

**BOKO HARAM ATTACK**  
**More than 90 schoolgirls 'missing'**  
REUTERS, Bauchi

More than 90 Nigerian schoolgirls are feared missing after Islamist insurgent group Boko Haram attacked a village in the northeastern state of Yobe, two sources told Reuters yesterday.

Their disappearance, if confirmed, would be one of the largest since Boko Haram abducted more than 270 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok in 2014. That case drew global attention to the nine-year insurgency, which has sparked what the United Nations has called one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

A roll-call at the girls' school on Tuesday showed that 91 students were absent, said the two people with direct knowledge of the matter.

"I saw girls crying and wailing in three Tata vehicles and they were crying for help," said a witness from the nearby village of Gumsa who was reportedly forced to show the insurgents the way out of the area and then released.

Reuters was unable to verify the witness's account that Boko Haram had abducted girls in the attack on Dapchi on Monday evening. Nigerian police and the regional education ministry denied any abductions had taken place.

The two sources, several parents and other local witnesses who spoke to Reuters did so on condition of anonymity because they had been warned by Nigerian security and government officials not to disclose the disappearance.

The Boko Haram militants arrived in Dapchi on Monday evening in trucks, some mounted with heavy guns and painted in military camouflage, witnesses told Reuters. The insurgents went directly to the school, shooting sporadically, sending students and teachers fleeing, the witnesses said, adding that some people had returned to Dapchi after spending the night hiding in the bush.



Syrians rescue a child following a reported regime air strike in the rebel-held town of Hamouria, in the besieged Eastern Ghouta region on the outskirts of the capital Damascus, yesterday. Inset: A convoy of pro-Syrian government fighters arrives in Syria's northern region of Afrin. PHOTO: AFP

**US-Russia ties will be hard to repair**  
*Says Russian deputy foreign minister*  
AFP, Moscow

Moscow said yesterday it would be "very difficult" to improve US-Russia relations, which have plummeted to Cold War lows on accusations of election meddling and crises in Syria and Ukraine.

Deputy foreign minister Sergei Ryabkov accused the US of trying to meddle in Russia's internal affairs ahead of a presidential election next month, after Washington indicted 13 Russians for an alleged covert effort to interfere in 2016 US polls.

"Paradoxically, the Americans are taking steps towards meddling in our internal affairs and exacerbating tensions in bilateral relations ahead of the presidential election" in Russia on March 18, Ryabkov told the news agency Interfax.

"Despite this, they continue -- without any foundation or proof -- to reproach us for apparently interfering in their electoral process," he said.

"Of course we in Moscow regret all of this," he said of potential sanctions against the 13 Russians who were indicted last week as part of a US federal government probe.

"It will be very difficult to move relations with the US on from their current state," he said.

Several US congressional committees and special prosecutor Robert Mueller are investigating allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 election and collusion with the campaign of President Donald Trump. Moscow denies the charges. The Cold War rivals have clashed over crises in Ukraine, Syria and Iran, with reciprocal expulsions of diplomats last year.

Following Russia's 2014 annexation of the Crimean peninsula and the war between Kiev and Kremlin-backed rebels, the US has imposed ever stricter sanctions on Moscow.

**Tensions soar in Afrin**

*Pro-Assad militia arrive in northern Syria to help Kurdish fighters repel Turkish offensive despite Ankara's warnings*

REUTERS, Beirut

Turkey warned yesterday that pro-Damascus forces would face "serious consequences" for entering Syria's Afrin region to help Kurdish fighters repel a Turkish offensive.

Their arrival raises the spectre of wider escalation on Syria's northern battlefield, where the Syrian army, allied Iran-linked militias, Kurdish forces, rebels, Turkish troops, and Russian and American forces are all contending.

The Syrian Kurdish YPG militia said Turkish planes bombed a town in Afrin yesterday. Turkey began its assault last month to drive out the YPG, which it deems a security threat along its border akin to the Kurdish PKK insurgency on its own soil.

Paramilitary forces aligned with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad arrived in Afrin on Tuesday. Turkey and the Syrian insurgents it supports tried

**SYRIA CRISIS**

- New confrontation risks more violence in Syria
- Turkey calls regime forces in Afrin legitimate targets
- Russia sought to foil army move: pro-Assad commander

to force them back with artillery fire.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan's spokesman said yesterday the forces in a convoy of some 40-50 vehicles had retreated. "Any step by the (Syrian) regime or other elements in this direction will surely have serious consequences," Ibrahim Kalin told a news conference.

