

NEWSIN brief

No China base being built: Cambodia PM

AFP, Phnom Penh

Cambodia will not allow foreign military bases on its soil, strongman premier Hun Sen said yesterday, swatting away US concerns about a possible Chinese naval site near hotly contested seas. Rumours a Chinese naval base is under construction off Cambodia's southwest coast have been swirling.

Indonesia mosques spreading radicalism

AFP, Jakarta

Dozens of Indonesian mosques that cater to government workers are spreading radicalism and calling for violence against non-Muslims, the country's intelligence agency said yesterday. Its findings come six months after Surabaya was rocked by a wave of suicide bombings at several churches during Sunday services, killing a dozen people.

Russia didn't meddle in vote, Putin tells Pence

AFP, Moscow

President Vladimir Putin denied any Russian involvement when US Vice President Mike Pence asked last week about meddling in the 2016 election, Kremlin said. Dmitry Peskov told Russian television that Pence had "started the conversation with this subject" in a 10-minute talk with Putin on the sidelines of Asean summit in Singapore.

BITS OF HISTORY (NOVEMBER 19)

1942: Soviet Red Army troops began a huge counter-offensive against the Germans at Stalingrad in World War Two.

1969: The US Apollo 12 lunar module landed on the moon, carrying astronauts Charles Conrad and Alan Bean.

2005: Prince Albert of Monaco was enthroned, succeeding his father Prince Rainier.



Yellow Vests (Gilets jaunes) stand near a fire as they block a road during a demonstration against higher fuel prices near the oil depot of Fos-sur-mer, southern France yesterday. Inset, anti riot police evacuate Yellow Vests during the demonstration in Bordeaux.

PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP

May sticks to Brexit deal Says transition phase must end before 2022 polls

AGENCIES

British Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday vowed to stick to her draft European Union divorce deal as dissenting lawmakers in her own party tried to trigger a leadership challenge.

Since striking a deal with the EU on Tuesday, May has faced the most perilous crisis of her premiership with several ministers resigning, including her Brexit minister.

May has pledged to fight on, warning that toppling her risks delaying Britain's exit from the EU or leaving without a deal, a step that could thrust the world's fifth largest economy into the unknown.

"We have in view a deal that will work for the UK and, let no one be in any doubt, I am determined to deliver it," May said in a speech to Britain's premier business lobby, the CBI, to loud applause. "We are not talking about political theory but the reality of people's lives and livelihoods."

"While the world is changing fast, our geography is not: Europe will always be our most proximate goods market, and ensuring we have free-flowing borders is crucial," May

said, citing the importance of the automotive industry.

The EU is due to hold a summit to discuss the draft deal on November 25. Some Brexit-supporting ministers are reported to want to rewrite parts of it, though Germany has ruled this out.

The EU's Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier, said the draft deal was "fair and balanced".

May said she wanted any Brexit transition, during which Britain will remain a member in all but name, to have ended by the time of the next national election, due in 2022, reported Reuters.

Meanwhile, European ministers signed off draft divorce deal yesterday as they launched an intense final week of negotiations on future cross-Channel ties.

Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier and the Union's Austrian rotating presidency said the negotiated text would be presented to EU leaders at a signing summit on Sunday, reported AFP.

More than two years after the United Kingdom voted to leave the EU, it is still unclear how, on what terms or even if it will leave as planned on March 29, 2019.

EU ministers agree to terms of divorce

Rebel lawmakers trying to force no confidence vote



Maldives set to pull out of China free trade deal Says senior lawmaker; Beijing remains mum

REUTERS, Male

The Maldives' new government will pull out of a free trade agreement (FTA) with China because it was a mistake for the tiny nation to strike such a pact with the world's second biggest economy, the head of the largest party in the ruling alliance said.

It is the latest sign of a backlash against China in the Maldives, best-known for its luxury resorts on palm-fringed coral islands.

"The trade imbalance between China and the Maldives is so huge that nobody would think of an FTA between such parties," said Mohamed Nasheed, the chief of the Maldivian Democratic Party, which leads the ruling federal alliance. "China is not buying anything from us. It is a one-way treaty."

On Saturday, as he took office, the new President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih declared the state coffers have been "looted" and warned that

the country was in financial difficulty after racking up debt with Chinese lenders.

Former President Abdullah Yameen, who lost the election in September, signed the FTA during a visit to Beijing in December, and the same month his parliament ratified the treaty despite opposition protests that he had rushed through the 1,000-page document in less than an hour without any debate.

