

NEWSIN brief

Pope calls worldwide day of prayer for peace

REUTERS, Vatican City

Pope Francis yesterday invited Roman Catholics and members of all other religions to observe a day of prayer, fasting and initiatives for peace on February 23, urging everyone to 'say no' to violence and conflict. Francis, speaking to people in St Peter's Square, said he was making the appeal because of the "tragic prolonging" of conflicts around the world.

Erdogan rejects option of partnership with EU

AFP, Rome

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has rejected proposals of a partnership with the EU, insisting full membership to the bloc is the only option, in an interview published yesterday. The EU must "keep its promises" to Turkey, Erdogan told Italy's Stampa newspaper, ahead of his arrival in Rome yesterday.

Maduro calls for polls date by today

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela's unpopular President Nicolas Maduro on Saturday urged officials to set a presidential election date in 48 hours' time for a vote that he'd like to see take place within another week. The snap poll is to happen sometime before the end of April, after the Constituent Assembly announced last week the vote was being brought forward from December.

Cyprus votes in close presidential run-off

AFP, Nicosia

Voters in Cyprus cast ballots yesterday in a presidential run-off, with incumbent Nicos Anastasiades and his leftist challenger sparring over who is best placed to reunify the island and boost a fragile economic recovery. In a first round on January 28, conservative Anastasiades garnered 35.5 percent of the ballots.



Sri Lanka's navy fires a gun salute during the Sri Lanka's Independence day celebrations in Colombo yesterday. Sri Lanka is marking the 70th anniversary of independence from Britain.

PHOTO: REUTERS

ROW OVER RABBI MURDER

Israel legalises West Bank settlement

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday granted legal status to a previously unauthorized outpost in the occupied West Bank in response to a Palestinian shooting attack last month that killed one of its residents.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the decision to retroactively authorize the 50-family outpost of Havat Gilad was meant to "allow the continuation of normal life there."

Most countries deem Israeli settlements in the West Bank, land Israel captured in a 1967 war that the Palestinians want for a future state, to be illegal. Israel disputes this.

The decision was approved unanimously by Israel's cabinet. Palestinian officials condemned the move.

"Netanyahu is trying to make facts on ground. All settlements in the West Bank, including in Jerusalem, are illegal," said Wasel Abu Youssef, a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization's executive committee.

On January 9, Havat Gilad resident Rabbi Raziel Shevah was shot dead from a passing vehicle as he drove near his home.

The following week, Israeli troops searching for his attackers shot dead what they described as a Palestinian suspect in the city of Jenin in the northern West Bank, about 35 kilometres north of Havat Gilad.

However, they did not catch the man considered to have led the attack on Shevah, 22-year-old Ahmed Jarar.

The manhunt continued on Saturday with a raid on the village of Burqin. In clashes that erupted there, soldiers shot dead a teenager identified by the Palestinian health ministry as Ahmad Abu Obeid, 19.

'Cold War mentality'

China condemns US over Trump's nuclear escalation; Iran says new policy brings world closer to annihilation

AGENCIES

China has criticised suggestions by the US government that it could be a potential nuclear adversary, accusing the Trump administration of peddling a "Cold War mentality".

The US Defense Department's Nuclear Posture Review on Friday released outlines the Pentagon's nuclear ambitions under President Donald Trump, while spelling out how it foresees nuclear threats in the coming decades.

Although the review largely focuses on Russia, several sections are dedicated to the lack of transparency in China's nuclear buildup.

The report says China has added new types of nuclear capabilities -- ranging from a mobile intercontinental ballistic missile to a new ballistic missile submarine -- "with little to no transparency into its intentions".

The report makes "wild guesses" about China's intentions and exaggerates the threat of its nuclear force, defence ministry spokesman Ren Guoqiang said in a statement.

China is "firmly opposed to this", Ren said.

China "has always kept its own nuclear forces at the minimum level required by national security", Ren said, pointing out that the US has the world's largest nuclear arsenal.

"We hope that the United States will abandon its Cold War mentality," Ren said.

Since taking office in 2012 President Xi Jinping has pushed for a muscular China, including calls last October to develop a "world-class" military by 2050.

Meanwhile, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said yesterday the United States' new nuclear policy brings humanity "closer to annihilation".

