

NEWSIN
brief

Trump names new US
ambassador to Saudi

President Donald Trump on Tuesday tapped John Abizaid, a top US general from the Iraq war who has studied the Middle East for years, as ambassador to Saudi Arabia. The 67-year-old wrote his master's thesis at Harvard University about Saudi Arabia, studying how the kingdom makes its decisions on defense spending, in a paper that won acclaim in academic circles.

Coalition air strikes
killed 38 in Syria

Air strikes by the US-led coalition have killed 38 people in an eastern Syria holdout of the Islamic State group on the Iraqi border, a war monitor said on Tuesday. Those killed in the village of Al-Shaafa on Sunday included 32 civilian members of IS families, including thirteen children.

25 separatists killed
in Cameroon

Twenty-five separatists were killed in fighting in a restive English-speaking region of Cameroon, security officials said yesterday. After years-long frustration at perceived discrimination, separatists launched an armed campaign last year for the independence of Cameroon's two anglophone regions, which they call Ambazonia.

Hezbollah leader's son
put on US terror list

The United States on Tuesday branded the son of Hezbollah's leader a "terrorist" subject to sanctions as it offered rewards to capture three militants in Lebanon with close ties to Iran. The State Department declared Jawad Nasrallah, the son of Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah, to be a "global terrorist".



Melania Trump
calls for firing
of national
security aide

US First Lady Melania Trump on Tuesday publicly pushed for the dismissal of deputy national security advisor Mira Ricardel -- a rare criticism of a senior administration official by the president's wife.

The rebuke -- via a brief statement from the first lady's spokeswoman -- came amid swirling speculation about a possible shake-up of President Donald Trump's cabinet following last week's mid-term elections.

"It is the position of the Office of the First Lady that she no longer deserves the honor of serving in this White House," Melania Trump's spokeswoman Stephanie Grisham said in a statement.

The Wall Street Journal claimed Ricardel had been fired and escorted out of the White House, but an administration official denied that to reporters. Ricardel reportedly battled with the first lady's staff during her trip to Africa last month, and was believed to be the source of negative stories about Melania Trump, according to the Journal, which cited unnamed sources.

After last week's mid-term elections, the Republican president was expected to make some changes as he prepares for the second half of his term in office.

Truce 'capitulating to terror'

Israel in turmoil as defence minister quits govt slamming ceasefire with Gaza militants

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman yesterday announced his resignation and called for early elections after a sharp disagreement over a Gaza ceasefire deal, throwing the government into turmoil.

Lieberman also said his party was quitting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition, leaving the premier with only a one-seat majority in parliament.

Elections are not due until November 2019, but Lieberman's resignation increases the likelihood of an earlier vote.

"What happened yesterday -- the truce combined with the process with Hamas -- is capitulating to terror," Lieberman told journalists in explaining his reasons for resigning.

"What we're doing now as a state is buying short-term quiet, with the price being severe long-term damage to national security."

He added later: "We should agree

on a date for elections as early as possible."

Netanyahu has defended Tuesday's ceasefire deal that ended the worst escalation between Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza since a 2014 war.

An official from Netanyahu's



Benjamin Netanyahu

Likud party hit back at speculation that early elections would be called and said the prime minister would take charge of Lieberman's portfolio at least temporarily.

Lieberman, a security hardliner, heads the right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu

party, which holds five seats in the 120-seat Knesset, or parliament.

The ceasefire held yesterday, but Netanyahu was seeking to combat criticism of the decision.

Beyond Lieberman's resignation, several hundred Israelis living near the border with Gaza protested on



Avigdor Lieberman

Tuesday night to call for further action against its Islamist rulers Hamas.

Hamas portrayed the ceasefire as a victory and thousands of residents of the blockaded enclave took to the streets late Tuesday to celebrate.

In a statement yesterday, Hamas called Lieberman's resignation a "victory for Gaza."

The Egyptian-brokered truce was announced by Gaza militant groups, including Hamas, on Tuesday.

A diplomatic source familiar with the agreement said it involved returning to arrangements put in place following the 2014 war, but warned: "The situation remains very precarious and can blow up again."

