

NEWSIN brief

Israel strike on Gaza border kills two

Two Palestinians were killed in an Israeli air strike on the Gaza border, the territory's Hamas-run health ministry said early yesterday, with Israel saying they had planted a suspicious object next to the border fence. A ministry spokesman said the bodies of two men had been taken to a hospital in southern Gaza.

US to take in 30,000 refugee in 2019

The Trump administration slashed its annual cap on refugee acceptances Monday for the second year in a row, saying it would take a maximum of just 30,000 in the fiscal year to come. That was down from a 45,000 limit in the year that ends on September 30 -- but higher than the actual number of refugees in the past year.

100 die in Nigeria flooding: agency

Nigeria has declared a national disaster after severe flooding left about 100 people dead across 10 states, the country's main relief agency said yesterday. Heavy seasonal rains have caused the Niger and Benue rivers to burst their banks, inundating communities, farms and trapping tens of thousands of people in their homes.

Poland banned from EU judicial body

Poland was banned Monday from the EU body representing the member states' judicial institutions over its perceived lack of independence after controversial government reforms. The European Network of Councils for the Judiciary announced it had stripped the Polish National Judicial Council of its voting rights.

Day of hope, tensions in Syria

Syria accidentally shot down a Russian military aircraft, killing all 15 crew members, when its air defences swung into action against an Israeli missile strike, Russian and Israeli forces said yesterday.

The Russian Ilyushin dropped off the radar over the Mediterranean moments after Turkey and Russia announced a deal that offered millions of people reprieve from a threatened military assault in northern Syria.

The Russian government stressed that the incident would have no impact on the fledgling Idlib deal, but warned Israel of reprisals and summoned its envoy in Moscow.

Russian President Vladimir Putin later downplayed the incident. "It rather looks like a chain of tragic accidental circumstances," Putin told reporters, rejecting any comparisons with the downing of a Russian jet by Turkey in 2015.

"An Israeli jet did not shoot down our plane," Putin said. There was no immediate word from Damascus, but the deadly air war sequence started when Israeli missiles struck the coastal region of Latakia on Monday.

Israel confirmed that it had targeted a Syrian military facility where weapons manufacturing systems were "about to be transferred on behalf of Iran" to Lebanese Shia group Hezbollah.

The Russian military claimed Israeli pilots had attacked Syrian targets by using "the Russian plane as a cover, exposing it to fire from Syrian air defences". Earlier in September, Israel admitted carrying out 200 strikes in Syria over the past 18 months.



The Syrian blunder came hot on the heels of a major deal announced by Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan after talks in the Russian resort of Sochi.

The two main brokers in northern Syria agreed to create a 15-20 kilometre-wide demilitarised zone along the line of contact between rebels and

regime troops in the Idlib region. That would be achieved by October 15 and would entail a withdrawal of all jihadist fighters from the area.

The demilitarised zone will be secured with the help of "mobile patrol groups of Turkish contingents and contingents of Russian military police," Putin said.

By the end of the year, transport routes between the key port of Latakia and Aleppo as well as Latakia and the major city of Hama must be restored, he added.

Iran, Syria welcomed the deal. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres yesterday welcomed the deal. Guterres called on all warring parties in Syria to cooperate in implementing it and ensure access for humanitarian aid to all areas of Idlib, where three million people live.

Guterres said he welcomed the agreement to "create a demilitarized buffer zone in Idlib region, which should avert a full-scale military operation and provide reprieve for millions of civilians," a UN statement said.

Three million people reside in the Idlib region, the last significant chunk of Syria still held by rebels. The UN had warned that a fully-fledged ground assault aimed at completing Damascus's military reconquest could spark the worst humanitarian catastrophe yet in a conflict that has killed more 360,000.

MALDIVES ISLAND SCAM

Yameen 'took gifts from developers'

The president of the Maldives appeared to accept lavish gifts from a billionaire developer who was later leased two islands in the paradise archipelago without bidding for them, a corruption watchdog alleged yesterday.

The claims -- including that President Abdulla Yameen directly participated in a multi-million dollar scam that helped developers skirt public tenders and acquire dozens of islands and lagoons -- come days before the strongman leader seeks re-election in the nation of 340,000 people.

Yameen, whose main political rivals are in jail or exile, has denied any involvement in the alleged island-leasing scam, which first came to light in a 2016 investigation by Al Jazeera.

His deputy and then-tourism minister Ahmed Adeeef who was accused of spearheading the scheme between 2014 and 2015 and paying off judges and politicians, was later jailed on multiple charges including corruption.

But new allegations of Yameen's involvement have been made by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, which gleaned fresh details from leaked government documents and other evidence it says implicates the president.

The global investigative journalism consortium says Yameen assisted with at least two dozen no-tender deals to tourism resort developers, and directly ordered one island be leased through a state-owned company.

Philippines storm toll climbs to 74

Florence leaves 32 dead in US

The death toll in Typhoon Mangkhut hit 74 yesterday, Philippine authorities said, as rescuers used their bare hands to sift through a massive landslide in which dozens were feared killed in the worst-hit region.

