

NEWSIN brief

Cinema returns to Saudi Arabia

AFP, Riyadh
Saudi Arabia hosted its first public film screening in over 35 years on Friday showing Hollywood blockbuster action film "Black Panther". Saudi Arabia lifted a decades-long ban on cinemas last year as part of a far-reaching modernisation drive.

Trump to visit Britain mid-year: reports

REUTERS, London
US President Donald Trump will visit Britain midway through 2018, possibly in July, British newspapers reported yesterday, citing government sources in Washington and London. A spokeswoman for PM Theresa May's office said officials were still working out the details of the visit.

C'wealth takes stance against cybercrime

BSS, Dhaka
Commonwealth countries have unanimously committed to take action on cybersecurity between now and 2020. In a major announcement at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in London, the 53 leaders agreed to work together to evaluate and strengthen their cybersecurity frameworks and response mechanism, said a statement yesterday.

Senate panel likely to reject Pompeo

AFP, Washington
President Donald Trump's secretary of State pick Mike Pompeo is likely to be rejected by a Senate panel after all its Democrats opposed his nomination. The panel has 11 Republicans and 10 Democrats. He still has a shot at confirmation. Republicans hold 51 of the chamber's 100 seats. With two Republicans opposing, Pompeo would need support from just 1 Democrat if all other Republicans back the nominee.



A student holds a sign on the West Lawn of the US Capitol to call for stricter gun laws in Washington, DC yesterday. Inset, Students gather for a rally in Washington Square Park in New York City. Students across the US were urged to walk out of classes to mark the 19th anniversary of the 1999 school shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado which left 13 people dead. PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

Iran vows 'expected, unexpected' moves

REUTERS, Dubai
Iranian President Hassan Rouhani yesterday said Iran's atomic agency was ready with "expected and unexpected" reactions if the United States pulls out of a multinational nuclear deal, as US President Donald Trump has threatened to do.
"Our Atomic Energy Organization is fully prepared... for actions that they expect and actions they do not expect," Rouhani said without elaborating in a speech carried by state television, referring to a possible decision by Trump to leave the accord next month.
The deal reached between Iran, the United States and five other world powers put curbs on Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief.
Trump has called the agreement one of the worst deals ever negotiated. In January he sent an ultimatum to Britain, France and Germany, saying they must agree to fix what the United States sees as the deal's flaws or he would refuse to extend the critical US sanctions relief that it entails.
US disarmament ambassador Robert Wood said on Thursday Washington had been having "intense" discussions with European allies ahead of the May 12 deadline, when US sanctions against Iran will resume unless Trump issues new waivers to suspend them.
Iran has said it will stick to the accord as long as the other parties respect it, but will "shred" the deal if Washington pulls out.

STATE DEPARTMENT'S GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT FOR 2017

China, Russia, Iran, North Korea 'forces of instability'

REUTERS, Washington
The United States on Friday labeled China, Russia, Iran and North Korea as "morally reprehensible" governments that it said violated human rights within their borders on a daily basis, making them "forces of instability."
In releasing the State Department's global human rights report for 2017, acting Secretary of State John Sullivan also singled out Syria, Myanmar, Turkey and Venezuela as nations with poor human rights records. Improved human rights in Uzbekistan, Liberia and Mexico were global "bright spots," Sullivan added.
Michael Kozak, a senior State Department official who helped oversee the report, said he did not think policies by President Donald Trump's administration on freedom of the press, refugees, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights and other issues undermined the report or left the United States open to accusations of hypocrisy.
The governments of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea "violate the human rights of those within their borders on a daily basis and are forces of instability as a result," Sullivan said in a preface to the congressionally mandated report that documents human rights in nearly 200 countries and territories.
Countries like these that restrict freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly, allow and commit violence against religious, ethnic and other minority groups or undermine the people's fundamental dignity "are morally reprehensible and undermine our interests," Sullivan added.
Sullivan said the right of peaceful assembly and freedoms of association and expression are "under attack almost daily" in Iran. Sullivan also condemned what he called "ethnic cleansing" of Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar, and said those responsible for attacks against the Rohingya should be held accountable.
Critics in the United States and globally have accused Trump of giving short shrift to human rights as a foreign policy issue, and of cozying up to authoritarian leaders in Russia, the Philippines and the Middle East. Trump also frequently attacks the US news media.
Myanmar slammed for 'ethnic cleansing' of Rohingyas

NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR DECLARATION

WHAT IT DOES AND DOES NOT MEAN

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has declared an end to the nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile tests that sent tensions soaring on the peninsula, in the region, and beyond. The move, enshrined in a decision by the ruling Workers' Party, comes ahead of a summit with the South's President Moon Jae-in next week, and with a much-anticipated meeting with US President Donald Trump due later. But it is only one step in a complicated sequence of moves that has a long way to play out. Here are some questions and answers on the latest developments.

