

NEWS IN brief

Xi to attend Russia summit, Kim invited

AFP, Beijing

Chinese President Xi Jinping will attend a regional summit in Russia next week, officials said yesterday, joining the prime ministers of Japan and South Korea at a gathering to which North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was invited. Kim has not confirmed his attendance in the September 11-13 Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok.

Mattis makes surprise visit to Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis met with top Afghan leaders during an unannounced visit to Kabul yesterday, adding his weight to a flurry of diplomatic efforts to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. His trip comes a little more than a year after President Trump unveiled a revamped strategy for Afghanistan.

Court rejects Lula's appeal on ban

AFP, Brasilia

A Brazilian Supreme Court judge on Thursday rejected an appeal by jailed former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to overturn a ban imposed by country's electoral court on running in next month's elections. Lula, who is convicted on charges of bribery, was the front runner in the polls.

Mass grave site found in Mexico

AFP, Coatzacoalcos

Mexican authorities discovered at least 166 bodies at a mass grave site in Veracruz state, prosecutors said Thursday, the latest horrifying find in a region hit by bloody drug cartel turf wars. Home to the city of Veracruz, one of Mexico's largest ports, the eastern state has a history of corrupt politics and grisly power struggles between rival cartels -- a toxic mix that has caused an explosion of violence.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (R), Iranian President Hassan Rouhani (C) and Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) join hands during a trilateral summit in Tehran, yesterday; rescuers carry an airstrike victim in Khan Shaykhun of Idlib province; and a protester in Turkey hold a placard demanding end to human sufferings in Syria.

PHOTO: AFP



'The hardest deal to make'
Trump admits ME peace tougher than he had thought

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump on Thursday admitted that bringing peace to the Middle East may be harder than he had thought, in comments to Jewish leaders marking the holiday of Rosh Hashanah.

Trump, who said in May 2017 that forging peace between Israel and the Palestinians would perhaps be "not as difficult as people have thought over the years," said Thursday he might have been wrong.

"All my life I've heard that's the hardest deal to make, and I'm starting to believe that maybe it is," he said in a conference call with Jewish faith leaders and the US ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, to mark the Jewish new year.

"But I will say that if it can be delivered, we will deliver it," he said, insisting that his team of regional envoys -- led by his son-in-law Jared Kushner -- "have made progress, believe it or not."

Trump stirred contro-



versy in the region when he announced he was moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, whose eastern half the Palestinians claim as their own capital.

More than 60 Palestinians were killed by Israeli gunfire during protests in the Gaza Strip the day of the inauguration of the new embassy on May 14, a ceremony attended by Kushner and his wife Ivanka, the president's daughter.

The Trump administration has also cut funds to the United Nation's Palestinian refugee agency and pulled out of the world body's human rights council, accusing it of anti-Israel bias. The US government has also ended some \$200 million in payments by USAID to the Palestinians.

RUSSIA-TURKEY-IRAN MEET IN TEHRAN ON SYRIA

Putin rules out ceasefire

Turns down Erdogan's proposal; leaders agree to 'stand against separatist agendas', eliminate IS and Nusra front

REUTERS, Tehran

The presidents of Turkey, Iran and Russia on Friday failed to agree on a ceasefire that would forestall a Syrian government offensive in rebel-held Idlib province which the United Nations fears could cause a humanitarian catastrophe involving tens of thousands of civilians.

Turkey's Tayyip Erdogan, Russia's Vladimir Putin and Iran's Hassan Rouhani, meeting in Tehran for a summit of key foreign players in Syria's war, agreed in a final statement that there could be no military solution to the conflict and it could only end through a negotiated political process.

But as Syrian government and Russian warplanes mounted air strikes in Idlib yesterday morning in a possible prelude to a full-scale offensive, Putin and Rouhani pushed back against Erdogan's call for a truce.

The Turkish leader said he feared a

massacre and Turkey could not accommodate any more refugees flooding over its border.

Putin said a ceasefire would be pointless as it would not involve Islamist militant groups it deems terrorists. Rouhani said Syria must regain control over all its territory.

Idlib is the insurgents' only remaining major stronghold and a government offensive could be the war's last decisive battle.

Tehran and Moscow have helped Assad turn the course of the war against an array of opponents ranging from Western-backed rebels to the Islamist militants, while Turkey is a leading opposition supporter and has troops in the country.

