

# Russia supplied fuel to N Korea

## Say Western security sources

REUTERS, London  
 Russian tankers have supplied fuel to North Korea on at least three occasions in recent months by transferring cargoes at sea, according to two senior Western European security sources, providing an economic lifeline to the secretive Communist state.

The sales of oil or oil products from Russia, the world's second biggest oil exporter and a veto-wielding member of the United Nations Security Council, breach UN sanctions, the security sources said.

The transfers in October and November indicate that smuggling from Russia to North Korea has evolved to loading cargoes at sea since Reuters reported in September that North Korean ships were sailing directly from Russia to their homeland.

"Russian vessels have made ship-to-ship transfers of petrochemicals to North Korean vessels on several occasions this year in breach of sanctions," the first security source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told Reuters.

A second source, who independently confirmed the existence of the Russian ship-to-ship fuel trade with North Korea, said there was no evidence of Russian state involvement in the latest transfers.

"There is no evidence that this is backed by the Russian state but these Russian vessels are giving a lifeline to the North Koreans," the second European security source said.

The two security sources cited naval intelligence and satellite imagery of the vessels operating out of Russian Far Eastern ports on the Pacific but declined to disclose further details to Reuters, saying it was classified.



**Iranians chant slogans as they march in support of the government near the Imam Khomeini grand mosque in the capital Tehran yesterday. Tens of thousands of regime supporters marched in cities across Iran in a show of strength for the regime after two days of angry protests directed against the country's religious rulers.**

# NEWS IN brief

## Russian SC upholds ban on Navalny

AFP, Moscow  
 Russia's top court yesterday rejected an appeal by opposition leader Alexei Navalny against a decision to bar him from running in the country's 2018 presidential election. The Supreme Court agreed with Russia's Central Election Commission that Navalny cannot register as a candidate due to a controversial embezzlement conviction which the opposition chief says is politically motivated. The court decided "to deny the granting of the appeal," judge Nikolai Romanenkov was quoted as saying by Russian agencies.

## Nepal bans solo foreign climbers from Everest

AFP, Kathmandu  
 Nepal has banned solo climbers from scaling its mountains, including Mount Everest, in a bid to reduce accidents, an official said yesterday. The cabinet late Thursday endorsed a revision to the Himalayan nation's mountaineering regulations, banning solo climbers from its mountains -- one of a string of measures being flagged ahead of the 2018 spring climbing season. The cabinet also endorsed a ban on double amputee and blind climbers.

## St Petersburg market bomber arrested

AFP, Moscow  
 The perpetrator of the bomb attack which tore through a Saint Petersburg supermarket wounding 18 people was arrested yesterday, a Russian news agency reported. "The organiser and direct perpetrator who triggered an improvised explosive device on December 27 in a supermarket in Saint Petersburg was arrested during a special operation by the FSB," the security services said. The Islamic State group claimed responsibility on Friday for the bomb attack that left 14 people injured.

## NEW YEAR WISHES TO TRUMP

# Putin calls for pragmatic cooperation with US

AFP, Moscow  
 Russian President Vladimir Putin called for "pragmatic cooperation" in his New Year wishes to US President Donald Trump, the Kremlin said yesterday.

In a statement on the Russian president's New Year wishes to world leaders, the Kremlin said Putin told Trump that "a constructive Russian-American dialogue is especially needed to strengthen strategic stability in the world".

According to the statement, Putin said that "mutual respect" should be "a base to develop relations" between the two countries.

"This would allow us to move towards building pragmatic cooperation, orientated on the long term," the statement quoted Putin as saying.

A US Justice Department investigation is looking into whether Trump campaign aides colluded with Russia, something that

Emmanuel Macron, Germany's Angela Merkel and Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad.

In his wishes to the Syrian leader, with whom he met with during a surprise visit to Russia's Syrian air base Hmeimim earlier this month, Putin "expressed sincere hope that key changes for the better will continue in Syria in the new year".



## Boy playing with stove started deadly NY fire

AFP, New York  
 A three-year-old boy playing with stove burners accidentally ignited the fire that ripped through a New York apartment building, killing 12 people including four children, the city's fire department chief said Friday.

The blaze broke out Thursday evening in a 25-apartment building near the Bronx Zoo, one of the most popular tourist attractions in the US financial capital.

Four people remain in a critical condition following the inferno, which Mayor Bill de Blasio called the "worst fire tragedy we have seen in this city in at least a quarter century."

"We found that this fire started in a kitchen on the first floor," fire commissioner Daniel Nigro told reporters.

# White House prepares for talks on immigration policy

REUTERS, West Palm Beach  
 The White House said on Friday it was set to kick off talks next week with Republican and Democratic congressional leaders on immigration policy, government spending and other issues that need to be wrapped up early in the new year.

The expected flurry of legislative activity comes as Republicans and Democrats begin to set the stage for midterm congressional elections in November. President Donald Trump's Republican Party is eager to maintain control of Congress while Democrats look for openings to wrest seats away in the Senate and the House of Representatives.

On Wednesday, Trump's budget chief Mick Mulvaney and legislative affairs director Marc Short will meet with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and House Speaker Paul Ryan - both Republicans - and their Democratic counterparts, Senator Chuck Schumer and Representative Nancy Pelosi, the White House said.

That will be followed up with a weekend of strategy sessions for Trump, McConnell and Ryan on January 6 and 7 at the Camp David presidential retreat in Maryland, according to the White House.

The Senate returns to work on January 3 and the House on January 8. Congress passed a short-term government funding bill last week before taking its Christmas break, but needs to come to an agreement on defense spending and various domestic programs by January 19, or the government will shut down.