DOES THIS MEAN KIM WILL GIVE UP HIS ARSENAL?
Not in the slightest. Kim explicitly said that the possession of nuclear weapons was "the firm guarantee by which our descendants can enjoy the most dignified and happiest life in the world". The North also reserved itself the right to use atomic weapons if there were "nuclear threats and nuclear provocations" against it—a threshold that falls short of an attack.

WHY IS THIS ANNOUNCEMENT BEING MADE NOW?
Pyongyang's declaration comes less than a week before the inter-Korean summit, and it has been on a charm offensive for months with the South's Winter Olympics triggering a diplomatic rapprochement on the peninsula. Kim first declared the completion of the country's nuclear force at the beginning of this year, and the North appears to believe last year's technological advances put it into a position of strength from which to negotiate. At the same time analysts say it has been rattled by the belligerent rhetoric of the Trump administration, and according to diplomats sanctions are having an increasing impact on the economy. The declaration of an end to testing has long been demanded by Washington, and will be seen as a confidence-building measure ahead of the talks.

WILL THERE BE A DEAL?
Trump warned on Wednesday that he would call off the Kim summit if it was unlikely to prove "fruitful". But what an ultimate deal over Pyongyang's nuclear weapons might look like, and what it will demand in the form of security guarantees, remains deeply unclear. And we have



been here before -- there have been declarations of a moratorium on testing, negotiations and even agreements in the past, but they have ultimately foundered sooner or later.

HOW SIGNIFICANT IS CLOSING PUNGGYE-RI?
All but one of the North's nuclear blasts have been carried out under Mount Mantap at the Punggye-ri nuclear test site in the northeast of the country, with landslides and earthquakes after the last blast leading to speculation it was suffering from "tired mountain syndrome". Closing Punggye-ri does not preclude the use of other locations, or even atmospheric nuclear tests, MIT political scientist Vipin Narang pointed out. But David Albright of the Institute for Science and International Security said the declared intention to "transparently guarantee" the end of testing was highly significant, opening the way to the US seeking access to the site.

HOW POWERFUL IS PYONGYANG'S ARSENAL?
Monitoring groups put the size of Pyongyang's sixth and last atomic blast in September at 250 kilotons -- 16 times the size of the US bomb that destroyed Hiroshima in 1945 and the kind of yield generated by a hydrogen bomb. The Hwasong-15 ICBM Pyongyang tested in November has an estimated range of more than 13,000 kilometres (8,000 miles), analysts say, bringing the whole of the US mainland within range. There are still questions over its capabilities -- it has not demonstrated targeting abilities, miniaturisation of a warhead, or the re-entry technology needed to survive coming back into the Earth's atmosphere. But it claims to have mastered all three. SOURCE: AFP

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II celebrates 92nd birthday

AFP, London
Queen Elizabeth II marked her 92nd birthday yesterday with traditional gun salutes and a Commonwealth-themed charity concert featuring Tom Jones, Kylie and Shaggy.
Horse-drawn guns fired 41 times in Hyde Park and 62 times at the Tower of London, while at Windsor Castle, the band played "Happy Birthday" during the changing of the guard.
In the evening, the monarch and her family were due to attend a concert with performers from around the Commonwealth, the 53-nation grouping which held its summit in London this week.
Australia's Kylie, Canadian pop chart-topper Shawn Mendes, South African all-male choir Ladysmith Black Mambazo and US-Jamaican reggae star Shaggy were to join British stars including Jones, Craig David and Sting.
The queen usually celebrates her birthday in private, saving the pomp for her official birthday in June.
The concert at the Royal Albert Hall will raise money for a new youth charity, The Queen's Commonwealth Trust.
The monarch's grandson Prince Harry, who will marry US actress Meghan Markle at Windsor on May 19, is the trust's new president and was due to give a speech at the concert.
The queen has been the symbolic head of the Commonwealth since her father king George VI's death in 1952, but its leaders agreed on Friday that her son and heir Prince Charles should succeed her.
The summit was overshadowed by a row over Britain's treatment of Caribbean immigrants, while Charles himself also came under scrutiny.
A non-white writer, Anita Sethi, claimed he joked about whether she was really from the British city of Manchester when they met at a Commonwealth meeting this week.
She wrote in the Guardian that she felt humiliated and angry, adding that "some people, including the prince, urgently need a history lesson about immigration".



