

Pak army chief in  
Kabul for conference  
XINHUA ONLINE

Pakistani Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa arrived in Kabul yesterday to participate in a high-level conference, local media reported. The United States Central Command, commander of Nato-led Resolute Support Mission, army chiefs of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and Afghan army chief are also attending the conference.

Ice on sensors 'caused  
Russia plane crash'  
AFP, Moscow

Russian experts probing the weekend plane crash outside Moscow which killed 71 people said the accident may have been caused by ice on speed probes which led to faulty information on the craft's airspeed. The IAC said it has completed analysis of the on-board recorder and would still need to analyse the black box which recorded conversations in the cockpit.

Assange loses UK  
legal bid again  
AFP, London

WikiLeaks founder Assange yesterday lost his legal battle to overturn a British arrest warrant against him, leaving him in the Ecuador's London embassy. A London court rejected his lawyers' argument that upholding the warrant was no longer in the public interest.

# N Korea warms to South

'Impressed' Kim calls for further reconciliation; US, Japan urge for more pressure

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea's leader said he wants to boost the "warm climate of reconciliation and dialogue" with South Korea after his high-level delegation returned from a visit to the South, as his foes reiterated the need to keep up maximum pressure and sanctions.

Kim Jong Un gave instructions for measures aimed at more inter-Korean engagement after his younger sister Kim Yo Jong led a three-day visit to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, North Korea's state media reported yesterday.

It did not specify what those instructions were.

The United States has appeared to endorse deeper post-Olympics engagement between the two Koreas that could lead to talks between Pyongyang and Washington. South's President Moon Jae-in yesterday said the United States is open to talking with North Korea, Moon's spokesman told a briefing.

N North dials down propaganda  
broadcasts after Olympics

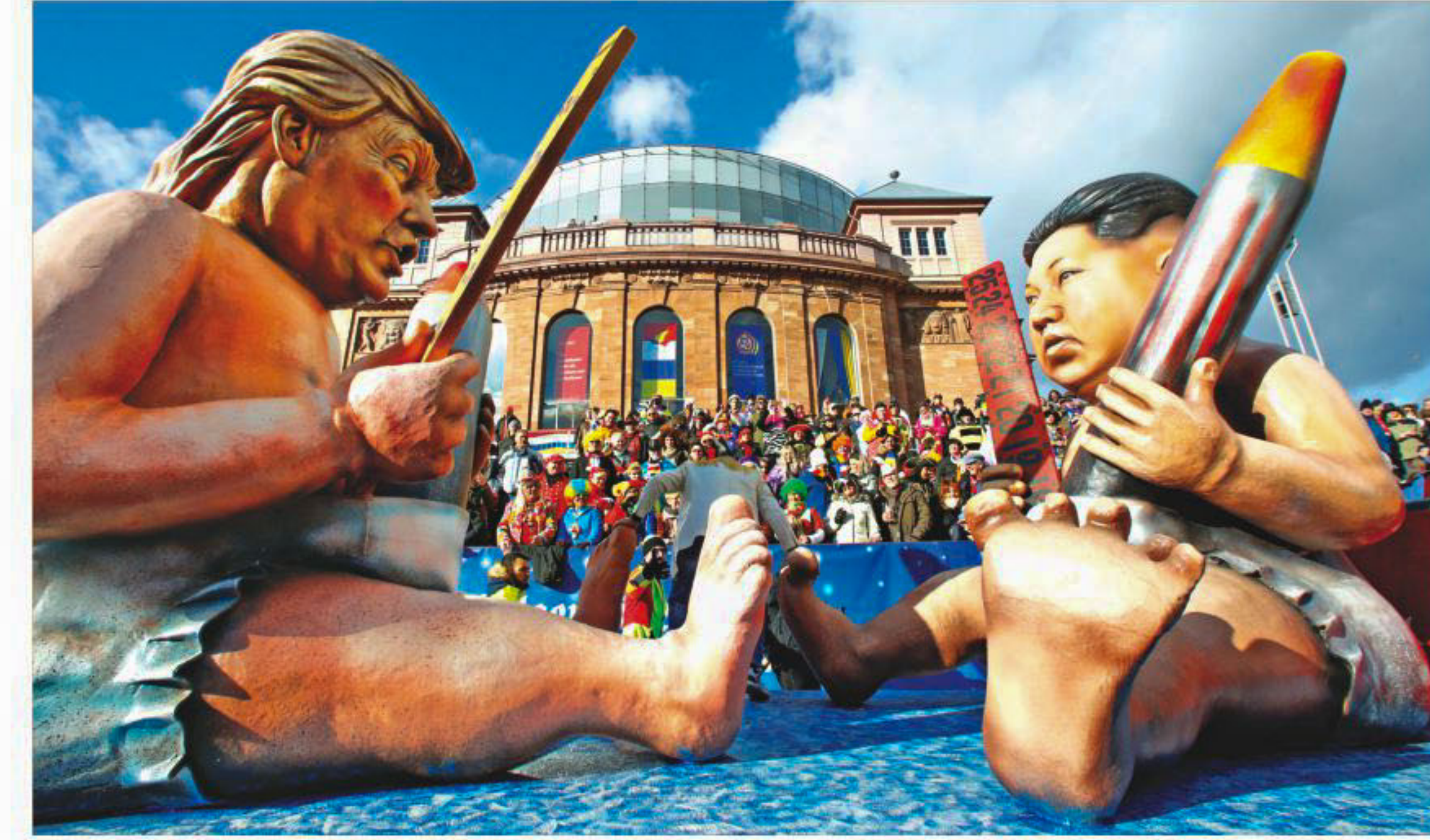
Japan's Abe vows to keep pressure  
on North with Seoul

