

# Aid convoy enters Syria enclave

14 killed as regime continues offensive

AFP, Douma

A UN convoy entered Syria's Eastern Ghouta yesterday to deliver much-needed aid as regime forces seized more ground in a fierce offensive to retake the battered rebel enclave.

The United Nations said 46 trucks had entered Eastern Ghouta and were headed for the main town of Douma, in the first aid delivery since the start of the regime assault last month.

The aid arrived after fresh air strikes hit Eastern Ghouta and regime troops were reported to have retaken a third of the enclave in a rapidly advancing offensive.

Western powers have piled pressure on Damascus and its Russian ally to end the offensive on Eastern Ghouta but President Bashar al-Assad warned there would be no let-up.

More than two weeks of air strikes, artillery and rocket fire have left more than 700 civilians dead and three quarters of housing damaged in the enclave.

More bombs, including crude improvised munitions known as "barrel bombs", were dropped in overnight raids yesterday, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group.

At least 10 people were killed in the town of Hammuriyeh, said the Britain-based Observatory.

Another four died in the towns of Hazeh and Jisreen, the monitor said, bringing to 709 the number of civilians killed since the assault began.

The UN Human Rights Council yesterday ordered an immediate probe into the situation in Eastern Ghouta.

The council approved a resolution calling on war crimes investigators to "urgently conduct a comprehensive and independent inquiry into recent events in Eastern Ghouta."



A general view shows smoke and flames rising from buildings following reported Syrian government air strikes on rebel-held town of Saqba, in the besieged Eastern Ghouta region on the outskirts of the capital Damascus on Sunday night. Inset, a boy kisses his relative, who was wounded in government shelling, in the radiography room of a hospital in Douma.

PHOTO: AFP



## China meeting lauds lifetime power for Xi

AFP, Beijing

Thousands of Chinese legislators erupted into enthusiastic applause yesterday over plans to give President Xi Jinping a lifetime mandate to mould the Asian giant into a global superpower.

China's rubber-stamp parliament met in the imposing Great Hall of the People for an annual session that will make Xi the most powerful leader since Mao Zedong, concentrating the growing might of the military, economy and state in the hands of one man.

As Xi looked on from a stage dominated by mostly male party leaders in dark suits, a constitutional amendment to scrap the two-term limit for the presidency was read out to the chamber, prompting fervent applause.

The legislators are all but certain to approve the amendment this Sunday, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership sets the agenda for the National People's Congress (NPC).

The text says the change "will be conducive to safeguarding the authority and the unified leadership of the CCP Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as the core and to strengthening and perfecting the national leadership system".

The amendment was presented after Premier Li Keqiang delivered a report warning that the country is fighting "three critical battles" against financial risk, poverty and pollution.

The government set an economic growth target of around 6.5 percent for 2018, in line with expectations but lower than the 6.9 percent GDP increase in 2017.

It announced an 8.1 percent increase for the defence budget to 1.11 trillion yuan (\$175 billion) this year, giving the world's largest armed forces a boost after spending growth slowed in

## PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

# Populists battle over right to govern Italy

AFP, Rome

Rival populist leaders yesterday fought for the right to govern Italy after their surge in a general election left the country in political limbo.

The anti-immigrant League party and the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S) each claimed Sunday's vote gave them a mandate to lead the nation of 60 million.

League leader Matteo Salvini said that he had "the right and the duty" to form a government after its surprise success at the heart of a right-wing coalition.

But M5S, which won the biggest share of the vote of any single party, claimed it was the winner. Its leader Luigi Di Maio said it had a "responsibility" to form a government.

With most ballots counted, the League was leading the dominant right-wing coalition, which won roughly 37 percent of the vote overall.

The League by itself was closing in on 18 percent, ahead of former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (Go Italy) party, which collapsed to 14 percent.

Salvini's party surged in the polls after promising to shut down Roma camps, deport hundreds of thousands of migrants and tackle the what it called "danger" of Islam.

"Italians have chosen to take back control of the country from the insecurity and precariousness put in place by (centre-left Democratic Party leader Matteo) Renzi," Salvini told a press conference.

However much depends on M5S, which has drawn support from Italians fed up with traditional parties and a lack of economic opportunity. It won 32 percent of the vote.

The M5S had previously refused to align itself with other parties, which it considered part of a "corrupt" system. But Di Maio said his party now "feels the responsibility to form a government".



Matteo Salvini

## Not cleared for take-off

Passenger tied up after stripping naked during flight

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

A Bangladeshi passenger who reportedly stripped naked and attacked a stewardess during a flight from Malaysia has been arrested, the airline said yesterday.

