

NEWSIN brief

US, S Korea, Japan start missile-tracking drill

AFP, Seoul
The US, South Korea and Japan yesterday carried out joint exercises to track missiles from North Korea, as China warned that such manoeuvres fuel tensions following nuclear-armed Pyongyang's longest-range test launch to date. The drill comes less than two weeks after Pyongyang test-fired a new ICBM.

Qatar signs deal to buy Typhoon jets from UK

AFP, Doha
Qatar signed a multi-billion-dollar deal Sunday to buy 24 Typhoon fighters from Britain, its second major defence agreement this week. The \$8-billion deal was signed in Doha by Qatar's Defence Minister Khalid bin Mohammed al-Attiyah and his British counterpart, Gavin Williamson.

French journalist detained in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar
Indian authorities have detained a French journalist in Kashmir where he was making a documentary on security in the disputed territory, officials said yesterday. Police said Paul Comiti was detained on Saturday in Srinagar, the capital of Indian-administered Kashmir, because of visa irregularities.

6,000 IS jihadists could return to Africa: AU

AFP, Algiers
Up to 6,000 Africans who fought for the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group in Iraq and Syria could return home, the African Union's top security official warned Sunday, calling on countries to prepare for the threat. Smail Chergui, the AU's commissioner for peace and security, said African nations would need to work closely with each other and share intelligence to counter returning militants.



Palestinian protestors throw stones towards Israeli security forces during clashes in the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday as demonstrations continue to flare in the Middle East and elsewhere over US President Donald Trump's declaration of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. PHOTO: AFP

SYRIA CONFLICT

Putin orders Russia troop withdrawal

REUTERS, Moscow
President Vladimir Putin ordered "a significant part" of Russia's military contingent in Syria to start withdrawing yesterday, saying Moscow and Damascus had achieved their mission of destroying Islamic State in just over two years.

Putin, who polls show will be re-elected comfortably in March, made the announcement during a surprise visit to Russia's Hmeymim air base in Syria, where he held talks with President Bashar al-Assad and addressed Russian forces.

The Kremlin first launched air strikes in Syria in September 2015 in its biggest Middle East intervention in decades, turning the tide of the conflict in Assad's favour, while dramatically increasing Moscow's own influence in the region.

Syrian state television quoted Assad as thanking Putin for Russia's help, saying the blood of Moscow's "martyrs" had been mixed with the blood of the Syrian army.

Russia's campaign, which has been extensively covered on state TV, has not caught the imagination of most Russians. But nor has it stirred unease of the kind the Soviet Union faced with its calamitous 1980s intervention in Afghanistan.

The use of private military contractors, something which has been documented by Reuters but denied by the defence ministry, has allowed Moscow to keep the public casualty toll fairly low.

Russia's "mission completed" moment in Syria may help Putin increase the turnout at the March presidential election by appealing to the patriotism of voters.

Rahul Gandhi takes over at Congress helm

Prepares to challenge Indian PM ahead of 2019 polls

REUTERS, New Delhi
India's main opposition Congress party yesterday elevated Rahul Gandhi, the scion of the country's most fabled political dynasty, as its president, preparing to challenge the dominance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi ahead of national polls in 2019.

In a long-awaited move, Gandhi, the great-grandson of India's founding prime minister Jawaharlar Nehru, was elected unopposed to head the party. He will take the reins from his mother Sonia, the party's longest-serving president, since 1998. Calling it a "historic occasion", the Congress party said Gandhi would take charge as president on Dec 16.

Television broadcast images of party supporters celebrating and distributing sweets outside Congress offices in the capital, New Delhi, and the financial hub of Mumbai.

Gandhi's ascent coincides with state polls in Modi's western home state of Gujarat that are shaping as a test for the prime minister, who has been facing criticism for softening

economic growth and poor implementation of a nationwide sales tax.

The Congress hopes a round of state elections offers the party, and Gandhi, a shot at revival ahead of the next national elections, due in 2019.

Modi's depiction of Gandhi as an underserving "prince" has helped sideline Gandhi since the last national election, during which time Congress has suffered some of its worst results in local elections.

The Nehru-Gandhi family has ruled the country for most of its 70 years since independence from Britain. Gandhi's father and grandmother were both prime ministers, and both assassinated.

Following Congress' defeat in the 2014 polls, Gandhi struggled to convince voters, as well as many within his party, of his leadership skills. But senior Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad said Gandhi was now ready for the next challenge. "The entire country has lots of expectations from Rahul Gandhi," Azad said. "Much before he was elected he has shown his mettle. He knows his responsibility."