Nasheed, now an advisor to Solih, said parliament would not pass the law changes required for the zero tariffs agreement to come into force.

"It was ratified by parliament, but fortunately it calls for different sets of legislation. We are not going to have this further legislation. We can't go with that," Nasheed told Reuters in an interview in the capital Male.

China's embassy in Male did not respond to a request for a comment.

Ex-president signed deal in December

New President Solih declares state coffers have been 'looted'

Maldivian

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federal alliance. "China is not buying anything from us. It is a one-way treaty."

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Pro-democracy activists pose outside a court in Hong Kong, China yesterday. Three leading Hong Kong democracy campaigners pleaded not guilty to public nuisance charges over their involvement in massive rallies calling for political reform, as room for opposition in the semi-autonomous city shrinks under an assertive China.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Israel avoids snap polls for now

Key minister says he won't quit govt

AFP, Jerusalem

A key Israeli minister said yesterday he will not quit Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition for now despite sharp disagreements, potentially ending a crisis that has threatened to topple the government and provoke snap polls.

The announcement by Education Minister Naftali Bennett was a dramatic climbdown from his Jewish Home party's earlier threat to leave Netanyahu's coalition if he was not named defence minister.

Netanyahu has refused to give the post to Bennett, one of his main political rivals, despite the coalition crisis.

Bennett, whose far-right party holds eight seats in parliament, said he would give Netanyahu time to correct course on a range of issues.

"If the prime minister is serious in his intentions, and I want to believe his words from last night, I am saying here to the prime minister we are removing at this moment all of our political demands and will help you in the huge mission of making Israel win again," Bennett said in a statement to journalists broadcast live on television.

He acknowledged the backlash he may face for backing down from the earlier ultimatum.

"I know I'll pay a political price -- not the end of the world, you win some, you lose some," Bennett said.

"It's better that the prime minister beats me in a political battle than (Hamas leader Ismail) Haniya beats Israel."

Bennett's comments followed an impassioned address to the nation on Sunday night by Netanyahu.

In the address, Netanyahu said he would retain the defence portfolio for now and seek to convince coalition partners to remain in the government.

Pakistan doesn't care about US

Says Trump defending military aid cut; Imran Khan hits back

AGENCIES

President Donald Trump on Sunday defended his administration's decision to stop hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid to Pakistan, saying the country does not do "a damn thing" for the US and its government had helped al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden hide near its garrison city.

Referring to Laden and his former compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, Trump in an interview to Fox News said, "You know, living - think of this - living in Pakistan, beautifully in Pakistan in what I guess they considered a nice mansion, I don't know, I've seen nicer."

The compound was demolished shortly after US Naval Special Warfare Development Group forces, in a daring helicopter raid, killed Laden there in 2011.

"But living in Pakistan right next to the military academy everybody in Pakistan knew he was there," he added.

"And we give Pakistan \$1.3 billion a year. ... (Laden) lived in Pakistan, we're supporting Pakistan, we're giving them \$1.3 billion a year -- which we don't give them anymore, by the way, I ended it because they don't do anything for us, they don't do a damn thing for us," he said.

Meanwhile, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan yesterday lashed out at Trump following his remarks, reported Reuters.

"Instead of making Pakistan a scapegoat for their failures, the US should do a serious assessment of why, despite 140,000 Nato troops plus 250,000 Afghan troops & reportedly \$1 trillion spent on war in Afghanistan, the Taliban today are stronger than before," Khan tweeted.

Saudi King Salman silent on Khashoggi murder

Germany bans 18 suspects from much of Europe

AGENCIES

Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz has addressed the kingdom's Shura Council but failed to mention the case of murdered Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Speaking to the council in a televised address yesterday, the king lauded his country's judiciary and public prosecution for "carrying out their duty in the service of justice", without directly invoking the killing of Khashoggi.

Last week, Saudi prosecutors announced they would push for the death penalty for five suspects in connection to the murder of the Saudi journalist, who was killed in the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul on October 2.

In the highly anticipated speech, the king reiterated his support for the UN's efforts to end the war in Yemen and said that the

Palestinian issue was a "top priority for the kingdom". He also said that Riyadh supported a political solution in Syria, ensuring the return of Syrian refugees to their homeland.

Commenting on the address, Marwan Kaballan, director of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, told Al Jazeera that the king appeared to indirectly mention the Khashoggi case in his speech.