A new confrontation, pitting the Turkish army directly against pro-Assad forces, would further scramble

the web of alliances and rivalries already at play in northern Syria.

The forces that arrived - which included combatants allied to Assad but not Syrian army troops - will deploy near the Turkish border, the YPG said.

Before they entered, Erdogan said he had won Russian President Vladimir Putin's backing to block a Syrian government deployment to Afrin.

Turkey and Russia have backed opposing sides during the seven-year war, with Moscow the closest ally of Assad and Ankara one of the main backers of rebels fighting to overthrow him.

But Ankara shifted its Syria policy, seeking to mend broken ties with Russia and turning its efforts towards fighting what it sees as a growing menace from Kurdish forces in Syria.

Russia intervened in Syrian crisis militarily in 2015 and helped Assad's government seize back most major

**GRAFT PROBE AGAINST NETANYAHU**

**Confidant of PM turns state witness**

AFP, Jerusalem

One of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's closest confidants has agreed to testify against him in a graft probe in a fresh blow to his long tenure in power, Israeli media reported yesterday.

Two new corruption investigations announced this week, hot on the heels of a police recommendation that Netanyahu face charges in two other cases, have fuelled growing speculation he could be forced to step down or call an early election.

Shlomo Filber, a Netanyahu ally for more than 20 years and a former communications ministry director general, is expected to agree to turn state witness in exchange for avoiding jail, Israeli media reported.

Police did not confirm any deal. Filber was arrested on Sunday in relation to allegations Shaul Elovitch, the controlling shareholder of Israeli telecommunications giant Bezeq, gave Netanyahu positive coverage on his Walla! news site in exchange for policies benefiting the business.

Filber is suspected of mediating between Netanyahu and Elovitch and promoting regulatory changes worth millions to Bezeq.

The prime minister himself has not been named as a suspect in the investigation.



**POLL ON GUN CONTROL**

**Two-thirds of US voters back tougher laws**

AFP, Washington

Americans support stricter gun laws by a more-than two-to-one margin, one of the highest levels on record, a polling agency reported Tuesday one week after the latest US school shooting left 17 people dead.

The tragedy at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida has shocked many Americans, inspired students to launch campaigns to reduce gun violence, and put Congress and President Donald Trump's administration in the spotlight as they consider what changes, if any, should be made to the country's gun laws.

Voters support tightening gun laws by 66 to 31 percent, according to Quinnipiac University's national poll, which described the margin as "the highest level of support" since it began surveys on the question in 2008.

The poll also found that a majority of gun owners, 50 percent to 44 percent, backed stricter gun laws, and that their support specifically for universal background checks rose to an overwhelming 97 percent, against just three percent who opposed such checks or expressed no opinion.

Trump on Tuesday threw his support behind moves to ban "bump stocks" -- an accessory that can turn a semi-automatic weapon into an automatic one.

Trump also said school safety was a "top priority" for his administration when he held talks with governors from all 50 US states.



**Presidency is costing the family firm**  
*Says Trump Jr in India*  
AFP, New Delhi

Donald Trump's presidency has cost the family firm "millions of dollars" in lost business, his son told an Indian newspaper during a visit aimed at drumming up sales of new luxury apartment complexes.

Donald Trump junior told the Times of India that the Trump Organization was turning down new business opportunities around the world because of his father's position.

"We are refraining from doing new deals while my father is in office," he said in an interview published yesterday.

"We are turning down deals worth hundreds of millions of dollars around the world."

Trump junior is in India to promote a series of luxury apartment developments being marketed under his father's name.

On Friday he will have dinner with dozens of people who have bought into a development in Gurgaon, a satellite of the capital where many major companies have their offices.

The 47-storey towers will comprise 250 homes and are expected to be completed by 2023, with price ranging from 55-110 million rupees (\$850,000-\$1.7 million).

Trump junior is on an unofficial visit to India, but will address a business conference on Friday on the subject of Indo-Pacific relations. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the keynote speaker at the event.

**STATE-LEVEL TERROR FINANCING**

**Pakistan narrowly averts watchlist**

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has narrowly avoided being targeted by a global watchdog over terrorism financing, the foreign minister said, after reports that the US had supported a motion to place its ally on the group's watchlist.

The country was granted a three-month reprieve by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), according to a tweet late Tuesday by Khawaja Asif, after a meeting in Paris failed to reach agreement on the matter.

