

NEWSIN brief

Sacred monastery hit by fire in Lhasa

AFP, Beijing

Streets around Lhasa's fire-hit Jokhang temple, one of the most sacred sites for Tibetan Buddhism, were reopened to pilgrims yesterday after a blaze broke out the night before, Chinese state media said, but the extent of damage remained unclear. The fire had erupted in part of the more than 1,300-year-old Jokhang temple, but was soon put out.

18 killed in explosion at Indian wedding

AFP, Ajmer

Rescuers yesterday discovered nine more bodies beneath the ruins of a Indian hotel, bringing the known death toll from an explosion which tore through a wedding party to 18, an official said. A gas cylinder exploded late Friday at the hotel in the city of Beawar, in the western state of Rajasthan.

Mexico helicopter crash in quake zone kills 13

AFP, Santiago Jamiltepec

Thirteen people were killed in southern Mexico when a minister's helicopter crash-landed on its way to the epicenter of a powerful earthquake that rattled the region, officials said Saturday. The 7.2 magnitude quake caused material damage when it struck late Friday, but it triggered a tragedy in Santiago Jamiltepec where the chopper landed on its side.

Malaysia apologises for barking rooster

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia has apologised after a government ad in Chinese-language newspapers featuring a picture of a barking rooster to mark the Year of the Dog sparked a flood of mockery. The full-page advert by the domestic trade, cooperatives and consumerism ministry showed a rooster emitting the word "wang", used to represent a dog's bark in Mandarin.

Poland defends PM's Holocaust remark

AFP, Warsaw

Poland yesterday sought to defend remarks by its prime minister which Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu called "outrageous" and amounted to denying the Holocaust.

"The comments of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki during a discussion in Munich were by no means intended to deny the Holocaust, or charge the Jewish victims of the Holocaust with responsibility for what was a Nazi German perpetrated genocide," Morawiecki's spokeswoman Joanna Kopcinska said in a statement.

The Israeli premier, who like Morawiecki was in Munich for a global security conference, on Saturday responded angrily to the remark that the Holocaust had involved "Jewish perpetrators" as well as Polish ones.

It showed "an inability to understand history and a lack of sensitivity to the tragedy of our people", Netanyahu said in a statement.

Morawiecki's spokeswoman countered yesterday that to the contrary the Polish prime minister "has repeatedly and categorically opposed denial of the Holocaust-the murder of European Jewry-as well as anti-Semitism in all its forms". Morawiecki's claim about the Holocaust's perpetrators came amid an unprecedented diplomatic row with Israel sparked by a controversial law passed by Poland's senate this month.

The law sets fines or a maximum three-year jail term for



anyone ascribing "responsibility or co-responsibility to the Polish nation or state for crimes committed by the German Third Reich".

On Saturday Morawiecki had been questioned by a journalist who told of his mother's narrow escape from the Gestapo in Poland after learning that neighbours were planning to denounce them, and asked if recounting that would now be against the law in Poland.

Morawiecki responded: "It's not going to be punishable, not going to be seen as criminal, to say that there were Polish perpetrators, as there were Jewish perpetrators, as there were Russian perpetrators, as there were Ukraine and German perpetrators."

After a slew of negative reactions to the comments, the Polish PM's spokeswoman sought to clarify the remark saying his words "should be interpreted as a sincere call for open discussion of crimes committed against Jews during the Holocaust, regardless of the nationality of those involved in each crime."



A protester holds a defaced placard at a rally calling for more gun control three days after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, US on Saturday. Young survivors of Wednesday's school shooting yesterday announced a national march on Washington to demand political action on gun control.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Do not test Israel's resolve

Netanyahu warns Iran, brandishing drone 'piece'; US calls for action to halt Tehran's proxies in Syria conflict

AGENCIES

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday warned Tehran over aggressions by what he called Iran and its "proxies" in Syria, while showing what he claimed was a piece of an Iranian drone shot down in Israeli airspace.

Saying he had "a message to the tyrants of Tehran" during a speech at the Munich Security Conference, he warned: "Do not test Israel's resolve."

He brandished a rectangular piece of dark green metal which he called "a piece of that Iranian drone, or what's left of it, after we shot it down."

Israel has said it shot down the drone on February 10 after it entered the country from Syria, and responded with a raid on what it said was the Iranian control systems for the craft in Syria.

It marked the first time Israel publicly acknowledged hitting Iranian targets in Syria since the 2011 start of the civil war there.

