

NEWS IN brief

Rebels kill 27 regime fighters in Syria

More than two dozen pro-government fighters were killed in northwestern Syria overnight in a joint attack by rebel and Islamist forces, a monitor said yesterday. The surprise offensive late Monday targeted a pair of villages in Latakia, near the Turkish border. Another 40 government loyalists were wounded and six rebels were killed.

Trump extends lead in Twitter race

US President Donald Trump is by far the most followed world leader on Twitter, with the Pope trailing him by some 4.5 million followers, a study showed yesterday. With more than 52 million followers, the @realDonaldTrump account also counts nearly 10 million more followers than third-place holder, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

WhatsApp goes offline to fight India rumours

WhatsApp took out full-page advertisements in Indian newspapers yesterday offering "easy tips" to identify fact from fiction after a slew of recent murders spurred by hoaxes shared on its platform. More than 20 people were lynched in India over child abduction rumours in the last two months.

Afghan blast kills 12

A suicide attacker blew himself up near an Afghan security forces vehicle yesterday, killing at least 12 people, mostly civilians, officials said, in the latest deadly violence to rock the country. The explosion in the eastern city of Jalalabad also left at least five people wounded and set a nearby petrol station alight, the provincial governor's spokesman Attaullah Khogyani told AFP.



Liu Xia finally 'leaves China'

Liu Xia, the widow of Chinese Nobel dissident Liu Xiaobo who had been under de facto house arrest in China, left the country yesterday en route to Germany, according to friends. Despite facing no charges, the 57-year-old poet had endured heavy restrictions on her movements since 2010 when her husband won the Nobel Peace Prize -- an award that infuriated Beijing.

Friends said she was on board a Finnair flight to Helsinki on her way to Berlin, a move that came just days before the first anniversary of her husband's death from liver cancer.

Berlin-based dissident Liao Yiwu, who is expected to welcome her in the German capital later yesterday, voiced his joy on Twitter, saying: "I am so, so, so happy! Finally, finally, Xia is coming today!!"

Liu had become a cause célèbre and was seen as a test case for China's attitude to human rights, with activists and foreign powers urging Beijing to allow her to leave the country.

Her husband Liu Xiaobo, a veteran of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, died last year while serving an 11-year jail sentence for "subversion", the first Nobel laureate to die in custody since the Nazi Germany era.

Speaking to AFP before her departure, close friend Ye Du said Liu was suffering from "very severe" depression, adding she would "sometimes faint" and was taking medicine to sleep.

MIRACLE RESCUE OF THAI BOYS STRANDED IN CAVE

'Incredibly strong kids'

Diver hails the young boys' courage and resolve, reveals rescuers worst fears

AFP, Mae Sai

A foreign diver involved in the mission to save 12 boys and their football coach from a flooded Thai cave has hailed the children as "incredibly strong", and described their treacherous escape journey as unprecedented.

"They are getting forced to do something that no kid has ever done before. It is not in any way normal for kids to go cave diving at age 11," Ivan Karadzic, who runs a diving business in Thailand, told the BBC in an interview that was published online yesterday. "They are diving in something considered (an) extremely hazardous environment in zero visibility, the only light that is in there is the torch light we bring ourself."

The boys, aged from 11 to 16, and their 25-year-old coach, ventured into the Tham Luang cave in northern Thailand on June 23 after football practice and became trapped when heavy rains flooded the cave.

Two British divers found them nine days later huddled on a muddy ledge in pitch darkness more than four kilometres inside the cave system.

Authorities then gathered 90 divers, 50 of them foreigners, to help extract the boys out of a claustrophobic tunnel network that in some places was completely filled with water and so narrow that they could only be squeezed through.

Conditions were so dangerous that



Volunteers celebrate at a makeshift press centre in Mae Sai district of Chiang Rai province yesterday, after the twelve boys and their football coach were rescued.

PHOTO: AFP

a retired Thai Navy SEAL died on Friday while trying to lay out oxygen tanks underwater in a tunnel, and the rescue chief at one point dubbed the operation "Mission Impossible".

Adding to the dangers, most of the boys could not swim, and none had scuba diving experience.

Karadzic, who the BBC reported was stationed near a difficult stretch of the cave about half-way along the escape route to replace oxygen tanks and help guide people through, said the rescue workers had feared the worst.

"We were obviously very afraid of any kind of panic from the divers," he

said, adding he was in awe of the boys' ability to stay calm.

"I cannot understand how cool these small kids are, you know? Thinking about how they've been kept in a small cave for two weeks, they haven't seen their mums. Incredibly strong kids. Unbelievable almost."

WORLD REACTION

World leaders and football stars joined the global outpouring of relief and congratulations at the astounding rescue of a young football team and their coach from a flooded Thai cave. Here are some of the reactions.

