

Six countries enter  
UN Security Council

AFP, United Nations

Equatorial Guinea, Ivory Coast, Kuwait, Peru, Poland and the Netherlands formally joined the ranks of the non-permanent members of the United Nations Security Council on Tuesday "to make a difference," the body's president said.

Beijing records best  
air quality in 5 years

AFP, Beijing

Air quality in China's notoriously smog-ridden capital in 2017 was the best since pollution control measures were implemented five years ago, the Beijing government announced yesterday. The average PM2.5 level in 2017 was 58 micrograms per cubic meter -- down 20.5 percent from the year before.

Al Shabaab kills five  
Kenyan policemen

REUTERS, Nairobi

Five Kenyan policemen were killed in an attack on their vehicle in the north-east county of Mandera near the border with Somalia late on Tuesday. Dozens of Kenyan security personnel have been killed in recent months in the remote lands near the border with Somalia, in raids by the al Shabaab militants.

Two dead as Russian  
copter crashes in Syria

AFP, Moscow

A Russian helicopter crashed in Syria on New Year's Eve killing both pilots following a technical fault, Moscow's defence ministry said yesterday. The Mi-24 military helicopter was flying to Hama, north-western Syria, and there was no firing from the ground, agencies quote the ministry as saying.

Blast kills 14 in  
Nigeria mosque

Boko Haram jihadists blamed

AFP, Kano

Fourteen worshippers were killed yesterday when a suicide bomber attacked a mosque on Nigeria's border with Cameroon, civilian vigilantes told AFP.

The suspected Boko Haram jihadist blew himself up amid worshippers inside the mosque in Gamboru around 5:00 am, shortly before morning prayers.

"Fourteen bodies have been pulled out of the rubble," said Umar Kachalla, a civilian militiaman, who said the mosque had been completely destroyed.

"Only the muezzin has survived and we believe more bodies are buried under the debris," said Kachalla. "The death toll may likely rise."

An hour earlier, a patrol of vigilantes spotted four suspected suicide bombers on the outskirts of the town and arrested one of them after a chase, said a second vigilante, Shehu Mada.

"Two of them turned back and fled while the fourth disappeared into the darkness and we believe it was he who attacked the mosque," Mada said.

Boko Haram's eight-year insurgency against the government of Nigeria has spilled into neighbouring Niger, Chad and Cameroon, killing around 20,000 people and displacing more than 2.6 million.

N Korea reopens hotline

Move raises hopes of diplomatic thaw after Seoul proposes high-level talks; Trump boasts of bigger nuke button than Kim Jong-Un

AFP, Seoul

North and South Korea yesterday reopened a cross-border hotline which had been shut down since 2016, forging ahead with peace overtures despite taunts from US President Donald Trump who said he has a "much bigger" nuclear button than Kim Jong-Un.

The hotline was restored at 0630 GMT after Seoul proposed high-level talks in response to an olive branch from the North's leader, who has offered to send a team to next month's Winter Olympics in the South.

"The phone conversation lasted 20 minutes," a South Korean Unification Ministry official told AFP, adding details were not known immediately.

Kim's overtures to the South marked a rare softening in tone. Tensions have surged in recent months following a flurry of North Korean missile launches and its most powerful nuclear test yet.

Seoul responded with an offer to hold talks on January 9 -- the first since 2015 -- to discuss "matters of mutual interest" including the North's Olympic participation.

But Kim's New Year address also included a warning to the US that he has a "nuclear button" on his table, prompt-

ing a furious response from Trump via Twitter.

"North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the 'Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.'

"Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!" he said.

The tweet generated Twitter responses largely of scorn and alarm.

"This borders on presidential malpractice," said Democratic Senator Ed Markey.

"Our President is a child. 'Mine is bigger than yours' may sound tough on the playground, but this is no juvenile affair. Literally millions of lives are at stake," tweeted Colin Kahl, a former national security adviser to then Vice-President Joe Biden.

But Trump's ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley maintained the tough line, playing down Seoul's offer to hold talks. These would be a "band-aid" unless denuclearisation was also up for discussion, she said.

US State Department spokesman Heather Nauert also warned Kim "may be trying to drive a wedge of some sort between the two nations."



