

NEWSIN brief

Hong Kong bans ivory sales in landmark vote
AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong yesterday voted to ban ivory sales in a landmark move to end the infamous trade in the city. MPs overwhelmingly voted for the bill that will abolish the trade by 2021, following on the heels of China's complete ban on ivory sales that went into effect last year.

Terrorism: Afghan spy chief visits Pakistan
REUTERS, Islamabad

Afghanistan's intelligence chief Masoom Stanekzai visited Pakistan yesterday, officials said, at a time when tension between the neighbours is simmering over accusations that Pakistan offers a safe haven for Taliban militants. The Afghan team will present documentary evidence linking individuals and groups based in Pakistan with the Kabul attacks that killed scores in recent days, a senior Afghan military source told Reuters.

Lese majeste: Thai teens get harsh sentences
AFP, Bangkok

Five Thai teens and a 20-year-old were yesterday sentenced to between nearly 3.5 and 11.5 years in prison for setting fire to royal portraits, their lawyers said. The six young men, five of whom are in their late teens, were arrested in May 2017 in the northeastern province of Khon Kaen after allegedly vandalising royal portraits.

Rajapakse-era graft: Lanka sets up courts
AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka is to set up special courts to investigate charges of corruption amounting to billions of dollars under former president Mahinda Rajapakse, the government said yesterday. The move, designed to accelerate the process of trying such cases, follows criticism over the slow pace of justice under the new government.

India boosts maritime reach

Signs pact with Seychelles to build naval facilities there

REUTERS, New Delhi/port Victoria

India has signed a 20-year pact with the Seychelles to build an airstrip and a jetty for its navy in the island chain, the two countries said, as the South Asian nation steps up a contest with China for influence in the Indian Ocean.

China last year inaugurated its first overseas military base in Djibouti, near one of the world's busiest shipping lanes, deepening Indian insecurities and pushing it to gain a foothold in the region.

The agreement signed in the Seychelles' capital of Victoria last weekend provides for India to develop the airstrip and jetty on the Assumption islands, near another shipping route.

"India is helping us free of charge, and the facilities and activities will entirely be at the control of Seychelles and will be conducted as per the laws of Seychelles," Barry Faure, its secretary of state for foreign affairs, told Reuters.

But nothing had been leased to



India's third Scorpene-class submarine INS Karanj is seen as a tugboat pulls it during its launch at the Mazagon Dock Ltd. naval shipbuilding yard, in Mumbai, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

India and the new facilities would help Seychelles better control its exclusive economic zone of 1.3 million square kilometres, Faure added.

First announced during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's trip to the islands in 2015, the pact faced problems, as critics who

feared a handover of territory demanded that the Seychelles government make clear the terms of India's role.

But those concerns have since been tackled, officials said.

India and Seychelles are maritime neighbours with a stake in each other's security, said Indian Foreign

Secretary Subrahmaniam Jaishankar, who signed the agreement in his last official action before retiring this week.

China has been building ports, power stations and highways across Asia, but the terms of some of its investments have angered people.

In Sri Lanka, China faced criticism after taking control of the southern port of Hambantota it had built in a debt-to-equity swap deal.

India has tried to be more careful, avoiding giving hard loans and casting its assistance as a joint endeavour.

But military officials called the Seychelles pact a big step in extending the reach of India's navy, which is expected to rotate its ships and aircraft through the islands.

"The development is a clear indicator that India's geo-strategic frontier is expanding in tandem with China's growing strategic footprint in the Indo-Pacific," said Captain Gurpreet Khurana of the Indian Navy's National Maritime Foundation.

BBC STUDY ON AFGHANISTAN

Govt controls only 30pc of country

REUTERS, Washington

The Taliban are openly active in 70 percent of Afghanistan's districts, fully controlling 4 percent of the country while the west-backed government controls roughly 30 percent, according to a BBC study published on Tuesday.