The violence saw seven Gazans killed in 24 hours as Israeli strikes targeted militants and flattened buildings, sending fireballs and plumes of smoke into the sky.

Sirens wailed in southern Israel as militants unleashed barrages of rocket and mortar fire, sending residents rushing to shelters. Around 460 rockets and mortar rounds were fired at Israel, the most ever in such a brief time period, the army said. In all, some 27 Israelis were wounded, three of them severely.



DRAFT BREXIT DEAL

UK PM faces cabinet test

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May hailed her draft European Union divorce deal yesterday but must convince ministers to back her plan amid open hostility from some of her own members of parliament who say it threatens the United Kingdom's unity.

Her minority government means May is the weakest British leader in a generation, yet she must try to get her Brexit deal, struck after months of negotiations with the EU, approved by parliament before leaving the bloc on March 29, 2019.

The deal has been denounced by both supporters and opponents of Brexit.

"I'm confident that this takes us significantly closer to delivering on what the British people voted for in the referendum," May told parliament. Britons voted 52-48 percent in favour of leaving the EU in 2016.

Brexit campaigners in May's Conservative Party said her deal was a surrender to the EU and said they would vote it down.

The Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) which props up May's government, said it would not back any deal that treated the British province differently from the rest of the United Kingdom.

Opposition Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn called it a "botched deal".

The British cabinet will meet at 1400 GMT and a number of senior ministers were expected to push back against the deal.

Brexit-supporting Conservative members of parliament (MPs) have made their unhappiness clear.

"If the media reports about the EU agreement are in any way accurate, you are not delivering the Brexit people voted for, and today you will lose the support of many Conservative MPs and millions of voters across the country," lawmaker Peter Bone said.

EU leaders could meet on Nov 25 for a summit to seal the Brexit deal if May's cabinet approves the text, Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar said.

For the EU, reeling from successive crises over debt and immigration, the loss of Britain is the biggest blow yet to 60 years of efforts to forge European unity in the wake of two world wars.

The ultimate outcome for the United Kingdom remains uncertain: scenarios range from a calm divorce to rejection of May's deal, potentially sinking her premiership and leaving the bloc with no agreement, or another referendum.

The government gave no immediate details on the Brexit deal text, which runs to hundreds of pages, although a statement to parliament was likely today.



UK and EU agree on draft Brexit deal

Brexiters say May has surrendered to EU

Northern Irish kingmakers caution May



Palestinians inspect a crater caused by an Israeli air strike earlier this week in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Lanka's 'Lord of the Rings' falls

AFP, Colombo

Among Sri Lankans, political veteran Mahinda Rajapakse earned the nickname "Lord of the Rings" thanks to his taste for gem-laden rings and an epic battle.

But the former strongman president lost his magic in his latest comeback bid.

Renowned and feared for his brutal ending of the country's prolonged Tamil separatist war in 2009, Rajapakse is a big believer in fate. With nearly every finger bearing a lucky gem, the 72-year-old consults astrologers even for political decisions.

But something went wrong when he agreed to become prime minister on October 26 after President Maithripala Sirisena sacked Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The strategy failed and the numbers in parliament did not add up. Wickremesinghe refused to leave the official residence, and the assembly voted Rajapakse's rival government down yesterday.

It was the latest blow for the politician who ruled Sri Lanka for a decade up to a surprise defeat in a 2015 presidential election.

Since then, Rajapakse and his family and allies have faced increasing legal and political pressure over fallout from the years in power. Several face legal action for corruption.

Rajapakse comes from a well-connected political family in the southern district of Hambantota. His father, DA Rajapakse, was a prominent independence activist and cabinet minister.

The younger Rajapakse studied law but at 24 -- before he had even qualified as an attorney -- he became an MP.

Using his expert espousal of conservative Buddhist values, Rajapakse became prime minister in 2004 and narrowly beat Wickremesinghe to the presidency a year later in their first showdown.

His two terms made him one of Asia's most controversial leaders. His name is feared by Tamils and his battles with the United Nations have become legendary.