His comments late Saturday came a day after the Pentagon revealed plans to revamp its nuclear arsenal, largely in response to a perceived renewed threat from Russia, reported AFP.

Zarif said the new policy was "in violation" of the international Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

"The US Nuclear Posture Review reflects greater reliance on nukes in violation of the #NPT, bringing humankind closer to annihilation," Zarif said on Twitter.



Turkey warns US troops

Vows to retaliate against Kurdish YPG forces after seven soldiers killed in deadliest day of operation

AGENCIES

Turkey yesterday threatened to expand its operation against Kurdish militia in Syria to the town of the Manbij and even east of the Euphrates, warning that American soldiers risked being targeted in the area if they wore enemy uniform.

Turkey on January 20 launched the "Olive Branch" operation in the northern Syrian region of Afrin, fighting Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia which Ankara sees as a terror group.

With the YPG a key ally of Washington in the battle against jihadists, the campaign has seen a fellow Nato partner of the United States fighting an openly US-backed and US-armed force.

Beyond the northwestern enclave of Afrin, the YPG also controls the key strategic town of Manbij to the east and then a long strip of territory east of the Euphrates up to the Iraqi border.

"If they (the YPG) do not withdraw from Manbij, then we will go to Manbij, we will go east of the Euphrates," Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdog told CNN-Turk.

American troops have no presence in and around Afrin but they are present in Manbij and east of the Euphrates, where they have assisted the YPG in the fight against IS.

Bozdog emphasised that Turkey wanted no confrontation with American troops but said US soldiers risked being caught

up in clashes if they appeared in uniforms of the YPG.

Turkey's Prime Minister on Saturday warned that Kurdish YPG forces will pay "twice as much" following the deaths of seven Turkish soldiers in Syria's Afrin province.

Prime Minister Binali Yildirim made the threat in a tweet Saturday, Turkey's state media said, which marked Turkey's deadliest day in its military operation dubbed "Operation Olive Branch" in northern Syria.

Meanwhile, President Emmanuel Macron's office said yesterday France and Turkey will be working in the coming weeks on a "diplomatic road map" for an end to the nearly seven-year war in Syria.

The announcement came after Macron spoke by telephone with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Saturday which discussed in particular Turkey's operation against Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia in Syria, reported AFP.

Macron had incensed Turkish officials last week by saying in a newspaper interview that France would have a "real problem" with the campaign if it turned out to be an "invasion operation".

Turkey's state-run Anadolu news agency reported Saturday that Erdogan had sought to reassure Macron during their talk, saying Ankara had no eye on Syrian territory.

"The two presidents agreed to work on a diplomatic road map for Syria in the coming weeks," the Elysee Palace said.

SYRIA CLASH RISK

Ankara threatens to expand ops in Manbij

France to work with Turkey govt on Syria road map

Thurman breaks silence on Weinstein 'attack'

AFP, Los Angeles

Actress Uma Thurman, who is indelibly linked to Harvey Weinstein's Miramax studio thanks to her iconic roles in "Pulp Fiction" and "Kill Bill," has broken her silence about the disgraced Hollywood mogul, accusing him of attacking her and threatening her career.

Dozens of Hollywood women -- including Ashley Judd, Gwyneth Paltrow, Kate Beckinsale and Salma Hayek -- have accused Weinstein of acts ranging from sexual harassment to rape.

The scandal touched off a deluge of allegations against powerful men in entertainment, politics and the media, forcing many industries to re-examine workplace policies.

Thurman, 47, told The New York Times in an interview published Saturday of two incidents in London that took place after the release of 1994's Oscar-winning "Pulp Fiction."

They followed an episode in Paris during

which Thurman said Weinstein, dressed in a bathrobe, led her into a steam room during a meeting about a script.

In the first "attack," in Weinstein's suite at London's Savoy Hotel, "he pushed me down. He tried to shove himself on me. He tried to expose himself. He did all kinds of unpleasant things," she said.

Thurman said she took a friend with her to confront Weinstein not long after, but his assistants pressured her to meet him alone.

Thurman said she told Weinstein: "If you do what you did to me to other people you will lose your career, your reputation and your family, I promise you."

Weinstein told the paper "she very well could have said this." Thurman's friend Ilona Herman, Robert De Niro's long-time makeup artist, recalled in the Times that the actress came out of that meeting "very disheveled and so upset."



