

NEWS IN brief

22m Yemenis now in need of aid: UN

More than three-quarters of Yemenis are now in need of humanitarian aid as the war between rebels and the Saudi-backed government nears its fourth year, the UN said yesterday. Some 8.4 million people are at risk of famine, up from 6.8 million in 2017, the UN humanitarian affairs office (OCHA) said.

Indian govt ends Hajj subsidy

Thousands of Muslims who go on Hajj pilgrimage each year will no longer get subsidised or cheaper air tickets, the government said yesterday. The big move would help empower Muslims with dignity, said Union Minister Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, adding, "We believe in empowerment without appeasement."

Japanese city on alert for deadly blowfish

A Japanese city has activated an emergency warning system to alert residents to avoid eating locally purchased blowfish, after a mix-up saw toxic parts of the delicacy go on sale. A supermarket in Gamagori sold five packages of fugu fish without removing the livers, which can contain a deadly poison.

Romania looks for third PM in seven months

Romania's ruling Social Democrats yesterday met to nominate a new prime minister after power struggles within the party forced out the impoverished EU country's second premier in seven months. This latest crisis also prompted Japan's visiting Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to cancel talks with the Romanian government, Romanian officials said.



Cloud-covered Mayon volcano spews ash as it erupts near the Philippine city of Legazpi in Albay province early yesterday. The Albay provincial government has expanded its class suspension order to include more towns around the 2,462-metre volcano, and advised travellers to avoid ashfall-hit villages amid poor road visibility.

PHOTO: AFP

Shackled siblings found in US home

Parents face torture charges

AFP, Perris

A California couple has been arrested on charges of torture after authorities on Monday said their 13 malnourished children were held captive in their home, with some shackled to beds in the dark. Authorities said they were alerted after a 17-year-old girl managed to escape the house on Sunday and call police using a cellphone she found. She was so emaciated that officers said they originally thought she was just 10 years old. The 13 victims at the house in Perris, California ranged in age from two to 29, the Riverside County Sheriff's Department said in a statement. "Further investigation revealed several children shackled to their beds with chains and padlocks in dark and foul-smelling surroundings, but the parents were unable to immediately provide a logical reason why their children were restrained in that manner," the statement said. "Deputies located what they believed to be 12 children inside the house, but were shocked to discover that seven of them were actually adults, ranging in age from 18 to 29. The victims appeared to be malnourished and very dirty." The sheriff's office said "the victims were provided with food and beverages after they claimed to be starving." The parents, 57-year-old David Allen Turpin and 49-year-old Louise Anna Turpin, were booked on torture and child endangerment charges with bail set at \$9 million. They are scheduled to appear in court on Thursday.

Xi tells Trump positive changes in N Korea

AFP, Beijing

Chinese president Xi Jinping told his US counterpart Donald Trump that there have been "positive changes" on the Korean peninsula, state media said yesterday following a phone call between the two leaders. Trump has pushed Xi to increase economic and political pressure on North Korea in the hopes of convincing it to stop the development of its nuclear weapons program. Tensions have been high after the North staged a flurry of nuclear and missile tests and leader Kim Jong-Un traded threats of war and personal attacks with Trump. But in recent weeks there has been an apparent rapprochement, with the two Koreas meeting for the first time in two years and Pyongyang agreeing to send athletes to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in South Korea. In the phone call, Xi "pointed out that the situation on the Korean peninsula has shown some positive changes," according to

the official Xinhua news service. "All sides concerned should make joint efforts to keep up the hard-won momentum for the easing of the situation on the Korean peninsula and create conditions to restart talks," he was quoted as saying. The call comes as foreign ministers from 20 nations gathered in Vancouver to hold two-day crisis talks on North Korea's ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programs. But the US, which at the summit will review with its allies the effectiveness of current sanctions against the hermit kingdom and explore adding more, remains sceptical that Kim is ready to negotiate away his weapons program. China has criticised the Vancouver talks -- hosted by the US and Canada and which exclude both Beijing and Moscow -- and called for sanctions discussions to remain within the United Nations framework. During Xi's phone call with Trump, he also urged the US president, who has taken a hard line against the trade imbalance between the two countries, to come to the table on economic issues.



