Arabia and other Arab foreign ministers yesterday held an emergency meeting in Cairo to discuss ways to confront Iran and its Lebanese Shia ally Hezbollah, who the Arab allies say are interfering in their internal affairs.

Regional tensions have risen in recent weeks between Sunni monarchy Saudi Arabia and Shia Islamist Iran over Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri's surprise resignation and after an escalation in Yemen's conflict.

Hariri, a long-time Saudi ally, resigned on Nov 4 in an announcement made from Riyadh. Hariri cited fear of assassination and accused Iran and Hezbollah of spreading strife in the Arab world.

Hezbollah, both a military force and a political movement, is part of a Lebanese government made up of rival factions, and an ally of Lebanese President Michel Aoun.

Aoun has accused Saudi Arabia of holding Hariri hostage. Senior Lebanese politicians close to Hariri also said he was coerced into resigning. Saudi Arabia and Hariri both deny

those accusations.

"What Iran is doing against some Arab countries calls for taking more than one measure to stop these violations, interferences and threats, which are carried out through many various means," Hossam Zaki, Arab League Assistant Secretary, told Asharq al Awsat newspaper in an interview.

"Stopping them requires a joint

Hariri resignation triggers regional tensions

Meeting looking for ways to confront Iran influence

Arab policy."

He said the meeting would send a "strong message" for Iran to step back from its current policies.

Egypt's state-owned newspaper Al Ahram cited an Arab diplomatic source saying the meeting may refer the matter to the United Nations Security Council.

The emergency Arab foreign ministers meeting was convened at the request of Saudi Arabia with support from the UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait to discuss means of confronting Iranian intervention, Egypt's state news agency MENA said.

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Adel Jubeir told Reuters last week the kingdom's actions in the Middle East were only a response to what he called the "aggression" of Iran.

"Unfortunately countries like the Saudi regime are pursuing divisions and creating differences and because of this they don't see any results other than divisions," Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told Iranian state media yesterday on the sidelines of a meeting in Antalya with his Russian and Turkish counterparts about the Syria conflict.

Saudi Arabia also accuses Hezbollah of a role in the launching of a missile at Riyadh from Yemen this month. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said Iran's supply of rockets to Houthi militias was an act of "direct military aggression".

Would resist illegal nuke strike order from Trump

Says top US general in charge of nuke forces

AFP, Ottawa

The general in command of US nuclear forces said Saturday that he would resist any "illegal" presidential order for a strike and work to find an alternative.

President Donald Trump's history of unpredictable and volatile behavior has raised concerns that he could unilaterally order an unnecessary nuclear attack -- an issue recently debated by members of the US Senate.

"We think about these things a lot. When you have this responsibility, how do you not think about it?" General John Hyten told the Halifax Security Forum in response to a question about the conversation he would have with the president on a potential strike.

"I provide advice to the president, he'll tell me what to do."

Hyten heads US Strategic Command, which is responsible for American cyber capabilities and missile defense, in addition to nuclear weapons.

"If it's illegal... I'm gonna say, 'Mr

Syria forces retake last IS stronghold

AFP, Deir Ezzor

The Syrian army and loyalist militiamen yesterday retook full control of Albu Kamal from the Islamic State group, a military source said, ousting the jihadists from their last urban stronghold in Syria.

Albu Kamal has changed hands several times, with government forces announcing the capture of the town near the Iraqi border earlier this month but losing it to a blistering IS counter-attack a week ago.

"Syrian troops and allied forces took full control of Albu Kamal, and are removing mines and explosives left by IS," the military source in Deir Ezzor told AFP on Sunday.

"IS put up fierce resistance and tried to use explosives and suicide bombers, but besieging the city allowed the army to clinch the offensive and take full control of the city," the source added.

State news agency SANA also reported the advance in Albu Kamal, saying the "Syrian army and its allies eliminated the last Daesh (IS) terrorist pocket in the town."

A string of territorial defeats across northern and eastern Syria had left Albu Kamal as the last significant Syrian town held by IS.

Syria's army announced on November 9 it had ousted IS from the town, but the jihadists launched a lightning offensive and retook it.

A week later, the army and allied Iraqi, Lebanese, and Iranian fighters broke back into Albu Kamal and steadily advanced through the town.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights confirmed on Sunday that Syrian troops and their allies had captured Albu Kamal.

The loss of Albu Kamal caps the group's reversion to an underground guerrilla organisation with no urban base.



President, that's illegal.' And guess what he's gonna do? He's gonna say, 'What would be legal?' And we'll come up with options, of a mix of capabilities, to respond to whatever the situation is," Hyten said.

Trump issued an apocalyptic threat to unleash "fire and fury" on North Korea and began calling Kim Jong-Un "Rocket Man" after a series of provocative missile tests, while the hermit state's leader branded Trump a "dotard."

The escalating war of words has alarmed some US lawmakers, and senators debated the limits of a president's unilateral power to launch a nuclear attack earlier this week.

In the event of an ongoing or imminent nuclear attack, senators and expert witnesses agreed that the president had full authority to defend the nation, but experts said there was no strict definition of "imminent."

As to what constitutes an illegal order, Hyten referred to the four key principles from the Law of Armed Conflict in his remarks.



Merkel in final push to avert another polls

AFP, Berlin

Chancellor Angela Merkel will make a last push yesterday to forge a government, in a twin battle to save her political future and avert fresh elections that could destabilise Germany and Europe.

Elections in September had left the veteran leader weakened and without a majority as some of her party's voters turned to the far-right AfD because of anger over her liberal refugee policy.

The disputed decision to let in more than a million asylum seekers since 2015 is also proving to be a stumbling block as she seeks an alliance with an unlikely group of parties spanning the left and right of the political spectrum.