A South Korean official checks direct hotline to talk with the North Korean side yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS



Members of the Dalit community shout slogans as they block a road during a protest in Mumbai, India, yesterday. The Dalits, who rank at the bottom in India's ancient caste hierarchy, called the strike in protest against an attack by right-wing groups in Pune on Monday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Jerusalem 'not for sale'

Palestinians condemn Trump's aid halt threat

REUTERS, Ramallah

Palestinian leaders said yesterday they will not be "blackmailed" after US President Donald Trump threatened to cut aid worth more than \$300 million annually, his latest provocative move that could upturn years of careful diplomacy.

Trump drew praise from a cabinet minister in Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing government but a warning from a former Israeli peace negotiator of the dangers in cutting off financial assistance to the Palestinians.

On Twitter on Tuesday, Trump said that Washington gives Palestinians "HUNDRED OF MILLIONS OF DOLLARS a year and get no appreciation or respect. They don't even want to negotiate a long overdue peace treaty with Israel ... with the Palestinians no longer willing to talk peace, why should we make any of these massive future payments to them?"

Hanan Ashrawi, a member of the

Palestine Liberation Organization's executive committee, said in response: "We will not be blackmailed."

Palestinian anger at Trump is already high over his December 6 recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, a declaration that also generated outrage across the Arab world and concern among Washington's Western allies.

Commenting on Trump's tweets, Nabil

Abu Rdainah, a spokesman for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, said: "Jerusalem is not for sale, neither for gold nor for silver."

Abu Rdainah said the Palestinians were not opposed to

returning to peace talks that collapsed in 2014, but only on the basis of establishing a state of their own along the lines that existed before the 1967 war.

Meanwhile, a Palestinian teenager was yesterday shot dead in clashes with the Israeli army near the city of Ramallah in the occupied West Bank.



Iran sedition defeated

Says head of Revolutionary Guards after Rouhani tells Erdogan protests to end in a few days

AFP, Tehran

Iran's Revolutionary Guards said yesterday that the unrest that had rocked Iran over several days was at an end, and that a maximum of 15,000 people had taken part nationwide.

"Today we can announce the end of the sedition," Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander of the Revolutionary Guards, said on its website.

"There were a maximum of 1,500 people in each place and the number of trouble-makers did not exceed 15,000 people nationwide," he added.

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani yesterday expressed hope in a telephone call with Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan that the protests which have rocked his country would end in a few days, a Turkish presidential source said.

Erdogan told Rouhani that "peace and stability" in Iranian society had to be preserved and said he concurred with his Iranian counterpart's statement that the right to protest should not lead to "violations of the law".

"President Rouhani thanked President Erdogan for his sensitivity and expressed hope that the protests would end in a few days," said

a statement by a Turkish presidential source.

The comments were not immediately confirmed by the Iranian side.

Turkey -- which was hit by street protests against Erdogan (then premier) in 2013 -- had already said it was concerned by the protests and warned against any escalation.

Turkey's conservative press has sounded grave unease over the protests, accusing the United States and its allies of fomenting the unrest.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands gathered across Iran yesterday in a massive show of strength for the country's Islamic rulers after days of deadly unrest, with state television showing vast crowds marching through several cities.

The UN human rights chief, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, yesterday urged Iran to conduct "thorough, independent and impartial investigations of all acts of violence that have taken place".

Protests over economic problems broke out in second city Mashhad on December 28 and quickly spread across the country, turning against the regime as a whole.

A total of 21 people have died in the unrest, with protesters attacking government buildings and police stations in some areas.



MOVE TO TACKLE RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

Indonesia launches cyber agency

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesia yesterday launched a new cyber security agency as the world's biggest Muslim majority country moves to tackle online religious extremism and a flood of fake news on social media.

Millions of Indonesians are going online for the first time just as concern about Internet hoaxes reaches a fevered pitch.

One of the most high-profile cases in recent times was a false claim circulating on social media in December that Beijing was seeking to wage biological warfare against Indonesia.

The viral hoax prompted the Chinese embassy to issue a statement saying that the reports were "misleading".

Yesterday, Indonesian president Joko Widodo named Major General Djoko Setiadi, former chairman of the country's encryption agency, to lead the new body.