Shortly after the Malindo Air flight departed from Kuala Lumpur on Saturday, the 20-year-old took his clothes off and started watching pornography on his laptop.

The man, a student at a Malaysian university, initially put his clothes back on at the request of cabin crew, the New Straits Times newspaper reported.

But he then tried to hug female crew members, and when his advances were rejected he became aggressive and attacked a stewardess, the paper said. The cabin crew and passengers reportedly managed to subdue him and his hands were tied up with a piece of cloth for the rest of the flight.

There was no indication as to why he was acting strangely.

The airline, a Malaysian subsidiary of an Indonesian company, declined to confirm all the details but said in a statement that a "disruptive passenger" was tied up on the flight to Dhaka, and was arrested on arrival.

It explained: "The crew on board has followed the standard operating procedure in restraining the passenger from causing further disruption onboard the flight."



Relatives of a civilian, who according to local media died in a gunbattle between suspected militants and Indian security forces, mourn during his funeral procession at Pinjora area of Kashmir's Shopian district yesterday. Two terrorists and four civilians were killed as security forces said they responded to an attack on a mobile vehicle check post in Shopian on Sunday evening.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## ANTI-MUSLIM RIOTS

# Sri Lanka imposes curfew in Kandy

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka yesterday imposed a curfew in a central hill station town popular with tourists after days of communal unrest that saw a man killed and Muslim businesses set alight.

Police had been placed on alert in Kandy, home to famous tea plantations and Buddhist relics, to ensure that the "situation does not spiral into inter-communal conflagration," the government said.

"The government appeals to all parties and especially the general public to act with responsibility and remain calm," it said in a statement.

Police said there had been riots and arson attacks since the weekend in Kandy.

"The curfew was imposed to control the situation in the area," said police spokesman Ruwan Gunasekera.

Local officials said over two dozen suspects had been detained by police in connection with the spate of arson attacks, while senior officers had also launched an investigation into the conduct of police.

The violence has worsened since a man from the island's mainly Buddhist Sinhalese majority died at the weekend from injuries sustained during a riot last week.

Kandy is just the latest region to be plagued by religious and ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, a nation of 21 million people.

# Kim hosts Seoul envoys

AFP, Seoul

The most senior South Koreans to travel to North Korea for more than a decade met leader Kim Jong Un yesterday, a Seoul official said, the latest step in an Olympics-driven rapprochement on the divided peninsula.

The delegation, representing the South's President Moon Jae-in, is pushing for talks between the nuclear-armed regime and the United States, after Kim sent his sister Kim Yo Jong to the Winter Games in the South.

"Chairman Kim Jong Un is currently hosting a dinner for the special envoys," Moon's spokesman told a press briefing yesterday evening, Yonhap news agency reported.

Kim Yo Jong's trip was the first visit to the South by a member of the North's ruling dynasty since the end of the 1950-53 Korean War, and her appearance at the Games' opening ceremony -- where athletes from the two Koreas marched together -- made global headlines.

Moon has sought to use the Pyeongchang Games to open dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang in hopes of easing a nuclear standoff that has heightened fears over global security.

In Seoul, Kim Yo Jong invited him to a summit in Pyongyang on her brother's behalf. But Moon did not immediately accept, saying the right conditions were necessary first.

Before leaving for Pyongyang, the South's national security advisor Chung Eui-yong said: "We plan to hold in-depth discussions for ways to continue not only inter-Korean talks but dialogue between North Korea and the international community including the United States."

It is a challenging task -- in defiance of UN sanctions, the isolated and impoverished North last year staged its most powerful nuclear test and test-fired several missiles, some of them capable of reaching the US mainland.

US President Donald Trump dubbed Kim "Little Rocket Man" and boasted about the size of his own nuclear button, while the North Korean leader called Trump a "mentally deranged US dotard".

They traded threats of war and sent tensions soaring before a thaw in the run-up to the Winter Olympics.

"We will deliver President Moon's firm resolution to denuclearise the Korean peninsula and to create sincere and lasting peace," delegation leader Chung told reporters.

Chung is one of five senior officials who flew to Pyongyang yesterday.

It was the first ministerial-level South Korean visit to the North since December 2007, when Seoul's then-intelligence chief travelled to Pyongyang.

