

NEWS IN brief

Paraguay opens Israel embassy in Jerusalem

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Paraguay opened its Israel embassy in Jerusalem yesterday, the second country to follow the United States in making the politically sensitive move from Tel Aviv. Paraguayan President Horacio Cartes and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attended the inauguration ceremony. The US relocated its embassy to Jerusalem a week ago, drawing Palestinian anger.

China calls on mosques to raise national flag

AFP, Beijing

All Chinese mosques should raise the national flag to "promote a spirit of patriotism" among Muslims, the country's top Islamic regulatory body has declared, as the Communist Party seeks to tighten its grip on religion. Flags should be hung in a "prominent position" in all mosque courtyards, the China Islamic Association said in a letter published Saturday on its website.

Nipah virus kills at least three in India

AFP, New Delhi

A deadly virus carried mainly by fruit bats has killed at least three people in southern India, sparking a statewide health alert yesterday. Eight other deaths in the state of Kerala are being investigated for possible links to the Nipah virus, which has a 70 percent mortality rate.

Ebola death toll 26 in new Congo outbreak

AFP, Mbandaka

The death toll from the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo has risen to 26 after a person died in the northwest city of Mbandaka, Health Minister Oly Ilunga said yesterday. "A death was recorded (on Sunday), while two people who had been confirmed as ill with the Ebola virus were cured on Saturday," he said.



Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, Russia yesterday. During their talks, Modi said the strategic partnership between the two countries has been elevated into a "special privileged strategic partnership" while Putin said India PM's visit would give a fresh impetus to bilateral ties.

PHOTO: REUTERS

ANTI-IS OFFENSIVE IN SYRIA
Regime secures capital, suburb

AFP, Damascus

Syria's army said yesterday it was in full control of the capital Damascus and its outskirts after ousting the Islamic State group, marking a major milestone in the seven-year war. "The Syrian army announces today that Damascus, its outskirts and surrounding towns are completely secure," it said in a statement carried on official media. The development came after troops had captured a key southern portion of Damascus from IS, the statement said, including the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmuk and the adjacent district of Hajar al-Aswad. "The wheel of our progress on the battlefield will not stop until all Syrian land is purified," it added. Syria's war erupted in 2011 with protests against President Bashar al-Assad, including in the capital. The following year, the government began losing control of parts of Damascus and placed a crippling siege around Yarmuk, which lies in the capital's south. The army's announcement came hours after a tenuous evacuation deal saw hundreds of IS fighters and their relatives quit Yarmuk, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The government has denied reaching a deal with IS. It said a brief ceasefire had allowed one convoy of women and children to leave the pocket in southern Damascus. The war monitor, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said yesterday that buses had already started leaving south Damascus for Islamic State areas in eastern Syria.

US lays out tough strategy

AFP, Washington

The United States will increase the financial pressure on Iran with the "strongest sanctions in history," after Washington pulled out of the 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said yesterday. "We will apply unprecedented financial pressure on the Iranian regime. The leaders in Tehran will have no doubt about our seriousness," Pompeo said in his first major foreign policy address since moving to the State Department from the CIA.

"The sting of sanctions will only grow more painful if the regime does not change course from the unacceptable and unproductive path it has chosen for itself and the people of Iran," he added in the speech at the conservative Heritage Foundation think tank. "Iran will never again have carte blanche to dominate the Middle East," he said in outlining the new US strategy on handling the Islamic regime, including 12 tough conditions from Washington for any "new deal" with Tehran.

Pompeo said if Iran were to abide by the stricter terms, including ending its ballistic missile program and its interventions in regional conflicts from Yemen to Syria, the United States would lift its sanctions. "We will track down Iranian operatives and their Hezbollah proxies operating around the world and crush them," Pompeo said.

"Iran will be forced to make a choice: either fight to keep its economy off life support at home or keep squandering precious wealth on fights abroad. It will not have the resources to do both."

President Donald Trump has long said the original 2015 deal with Iran -- also signed by Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia -- did not go far enough, and now wants the Europeans and others to support his headline strategy.

"In the strategy we are announcing today, we want the support of our most important allies and partners in the region and around the globe. I don't just mean our friends in Europe," Pompeo said.

The secretary of state also warned European businesses who work with Iran in violation of US sanctions that they will be held "to account."

