

Qaeda affiliate claims
Burkina Faso attacks

REUTERS, Ouagadougou

A Mali-based al-Qaeda affiliate, Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), claimed responsibility on Saturday for attacks in neighbouring Burkina Faso that left 16 people dead, including eight gunmen, at the army headquarters and French embassy, Mauritanian news agency Alakhbar reported. Eighty others were wounded in the coordinated attacks in the capital Ouagadougou.

Man kills himself in
front of White House

AFP, Washington

A man fatally shot himself on the crowded pedestrian avenue directly in front of the White House on Saturday, officials said. The Secret Service said a white male approached the fence north of the White House at about 11:46 am, "removed a concealed handgun and fired several rounds, none of which appear at this time to have been directed towards the White House." The identity of the man has not been revealed.

Egypt top court clears
Saudi island transfer

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's constitutional court on Saturday voided contradictory lower court rulings on the controversial transfer of two islands to Saudi Arabia, state media reported. The ruling on the transfer of the Tiran and Sanafir islands in the Red Sea, which sparked protests in Egypt, effectively ends legal challenges to the deal, already ratified by the government. The ruling comes a day before Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman arrives in Egypt for a two day visit, the first leg of a foreign tour.



PHOTO: AP

A bandaged Syrian child sits on a bed next to another child after receiving medical attention at a makeshift hospital in the rebel-held town of Douma, in the besieged Eastern Ghouta region on the outskirts of the capital Damascus, following reported regime bombardment on Saturday.

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN EASTERN GHOUTA

Syrians flee govt advances

UN says collective punishment of civilians unacceptable

REUTERS, Beirut/geneva

Thousands of civilians have fled advances by Syrian government forces in eastern Ghouta over the last two days, a war monitor and a resident said yesterday, as Damascus wages an offensive to crush the last major rebel enclave near the capital.

A commander in the military alliance that backs President Bashar al-Assad said government forces needed to advance just a few more kilometres (miles) into the enclave to split it in two.

A UN humanitarian official said 400,000 people in eastern Ghouta were being subjected to unacceptable "collective punishment", and called for the implementation of a 30-day ceasefire demanded by the UN Security Council.

With the war entering its eighth year, capturing the eastern Ghouta area would be a major victory for Assad, who has steadily recovered control of

rebellious areas with military support from Russia and Iran.

The multi-sided Syrian war, which has killed hundreds of thousands of people since 2011, has escalated on several fronts this year, as the collapse of Islamic State has given way to other conflicts between Syrian and international parties.

Turkey, backed by allied Syrian militias, has gained ground in recent days against the Kurdish YPG militia in an offensive it is waging in northwestern Syria. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the advances threaten to encircle Afrin city, where 1 million people are estimated to live.

The eastern Ghouta offensive is one of the deadliest of the war. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says shelling and air strikes have killed 659 people there since Feb. 18, while rebel shelling of Damascus has killed 27.

Orient TV, which supports the opposition, said advances by pro-

Assad forces had triggered large-scale displacement.

One resident estimated that thousands of people were on the move and seeking shelter in areas further from the frontlines.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based organisation which reports on the war, estimated that between 300 to 400 families - roughly several thousand people - had fled areas seized by government forces since Saturday.

The pro-Assad commander said civilians were fleeing into to the town of Douma.

Gunfire was audible during a broadcast by a Syrian state television journalist from a position he said had been captured by the advancing forces.

The Syrian army said it had been attacking rebel positions for the last two days in response to shelling of Damascus and had recovered control of farmland and towns.

US may have a
president for life!

AP, Washington

President Donald Trump says he thinks it's great that China's President now holds that office for life and muses that maybe the US will do the same someday.

Trump's remarks came during a luncheon for Republican donors on Saturday at his South Florida estate. CNN reported the remarks based on a recording it obtained.

"He's now president for life, president for life. And he's great," Trump said, according to audio excerpts of Trump's remarks at a closed-door fundraiser in Florida aired by CNN.

"And look, he was able to do that. I think it's great. Maybe we'll have to give that a shot someday," Trump said to cheers and applause from supporters.

US Presidents by tradition served a maximum of two four-year terms until President Franklin Roosevelt was elected a record four times starting in 1932. An amendment to the US Constitution approved in 1951 limits presidents to two terms in office.

