

Catalan ex-minister  
surrenders in Scotland

AFP, Edinburgh

Former Catalan minister Clara Ponsati, who is wanted by Spain for her role in last year's independence bid, surrendered to Scottish police yesterday to face arrest under a European warrant. A Spanish judge last week issued international and European arrest warrants for Ponsati and other separatist leaders, including former regional president Carles Puigdemont. Puigdemont was arrested by German police on Sunday.

Poland buys Patriot  
anti-missile system

AFP, Warsaw

Poland yesterday signed a \$4.75 billion (3.8-billion-euro) contract to purchase a US-made Patriot anti-missile system, a move that is likely to irk Russia as East-West tensions rise. The Patriot is a mobile air-defence system made by US defence firm Raytheon and designed to intercept tactical ballistic missiles, low-flying cruise missiles and aircraft. The first deliveries are expected in 2022.

Israel strikes Hamas  
positions in Gaza

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli tanks hit two Hamas positions in the Gaza Strip yesterday after activists set fire to the base of the security fence on the volatile frontier, the army said. The army said the two suspected arsonists had not crossed the fence and infiltrated Israel but it retaliated with tank fire against two Hamas observation posts. The incident comes a day after Israeli soldiers detained three Palestinians who had slipped across the border from Gaza in possession of knives and grenades.



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (C) waves from his train as he departs from Beijing after an unofficial visit. Kim Jong Un pledged his commitment to denuclearisation and to meet US officials, China said yesterday after his meeting with President Xi Jinping, who promised China would uphold friendship with its isolated neighbour. This picture from North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) was taken on Tuesday and released yesterday. Story on page 16.

PHOTO: AFP

POWER STRUGGLE IN SRI LANKA

President cuts  
PM's duties

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena yesterday reduced the responsibilities of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe as a power struggle worsened within their uneasy coalition. Sirisena took away the central bank, the policy-making National Operations Room and several other institutions from the control of Wickremesinghe, who had held them since coming to power in January 2015. The changes were published in a government gazette notice issued yesterday which transferred the responsibilities to Finance Minister Mangala Samaraweera. Sirisena joined hands with Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) to oust strongman President Mahinda Rajapakse in January 2015 after a decade in power. Earlier this year, Sirisena publicly lambasted Wickremesinghe and his UNP, saying they had mismanaged the economy. Sirisena said the current government was also more corrupt than the former regime they toppled together. A section within Sirisena's party supports a no-confidence move against Wickremesinghe slated for April 4. However, the UNP is the largest single party in the 225-member assembly and commands a comfortable majority with the help of allies. Presidential powers to sack the government and call early elections were removed through a constitutional amendment introduced in the early days of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe coalition.

Suu Kyi ally elected as  
Myanmar president

AFP, Naypyidaw

Myanmar's parliament yesterday elected a staunch ally of Aung San Suu Kyi as the country's new president, allowing her to maintain a tight grip on top-level decision-making. Win Myint, 66, had been tipped for the role after former president Htin Kyaw suddenly stepped down last week, citing the need for rest. Suu Kyi is barred by the military-drafted constitution from the presidency because she was married to a foreigner and has two sons who are British citizens. She has instead served as state counsellor since her party's landslide 2015 election victory, declaring she would work "above" the president. But her position has no official constitutional role. That makes it crucial for her to have a compliant friend as president as she manages an often fraught power-sharing arrangement with the still powerful military, which ruled the country for almost half a century.



Win Myint

"I will do my best to carry out my duties for the people," Win Myint told reporters as he left parliament after the vote. Win Myint, who resigned as lower house speaker last week, swept up nearly two thirds of the votes in a parliament dominated by Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party. He beat two opponents, including the military-backed acting president Myint Swe. The former lawyer hails from Suu Kyi's inner circle -- the pair fought side-by-side during the 1988 democracy movement that was violently quashed by the junta and saw Win Myint, alongside many others, being taken political prisoner. Suu Kyi is still widely regarded as a heroine in Myanmar even though her reputation lies shattered globally for failing to speak up on behalf of the country's Rohingya Muslim community. Observers say his appointment is unlikely to change politics much although he could assume some duties from Suu Kyi, who is notoriously unwilling to delegate.