During the strikes, one of Israel's F-16 fighter jets was shot down, believed to be the first loss of an Israeli plane in combat since 1982, reported AFP.

Calling Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif the "smooth-talking mouthpiece of Iran's regime," Netanyahu said: "Mr Zarif, do you recognise this? You should, it's yours."



Again referring to Zarif, who is scheduled to speak later in Munich, the Israeli leader said: "No doubt Mr Zarif will brazenly deny Iran's involvement in Syria."

"He lies with eloquence."

The Israeli military has claimed the drone was a copy of a US model captured by Iran in 2011, based on an analysis of the drone's debris.

Tensions between the two countries have been building in recent months, with Israel fearing that Tehran is trying to establish a permanent presence in Syria.

Netanyahu said yesterday that Israel would not let Iran obtain a permanent foothold in its northern neighbour. "Through its proxies -- Shia militias in Iraq, the Huthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza -- Iran is devouring huge swathes of the Middle East," he said.

Meanwhile, US National Security Adviser H R McMaster called on Saturday for more forceful action to halt Iran's development of what he said was an increasingly powerful network of proxy armies in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Iraq.

McMaster accused Iran of escalating a campaign to increase its influence in the Middle East by building and arming "Hezbollah-style" proxy armies in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere as it has done in Lebanon, reported Reuters.

HUTHI INSURGENCY IN YEMEN

Saudi welcomes push for UN action against Iran

REUTERS, Munich

Saudi Arabia yesterday welcomed a draft United Nations resolution offered by Britain, the United States and France that would condemn Iran for failing to stop its ballistic missiles from falling into the hands of Yemen's Huthi group.

Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir told Reuters the measure, if passed, would help hold Iran accountable for what he described as its "exports of ballistic missiles" to the Iran-backed Huthi rebels, and "radical and aggressive" behaviour in the region, including support for terrorist groups.

A proxy war is playing out in Yemen between Iran and US ally Saudi Arabia. A Saudi-led coalition intervened in Yemen in 2015, backing government forces fighting Iran-allied Huthi rebels. Iran has denied supplying the Huthis with weapons.

"In order to ensure that Iran comport itself with international law, we must have firmer positions with regards to ballistic missiles and with regards to Iran's support for terrorism," al-

NORTH KOREA TALKS

'I'm listening' for signs: Tillerson

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said in an interview yesterday that he is "listening" for signs that North Korea is ready to engage in direct talks.

"My job as chief diplomat is to ensure that the North Koreans know, we keep our channels open," Tillerson told the CBS news show "60 Minutes."

"I am listening. I am not sending a lot of messages back because there's nothing to say to them at this point. So I am listening for you to tell me you are ready to talk," he said, according to excerpts of the interview.

An Olympic-driven thaw in relations between Kim Jong Un's nuclear armed North Korean regime and South Korea has raised speculation that direct talks between Washington and Pyongyang could be on the horizon after months of sharp tension and heated rhetoric.

"They will tell me," Tillerson told "60 Minutes."

"We receive messages from them, and I think it will be very explicit as to how we want to have that first conversation."

The top US diplomat however stressed that no incentive was being offered to get Pyongyang to the table.

"We are not using a carrot to convince them to talk, we are using large sticks -- and that is what they need to understand," he said.

"This pressure campaign is having its bite on North Korea."

The North is subject to a series of UN Security Council sanctions over its banned nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

The United States has previously indicated Washington is open to direct talks, but Tillerson stressed earlier this month that the ball was now in Pyongyang's camp.



Jubeir said in an interview during the annual Munich Security Conference. "Iran must be held accountable."

He said Iranian missiles were regularly used by Huthis "to target civilians in Yemen as well as inside Saudi Arabia."

Al-Jubeir also called for changes to two aspects of the 2015 nuclear accord with Iran - cancellation of a so-called sunset provision, and expanded inspections to include non-declared and military sites.

The draft UN resolution, which needs to be adopted by February 26, is likely to face resistance from Russia. A resolution needs nine

votes in favor and no vetoes by Russia, China, the United States, France or Britain to pass.

Al-Jubeir said he hoped Russia could be persuaded to support the measure.

The draft text to renew UN sanctions on Yemen for another year would also allow the 15-member council to impose targeted sanctions for "any activity related to the use of ballistic missiles in Yemen."

