

NEWSIN brief

Qatar eyes for Russian S-400 missile systems

AFP, Moscow

Qatar is finalising a deal to buy Russian S-400 air defence systems, the isolated Gulf state's ambassador to Moscow said yesterday. The announcement came after the historic visit of Saudi Arabia's King Salman to Moscow last year, when Riyadh signed preliminary agreements to buy S-400 air defence systems and anti-tank guided missile systems.

British PM May to visit China as Brexit looms

AFP, Beijing

British Prime Minister Theresa May will visit Beijing next week, China said Thursday, as her country looks to bolster trade links ahead of its departure from the European Union. May will be in China from January 31 to February 2.

Kabul hotel attack toll rises to 25

AFP, Kabul

An Afghan official yesterday said at least 25 people were killed in the attack on a Kabul hotel, as confusion reigned over the true toll with conflicting figures given and Afghan media reporting higher numbers. The health ministry official said at least 25 people had been killed, including 13 foreigners. But AFP has independently verified that 15 foreigners died in the massacre.

Evil sandwiches!

AFP, London

Britain's annual sandwich consumption produces the same amount of carbon dioxide as more than eight million cars, according to a study published yesterday. This annual consumption, around 11.5 billion sandwiches, on average, 9.5 million tonnes of CO2 eq., equivalent to the annual use of 8.6 million cars," said the study.



US President Donald Trump (C) waves upon his arrival at the Economic Forum (WEF) annual meeting on January 25, 2018 in Davos, eastern Switzerland. The world's political and business elite yesterday headed into a compelling encounter with President Donald Trump as the United States bids to carve out a competitive edge in trade, taxes and currency rates. PHOTO: AFP

Sit for talks to avoid aid cuts

Trump tells Palestinians

AFP, Davos

President Donald Trump yesterday insisted that Palestinians had "disrespected" the United States and threatened to withhold aid worth hundreds of millions of dollars until they agree to US-brokered peace talks.

"They disrespected us a week ago by not allowing our great vice president to see them," Trump said during a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Davos, Switzerland.

"We give them hundreds of millions," Trump added. "That money is not going to them unless they sit down and negotiate peace."

Palestinians were infuriated by Trump's recent decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital -- which for decades both sides agreed would be the subject of negotiation.

Facing severe pressure at home, Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas responded by cancelling a planned meeting with US Vice President Mike Pence.

Palestinians, who also consider the divided city their capital, took to the streets in deadly riots after Trump's decision.

During the meeting with Netanyahu in Davos, Trump tried to convince a deeply sceptical Arab world that he could still be an honest broker.

"We have a proposal for peace. It is a great proposal for the Palestinians," Trump claimed, adding that Israel would also be forced to make concessions.

But Trump also doubled down, saying he would move the US embassy to Jerusalem as soon as next year, despite no suitably sized building existing.

US-Turkey tensions rise

Trump, Erdogan face off as UN hosts critical peace talks in Vienna

AFP, Aljazeera Online

Tensions between Ankara and Washington over the Turkish army's operation in Syria escalated further yesterday as Turkey accused the White House of misrepresenting a phone call between Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Donald Trump.

Meanwhile, UN yesterday embarked on fresh efforts to jumpstart Syrian peace talks that Western countries and the opposition fear are being undermined by a separate Russian diplomatic push.

The two days of talks in Vienna come after eight previous rounds in Geneva, during which the two sides failed to even meet each other.

The assault by Turkish troops against a Kurdish militia in northern Syria has seen Washington's fellow Nato member Ankara attacking a US-allied force, even raising fears of military confrontation between the two Alliance powers.

Turkey says it has made gradual

progress in the offensive against Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia but has refused to give any time limit for the campaign.

After the Turkish and US presidents spoke late on Wednesday, the White

SYRIA OPS AGAINST KURD MILITANTS

Turkish PM hits out at US support for terror organisations

Prolonged ops risks giving life to IS: US

Kurds deploy fighters to Manbij as Turkey targets it for next ops

House said Trump had urged Turkey to "to de-escalate, limit its military actions", expressing concern that the assault could harm the fight against jihadists.

But a Turkish official said the US statement did "not accurately reflect

the content" of the call, adding that Trump did not share any concerns regarding "escalating violence".

Turkey launched an offensive against the YPG militia on Saturday in their enclave of Afrin, supporting Syrian rebels with air strikes and ground troops.

Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim yesterday hit out at the US "support for terror organisations", which "could not be accepted".