NEW US-BACKED SYRIA FORCE

Five things you should know

A US plan to form a new border security force in the northeast of Syria has drawn condemnation from major powers in the region, including Turkey and Russia. Under the plan, the US-led coalition fighting against IS in the war-torn area would recruit 30,000 fighters into the new force, according to US officials.

PURPOSE OF THE FORCE

The force would not be an entirely new with regard to recruitment and initial training, said Ryan Dillon, spokesman for the US-led coalition, officially known as Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve. "The coalition is working jointly with the [Syrian Democratic Forces] to establish and train the new Syrian Border Security Force (BSF)," Dillon told Turkey's state-run Anadolu news agency. Dillon said efforts were taken to ensure individuals served in areas close to their homes.

KURDISH FIGHTERS' INVOLVEMENT

Around half of the new force will reportedly be recruited from the SDF, an umbrella group of fighters dominated by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in control of the northeast of Syria. The US views the YPG as a highly effective fighting force against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as IS) and President Donald Trump decided to arm YPG fighters earlier this year. The US arms shipments began before the launch of a months-long offensive to remove IS from the Syrian city of Raqqa, its self-declared capital. The YPG played a prominent role in the eventual defeat of the group later in 2017.

TURKEY'S REACTION

YPG is considered a "terrorist group" by Turkey over its ties to the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged a decades-long fight inside the country. PKK's initial aim was achieving an independent Kurdish state, but later changed it to a demand for equal rights and Kurdish autonomy in Turkey.



Ankara is furious over the US plans to form the new force with Kurdish fighters and has responded by reinforcing the border with Syria with more of its troops.

RUSSIA'S REACTION

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov criticised the reported US move, accusing Washington of seeking to establish a Kurdish-controlled entity along Turkish and Iraqi border zones. He claimed that the Trump administration "did not want to keep Syria as a state in its current borders".

"What it would mean is that vast swaths of territory along the border of Turkey and Iraq would be isolated, it's to the east of the Euphrates River. There are difficult relations between Kurds and Arabs there," Lavrov said.

SYRIA'S REACTION

The Syrian government denounced the new border force in northern Syria as a "blatant assault" on its sovereignty. "Syria strongly condemns the US announcement on the creation of militias in the country's northeast, which represents a blatant attack on the sovereignty and territorial integrity and unity of Syria, and a flagrant violation of international law," a government source, cited by state news agency SANA, said. "Syria considers any Syrian who participates in these militias sponsored by the Americans as a traitor to their people and nation, and will deal with them on this basis," the official was cited as saying.

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA ONLINE

UPCOMING ELECTIONS IN MALAYSIA

PM Najib takes a swipe at ex-leader Mahathir

AFP, Singapore

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak yesterday took a swipe at ex-leader Mohamad Mahathir, his opponent in upcoming elections, saying on a trip to Singapore he did not want a return to "confrontational diplomacy". Mahathir, who ruled Malaysia for more than two decades and is now making another run at the top job aged 92, frequently traded barbs with Singapore's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew during his time in office. Najib used a two-day trip to Singapore for annual talks with his counterpart Lee Hsien Loong to highlight the good state of relations between Kuala Lumpur and the city-state -- and how bad they were under Mahathir.