The typhoon, the most powerful to strike this year, smashed homes and flooded key agricultural regions in the northern Philippines before battering Hong Kong and southern China with fierce winds and heavy rain.

As Hong Kong gradually got back on its feet, residents from teachers to refugees mobilised to help clean up after Mangkhut, which smashed windows, felled at least 1,000 trees and sent skyscrapers swaying.

The violent storm killed four in China's southern province of Guangdong and the toll rose to 74 yesterday on the Philippines' northern Luzon island according to police, with that number expected to further climb.

Up to 40 people are still feared buried in the landslide in Itogon unleashed Saturday as the typhoon stalled over the area and dumped a month's worth of rain in a matter of hours.

"While I said there is a 99-percent chance that all of them are dead, there is still that one-percent chance," Itogon Mayor Victorio Palangan told AFP.

Meanwhile, rain-gorged rivers threatened further flooding on the storm-battered US East Coast Monday as the death toll from Hurricane Florence, now a tropical depression, jumped to 31.

Emergency management authorities in North Carolina said an earlier toll of 17 had risen to 25 since Florence made landfall Friday as a Category 1 hurricane, with its aftermath threatening further flooding.



Rescuers carry a body bag containing a landslide victim, triggered by heavy rains during Typhoon Mangkhut, in Itogon, Benguet province, yesterday.

UN'S MYANMAR PROBE CRIMES OF THE HIGHEST ORDER

A United Nations probe into abuses against the Rohingya committed by Myanmar's military, released yesterday, determined the level of brutality employed was "hard to fathom". Here are extracts from the speech delivered by Marzuki Darusman, chairman of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar in Geneva, as he unveiled the report.

MYANMAR MILITARY THE CULPRIT

"With a heavy heart and deep sadness we have drawn conclusions, on the basis of the facts, that we never expected would be as grave as they are. What we have found are not only the most serious human rights violations, but crimes of the highest order under international law.

"At the core of every incident and every human rights violation we examined was the extreme brutality of the Myanmar military (known as the Tatmadaw).

"The facts indicate that its operations are consistently and grossly disproportionate to any discernible military objective. It enforces a vision of a Bamar-Buddhist nation that dominates the other 135 officially recognized ethnic minority groups, in which the Rohingya have no place. Moreover, it has no incentives to work towards peace or to respect human rights. This lies at the root of Myanmar's human rights problems, which have been documented for decades.

"We have verified the destruction resulting from Tatmadaw operations in numerous sites across the three States. It is hard to fathom the level of brutality of Tatmadaw operations, its total disregard for civilian life. I invite everyone here to judge for yourself.

A STORY OF UNHEARD BRUTALITY

"The village Min Gyi (also known by its Rohingya name of Tula Toli) is etched in my mind. On the morning of 30 August 2017, Tatmadaw soldiers, accompanied by armed ethnic Rakhine and other ethnic minorities, descended on this Rohingya village, which is bordered on three sides by a river. Without notice, Tatmadaw soldiers entered by land, opening fire and burning houses.

"As villagers fled in the opposite direction, soldiers fired directly on people trapped between themselves and the riverbank. Many people were shot and killed. Those who could not escape were rounded up and separated by sex. The men were systematically killed. Children were shot, thrown into the river or onto a fire.

"The women and girls were taken in groups of five to seven to the larger houses in the village, where their jewellery was taken from them. They were beaten, and viciously raped. Many were stabbed and killed, along with their small children. The houses were then locked and set on fire with petrol brought by Tatmadaw helicopters.

"The destruction was complete. All the Rohingya houses and structures in Min Gyi were burned to ashes. All its inhabitants fled or were killed. Lists carefully compiled by Rohingya community volunteers in the refugee camps suggests that approximately 750 men, women and children died that day. All the interviewees identified Tatmadaw soldiers as the main perpetrators.

"This was not an incident of spontaneous inter-communal violence. The killing of civilians of all ages, including babies, cannot be argued to be a counter-terrorism measure. There can be no military imperative to rape women and girls or to burn people alive. It was a well planned, deliberate attack on a specific civilian population.

"Another feature of Tatmadaw operations is sexual violence. Its scale, cruelty and systematic nature reveal beyond doubt that rape is used as a tactic of war.

"During the 2016 and 2017 clearance operations, 80 percent of rape survivors who were interviewed by the Fact-Finding Mission said they had been gang raped, and of those, over 40 percent were subjected to mass gang rape.

"Many women and girls were physically and mentally tor-

GENERALS ACCUSED OF 'GENOCIDE'

A UN probe is calling for six members of Myanmar's military -- including its commander-in-chief -- to be investigated for 'genocide' against the Rohingya. Here is what we know about those the UN team has singled out as most responsible for the crimes.



