

NEWS IN brief

Firefighters gain ground on California wildfire

Firefighters, taking advantage of a lull in the winds, on Monday held in check a massive California wildfire that has torched hundreds of buildings and charred an area larger than New York City. The Thomas Fire ignited a week ago and has burned 231,700 acres, in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. It continued to grow on Monday, but at a slower pace.

Magnitude 6.2 quake hits southeast Iran

An earthquake of magnitude 6.2 hit Kerman province in southeast Iran yesterday, injuring 15 people and causing the walls of some houses to collapse, state media reported. Another 5.4 quake hit western Iran on Monday, in the same region where a magnitude 7.3 earthquake killed at least 530 people last month. There have been no reports of deaths or injuries from Monday's quake.

Inter-clan fighting kills 170 in S Sudan

The death toll from inter-clan fighting in South Sudan's Great Lakes region last week has reached at least 170, officials said yesterday. The clashes in the province's Malek county broke out after a group of men from the Ruop ethnic group attacked rival youth from the Pakam group on Wednesday and Thursday.

US army must accept transgenders: court

Transgender recruits will be able to join the US military as of Jan 1 after a federal judge on Monday denied a request by President Donald Trump's administration to enforce his ban on transgender troops while the government appeals an order blocking it. The Pentagon said in a statement that it would follow court orders.



Palestinian paramedic volunteers carry away an injured protester into an ambulance past smoke from flaming tires during clashes with Israeli forces 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. *Inset*, Indian activists burn an effigy depicting U.S. President Donald Trump during a protest in New Delhi, India. PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS



Russia to keep bases in Syria

S-400 defence deal with Turkey soon

Russia will keep a naval and an air base in Syria capable of carrying out strikes against "terrorists" if required after a partial military pull-out announced by President Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin said yesterday.

Putin on Monday ordered "a significant part" of Moscow's military contingent to start pulling out of Syria, declaring their work largely done.

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

"Thanks to the fact that the operation to save Syria and the liberation of Syrian land from terrorists have been completed, there is no longer a need for broad-scale combat strength," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

But he added that Russia will keep the Hmeymim air base in Syria's Latakia Province and its naval facility in the port of Tartous.

"The President stressed that the terrorists might try to 'walk tall' again in Syria. If that happens, crushing blows will be carried out," Peskov said.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Monday that Turkish and Russian officials would meet in the coming days to finalise the deal for Russia to supply its latest S-400 air-defence system to Ankara.

The purchase of the surface-to-air missile defence batteries, Ankara's most significant deal with a non-Nato supplier, comes with Turkey in the throes of a crisis in relations with several Western states.

There are also worries in the West, including in the US, over the missile system's technical compatibility with the alliance's equipment.

'We're losing the battle'

Macron tells world leaders at Paris climate summit

French President Emmanuel Macron issued a stark warning on climate change at a summit in Paris yesterday, telling world leaders "we are losing the battle" against global warming.

"We're not moving fast enough, that's the problem," Macron told the One Planet Summit called to boost the 2015 Paris climate accord, which US President Donald Trump has renounced.

"We must all act because we will be held to account," Macron told the gathering on an island in the River Seine, adding: "We cannot say we did not know."

Dozens of world leaders and hundreds of ministers, company bosses, and environmentalists attended the meeting held two years to the day since 195 nations sealed the Paris

Agreement on curbing emissions. The absence of the US was keenly felt at the talks, which focused on boosting investment in green energy and divesting from fossil fuels.

Speaking ahead of the "One Planet" summit Macron said he was hopeful

'ONE PLANET' SUMMIT
French president pushes private sector to do more
Investors say will put more pressure on global companies

Trump would reconsider his decision to take the US out of the climate pact.

Macron is urging wealthy countries and global companies to commit more funds to combating global warming and help poorer nations deal with the impact of climate change.

Though Macron has said that concrete projects with real financing behind them are lacking, no internationally binding commitments will be announced at the summit.

In focus is how public and private financial institutions can mobilise more money and how investors can pressure corporate giants to shift towards more ecologically friendly strategies.

More than 200 institutional investors with \$26 trillion in assets under management yesterday said they would step up pressure on the world's biggest corporate greenhouse gas emitters to combat climate change.

That, they said, would be more effective than threatening to pull the plug on their investments in companies, which include Coal India, Gazprom, Exxon Mobil and China Petroleum & Chemical Corp.

World is in a mess

Ex-UN chiefs lament the state of global leadership in the age of Trump, warn of accidental nuclear war

Former UN chiefs Kofi Annan and Ban Ki-moon have lashed out at the state of global leadership in the age of Donald Trump, warning a nuclear war could be triggered by accident.

"Honestly speaking, we are in a mess," Annan told AFP in an interview ahead of yesterday's climate talks in Paris.

"In the past when we went through this sort of crisis, you had leaders who had the courage and the vision to want to take action, to understand that they needed to work with others," he said.

At a time of growing US isolationism, Annan urged leaders to cooperate better on fighting terrorism, migration and climate.

"Today, leaders are going in the wrong direction," he said. "Leaders are withdrawing."

He expressed particular concern over escalating tensions with North Korea, warning: "One miscalculation, one mistake and we are all victims".

"It may not be a deliberate decision to start a nuclear war," he added.

Ban, who like Annan spoke to AFP as part of The Elders group of senior statesmen and women, blasted Trump's climate stance as "politically short-sighted and misguided".

"The richest and most powerful country" in the world is disengaging from a historic deal that "even countries like Syria" have signed, Ban said.

"We are seeing more and more troubles and conflicts still continuing, because of the lack of global commitment and global vision," he added.