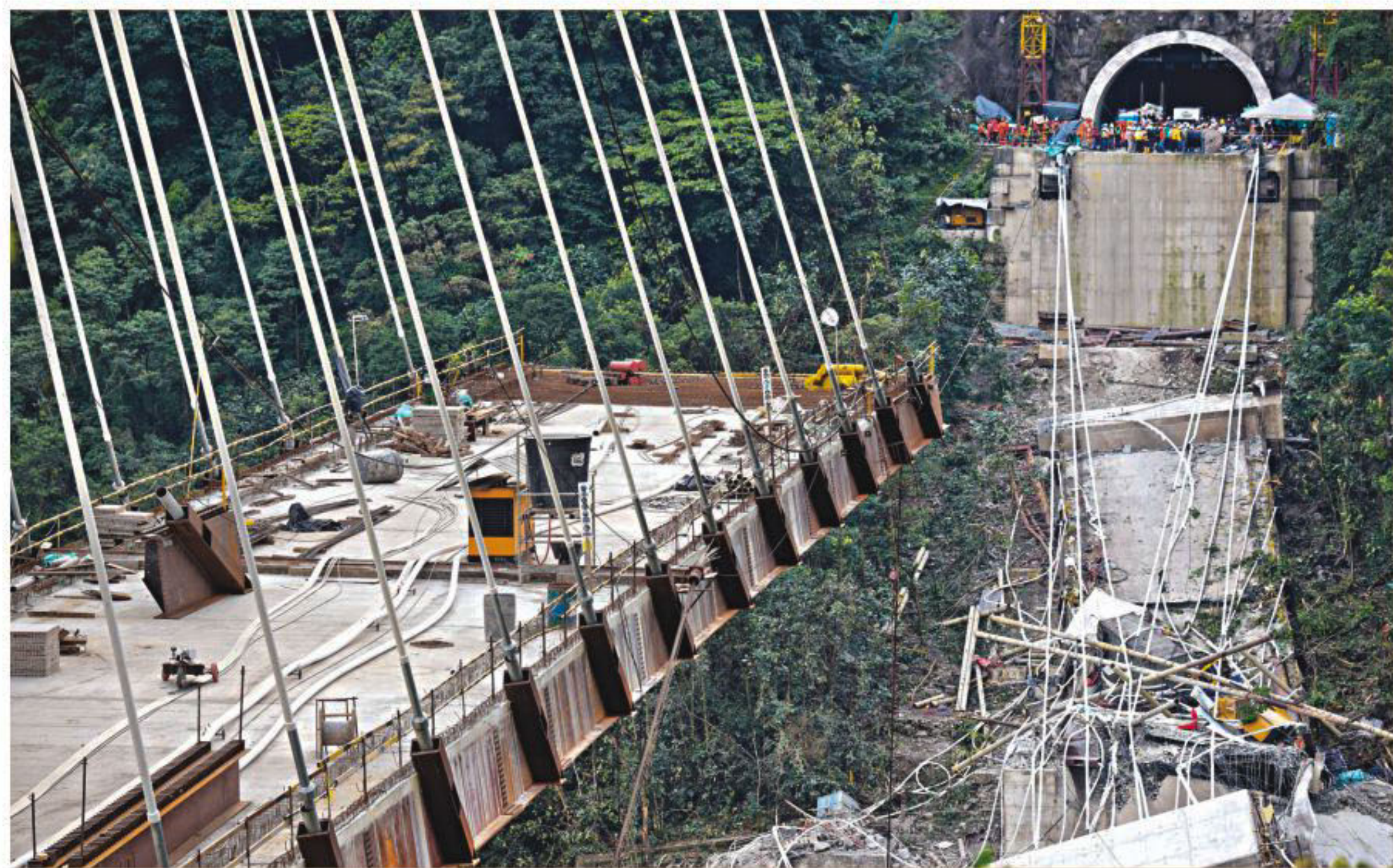
Najib and Mahathir, the opposition coalition's candidate, are due to face off in elections which must be called by August.

During a joint press conference with Lee, Najib said both countries had a "very productive" relationship and he believed in promoting good ties.



"That is the position of our government. The other side may have other ideas," he said, in a veiled reference to Mahathir. "We certainly do not want to return to the era of confrontational diplomacy and barbed rhetoric between our two countries... It is an era that we want to forget."

Kuala Lumpur and its neighbour have often had a spiky relationship since Singapore was expelled from Malaysia after a short-lived union in the 1960s following independence from Britain.



A motorway bridge under construction in Colombia has collapsed, killing at least nine workers and injuring five others on Monday. The bridge in Chirajara was to be part of a highway connecting the capital, Bogota, with the city of Villavicencio.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Sharif compares graft cases to a 'flop' movie

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan's ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday compared the corruption cases against him to a 'flop' movie as he appeared before an accountability court trying him for graft in the Panama Papers scandal that forced him to resign.

The cases were launched on September 8 following the Supreme Court verdict of July 28 that disqualified Sharif as prime minister and ordered the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) for institution of cases against him.

