

Brutal cold grips US Northeast

Icy storm leaves 19 dead

CNN ONLINE

High winds are making already frigid temperatures even more miserable across the Northeast yesterday.

State officials are urging residents to limit the time spent outdoors saying it's "dangerously cold" and warned them of blowing snow.

Cities like Minneapolis and Boston were set to reach below zero degrees yesterday and with low wind chills, some areas could feel as low as minus 40 degrees, the National Weather Service said.

At least 19 people have died this week because of severe weather, officials said.

"The snow is done but the cold temperatures are here to stay for the foreseeable future," CNN meteorologist Derek Van Dam said.

The powerful Nor'easter or "bomb cyclone" that left the parts of the US resembling an icy tundra is to blame for this weekend's dangerously cold weather.

It dumped more than a foot of snow across eight states, deluged streets in Massachusetts with icy water and is now bringing extremely strong northwest winds and frigid arctic air to the US.

Over 110 million people were under a wind chill warning or advisory stretching from the Great Lakes to New England yesterday.

Forecasters say the brutal cold was set to make yesterday the coldest day of the weekend before a gradual warm trend begins today making temperatures rise.

It's the perceived temperature that people and animals feel when exposed to the elements. Or as forecasters say, it's the "feels like" temperature.



Palestinians protesting church land sales to Israelis scuffle with Palestinian police in Bethlehem as they try to block the arrival of the Holy Land's Greek Orthodox patriarch for Christmas celebrations yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Tillerson backs Trump

Says he never questioned President's mental fitness; Republicans gather for key meeting to thrash out their priorities for 2018

AFP, Washington

Washington's chief diplomat Rex Tillerson found himself obliged to defend President Donald Trump's fitness for office Friday after a bombshell new book called into doubt his mental health.

In an extraordinary portion of a television interview on foreign policy challenges, Tillerson was asked about claims that Trump has a short attention span, regularly repeats himself and refuses to read briefing notes.

"I've never questioned his mental fitness. I've had no reason to question his mental fitness," said Tillerson, whose office was last year forced to deny reports that he had referred to Trump as a "moron" after a national security meeting.

And, even in defending Trump, the former ExxonMobil chief executive admitted he has had to learn how to relay information to a president with a very different decision-making style.

ROW OVER BOMBSHELL BOOK



decisions had been made and that the United States is in a stronger place internationally thanks to Trump's policies.

"He is not a typical president of the past, I think that's well recognized -- that's also why the American people

chose him," he said, insisting that he does not expect to be asked to resign in the coming year.

Tillerson was forced to mount his defense as Washington devoured a new supposed tell-all -- Michael Wolff's "Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House" -- rushed into bookstores after the White House failed to suppress it.

Trump yesterday praised himself as "not smart, but genius... and a very stable genius at that," following the release of the bombshell new book that called into doubt his mental health.

The book quickly sold out in shops in the US capital, with some people even lining up at midnight to get their hands on it and others circulating pirated copies. Trump has decried the instant best-seller as "phony" and "full of lies."

Meanwhile, Trump and top Republicans began a two-day retreat in Maryland on Friday to lay out legislative priorities for the year and discuss strategy for pivotal November congressional elections.

Saudi arrests 11 princes over anti-austerity protest

REUTERS, Riyadh

Saudi authorities have detained 11 princes after they gathered at a royal palace in Riyadh in a rare protest against austerity measures that included suspending payment of their utility bills, Saudi media reported yesterday.

Saudi officials did not respond immediately to a request for a comment on the report.

Saudi Arabia, the world's top oil exporter, has introduced reforms that included cutting subsidies, introducing value added tax (VAT) and cutting perks to royal family members to try to cope with a drop in crude prices that has caused a budget deficit estimated at 195 billion riyals in 2018.

Online news website sabq.org said the princes had gathered at the Qasr al-Hokm, a historic royal palace, demanding the cancellation of a royal decree that stopped state payment of water and electricity bills for royal family members.

They were also demanding compensation for a death sentence issued against a relative, Sabq.org said.

