

NEWS IN
briefTurkey dismisses 2,700
in post-coup purges

AFP, Ankara

Turkey yesterday ordered the dismissal of over 2,700 people working in public institutions over alleged links to "terror" in the latest round of purges since last year's failed coup. A total of 2,756 people were removed from different bodies including the interior, foreign and defence ministries, according to the official gazette.

Trump takes aim at top
FBI official on Twitter

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump again took aim Saturday at deputy FBI director Andrew McCabe, saying he was "racing the clock to retire," as US media reported McCabe plans to step down. "FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe is racing the clock to retire with full benefits," Trump tweeted. "90 days to go!!!!"

Roadside bomb kills 3
soldiers in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

A roadside bomb yesterday killed three soldiers in a remote part of northwest Pakistan near the border with Afghanistan, officials said. The bombing took place in the village of Ghulam Khan in North Waziristan, one of the country's seven semi-autonomous tribal areas.

Gunmen kill 3 at cafe
south of Egypt capital

AFP, Cairo

Masked gunmen opened fire on a cafe south of the Egyptian capital, killing three people, security officials said yesterday. The attack, which took place overnight in the village of Al-Ayat about 50 kilometres (31 miles) from Cairo, left at least five others wounded, they said. While the motivation was unclear officials suspect it was a criminal incident rather than terrorism.



Philippine nationals pose for a selfie underneath a giant Christmas tree on the eve of the holiday in Hong Kong's Central district yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

US court partially lifts ban

Federal judge rules authorities could carry out security review, but that it could not stop processing refugees from 11 countries

REUTERS, Washington

A federal judge in Seattle partially blocked US President Donald Trump's newest restrictions on refugee admissions on Saturday, the latest legal defeat for his efforts to curtail immigration and travel to the United States.

The decision by US District Judge James Robart is the first judicial curb on rules the Trump administration put into place in late October that have contributed significantly to a precipitous drop in the number of refugees being admitted into the country.

Refugees and groups that assist them argued in court that the administration's policies violated the Constitution and federal rulemaking procedures, among other claims. Department of Justice attorneys argued in part that US law grants the executive branch the authority to limit refugee admissions in the way that it had done so.

On Oct 24, the Trump administration effectively paused refugee admissions from 11 countries mostly in the

Middle East and Africa, pending a 90-day security review, which was set to expire in late January.

The countries subject to the review are Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Mali, North Korea, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. For each of the last three years, refugees from the 11 coun-

TRUMP'S REFUGEE RESTRICTIONS

Donald Trump administration paused a programme that allowed for family reunification for refugees



tries made up more than 40 percent of US admissions. A Reuters review of State Department data showed that as the review went into effect, refugee admissions from the 11 countries plummeted.

Robart ruled that the administration could carry out the security review, but that it could not stop processing or

admitting refugees from the 11 countries in the meantime, as long as those refugees have a "bona fide" connection to the United States.

As part of its new restrictions, the Trump administration had also paused a programme that allowed for family reunification for refugees, pending further security screening procedures being put into place.

Robart ordered the government to restart the program, known as "follow-to-join". Approximately 2,000 refugees were admitted into the United States in fiscal year 2015 under the program, according to Department of Homeland Security data.

Refugee advocacy groups praised Robart's decision.

"This ruling brings relief to thousands of refugees in precarious situations in the Middle East and East Africa, as well as to refugees already in the US who are trying to reunite with their spouses and children," said Mariko Hirose, litigation director for the International Refugee Assistance Project, one of the plaintiffs in the case.

RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2018
Putin critic clears hurdle

REUTERS, Moscow

Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny yesterday cleared the first hurdle towards taking part in next year's presidential election, even though the central election commission has previously ruled him ineligible to run.

Navalny, 41, is a fierce opponent of President Vladimir Putin, who is widely expected to win re-election in March, extending his 17 years in power.

Navalny, a veteran campaigner against corruption among Russia's elite, yesterday won the initial support of 742 people at a gathering in a district of Moscow, above the minimum 500 required to initiate a presidential bid.

"There is no large-scale support for Putin and his rule in this country," Navalny told the gathering, describing himself as a "real candidate" for the election and threatening a boycott of the vote by his supporters if he is barred from running.

But Navalny now needs to be officially registered as a candidate by Russia's central election commission, which has previously



Putin

Navalny

to win a further six years in power in the March election.

Also on Saturday the Russian Communist Party named its presidential candidate, Pavel Grudinin, 57. The party came second after United Russia in the 2016 parliamentary elections. Russian property developer Sergei Polonsky also secured enough initial backing to seek clearance from the election commission.

POLICY VIOLATIONS
China has shut down 13,000
websites in 2 yrs

REUTERS, Beijing

China has closed more than 13,000 websites since the beginning of 2015 for breaking the law or other rules and the vast majority of people support government efforts to clean up cyberspace, state news agency Xinhua said yesterday.

The government has stepped up already tight controls over the internet since President Xi Jinping took power five years ago, in what critics say is an effort to restrict freedom of speech and prevent criticism of the ruling Communist Party.

The government says all countries regulate the internet, and its rules are aimed at ensuring national security and social stability and preventing the spread of pornography and violent content.

A report to the on-going session of the standing committee of China's largely rubber stamp parliament said the authorities had targeted pornography and violence in their sweeps of websites, blogs and social media accounts, Xinhua said.

As well as the 13,000 websites shut down, almost 10 million accounts had also been closed by websites, it added. It did not give details but the accounts were likely on social media platforms.

"Internet security concerns the party's long-term hold on power, the country's long-term peace and stability, socio-economic development and the people's personal interests," Xinhua said.