Following the Erdogan-Trump telephone talks, the US envoy to the coalition against IS, Brett McGurk, said on Twitter the "prolonged operation risks giving life to ISIS (IS) as it's on verge of defeat".

Meanwhile, US-backed SDF Kurdish militia has deployed fighters to the front line of Syria's Manbij to battle Turkey's military after Erdogan said it would be next after launching the cross-border Afrin operation, reported Aljazeera Online.

'Tell them not to worry'

Trump lays out path to citizenship for Dreamers, seeks \$25b in a fund to build border wall

REUTERS, Washington

President Donald Trump on Wednesday previewed his outline for an immigration bill that he will promote next week, saying he wants \$25 billion to build a border wall and is open to granting citizenship to illegal immigrants who were brought to the United States as children.

Trump said he was optimistic he could come to an agreement with both Republicans and Democrats in the US Congress that would appeal to hardliners seeking tougher rules for immigrants while also preventing the roughly 700,000 "Dreamers" from being deported.

"Tell them not to be concerned, ok? Tell them not to worry. We're going to solve the problem. It's up to the Democrats, but they (the Dreamers) should not be concerned," Trump told reporters during an impromptu question-and-answer session at the White

House.

Trump campaigned for president in 2016 promising tougher rules for immigration. In September, he announced he was ending the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program created by his Democratic predecessor Barack Obama, effective in

March - unless Congress came up with a new law.

The program currently protects about 700,000 people, mostly Hispanic young adults, from deportation and provides them work permits.

Trump said his proposal would include a request for \$25 billion for the border wall, \$5 billion for other border security programs, measures to curb family sponsorship of immigrants, and an overhaul of or end to the visa lottery system.

In exchange, he said he wanted to offer the Dreamers protection from deportation and an "incentive" of citizenship, perhaps in 10 to 12 years.



Spanish govt acts to block election of Puigdemont

REUTERS, Madrid

Spain's government has taken a first step towards preventing the election of ex-Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont as head of the Spanish region, the deputy prime minister said yesterday as tensions rose again between Madrid and Barcelona.

Puigdemont has been living in Brussels since he fled there in late October to avoid arrest on charges of sedition and rebellion for organising an illegal referendum and unilaterally declaring Catalan independence from Spain.

Catalonia's newly elected parliament speaker, Roger Torrent, nominated Puigdemont on Monday as the sole candidate to be the regional president again, defying Spanish government warnings against such a move.

"Current circumstances do not permit his investiture," Deputy Prime Minister Soraya Saenz de Santamaria told a news conference in Madrid, referring to the fact that there is an arrest warrant against Puigdemont in Spain.

She said the government had asked the council of state to give its opinion on the possibility of appealing against the Catalan parliament speaker's nomination of Puigdemont to the constitutional court.

If the council's opinion echoes that of the Madrid government, the appeal will be filed immediately, she said.

"The parliament speaker has put forward as candidate someone who does not enjoy his full rights, who has no right to freedom of movement," Saenz de Santamaria said. "Mr Torrent must have known that Mr Puigdemont could not enter Spain without being detained."

The Catalan parliament must hold its first round of voting a new regional leader no later than January 31.

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy called a new Catalan regional election in December to try to defuse the crisis but his gamble backfired when separatist parties won a majority, giving new impetus to the independence movement.



CATALONIA CRISIS



Italian rescuers, policemen and technicians work on the site of a train crash in Pioltello, near Milan, yesterday. At least three people were killed and 10 seriously injured when a packed regional train derailed near Milan in northern Italy, emergency services said. The incident happened at around 7:00 am near the Milan suburb of Segrate. The cause was not immediately clear. PHOTO: AFP



GRAFT CONVICTION

Brazil's Lula loses appeal

AFP, Porto Alegre

A Brazilian appeals court Wednesday upheld ex-president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's conviction for corruption, dealing a body blow to his hopes of running for re-election this year.

The three-judge panel sitting in the southern city of Porto Alegre unanimously ruled that his original 9.5-year jail sentence be extended to more than 12 years.

Thousands of Lula supporters rallied in Sao Paulo to protest the verdict.

Wearing a short-sleeved black T-shirt, the 72-year-old was defiant, telling the crowd of around 10,000 that he intended to run for the presidency despite the court setback.

"Now I want to run for the presidency," he said to wild cheers. "They can take away my rights; no big deal. What I'd like to differ with them on is the conscience of the Brazilian people."