Setiadi's Herculean task will include cracking down on terrorist networks which communicate online and combating online hate speech that has been blamed for driving fundamentalism in a country once praised for its religious pluralism.

"We will control cyberspace," Setiadi said yesterday.

"Our technology will not only be able to detect, but also to penetrate [terrorist] networks."

Chief Security Minister Wiranto, who like many Indonesians goes only by one name, added: "We need this body to help maintain security nationally, regionally and globally."

India limits visitors to save Taj Mahal

AFP, Agra

India is to restrict the number of daily visitors to the Taj Mahal in an attempt to preserve the iconic 17th-century monument to love, its biggest tourist attraction.

Millions of mostly Indian tourists visit the Taj Mahal every year and their numbers are increasing steadily as domestic travel becomes easier.

Experts say the vast crowds increase wear and tear on the white marble tomb, which already must undergo regular cleaning to stop it turning yellow from polluted air, and could put pressure on its foundations.

In future only 40,000 local tourists will be allowed to enter the historic complex per day, authorities said yesterday.

"We have to ensure the safety of the monument and visitors as well. Crowd management was emerging as a big challenge for us," an official with the Archeological Survey of India -- which controls the monument -- told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The restrictions will not apply to foreigners, who pay 1,000 rupees (\$16) to enter.

Indian visitors normally pay just 40 rupees, but will be able to buy the more expensive ticket if they want to get around the limit.

The Taj Mahal was built by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan as a tomb for his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal, who died giving birth in 1631.

Trump Tower meeting was 'treasonous'

Says Steve Bannon

AFP, Washington

Former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon has described a meeting between President Donald Trump's son Don Jr and a Russian lawyer during the 2016 presidential election campaign as "treasonous" and "unpatriotic." The Guardian reported yesterday.

Bannon made the scathing comments in Michael Wolff's book "Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House," which is to be published next week.

"They're going to crack Don Junior like an egg on national TV," Bannon reportedly said.

Bannon, who left the White House in August, was also quoted as saying that the investigation by special



Rescue workers and police work at the scene after a bus crashed with a truck and careened off a cliff along a sharply curving highway north of Lima, Peru, on Tuesday, killing at least 48 people. PHOTO: REUTERS

Norway suspends arms, ammo exports to UAE

AP, Copenhagen

Norway said yesterday it has suspended exports of munitions and arms to the United Arab Emirates as a "precautionary line," based on its assessment of the situation in Yemen, where a Saudi-led coalition has been fighting Shia rebels for the past three years.

The UAE is part of the coalition.

Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Soreide said she has "no information" that any of Norway's military exports have been used in Yemen but that there's "great concern" over the humanitarian crisis.

On Tuesday, Norwegian newspaper Verdens Gang published a video by the Yemeni rebels, known as the Houthis, in which they claim to have seized "a US spy submarine."

The Norwegian newspaper said it was a REMUS 600 Autonomous Underwater Vehicle made by Norway's Kongsberg group. There was no immediate comment from Kongsberg or from the Saudi-led coalition. It

was not immediately clear when it was seized.

Eriksen Soreide added that since 2010, Norway has allowed sale of weapons and ammunition to the UAE. The decision to suspend sales for so-called A-material -- munitions and arms -- was made December 19 and announced yesterday.

The Houthis, who are allied with Saudi Arabia's rival, Iran, have forced into exile the Saudi-backed and internationally recognised government of Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. Despite a fierce air campaign against them, the rebels still control Yemen's

capital, Sanaa, and much of the country's north along the border with Saudi Arabia.

Earlier this month, the Houthis killed Yemen's former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, after he broke off his alliance with the rebels and appeared ready to switch sides.

Yemen's war has killed more than 10,000 civilians and pushed millions to the brink of famine.

HUMANITARIAN  
CRISIS IN YEMEN



counsel Robert Mueller into Russian interference in the 2016 election will focus on money laundering.

Bannon joined Trump's election campaign two months after the June 2016 meeting between Russian lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya and campaign officials.

Donald Trump Jr, Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and then campaign chairman Paul Manafort were at the meeting held at Trump Tower in New York.

Donald Trump Jr took the meeting with the Russian lawyer after being promised material that would incriminate Trump's Democratic rival Hillary Clinton.