

NEWS IN
briefUS strike kills 100
Shabaab fighters

AFP, Washington

US forces conducted an air strike against the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Shabaab group in Somalia yesterday, killing more than 100 jihadis, military officials said. The operation occurred 125 miles (200 kilometers) northwest of the capital, Mogadishu.

Palestinian factions
start talks in Cairo

AFP, Cairo

Leading Palestinian political factions began talks in Cairo yesterday aimed at pushing ahead with reconciliation efforts, including discussing the formation of a unity government. Representatives of 13 political parties are in the Egyptian capital for meetings that are expected to last three days.

'Advanced' cyber
attack hits Saudi

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi authorities said Monday they had detected an "advanced" cyber attack targeting the kingdom, in a fresh attempt by hackers to disrupt government computers. National Cyber Security Centre said the attack involved the use of "Powershell" malware, but it did not comment on the source of the attack or which government bodies were targeted.

'Opposition' editor
gets 3 yrs in Turkey

AFP, Istanbul

A Turkish court sentenced the online editor of Turkey's main opposition daily to three years and one month in jail on terror charges, reports said yesterday. Oguz Guven, editor of the online version of the secular Cumhuriyet daily, was found guilty by an Istanbul court of disseminating "terror" propaganda for outlawed groups.

POLITICAL CRISIS IN GERMANY

Merkel for new polls
than minority govt

CNN ONLINE

Fresh elections in Germany appeared increasingly likely after Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that she preferred a new vote over going without a parliamentary majority.

The country has been plunged into its worst political crisis in years after negotiations to form the next government collapsed overnight, dealing a serious blow to Merkel and raising questions about the future of the longtime Chancellor.

Merkel's party, which lacks a majority in the Bundestag, had spent weeks trying to cobble together a ruling coalition with three other parties. But the plan fell apart when the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) walked out of talks shortly before midnight on Sunday over disagreements on issues ranging from energy policy to migration.

Speaking to state broadcaster ARD Monday evening, Merkel said that the "path of minority government" should be considered "very very closely".

"I am very skeptical and I believe that new elections would be the better path," she said. Merkel also confirmed that she



would be ready to lead her party into any new vote.

She did not rule out further talks with other parties, however, and acknowledged that the country's next steps were in the hands of German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

Merkel met with Steinmeier earlier in the day to discuss the country's options. Speaking after their meeting, Steinmeier described the situation as unprecedented in postwar Germany and urged the country's parties to work together to try to form a government.

But Merkel is not the only party leader who has voiced doubt about whether further talks could lead to a resolution. Martin Schulz, the leader of the Social Democrats -- the second largest party in parliament after Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) -- described new elections as "the right path" earlier Monday.

Either way, the setback has raised concerns about the political stability of Europe's largest economy.

If all other options of forming a government fail, Steinmeier has the power to set in motion a complex process that could lead to a new vote next year.

But recent polling puts all parties roughly where they were on election night, meaning a new election could result in similar deadlock.

Whatever the outcome of talks, one thing is for sure: Once unassassable Merkel will be the biggest victim.



People and soldiers celebrate after the resignation of Zimbabwe's president Robert Mugabe in Harare, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

N KOREA AS 'STATE SPONSOR OF TERRORISM'

China urges talks

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday called for extra efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis through talks after US President Donald Trump re-branded Pyongyang as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Beijing has repeatedly pushed for negotiations to end the standoff. Some analysts warned that the terror designation could further inflame tensions.

"We still hope all relevant parties can contribute to easing tensions, that the relevant parties can resume talks and (adopt) the correct track to resolving the Korean peninsula issue through dialogue and consultation," said foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang.

China has pushed for a "dual track approach" which would require the United States to freeze its military drills in South Korea while North Korea would halt its weapons programmes, but the proposal has not gained traction.

Trump on Monday promised a rapid escalation of US Treasury sanctions against the North after adding its name to a terror blacklist previously led by Iran and Syria.

"Should have happened a long time ago. Should have happened years ago," Trump said.

However, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said sanctions and diplomacy could still pressure North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un into talks on nuclear disarmament.

There was no immediate reaction from North Korea. Japan and South Korea praised the US move but some analysts warned of a possible backlash.

"North Korea will consider it as a thing next to a declaration of war," Professor Yang Moo-Jin of the University for North Korean Studies in Seoul told AFP. "There is a possibility that it may retaliate by test-launching an ICBM in the near future."

Meanwhile, two key figures in the North Korean military have been punished for "impure behavior," according to a

US to impose more sanctions; S Korea, Japan hail move

Pyongyang punishes top military leaders: Seoul



South Korean lawmaker, a move analysts say is likely intended to help leader Kim Jong Un tighten his grip on power.

A closed-door briefing by South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) identified the two officials as Hwang Pyong So, the director of North Korea's General Political Bureau (GPK), and his deputy Kim Won Hong, said South Korean Rep. Kim Byung-keo after the meeting.

It's unclear how exactly Hwang and his deputy were disciplined, but one analyst told CNN they could have been required to undergo re-education, which is likely to include a period of re indoctrination of North Korean ideology.

"He's playing musical chairs with key positions," said Andrei Lankov, a professor at Kookmin University in Seoul and the director of NKNews.org. "Kim Jong Un doesn't want anybody in the military to stay in charge for too long... He's brilliant, cynical, brutal and efficient."