Min Aung Hlaing Soe Win

MIN AUNG HLAING: Senior General Min Aung Hlaing is the most powerful man in Myanmar. As well as controlling all branches of Myanmar's military, he wields significant political might with three ministries -- defence, interior and border affairs -- reporting to him. Military men also fill a quarter of parliamentary seats, giving the armed forces chief an effective veto over any constitutional changes.

During the crackdown against the Rohingya, UN investigators say he was "well-informed of real-time developments" with "a full picture of what was transpiring, both on his orders and on his watch".

SOE WIN: A shadowy figure, Vice Commander-in-Chief Soe Win joined the military in 1980 and is known for his headline stance and reluctance to speak publicly. As the military number two, Soe Win was "heavily involved" with managing combat deployments in Rakhine, according to Amnesty International.

AUNG KYAW ZAW: Lieutenant General Aung Kyaw Zaw is the highest-ranking Myanmar military officer to be targeted by both US and EU sanctions. He commanded the Bureau of Special Operations from 2015 to January 2018, making him fourth in the chain of command in the Rakhine operations last year, according to NGO Fortify Rights.

The group also says he was "embedded...on the ground", increasing the likelihood that troops were acting under his direct orders. He was fired from the army in May this year for "weakness in serving duty", according to an army Facebook post, a move seen by many as an attempt to use him as a scapegoat.

MAUNG MAUNG SOE: The same fate awaited Major General Maung Maung Soe, formerly the chief of the military's Western Command, which includes Rakhine. He was reassigned in November to "inspect his responsibility over his weakness while working for Rakhine state stability", the military said, later declaring that he had been "purged" for poor performance. The US hit him with sanctions in December.

AUNG AUNG: The notorious 33rd Light Infantry Division (LID) is known to have played a leading role in committing atrocities against the Rohingya. Brigadier General Aung Aung is the commander and would have given orders for troops to target specific villages, Amnesty says. The US has sanctioned the 33rd LID.

THAN OO: The soldiers of the 99th Light Infantry Division, under the command of Brigadier General Than Oo, are implicated in the Tula Toli massacre in Rakhine's Maungdaw township. His soldiers rounded up hundreds of Rohingya to a nearby river bank and opened fire on them, according to the US Treasury. Women and girls were raped.

BREXIT STALEMATE

Tusk pushes for another summit

European leaders may need to hold an extra summit in November to clinch a Brexit deal and avert "a catastrophe" when Britain leaves in March, EU President Donald Tusk warned yesterday.

When European Union leaders meet this week in the Austrian Alps, they will discuss how to clear both the last hurdles to a divorce deal and to develop a plan for future ties, he said.

"We will discuss how to organise the final phase of the Brexit talks, including the possibility of calling another European Council in November," he said, in a letter inviting the 28 leaders to the informal summit.

The leaders who make up Tusk's European Council had been aiming to strike a Brexit deal at a scheduled October summit, but now seem to be on course to hold another last-ditch get-together in November.

This would still give the British, European and member state parliaments enough time to debate and ratify the terms before the end of March, when Britain would otherwise crash out without a plan.

"Let me recall that limiting the damage caused by Brexit is our shared interest. Unfortunately, a no deal scenario is still quite possible. But if we all act responsibly, we can avoid a catastrophe," Tusk wrote.

3 infants die every 2 mins in India: UN

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Three infants die every two minutes on an average in India due to lack of access to water, sanitation, proper nutrition or basic health services, according to a report by the United Nations Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation.

About 8,02,000 infant deaths were reported in India in 2017, the lowest in five years, but the infant death numbers still remained the highest in the world, followed by China at 3,30,000.

Dr Gagan Gupta, Chief of Health at the World Health Organization, however, said India is making good progress in tackling the causes leading to infant deaths through a number of government-led initiatives.

Indian villagers who have musical identities

Curious whistles and chirrups echo through the jungle around Kongthong, a remote Indian village, but this is no birdsong. It's people calling out to each other in music -- an extraordinary tradition that may even be unique.

Here in the lush, rolling hills of the northeastern state of Meghalaya, mothers from Kongthong and a few other local villages compose a special melody for each child.

Everyone in the village, inhabited by the Khasi people, will then address the person with this individual little tune -- and for a lifetime. They have conventional "real" names too, but they are rarely used.

To walk along the main road in this village of wooden huts with corrugated tin roofs, perched on a ridge miles from anywhere, is to walk through a symphony of hoots and toots.

On one side a mother calls out to her son to come home for supper, elsewhere children play and at the other end friends mess about -- all in an unusual, musical language of their own.



Children play and at the other end friends mess about -- all in an unusual, musical language of their own.

"The composition of the melody comes from the bottom of my heart," mother-of-three Pyndaplin Shabong told AFP.

"It expresses my joy and love for my baby," the 31-year-old said, her youngest daughter, two and a half years old, on her knee.

"But if my son has done something wrong, if I'm angry with him, he broke my heart, at that moment I will call him by his actual name," rather than singing lovingly, said Rothell Khongsit, a community leader.