

NEWS IN
brief

Paris braces for floods

AFP, Paris

Paris was on alert yesterday as the swollen Seine continued to creep higher, with forecasters expecting the flooding to peak at the end of the weekend. The river reached 5.7 metres (19 feet) at 9:00am (0800 GMT) yesterday, more than four metres above its normal height, causing headaches for commuters as well as people living near its overflowing banks.

US drone strike kills 7

Qaeda men in Yemen

AFP, Aden

A drone strike early yesterday killed seven suspected al-Qaeda militants in southern Yemen, a security official said. The US military is the only force known to operate armed drones over Yemen. The United States considers the Yemen-based Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to be the radical group's most dangerous branch.

More than 1,000 SA

rhinos killed last year

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The South African government has revealed the number of rhinos illegally killed last year, suggesting measures to reduce poaching have had limited success. A total of 1,028 rhino were poached from 1 January to 31 December 2017, compared to 1,054 in the same period for 2016, "representing a decrease of 26 animals", the environment ministry said in a statement. There are estimated to be around 30,000 rhinos of all five rhino species surviving in the wild, and South Africa is home to the vast majority of the world's rhino population.

Islamists kill 10

Malian soldiers

AFP, Bamako

At least 10 Malian soldiers were killed yesterday in an attack on their camp in the restive north blamed on jihadists, military sources told AFP. The attack took place in Timbuktu region.



CATALAN CRISIS

Spain turns to court to block Puigdemont

AFP, Madrid

The Spanish government on Friday turned to the courts to try to stop Catalonia's ousted separatist leader Carles Puigdemont from returning to power despite facing arrest.

Puigdemont, who fled to Belgium after the Catalan parliament declared independence in October, was earlier this week chosen as his candidate to lead Catalonia again after December elections saw separatist parties win an absolute majority of seats.

Catalonia's regional parliament is scheduled to debate and vote on Tuesday whether to reinstall Puigdemont, who faces arrest for rebellion, sedition and misuse of public funds over his attempt to break Catalonia from Spain as soon as he comes back.

But Spain's conservative central government on Friday filed a legal challenge with the country's Constitutional Court against Puigdemont's bid to return to power, on the grounds that as a fugitive of justice, he cannot be elected.

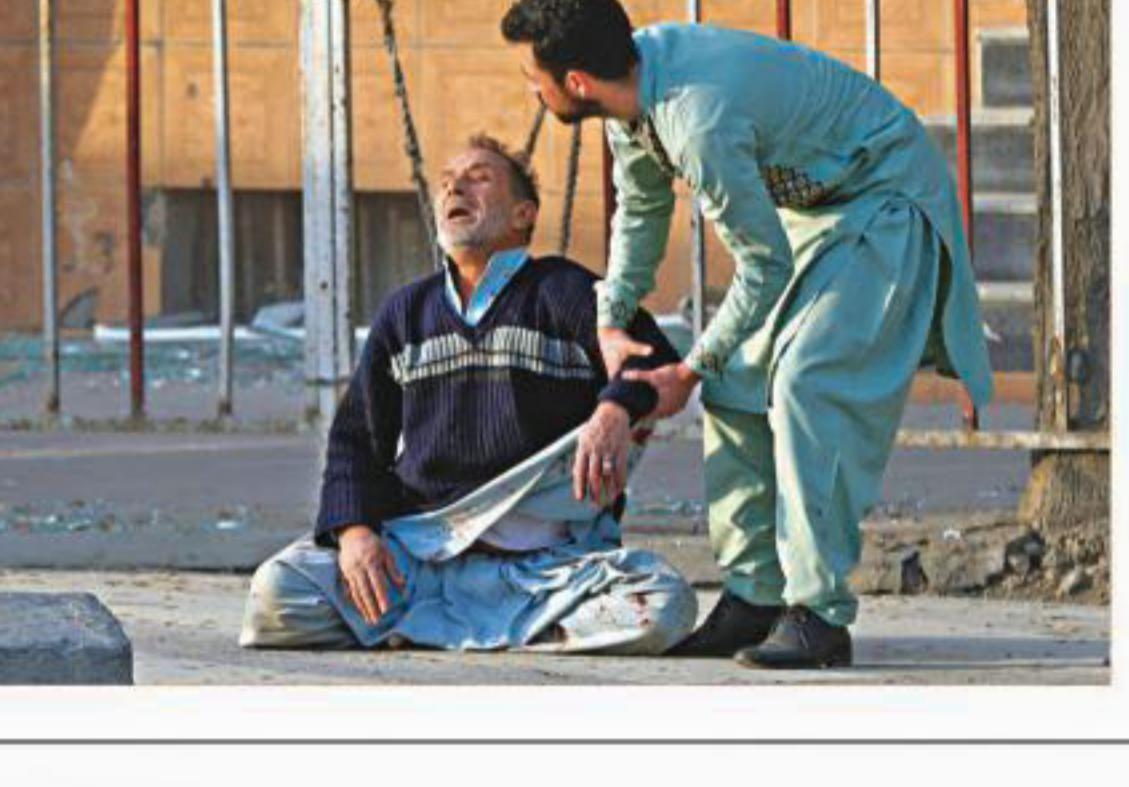
The court was scheduled to meet yesterday to study the government's challenge. If it agrees to take up the case, the parliamentary session to swear in Puigdemont would be automatically suspended while the court considers legal arguments.



