

# NEWSIN brief

## One arrested after Italy gun attack

Italian police said they have arrested a young man suspected of opening fire on foreigners from a vehicle in central Italy yesterday, wounding several people. After the attack in the town of Macerata, the suspect got out of his car and made a fascist salute while wearing a tricolour scarf, according to Italian media. He was allegedly found to be carrying a gun when he was arrested.

## Israeli planes hit Hamas in Gaza

Israeli aircraft hit a Hamas compound in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday, after Palestinians there fired a rocket into the Jewish state, the Israeli army said. A Palestinian security source said the raid hit a facility of Hamas's military wing west of Rafah in southern Gaza, "without causing injuries."

## Brazil ex-president Lula to get his passport back

A Brazilian federal judge on Friday ordered that former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's seized passport be returned. A lower court judge had ordered Lula -- sentenced last week to more than 12 years in prison on graft charges -- to surrender his passport on fears that he would seek asylum abroad. Lula still retains a strong lead in the polls ahead of presidential elections in October despite his graft conviction.

## Nigeria's anti-graft court chief charged

Nigeria's top judge handling corruption cases against public officials has himself been charged with bribery, court papers showed yesterday. Danladi Umar was accused by the country's anti-graft body EFCC of demanding \$2,700 from a suspect "for a favour", according to court papers seen by AFP.



A Syrian child looks on from a hole in the wall as a youth makes tea in the rebel-held besieged town of Arbin, in the eastern Ghouta region on the outskirts of the capital Damascus on Friday. Inset, Children stand over the body of a child killed in an airstrike in Arbin. The raids killed at least 11 civilians Friday in the town. PHOTO: AFP



Inset, Children stand over the body of a child killed in an airstrike in Arbin. The raids killed at least 11 civilians Friday in the town. PHOTO: AFP

## NEW US-RUSSIA ARMS RACE?

# Pentagon pushes for low-yield nuke arms

Concerned about Russia's growing tactical nuclear weapons, the United States will expand its nuclear capabilities, a policy document released on Friday said, a move some critics say could increase the risk of miscalculation between the two countries. It represents the latest sign of hardening resolve by President Donald Trump's administration to address challenges from Russia, at the same time he is pushing for improved ties with Moscow to rein in a nuclear North Korea. The focus on Russia is in line with the Pentagon shifting priorities from the fight against Islamist militants to "great power competition" with Moscow and Beijing. "Our strategy will ensure Russia understands that any use of nuclear weapons, however limited, is unacceptable," the document, known as the Nuclear Posture Review, said. The rationale for building up new nuclear capabilities, US officials said, is that Russia currently perceives the United States' nuclear posture and capabilities as inadequate. Russia's Foreign Ministry yesterday said in a statement it was very disappointed by the content of the document, which, it said, has a confrontational feel and anti-Russian orientation. Low-yield nuclear weapons, while still devastating, have a strength of less than 20 kilotons. The atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima had about the same explosive power. The argument for these weapons is that larger nuclear bombs are so catastrophic that they would never be used and do not work as an effective deterrent. With less power and destruction, the low-yield option would potentially be more likely to be used, serving as an effective deterrent.

# Maldives defies pressure

### Shuts House, resists SC order to free political dissidents UN chief, world powers urge Male to respect court ruling

Maldivian authorities yesterday announced an indefinite postponement of parliament as President Abdulla Yameen's regime resisted international pressure to comply with a landmark Supreme Court order to free political prisoners. The People's Majlis, or parliament, told local reporters in a brief message that the assembly will not have its scheduled sessions on Monday "due to security reasons".

Ahmed Saudhee, who was appointed just two days ago. His predecessor Ahmed Areef was fired on Thursday, shortly after he said he will honour the court's decision. The court had said that cases against the nine dissidents, including MDP leader and former president Mohamed Nasheed, were politically motivated and asked the government to release

the government to respect the top court's decision. The United Nations, Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States welcomed the court's decision as a move towards restoring democracy in the politically troubled Indian Ocean nation. Neighbouring India, in a rare statement on Friday, urged Yameen's government to comply with the ruling. Yesterday, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres called upon the Maldivian government to respect the law. Guterres' spokesman Stephane Dujarric said in a statement released overnight that the UN chief believes the Maldives' "political stalemate" can be resolved through "all-party talks, which the United Nations continues to stand ready to facilitate."