Iran declares 'victory' over IS group

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani yesterday declared "victory" over the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria as the jihadists cling to just a few remaining scraps of territory.

Iran is one of the main international backers of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and has sent military advisers and thousands of "volunteers" to fight IS on the ground in Syria and Iraq.

In a televised speech Rouhani thanked "all the fighters of Islam", supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the armed forces of Iraq and Syria for "the end of this group that brought nothing but evil, destruction, murder and savagery".

He congratulated Iran's Revolutionary Guards and its foreign arm, the Quds Force for a "great victory" but insisted that the "main work was accomplished by the people and armies of Syria, Iraq and Lebanon".

"We helped them in accordance with our religious and Islamic duties," he said.

Iranian media on Sunday and Monday showed footage of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in the Syrian border town of Albu Kamal, reporting he personally directed operations that recaptured the jihadists' final urban bastion over the weekend.

In a message released by the Revolutionary Guards, Soleimani congratulated supreme leader Khamenei on this "decisive victory" over IS.

Russia 'saved Syria as a state'

Says Putin as he meets Assad ahead of talks with Turkey and Iran

AFP, Sochi

President Vladimir Putin said the Russian army had "saved Syria as a state" after meeting with leader Bashar al-Assad in Russia, as Syrian regime forces take an upper hand over rebels and the Islamic State group.

Monday's talks came during an unannounced "working visit" by Assad to the Black Sea resort of Sochi, ahead of a summit between Putin and the leaders of Turkey and Iran on Wednesday aimed at rebooting the Syrian peace process.

"As for our joint work in the fight against terrorism in Syria, this military operation is coming to an end," Putin said, according to a transcript published on the Kremlin's website.

The Russian leader praised Assad and predicted terrorism would suffer an "inevitable" defeat in the country.

"Thanks to the Russian army, Syria has been saved as a state. Much has been done to stabilise the situation in Syria," the transcript said.

"It is in our interest to advance



Russia's President Vladimir Putin (L) embraces Syria's Bashar al-Assad during a meeting in Sochi, Russia, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

the political process... we don't want to look back and we are ready for dialogue with all those who want to come up with a political settlement," Assad said in translated comments.

Putin said he would consult world leaders on his talks with Assad, including with US president Donald Trump in a telephone call expected on Tuesday.

Putin will Wednesday host

Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Iran's Hassan Rouhani for the first in a series of summits on the peace process, ahead of parallel UN-led talks in Geneva set for November 28.

The meeting -- the first such three-way summit between the trio -- comes as Ankara, Moscow and Tehran cooperate with increasing intensity on ending the over six-year civil war in Syria that has left 330,000 dead and millions homeless.

"Assad's visit... shows that there was a need to relay the Syrian leadership's position on a future settlement to the Kremlin, and that (Assad) was interested in the forthcoming summit with the presidents of Iran and Turkey," said Russian political analyst Azhdar Kurtov.

"It is unlikely this was just another demonstration of the Kremlin's political loyalty to Assad," he told AFP.

"The open-war phase in the Syria conflict will soon be over and the question of a political solution will become more pressing than before."

Odd name gets job!

AFP, Pasuruan

An Indonesian can thank his parents after his unusual name not only spared him a traffic ticket but also landed him a job with the police who stopped him. Cops were shocked when they pulled over the 22-year-old for driving without a licence and discovered his name was Polisi, which means police in Indonesian.

The man, who like many Indonesians goes by one name, told authorities that he was a poor construction worker who was his family's sole breadwinner.

Video of the incident went viral and big-hearted officers sympathetic to Polisi's plight not only spared him the ticket but offered him a job at the local police station. He started Monday.

His position? Helping the force conduct driving licence tests.



ALLEGED PHONE TAPPING OF LEGISLATORS

Lanka launches probe

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's parliament yesterday announced an investigation into how the private phone records of legislators were leaked in a scandal that has deepened acrimony between President Maithripala Sirisena and his coalition.

Lawmakers allege their phones were illegally tapped by a commission selected by Sirisena to investigate a long-running insider trading scandal linked to the central bank.

"We must find out how this information leaked out and remedial action should be taken," said parliament speaker Karu Jayasuriya as ruling party legislators accused the presidential commission of hacking their phones.

Sirisena has publicly accused politicians from his own coalition of frustrating his investigation, launched earlier this year, into a bond dealing scandal at the central bank.

The then-central bank governor Arjuna Mahendran, who was sacked in April 2016,

was accused of misconduct regarding alleged favours to his son-in-law Arjun Aloisius, who is accused of causing millions in losses to the island's coffers.

Ravi Karunayake resigned as foreign minister in August after being linked to Aloisius, a controversial financial trader who is under investigation.

The leaked phone records of 28 members of parliament, including calls made by WhatsApp and Viber, detail how several of them were also in communication with Aloisius.

The presidential commission investigating the insider trading scandal denied it ordered the phones tapped.

In a statement, it said the records were obtained from mobile devices used by Mahendran and Aloisius and information from telecom service providers. There was no explanation as to how the records were leaked. Sirisena was elected after defecting from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and securing support from Wickremesinghe's United National Party.