Trump tells Russia more needed for  
N Korea denuclearisation

But US officials also want tough international sanctions to be ramped up to push North Korea to give up its nuclear programme.

That sentiment was repeated by Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday, who said Moon had agreed it was necessary to keep up maximum pressure on North Korea.

Last year, North Korea conducted dozens of missile launches and its sixth and largest nuclear test in



A carnival float, depicting caricatures of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (L) and US President Donald Trump is pictured during a carnival parade on Rose Monday in Mainz, western Germany.

PHOTO: REUTERS

defiance of UN resolutions as it pursues its goal of developing a nuclear-armed missile capable of reaching the United States.

The United States' "fundamental policy" aimed at denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula has not changed, said a senior Japanese diplomat in a briefing to lawmakers.

"The goal is denuclearisation and the process is dialogue for dialogue, action for action, so if North Korea does not show actions, the United States and Japan will not change their policies," he said.

A senior military official stationed at the border between North and South Korea told Reuters North Korea has lowered the volume of its border propaganda broadcasts since the Olympics' opening ceremony on Feb 9.

Moon, who was offered a meet-

ing with Kim Jong Un in Pyongyang via his sister, has been pushing for a diplomatic solution to the standoff over North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes.

Seoul is planning to push ahead with its plans for reunions of family members separated by the 1950-53 Korean War in order to sustain the dialogue prompted by the North Korean delegation's visit.

Meanwhile, Trump urged Russia to do more in urging North Korea to scrap its nuclear programme, the White House said on Monday, aimed at intensifying the pressure campaign on Pyongyang.

Talk of an inter-Korean summit, which would be the first since 2007 if it happened, come after months of tension between Pyongyang, Seoul and Washington.

As with North Korean media over the weekend, the KCNA report again made no mention of the summit offer made to Moon. Rather, Kim Jong Un gave his gratitude to Seoul for their "sincere efforts" to prioritise the delegation's visit, which were "very impressive", KCNA said.

Moon and his administration hosted several meetings and meals for the delegation during their stay at the presidential Blue House and luxury five-star hotels while Moon personally accompanied Kim Yo Jong for events at the Olympics as well as an orchestra concert.

In addition to the high-level delegation, hundreds of North Koreans including an orchestra and cheer squad have visited South Korea for the Winter Olympics.

## ALLEGED THREATS FROM RUSSIA, CHINA Pentagon asks for record \$686b

AGENCIES

Citing increasing threats from China and Russia, the Pentagon is asking for a major boost in military spending for 2019, requesting Congress approve a budget of \$686 billion -- one of the largest in US history.

The \$686 billion spending plan -- up from \$612 billion in 2018 -- is framed in the context of the Pentagon's new national defense strategy, and comes in stark contrast to the State Department's budget, which calls for steep cuts in spending on aid and diplomacy.