"They were informed of the error of their demands, but they refused to leave Qasr al-Hokm," Sabq said, quoting unidentified sources. "A royal order was issued to the royal guards ... to intervene and they were detained and put into al-Hayer prison in preparation to put them on trial."

It gave no details on the identity of the princes but said the leader of the group had been identified by the initials S.A.S.

"Everybody is equal before the law and anyone who does not implement regulations and instructions will be held accountable, no matter who he is," the website added.

Arabic-language Okaz daily carried a similar report. Reuters could not immediately verify the report.

Saudi Arabia last year rounded up dozens of royal family members, current and former senior officials in a crackdown on corruption that has also strengthened the power of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

They were held at the five-star Ritz Hotel in the capital Riyadh while government officials negotiated financial settlements.

NEWS IN brief

Bomb blast kills 4 police in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Four policemen were killed yesterday in a bomb blast set off by suspected Islamist militants in Indian Kashmir, police and reports said, marking a deadly start to the new year in the restive valley. They were on patrol when the improvised explosive device exploded in Sopore, some 50 kilometres (30 miles) from the main city of Srinagar.

CJP calls on Saudi to release local journo

REUTERS, Dubai

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has called on Saudi Arabia to release a local journalist who was reportedly arrested this week after criticising the government. Saudi activists and media reported that Saleh al-Shehi, a columnist for Arabic-language daily al-Watan, was detained on Wednesday over various articles and television appearances.

US National Security Agency chief to retire

AFP, Washington

National Security Agency Director Admiral Mike Rogers, the US signals intelligence czar, plans to retire within months after a four-year term scarred by damaging leaks, US intelligence sources confirmed Friday. Rogers, who has led the NSA and its sister agency, the US Cyber Command, for four years, told staff in an internal letter Friday that he would depart in the spring.



A Syrian girl who was injured in bombardment cries as she receives treatment at a make-shift hospital in the besieged rebel-held town of Douma, on the outskirts of the capital Damascus yesterday. The deadliest of Syrian regime and Russian air strikes on the Eastern Ghouta region hit the Hammuriyah district, leaving 12 civilians dead including two children.

FBI investigating Clinton Foundation: reports

AFP, Washington

The Federal Bureau of Investigation is probing the foundation of former president Bill Clinton amid pressure from President Donald Trump and allegations of corruption by Republican lawmakers, US media reported Friday.

The Hill, a news website covering Congress, CNN and the New York Times all confirmed that Justice Department investigators are looking into issues involving donations to the Clinton Foundation in exchange for political favors while the ex-president's wife, Hillary Clinton, was secretary of state from 2009-2013.

The Justice Department would not confirm the probe, but in November it informed House Judiciary Committee chairman Robert Goodlatte that Attorney General Jeff Sessions was evaluating the need for a probe into a controversial uranium deal that involved a major donor to the foundation.

Justice Dept investigators looking into issues involving donations to the foundation

ing the case.

"This is a philanthropy that does life-changing work, which Republicans have tried to turn into a political football," Merrill said of the foundation.

Trump has, via Twitter and in speeches, repeatedly called for the Justice Department to reopen a probe into the private email server of Hillary Clinton, whom he defeated in the 2016 presidential election.

25 dead in migrant shipwreck off Libya

AFP, Rome

At least 25 people are feared to have drowned in a shipwreck off Libya after a dinghy, possibly carrying some 150 migrants, ran into trouble, two rescue organisations said yesterday.

"Rubber dinghy sunk north of Tripoli. At least 25 people died in the incident, exact numbers still unclear. Italian navy on the scene," the German charity Sea Watch said on Twitter.

The Italian coast guard told AFP 85 people had been rescued from the sinking vessel, and eight bodies recovered so far.

It was believed to be the first shipwreck of 2018 -- though rescue organisations say countless dinghies attempting to cross the Mediterranean are likely to sink without a trace, meaning the year's death toll may have begun even earlier.

The alarm was sounded after a surveillance aircraft deployed in the EU anti-trafficking mission Sophia spotted the partly-submerged dinghy some 40 miles off the Libyan coast, in international waters.