Their discussions in Tehran mark a crucial point in a seven-year-old war which has killed more than half a million people and forced 11 million to flee their homes.

In the final statement, the three agreed on the need to eliminate

Islamic State, the Nusra Front, and other groups linked to al-Qaeda and designated as terrorists. But there were other armed opposition groups who could join any ceasefire agreement, they said.

The communiqué also called on the United Nations and the international community to step up humanitarian aid to Syria and help in restoring basic infrastructure assets. Efforts must be made to protect and to create conditions for the safe return of refugees, it added.

Meanwhile, the fate of Idlib hung in the balance.

The United Nations Security Council met to discuss Idlib yesterday at the request of the United States, and UN Syria mediator Staffan de Mistura said there were "all the ingredients for a perfect storm".

"The dangers are profound that any battle for Idlib could be, would be a horrific and bloody battle," de Mistura said.

BRITISH WARSHIP MISSION TO SOUTH CHINA SEA

China warns UK over trade ties

REUTERS, Beijing

China warned yesterday that Britain ties were at risk unless it took steps to "rectify" the situation, after a British warship sailed close to South China Sea islands claimed by China, while a major newspaper said sealing a free trade deal could now be harder.

China was infuriated by the HMS Albion, a 22,000-ton amphibious warship, sailing near the Paracel Islands last month, calling it a "provocation". The Paracels are occupied entirely by China but also claimed by Vietnam and Taiwan.

China and Britain, which have talked of a "golden era" of relations, agreed last month to look at the possibility of reaching a "top notch" post-Brexit free trade deal that promises an important political win for the conservative government.

But the Royal Navy's mission in the South China Sea, one of China's most sensitive issues, risks undermining the relationship, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying told a daily news briefing.

There could be real consequences for Britain, the official China Daily newspaper said in an editorial.

Britain has long courted China for a post-Brexit trade deal, though any formal talks could not begin until it officially leaves the European Union next year and typically take many years to conclude.

'We live death'
A chronicler of Afghan loss is killed on live TV in Kabul blast

NY TIMES ONLINE

As he reported for years on the killing of civilians around him, the Afghan reporter Sami Faramarz grappled with the idea of mortality in a country where violent deaths are the overwhelming daily reality.

"We live death," Faramarz, a 28-year-old reporter for the Afghan channel ToloNews, wrote on Facebook in September 2016 after a double bombing in Kabul.

"Has anyone asked who are the luckier ones: those who die in terrorist attacks and leave this world, or those who are left living to see this oppression with their own eyes," he wrote in June 2017 after a suicide bombing inside a mosque where the poor were being fed.

This week his own death came, live on national television — the latest journalist to be killed while working to highlight the human toll of the war in Afghanistan, a 17-year conflict whose fighting is intensifying.

On Wednesday, Faramarz had finished his day's assignment: covering what changes might come with the arrival of a new United States envoy, charged with seeking talks to end the conflict. Then, news came of an explosion in the western part of Kabul. In the latest Islamic State attack on a civilian target, a suicide bomber had fatally shot the guard of a



wrestling gym, walked in and detonated his explosives.

Faramarz and his cameraman, Ramiz Ahmady, 23, rushed to the scene, where they reported live as young men in their wrestling singlets carried bodies off the bloodied mat and onto any vehicle they could find.

He was on air when the blast from a second, much larger explosion cut off the broadcast and killed them both, along with 24 others.

The reporter's last words: "The area is completely terrorized. I can smell blood here, and as you can see in the pictures..."

When the phones of Faramarz and Ahmady went silent after the second explosion, the TV channel's staff started a desperate search, hospital to hospital, in the hopes of finding their colleagues alive. Then the search expanded from morgue to morgue, until their bodies were found.

Thirteen journalists have been killed in Afghanistan this year. And in less than three years, ToloNews and its parent media company have lost 11 staff members to bombings. A minibus carrying workers home was targeted by a bombing in January 2016, killing seven.

JAPAN QUAKE
Hopes fade for survivors, toll rises to 18

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese rescue workers with bulldozers and sniffer dogs yesterday scoured through the mud to find survivors from a landslide that buried houses after a powerful quake, as the death toll rose to 18.

Around 22 people are still unaccounted for in the small northern countryside town of Atsuma, where a cluster of dwellings were wrecked when a hillside collapsed with the force of the 6.6-magnitude quake, causing deep brown scars in the landscape.

