

NEWS IN brief

US scraps UN meeting on North Korea rights
 AFP, United Nations
 The United States has dropped a bid to hold a UN Security Council meeting on North Korea's human rights record after failing to garner enough support for the talks, diplomats said Friday. The decision to scrap the meeting held every year since 2014 also comes as the United States is seeking a second summit between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Twelve killed in foiled Brazil bank assaults
 AFP, Rio De Janeiro
 Twelve people -- including five hostages -- were killed in northeast Brazil on Friday after police foiled a gang of armed robbers staging simultaneous pre-dawn assaults on two banks in the town of Milagres, officials said. The five dead hostages were members of the same family and included two children, the local mayor, Nielson Landim, told the Folha de Sao Paulo newspaper.

Myanmar activists jailed over anti-war protests
 AFP, Yangon
 A court in Myanmar's restive Kachin state has jailed three activists for defaming the military, their lawyer said yesterday, as campaigners slammed the "chilling warning" the verdict sends to critical voices in the country. Lum Zawng, Nang Pu and Zau Jet had helped organise an anti-war demonstration in April in the state capital Myitkyina to highlight the plight of thousands displaced by fighting between the military and ethnic Kachin insurgents. The youth leaders were sentenced on Friday to six months in prison and fined about \$320 each.



US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials detain a migrant woman and children, part of a caravan of thousands from Central America trying to reach the United States, after they crossed illegally with other migrants from Mexico to the US, at International Friendship Park, in San Diego, US, on Friday.

UN CLIMATE SUMMIT

Negotiations stall as deadline looms

REUTERS, Katowice
 Half-way through crucial talks to breathe life into the Paris climate deal negotiators haggled over how to share out the cost of curbing global warming and struggled to pare down a sprawling text.
 The two weeks of talks, which began at the start of the week, are billed as the most important UN conference since the Paris 2015 agreement on climate change. The goal is to meet an end-of-year deadline for agreeing a rule book on how to enforce action to limit global warming.
 By the end of Saturday, negotiators aim to have a simplified draft ready for high-level ministerial debate that starts on Monday.
 The challenge is to ensure any rule book agreed in Katowice is accompanied by ambition and to resolve deep rooted tensions between the developed and developing world over how to finance change.
 "We're in the initial period, so everybody is flexing their muscles. It's not the time for concessions yet," one delegate said on condition of anonymity.
 Delegates said a big issue was how to provide certainty for developing countries that promises of future finance from the richer world would be forthcoming.
 He said there were still around 800 brackets in the text, indicating points of disagreement, but that compares with nearly 3,000 before the talks in Katowice began.
 Territorial concerns have also complicated discussion.
 "There are many discrepancies about emissions reporting and monitoring, especially when it comes to sharing the data with other countries," one delegate said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

US sanctions are 'economic terrorism'

Iran seeks regional front saying US actions harming all

AFP, Tehran
 Iran's President Hassan Rouhani said US sanctions were "economic terrorism", as he sought to foster a united front from visiting regional officials yesterday.
 Addressing parliament speakers from Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Russia and Turkey, Rouhani said they had all suffered economic pressure from the US.
 "We are facing an all-out assault which is not only threatening our independence and identity but also is bent on breaking our longstanding ties," he said.
 Washington has reimposed an oil embargo and other damaging sanctions on Iran since withdrawing in May from a landmark 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and major powers.
 "America's unjust and illegal sanctions against the honourable nation of Iran have targeted our nation in a clear instance of terrorism," Rouhani said.

"Economic terrorism is designed to create panic in the economy of a country and fear in other countries in order to prevent investment."
 The conference in Tehran was a second annual meeting of parliament speakers focused on terrorism and



regional cooperation. The first was held last December in Islamabad.
 Most participating countries have faced harsh sanctions and other economic pressure as part of the Trump administration's use of trade as a diplomatic weapon.

"When they put pressure on China's trade, we are all harmed... By punishing Turkey, we are all punished. Any time they threaten Russia, we too consider our security to be endangered," Rouhani said.
 "When they impose sanctions on Iran, they deprive all of us of the benefits of international trade, energy security and sustainable development. And in fact, they impose sanctions on everyone.
 "We are here to say that we don't intend to tolerate such insolence."
 Rouhani warned Europe -- which has strongly objected to the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal -- that much is at stake in its efforts to bypass US sanctions and maintain trade with Iran.
 "They should know that by sanctioning Iran, they would harm our ability to fight drugs and terrorism," Rouhani said, referring to Iran's efforts to combat smuggling, particularly from Afghanistan.