More than 90 percent of people surveyed supported government efforts to manage the internet, with 63.5 percent of them believing that in recent years there has been an obvious reduction in harmful online content, it added.

Jerusalem row mars
Christmas festivities

AFP, Bethlehem

Palestinian scouts played drums and bagpipes as Christmas celebrations began in Bethlehem yesterday, but many tourists stayed away with tensions still simmering following Washington's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

The December 6 announcement by US President Donald Trump unleashed demonstrations and clashes, including in Bethlehem in the Israeli-occupied West Bank where Christians will mark the birth of Jesus in a midnight mass.

On Bethlehem's Manger Square, hundreds of Palestinians and tourists gathered in the cold near a huge nativity scene and Christmas tree to watch the annual scout parade.

They took pictures as a marching band made its way through the square towards the Church of the Nativity, built over the spot where tradition says Mary gave birth to Jesus.

The square usually throngs with tourists on Christmas Eve, but clashes between Palestinian protesters and the Israeli army in the past weeks have kept people away this year.

Twelve Palestinians have been killed since Trump's declaration, including a 19-year-old who died of his wounds yesterday nine days after he was shot during a Gaza protest.

Nahil Banura, a Christian woman from Beit Sahur, a town near Bethlehem, said Trump's decision had made the run-up to Christmas "miserable".

"People are only going out to vent," said the 67-year-old, whose granddaughter wore a Santa Claus hat and clutched a pink balloon.

Perhaps as few as 50,000 Palestinian Christians make up just around two percent of the predominantly Muslim population of the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, apostolic administrator of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, arrived in Bethlehem after noon and shook hands with local personalities.



Smoke billows from a shopping mall on fire in Davao City, Philippines, yesterday. At least 37 people, including call centre staff from an American firm, are believed to have perished in the fire that tore through the shopping mall.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Search on for victims

Tens of thousands displaced; death toll tops 200

AFP, Manila

At least 200 people have been killed and scores are missing in the southern Philippines after a tropical storm triggered severe flooding and landslides that also wrecked Christmas for tens of thousands of survivors.

Tropical Storm Tembin lashed Mindanao island, home to 20 million people, on Friday with strong gusts and torrential rain, wiping out at least one mountain village and prompting a massive rescue operation.

Police said 144 people remained missing while more than 40,000 had fled their homes to evacuation camps as Tembin roared out into the South China Sea early yesterday.

A total of 70,000 have been displaced or otherwise affected by the storm according to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), which

warned that continued heavy rain could hamper the search for survivors.

"People left everything behind when they fled for their lives," the IFRC's Philippines operations and programmes manager Patrick Elliott said in a statement.

The archipelago nation is pummelled by major storms every year, many of them deadly. Mindanao tends to be less affected and officials said this may have caused many to ignore warnings to move to safer ground.

Footage showed vast tracts of land on the island submerged by brown water, often waist-deep, with streets turning into rivers.

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PHILIPPINES TROPICAL STORM

Nato to re-establish Cold
War-era command post

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Russian submarines have dramatically stepped up activity around undersea data cables in the North Atlantic, part of a more aggressive naval posture that has driven Nato to revive a Cold War-era command, according to senior military officials.

The apparent Russian focus on the cables, which provide internet and other communications connections to North America and Europe, could give the Kremlin the power to sever or tap into vital data lines, the officials said. Russian submarine activity has increased to levels unseen since the Cold War, they said, sparking fears in recent months for the elusive watercraft.

"We are now seeing Russian underwater activity in the vicinity of undersea cables that I don't believe we have ever seen," said US Navy Admiral Andrew Lennon, the commander of Nato's submarine forces. "Russia is clearly taking an interest in Nato

and Nato nations' undersea infrastructure."

Nato has responded with plans to establish a command post, shuttered after the Cold War, to help secure the North Atlantic. Nato allies are also rushing to boost anti-submarine warfare capabilities and to develop advanced submarine-detecting planes.

Britain's top military commander also warned that Russia could imperil the cables that form the backbone of the modern global economy. The privately owned lines, laid along some of the same corridors as the first transatlantic telegraph wire in 1858, carry nearly all of the communications

on the internet, facilitating trillions of dollars of daily trade. If severed, they could snarl the Web. If tapped, they could give Russia a valuable picture of the tide of the world's internet traffic.

"It's a pattern of activity, and it's a vulnerability," said British Air Chief Marshal Stuart Peach, in an interview.

CRITICISM OF MADURO'S GOVT

Venezuela expels top
Brazil, Canada envoys

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela on Saturday said two diplomats from Canada and Brazil were no longer welcome, in an escalating showdown over their criticism of President Maduro's socialist government.

The head of the powerful pro-government Constituent Assembly, Delcy Rodriguez, said the body decided on the move against Brazil's ambassador Ruy Pereira and Canadian chargé d'affaires Craig Kowalik.

"We have decided to declare persona non grata the Brazilian ambassador until such time as constitutional order is restored in the neighboring country," Rodriguez said referring to the government of Brazilian President Michel Temer.

The Brazilian conservative replaced leftist Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff after she was impeached.

And Kowalik of Canada has been carrying out "nagging, constant rude and offensive interference in Venezuela's domestic affairs."

On the Twitter account of the Canadian embassy in Caracas, she said, the assembly was described as a threat to Venezuelans' ability to elect their leaders, including their next president.

Last week, Brazil urged Venezuela -- which has been sidelined from the regional trading bloc Mercosur -- to improve its human rights record. Temer said he would welcome Caracas back into Mercosur's fold when Venezuela returns to democracy.