GROWING THREAT FROM RUSSIA

EU eyes 'military  
Schengen zone'

AFP, Brussels

The EU yesterday launched plans to make it easier to move troops and equipment around the bloc as Europe seeks to boost its defences in the face of the growing threat from Russia.

Officials want to create a "military Schengen zone" similar to the EU's civilian passport-free travel area by simplifying customs checks and bureaucracy that currently cause hold-ups for Nato forces and vehicles trying to cross borders.

Top Nato commanders say the changes are essential if Europe is to have a serious deterrent to potential Russian aggression, warning that cumbersome checks are hampering their ability to move resources quickly.

Working with EU member states, over the next year the European Commission, the bloc's executive arm, will carry out an assessment of existing bureaucratic hurdles and transport infrastructure to see where and how improvements can be made. Dedicated EU funding could be devoted to projects that can be used for both civilian and military purposes.

The EU plans do not mention Russia specifically but tensions with Moscow have been high since the Ukraine crisis and Kremlin's annexation of Crimea in 2014 -- and the current diplomatic spat over the nerve agent attack on a former Russian spy in Britain has done nothing to calm matters.

The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have already created a military mini-Schengen among themselves, Elisabeth Braw of the Atlantic Council think tanks said.

Nato has deployed around 4,000 troops along with tanks and artillery in Poland and the Baltic countries -- the biggest reinforcement in Eastern Europe since the end of the Cold War -- both as a sign of determination and to be ready in the event a crisis erupts.

Meanwhile, Britain has said that it shared "unprecedented levels" of intelligence about a spy poisoning it blamed on Moscow, which has led at least 25 countries to expel Russian diplomats.

This week's coordinated expulsions have echoed Britain's action in response to the March 4 attack on former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the English city of Salisbury.

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said the mass expulsions were "a blow from which Russian intelligence will need many years to recover".

It "could become a turning point", he wrote in The Times newspaper, adding: "The Western alliance took decisive action and Britain's partners came together against the Kremlin's reckless ambitions."

Moscow has fiercely denied any involvement in his attempted murder, instead pointing the finger at London.

The Kremlin yesterday said that President Vladimir Putin was still ready to hold a summit with US counterpart Donald Trump despite the crisis.

"This depends on the American side, but the Russian side remains open," Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

RUSSIA-WEST TENSIONS

Britain says shared 'unprecedented' intelligence with allies over spy attack

Kremlin says despite tensions, Russia 'remains open' to Putin-Trump meet

FB revamps privacy settings

New tools introduced to let people delete, see their data

AFP, Washington

Facebook yesterday said it will overhaul its privacy settings tools to put users "more in control" of their information on the social media website.

The updates include improved access to Facebook's user settings and tools to easily search for, download and delete personal data stored by Facebook.

Meanwhile, a new privacy shortcuts menu will allow users to quickly increase account security, manage who can see their information and activity on the site and control advertisements they see.

"We've heard loud and clear that privacy settings and other important tools are too hard to find and that we must do more to keep people informed," chief privacy officer Erin Egan and deputy general counsel Ashlie Beringer said in a blogpost.

"We're taking additional steps in the

coming weeks to put people more in control of their privacy," they confirmed.

The new features follow fierce criticism after it was revealed millions of Facebook users' personal data was harvested by a British firm linked to Donald Trump's 2016 campaign -- although Facebook said they have been "in the works for some time."

Earlier this month, whistleblower Christopher Wylie revealed Cambridge Analytica created psychological profiles on 50 million Facebook users via a personality prediction app.

The app was downloaded by 270,000 people, but also scooped up their friends' data without consent -- as was possible under Facebook's rules at the time.

Egan and Beringer also announced updates to Facebook's terms of service and data policy to improve transparency about how the site collects and uses data.

OUTCRY OVER DATA BREACH



People visit a makeshift memorial for the victims of a shopping mall fire in Kemerovo on an embankment of the Yenisei River in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk, Russia, yesterday. Russia held a national day of mourning yesterday and buried the first victims of the tragedy which killed at least 64 people, most of them children.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Pak PM faced  
security check  
in US: report

TNN, Washington

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi had to undergo a routine security check at a US airport during a recent visit, an 'indignity' that has enraged the Pakistani media amid reports that the Trump administration is considering imposing visa bans and other sanctions on individuals in the Pakistani government.