Pentagon chief Jim Mattis has warned of a new "Great Power" competition with Russia and China and wants to increase the size of the military, introduce new ships and weapons, and improve readiness -- all while operating across multiple theaters in Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

"It is increasingly apparent that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian values and, in the process, replace the free and open order that has enabled global security and prosperity since World War II," Pentagon comptroller David Norquist told reporters.

"If unaddressed, the eroding US military advantage versus China and Russia could undermine our ability to deter aggression and coercion in key strategic regions."

Though the US spends more money on defense than the next eight militaries combined, Norquist said the 2019 budget request merely would put Pentagon spending back on track to where it would have been had the administration of Barack Obama not implemented strict spending caps.

The budget from President Donald Trump's administration calls for an additional 25,900 troops, as well as major investments in aircraft, ships, ground systems and missile defense.

The State Department, meanwhile, published its own budget proposal for 2019 calling for deep cuts, though Congress has already dismissed the idea as a non-starter.

In the case of the State Department and USAID, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson requested \$37.8 billion, up only slightly from the \$37.6 billion 2018 request.



Mattis warns of new competition with Russia and China

Budget calls for 25,900 more troops across US military services



## No mediator role for US in Mideast

Abbas tells Putin  
AGENCIES

Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas told Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday he could no longer accept the role of the United States as a mediator in talks with Israel because of Washington's behaviour, the Interfax news agency reported.

"We state that from now on we refuse to cooperate in any form with the U.S. in its status of a mediator, as we stand against its actions," Abbas told Putin at the start of talks in Moscow.

Abbas was quoted as saying he wanted an expanded new mediation mechanism to replace the Middle East Quartet.

Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin said at the start of talks with Palestinian leader that he had discussed the Middle East conflict with his US counterpart Donald Trump.

"I just spoke with American President Trump," Putin told Abbas before continuing the talks behind closed doors. "Obviously we spoke about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

The Palestinian leader was visiting Moscow in a bid to secure Putin's support after Trump outraged the Palestinians and their allies by recognising Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

The "situation is far from what we want to see," Putin said, adding that he has "always supported the Palestinian people".

Abbas has refused any contact with Trump's administration since Washington's decision at the end of last year.

Abbas's meeting with Putin came two weeks after Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also visited Moscow.

Palestinians see the US Jerusalem decision, which broke with years of international diplomacy, as a denial of their claim to East Jerusalem as the capital of an eventual Palestinian state.

Palestinian statehood is recognised by more than 130 countries.

## POLITICAL CRISIS IN MALDIVES China to stop any military action

GLOBAL TIMES ONLINE

China will stop Indian military action in the Maldives, the state-run Global Times has said, as there is no "righteous cause" for any armed intervention without UN backing.

The Beijing-based tabloid fired a warning shot at New Delhi, which has been entreated several times by the former Maldives president Mohamed Nasheed to help resolve a crisis in the honeymoon destination.

President Abdulla Yameen declared a state of emergency following a shock Supreme Court ruling ordering the release of his opponents including Nasheed. Yameen said he declared the state of emergency so he could investigate a plot to overthrow his government.

On February 6, the day after the state of emergency was declared, Nasheed said he wanted India to send an envoy backed by the military.

Beijing has asked the international community to respect the tropical nation's sovereignty, but the Global Times was much more strident in its Monday editorial.

"China will not interfere in the internal affairs of the Maldives, but that does not mean that Beijing will sit idly by as New Delhi breaks the principle."

"If India one-sidedly sends troops to the Maldives, China will take action to stop New Delhi. India should not underestimate China's opposition to unilateral military intervention."

India has said it is disturbed by the state of emergency, but has made no formal comment about Nasheed's requests, while Indian media appears divided over the prospect of gunboat diplomacy.

On Sunday RaajeeTV said that 70 percent of people who took part in a poll on the subject opposed Nasheed's request to India.



Drum queen Flavia Lyra from Imperatriz samba school performs during the second night of the Carnival parade at the Sambadrome in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Damascus warns Israel of 'more surprises' in Syria

AGENCIES

Israel will face "more surprises" should it again attack Syrian territory, Damascus said yesterday, after Syria's air defences shot down an advanced Israeli warplane during the fiercest flare-up between the old foes in 36 years.