Emergency crews attend to the site of a train collision near Pine Ridge, Lexington County, South Carolina, US yesterday. At least two people were killed and 70 more injured when the train carrying 147 people collided with a freight train, local police said.

PHOTO: REUTERS

GERMANY POLITICS

Coalition talks to be tough

Says Angela Merkel

REUTERS, Berlin

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that her conservatives faced tough negotiations with the Social Democrats (SPD) yesterday as they strive to form a ruling coalition, and it was unclear when the two blocs would be able to wrap up the talks.

More than four months after a national election, Europe's largest economy and pre-eminent power broker is in political paralysis, causing concern among investors and partner countries that policymaking on key issues like Britain's looming departure from the European Union and euro zone reform may be held up.

The conservatives and



MIGRANT CRISIS

16 bodies recovered off Morocco coast

AFP, Nador

Moroccan rescue services have recovered the bodies of 16 migrants off the coast of Spain's enclave of Melilla, Moroccan and Spanish officials said yesterday.

Three women were among the dead taken to a morgue in the Moroccan city of Nador, a medical official there told AFP.

All were sub-Saharan Africans apart from one Moroccan, the official said.

A spokeswoman for Melilla's authorities earlier said "about 20" bodies had been recovered in Moroccan territorial waters.

The bodies of the migrants were spotted Saturday by a Spanish ship, which alerted the rescue services of both countries, she said.

Late Saturday, a Spanish police patrol boat found one more body, which was taken to Melilla, a Spanish enclave bordering Morocco.

Spanish authorities said a Civil Guard helicopter was supporting Moroccan search patrols yesterday morning.

Migrants are increasingly favouring the so-called western Mediterranean route to reach Europe, which involves making the sea crossing between North Africa and southern mainland Spain.

It's when, not if

Singapore worries, and prepares, for militant attack

REUTERS, SINGAPORE

Armed officers patrol a train station where television screens and giant posters warn of the threat from militants. Nearby, fake gunmen storm a shopping mall in one of many recent terror attack simulations.

But this is not some war-ravaged country. It is one of the safest in the world, Singapore.

The wealthy island-state has a near-perfect record of keeping its shores free from terror, but as it prepares to host defence ministers from around Southeast Asia this week, it appears to have good reason to have prioritised stopping the spread of militancy in the region.

The cosmopolitan financial hub, which was second only to Tokyo in The Economist Intelligence Unit's Safe Cities Index in 2017, says it has been the target of militant plots for years, some stemming from its Muslim-majority neighbours, and that it's a matter of 'when' and not 'if' militants will strike.

"Singapore continues to face a serious security threat from both homegrown radicalised individuals and foreign terrorists who continue to see Singapore as a prized target," Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) said.

Singapore authorities say they have been a target of Islamic extremism since the 1990s, but efforts to deter terrorism have stepped up markedly in recent years with more frequent attacks on Western countries and after Islamic State (IS) militants briefly took over a town in the southern Philippines last year.

Raising further concerns about the threat to the island, a Singaporean soldier has featured on a number of Islamic State promotional videos, most recently in December where he was filmed executing men alongside other militants.

In its inaugural Terrorism Threat Assessment Report released last year, the MHA said Islamic State has demonstrated that Singapore is "very much on its radar" and that the threat to the country remains "the highest in recent years" - claims that are backed up by security experts.



Pakistan actress killed by gunmen

PTI, Peshawar

A Pashto theatre actress was shot dead by three gunmen after she refused to go with them for a private event in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, police said.

According to police, the three men have already been identified and police personnel are actively searching for them.

The gunmen broke into actress Sumbul's house Saturday evening and opened fire at her when she refused to accompany them to a private event. They fled the scene after killing her, Dawn reported.

The singer succumbed to her injuries before reaching the nearby Mardan Medical Complex. The body was handed over to the family after post-mortem.

The police registered a case on the complaint of the actress' grandfather Ameer Bahadar against the three accused and launched a probe into the incident.

Sources said one of the accused, Naeem, was a former employee of police department, while the other, Jehangir, was the former husband of slain Pashto singer Ghazala Javed.

Jehangir was handed down death sentence on two counts and Rs 70 million fine by the Swat district and sessions judge in December 2013 in the killing case of Ghazala and her father Javed Khan.

However, he was acquitted by the Peshawar High Court in May 2014 after he reached a compromise with Ghazala's family.