"No consensus for nominating Pakistan," Asif wrote, adding that the forum instead proposed a three-month pause along with the submission of a new report to the body.

FATF declined comment, with a spokeswoman saying any formal decision would be made by Friday.

Earlier this month Pakistan quietly amended its anti-terrorism laws to ban groups listed as terrorists by the UN.

Following the move, officials began seizing assets from the Jamaat-ud-Dawa group, whose leader Hafiz Saeed is a prime suspect in the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

Reports claimed earlier this month that the US had tabled a motion to add Pakistan to the FATF watchlist, as ties fray over accusations that Islamabad gives safe haven to militants who launch attacks in neighbouring Afghanistan.



Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, his wife Sophie Gregoire, daughter Ella Grace and son Xavier pose for photographers during their visit to the holy Sikh shrine of Golden temple in Amritsar, India, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

**Abbas, at UN, calls for ME peace conference**

*Israel, US accuse him of 'running away from peace'*

AFP, United Nations

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas yesterday called for an international conference to be held later this year to launch a new, wider Middle East peace process and pave the way to Palestinian statehood.

In a rare address to the UN Security Council, Abbas presented a plan to revive Israeli-Palestinian talks under a new international peace process that would replace the US-led mediation.

President Donald Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital infuriated the Palestinians, who declared that Washington could no longer play a role as peace broker.

"To solve the Palestine question, it is essential to establish a multilateral international mechanism emanating from an international conference," Abbas said.

Abbas said the conference would be

attended by Israel and the Palestinians, regional players, the five permanent Security Council members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- and the diplomatic Quartet comprised of the European Union, Russia, US and the United Nations.

The gathering should lead to full UN membership for the state of Palestine, mutual recognition of Israel and Palestine, and the creation of a new international mechanism to reach a final settlement, he said.

The Palestinian leader immediately left the council chamber following his address, leading Israeli Ambassador Danny Danon to complain that Abbas was "running away" from dialogue.

Addressing the council, US Ambassador Nikki Haley warned that turning to the United Nations and rejecting the US role in peace talks "will get the Palestinian people exactly nowhere toward the achievement of their aspirations."



**EMERGENCY EXTENSION**  
**India 'deeply dismayed' over Maldives move**  
AGENCIES

India yesterday said it was "deeply dismayed" by the extension of Emergency in neighbouring Maldives by 30 days.

It also expressed concern over the "manner" in which the extension was approved by the island nation's Majlis (Parliament) "in contravention of the Constitution of Maldives." "It is important to ensure that all democratic institutions are allowed to function in a fair and transparent manner in accordance with the Constitution," the ministry of external affairs (MEA) added in a statement.

Maldives on Tuesday extended the state of Emergency by 30 days, in the presence of only 38 MPs, despite the requirement that 43 MPs be present during voting.

**North Korea cancelled planned talks with VP**

*Says US; Japan reports another sanctions breach*

AGENCIES

US Vice President Mike Pence was scheduled to meet with North Korean officials, including leader Kim Jong Un's sister, while in South Korea for the Winter Olympics this month but the North Koreans canceled at the last minute, US officials said on Tuesday.

"North Korea dangled a meeting in hopes of the Vice President softening his message, which would have ceded the world stage for their propaganda during the Olympics," Pence's chief of staff, Nick Ayers, said in a statement.

But after Pence condemned North Korean human rights abuses and announced plans for new economic sanctions, "they walked away from a meeting or perhaps they were never sincere about sitting down," Ayers said.

Pence was going to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's younger sister, Kim Yo Jong, and the nominal head of state, Kim Yong Nam, but the North Koreans

called off the February 10 meeting two hours before it was set to start, a US official said, confirming a story first reported by the Washington Post.

"The President made a decision that if they wanted to talk, we would deliver our uncompromising message. If they asked for a meeting, we would meet. He also made clear that until they agreed to complete denuclearization we weren't going to change any of our positions or negotiate," Ayers said, echoing comments made by Pence since he left the Olympics and other US officials.

Meanwhile, Japan has reported a new suspected sanctions violation by Pyongyang to the UN after spotting an apparent cargo transfer between a ship marked with Chinese characters and a North Korean vessel, reported AFP.

The Japanese navy "found the Yu Jong 2, a North Korean-flagged tanker, lying alongside a small vessel of unknown nationality... on the high sea" around 250 kilometres offshore from the Chinese city of Shanghai, the foreign ministry said.