

NEWSIN brief

Hurricane Lane lashes Hawaii with rain, winds

REUTERS, Honolulu

Hurricane Lane, a powerful Category 3 storm, lashed Hawaii on Thursday with high winds and torrential rain, causing flash floods, landslides and raging surf as residents hunkered down to ride out the storm. There were no reports of injuries, but roads were closed because of flash floods and landslides in the Pacific island state.

US, Russia agrees to resume contacts

REUTERS, Moscow

Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev said he and his US counterpart John Bolton had broadly agreed to re-open communication lines between their respective foreign and defence ministries, the RIA news agency reported on Thursday. Bolton and Patrushev met on Thursday in Geneva in the first high-level meeting of its kind since the Russian and US presidents held talks in Helsinki in July.

Deep magnitude 7.1 quake strikes Peru

REUTERS, Lima

A magnitude 7.1 quake struck nearly 250 km (155 miles) northwest of Puerto Maldonado, Peru, in the early hours of yesterday at a depth of 610 km, the US Geological Survey said. There were no immediate reports of damage, though social media users said tremors had been felt across the country.

UN to meet on Syria charter next month

AFP, Geneva

The UN peace envoy for Syria will host Iran, Russia and Turkey for talks on drafting a new Syrian constitution on September 11-12, a United Nations spokeswoman said yesterday. Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura has been tasked with setting up a committee to write a new constitution for the war-ravaged country.



North and South Korean separated family members react as they meet during a reunion at Mount Kumgang resort, North Korea, yesterday. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Thursday said he will visit North Korea again next week to try to persuade it to abandon its nuclear weapons.

PHOTO: REUTERS

TURKEY ON IDLIB CRISIS

Military solution will 'cause catastrophe'

AFP, Moscow

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu yesterday warned Russia that seeking a military solution in Syria's last rebel-held province of Idlib would be disastrous.

"A military solution there will cause catastrophe," Cavusoglu said at a press conference in Moscow with Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, before meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"Not only for the Idlib region but for the future of Syria, it will cause catastrophe and the clashes may last a long time," he warned.

Speculation is increasing that there could be a Russian-backed government assault on the northwestern province, home to Syria's last major rebel stronghold.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime still holds Idlib's southeastern tip and he has set his sights on retaking control of the region, which borders Turkey, calling this one of his priorities.

Cavusoglu warned of the risk heavy fighting would pose to the large civilian population.

"Civilians will be harmed. Where will the 3.5 million civilians go?" he asked, as Turkey has already taken in more than three million refugees from Syria.

Russia's Lavrov yesterday called the situation in Idlib "multi-faceted" and called for separating out "the healthy opposition from terrorist structures".

Idlib is a strategically important province adjacent to Latakia, a regime stronghold on the Mediterranean coast that is home to Assad's clan.

SAUDI-LED AIR RAIDS IN YEMEN

'22 kids among 31 killed'

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Yemen's Houthi rebels said air raids by the Saudi-UAE military alliance killed dozens of civilians, most of them children, reports that were denied by the coalition.

According to the Houthi movement's Al Masirah TV, 22 children and four women died on Thursday as fighter jets targeted a camp for internally displaced people in Ad Durayhimi, which lies about 20km from the Red Sea city of Hodeidah.

The reported attack comes two weeks after a coalition air strike on a school bus killed 40 boys.

Backed by the United States, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have carried out attacks in Yemen since March 2015 as part of a military campaign to reinstate the internationally recognised government of President Abu-Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

Hussein al-Bukhaiti, a pro-Houthi activist based in Sanaa, said the death toll in Thursday's air raids stood at 31, citing a medical source.

"The Saudi strikes at first targeted a village in the Ad Durayhimi area south of Hodeidah, killing five people and injuring another two," he told Al Jazeera.

Bukhaiti said 26 women and children had come under

attack before boarding a bus in an attempt to flee, but a "second Saudi-UAE strike targeted that bus, killing everyone".

Earlier on Thursday, the UAE state news agency WAM said the Houthis launched a ballistic missile in the same district, which resulted in the death of one child.

WAM said the attack in the recently recaptured village of al-Ghalifqa in Ad Durayhimi also wounded dozens of people, three of them seriously.