The BBC estimate, which it said was based on conversations with more than 1,200 individual sources in all districts of the South Asian country, was significantly higher than the most recent assessment by the Nato-led coalition.

The coalition said on Tuesday that the Taliban contested or controlled only 44 percent of Afghan districts as of October 2017.

Afghanistan has been reeling over the past nine days from a renewed spate of violence that is adding scrutiny to the latest, more aggressive US-backed strategy to bolster Afghan forces battling the Taliban in a 16-year-old war. Scored died in the attacks.

The BBC study said the Afghan government controlled 122 districts, or about 30 percent of the country. Still, it noted, that did not mean that they were free from Taliban attacks.

The study by Britain's public broadcaster quoted a spokesman for Afghan President Ashraf Ghani playing down the findings.

The BBC study also said Islamic State had a presence in 30 districts, but noted it did not fully control any of them.

Taliban openly active in 70pc of country but control 4pc

France warns Turkey over Syria invasion

Moscow, Ankara happy with Sochi talks

AFP, Paris

French President Emmanuel Macron yesterday said in an interview that he would have a "real problem" with Turkey's intervention against a Kurdish militia in Syria if it turned into an outright "invasion".

"If the operation became more than fighting a potential terrorist threat on the Turkish border and turns out to be an invasion operation, we would have a real problem with that," Macron told Le Figaro daily.

Turkey's 12-day cross-border offensive against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan last week threatened to expand, has strained relations with its Nato allies.

Ankara views the YPG as a terror organisation allied to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) inside Turkey but the US has been backing it as a key secular ally in the fight against the Islamic State group.

Reacting to Macron's remarks Turkish Prime Minister Binaldi Yildirim said any suggestion that Ankara had broader designs in Syria, beyond pushing the YPG back from the border, was "totally wrong".

"The whole world knows, or should know, that Turkey is not engaged in an invasion," he told reporters in Ankara.

Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday expressed "satisfaction" with the results of a Syria peace congress, the Kremlin said.

"The heads of state expressed satisfaction with the results of the Congress of Syrian National Dialogue held in Sochi on January 30," the Kremlin said in a statement.



US President Donald J Trump gestures at the podium in front of US Vice President Mike Pence (L) and Speaker of the House Paul Ryan during his first State of the Union address to a joint session of Congress inside the House Chamber on Capitol Hill in Washington, on Tuesday. Insert, First lady Melania Trump arrives to the State of the Union address.

PHOTO: REUTERS



'Dogs bark but the caravan goes on'

US threatens new sanctions as Putin laughs off Russia list

AGENCIES

The United States warned Tuesday that it may soon impose new sanctions on Russian figures, after Vladimir Putin laughed off the release of a US target list of his closest and richest allies.

The world was braced for a US sanctions onslaught on Monday when a new law came into effect 180 days after President Donald Trump, still hopeful for warmer ties, begrudgingly signed it.

But to general surprise, Washington declined to identify any companies or individuals to face new measures, and the Treasury contented itself with issuing a list of top Russian officials and super-rich businessmen it regards as Putin's inner circle.

Putin joked that he was upset not to have been included himself. The 65-year-old Russian president -- who is running for re-election -- said he had not seen the list and quoted an old proverb, "the dogs bark but the caravan goes on," to play down the significance of Washington's report.

However he said the US report further complicates US-Russia ties as well as international relations, but added that -- while he has "reciprocal measures" in mind -- he would take no action for now.

Later, in face Democrats grilling, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin told the Senate there would be more action soon to punish Russia for human rights abuses, election interference or intervention in neighbors like Ukraine.

The list is led by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, one of 114 political or official figures on the list, alongside 96 people considered "oligarchs" worth at least \$1 billion (805 million euros) each, like tycoons Roman Abramovich or Oleg Deripaska.

Despite the tensions, two US sources said Russia's foreign spy chief, who is under US sanctions, met last week outside Washington with US intelligence officials.