"At the end of his speech, it was really indicative when he talked about the judicial system of Saudi Arabia. It seemed like an indirect reference to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi," Kaballan said.

Meanwhile, Germany has issued entry bans for 18 Saudi citizens suspected of involvement in the killing of Khashoggi, effectively banning them from the European Union's passport-free Schengen zone, reported Reuters.



SHURA ADDRESS

Global fight against malaria stalled: WHO

AFP, Maputo

The World Health Organisation yesterday said global efforts to fight malaria have hit a plateau as it reported there were more cases of the killer disease in 2017 than the previous year.

The latest WHO report showed that the number of malaria cases climbed to 219 million last year, two million higher than 2016, while international funding has declined.

"The world faces a new reality," WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, warned as the UN agency launched the new report.

"As progress stagnates, we are at risk of squandering years of toil, investment and success in reducing the number of people suffering from the disease," the WHO chief said.

Malaria, which is spread to people through the bites of infected female mosquitoes, occurs in 91 countries but about 90 percent of the cases and deaths are in sub-Saharan Africa.

Foreign funding to some of the most affected countries has declined, in certain instances by more than 20 percent for every individual at risk of contracting the disease.

"A considerable proportion of people at risk of infection are not being protected, including pregnant women and children in Africa," the WHO chief said.

The disease killed 435,000 people last year, the majority of them children under five in Africa.

Another constraint in fighting malaria has been mosquitoes building up resistance to some commonly used insecticides, according to the report.

World powers clash over chem watchdog's new role

AFP, The Hague

World powers yesterday traded accusations of hypocrisy in bitter clashes over the global toxic weapons watchdog's new ability to attribute blame for attacks like those in Syria and Salisbury.

The United States and Britain went head-to-head with Russia, China and Syria over the boosted powers that members agreed to give the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in June.

At a tense meeting in The Hague, Moscow and Beijing were accused of trying to stall the watchdog's new role indefinitely by proposing that the changes be subjected to "open ended" scrutiny before going live.

US Ambassador Kenneth Ward said Russia's claims that the OPCW's new powers were illegitimate were "pungent hypocrisy", and warned against allowing a "new era of chemical weapons use to take hold".

"What have they done for the last few years but to connive with their Syrian ally to bury the truth of what has happened in Syria, along with the dead killed by the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime," Ward said.

"And as if that wasn't bad enough, Salisbury comes along."

The West pushed through the new powers after a string of chemical attacks in Syria, as well as a nerve agent attack on Russian former double agent Sergei Skripal in the British city of Salisbury in March.

Britain accused Russia of carrying out the attack using a Soviet-era chemical called Novichok and the West has since imposed a series of sanctions on Moscow.

British envoy to the OPCW Peter Wilson called any attempt to limit the watchdog's power to attribute blame for chemical attacks "unacceptable".

But Russia's envoy Alexander Shulgin hit back, saying that Western claims of chemical weapons use by Damascus and Moscow were a "scam" and "out and out lies".

He added that Russia had a "principled position regarding the illegitimacy" of the new investigative powers, adding that they "infringe on the properties of the UN Security Council", where Russia has a veto.

Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad meanwhile launched a fierce broadside at the US and Britain.

US, Britain blame Russia for attacks in Syria, Salisbury

DEADLINE TO END AFGHAN WAR

No pact struck with US: Taliban

REUTERS, Kabul

A three-day meeting between the Taliban and the US special envoy for Afghanistan to pave the way for peace talks ended with no agreement, the militant group said a day after the diplomat declared a deadline of April 2019 to end a 17-year-long war.

Afghanistan's security situation has worsened since Nato formally ended combat operations in 2014, as Taliban insurgents battle to re-impose strict Islamic law following their overthrow in 2001 at the hands of US-led troops.

Leaders of the hardline Islamist group met US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad at their political headquarters in Qatar last week for the second time in the past month, said spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid.

"These were preliminary talks and no agreement was reached on any issue," he said in a statement yesterday.

Taliban leaders had not accepted any deadline set by the US to wrap up talks, three Taliban officials added.

The US embassy in Kabul declined to comment.

Khalilzad, an Afghan-born US diplomat authorised by US President Donald Trump's government to lead peace negotiations with the Taliban, on Sunday said he hoped to cut a peace deal with the group by April 20.

That deadline coincides with the date set for presidential elections in Afghanistan.

Two senior US officials confirmed that the second round of peace talks ended last week and the Taliban expected Khalilzad to visit Qatar for a meeting before the end of 2018.