US PRESIDENT: Donald Trump was among the first to congratulate the Thai Navy SEALs who spearheaded the mammoth international rescue effort at the Tham Luang cave complex in northern Thailand. "On behalf of the United States, congratulations to the Thai Navy SEALs and all on the successful rescue of the 12 boys and their coach from the treacherous cave in Thailand," Trump tweeted. "Such a beautiful moment - all freed, great job!"

UK PRIME MINISTER: "Delighted to see the successful rescue of those trapped in the caves in Thailand. The world was watching and will be saluting the bravery of all those involved," British Prime Minister Theresa May said on Twitter.

TECH GURU ELON MUSK: "Great news that they made it out safely. Congratulations to an outstanding rescue team!" said tech guru Elon Musk, who visited the cave and offered the use of a prototype mini-sub made from rocket parts. In the end, the sub was not needed and Musk earlier said he was leaving it "here in case it may be useful in the future".

CHILEAN MINERS: "Youjuuuuul," exclaimed Chilean miner Mario Sepulveda, who was among 33 miners trapped down a mine for 69 days in 2010. "I feel a lot of emotion. What can I say? I hope these kids will be very successful," he told AFP.

FIFA: Football's governing body FIFA also welcomed the rescue but said the boys were too weak to attend Sunday's World Cup final in Moscow. FIFA boss Gianni Infantino had invited the boys' Wild Boars football team to the final "as our guests" last week. But FIFA said it had been informed "that due to medical reasons, the boys will not be in a position to travel to Moscow".

MANCHESTER UNITED: Manchester United also invited the "Wild Boars", as well as those involved in the rescue, to travel to England and visit the club. "Our thoughts and prayers are with those affected. We would love to welcome the team from Wild Boars Football Club and their rescuers to Old Trafford this coming season," the club said in a tweet.

SOURCE: AFP

THAI BOYS IN HOSPITAL

They are expected to stay in hospital at least for a week

Parents can see the boys through glass wall, no touch allowed

Boys not allowed to attend World Cup final

Experts won't rule out psychological damage in the long run

THE STRAIT TIMES ONLINE

The rescued boys have been given a clean bill of health by doctors.

They have no fever or serious ailments, said public health permanent secretary Dr Jesada Chokedamrongsuk at a press conference yesterday.

"Everyone is in a good mental state," he told reporters in the clearest update yet on the health of the boys. The boys are alert and the group can eat, move about, and talk, he said.

Doctors are taking no chances with their physical recovery, quarantining the group, administering tetanus and rabies shots, and putting two of the team on antibiotics after they showed signs of

pneumonia. They have also been given sunglasses to wear as they adjust to daylight after days trapped in the dark.

All boys, aged between 11 and 16, are being treated in an isolation ward in Chiang Rai Prachanukroh hospital. Four of them were rescued from the flooded Tham Luang cave on Sunday and four on Monday and rest of the four along with their assistant football coach yesterday.

The second group who were rescued on Monday have low body temperature and slow heartbeat. Details about the group rescued yesterday were not known.

"The first four boys' eyes are normal. For the second group (that) arrived last

night, they are still wearing sunglasses. We will check later today whether their eyes have adjusted to light," said Dr Jesada.

The parents of first four boys can see them through a glass wall, but no physical contact is allowed.

When asked why the boys managed to survive so long underground before they were found by divers, Dr Jesada said: "The kids are footballers, are strong and have high immunity."

But he said the youngsters are unlikely to be able to take up an offer to attend the World Cup final in Moscow.

Doctors said while the boys are in good shape they will go through a slow and careful recovery that will see them

stay in hospital for a week.

The boys have a good appetite but are being given bland, easily digestible foods. However, doctors later relented after some of the boys asked for bread with chocolate spread.

Experts had warned of possible long-term psychological damage such as PTSD from the ordeal, including the initial 10 days underground, in darkness and without contact with the outside world, reported AFP.

"It is certainly a risk and can take some time to manifest itself and make its presence known," said Dr Andrew Watson, a specialist on rescues from mines and floods trapped. "I am not sure about children and how they will react."

Pak politicians 'under threat from terrorists'

DAWN ONLINE

Pakistan's National Counter Terrorism Authority (Nacta) on Monday revealed the names of six personalities, including Imran Khan, who could be targeted by terrorists during the ongoing election campaign.

"Six people include Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf chairman Imran Khan, Awami National Party leaders Asfandyar Wali and Ameer Haider Hoti, Qaumi Watan Party head Aftab Sherpao, Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl leader Akram Khan Durrani and Hafiz Saeed's son Talha Saeed. Moreover, there are threats to senior leadership of the Pakistan Peoples Party and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz," Nacta director Obaid Farooq said while briefing the Senate Standing Committee on Interior.

He said Nacta had forwarded 12 threat alerts to the federal interior and provincial home ministries as well as law enforcement agencies.