The move followed a shock order Thursday by the country's Supreme Court to release nine political dissidents. It also restored the seats of 12 legislators who had been sacked for defecting from Yameen's party. The reinstatement of the dozen legislators has given the opposition a majority in the 85-member assembly, and it can now potentially impeach Yameen as well as his cabinet.

Nasheed, the country's first democratically-elected president, has urged

the government to respect the top court's decision. Earlier, Nasheed had said the ruling cleared the way for him to return to the Maldives and contest elections due later this year. For its part, the Maldivian government said Friday that it had concerns about releasing those convicted for "terrorism, corruption, embezzlement, and treason".



Yameen Nasheed

## TALKS TO FORM COALITION GOVT IN GERMANY

# Merkel warns 'very serious differences' blocking deal

Chancellor Angela Merkel warned Friday that Germany's top parties still had "very serious differences" to overcome ahead of next week's deadline for sealing a coalition deal. Heading into what she called the "decisive phase of the negotiations" on a new right-left "grand coalition", Merkel said her conservatives and the Social Democrats (SPD) would have to haggle down to the wire.

Merkel initially turned to two smaller parties, the Free Democrats and Greens, to form a new coalition government for her fourth term. But when those talks collapsed in November, she had to once more woo a reluctant SPD for a new pact. Both main parties reached a breakthrough deal in January when they presented an in-principle agreement to start formal coalition talks that could lead to a new government for the biggest EU economy by the end of March.

"There is still a whole range of very serious differences -- we have an enormous amount of work ahead of us," she said in reference to policies on refugees, the labour market and health insurance. "I hope we will succeed but the problems are, as I said, not yet solved."

However, with the devil in the details, they have again clashed on divisive policies -- especially SPD demands to shift temporary workers to permanent contracts, and to make Germany's health insurance system fairer. National news agency DPA reported Friday that they also reopened another point of contention -- whether their agreed cap of allowing in 180,000 to 220,000 new asylum seekers a year should be regarded as a firm limit as sought by conservatives, or a flexible goal.

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## THE NUNES MEMO

Republican legislators released Friday a highly contentious memo alleging that the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Justice abused their powers to spy on President Donald Trump's election campaign.

### KEY FINDINGS

Based on classified materials, the four-page memo claims that the FBI and DOJ in 2016 used an unsubstantiated, Democratic-funded research report to obtain a FISA national security warrant to surveil Trump advisor Carter Page, who had extensive Russian contacts. Several former and current top FBI and DOJ officials, it said, signed off on the FISA application and three renewals, in what the memo's authors says amounted to accepting an unacceptably weak basis for a warrant. The findings of the report "raise concerns with the legitimacy and legality of certain DOJ and FBI interactions" with the court that issued the warrant, said the memo, produced by the Republican leadership of the House Intelligence Committee. They "represent a troubling breakdown of legal processes established to protect the American people from abuses," it said.

### WHO IS SINGLED OUT?

- Those named in the Nunes memo as responsible for the alleged abuse of the FISA warrant process include: -- Former FBI director James Comey, who was fired last May over the agency's investigation into Russia meddling in the 2016 election -- Comey's top aide, FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe, who stepped down last Monday after coming under strong pressure from Trump -- Justice Department Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who oversees the work of special counsel Robert Mueller, now investigating Trump's campaign for alleged collusion with Russians -- Former deputy attorney general Sally Yates, former acting deputy attorney general and current FBI general counsel Dana Boente, and



Mueller Devin Nunes Comey

### WHAT HAS BEEN THE REACTION?

-- Trump, who approved the memo's release, said it shows pro-Democratic bias at the top levels of the Justice Department and FBI. "I think it's terrible. I think it's a disgrace what's going on in this country," Trump said of the memo's contents. "A lot of people should be ashamed." -- House Republican leader Paul Ryan said the memo's release was an effort to protect Americans' civil liberties. -- Devin Nunes, the Republican chairman of the House Intelligence Committee who wrote and released the memo. "The American people have a right to know when officials in crucial institutions are abusing their authority for political purposes," Nunes said. -- Adam Schiff, the senior Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, said Nunes' memo excludes and distorts a lot of key information about the FISA application. -- Senior Democrats in Congress warned Trump about firing any of those named in the memo. "We would consider such an unwarranted action as an attempt to obstruct justice in the Russia investigation," said Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, House Minority Nancy Pelosi, and eight other key Democrats in a statement. Firing Rod Rosenstein, DOJ Leadership, or Bob Mueller could result in a constitutional crisis. SOURCE: AFP

## I stand with you

### FBI chief Wray tells colleagues

Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Chris Wray told his staff Friday to shrug off the attack on the agency's independence by President Donald Trump and congressional Republicans, and pledged to defend his agents. "Talk is cheap; the work you do is what will endure," Wray told the 35,000 FBI staff in an internal letter.