## KOREAN RECONCILIATION EFFORTS

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Delegation aims to bring Pyongyang, Washington to talks



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# New setback for Israel's Netanyahu

Ex-aide turns witness in graft probe

AFP, Jerusalem

An ex-aide to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has signed a state witness deal in a corruption probe linked to his former boss, Israeli media reported yesterday, dealing a new setback to the premier.

News of the agreement broke ahead of Netanyahu's meeting with US President Donald Trump at the White House later yesterday.

The widely reported agreement between Israeli authorities and Nir Hefetz, a former spokesman for the Netanyahu family, comes as corruption investigations into the prime minister intensify.

Israeli police provided no details on the reported agreement. Hefetz would be the third Netanyahu associate to sign a state witness deal in recent months.

An aide to Netanyahu immediately denounced the reports and proclaimed the long-serving prime minister's innocence.

"When there's something there, it doesn't take even one state witness," the aide said.

"And now, even a thousand state witnesses will not help."

On Sunday, an Israeli court released Hefetz and telecoms mogul Shaul Elovitch to house arrest after 14 days in custody.

Hefetz is alleged to have acted as a messenger between Netanyahu, Elovitch's telecoms group Bezeq and news website Walla!, media reports say.

# 'Completely unexpected'

Manik Sarkar tells NDTV after Tripura polls debacle

NDTV ONLINE

Manik Sarkar, the four-time Chief Minister of Tripura who was edged out of the seat in assembly election results declared on Saturday, told NDTV that the BJP victory had caught him off guard and was "completely unexpected".

"We will review this defeat... We were not prepared for such a result," Sarkar, 69, told NDTV in an exclusive interview, his first after the CPM's stunning defeat in the assembly elections at the hands of the BJP and its alliance partner Indigenous People's Front of Tripura, or IPFT.

The defeat ended the 25-year rule of the Left in the northeastern state seen as an important citadel of the Left in the country. Kerala is the only state now governed by Left parties.

The BJP-led alliance has won 43 of Tripura's 60 seats.

The BJP, which had launched a shrill campaign to seek "poriborton" (change), got 35 seats and a 43 percent

vote share. It had won no seat in 2013.

The CPM's vote share was just a fraction less than the BJP, 42.3 percent, but the Left ended up with only 16 seats, down by 35 seats.

Sarkar, reputed as India's poorest chief minister, was single-handedly leading his party's campaign that at

"We will review this defeat... We were not prepared for such a result."



times appeared to pale in front of the BJP's aggressive campaign led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and others.

As the results came in, PM Modi had described the Tripura election as "epoch-making". "The historic victory in Tripura is as much an ideological one. It is a win for democracy over brute force and intimidation," he tweeted.

Sarkar handed over his resignation to Governor Tathagata Roy on Sunday; the post is widely expected to go to BJP chief Bipul Kumar Deb, 48.

Later back home, Sarkar told NDTV that the party would sit down to analyse the results.

"This is a completely unexpected result. But you see, just results were published yesterday night. So now we are collecting all information from different corners of the state," he said, adding that it would not be correct to draw a conclusion before analysing the statistics. "So we shall have to wait," he said.

The CPM had on Sunday accused the BJP of "massive deployment of money and other resources to influence the elections".

Analysis of booth-level results would indicate how the people had voted in the elections, Sarkar said, responding to initial reports that some communities such as the backward classes and tribals may have gone with the BJP this time.

## NEWSIN brief

### Indian embassy phone lines in US spoofed

PTI, Washington

Indian embassy telephone lines have been spoofed by fraudsters in the US to cheat people for money, according to an advisory issued by mission which warned against entertaining any suspicious calls. The Indian Embassy here has informed the US Government about it and launched its own internal investigation. It also issued a rare public advisory on such fraud calls that has cheated people with money, thus bringing bad name to the diplomatic mission.

### Iran deal failure would be 'great loss': IAEA

AFP, Vienna

The failure of the 2015 accord between Iran and world powers to restrict Tehran's nuclear programme would be a "great loss", the head of the UN's atomic watchdog said yesterday. International Atomic Energy Agency director general Yukiya Amano said Iran was, as of today, "implementing its nuclear-related commitments" under the deal. US President Donald Trump has been a harsh critic of what he calls the agreement's "disastrous flaws".

### Eight held in Belgium anti-terror raids

AFP, Brussels

Eight people were arrested in Brussels after counter-terror raids as part of an investigation into an alleged attack plot, a source close to the probe said. All eight were arrested Sunday in Molenbeek, an immigrant district linked to the Paris and Brussels terror attacks, following the raids, the source told AFP. The eight were taken for questioning before a judge the sources said.