

NEWS IN brief

US closes Palestinian mission in Washington

US confirms closure of the Palestinian mission in Washington in the latest move against them by President Donald Trump, a Palestinian official said yesterday, denouncing it as a "dangerous escalation." The closure comes as Trump seeks to force the Palestinian leadership to negotiate as his team pursues a plan for Middle East peace.

Ball now in US court, says N Korean leader

A senior Russian official who met Kim Jong Un this week-end cited the North Korean leader as saying he did not plan any unilateral steps to denuclearise and was instead awaiting a US response to steps he already took, RIA news agency reported. Valentina Matvienko met the North Korean leader in Pyongyang on Saturday.

S'pore to return \$11m of 1MDB to Malaysia

A Singapore court has ordered the return of millions of dollars misappropriated from Malaysian state fund 1MDB in a cross-border financial scandal. Tan Rajah and Cheah, a Singapore-based law firm acting for 1MDB, said yesterday the Singapore State Courts "have granted disposal orders" in respect to the money totalling \$11.1 million.

China shuts down Christian church

Beijing officials have shut down one of China's largest "underground" Protestant churches for operating without a licence, the Communist government's latest move to ramp up control over religious worship. Around 70 officials stormed into the Zion Church after its Sunday afternoon service.



Police detain a supporter of India's main opposition Congress party, during a nationwide strike against hike in fuel prices, in Ahmedabad, India, yesterday. Inset, Rahul Gandhi (L), President of India's main opposition Congress party and his mother and leader of the party Sonia Gandhi (R) help India's former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to stand during the protest. Story on Page 16.



PHOTO: REUTERS

ALLEGED WAR CRIMES IN AFGHANISTAN

US to take tough stance against ICC

The United States will adopt an aggressive posture against the International Criminal Court, threatening sanctions against ICC judges if they proceed with an investigation into alleged war crimes committed by Americans in Afghanistan. President Donald Trump's national security adviser, John Bolton, was set to make the announcement in a mid-day speech to the Federal Society, a conservative group, in Washington yesterday. It will be his first major address since joining the Trump White House. "The United States will use any means necessary to protect our citizens and those of our allies from unjust prosecution by this illegitimate court," Bolton will say, according to a draft of his speech seen by Reuters. Bolton will also say that the State Department will announce the closure of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) office in Washington out of concern about Palestinian attempts to prompt an ICC investigation of Israel. Bolton's draft speech says the Trump administration "will fight back" if the ICC proceeds with opening an investigation into alleged war crimes committed by US service members and intelligence professionals during the war in Afghanistan. If such an inquiry goes ahead, the Trump administration will consider banning judges and prosecutors from entering the United States, put sanctions on any funds they have in the US financial system and prosecute them in American courts. "We will not cooperate with the ICC. We will provide no assistance to the ICC. We will not join the ICC. We will let the ICC die on its own. After all, for all intents and purposes, the ICC is already dead to us," says Bolton's draft text.

US-led force launches assault on IS in east

17 killed; UN warns of worst catastrophe in Idlib raid

US-backed fighters yesterday launched a fierce assault against a dwindling pocket of territory held by the Islamic State group in east Syria, a commander and a war monitor told AFP. "The operation to end Daesh's presence in this pocket began today, with the heaviest air strikes, artillery fire, and ground attacks in months by the SDF and the coalition," said Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman. Meanwhile, UN's new humanitarian chief warned yesterday that a large-scale military operation against the rebel-held Syrian province of Idlib could create "the worst humanitarian catastrophe" of this century. "There needs to be ways of dealing with this problem that don't turn the next few months in Idlib into the worst humanitarian catastrophe with the biggest loss of life in the 21st century," Mark Lowcock told reporters in Geneva. "The clashes will be fierce in Hajin because Daesh has reinforced their positions, but we will take control of it," the commander told AFP. "The Syrian Democratic Forces, an alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters, have been closing in for months on the town of Hajin in eastern Deir Ezzor province. Yesterday, they began an offensive for the IS-held town itself. An SDF commander said the assault, relying heavily on artillery and US-led coalition air strikes, had killed at least 15 IS fighters. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor said the IS death toll was at least 17. "Our forces today began attacking the last bastions of Daesh in Hajin, with intense artillery and air support," said the SDF commander, who spoke on condition of anonymity and used the Arabic acronym for IS.