Sergey Naryshkin, head of the Russian service known by its acronym SVR, held talks with US Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats and other US intelligence officials, the sources said. The sources did not reveal the topics discussed.

Russian spy chief met US officials in US last week: report

Russia to send home all North Korean migrant workers by 2019

N Korea not demonstrated all components of ICBM

Says US general; South Korea sends skiers to North

AGENCIES

North Korea's nuclear program has made strides in recent months but the country has not yet demonstrated all the components of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), including a survivable re-entry vehicle, the vice chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff said on Tuesday.

Air Force General Paul Selva's remarks confirmed an assessment by Defense Secretary Jim Mattis in December that North Korea's ICBM did not pose an imminent threat to the United States.

"What he has not demonstrated yet are the fusing and targeting technologies and survivable re-entry vehicle," Selva said, referring to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

"It is possible he has them, so we have to place the bet that he might have them, but he hasn't demonstrated them," Selva, the second highest-ranking US military official, added.

In November, North Korea said it had successfully tested a new type of ICBM that

could reach all of the US mainland and South Korea.

Selva said that if conflict were to break out, it was unlikely the United States would be able to get an early indication of North Korean launches.

"It is very unlikely that in a tactical situation, we would get any of the indications and warning that would precede a launch other than if we got lucky and saw the movement of the launch mechanism to the launch platform," Selva said.

He said that by using mobile erected launchers, the warning time for the United States had decreased from up to an hour to about a dozen minutes.

Meanwhile, a group of South Korean skiers flew to North Korea yesterday ahead of the Winter Olympics to train with their rivals, on a rare direct flight, reported AFP.

The 45-strong delegation, including 24 skiers travelled to the North's Masikryong ski resort, a pet project of leader Kim Jong-Un.

Strong quake hits India, Pak, Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

A powerful 6.1 magnitude earthquake struck northern Afghanistan yesterday, the US Geological Survey said, sending people in Kabul rushing into the streets and creating tremors as far away as Islamabad and New Delhi.

The quake struck at 0707 GMT near Afghanistan's northern border with Tajikistan in the Hindu Kush mountains at a depth of 191 kilometres, the USGS said.

Across the border in Pakistan, people came out on roads in Islamabad, Peshawar and Lahore, where homes, offices and schools were quickly evacuated. At least one infant was killed in Balochistan province after the roof of their home collapsed, a local official said.



A Palestinian boy charges a mobile phone from batteries offered as a free service in his neighborhood which experiences power shortages, in Johr El-Deek in Gaza, yesterday. Seven medical centres in Gaza have stopped services due to lack of fuel to power generators, the health ministry in the Palestinian enclave said yesterday, two days after a hospital took similar steps. On Tuesday, UN Middle East peace envoy Nickolay Mladenov warned the Palestinian coastal enclave was on the verge of "full collapse" due to political crisis and aid cuts.

PHOTO: REUTERS



I'm not a quitter: May

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday batted away critics of her leadership, saying she was "not a quitter", according to media reports.

May is under pressure from across her Conservative party over her Brexit strategy and her domestic policy programme, with one veteran MP calling it "dull, dull, dull".

"First and foremost, I'm serving my country and my party. I'm not a quitter and there's a long-term job to be done," she told reporters travelling with her on a visit to China.

"That job is about getting the best Brexit deal, it's about ensuring that we take back control of our money, our laws, our borders, that we can sign trade deals around the rest of the world. But it's also about our domestic agenda."

"Yes, we want to get Brexit right and we are working on that, but we also alongside that are working on the key issues that matter to people on a day-to-day basis."

"We need to ensure that we do speak about the achievements that we've seen," she added.

May rose to power after her predecessor David Cameron quit in the wake of the Brexit referendum in 2016 after failing to persuade Britons to stay in the EU.

She was severely weakened by a general election in June in which she lost her parliamentary majority, forcing the Conservatives into a power alliance with Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).