"Mandela was put in prison and then he came back and became president of South Africa," he added, comparing himself to the great African statesman.

One of the judges, Joao Gebran Neto, said in his ruling that during his 2003-2010 presidency, Lula was one of the architects "of a sophisticated scheme of fraud and corruption" that had weakened Brazil's entire political system.

A defiant Lula said before the judgment he would continue to fight "for the dignity of the Brazilian people" and insisted he had committed no crime.

One cigarette a day, you are harm's way

AFP, Paris

Just one cigarette a day carries nearly half the risk for heart attack and stroke as smoking a full pack of 20, according to a large-scale study published yesterday.

"If someone smokes one cigarette instead of 20 per day, intuitively we'd think that the risk drops to 1/20, or five percent," said lead author Allan Hackshaw, a professor at University College London, whose paper analysed 141 previous studies.

"This seems to be the case for lung cancer, but is not true for heart attacks and stroke, where one cigarette per day carries around 50 percent of the risk of a pack a day," he told AFP.

Smokers should not be fooled, in other words, into thinking that a few cigarettes a day -- or even just one -- carries little or no long term harm, he added.

"Whilst it is great that smokers try to cut down -- and they should be positively encouraged to do so -- in order to get the big benefits on cardiovascular disease they need to quit completely," he said by email.

Tobacco kills about seven million people worldwide every year, according to the World Health Organization. About two million of those deaths are due to cardiovascular disease, mainly coronary heart attacks and stroke. The findings were published in the medical journal BMJ.

USA Gymnastics doctor gets up to 175 yrs in jail

AFP, Lansing

Disgraced former USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar was sentenced to 40 to 175 years in prison on Wednesday after a week of raw emotional testimony by scores of women he sexually abused for years under the guise of medical treatment.

"I've just signed your death warrant," Judge Rosemarie Aquilina said as she handed down what amounts to a life sentence to the 54-year-old Nassar in a tense Lansing, Michigan, courtroom.

"You do not deserve to walk outside of a prison ever again," the judge said as Nassar, dressed in a blue prison jumpsuit, stood expressionless before her flanked by two defense attorneys.

Minutes ahead of the sentencing, Nassar apologised in court to his victims, who included Olympic gold-medal winning gymnasts Simone Biles, Aly Raisman, Gabby Douglas and McKayla Maroney but also scores of female athletes at Michigan State University, where he worked.

"What I am feeling pales in comparison to

the pain, trauma, and emotional destruction that all of you are feeling," Nassar said, turning at several points to face his victims in court. ... There are no words to describe the depth and breadth of how sorry I am for what has occurred," he said.

Judge Aquilina scoffed at his apology, however, and read from a letter in which Nassar, despite his guilty plea, once again claimed to have been providing legitimate medical treatment.

"It was not treatment. It was not medical," the judge said. "I wouldn't send my dogs to you, sir."

In extra-dourous scenes over the past week, around 160 women appeared in court or testified anonymously to the emotional pain they continue to experience because of the sexual abuse by Nassar. Already sentenced to 60 years in prison on federal child pornography charges, Nassar pleaded guilty to 10 counts of criminal sexual conduct. He was sentenced Wednesday on seven of those counts, with a final additional sentence to be handed down later this month.



SEXUAL HARASSMENT

EGYPT PRESIDENTIAL RACE

Sisi's last real challenger quits

AFP, Cairo

A rights lawyer seen as the last real challenger to Egypt's Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on Wednesday quit the race to be president, the latest in a string of potential candidates to withdraw or be jailed.

Sisi, who has ruled the North African country with an iron fist since being elected in 2014, earlier in the day became the only candidate so far to formally submit his bid to stand in the election.

Since December, one by one, all of his other likely challengers have either ruled themselves out of the race or been sentenced to time in prison.

On Wednesday it was the turn of Khaled Ali, a leftist human rights lawyer who was seen as the strongest candidate still standing against Sisi following the elimination of two others.

"Today we announce our decision that we will not run in this race," Ali said at a news conference in Cairo.

A presidential candidate in 2012, the 45-year-old Ali said he had been forced to pull out of this year's election to be held on March 26-28.

There were, he said, "signs that pointed to a will to poison the whole operation and to corrupt and empty it of its supposedly democratic content."

They included the arrest of some of his campaign activists, a tight schedule that made it difficult for potential candidates to gather the needed endorsements for their applications, and a generally unfair climate.