Meanwhile, an official source told Dawn the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) was weighing two options to arrest ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif and his daughter Maryam Nawaz upon their arrival at the Lahore airport on Friday.

In the first option, NAB may write to the caretaker government seeking a helicopter to shift Sharif and Maryam to Islamabad after their arrival at the Lahore airport. The other option is to request the government to divert the flight to the federal capital to take them into custody at the (Islamabad) airport.



People clear debris caused by flooding caused by torrential rain at Aki ward in Hiroshima, Hiroshima Prefecture, Japan, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Respect the allies you have

EU president tells Trump as the latter flies in to Europe

REUTERS, Brussels

European Council President Donald Tusk yesterday told US President Donald Trump to stop berating Nato allies over military investment levels ahead of what is expected to be a fraught alliance summit.

Before taking off for Brussels, Trump again chided fellow Nato members for not contributing enough to the alliance while maintaining a trade surplus with the United States, his latest reprimand on issues that are straining transatlantic relations.

"Dear America, appreciate your allies, after all you don't have that many," Tusk, a former Polish prime minister, said after a signing statement on more cooperation between the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, although he also accepted Europe should spend more on defence.

Many US presidents have urged European governments to spend more on their militaries. But Trump has intensified the demands to such an extent that allies worry it could damage Nato morale and play into the hands Russian President Vladimir Putin, who they accuse of trying to divide and destabilise the West. "Dear President Trump: America does not have, and will not have a better ally than Europe," said Tusk, who

IS PUTIN FRIEND OR FOE OF US?

US President Donald Trump said yesterday he could not say if Vladimir Putin is a friend or foe, and that a meeting with the Russian president could be the easiest part of a tour of Europe that includes a Nato meeting and a visit to Britain. "So I have Nato, I have the UK which is in somewhat turmoil, and I have Putin. Frankly Putin may be the easiest of them all. Who would think?" Trump said. Asked if Putin is a friend or foe, Trump said: "I really can't say right now. As far as I'm concerned, a competitor."

chairs summits of EU leaders. "Today, Europeans (collectively) spend on defence many times more than Russia, and as much as China." He said that money went towards both US and European security when the United States regards Russia and China as threats.

Trump's tweet yesterday echoed earlier posts on Twitter on Monday and his criticism at a rally of supporters in the United States last week, in which he said that Washington was unfairly carrying almost all the cost of defending Europe. "Getting ready to leave for Europe. First meeting - Nato. The US is spending many times more than any other country in order to protect them. Not fair to the US taxpayer," Trump said.

Japan flood toll hits 156

Hope fading for finding survivors

AFP, Kurashiki

Rescue workers carried out house-to-house searches yesterday in the increasingly unlikely hope of finding survivors after days of deadly floods and landslides that have claimed 156 lives in Japan's worst weather-related disaster for decades.

The record downpours that began last week have stopped and receding flood waters have laid bare the destruction that has cut a swathe through the west of the country.

In the city of Kurashiki, the flooding engulfed entire districts at one point, forcing some people to their rooftops to wait for rescue.

By yesterday morning, rescue workers were going door-to-door, looking for survivors -- or victims -- of the disaster.

"It's what we call a grid operation, where we are checking every single house to see if there are people still trapped inside them," an official with the local Okayama prefecture government told AFP.

"We know it's a race against time, we are trying as hard as we can." Hideto Yamanaka was leading a team of around 60 firefighters dispatched from outside the prefecture searching homes.

"I'm afraid elderly people who were living alone may have failed to escape," said Yamanaka, 53.

The crisis is the deadliest weather-related disaster in over three decades, and has sparked national grief.

Trump picks SC nominee, Senate battle looms

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump on Monday nominated conservative judge Brett Kavanaugh to the US Supreme Court, a decision likely to cement a rightward tilt on the top judicial body with momentous implications for American society.

Trump's decision stands to be among the most consequential of his presidency as he seeks to shape the high court to his conservative leanings for decades to come. With Kavanaugh a mere 53 years old, he could serve for a generation or more.

After days spent teasing his highly-anticipated decision, Trump ended up picking a jurist with extended federal bench and administration experience to fill the vacancy left by retiring Justice Anthony Kennedy.

Kavanaugh worked for president George W Bush,



who appointed him in 2003 to the US Court of Appeals in Washington. He is also a robust supporter of the executive power of the presidency.

Kennedy was long a swing vote on the nine-member court, and Trump's choice -- his second opportunity in 18 months to fill a Supreme Court seat -- stands to dramatically affect many aspects of American life, from abortion to voting rights to immigration.

Kavanaugh has the reputation of a staunch conservative, one who many Republicans no doubt hope could help overturn Roe v Wade, the landmark 1973 decision that guarantees women the right to an abor