The re-establishment of the US sanctions will force European companies to choose between investing in Iran or trading with the United States.

In reality, there is no choice -- European companies cannot afford to forsake the US market.

For now, the European Union is trying to persuade Iran to stay in the 2015 agreement, even without Washington's participation.

The so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) saw Iran agree to limit the size of its stockpile of enriched uranium - which is used to make reactor fuel, but also nuclear weapons - for 15 years and the number of centrifuges installed to enrich uranium for 10 years.

IRAN NUCLEAR DEAL ROW

Pompeo vows to increase pressure on Tehran with "strongest sanctions"

Warns Iran will never again have complete freedom to dominate ME



VENEZUELA PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Maduro wins second term

Faces overseas censure as rivals claim vote-rigging

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela was facing the threat of fresh international sanctions and intensified domestic unrest yesterday following President Nicolas Maduro's re-election in a vote rejected by the opposition as a farce.

Election officials said Maduro won 68 percent of the votes cast in Sunday's presidential poll, far ahead of the 21 percent won by his nearest rival, ex-army officer Henri Falcon.

In an address to cheering supporters outside Miraflores Palace in Caracas, Maduro hailed his victory for another six-year term as a "historic record."

"We won again! We triumphed again! We are the force of history turned into a permanent popular victory!" Maduro told those gathered to celebrate his "knockout" victory.

But the vote was marred by a 52 percent abstention rate -- a historic high -- following a boycott called by the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) opposition coalition, which slammed the ballot as a "farce."

And even before it took place, the

United States, Canada, the European Union and a dozen Latin American countries said they would not recognise the results.

Falcon, a loyalist of the late leftist firebrand Hugo Chavez who was neck-and-neck with Maduro in pre-election surveys, said the vote lacked "legitimacy" and accused the government of vote buying.

"For us, there were no elections," he told reporters. "We have to have new elections in Venezuela."

And third-placed Javier Bertucci, an evangelist preacher who polled around 11 percent, also joined the call for new elections.

Maduro may have won, but the near future appears bleak.

Venezuela is isolated and deep in the worst economic crisis of its history, with its people enduring food and medicine shortages.

"The upcoming scenario is clear: political tension and radicalization, repression, massive international rejection, a sharpening of sanctions, and a climax to the economic crisis," said analyst Luis Vicente Leon.



ALLEGED SPYING ON 2016 CAMPAIGN

Trump 'demands' DOJ probe

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump demanded Sunday that the Justice Department investigate whether his presidential campaign was "infiltrated" or spied on for political purposes, prompting it to announce it would look into those issues.

Trump has described the infiltration allegations as being potentially "bigger than Watergate," but Democrats say he is attempting to undermine the year-old investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election and possible collusion with his campaign, headed by special counsel Robert Mueller.

"I hereby demand, and will do so officially tomorrow, that the Department of Justice look into whether or not the FBI/DOJ infiltrated or surveilled the Trump Campaign for Political Purposes - and if any such demands or requests were made by people within the Obama Administration!" Trump tweeted.

Trump's angry order came amid building pressure from the year-old Russia meddling

investigation, and as US media reported that the Federal Bureau of Investigations sent a Britain-based American professor to speak separately with Trump campaign advisers in 2016.

A New York Times report described the professor as "an informant," saying the federal agency was looking into evidence that Carter Page and George Papadopoulos had suspicious contacts with Russia.

The Washington Post called him "a longtime US intelligence source," and said he met with a third campaign adviser -- Sam Clovis -- as well as Page and Papadopoulos.

Trump and his supporters have cast the man as a mole possibly sent by the Obama administration to burrow into his campaign.

The Justice Department tasked its internal watchdog with looking into the issues raised by Trump.

But it paired that inquiry with an existing "review" of the application process for FISA national security warrants, which Republicans allege was abused in connection with the surveillance of Page.



A picture released by Kensington Palace on behalf of The Duke and Duchess of Sussex yesterday shows Britain's Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, (CL) and his wife Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, (CR) posing for an official wedding photograph in the Green Drawing Room, Windsor Castle, in Windsor on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Taliban plan more attacks on Kabul

Warn people to avoid military centres

AFP, Kabul

The Taliban yesterday warned Kabul residents to avoid "military centres" in the heavily fortified city, saying they are planning more attacks in the Afghan capital where civilians have long borne the brunt of casualties.