Chinas annual parliament gathering kicks off on Monday as Xi presses ahead with efforts to ward off financial risks without undermining the economy. The Communist party announced on Feb 25 the end of the two-term limit for the president — and the parliament is expected to ratify the move.

Trump has often praised Xi, but in January Trump told Reuters the United States was considering a big "fine" as part of a probe into Chinas alleged theft of intellectual property. He has been critical of China's trade policies.

Merkel clears hurdle

Secures fourth term in Germany after Social Democrats vote in favour of another grand coalition

REUTERS, Berlin

Germany's Social Democrats (SPD) voted decisively for another coalition with Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives yesterday, clearing the way for a new government in Europe's largest economy after months of political uncertainty.

Two thirds of the membership voted "yes" to the deal -- a wider margin than many had expected -- meaning Merkel could be sworn in for a fourth term as early as the middle of the month in a repeat of the grand coalition that has governed since 2013.

The challenges are piling up for Merkel, who has been acting chancellor for more than five months since an inconclusive election, with the European Union looking for leadership on economic and security issues and France seeking a partner for President Emmanuel Macron's ambitious EU reform plans.

Macron hailed the development as "good news for Europe".

A statement from his office added: "France and Germany will work together on

new initiatives in the coming weeks to bring the European project forward."

Acting SPD leader Olaf Scholz announced the result to applause from activists lining the balconies around the atrium of the party's Berlin headquarters early yesterday.

"We now have clarity: the SPD will join the next German government," Scholz said. The party had initially planned to go into opposition after its worst election result since Germany became a federal republic in 1949.

Merkel, in power since 2005, took to her party's Twitter feed to congratulate the SPD. "I look forward to working with the SPD again for the good of our country," she said.

The SPD ballot pitted the leadership of the centre-left party against the radical youth wing, which wanted the SPD to rebuild in opposition after a disastrous election showing.

"I'm happy it worked out this way," Andrea Nahles, the SPD's likely next leader, told Reuters.

Scholz declined to comment on reports that he would be finance minister.



Nothing to rejoice, 2019
will be disaster for BJP

Says Mamata as Modi eyes West Bengal, Odisha

PTI, Kolkata

Downplaying the BJP's victory in Tripura, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee yesterday said the BJP will never win West Bengal and Odisha, and dubbed it as "a cockroach dreaming of becoming a peacock by putting on its feathers".

She said the result in Tripura was due to CPM's "surrender" and the "failure" of the Congress to agree to an alliance.

The result could have been different had Rahul Gandhi agreed to an alliance with the Trinamool Congress and local hill parties, she said and claimed the poll results will not help the BJP in the upcoming assembly elections in several states.

"There is nothing to rejoice in the win in a state having only about 26 lakh voters and two parliamentary seats with a difference of only five per cent votes," Banerjee said reacting to BJP's win in Tripura ending the 25 year-long Left regime there.

"The CPI-M has done well in the poll. It is a difference of about five per cent votes only. But the CPM in Tripura had never shown any seriousness to resist the saffron party in that state. I don't know why. We need to analyse this," Ms Banerjee said.

Despite the BJP's success in Tripura, "it will not be possible at all to get through in West Bengal and Odisha. BJP will concede defeat in Karnataka, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. In Gujarat it was a moral defeat for them," she said.

The 2019 Lok Sabha election would be a disaster for the saffron party and the party would fail to retain power, she claimed.

Banerjee wondered why the CPM "surrendered" before the BJP. "Was it in fear of being blackmailed and harassed by the central agencies?" she asked.

Banerjee also alleged that the BJP has used money power as well as the Central forces to win the elections.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Relatives of Palestinian farmer Mohamad Abu Jamea, mourn during his funeral in Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday. He was killed Saturday by Israeli army fire after he had entered a "banned zone" near Gaza's border with Israel.

South sends envoys to North

Trump suggests US willing to talk; Pyongyang condemns military drills

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korea will dispatch a delegation led by senior security officials for a two-day visit to North Korea starting today, the presidential Blue House announced yesterday, as US President Donald Trump hinted that he is ready to talk to Pyongyang.

For its part, North Korea said it was not begging to talk with Washington and denounced upcoming US-South Korean joint-military exercises, warning that it would take counter measures against the United States if they went ahead.

The drills will take place next month, a South Korean presidential security adviser said according to the Yonhap news agency. They had been delayed until after the Winter Olympics and Paralympic games in South Korea.

