

NEWS IN brief

US defence chief arrives in Pakistan

US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis arrived in Pakistan yesterday as Washington pressures its wayward ally to eliminate militant safe havens, days after Pakistani authorities freed an alleged mastermind of the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

Merkel's coalition woes pile up

German Chancellor Angela Merkel's struggling bid to form a government was hit by a new setback yesterday as her key ally was weakened in a leadership tussle. Horst Seehofer, head of Merkel's Bavarian allies, will step down as premier of southern state in early 2018, leaving the post to regional finance minister.

S Sudan to use drone system to curb crime

South Sudan launched a closed-circuit television (CCTV) and drone security system yesterday that officials said would help improve safety in the capital Juba where violent crime has spiked on the back of an insurgency. Kfir Shilder, project manager at Global Group said the surveillance system had 11 cameras installed in Juba and two drones.

Still no trace of half of Yazidis abducted by IS

Around half of the Yazidis kidnapped by the Islamic State group three years ago are still missing, Iraqi Kurdish officials said Sunday. In 2014, IS jihadists killed thousands of Yazidis in Sinjar and kidnapped thousands of women and girls from the religious minority to abuse them as sex slaves.



Civilians and members of the army attend one of the joint meetings, which were held across South Phyongan, Hwanghae and Hamgyong provinces, to celebrate North Korea's nuclear progress in this photo released by North Korea's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) in Pyongyang yesterday.

US, S Korea begin largest-ever drill

Ignore call for restraint amid tension

The United States and South Korea went ahead with large-scale joint aerial drills yesterday, a move North Korea had said would push the Korean peninsula to "the brink of nuclear war", ignoring calls from Russia and China to call them off.

The drills come a week after North Korea said it had tested its most advanced intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching the United States as part of a weapons programme that it has conducted in defiance of international sanctions and condemnation.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said it was "regrettable" that all parties had not "grasped the window of opportunity" presented by two months of relative calm before North's most recent test.

China and Russia had proposed that the United States and South Korea stop major military exercises in exchange for North Korea halting its weapons programmes.

The annual US-South Korean drill, called Vigilant Ace, will run until Friday, with six F-22 Raptor stealth fighters to be deployed among the more than 230 aircraft taking part.

F-35 fighters will also join the drills, which will include the largest number of 5th generation fighters ever to have taken part, according to a South Korea-based US Air Force spokesman.

Meanwhile, an airplane crew flying over Japan saw North Korea's missile as it plunged back through the atmosphere last week, their airline said yesterday.

Yemen's ex-president killed

Claim Iran-backed Huthi militias after clashes between rebels and supporters of Saleh spread beyond Sanaa

Yemen's rebel-controlled interior ministry yesterday announced the "killing" of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, as a video emerged showing what appeared to be Saleh's corpse.

"The interior ministry announces the end of the crisis of militias and the killing of their leader and a number of his criminal supporters," an anchor said on the rebels' official Al-Masirah television, referring to armed supporters of Saleh.

Saleh on Saturday announced the end of his alliance with the Iran-backed Huthi rebels, with whom he has jointly ruled the capital for three years.

The statement came shortly after a video began to circulate on social media showing what appeared to be a dead Saleh, wrapped in a floral-print blanket with a severe head injury.

Saudi-owned al-Arabiya television quoted sources in former President Ali Abdullah Saleh's party as confirming he had been killed, reported Reuters.

The Saudi-led coalition fighting Yemen's Iran-backed Huthi insurgents warned civilians yesterday to evacuate rebel-held areas of the capital Sanaa, after the government ordered an advance to retake the city.

"The coalition urges civilians to evacuate areas near

positions held by the Huthis," read a statement published by Saudi Arabia's state-run Al-Ekhabariya TV.

"We ask civilians to remain at least 500 metres away from Huthi military vehicles and gatherings."

Earlier, Yemen's president has ordered his forces to retake control of Sanaa, a presidential source said yesterday, after the rebel alliance that forced his government from the capital collapsed amid heavy fighting.