"Shipwreck off the coast of Libya, east of Tripoli. Dozens of people missing who will die without a burial," tweeted the Spanish charity Proactiva Open Arms.

Sea Watch said it had been alerted to the disaster by the guard, which believed 150 people had been aboard.

"The search continues for survivors," said the coast guard, which was aided in the rescue by a navy vessel.

'No chance for progress'

Macron suggests Turkey to renounce its ambition of joining EU; Erdogan warns French reporter over Syria question

AFP, Paris

French President Emmanuel Macron suggested Friday that Turkey should renounce its ambition of joining the EU and settle instead for a looser "partnership" after talks with visiting Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Turkey was hoping to warm frosty relations with Europe during Erdogan's trip to Paris, but the talks were overshadowed by concerns over Turkey's huge crackdown after a 2016 failed coup.

Macron said there was no chance of Turkey's membership bid, which has been languishing for years, moving forward.

"I'd be lying if I said we could open new chapters," he said in reference to the accession process.

"As regards recent relations with the European Union, it is clear that recent developments and choices allow no chance for progress in the process," Macron said after what he described as "very frank" talks with Turkey's strongman.

"We must list the subjects that are blocking things from the EU's perspective... and see if we cannot rethink this relationship, not in terms of an integration process but a cooperation, a partnership," he added at a joint press conference.

He emphasized however that he wanted to see Turkey "remain anchored to Europe".

Erdogan said that Turkey's 54-year wait to join the EU was "seriously exhausting" the Turkish people and that he might be forced "to take a decision."

He did not specify what that might be but admitted: "We don't really have an attitude of 'let's us in' (to the EU) anymore."

He also lashed out at a French reporter who asked him about claims that Ankara arms to Syria.

Vicar slaps fine on brides running late

AFP, London

Fed up with repeated delays to wedding services because of brides arriving late, an English vicar is imposing £100 fines for a delay of more than 10 minutes, The Times reported on Friday.

Church of England vicar John Corbyn said he had introduced the policy at his two churches, Holy Cross in Bearsted and St Mary the Virgin in Tunbridge, after two delayed weddings in a row.

"My team was feeling a bit ill-used... We worried that it was going to become normal practice," he said.

Couples are asked to present the vicar with a £100 (110 euros, \$135) cheque before the service, which he gets to keep if the bride is late and distribute to the organist, bellringers and choristers kept waiting.

The only exception to the fine is for delays caused by traffic jams or genuine mishaps, the paper said.

Corbyn said the fine was proving a success, pointing out that brides were now arriving 10 minutes early.

"It has had the desired effect," he said.

Corbyn hit on the idea while on sabbatical in Uganda, where he read a notice about their method of ensuring weddings took place on time.

NORTH KOREA TALKS

Seoul offers high-level delegation

AFP, Seoul

South Korea has proposed sending a five-member delegation led by a government minister to rare talks with North Korea next week, the Unification Ministry in Seoul said yesterday.

The offer came a day after the two Koreas agreed to hold their first official dialogue in more than two years to discuss the North's participation in next month's Winter Olympics in South Korea.

The tentative rapprochement comes after the North's leader Kim Jong-Un warned in his New Year speech that he had a nuclear button on his desk, but also said Pyongyang could send a team to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics.

Seoul responded with an offer of talks and earlier this week the hotline between the neighbours was restored after being suspended for almost two years.

The ministry said yesterday that the South had suggested Unification Minister Cho Myung-Gyon lead the delegation to the meeting in the truce village of Panmunjom on Tuesday.

He would be accompanied by four other officials, including two vice ministers -- one of whom is in charge of sports -- the South said as the two Koreas discussed the size and formation of delegations by fax.

"We've been informed from the North's side that there won't be any response today," a unification ministry official was quoted as saying by Yonhap news agency.

Kim said in his New Year speech that his country wished success for the Olympics, to be held from February 9-25.

Yesterday, North Korea's Olympic representative said the hermit state was "likely to participate" in the games, Kyodo news agency reported.

The two Koreas have been separated by the world's most heavily militarised border since the Korean War ended in a stalemate in 1953.