KABUL CARNAGE

(From top left, clockwise) Afghan volunteers and policemen help injured men at the scene where a car bomb exploded in front of the old Ministry of Interior building in Kabul yesterday; smoke seen from miles away after the powerful bomb exploded; Afghan medical staff treat a wounded boy; and a man reacts after hearing his son was killed in the blast. The blast killed at least 95 people. Story on page 1.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS



N Korea exported coal to South, Japan via Russia

REUTERS, Paris/london/moscow

North Korea shipped coal to Russia last year which was then delivered to South Korea and Japan in a likely violation of UN sanctions, three Western European intelligence sources said.

The UN Security Council banned North Korean exports of coal last Aug 5 under sanctions intended to cut off an important source of the foreign currency Pyongyang needs to fund its nuclear weapon and missile programmes.

But the secretive Communist state has at least three times since then shipped coal to the Russian ports of Nakhodka and Kholmsk, where it was unloaded at docks and reloaded onto ships that took it to South Korea or Japan, the sources said.

Western shipping source said separately that some of the cargoes reached Japan and South Korea in October last year. A US security source also confirmed the coal trade via Russia and said it was continuing.

Asked to respond to the report, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday that Russia abided by international law.

UN sanctions ban North Korean coal exports

Trump says Russia helps Pyongyang get supplies

North Korea condemns latest US sanctions

The US Treasury on Wednesday put the owner of one of the ships, the UAL Ji Bong 6, under sanctions for delivering North Korean coal to Kholmsk on Sept 5.

North Korean coal exports were initially capped under a 2016 Security Council resolution that required countries to report monthly imports of coal from North Korea to the council's sanctions committee within 30 days of the end of each month.

The United States has led efforts to toughen UN sanctions to force North Korea to give up development of nuclear missiles capable of hitting America.

North Korea has refused to give up the development of nuclear missiles capable of hitting the United States. It has said the sanctions infringe its sovereignty and accused the United States of wanting to isolate and stifle North Korea.

North Korea yesterday condemned the latest US sanctions announced this week aimed at curbing the isolated nation's development nuclear weapons.

The US Treasury on Wednesday imposed sanctions on nine entities, 16 people and six North Korean ships it accused of helping the weapons programs.

DRIVE AGAINST CORRUPTION IN SAUDI ARABIA

Billionaire Prince released after financial settlement

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi billionaire Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal was released yesterday after nearly three months in detention following a "settlement" with authorities, as a sweeping anti-corruption campaign targeting the kingdom's elite winds down.



Prince Al-Waleed, dubbed the Warren Buffett of Saudi Arabia, was the most high-profile detainee among 350 suspects rounded up since November 4, including business tycoons and ministers, who were held in Riyadh's luxury Ritz-Carlton hotel.

The prince was released following an undisclosed financial agreement with the government, similar to deals that authorities struck with most other detainees in exchange for their freedom.

"The attorney general this morning approved the settlement with Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal," paving the way for his release, a government source told AFP without disclosing figures.

When asked whether the prince was still the head of his publicly listed Kingdom Holding Company, the source who asserted he was guilty of corruption replied: "For sure."

The prolonged detention of Prince Al-Waleed, ranked among the richest men in the world, had sent shock waves across a host of companies that count him as a major investor.

Kingdom Holding -- in which the prince has a 95 percent stake -- owns The Savoy in London, the Fairmont Plaza and the famed George V Hotel in Paris.

The prince, who Forbes estimates is worth \$18.7 billion, has also invested in Lyft and Twitter.

Prince Al-Waleed is the latest in a series of high-profile detainees to be freed from the hotel, as the campaign against elite corruption launched by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman draws to a close.



A resident wades through a river with lahar flow coming from Mount Mayon volcano in Guinobatan, Albay province, south of Manila, Philippines, yesterday. Millions of tonnes of ash and rock from the erupting volcano could bury nearby communities due to heavy rain, authorities said yesterday, as tens of thousands flee over fears of a deadly explosion.

PHOTO: REUTERS

'She's developed a classic bubble'

Despite clash, Richardson says Suu Kyi remains Myanmar's best hope

REUTERS, London/washington

Aung San Suu Kyi remains Myanmar's best hope for change, veteran US mediator Bill Richardson said on Friday, days after he got into a fight with the Nobel laureate and quit an international panel advising her government on the Rohingya crisis.

Richardson said Suu Kyi - whom he described as a long-time friend - had developed a "siege mentality" in her position as Myanmar's State Counsellor, the country's civilian leader, but added that Western governments should continue to engage with her.