Witnesses reported fresh clashes between forces loyal to ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh and Iran-backed Shia Huthi rebels, who together seized control of Sanaa from the internationally recognised government three years ago.

Their alliance has unravelled over the last week, with fierce battles breaking out across the capital, accusations of betrayal and Saleh reaching out to the Saudi-led coalition battling the insurgents.

President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi, whose government operates from the southern city of Aden, moved to take advantage of the chaos yesterday.

"The president has ordered Vice President Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who is in Marib (east of Sanaa), to activate military units and advance towards the capital," an official in the presidency told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity.



Saleh

Saudi coalition warns Yemenis to evacuate rebel-held areas

President Hadi orders advance on capital after rebel pact collapses

TRUMP'S JERUSALEM DECISION

Move could fuel violence

Warns Arab League as Palestinian leaders fear it would sink peace hopes for a generation

AFP, Cairo

The Arab League chief said on Sunday a decision by US President Donald Trump to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital would boost fanaticism and violence, and not serve the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Trump's son-in-law and Middle East peace envoy Jared Kushner told the Saban Forum on Sunday the president is close to a decision on whether to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

"It is unfortunate that some are insisting on carrying out this step without any regard to the dangers it carries to the stability of the Middle East and the whole world," Ahmed Abul Gheit, head of the Arab League, told reporters in Cairo on Sunday.

Abul Gheit said the Arab League is closely following the issue and is in contact with the Palestinian authorities and Arab states to coordinate the Arab position if Trump takes the step.

Trump must decide whether to sign a legal waiver that would delay plans to move

the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem for another six months.

But, according to diplomats and observers, he is also now expected to announce in a speech on Wednesday that he supports Israel's claim on Jerusalem as its capital.

Palestinian leaders are lobbying desperately against such a move, fearing it could provoke such fury in the Arab world it could sink peace hopes for a generation.

"Nothing justifies this act... it will not serve peace or stability, instead it will nourish fanaticism and violence," said Abul Gheit.

The move would "benefit only one side, which is the anti-peace Israeli government," he told reporters.

Jordan has warned of "grave consequences" if US President Donald Trump decides to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, state media said.

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation yesterday called for a summit of Muslim nations if the United States takes the controversial decision.

US president 'close' to decision on Jerusalem: Kushner
Jordan warns of 'grave consequences' if Trump recognises Jerusalem

PROBE INTO RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE IN US ELECTION

Trump tweets prompt warnings from lawmakers

REUTERS, Washington

A series of tweets by US President Donald Trump about the investigation into contacts between his 2016 campaign and Russia prompted concerns on Sunday among both Democratic and Republican lawmakers, with Republican Senator Lindsey Graham saying Trump could be wading into "peril" by commenting on the probe.

"I would just say this with the president: There's an ongoing criminal investigation," Graham said on the CBS program "Face the Nation."

"You tweet and comment regarding ongoing criminal investigations at your own peril," he added.

On Sunday morning, Trump wrote on Twitter that he never asked former FBI Director James Comey to stop investigating Michael Flynn, the president's former

national security adviser - a statement at odds with an account Comey himself has given.

That tweet followed one on Saturday in which Trump said: "I had to fire General Flynn because he lied to the Vice President (Mike Pence) and the FBI."

Legal experts and some Democratic lawmakers said if Trump knew Flynn lied to the Federal Bureau of Investigation and then pressured Comey not to investigate him, that could bolster a charge of obstruction of justice.

Trump's attorney, John Dowd, told Reuters in an interview on Sunday that he had drafted the Saturday tweet and made "a mistake" when he composed it.

Trump said yesterday he "feels badly" for Flynn and lamented that his former rival Hillary Clinton "lied many times" and nothing happened.



A Palestinian youth throws stones during clashes with Israeli soldiers at the entrance of the northern village of Qusra in the occupied West Bank near Nablus yesterday. An Israeli settler shot dead a Palestinian in the occupied West Bank last week after a group of Israelis was targeted by Palestinian stone-throwers, officials said.