WAR IN SYRIA

Sweden risks govt deadlock

Split in votes to centrist parties puts far-right leader in role of kingmaker after legislative elections

Sweden faces a political impasse after its mainstream centre-left and centre-right blocs virtually tied in an election on Sunday, while the far-right - which neither wants to deal with - made gains on a hardline anti-immigration platform. With nearly all votes counted yesterday, the ruling centre-left Social Democrats and Greens and their Left Party parliamentary ally had 40.6 percent of the vote, while the opposition centre-right Alliance was on 40.3 percent. That translates into a single-seat advantage in the 349-member Riksdag. The Sweden Democrats, a party with white supremacist roots, won 17.6 percent, about 5 percentage points more than four years ago. It was the biggest gain of any party and in line with conventional opinion polls but fell short of the 20-30 percent their leader Jimmie Akesson had predicted. "Most signs pointed towards the Sweden Democrats taking over the position as the second-biggest party in Sweden. But the expected ... bang did not happen," the liberal Expressen daily said in an opinion piece. The Sweden Democrats were beaten by Prime Minister Stefan Lofven's Social Democrats by a 10 percentage point margin and eclipsed also by Ulf Kristersson's Moderates, the Alliance's candidate for the premiership. "In some sense we're happy the Sweden Democrats didn't grow more than they did," Liberal Party lawmaker Allan Widman told Reuters. The Sweden Democrats' success follows a rise in popularity of other far-right parties in Europe amid growing anxiety over national identity, the effects of globalisation and fears over immigration boosted by conflicts in the Middle East and Africa. Senior figures in the mainstream parties headed into meetings yesterday to produce a strategy for forming a government. But the process could take weeks and possibly fail, with the Sweden Democrats vowing to sink any cabinet that doesn't give them a say in policy. "We won't participate in letting through a government which doesn't give us influence," Akesson said on local channel TV4. "On the contrary, we will do what we can to take down any such government."



Stefan Lofven Ulf Kristersson Jimmie Akesson

UK PM's party faces 'catastrophic split'

80 MPs ready to vote against May's proposals

British Prime Minister Theresa May's Conservative Party faces a "catastrophic split" if she persists with her proposals on Brexit, which 80 or more of her lawmakers are prepared to vote against, a former junior minister said. Such public criticism, a day after former foreign minister Boris Johnson described her Brexit plans as "a suicide vest" wrapped around the British constitution, indicates how hard it could be for May to get any Brexit deal approved. Steve Baker, a former junior Brexit minister who resigned over May's so-called Chequers proposals on Brexit, told the Press Association that May faced a massive problem at the September 30-October 3 party conference. If 80 of May's 315 lawmakers voted against a Brexit deal based on her proposals, the fate of the government and exit process would depend on the opposition Labour Party, because she would not command the 320 votes needed to dominate parliament. "If we come out of conference with her hoping to get Chequers through on the back of Labour votes, I think the EU negotiators would probably understand that if that were done, the Tory party would suffer the catastrophic split which thus far we have managed to avoid," Baker was quoted as saying. Other Conservatives have given much more modest estimates of the number of lawmakers who oppose her plans. While some Brexiteers are unhappy with her premiership, they see May as their best immediate hope of ensuring the UK leaves the EU. The UK is due to leave the European Union on March 29, yet little is clear.

BREXIT PLANS



French police is investigating on the scene where a man attacked and injured people with a knife in the streets of Paris in the 19th arrondissement on Sunday night. Seven people including two British tourists were wounded after they were attacked by the man armed with a knife and an iron bar.