UN ambassadors pose for a group photo for a UN Security Council meeting at Backakra outside Ystad, southern Sweden yesterday. In a first for the UNSC, it is meeting in a secluded farmhouse on the southern tip of Sweden yesterday in a bid to overcome deep divisions over how to end the war in Syria. PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian scholar killed in Malaysia

Family accuses Mossad
AFP, Gaza City
The family of a Palestinian professor and Hamas member yesterday accused Israel's Mossad spy agency of killing him on the streets of Kuala Lumpur.
Malaysian police said Fadi Mohammad al-Batsh, 35, was killed in a drive-by motorcycle shooting as he headed on foot to take part in dawn Muslim prayers on Saturday.
In a statement from the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, his family said: "We accuse the Mossad of being behind the assassination."
The Islamist Palestinian movement said Batsh, a research scientist specialising in energy issues, was one of its members.
Hamas did not accuse Israel of killing him but called Batsh a "martyr".
Contacted by AFP, an



Israeli official refused to comment.
Kuala Lumpur police chief Datuk Seri Mazlan Lazim said one of two suspects on a high-powered motorcycle "fired 10 shots, four of which hit the lecturer. He died on the spot."
The Mossad is believed to have assassinated Palestinian militants and scientists in the past, but has never confirmed such operations.
The killing came as on Friday four more Palestinians were shot dead by Israeli forces during protests. The latest deaths brought to 38 the toll of those killed by Israeli forces since March 30.

Dog save kid lost in the wild, honoured

AFP, Sydney
A deaf and partially blind dog that kept a lost three-year-old girl safe in Australian bushland overnight was awarded police honours yesterday after leading rescuers to the child.
Emergency services began a search on foot and from the air for Aurora Friday after the young girl wandered off into bushland on a rural property in Queensland state.
Seventeen-year-old blue heeler Max stayed with the child through a rainy night before leading family and rescuers to her Saturday morning after more than 15 hours in the wild.
Police were quick to make the hero pooch one of their own.
"SUCH A GOOD BOY, MAX!" Queensland Police posted on Facebook. "For keeping her safe until she was found, you're now an honorary police dog!" police posted alongside a picture of family pet.
To the relief of her distraught family the three-year-old was in good health, rescuers said, suffering just minor scratches.



CHEMICAL ATTACK OPCW team visits Douma

AFP, Moscow
Inspectors from the world's chemical arms watchdog arrived yesterday in the Syrian town of Douma, where an alleged chemical attack took place earlier this month, the Russian foreign ministry said.
A team from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) have been in Syria for a week but had not travelled to the city because of security fears.
Dozens were killed in the suspected gas attack in Douma, near Damascus, on April 7, widely blamed on President Bashar al-Assad's forces.
The Syrian government has consistently denied using chemical arms and invited the OPCW to investigate.

Democrats sue Trump campaign, Russia for alleged polls conspiracy

AFP, Washington
The Democratic Party filed a lawsuit Friday alleging that Russia, WikiLeaks and top officials from Donald Trump's campaign conspired to tilt the 2016 US presidential election in the Republican's favor.
The civil complaint filed in federal court in Manhattan by the Democratic National Committee alleges that Russia informed Trump's campaign that it had conducted a cyber attack on the DNC, leading to the release of information damaging to Trump's rival Hillary Clinton.
It also says a close Trump advisor, Roger Stone, appeared to have "advance knowledge" of plans by the anti-secrecy group WikiLeaks to disseminate some of the stolen information -- as part of what the suit alleges was a wide-ranging illegal conspiracy to influence the election.
Republican Party chair Ronna McDaniel called the lawsuit "a last-ditch effort by a bankrupt party still trying to cope with the fact that their candidate lost the 2016 election."
Trump tweeted that the lawsuit "can be good news in that we will now counter."
The Democrats allege that in a series of meetings and communications, Russian officials or representatives coordinated with Trump campaign personnel or associates for more than a year as they sought to lay the groundwork for a Trump upset.
"The Trump campaign and its agents gleefully welcomed Russia's help," according to the 66-page complaint, which demands monetary damages and a declaration that the defendants conspired illegally.
"The conspiracy constituted an act of previously unimaginable treachery: the campaign of the presidential nominee of a major party in league with a hostile foreign power to bolster its own chance to win the presidency," it added.
The lawsuit targets Trump's campaign, his son Donald Trump Jr, his son-in-law Jared Kushner and numerous campaign officials such as Paul Manafort, as well as the Russian government, including its foreign military intelligence agency, and WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange.
The Democratic move comes at a time of legal turmoil for the president, marked by a raid on the offices of his personal lawyer, and the release of a book by James Comey that alleges Trump was obsessed with the Russia meddling probe when he sacked the former FBI chief.
Special counsel Robert Mueller and congressional investigators are probing possible Trump campaign links to what US intelligence has concluded was a sweeping effort to tilt the 2016 vote in Trump's favor.