CATALONIA CRISIS

Judge refuses to free four Catalan leaders

AFP, Madrid

Catalonia's sacked vice president Oriol Junqueras and three other separatist leaders will remain in prison during a probe over their role in the region's independence drive, a Spanish judge decided yesterday, as critical Catalan elections approach.

Six other former ministers who were also remanded in custody last month will be released on bail of 100,000 euros (\$119,000) each as an investigation into charges of rebellion, sedition and misuse of public funds continues, the Madrid court said in a statement.

The decision comes as axed Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont attended an extradition hearing in Belgium, where he escaped to after his region's parliament declared independence on October 27, claiming he would not get a fair trial at home.

Spain is seeking to have Puigdemont and four of his former ministers who fled with him sent back to face charges over their role in the independence drive.

The Belgian judge will decide on December 14 whether to grant the European arrest warrant, their lawyers said after the hearing.

The ruling that Junqueras, former regional interior minister Joaquim Forn and two civil society leaders will stay in prison comes as the official campaign for Catalan elections on December 21 kicks off at midnight.

Madrid called the new elections after the independence declaration, while dismissing Catalonia's government and suspending the region's autonomy.

After receiving a request to free the 10 Catalan leaders, Supreme Court Judge Pablo Larena decided there was a likelihood that Junqueras and three others would repeat their alleged offences if he released them.

China halts 'female morality lessons'

AFP, Beijing

Chinese authorities have shut down a "female morality class" that provoked anger by lecturing women to shut up, accept a second-rate role in society and focus on housework, state media reported yesterday.

In viral video that surfaced on China's internet, an instructor in the class in the northeastern province of Liaoning tells students that "women should talk less, do more housework and shut their mouths".

The teacher also said that "women should not strive to move upwards in society, but should always remain at the bottom level".

"If you order food delivery instead of cooking by yourself, you are disobeying rules for women," another instructor said.

The class was launched in the city of Fushun by the Fushun Traditional Cultural Research Association, which was established in 2011 with the approval of city authorities.

Its aim was ostensibly to reinforce Confucian values, part of a growing national embrace of traditional teachings, but video of the lectures angered many.

"This is female slavery, not female morality," wrote one angry user of China's Twitter-like Weibo

25 civilians killed in air raids in Syria

AFP, Hammurriyeh

A wave of Syrian air strikes killed at least 25 civilians and wounded dozens across the besieged rebel enclave of Eastern Ghouta near Damascus on Sunday, a monitor said.

The deadliest raids hit the town of Hammurriyeh, killing 17 civilians including six children, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Other air strikes on the towns of Arbeen, Beit Sawa, Harasta and Misraha killed eight civilians.

The Observatory said at least 75 people were wounded and the death toll was likely to rise given the critical wounds suffered by dozens of people.

The strikes appeared to hit a modest residential neighbourhood, smashing a small convenience store and caking a vegetable stand in a layer of dust.

Victims were taken to a nearby clinic where doctors could be seen treating a man wincing from a gash above his knee.

In another room, the lifeless soot-covered body of a boy lay in a pool of blood.

10 held over killing of Malta journalist

AFP, Valletta

Maltese authorities yesterday arrested 10 people in connection with the killing of a whistle-blowing journalist that turned an international spotlight onto crime and corruption on the Mediterranean island.

Daphne Caruana Galizia, who died when her car was blown up on October 16, was one of Malta's most prominent public figures, thanks to a widely read blog she used to expose the murky underbelly of the economically booming island nation.

Her most explosive reports included allegations that members of Prime Minister Joseph Muscat's inner circle benefited from kickbacks from major business deals and a controversial passports-for-investment scheme.

But the 53-year-old also focused on alleged dubious behaviour by prominent opposition and business figures, fuelling speculation she could have been the victim of mobsters as easily as a political vendetta.

Muscat said all the suspects were Maltese and some were known to the police. The Times of Malta identified two of those arrested as brothers Alfred and George Degiorgio, describing them as members of a criminal gang.



Caruana Galizia