Pak sitting on billions worth of 'dead capital'

Prime Minister Imran Khan yesterday said Pakistan is sitting on hundreds of billions of rupees in "dead capital" in the form of state land and rest houses and official residences built on that land. The premier took to Twitter to share figures extracted from data he received regarding 90 per cent of government-owned land in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the federal areas, and buildings constructed on the estates. According to figures cited by PM Khan, 34,459 kanals of the state-owned land is located in rural areas while 17,035 kanals is in urban areas. "Just the urban land with buildings is worth over Rs300bn!" Khan wrote.



Suggesting that this money could be used for other purposes of public interest, the prime minister said: "A country that has to borrow money to pay interest on its loans [...] is sitting on huge amounts of dead capital in the form of this govt-owned land with buildings." The loans that the country has been taking are burdening its future generations, Khan said, noting that the daily interest liability is a whopping Rs5bn. The premier's statement comes amid an austerity drive undertaken by the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf-led (PTI) government to try and cut down on expenditures.

Egyptian arrested after breakfast with woman

Saudi Arabian authorities have detained an Egyptian hotel worker who appeared in an online video eating breakfast with a female Saudi colleague, said the labour ministry, which also summoned the hotel owner for questioning. The world's top oil exporter is pushing a host of economic and social reforms, including ending a ban on women driving and opening up new sectors for women, in a bid to end dependency on crude revenues. But some conservative traditions have not been as quick to change in the deeply religious Muslim kingdom. In footage shared widely on social media, the pair eat breakfast at a desk and wave at the camera. At one point the woman, wearing a traditional black robe covering all but her hands and eyes, feeds the man a piece of food. A labour ministry statement on Sunday said an inspection team had visited the unidentified hotel in the western city of Mecca and detained the Egyptian for violations including working in a profession restricted to Saudis, without providing details. The hotel owner was also summoned "for failing to adhere to spatial controls for employing women", the statement added.

17 yrs on, workers still search for remains

Seventeen years later, more than 1,100 victims of the hijacked plane attacks on the World Trade Center have yet to be identified. But in a New York lab, a team is still avidly working to identify the remains, with technological progress on its side. Day in, day out, they repeat the same protocol dozens of times. At first, they examine a bone fragment found in the wreckage of the Twin Towers. It has yet to be matched to DNA. Cut and ground to a fine dust, the remains are then mixed with two chemical products that can expose and then extract DNA. But success is not guaranteed. "The bone is the hardest biological material to work with," said Mark Desire, assistant director of forensic biology at the Office of Chief Medical Examiner in New York. "And, on top of that, when they're exposed to things that were present at Ground Zero, fire, mold, bacteria, sunlight, jet fuel, diesel fuel, all these destroy DNA. So you could physically have a sample with very very small amounts of DNA there." The 22,000 pieces of human remains found at the site since the attacks have all been tested - some 10 or 15 times already. So far, only 1,642 of the 2,753 people who died in the attacks in New York have been formally identified. The 1,111 others have yet to yield identifiable information. Several years have sometimes passed without the lab adding a name. But no one is giving up. "These are all the same protocol that we had in 2001, but we were able to improve the process for each of the steps, out of necessity," Desire said.

9/11 ANNIVERSARY



Gunmen storm HQ of Libya's state oil firm

Two staff killed, 10 injured. Several armed men attacked the headquarters of Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC) in the capital Tripoli yesterday, killing at least two staff members, a security official said. In the first attack of its kind against the top managers of Libya's state oil industry, two of the gunmen were also killed and at least 10 NOC staff wounded, officials said. Security forces said they had regained control of the landmark-glass-fronted building in the centre of the city. The attack came less than a week after a fragile truce halted fierce clashes between rival armed groups in Tripoli, the latest eruption of violence in Libya, which has been in turmoil since a 2011 uprising toppled Muammar Gaddafi. Armed groups regularly block oilfields to make demands but the NOC headquarters had so far been spared the violence. The NOC provides the vast bulk of Libya's state income and, along with the Tripoli-based central bank, is one of the only state institutions still functioning well amid chaos. No group immediately claimed responsibility for yesterday's attack. But the interior ministry said in a statement initial indications showed the gunmen belonged to Islamic State, which has previously carried out attacks in Tripoli and other Libyan towns and cities. Gunfire rang out in the morning as security forces allied to the Tripoli-based government arrived.