Merkel's conservative CDU party and its Bavarian allies the CSU, hoping to find common ground with the pro-business FDP and the Greens, have given themselves until Sunday to clinch a deal.

If they do not, Germany would have to hold new elections in 2018, as the centre-left Social Democratic Party has ruled out returning to a coalition with Merkel after suffering a humiliating loss at September's elections.

"Today is the last day of these exploratory talks. We must decide," CSU chief Horst Seehofer said as he entered into talks Sunday.

THREAT TO CLOSE PLO OFFICE IN WASHINGTON

Palestinians threaten to cut ties with US

AFP, Ramallah

The Palestinians will freeze their ties with the US if it follows through on a threat to close the Palestine Liberation Organisation's office in Washington, a senior PLO official warned Saturday.

The surprise American move and Palestinian backlash came as US President Donald Trump seeks bargaining chips in his bid to broker an elusive Israeli-Palestinian peace deal.

Trump has a 90-day window to avert the closure if he deems progress has been made.

But PLO Secretary General Saeb Erekat said his organisation had officially informed Washington that "we would put on hold all our communications with this American administration" if the office were closed.

The PLO, which the international community sees as representing all Palestinians, must have its permission to operate its premises in the American capital renewed every six months.

Palestinian foreign minister Riyad al-Malki said it was the first time since the 1980s that the State Department had refused to renew it.

Malki told AFP Palestinian officials had received a letter from Washington two days ago "saying that the Secretary of State had not found enough reasons to keep the office open".



China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi (L) and Myanmar's President Htin Kyaw shake hands before their meeting in Presidential Palace in Naypyitaw, Myanmar, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Rahul set to replace Sonia

Congress top brass meet today to elect next leader

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's main opposition party Congress led by Italy-born Sonia Gandhi has called a meeting of the party's decision-making forum today amidst speculations that it will clear the decks for anointment of her son Rahul Gandhi as the party chief.

The long-held suspense over 47-year-old Rahul Gandhi's elevation as the Congress president, which will see a generational shift in the party's leadership, could be over as early as December 1 if the meeting of the Congress Working Committee (CWC) gives its stamp of approval to the suggested dates for completing its organisational polls. Rahul, the scion of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, is now the vice president of the party.

According to the poll schedule drawn up by the party's election authority, the last date of filing nomination papers is December 1 and if there is a contest, the election would be

held on December 8.

"The dates for election of the next Congress president will be fixed on Monday," senior leader Janardan Dwivedi said. "If there is only one nomination, the next Congress president will be announced on the last day of withdrawal itself."



If things go as per the script, Rahul Gandhi could take over as Congress chief and will lead the party in next parliamentary elections in early 2019.

His elevation to be the party chief, it happens, will come ahead of the crucial elections to the 182-member legislative assembly in Prime Minister

Narendra Modi's home state of Gujarat scheduled for December 9 and 14 in two phases.

Congress is out of power in India since May, 2014 having lost parliamentary polls to Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party and in Gujarat for the last two decades.

If there is a contest for the post of Congress President, which is extremely unlikely, around 2,000 delegates of the party's electoral college will vote.

Rahul, who joined politics in 2004 and became party vice president in January, 2013, had last month made clear his willingness to take over the mantle of the party from his mother.

Sonia holds the record of being the party chief for more than 19 consecutive years after taking over from Sitaram Kesri in March 1998.

Congress party is running behind schedule to elect its new chief. After two extensions, the Election Commission of India has set December 31 deadline for the party to complete its internal polls.

UK budget aims for driverless cars by 2021

AFP, London

British finance minister Philip Hammond is to announce £75 million (\$99 million, 84 million euros) funding for Artificial Intelligence and plans to put driverless cars on UK roads by 2021, in his budget speech.

Hammond will announce regulation changes to allow Britain's driverless car industry, which the government estimates will be worth £28 billion by 2035, to get cars on the road within as little as three years, according to extracts of the budget released by his office.

"Some would say that is a bold move, but I believe we have to embrace these technologies if we want to see Britain leading the next industrial revolution," he told BBC's Andrew Marr Show.

The minister, who is under pressure to deliver an eye-catching budget following Brexit spats with cabinet colleagues, will also announce a £400 million fund for companies hoping to roll out electric-car charge points across the country.

People who want to buy a battery-electric vehicle will also be able to access funding as Britain attempts to move towards zero-emission transport.

With a focus on tech industries, the government is also planning to spend £75 million supporting companies developing AI and £160 million in developing 5G technology, which it believes will be necessary for the mass rollout of driverless cars.

Libya to probe 'slave trade' after outcry

AFP, Tripoli

Libya will investigate alleged slave trading in the country, the internationally recognised government announced Sunday, following the release of video footage appearing to show migrants being auctioned off.

Chaos-ridden Libya has long been a major transit hub for migrants trying to reach Europe, and many of them have fallen prey to serious abuse in the North African country at the hands of traffickers and others.

US television network CNN aired the footage last week of an apparent live auction in Libya where black men are presented to North African buyers as potential farmhands and sold off for as little as \$400.

Deputy Prime Minister Ahmed Metig said his UN-backed Government of National Accord would investigate the allegations, in a statement posted Sunday on the Facebook page of the GNA's press office.

Metig said he would instruct the formation of a "commission to investigate these reports in order to apprehend and bring those responsible to justice", the statement added.

The foreign ministry in a statement added: "If these allegations are confirmed, all implicated persons will be punished."

The CNN report apparently showing migrants being auctioned off in Libya was shared widely on social media, provoking outrage in Africa, Europe and the rest of the world.

The grainy footage shot on a mobile telephone shows a man CNN said was Nigerian and in his 20s being offered up for sale as part of a group of "big strong boys for farm work".