"We've heard there are people still stuck under the mud, so we've been working around the clock but it's been difficult to rescue them," a Self-Defense Forces serviceman in Atsuma told public broadcaster NHK.

"We will take measures to find them quickly."

An elderly woman in Atsuma told NHK: "My relative is still buried under the mud and has not been found yet, so I couldn't sleep at all last night. There were also several aftershocks so it was a restless night."

Around 1.6 million households in the sparsely populated northern island of Hokkaido were still without power after the quake damaged a thermal plant supplying electricity to the region.

Industry minister Hiroshige Seko said that number should be reduced to 550,000 households yesterday.

"It will take about a week" before the largest thermal power plant recovers, "so during that period, we are sending power-generating vehicles to hospitals," Seko told reporters.



Brazilian right-wing presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro gestures after being stabbed in the stomach during a campaign rally in Juiz de Fora, Minas Gerais State, in southern Brazil, on Thursday. Front runner Bolsonaro was attacked with a knife while campaigning -- but escaped with minor injuries, his son said.

PHOTO: AFP

ISLAMIST BACKLASH
Pak removes Ahmadi adviser from key role

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's new government cancelled the appointment of a renowned Princeton economist to its Economic Advisory Council, an official said yesterday, after a strong backlash against the choice of a member of the Ahmadi religious minority.

The failure of Prime Minister Imran Khan's government to resist pressure to drop economist Atif Mian reflects the increasing clout of hardline Islamists, whose parties won around 10 percent of the vote at the last election in July.

Faced with a looming balance of payments crisis that may force the country to seek a fresh bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), or other lenders, the government had picked Mian to join an 18-member council to advise prime minister Khan.

Aged 43, and a scholar in the field of finance and macroeconomics, Mian is regarded as one of the world's top young economists.

The prime minister's adviser on media, Iftikhar Durrani, confirmed that Mian's appointment had been revoked, while the government's main spokesman alluded to the pressure the government had come under from religious quarters.

"The government wants to move forward with the religious leaders and all segments of society, and if one nomination gives a different impression, then it's not appropriate," Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry said on Twitter.

Chaudhry had previously defended Mian's appointment saying: "Pakistan belongs as much to minorities as it does to the majority."

ATTEMPT TO END 'INDIAN MONOPOLY'

Nepal gets access to China ports

REUTERS, Kathmandu

China will allow Nepal the use of four of its ports, the Nepalese government said on Friday, as the landlocked Himalayan nation seeks to end India's monopoly over its trading routes by increasing connections with Beijing.

Winged between China and India, Nepal depends heavily on India for the supply of essential goods including fuel and the use of its ports for trade with other countries.

But Kathmandu has sought access to Chinese ports to reduce dependence on India since a prolonged blockade of its border crossings with India in 2015 and 2016 left the country short of fuel and medicine for several months.

Officials from Nepal and China finalised a protocol during a meeting in Kathmandu on Friday giving Nepal access to the Chinese ports of Tianjin, Shenzhen, Lianyungang and Zhanjiang, a statement from Nepal's Commerce Ministry said.

It said China had also agreed to allow Nepal use its dry (land) ports at Lanzhou, Lhasa and Xigatse as well as roads to these facilities. The arrangements will come into effect when the protocol is signed, an official said without giving a date.

Kathmandu says cargo through China will cut shipping time and costs

Beijing and Kathmandu are also in talks for building a railway link into Nepal

"This is one of the milestones because we are getting access to four Chinese ports in addition to two ports in India," Rabi Shankar Sainju, a commerce ministry official, told Reuters.

He said Nepali cargo from Japan, South Korea and other north Asian

countries could be routed through China which would cut shipping time and costs.

Overland trade is now routed mainly through the east Indian port of Kolkata which takes up to three months, officials said. New Delhi has also opened the southern port at Vishakhapatnam for Nepali trade.

Traders say the plan to connect the country with China could face issues due to a lack of proper roads and customs infrastructure on the Nepalese side of the border. The nearest Chinese port is also located more than 2,600 km from its border.

China is making fast inroads into Nepal with aid and investment, challenging India's long-held position as the dominant outside power.

Beijing and Kathmandu are also in talks for building a railway link into Nepal, constructing an electric transmission line and are conducting a feasibility study for a free trade agreement.