Yemen govt says rebels 'not serious' at UN talks

AFP, Rimbo
 A Yemeni government official yesterday said that Huthi rebels were "not serious" on finding common ground to end the devastating war, three days into UN-brokered talks in Sweden.
 Nearly four years into a war that has pushed 14 million Yemenis to the brink of starvation, the Saudi-backed government of Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi and Huthi rebels, linked to Riyadh's archrival Iran, are in the rural town of Rimbo for what UN officials expect will be a week of negotiations.
 Government representatives, rebel spokesmen and UN Yemen envoy Martin Griffiths have all said the talks are not aimed at finding a political solution to the conflict.
 Both Yemeni parties have threatened to leave the talks if certain demands are not met.
 Among the issues under discussion are the country's failed economy, potential humanitarian corridors, a prisoner swap, the reopening of the defunct Sanaa international airport, and Hodeida, the rebel-held city at the heart of an ongoing government

offensive.
 The government has held firm to its demand that the Huthis evacuate the western governorate of Hodeida, home to a Red Sea port that is the entry point for 90 percent of food imports to impoverished Yemen, and hand the area over to security forces.
 The rebels, however, refused that demand Friday.
 A government proposal to turn Sanaa international airport into a domestic airport was also rejected by the rebels Friday.
 Sanaa airport has been largely shut for three years, during which the Saudi-led coalition took control of Yemen's sea and airspace.
 The coalition accuses the rebels of smuggling arms from Iran through Hodeida and Sanaa airport. Tehran denies the charge.
 The Huthis, northern tribesmen who hail from the minority Zaidi Shia community, overran the capital and a string of ports in a territorial takeover in 2014.
 Saudi Arabia and its allies intervened to bolster the Hadi government's standing, triggering what the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

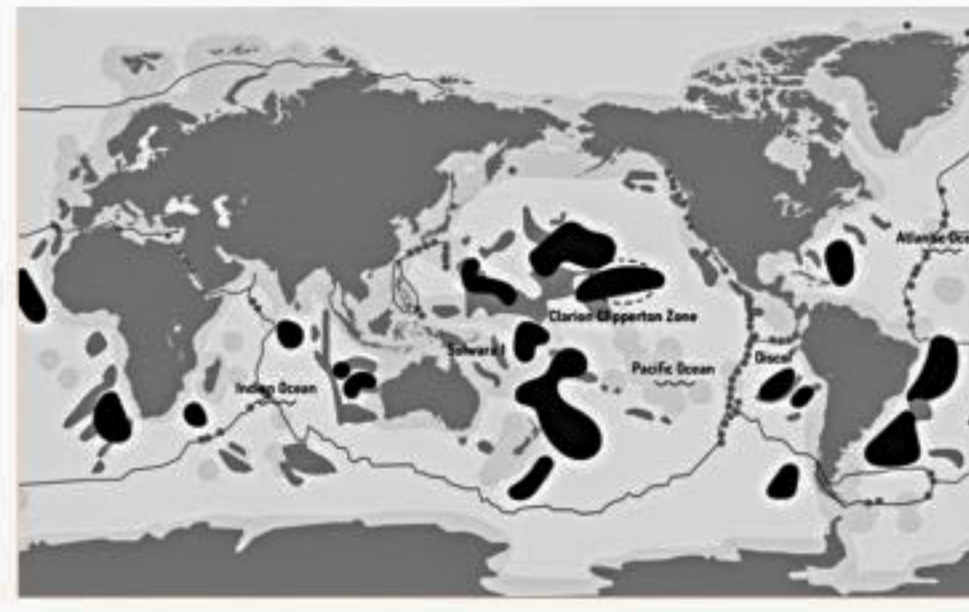
Houthis reject govt call to open Sanaa airport
 Rebuff govt demand for Hodeida withdrawal

The \$3 billion map

Scientists pool oceans of data to plot Earth's final frontier

REUTERS, London
 For experts in the field of ocean mapping it is no small irony that we know more about the surfaces of the Moon and Mars than we do about our planet's sea floor.
 "Can you imagine operating on the land without a map, or doing anything without a map?" asked Larry Mayer, director of the US-based Center for Coastal and Ocean Mapping, a research body that trains hydrographers and develops tools for mapping.
 "We depend on having that knowledge of what's around us - and the same is true for the ocean," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.
 With their deep craters and mountain ranges, the contours of the earth beneath the waves are both vast and largely unknown.
 But a huge mapping effort is underway to change that.
 The UN-backed project, called Seabed 2030, is urging countries and companies to pool data to create a map of the entire ocean floor by 2030. The map will be freely available to all.
 The project, which launched in 2017, is expected to cost about \$3 billion. It is a collaboration between the Nippon Foundation and GEBCO, a non-profit association of experts, which is already involved in charting the ocean floor.
 The end result would be greater knowledge of the oceans' biodiversity, improved understanding of the climate, advanced warning of impending disasters, and the ability to better protect or exploit deep-sea resources.
 So far, the biggest data contributors to Seabed 2030 have been companies - in particular Dutch energy prospector Fugro and deep-sea mapping firm Ocean Infinity. Both were involved in the search for the Malaysian airliner MH370, which disappeared in 2014.
 But mapping the oceans goes back much further, said Mayer - to 1903, when Prince Albert I of Monaco was the first to do it comprehensively. The rudimentary method involved tossing overboard a "hunk of lead at the end of a rope" to plumb the depths.
 Technology evolved after the second world war to using echosound reflections, but that produced only a "blurry picture", said Mayer.
 Today, high-tech multibeam