Also on the agenda for lawmakers is disaster aid for people hit by hurricanes in Puerto Rico, Texas and Florida, and by wildfires in California. The House passed an \$81 billion package in December, which the Senate did not take up. The White House has asked for a smaller figure, \$44 billion.

Deadlines also loom for soon-to-expire protections for young adult immigrants who entered the country illegally as children, known as "Dreamers."

Republicans and Democrats begin to set the stage for midterm congressional elections in November

## Egypt's Morsi sentenced to 3 yrs in prison

AFP, Cairo  
 An Egyptian court sentenced ousted Islamist president Mohamed Morsi to three years in prison along with 19 other defendants yesterday for "insulting the judiciary," his lawyer said.

The other defendants include former members of parliament, activists and three journalists.

Morsi had already been sentenced to a total of 45 years in prison in two other trials after the military ousted him in 2013.

The defendants had all been charged with making statements deemed insulting to the judiciary.

Five other defendants, including jailed activist Alaa Abdel Fattah, were fined 30,000 pounds (about \$1,680) each.

Abdel-Fattah is an outspo-

# Regime forces advance against jihadists in Syria

## Says monitor; two mass graves found in Raqa

AFP, Beirut  
 Syrian regime forces yesterday advanced against jihadists on the edge of the north-western province of Idlib, the last outside government control, a monitor and the state news agency said.

Government and allied forces backed by Russian warplanes have since Monday been fighting mostly jihadist fighters in an area straddling the border between Idlib and Hama provinces.

The fighting, which could signal the start of a major offensive to seize Idlib province from rebels dominated by a former Al-Qaeda affiliate, escalated on Thursday.

Yesterday, regime troops advanced, seizing several villages and surrounding areas, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a

Britain-based war monitor, said. State news agency SANA said regime forces had taken control of five villages, areas and "strategic hills" in the northeast of Hama province.

An AFP correspondent said civilians continued to flee areas near the battle zone, heading north towards the provincial capital of Idlib with their belongings piled high on pick-up trucks.

Government forces' first aim to take control of the south-east of Idlib province, Observatory head

Rami Abdel Rahman said. Two mass graves containing dozens of bodies of civilians and Syrian troops killed by Islamic State jihadists have been found in the west of Raqa province, state news agency SANA reported Friday.



**Relatives of Palestinian Jamal Mesleh, who died of his injuries during clashes with Israeli troops on Friday, mourn at his funeral in the central Gaza Strip yesterday. Unrest continues to erupt across Gaza following US President Donald Trump's declaration of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.**



# Kim applies science to kimchi-making

AP, Pyongyang  
 Kim Jong Un wants to turn the art of kimchi-making into a science. And the North Korean leader is putting his money where his mouth is.

On the outskirts of Pyongyang, surrounded by snow-covered farms and greenhouses, stands one of Kim's latest pet projects, the Ryugyong Kimchi Factory, which produces 4,200 tons of the iconic Korean pickled vegetable dish a year. The shiny new facility replaces an older factory and opened in June last year after getting Kim's final seal of approval, according to manager Paek Mi Hye.

The factory is intended to showcase Kim's efforts to boost North Korea's domestic economy and produce more, and better, consumer products. His strategy, known as "byungjin," aims to simultaneously develop the national economy and North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

Kim has transformed the Pyongyang skyline with high-rise apartments to house his prized rocket scientists and nuclear engineers, and Paek repeatedly stressed while giving a tour of the facility to The Associated Press how even an ancient delicacy like kimchi can benefit from scientific innovation.

# Whole of England to be mapped with lasers

## MOVE TO TACKLE FLOODING, ILLEGAL WASTE DUMPS

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK  
 England's entire landscape will be mapped with lasers to tackle flooding, help conservation work and even track illegal waste dumps, the Environment Agency said.

Under plans unveiled by the government agency, aircraft equipped with laser scanners will map all 130,000 sq km of the country in 3D, including rivers, fields and national parks, by 2020.

The data gathered will be used to understand flooding risk and plan flood defences, and will also be made available for free for the public and industry including archaeologists, urban planners and even gamers.

coverage of upland areas and the new project, beginning over winter, will fill in the gaps.

The new data will be better quality than ever before, the Environment Agency said, with the whole country mapped at a one metre resolution using the most up-to-date laser technology to reveal the terrain more clearly.

The "lidar" - light detection and ranging - technology, which measures the distance between the aeroplane and the ground to build up a picture of the terrain, can be used to detect sudden landscape changes which could indicate illegal tips.

In 2014, eight people in Cornwall were fined for dumping thousands of tonnes of waste which was discovered using lidar data, the agency said.



# Israel withdraws from Unesco

AFP, Paris  
 Israel has formally notified the UN's culture and education body of its withdrawal from the organisation, two months after it announced it would follow the US by walking out over resolutions critical of the Jewish state.

In a statement Unesco chief Audrey Azoulay said she had been officially notified on Friday that Israel would leave on December 31, 2018.

"I regret this deeply, as it is my conviction that it is inside Unesco and not outside it that states can best seek to overcome differences in the organization's fields of competence," she said.

The October 12 announcement by the United States that it was pulling out of the organisation underlined Washington's drift away from multilateral institutions under nationalist President Donald Trump.

The US at the time accused Unesco of having an "anti-Israel bias" -- a sentiment echoed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who accused Unesco of becoming "the theatre of the absurd".

Their pullout followed two Arab-sponsored resolutions adopted by Paris-based Unesco this year which were critical of Israel.

One referred to the Jewish state as "the occupying power" in the divided city of Jerusalem. Another declared the Old City of Hebron in the occupied West Bank a Palestinian World Heritage site.