Neither side's claims could be independently verified.

Last year, the United Nations added the Saudi-UAE military coalition to a blacklist of child rights violators for causing the deaths and injuries of hundreds of children in Yemen.

On August 9, an air attack by the Saudi-UAE coalition hit a school bus in the Houthi-controlled province of Saada, killing 51 people, including 40 children.

According to munitions experts, a US-made bomb was used in the attack on the school bus, leading to further criticism over Washington's role in the war in Yemen - described by the UN as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

According to the UN, at least 10,000 people have been killed in the three-year war - a death toll that has not been updated in years and is certain to be far higher.



Pakistan disputes US account of call between Pompeo, PM

China's foreign minister to visit Islamabad on Sept 8

REUTERS, Dawn

Pakistan has called for the United States to amend what its foreign ministry described as a "factually incorrect" account of a phone call between US Secretary of State Michael R Pompeo and new Prime Minister Imran Khan.

The US State Department said it stands by its account.

The row comes ahead of a planned visit by Pompeo to Islamabad in the first week of September to meet with Khan, who was sworn in as prime minister last week.

The US State Department readout of the call said Pompeo wished Khan success and also asked Khan to take "decisive action against all terrorists operating in Pakistan".

US officials routinely raise the issue of Taliban and other militants operating from safe havens in Pakistan, where they plot attacks on US and Afghan troops across the border. Pakistan regularly denies that the Afghan Taliban operates from its soil.

And overnight on Thursday, Pakistan's foreign ministry asserted that the issue of mili-

tants never came up in the phone call between Pompeo and Khan.

However, US State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert indicated there would be no correction in response to Pakistan's complaint.

Pompeo is expected in Islamabad on September 5, and is likely to be the first foreign dignitary to meet with Khan since he was sworn in.

Khan is well known for his criticism of U.S. military policy in Afghanistan, but he said after winning elections last week that he seeks better relations with the United States after a series of aid cuts and the suspension of U.S. military training.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi while addressing a press conference at the Foreign Office (FO) yesterday said that his Chinese counterpart would be visiting Islamabad on Sept 8.

Qureshi was speaking at a briefing following a meeting with Prime Minister Imran Khan, Foreign Secretary Tehmina Janjua and other senior officials at the FO.



Trump: social media 'silencing millions'

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump criticised social media companies yesterday, saying without evidence that they have silenced "millions of people" in an act of censorship.

Trump did not mention any companies by name. On Tuesday, Facebook Inc, Twitter Inc and Alphabet Inc removed hundreds of accounts tied to an alleged Iranian propaganda operation, while Facebook took down a second campaign it said was linked to Russia.

"Social Media Giants are silencing millions of people. Can't do this even if it means we must continue to hear Fake News like CNN, whose ratings have suffered gravely. People have to figure out what is real, and what is not, without censorship!" Trump said.

Trump's comments come as the social media industry faces mounting scrutiny from Congress over the policing of foreign propaganda.

The Republican president in recent weeks has expressed concern about the companies' actions. In an interview with Reuters on Monday, Trump said it was "very dangerous" for social media companies like Twitter and Facebook to silence voices on their services.

Trump criticized the social media industry last week, claiming without evidence that unidentified companies were "totally discriminating against Republican/Conservative voices."

Spain passes decree to exhume Franco remains

AFP, Madrid

Spain's Socialist government passed a decree yesterday allowing the exhumation of the remains of Francisco Franco from his vast mausoleum.

"We are celebrating 40 years of a democratic Spain, of a stable and mature constitutional order... and this is not compatible with a public tomb where we continue to glorify Franco," Deputy Prime Minister Carmen Calvo told a news conference following a cabinet meeting that approved the decree.

The exhumation, which is fiercely opposed by the late dictator's descendants, could take place at the end of the year, she said.

General Franco, who ruled Spain with an iron fist from the end of the 1936-39 civil war until his death in 1975, is buried in an imposing basilica carved into a mountain-face just 50 kilometres outside of Madrid.

Built by Franco's regime between 1940 and 1959 -- in part by the forced labour of some 20,000 political prisoners -- the monument holds the remains of around 37,000 dead from both sides of the civil war, which was triggered by Franco's rebellion against an elected Republican government.