"The relationship with the West, with human rights groups, with the United Nations, with the international media is terrible," he told Reuters by phone from New Mexico on Friday.

"And I think Aung San Suu Kyi has brought this upon herself, the constant disparagement of the international community, which I think can be helpful to her... She seems isolated. She doesn't travel much into the country. I think she's developed a classic bubble."

Richardson said he resigned from the advisory board on Wednesday, during its first visit to troubled Rakhine State, saying it was conducting a "whitewash". Suu Kyi's office said on Thursday her government had asked Richardson to step down and accused him of pursuing "his own agenda".



Nikki Haley denies 'affair' rumours with Trump

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US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley has responded to rumours that her swift ascension into President Donald Trump's inner circle was a pleasant perk of an affair with the former business mogul.

Haley, speaking to Politico's podcast Women Rule, said the rumours are "highly offensive" and "disgusting".

They're not true, she said, and are simply the predictable result of a strong woman earning seats of power.

"It is absolutely not true," Haley said. "I have literally been on Air Force One once and there were several people in the room when I was there."

The rumours began after journalist Michael Wolff told television comedian Bill Maher that he was "absolutely sure" that Trump was having an affair. Wolff wrote the recently released book *Fire and Fury: A year inside the Trump White House*, which details a turbulent first year in Trump's presidency.

Haley was the governor of South Carolina during the 2016 campaign, and was reluctant to throw her support behind Trump's campaign.

The former governor was already seen as a rising star in the Republican Party when she later joined the Trump administration, and had been picked by the party to deliver the yearly rebuke to president Barack Obama in 2016.

Syrian opposition to boycott Russia-voiced peace talks

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will send his Syria peace negotiator to a conference in Russia next week, a spokesman said yesterday, despite the Syrian opposition's boycott of the meeting.

Guterres "is confident that the congress in Sochi will be an important contribution" to reviving the peace talks held under UN auspices in Geneva, a UN spokesman said in a statement.

Russia had long sought UN participation in the conference opening tomorrow in the Black Sea resort of Sochi to lend credibility to its diplomatic efforts to end the six-year war.

Hours earlier, UN envoy Staffan de Mistura ended a ninth round of UN-sponsored talks in Vienna, with no sign of progress toward a peace deal.

UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric indicated that Guterres had received assurances that the Sochi conference would not seek to sideline the UN talks.

Russia has invited more than 1,500 delegates to the two-day conference that the West views with

Suspicion.

In Vienna, the Syrian Negotiations Commission (SNC) announced it would not be attending the Sochi conference.

The main opposition coalition fears that Russia will push a peace deal that will keep President Bashar al-Assad's authority intact after six years of bloodshed.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said he stands by his claim that Russia bears responsibility for recent chemical attacks in Syria, despite strong denials from Moscow.

"These are just unacceptable deployments of chemicals in ways that violate all conventions in which Russia itself has signed up for. It violates agreements that Russia undertook to be responsible for identifying and eliminating the chemical weapons inside of Syria," Tillerson said during a visit to Warsaw.

Tillerson first made the accusations on Tuesday, as diplomats from 29 countries met in Paris to push for sanctions and criminal charges against the perpetrators of the chemical attacks in Syria.

Eight dead as US-led strike hits Iraq forces

AFP, Baghdad

An air strike by the US-led coalition battling the Islamic State group hit Iraqi security personnel yesterday, officials said, in an apparent mistake that killed eight people.

The friendly fire incident drew swift criticism of the US military presence in Iraq from pro-Iranian figures in Baghdad.

"Eight people -- a senior intelligence official, five policemen and a woman -- were killed by a US strike on the centre of Al-Baghdadi," a town in western Iraq, a provincial official said, asking not to be identified.

"It seems the strike was a mistake," the official said of the incident in the Euphrates Valley town, adjacent to the Ain al-Asad airbase 250 kilometres west of the capital.

Those killed were travelling in a convoy which had been deployed to support a dawn raid on suspected IS militants in the area.

US to end arms support for Kurdish forces

Claims Turkey

REUTERS, Ankara

The United States has told Turkey it will not provide any more weapons to the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, the Turkish presidency said yesterday, as Turkey's offensive against the US-backed YPG in Syria entered its eighth day.

The Turkish incursion in northwest Syria's Afrin region against the YPG has opened a new front in the multi-sided Syrian civil war, but has also further strained ties with Nato ally Washington.

Washington has angered Ankara by providing arms, training and air support to the Syrian Kurdish forces. Turkey sees the YPG as an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has waged a deadly insurgency in Turkey's largely Kurdish southeast for three decades.

The Turkish presidency said in a statement yesterday that Ibrahim Kalin, spokesman for President Tayyip Erdogan, and US National Security Adviser HR McMaster held a phone call on Friday in which McMaster confirmed the United States would no longer provide weapons to the YPG.

On Thursday, Erdogan said Turkish forces would sweep Kurdish fighters from the Syrian border and could push all the way east to the frontier with Iraq - a move which risks a possible confrontation with US forces allied to the Kurds.