Sharif, 68, arrived in the court - his 13th appearance - in Islamabad. He was accompanied by daughter Maryam and son-in-law Mohammad Safdar, who are co-accused in one of three cases. During the hearing, at least two more witnesses produced by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) recorded their statements. Sharif's lawyer Khawaja Harris cross-examined the witnesses.

Sharif after the court hearing narrated a story about a famous big-budget film in the 1960s to dismiss corruption charges against him. "After it was released, amid much fanfare, someone asked the producer and director how the movie was faring to which they replied 'Pehlay haftay zabardast, doosray haftay zabardasti (The first week was great but the second was forced)'," Sharif said as he linked the 'flop' movie to his

Iceland pledges to go 'plastic-free'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Iceland has become the first major retailer to commit to eliminating plastic packaging for all its own brand products within five years to help end the "scourge" of plastic pollution. The retailer said it would be replacing plastic with packaging including paper and pulp trays and paper bags, which would be recyclable through domestic waste collections or in-store recycling facilities. Iceland said it was the first major retailer globally to go "plastic-free" on its own label products and aimed to complete the move by the end of 2023. It has already removed plastic disposable straws from its own label range and new food ranges set to hit the shelves in early 2018 will use paper-based rather than plastic food trays. The move, which has been welcomed by environmental campaigners, comes amid growing concern over plastic pollution in the world's oceans, where it can harm and kill wildlife such as turtles and seabirds. A survey for Iceland revealed overwhelming public support for a shift away from plastic by retailers, with 80% of 5,000 people polled saying they would endorse a supermarket's move to go plastic-free.

Serb politician shot dead

Kosovo president condemns as killing could reignite ethnic tensions between Pristina and Belgrade

AFP, Kosovska Mitrovica

Prominent Kosovo Serb politician Oliver Ivanovic was killed in a brazen drive-by shooting yesterday that could reignite ethnic tensions in the region. The assassination of Ivanovic -- who was facing a retrial on war crimes charges over the 1990s Kosovo conflict -- occurred on the very day that Belgrade and Pristina resumed talks on normalising ties after a hiatus of more than a year. Marco Djuric, the Serbian government official in charge of Kosovo, described the murder as a "criminal, terrorist act against the entire Serbian people". Ivanovic, 64, was shot dead by gunmen firing from a car as he arrived at the headquarters of his party in the flashpoint town of Mitrovica at about 8:15 am, according to police. The moderate politician, who had pub-



licly spoken out against Belgrade's policies in Kosovo, was hit by five bullets and died on the spot, his lawyer Nebojsa Vljacic told AFP. Kosovo President Hashim Thaci and the government in Pristina "strongly" condemned the assassination, as did representatives of the United Nations and the United States in Kosovo. European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini spoke with Thaci and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and "called on all sides to show calm and restraint and allow the rule of law and justice to take its course," a statement from her office said. Vucic called an emergency meeting of his national security council to discuss the killing, national broadcaster RTS reported. Following the assassination, the Serb-populated northern part of ethnically divided Mitrovica was unusually calm and its streets deserted.

Duterte defiant over news website closure

AFP, Manila

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said yesterday he "did not give a shit" as his government moved to shut down a news website that has been critical in its reporting on his deadly drug war, with media watchdogs raising fears over eroding freedoms. The country's corporate regulator revoked the incorporation papers for Rappler on Monday accusing the online portal of ceding control to foreign investors in an industry exclusively reserved for Filipinos. At a rambling speech to aviation industry officials yesterday, Duterte singled out a Rappler reporter, saying: "I never had a hand, and I don't give a shit if you continue or not continue with your network". The fiery 72-year-old said the Rappler sanction was not his own doing, then went on to accuse unnamed sectors of the media of "attacking us below the belt". "You've gone too far. You didn't stop at (hurling) garbage and even used the spoils of the toilet bowl. Then I realised you are not saints," he said. "In this country the issue is not press freedom. The issue is abuse of the elite and those in power," Duterte continued, accusing "oligarchs" of using media ownership as cover to steal from the government or cheat on taxes.