"You've all been through a lot in the past nine months and I know it's often been unsettling, to say the least. And the past few days haven't done much to calm those waters," he said. "Let me be clear: I stand fully committed to our mission... I stand with you." Earlier Friday, Trump approved the release of a memo by congressional Republicans alleging abuse of power by the FBI and Department of Justice in their handling of an investigation of Trump's election campaign's ties to Russia. Trump wrote on Twitter ahead of the memo's release: "The top Leadership and Investigators of the FBI and the Justice Department have politicized the sacred investigative process in favor of Democrats and against Republicans - something which would have been unthinkable just a short time ago."

The memo's release raised concerns that Wray could be forced out of the FBI just six months after being appointed by Trump, who fired Wray's predecessor James Comey last May. Wray's letter made no direct reference to the memo or Trump's comments, and did not suggest that he plans to leave.



Protestors carry placards during a march calling for an end to the crisis in the state-run National Health Service (NHS), in central London, yesterday.

# N Korea flouting sanctions

### UN report says Pyongyang earned \$200m from banned exports, sends arms to Syria, Myanmar

North Korea violated United Nations sanctions to earn nearly \$200 million in 2017 from banned commodity exports, according to a confidential report by independent UN monitors, which also accused Pyongyang of supplying weapons to Syria and Myanmar. The report to a UN Security Council sanctions committee, seen by Reuters on Friday, said North Korea had shipped coal to ports, including in Russia, China, South Korea, Malaysia and Vietnam, mainly using false paperwork that showed countries such as Russia and China as the coal origin, instead of North Korea. The 15-member council has unanimously boosted sanctions on North Korea since 2006 in a bid to choke funding for Pyongyang's nuclear and ballistic missile programs, banning

exports including coal, iron, lead, textiles and seafood, and capping imports of crude oil and refined petroleum products. "The DPRK (North Korea) is already flouting the most recent resolutions by exploiting global oil supply chains, complicit foreign nationals, offshore company registries and the international banking system," the UN monitors wrote in the 213-page report. The North Korean mission to the United Nations did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the UN report. Russia and China have repeatedly said they are implementing UN sanctions on North Korea. The monitors said they had investigated ongoing ballistic missile cooperation between Syria and Myanmar, including more than 40 previously unreported North Korea shipments between 2012 and 2017 to Syria's

Scientific Studies and Research Centre, which oversees the country's chemical weapons program. The investigation has shown "further evidence of arms embargo and other violations, including through the transfer of items with utility in ballistic missile and chemical weapons programs," the UN monitors wrote. Syria agreed to destroy its chemical weapons in 2013. However, diplomats and weapons inspectors suspect Syria may have secretly maintained or developed a new chemical weapons capability. The UN monitors also said one country, which they did not identify, reported it had evidence that Myanmar received ballistic missile systems from North Korea, along with conventional weapons, including multiple rocket launchers and surface-to-air missiles.

## YEMEN WAR

# Saudi-led air strikes killed 68 children

The Saudi-led coalition that is fighting Houthi rebels in Yemen is responsible for the deaths of scores of children since last summer, a United Nations report says. Al Jazeera obtained excerpts from the confidential report by the UN Office on Children and Armed Conflict, which was sent to the UN Security Council on January 19.

According to the excerpts, the Saudi-led coalition killed 68 children and wounded 36 others from July to September 2017. The report found there were at least 20 coalition raids every day - some targeting schools and homes. Saudi Arabia, together with several other Arab nations, launched a military campaign in 2015 that aimed at rolling back advances made by Houthi rebels after they overran much of the country, including the capital, Sanaa, in 2014.

The Saudi-led intervention initially consisted of a bombing campaign and later saw a naval blockade and the deployment of ground forces into Yemen. The coalition says it is attacking positions of the Houthi rebels in response to a request from the internationally recognised government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Houthi killings In addition to the coalition, the UN report also points fingers at the Houthis, blaming the rebels for the deaths of 18 children since last summer. Another 29 children were wounded in attacks by Houthis in the same period, the report says. The report also notes that recruitment of children to fight has increased, particularly by the Houthis and the Yemeni National Army. The UN describes the situation in Yemen as "the worst man-made humanitarian crisis" in the world, with the ongoing conflict making an already dire situation worse.