End 'stupid war' in Yemen

UN chief urges Saudi Arabia to stop anti-Huthi military campaign, hopes US could pressure Riyadh to ease humanitarian crisis

AFP, Washington
UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called Sunday for a renewed push to end the "stupid war" in Yemen, saying he hoped the Trump administration could pressure Saudi Arabia to ease the humanitarian crisis there.

"I believe this is a stupid war. I think this war is against the interests of Saudi Arabia and the Emirates... (and) of the people of Yemen," he said on CNN, employing unusually blunt language for the top UN diplomat.

"What we need is a political solution." US President Donald Trump on Wednesday took the rare step of publicly demanding that ally Saudi Arabia immediately allow vital humanitarian supplies to reach Yemen, scene of what the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with millions at risk of starvation.

Trump, while not asking for an end to Saudi-led bombing of Yemen, said in a statement that his aides would ask the Saudis to "completely allow food, fuel, water and medicine to reach the Yemeni people, who desperately need it."

Guterres said conditions in Yemen had improved somewhat, adding, "I hope that President Trump has put a lot of pressure

recently... A lot of humanitarian aid is already going in."

He said he hoped a Saudi blockade of Yemen's ports, imposed after a Huthi missile was intercepted near Riyadh last month, would be lifted.

Saudi Arabia and its allies have launched a campaign to oust Huthi rebels who control the capital Sanaa and who have links to Riyadh's arch-foe Iran.

As the war drags on, seven million people are believed to be on the brink of famine and a cholera outbreak has caused more than 2,000 deaths.

"This war is causing, in my opinion, terrible suffering to the Yemeni people," while also harming Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, Guterres told CNN.

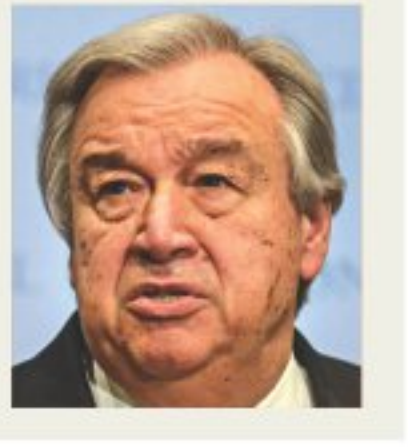
"It's in the interests of everybody to stop this war."

On Sunday, Saudi-led coalition air strikes on a Yemen rebel training camp northwest of the capital killed at least 26 Huthi fighters, security sources said.

The head of the training camp in Hajjah province, Amar al-Jarab, was among those killed in the strikes, the sources close to the Shia rebels told AFP.

The International Committee of the Red Cross on Saturday warned against fighting intensifying along the Red Sea coast near what it called densely populated urban areas.

Guterres hoped a Saudi blockade of Yemen's ports would be lifted
Red Cross warned against fighting intensifying along the Red Sea coast



German intel warns of Chinese espionage

REUTERS, Berlin
Germany's intelligence service has published the details of social network profiles which it says are fronts faked by Chinese intelligence to gather personal information about German officials and politicians.

The BfV domestic intelligence service took the unusual step of naming individual profiles it says are fake and fake organisations to warn public officials about the risk of leaking valuable personal information via social media. "Chinese intelligence services are active on networks like LinkedIn and have been trying for a while to extract information and find intelligence sources in this way," including seeking data on users' habits, hobbies and political interests, they said. Nine months of research had found that more than 10,000 German citizens had been contacted on the LinkedIn professional networking site by fake profiles disguised as headhunters, consultants, think-

tankers or scholars, the BfV said. "There could be a large number of target individuals and fake profiles that have not yet been identified," they added. Speaking in Beijing yesterday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang said the accusations were baseless.

"We hope the relevant German organisations, particularly government departments, can speak and act more responsibly, and not do things that are not beneficial to the development of bilateral relations," Lu said.

Among the faked profiles whose details were published were that of "Rachel Li", identified as a "headhunter" at "RiseHR", and an "Alex Li", a "Project Manager at Center for Sino-Europe Development Studies".

Many of the profile pictures show stylish and visually appealing young men and women. The picture of "Laeticia Chen", a manager at the "China Center of International Politics and Economy" was nicked from an online fashion catalogue, an official said.