It was long used as a place to pay tribute to Franco on the anniversary of his death, but that was stopped by a 2007 law.



An Indian worker sits on a bench at a petrol pump partially submerged by flood waters after heavy rain in Guwahati in northeast Assam state, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Moaning about loud prayer call not blasphemy

Says Indonesian Muslim group

REUTERS, Jakarta

Indonesia's biggest Islamic organisation called for greater tolerance yesterday as it criticised a court that jailed a mother of four for blasphemy after complaining that a mosque in her neighborhood was too loud.

The 44-year old ethnic Chinese Buddhist woman, named Meiliana, was found guilty and sentenced to 18 months in prison by a court in Medan on Sumatra island earlier this week.

Senior members of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), a moderate Islamic organisation that boasts over 40 million members across the country, added their voice to a chorus of criticism denouncing the verdict.

"Saying the volume of the call to prayer is too loud, in my opinion, is not blasphemy," said Robikin Emhas, head of the NU's legal division.

"As Muslims, such opinions should be received as constructive criticism in a pluralistic society," he added.

Amnesty International has described it as "ludicrous", and an online petition calling for the woman's release had received nearly 100,000 signatures by yesterday.

Indonesia has the world's largest population of Muslims, and sizable Buddhist, Christian and other religious minorities, but the propagation of conservative and hard-line interpretations of Islam in recent years has fanned fears that the secular nation is becoming less tolerant.

There are hundreds of thousands of mosques across the vast Indonesian archipelago and most use loudspeakers to play the 'azan' or call to prayer, which lasts a few minutes. But many also play lengthy versions of prayers or sermons lasting over 30 minutes, which the Indonesian Mosque Council has deemed unnecessary.

India, China agree to expand military ties after defence talks

REUTERS, New Delhi

India and China have agreed to expand their military ties and enhance interaction to ensure peace on their common border, India said after a meeting between the old rivals' defence ministers.

Relations between the Asian giants were strained last year over a 73-day military face-off in a remote, high-altitude stretch of their disputed Himalayan border.

But the neighbours have over recent months been working on mending ties and visiting Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe told Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi this week that their countries' friendship dated back to ancient times.

On Thursday, Wei had extensive discussions with his Indian counterpart, Nirmala Sitharaman, the Indian government said.

"It was decided to expand the engagement between their armed forces relating to training, joint exercises and other professional interactions," the government said in a statement issued late on Thursday.

The ministers also discussed their border and agreed to implement "confidence building measures" to ensure the maintenance of peace, including the early operationalisation of a hotline between their armed forces, India said.

India and China fought a war in 1962 and the unresolved dispute over stretches of their 3,500 km (2,200 miles) border has clouded relations ever since.

But the two big Asian economies share similar positions on a host of issues including concern about US tariffs and Chinese President Xi Jinping and Modi agreed in April to improve relations.



China's Defense Minister Wei Fenghe shakes hands with his Indian counterpart Nirmala Sitharaman before their meeting in New Delhi on Thursday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Baghdadi alive

REUTERS, Cairo

Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in his first purported speech in nearly a year, has called on followers to fight on despite recent defeats, according to an audio recording posted on the group's media outlet.

In the 55-minute statement, Baghdadi congratulated what he described as the "striking lions" behind recent attacks in Canada and Europe and called on followers to use bombs, knives or cars to carry out attacks.

Baghdadi also offered greetings to Muslims for Eid al-Adha, a feast which is celebrated this week, suggesting the message was recorded recently.

Reuters was unable to verify whether the voice on the recording was Baghdadi's.

Islamic State, which until last year controlled large areas in Syria and Iraq, has since been driven into the desert by successive defeats in offensives by international allies in both countries.

Baghdadi, who declared himself ruler of all Muslims in 2014 after capturing Iraq's main northern city Mosul, is now believed to be hiding in the Iraqi-Syrian border region after losing all the cities and towns of his self-proclaimed caliphate.

The secretive Islamic State leader has frequently been reported killed or wounded since leading his fighters on a sweep through northern Iraq. His whereabouts are not known but Wednesday's message suggests he is still alive.