Rajapakse ordered the military campaign to end the 37-year-old Tamil conflict in May 2009, although he has rejected allegations that at least 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed by government forces in the closing weeks of the civil war. More than 100,000 people died during the whole conflict.

But his action to end the threat from Tamil Tiger suicide bombers made him a hero among the majority Sinhalese community.

He might have been voted down in the most recent parliamentary poll, but few doubt that Rajapakse is consulting his astrologers about his next move.



Marie Antoinette's prized jewels up for auction

CNN ONLINE

Have you ever wanted to wear jewels fit for a queen? Now's your chance. Jewels that once belonged to Marie Antoinette, the last queen of France before the French Revolution, is going under the hammer today evening at Sotheby's in Geneva.

The jewels once belonging to the ill-fated queen include a diamond and pearl pendant estimated to be worth between \$1 million and \$2 million, a pearl and diamond necklace valued at \$200,000 to \$300,000 and a diamond double-ribbon-bow brooch valued between \$50,000 and \$80,000.

There's also a diamond ring containing a lock of the queen's hair. It's worth an estimated \$20,000 to \$50,000.

Sotheby's, the luxury dealer managing the auction, called the collection "one of the most important royal jewelry collections ever to come to auction" in a press release.

With the revolution raging, King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette plotted their escape from France. In March 1791, just months before her arrest, the queen placed a selection of her diamonds, rubies and pearls in a wooden chest, which made its way to Vienna.

Both Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were imprisoned and executed by guillotine in 1793. Their son died in captivity shortly afterwards at the age of 10.

"Their last surviving child Marie-Thérèse was released from three years of solitary confinement in 1795. Upon her eventual arrival in Vienna in 1796 she reclaimed her mother's jewels, which had been kept safe by her cousin, the Austrian Emperor," Sotheby's said.

CALIFORNIA INFERNO

Death toll hits 50

AFP, Paradise

Thousands of firefighters battled blazes in northern and southern California on Tuesday as body recovery teams searched the remains of houses and charred cars for victims of the deadliest wildfire in the history of the US state.

At least 50 deaths have been reported statewide so far from the late-season wildfires, and with hundreds of people unaccounted for, the toll is likely to rise.

Most of the fatalities have been caused by the so-called "Camp Fire" in and around the town of Paradise, population 26,000, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains about 80 miles (130 kilometers) north of the capital Sacramento.

"Today an additional six human remains were recovered, which brings the total to 48. All six of those remains were located in Paradise, and they were located within homes," Sheriff Kory Honea told a news conference.

Another two deaths have been reported from the "Woolsey Fire," north of Los Angeles.

Others escaped by driving through tunnels of smoke and fire as flames licked at their vehicles on gridlocked roads dotted with abandoned cars.

The "Camp Fire" has destroyed some 7,600 homes and 260 commercial properties. Battling the blaze are more than 5,600 fire personnel, some from as far away as Washington state and Texas.

The "Woolsey Fire," which also began on Thursday, has razed 97,114 acres (39,300 hectares) and has been 40 percent contained.

BOKO HARAM ATTACK IN NIGERIA

Militants kill 16; dozens missing

AFP, Kano

Boko Haram jihadists have killed at least 16 farmers and left dozens missing in the latest attacks in restive northeast Nigeria's Borno state, militia and residents said yesterday.

The civilian militia fighting the Islamists found 15 bodies in fields around Kazaa and Daraa villages, five kilometres outside the garrison town of Monguno on Tuesday.

A farmer was also shot dead while working near Gremari village, 13 kms from the state capital Maiduguri.

"Yesterday our members recovered 15 bodies from farms around neighbouring Kazaa and Daraa villages who were killed by Boko Haram on Monday," militia leader Ibrahim Liman told AFP.

"Another 35 people have not been seen and a search will continue today (Wednesday) to find them," he said.

The farmers were mostly from camps in Monguno housing people displaced by the nine-year Islamist insurgency.

Boko Haram has stepped up attacks on farmers and loggers in recent years, accusing them of passing information to the group to the military.



Members of the Sri Lankan parliament raise their hands at a session in Colombo, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP