

NEWSIN brief

Fifth parcel blast reported in Texas

AFP, Austin
A package exploded early yesterday at a FedEx distribution facility in Texas, authorities said, following a series of other blasts in Austin in recent weeks that police had attributed to a serial bomber. The explosion came as hundreds of police officers and FBI agents searched for the perpetrator of Sunday's blast in Austin -- the fourth this month -- left two young men seriously injured and the city on edge.

US-S Korea military drills to resume

AFP, Seoul
The United States and South Korea yesterday announced that their annual joint military drills will go ahead next month, but the main exercise will be shortened by a month as a diplomatic thaw with North Korea gathers pace. No aircraft carrier will take part in the large-scale exercises that involve tens of thousands of troops and which are a perennial source of tension between the two Koreas.

20 killed as storm hits Madagascar

AFP, Antananarivo
A powerful tropical storm that lashed the island of Madagascar has left 20 people dead and affected 19,000 more, according to an official toll. The storm also closed several national highways that were flooded by the heavy rain, the country's disaster management office said late Monday. Storm Eliakim slammed into the northeastern Masoala peninsula on Friday before barreling south down the coast.

Egypt court bans Uber

AFP, Cairo
Egypt's administrative court yesterday issued a ruling stopping the operations of ride sharing apps Uber amid opposition from taxi drivers, reports said.



A Syrian woman holds a child and runs for cover following Syrian government air strikes on the Eastern Ghouta rebel-held enclave of Douma, on the outskirts of the capital Damascus, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

WB REPORT ON CLIMATE CHANGE

143m people will be displaced by 2050

AFP, Washington
The wave of refugees fleeing crop failures, droughts and rising sea levels will grow drastically over the next three decades if world governments do not intervene, the World Bank warned Monday.
By 2050, 143 million "climate migrants" will face an "existential threat" and be displaced, the World Bank said in a new report. That includes 86 million in Sub-Saharan Africa, 40 million in South Asia and 17 million in Latin America.
These regions are home to more than half the developing world's population, and 2.8 percent of inhabitants are among those at risk, according to the report, which the bank said was the first to address the question of migration spurred by climate change.
Climate change has inexorably become an "engine of migration," forcing individuals, families and even whole communities to seek more viable homes, World Bank CEO Kristalina Georgieva said.
The report said Ethiopia's population could almost double by 2050 and migration will rise due to diminishing harvests.
In Bangladesh, climate migrants could be the single-largest group among all internally displaced persons.
And in Mexico, people increasingly will gravitate towards urban areas away from more vulnerable regions.
The World Bank also said climate-linked migration need not descend into humanitarian crisis.

UN envoy sees partition of Syria, fears IS's return

REUTERS, Geneva
IS takes Ghouta town in surprise attack; 36 troops killed
Syria is heading for a catastrophic partition and could see the return of Islamic State if there is no inclusive peace settlement, UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura said on Monday.
"The truth is that a soft, long-term partition of Syria, which (is) the one that we are witnessing at the moment, in different areas of control, will be a catastrophe, not only for Syria but for the whole region," he told an audience at Geneva's Graduate Institute.
"Without an inclusive political process, including those who are excluded, particularly the majority, the Sunnis, Daesh will come back," he said, referring to Islamic State by its pejorative Arabic name.
De Mistura, holding up a map of Syria with different colours for territory held by different parties, said: "This is fragmentation, this is in fact a country which has areas under the influence of other countries."
"This is not sustainable, he added. "I believe at end of day Syria has to remain unified."
"Much of what we are seeing in Iraq, in Syria, in Lebanon, in Yemen is connectable to the tectonic fight between one country and another: Iran and Saudi Arabia, Shia and Sunni. We cannot hide it," he said.
On the ground, Syrian regime and allied forces yesterday battled to suppress the last pockets of resistance in and around Damascus yesterday while the beleaguered Kurds in the north braced for further Turkish advances.
The simultaneous assaults have sparked one of the worst humanitarian emergencies since the start of the Syrian conflict seven years ago, with aid groups struggling to gain access to the masses of displaced civilians.
Washington has voiced concern that the chaos in Syria could allow a revival of the Islamic State group.
The jihadists launched a surprise nighttime attack in a southern neighbourhood of Damascus, moving into the vacuum left by a deal that saw another armed group pull out exactly a week ago.
"IS took full control of Qadam, and 36 government troops and loyalist fighters have been killed," the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported.

Attempts to split China 'doomed'

Says President Xi as he makes case for Beijing's global role

AFP, Beijing
President Xi Jinping yesterday delivered a blistering nationalist speech, warning against any attempts to split China and touting the country's readiness to fight "the bloody battle" to regain its rightful place in the world.
Xi's address capped an annual session of the National People's Congress that paved the way for him to rule for life, as China's most powerful leader since Mao Zedong pushes through his vision of guiding the country through a "new era" of unrivalled global military and economic supremacy.
Days after President Donald Trump signed new rules allowing top-level US officials to travel to Taiwan, Xi warned that Beijing would defend its "one China principle", which sees the self-ruled island as its territory awaiting reunification.
"All acts and tricks to separate the country are doomed to fail and will be condemned by the people and punished by history," Xi told nearly 3,000 delegates assembled at the imposing Great Hall of the People facing Tiananmen Square.
Taiwan in response urged China to shelve its mindset of "forceful intimidation" and pursue a breakthrough in cross-strait relations. The island's Mainland Affairs Council in a statement accused Beijing of intensifying "propaganda measures to lure away Taiwan's talent, funds and technology for its own economic development".
Xi also sought to address concerns about ambitious Chinese development projects abroad, saying they "will not pose a threat to any country."
"Only those who are accustomed to threatening others will see everyone as a threat," he added in an address that drew waves of applause from the legislators.

Emboldened president reserves strong words for Taiwan and HK activists
Taiwan in response urges China to shelve its mindset of forceful intimidation



China is overseeing a massive global trade infrastructure initiative to revive the ancient Silk Road, drawing interest from nations participating in the investment but also criticism from others fearing that it mainly serves Beijing's interests.
The Chinese leader's plan to build a "world-class" military by mid-century has also raised concerns about how it plans to use its increasingly modern forces amid regional frictions over China's territorial claims in the South China Sea.
Xi used the speech to espouse his vision of realising the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" -- the "greatest dream" of the world's second-largest economy.
"The Chinese people have been indomitable and persistent, we have the spirit of fighting the bloody battle against our enemies to the bitter end," he said.
But his speech was also a reminder that the Communist Party, more than ever, reigns over the country's affairs.
"History has already proven and will continue to prove that only socialism can save China," he said.
"The Communist Party is the supreme political leadership of the country and the fundamental guarantee to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."
The two-week session of the National People's Congress handed Xi, 64, a second term and endorsed the Communist Party's decision to lift presidential term limits, clearing the way for him to remain in power indefinitely after his new term ends in 2023.

Maldives to lift emergency

Ex-president Gayoom, CJ to face bribery charges

REUTERS, Colombo
Correspondents Association forum on Monday.
Shareef said bribery charges against Chief Justice Abdulla Saeed and Supreme Court Judge Ali Hameed have been sent to the prosecutor general and that bribery charges will also be brought against former president Gayoom and Supreme Court administrator Hassan Sayeed.
Gayoom is accused of bribing the three legal professionals to overthrow the Yameen government.
Despite opposition claims that hundreds of people have been arrested under the state of emergency, Shareef said only 38 had been arrested so far while others were "detained and released".
Maldives police told Reuters on Saturday that at least 139 opposition protesters were arrested as they attempted to defy orders under the state of emergency and march into the high security zone in capital Male.
Rights group Amnesty International has said the Maldivian government was using the emergency "as a licence for repression, targeting members of civil society, judges and political opponents".



Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is welcomed upon his arrival in Washington, US, on Monday. The crown prince is on a three-week US visit and was set to meet US President Donald Trump later yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

India confirms deaths of 39 workers in Iraq

AFP, New Delhi
The bodies of 39 Indian construction workers kidnapped in Iraq in 2014 by the Islamic State group have been found in a mass grave, India's foreign minister said yesterday.
Sushma Swaraj told the upper house of parliament the workers had been murdered by IS.
Their bodies had been found in the grave in the village of Badush northwest of the city of Mosul and taken to a local organisation for DNA testing.
"Yesterday [Monday] they told us that 38 samples had matched. The 39th had a partial match as he didn't have any immediate family," said Swaraj.
The workers were abducted in June 2014 when IS jihadists overran large swathes of territory in Iraq and captured Mosul.
The government had for years insisted they were believed still alive and the latest announcement sparked criticism from some relatives of the dead.
"We got to know that these people were moved from Mosul to Badush by their captors," Swaraj said.
When India's junior foreign minister Vijay Kumar Singh and Iraqi government officials went to Badush, someone told them to inspect a mound in the village, the minister added.
"They said that they had buried many people there (in a mass grave). We reached there and requested Iraqi authorities to use a deep penetration radar, which detected many bodies under the surface," she told parliament.
When the area was excavated, Indian officials found many identification marks such as non-Iraqi shoes and Sikh religious bangles.

'Son of a dog'

Abbas blasts US ambassador to Israel

AFP, Ramallah
Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas labelled the US ambassador to Israel David Friedman a "son of a dog" on Monday during an attack on Donald Trump's policies.
The scathing comments come with US President Trump still expected to launch a plan for peace between Israel and the Palestinians despite Abbas boycotting his administration over his controversial recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.
"The US ambassador in Tel Aviv is a settler and a son of a dog," Abbas said in comments to Palestinian leaders in Ramallah.
The White House later Monday slammed Abbas's "insults", saying he must choose between hate and peace.
Relations between Abbas's government and Trump's administration have broken down since the White House recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital in December. The Palestinians also see the disputed city as the capital of their future state and have refused to meet with Trump's envoys since.
Separately during the speech, Abbas accused rival Palestinian faction Hamas of a bomb attack targeting his prime minister Rami Hamdallah last week and threatened fresh sanctions against the Islamist movement.

2007 ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Ex-French president held over 'Gaddafi funding'

REUTERS, Paris
Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy was held in custody yesterday and questioned by magistrates investigating whether late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi helped finance his 2007 election campaign, an official in the French judiciary said.
It is the second major judicial investigation to fall on the 63-year-old, who served as president from 2007-2012. He already faces trial on separate charges of illicit spending overruns during his failed re-election campaign in 2012.
A lawyer for Sarkozy could not immediately be reached for comment. The former president has dismissed the Libya allegations as "grotesque" and a "crude manipulation".
France opened an inquiry into the Libya case in 2013, after reports by French website Mediapart based on claims by a Franco-Lebanese businessman, Ziad Takieddine, who said he had transferred \$6 million from Gaddafi's former intelligence chief Abdullah Senussi to Sarkozy's campaign director.
Months after he took office in 2007, the French leader came in for criticism for hosting a state visit by Gaddafi during which the Libyan leader pitched his trademark Bedouin-style tent next to the Elysee Palace.
Sarkozy was later one of the chief advocates of a Nato-led military campaign that resulted in Gaddafi's overthrow and killing at the hands of rebel forces in 2011.
French judicial procedure allows for investigators to hold a person for questioning for up to 48 hours, after which the magistrates must say whether they have grounds for turning a preliminary inquiry into a full investigation. The latter can, but does not always, lead to a trial.
Sarkozy has been dogged for years by political scandals, but none has led to a conviction.

MARYLAND SCHOOL SHOOTING

2 students injured

REUTERS, New York
A student shot and critically wounded two fellow students at a Maryland high school before a campus security officer ended the attack by wounding the shooter, a law enforcement official said.
The shooter shot a male student and a female student at Great Mills High School in St Mary's County, and was then wounded by a campus security officer, county Sheriff Timothy Cameron told MSNBC. All three were in critical condition at hospitals. It was not clear whether the student shooter was shot by the security officer or wounded in another fashion.
The reason for the shooting was unclear, Cameron said.
The violence was the latest in a decades-long series of shootings at US schools and colleges, coming a little more than a month after 17 students and faculty were killed in a rampage at a Florida high school.
Great Mills High School is in St Mary's County, which is about 70 miles south of Washington.
The shooting occurred amid a re-energized national debate over school shootings in the United States following the attack on February 14 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. It was the deadliest mass shooting at a US high school.
Maryland Governor Larry Hogan pledged to provide assistance. "Our prayers are with students, school personnel and first responders," Hogan said in a tweet.