Chinese agencies active on networks like LinkedIn
More than 10,000 Germans contacted by fake profiles



A family walks through a snow covered wood near Mold, north Wales, UK. Britain was recovering yesterday after heavy snow brought freezing temperatures, shutting hundreds of schools and disrupting flights for a second day. PHOTO: AFP

Mahathir returns both Selangor royal awards

THE STAR ONLINE, Petaling Jaya
Former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad has returned the two awards he received from the Selangor Palace, a move believed to be related to the palace's outrage over his remark on the Bugis. Mahathir, also the chairman of Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Pribumi), was the recipient of two medals of honour from the then Selangor Sultan in 1978 and 2003. One of them was the Darjah Kebesaran Seri Paduka Mahkota Selangor (SPMS) (First Class). Pribumi supreme council member Datuk Dr Rais Husin confirmed that Dr Mahathir had returned the awards to the palace. "Yes," Dr Rais said in a WhatsApp reply. On why Dr Mahathir made the decision to give back the awards, Dr

Saudi Arabia lifts ban on cinemas

AFP, Riyadh
Saudi Arabia yesterday lifted a decades-long ban on cinemas, part of a series of social reforms by the powerful crown prince that are shaking up the ultra-conservative kingdom. The government said it would begin licensing cinemas immediately and the first movie theatres are expected to open next March, in a decision that could boost the kingdom's nascent film industry. Reviving cinemas would represent a paradigm shift in the kingdom, which is promoting entertainment as part of a sweeping reform plan for a post-oil era, despite opposition from hardliners who have long vilified movie theatres as vulgar and sinful. "Commercial cinemas will be allowed to operate in the Kingdom as of early 2018, for the first time in more than 35 years," the culture and information ministry said in a statement. "This marks a watershed moment in the development of the cultural economy in the kingdom," the statement quoted Information Minister Awwad Alawwad as saying. Saudi Arabia is expected to have more than 300 cinemas -- with over 2,000 screens -- all across the kingdom by 2030, the ministry said.

Follow US on Jerusalem

Israel urges EU to back ME peace moves

REUTERS, Brussels
Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took his case to Europe to ask allies to join the United States in recognising Jerusalem as Israel's capital, but was met by a firm rebuff from EU foreign ministers who saw the move as a blow against the peace process.

Making his first ever visit to EU headquarters in Brussels, Netanyahu said President Donald Trump's move made peace in the Middle East possible "because recognising reality is the substance of peace, the foundation of peace."

Trump announced last Wednesday that the United States would recognise Jerusalem.

Israel, which annexed East Jerusalem after capturing it in a 1967 war, considers the entire city to be its capital. Palestinians want East Jerusalem as the capital of a future independent state.

The Trump administration says it remains committed to the peace process and its decision does not affect Jerusalem's future borders or status. It says any credible future peace deal will place the Israeli capital in Jerusalem, and ditching old policies is needed to revive a

peace process frozen since 2014. But even Israel's closest European allies have rejected that logic and say recognising Israel's capital unilaterally risks inflaming violence and further wrecking the chance for peace.

After a breakfast meeting between Netanyahu and EU foreign ministers, Sweden's top diplomat said no European at the closed-door meeting had voiced support for Trump's decision, and no country was likely to follow the United States in announcing plans to move its embassy.

"I have a hard time seeing that any other country would do that and I don't think any other EU country will do it," Margot Wallstrom told reporters.

Several EU foreign ministers arriving at the meeting reiterated the bloc's position that occupied areas, including East Jerusalem, are not within Israel's borders.

Israel however got support from some EU states. Last week, the Czech foreign ministry said it would begin considering moving the Czech Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, while Hungary blocked a planned EU statement condemning the US move.

VENEZUELA CRISIS

Opposition banned from 2018 election

AFP, Caracas
Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro announced Sunday that leading opposition parties will be barred from taking part in next year's presidential vote after they boycotted mayoral polls, in a move set to further consolidate his grip on power.

That includes the groups of key figures who have led street protests against his rule such as Henrique Capriles, Leopoldo Lopez and others, Maduro told reporters after casting his vote in the municipal polls.

"That's what the National Constituent Assembly set out," he said, referring to a controversial Maduro-allied special powers legislature whose legitimacy has been questioned by many in the international community.

"If they don't want elections, what are they doing? What's the alternative? (Civil) war?" the president asked, visibly angry. While municipal elections were under way across the country, Maduro clearly had his mind on the 2018 presidential race, in which he plans to seek reelection despite an approval rating of around 30 percent.

Crisis-weary voters meanwhile appeared to be staying away in droves from mayoral elections that the opposition is already boycotting.

Maduro said his party won more than 300 of Venezuela's 355 mayoral races. And the president insisted that 9.3 million people voted, which he called a record for a municipal vote.



Rais only said "it is very clear." Attempts to get the Selangor Palace and Dr Mahathir's office for comments have not been successful. Dr Mahathir, 93, reportedly told a Pakatan Harapan rally in October that Malaysia was being led by a prime minister who came from "Bugis pirates". His remark triggered outrage from the Johor Palace, Bugis community and associations in Malaysia and some parts in Indonesia. Selangor Ruler Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah also expressed outrage over Dr Mahathir's remarks in an interview with The Star.