South Korea's presidential Blue House said in a statement that National Security Office (NSO) head Chung Eui-yong and National Intelligence Service (NIS) chief Suh Hoon, a veteran of past negotiations with the North, will be among the 10-member South Korean delegation visiting

Pyongyang.

The visit was part of an effort to lower tensions on the Korean peninsula as well as possibly arrange talks between North Korea and the United States, it said.

After the visit to North Korea the envoys will travel to the United States to brief officials, and Seoul said it would also coordinate closely with officials in Japan and China.

During a joke-filled monologue at a dinner with journalists in Washington on Saturday, Trump suggested that the United States will be meeting with North Korea but has told Pyongyang it must first "denuke."

"We will be meeting and we'll see if anything positive happens," he added.

It was unclear if Trump was joking or if formal US-North Korea talks were imminent.

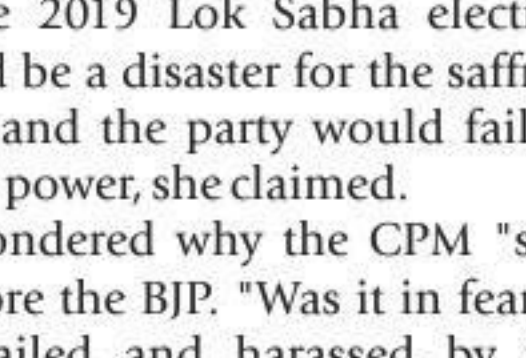
Speaking on Sunday in Beijing ahead of the opening of China's parliament, Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui said China hoped the United States and North Korea could begin dialogue too.

"War and chaos on the peninsula in not in the interests of any side," Zhang said.

KOREAN RECONCILIATION EFFORTS

S Korean delegation to arrive in Pyongyang today

Team includes national security adviser, intelligence chief



Italy goes to polls amid
fears of far-right victory

Hung parliament most likely outcome

REUTERS, Rome

Italians waited in long queues at polling booths yesterday to vote in an election that could bring political gridlock after a campaign marked by anger over the listless economy, high unemployment and immigration.

Pollsters have predicted that former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right party and his far-right allies will emerge as the largest bloc in parliament but fall short of a majority.

The anti-establishment 5-Star Movement looks set to be the biggest single party, feeding off discontent over entrenched corruption and growing poverty, while the ruling centre-left bloc led by the Democratic Party (PD) is seen in third place.

Berlusconi and 5-Star leader Luigi Di Maio both had to wait in queues to cast their votes as new election procedures slowed the process at several polling stations.

At Berlusconi's voting station in Milan, a Femen activist bared her chest in front of the

former premier and shouted, "time's up" before being hauled away.

"She passed so quickly I didn't get a chance to see her," quipped Berlusconi, who has a history of being caught up in sex scandals.

Berlusconi also said he was concerned about the queues.

"There will be queues as well this evening. I am worried that there might be some situations in which some people will not be able to vote," he said.

The turnout by noon was a little more than 19 percent. That was higher than five years ago, when Italians voted over two days, but slightly lower than a 2016 referendum in which the final turnout exceeded 68 percent.

Heavily indebted Italy is the third-largest economy in the 19-member euro zone and, though investors have been sanguine ahead of the ballot, prolonged political stalemate could reawaken the threat of market instability.

Polling stations closed at 2200 GMT, with exit polls due immediately afterwards.

Pakistan elects
first female
Dalit senator

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan elected its first female senator from the lowest Dalit caste in weekend polls which also saw the ruling party strengthen its hand ahead of a general election in the Muslim-majority country.

The surprise victory of opposition candidate Krishna Kumari Kohli in the Senate election stirred a wave of optimism on social media, as Pakistanis celebrated the rare success for a woman from a marginalised community at the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy.

"I feel proud, I am thankful to Pakistan People's Party that they nominated me," Kohli told AFP yesterday.

Pakistan's Hindus, who make up around two per cent of the country's 200 million people, have long faced economic and social



discrimination.

Members of parliament and of provincial assemblies cast ballots in secret Saturday to fill half the seats in the Senate, or upper house, before elections due this summer for the lower house of parliament.

The ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) won 15 of the 52 seats up for election to secure a total of 33 spots in the 104-seat upper house. Support from allies is likely to give it a dominating majority.

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) won 12 and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party of former cricket star Imran Khan came third with six.