ALLEGED SEXUAL MISCONDUCT BY TRUMP

50 women lawmakers seek congressional investigation

Over the past two years, more than a dozen women have accused Trump of making unwanted sexual advances against them in the years before he entered politics. Monday's letter from the Democrats said there were at least 17 accusers and listed names.

"The president's own remarks appear to back up the allegations," the letter said, saying Trump had boasted "that he feels at liberty to perpetrate such conduct against women."

Meanwhile, Trump said yesterday denied the charges. "Despite thousands of hours wasted and many millions of dollars spent, the Democrats have been unable to show any collusion with Russia - so now they are moving on to the false accusations and fabricated stories of women who I don't know and/or have never met. FAKE NEWS!" Trump said on Twitter, citing an ongoing probe into alleged Russia meddling during the 2016 election.



Children play in the snow in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Britain, on Monday. Heavy snow fell across northern and central parts of England and Wales and caused disruption, closing roads and grounding flights at Birmingham airport. PHOTO: REUTERS



Stakes high for Trump as Alabama votes

After weeks of scandal and Republican Party hand-wringing, Alabama voters went to the polls yesterday in a Senate contest between a Republican accused of once preying on teenage girls, and a Democrat seeking an upset win in this deeply conservative state.

US President Donald Trump has made the special election a test of his brand of populism by urging loyalists to elect Republican fire-brand Roy Moore, an ultra-conservative former judge who has been the focus of the race from the start.

Moore, who wants to bring his religious activism to the US Senate, has for the past month been fighting accusations he fondled two underage girls in the late 1970s when he was a state prosecutor in his 30s.

If Moore loses, Republicans will see their US Senate majority eroded, slipping from 52 to 51 seats out of 100 and reducing the GOP's margin for maneuver to the bare minimum.

To protect that precious seat, Trump ultimately endorsed Moore -- throwing caution to the wind for the 2018 mid-term elections, and for the party's image.

The Democratic candidate, Doug Jones, received support from Barack Obama, who made his own robo-call in a state where the black vote could prove decisive.

The latest survey by Fox News put the Democrat Jones ahead by 10 points, although a new Emerson poll has Moore ahead by nearly that much.

Send US astronauts back to the moon

Trump directs Nasa

US President Donald Trump directed Nasa on Monday to send Americans to the moon for the first time since 1972, in order to prepare for future trips to Mars.

"This time we will not only plant our flag and leave our footprint," Trump said at a White House ceremony as he signed the new space policy directive.

"We will establish a foundation for an eventual mission to Mars and perhaps someday to many worlds beyond."

The directive calls on Nasa to ramp up its efforts to send people to deep space, a policy that unites politicians on both sides of the aisle in the United States.

However, it steered clear of the most divisive and thorny issues in space exploration: budgets and timelines.

Space policy experts agree that any attempt to send people to Mars, which lies an average of 140 million miles from Earth, would require immense technical prowess and a massive wallet.

The last time US astronauts visited the moon was during the Apollo missions of the 1960s and 1970s. On July 20, 1969, US astronaut Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon.

DR CONGO CRISIS 400,000 children could die from hunger

The United Nations yesterday warned that more than 400,000 children in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are severely malnourished and could die within months without emergency intervention.

The crisis -- the latest to hit the poverty-stricken, strife-torn central African country -- is unfolding in the vast region of Kasai, the UN's children fund Unicef said.

An 18-month-long combination of violence, mass displacement and slumping agricultural output are having a devastating impact on the very young, it said.

The children are the neediest of more than three-quarters of a million who are badly malnourished.

Sanctions can hurt millions

Warns UN; Japan air force stages drill with US bombers

The UN rights chief told the Security Council on Monday that tough sanctions imposed on North Korea are complicating the delivery of desperately needed humanitarian aid and called for an assessment.

An estimated 18 million North Koreans, or 70 percent of the population, suffer from acute food shortages and aid agencies provide "literally a lifeline" for 13 million of them, said UN Human Rights Commissioner Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein.

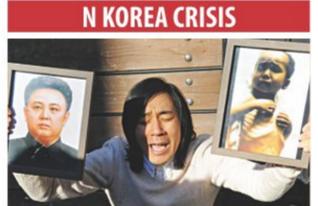
"But sanctions may be adversely affecting this essential help," he told a special Security Council meeting on human rights in North Korea.

Sanctions that have tightened controls over international bank transfers "have caused a slowdown in UN ground operations, affecting the delivery of food rations, health kits and other humanitarian aid," he said.

The rights chief asked the council to conduct an assessment of the human

rights impact of sanctions and urged them to take action to minimize consequences.

Over the past year, the council has adopted three rounds of sanctions aimed at choking off revenue to Pyongyang's military programs after Kim Jong-Un's regime carried out a



N KOREA CRISIS

series of advanced missile launches. Meanwhile, Japanese F-15 fighters yesterday held drills with US B-1B bombers, F-35 stealth aircraft and F-18 multirole combat jets above the East China Sea, south of the Korean peninsula, Japan's Air Self Defence Force said.

The exercise was the largest in a series aimed at pressuring North Korea following its ballistic missile tests. The latest launch, on Nov 29, featured a new missile type the North said could hit targets in the United States, such as Washington DC.

Two US Air Force B-1B Lancer bombers flew from Andersen Air Force Base on the US Pacific island territory of Guam, joined by six F-35s, four F-18s and a tanker aircraft from US bases in Japan.

Curbing North Korea's nuclear ambitions will top South Korean President Moon Jae-in's agenda in Beijing during a visit this week aimed at breaking the ice after a furious row over Seoul's deployment of a US anti-missile system, reported Reuters.

At his third meeting this year with Chinese President Xi Jinping on Thursday in Beijing, Moon is expected to reaffirm South Korea's agreement with China in late October that they would normalise exchanges and move past the dispute over THAAD, which froze trade and business exchanges between the two.