HAJJ PILGRIMAGE

Pak to send transgenders as volunteers

PTI, Islamabad

For the first time in the history of Pakistan, transgenders will be part of a team of boy scouts being sent to Saudi Arabia to serve as volunteers during 2018 Hajj pilgrimage, a media report said yesterday.

"Efforts for sending transgender youth to Saudi Arabia to serve as Khuddamul Hujjaj (volunteers during the annual Hajj) are underway," IPC Sindh Boys Scouts Commissioner Atif Amin Husain was quoted as saying by the Express Tribune.

Blue Veins, a transgender welfare organisation, is co-ordinating with the IPC on the matter, the paper said.

"At least two to three transgender persons will be selected from each of the remaining three provinces for joining the scouting community that leaves for Saudi Arabia every year," Husain said.

He said recently 40 transgender youth from Sindh were administered oath on joining the Pakistan Boy Scouts Association (PBSA) a national scouting organisation and one of the largest volunteer forces in the country.

The transgender persons would be part of a team of more than 150 boy scouts, he said, adding that last year over a hundred boy scouts had been sent.

"The recruitment process for Khuddamul Hujjaj includes physical training and a test. After that, the PBSA sends a list of successful candidates to the Federal Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony for a final approval," Husain said, explaining the process.

This year the list would include names of transgender youth, he added.



Chief Minister of Tripura Manik Sarkar arrives to cast his vote at a polling station during Tripura legislative assembly elections in Agartala, the capital of northeastern state of Tripura yesterday. The counting of votes will take place on March 23.

PHOTO: AFP

Global sea ice hits new low

Report says 5.04m square miles of ice in the Arctic was 525,000 square miles below the 1981-to-2010 ice cover average

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The world's sea ice shrank to a record January low last month as the annual polar melting period expanded, experts say.

The 5.04 million square miles of ice in the Arctic was 525,000 square miles below the 1981-to-2010 ice cover average, making it the lowest January total in satellite records, according to the US National Snow and Ice Data Center (NSIDC).

Combined with low levels in the Antarctic, global sea ice amounted to a record low for any first month of the year, the organisation concluded.

The news comes just days after researchers from the University of Colorado Boulder said the rate at which sea levels are rising was increasing every year, driven mostly by accelerated melting in Greenland and Antarctica.

The NSIDC, a respected authority on the Earth's frozen regions, which researches and analyses snow, glaciers and ice sheets among other features, said that ice in the Arctic Ocean hit "a new record low" at both the start and end of last month.

In an online post, the group said: "January of 2018 began



and ended with satellite-era record lows in Arctic sea ice extent, resulting in a new record low for the month. Combined with low ice extent in the Antarctic, global sea ice extent is also at a record low."

It said the Arctic experienced a week of record low daily ice totals at the start of the month, with the January average beating 2017 for a new record low.

"Ice grew through the month at near-average rates, and in the middle of the month daily extents were higher than for 2017," the report went on. "However, by the end of January, extent was again tracking below 2017."

Scientists place more importance on monthly average figures, which smooth out temporary weather effects.

However, the organisation's chief,

Mark Serreze, said he was more worried than ever because ice shrinkage was now starting to happen all year round -- in winter as well as in September, the warmest month -- which is a recent phenomenon.

Ingrid Onarheim, of the University of Bergen and Bjerknes Centre for Climate Research, said: "We are losing sea ice in all seasons now."

Saudi women don't need male permission to start businesses

AFP, Riyadh

Women in Saudi Arabia can now open their own businesses without the consent of a husband or male relative, as the kingdom pushes to expand a fast-growing private sector.

The policy change, announced by the Saudi government on Thursday also marks a major step away from the strict guardianship system that has ruled the country for decades.

"Women can now launch their own businesses and benefit from (governmental) e-services without having to prove consent from a guardian," the ministry of commerce and investment said on its website.

Under Saudi Arabia's guardianship system, women are required to present proof of permission from a male "guardian" -- normally the husband, father or brother -- to do any government paperwork, travel or enrol in classes.

Long dependent on crude production for economic revenue, Saudi Arabia is pushing to expand the country's private sector, including an expansion of female employment under a reform plan for a post-oil era.

While women still face a host of restrictions in the ultraconservative Muslim kingdom, Saudi Arabia's public prosecutor's office this month said it would begin recruiting women investigators for the first time.

The kingdom has also opened 140 positions for women at airports and border crossings, a historic first that the government said drew 107,000 female applicants.