The F-16 jet was hit over northern Israel on Saturday as it returned from a raid on a Syrian position blamed for launching an Iranian-made drone across the border. Iran is supporting President Bashar al-Assad in Syria's near seven-year civil war.

"God willing, they will see more surprises whenever they try to attack Syria," Assistant Foreign Minister Ayman Sussan said.

The downed F-16 was the first warplane Israel has lost to enemy fire since its 1982 Lebanon war. Its two-man crew survived, with injuries, after bailing out of the stricken jet.

Israel retaliated by destroying around half of Syria's anti-aircraft batteries, according to an initial assessment shared with Reuters by an Israeli official who requested anonymity.

Israel has said it will press ahead with missions in Syria, where it has launched scores of sorties against suspected arms transfers to Iranian-sponsored Lebanese Hezbollah guerrillas.

Tehran's involvement in Syria, including the deployment of Iran-backed forces near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, has

alarmed Israel. It has also has accused Iran of building precision-guided missile factories for Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Russian President Vladimir Putin responded to the flare-up by urging Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to avoid escalation in Syria.

Meanwhile, Turkey on Monday warned the United States it was time to either make or break ties between the Nato allies that have strained badly over the Turkish operation in Syria, days ahead of key talks with Washington's top diplomat.

"Our relations are at a very critical point. They will either be fixed or these ties will be completely damaged," Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said in televised comments in Istanbul.

On his part, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson yesterday said that Turkey's operation against Kurdish forces in northwestern Syria has "detracted" from the larger coalition war against the Islamic State group.

Ankara last month launched a military operation against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia in the western enclave of Afrin in northern Syria.

While Turkey views the YPG as a "terrorist" offshoot of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the US has been working closely with the militia against the Islamic State extremist group in Syria and giving it weapons.

## End of combat does not spell end of IS Says Tillerson

AFP, Kuwait City

Washington's top envoy yesterday called on allies to keep fighting the Islamic State group, saying that the end of major combat did not mean "enduring defeat" of the extremists.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson spoke at a ministerial meeting in Kuwait of the US-led military coalition that has been fighting IS in Iraq and Syria, being held in parallel with a conference on reconstruction in Iraq.

The jihadist group has lost much of the territory it once controlled when it seized large swathes of Syria and Iraq in 2014.

"The end of major combat operations does not mean we have achieved the enduring defeat of ISIS," Tillerson said, using another acronym for IS. "ISIS remains a serious threat to the stability of the region, our homelands," he said.

He said IS had the capacity to re-emerge in liberated territories of Iraq and Syria or elsewhere in the world.

## West used lizards for nuke spying!

AFP, Tehran

The former chief-of-staff of Iran's armed forces yesterday said that Western spies had used lizards which could "attract atomic waves" to spy on the country's nuclear programme.

Hassan Firuzabadi, senior military advisor to supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was responding to questions from local media on the recent arrest of environmentalists.

He said he did not know the details of the cases, but that the West had often used tourists, scientists and environmentalists to spy on Iran.

"Several years ago, some individuals came to Iran to collect aid for Palestine... We were suspicious of the route they chose," he told the reformist ILNA news agency.

"In their possessions were a variety of reptile desert species like lizards, chameleons... We found out that their skin attracts atomic waves and that they were nuclear spies who wanted to find out where inside the Islamic republic of Iran we have uranium mines and where we are engaged in atomic activities," he said.

Firuzabadi said Western spy agencies have "failed every time".



## 'DREAMERS' US Congress debates fate of 1.8m

AFP, Washington

The citizenship hopes of 1.8 million immigrants brought to the United States as children hung in the balance Monday as Congress launched debate on the hot-button issue, with President Donald Trump eager to "make a deal" on new legislation.

In offering a path to citizenship for so-called Dreamers, Trump has exceeded the demands of opposition Democrats -- but only in exchange for tough cutbacks on overall immigration and funding for a massive wall on the Mexican border.

The Secure and Succeed Act offers a 10- to 12-year path to citizenship for Dreamers. But it also ends the popular diversity lottery system and sharply limits family-based immigration. It also allocates \$25 billion for tighter border security, including construction of the Mexico wall. Several Democrats have said Trump's plan is dead on arrival because it would so dramatically curb legal immigration.