The militant group has issued such warnings to civilians before, including during a failed attempt to take the western city of Farah last week, but it is believed to be the first time they have singled out Kabul.

The United Nations has said the capital -- where the Islamic State group is also stepping up attacks -- is already the deadliest place in the country for civilians.

The Taliban said they were planning more attacks on "the enemy's military and intelligence centres" as part of an annual spring offensive.

"Therefore, to avoid civilian casualties and only cause damage to enemy military, we are asking Kabul residents to keep away... we don't want even a single innocent civilian to be killed," said a statement published online.

In response, the defence ministry said police and troops are "ready to protect the people with all means possible", and would not allow the militants to reach their "un-Islamic and inhuman goals".

The Taliban did not define what was meant by "military and intelligence centres".

Such targets are difficult to avoid given that the overcrowded city is the heart of the country's intelligence, government and military operations and plagued by traffic jams due to ubiquitous checkpoints and barriers.

Baby's birth breaks rule on remote island

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

She's a born rebel: a remote Brazilian island welcomed its first baby in 12 years after a local woman broke the rule against giving birth there.

The baby girl born on the Atlantic outpost of Fernando de Noronha on Saturday came as a surprise to everyone -- including the parents.

"The mother, who does not want to be identified, went into labor at home," the island's administration said in a statement carried by O Globo newspaper. "The family says it wasn't aware of the pregnancy."

Tiny Fernando de Noronha -- an archipelago famous for its wildlife preserve and with a population of just over 3,000 -- doesn't authorize births because there's no maternity ward, O Globo reported.

Expectant mothers are told to travel to the mainland, where the nearest big city is Natal, 227 miles (365 km) across the ocean.

The unidentified mother in Saturday's birth has another child who was born on the mainland, but told O Globo that this time she "didn't feel anything" during her pregnancy.

India successfully test fires supersonic cruise

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India yesterday successfully test-fired a supersonic cruise missile from a test range along the Bay of Bengal coast to validate some of its new features.

The BrahMos supersonic missile, a joint venture of India and Russia, was test-fired from a mobile launcher stationed of the Integrated Test Range (ITR) at Chandipur in the eastern state of Odisha, officials of state-owned Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) said.

The trial was conducted to validate its "life extension" technologies developed for the first time in India by DRDO and team BrahMos, said an official of the ITR.

Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman congratulated DRDO scientists for the successful launch of BrahMos missile with new technology yesterday. The missile has already been introduced in the Indian army and navy, while the air force version had witnessed successful trial, the DRDO scientists said. The BrahMos missile can be launched

from land, air, sea and under water. India successfully launched the world's fastest supersonic cruise missile from a fighter plane Sukhoi-30 MKI for the first time against a target in the Bay of Bengal in November last year.

At least two squadrons with 20 fighter jets each are planned to be equipped with



the air-launch variant BrahMos missiles which are 3 kg lighter than land and naval variants.

India has already extended the range of the three-tonne missile from 290 km to 400 km and successfully test-fired the variant in March 2017.

Tackle graft to stem meth production

UN urges 'Golden Triangle' nations

AFP, Yangon

"Golden Triangle" countries must address corruption and collaborate more closely to tackle record meth production and the gangs who traffic the drug across Southeast Asia and beyond, the UN said yesterday.

From Bangkok to Brisbane, authorities are raking in huge hauls of methamphetamine stimulant pills -- better known as "yaba" -- and the purer, more potent crystallised version known as "ice".

They hail from the "Golden Triangle", a lawless wedge of land that intersects China, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar and is the world's second-largest drug-producing region.

Its drug labs -- mainly in Myanmar's conflict-ridden Shan State -- are working overtime, aiding organised crime gangs in their quest for new markets as far away as Australia and Japan.

Worth an estimated \$40 billion a year, huge volumes of meth pass through the Golden Triangle, waved through by corrupt law enforcement and border controls.

"Ensuring governance and the rule of law will be crucial to any long-term reduction in drug production and trafficking," said Jeremy Douglas, regional representative of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime for Southeast Asia and the Pacific.