Washington also announced sanctions on Monday on seven Pakistani companies over suspicion they have links to the nuclear trade, signaling a further downturn in ties.

Footage aired on Pakistani TV channels over the past two days shows Abbasi picking up his bag and coat and walking out from a security check at



what they said was an American airport.

Abbasi was in the US last week on a private trip to visit his ailing sister but he also met vice-president Mike Pence in an unscheduled engagement at which he was bluntly told Pakistani has to do more to address concerns about its nurturing of terrorist groups.

The US smackdown came even as Foreign Policy magazine reported that the Trump administration is 'weighing unprecedented political penalties' on Islamabad for harbouring Afghan militants waging war on the US-backed government in Afghanistan.

INTERSTITIUM

New organ found  
in human body

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Scientists have identified a new human organ hiding in plain sight, in a discovery they hope could help them understand the spread of cancer within the body.

Layers long thought to be dense, connective tissue are actually a series of fluid-filled compartments researchers have termed the "interstitium".

These compartments are found beneath the skin, as well as lining the gut, lungs, blood vessels and muscles, and join together to form a network supported by a mesh of strong, flexible proteins.

New analysis published in the journal Scientific Reports is the first to identify these spaces collectively as a new organ and try to understand their function.

Remarkably, the interstitium had previously gone unnoticed despite being one of the largest organs.

The team behind the discovery suggest the compartments may act as "shock absorbers" that protect body tissues from damage. Besides their ability to cushion the body's organs and protect them from harm, the researchers found evidence that cancer cells from tumours could make their way via the interstitium into the lymphatic system.

Surrender or face attack

Pressure mounts on rebels to quit last Ghouta holdout

AFP, Beirut

Pressure was mounting yesterday for rebels to accept a negotiated withdrawal from their final holdout in Syria's Eastern Ghouta, as hundreds boarded buses to leave another part of the battered enclave.

Thousands of opposition fighters and civilians have agreed to quit the former rebel bastion of Ghouta, target of a five-week-long assault by the regime.

Syrian troops have recaptured more than 90 percent of Ghouta, and are draining the last opposition pockets with negotiated pull-outs mediated by Russia.

Moscow has secured two such deals already and has been pressing Jaish al-Islam, the rebel faction in control of the third and final pocket of the enclave near Damascus, to leave too.

The group holds Ghouta's largest town of Douma, whose population has swelled to an estimated 200,000 with people displaced from other devastated districts. Jaish al-Islam had hoped to reach a settle-

ment that would avoid their evacuation, but they were now facing the spectre of a renewed blitz on Douma.

Syrian troops were clustering around the town for a second day on Wednesday, Syria's Al-Watan daily reported.

Negotiations faltered over the group's demands that Syria's regime grant them a general amnesty and allow Douma's residents to move freely across the country, a source with knowledge of the talks told AFP.

"At the end of their meeting Monday, the Russians gave Jaish al-Islam two choices: surrender or face an attack," another source close to the talks said.

Anticipating further bombardment, hundreds of civilians fled Douma into government territory via a humanitarian corridor yesterday, state media reported.

More than 128,000 people have fled Ghouta in recent weeks, many of them through routes into government-held territory that were opened by advancing army troops.

WAR IN SYRIA

REPEAL OF RIGHT TO BEAR ARMS

Trump rejects  
ex-judge's call

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump yesterday rejected a former US Supreme Court judge's call for the repeal of the Second Amendment to the US Constitution, which guarantees the right to bear arms.

"THE SECOND AMENDMENT WILL NEVER BE REPEALED!," Trump wrote in a tweet in response to the appeal by former justice John Paul Stevens.

"As much as Democrats would like to see this happen, and despite the words yesterday of former Supreme Court Justice Stevens, NO WAY. We need more Republicans in 2018 and must ALWAYS hold the Supreme Court!," Trump added.

Stevens made the call Tuesday in an op-ed in The New York Times three days after the "March for Our Lives," a series of nationwide protests that were the largest in support of gun control for nearly two decades and came in response to the Valentine's Day school shooting in Parkland, Florida that left 17 students and staffers dead.

"Rarely in my lifetime have I seen the type of civic engagement school children and their supporters demonstrated in Washington and other major cities throughout the country this past Saturday," wrote the former high court judge, now aged 97.