echosounders transmit a fan of acoustic beams from a ship, which ping back depending on the depth and topography of the ocean floor. That creates data points, which can be converted into a map.
 "With advanced sonar technology it really is like seeing. I think we've come out of the era of being the blind man with the stick," said Robert Larter, a marine geophysicist at the British Antarctic Survey.
 The advent of new technology such as underwater drones and robots is also speeding up the mapping process.
 Exploring Earth's final frontier will do more than satisfy scientific curiosity - it should bring economic benefits too.
 More than 90 percent of the world's trade is carried by sea, according to the International Maritime Organization (IMO), a UN body, making safe navigation a key motivator for mapping.
 Seabed 2030's map would have other benefits, experts said - in a warming world it would provide a better idea of sea levels as ice melts and, importantly, warn about impending tsunamis that could devastate coastal communities.
 They said it would also help the so-called "blue economy" as countries and companies seek to protect or exploit deep-sea resources - from exploring for oil and gas to installing wind farms or laying fibre-optic cables for the internet.
 That is predicted to become more important in the coming years, according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). It expects the ocean economy to contribute \$3 trillion to the world economy by 2030, up from \$1.5 trillion in 2010.
 Some parts of the oceans - the east coast of the United States, areas around Japan, New Zealand and Ireland - are relatively well mapped, experts said. Others, including the West African coast or that off the Caribbean, remain largely blank.
 Some countries, according to Julian Barbiere of UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, are reluctant to give up strategic proprietary data to the Seabed 2030 project, largely due to national security concerns or in areas with sensitive geopolitical tensions, such as the South China Sea.



Former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak and his wife Rosmah Mansor attend the Anti-ICERD (International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination) mass rally in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, yesterday. Tens of thousands of banner-waving Muslims rallied in the Malaysian capital yesterday to defend their long-cherished privileges, at a time of growing racial tensions in the multi-ethnic country.

Kashmir bus plunges into gorge; 13 killed

AFP, Srinagar
 Thirteen people were killed yesterday when a passenger bus fell 70 metres down a gorge in southern Indian-administered Kashmir, police said.
 The accident occurred as the bus carrying 26 passengers was negotiating a sharp turn on a narrow road in the mountains of Poonch, some 200 kilometres (120 miles) south of Srinagar, senior superintendent of police Rajiv Pandey said.
 "Thirteen died in the accident and the rest were injured," Pandey told AFP, adding three critically injured passengers were evacuated by air to a hospital in the city of Jammu.
 In India an average of 150,000 people die in road accidents each year.

ALLEGED REBEL CHEMICAL ATTACK IN SYRIA

US accuses Russia of lying to undermine ceasefire

AFP, Washington
 The United States and Britain accused Russia on Friday of fabricating a story about chemical weapons use by Syrian rebels and warned Moscow against undermining a shaky truce.
 Russia's defense ministry said rebels fired weapons containing chlorine on November 24 on the regime-held city of Aleppo, with Syrian state media reporting that around 100 Syrians were hospitalized for breathing difficulties.
 Russia responded to the purported attack with air raids on Idlib, the latest major stronghold of rebels and jihadists battling President Bashar al-Assad, throwing into question a truce reached in mid-September.
 The United States said it had "credible information" that the chlorine attack was false and that Russian and Syrian forces instead had fired tear gas.
 In a similar statement, Britain said it was "highly unlikely" that chlorine or the opposition were involved in the incident.
 Russia's embassy in Washington hit back

on Facebook.
 "The Russian Defense Ministry does not rule out that the US Department of State's allegations about the recent toxic chemicals attack in Syria's Aleppo are aimed at distracting the public attention from the crimes of the US aviation in the east of the Middle Eastern country," the post said.
 Russia's allegations over the latest incident came amid elusive efforts to find a political solution to Syria's civil war, which has killed more than 360,000 people and displaced millions.
 Negotiators from Russia and fellow Assad ally Iran met last week with opposition supporter Turkey in Kazakhstan's capital Astana, making no apparent headway in a UN-backed goal of setting up a constitutional committee by the end of the year.
 But Russia and Turkey agreed to keep working to preserve the U-shaped buffer zone around Idlib, which is keeping pro-government forces out of the region.

Myanmar court to hear Reuters reporters appeal this month

AFP, Yangon
 A Myanmar court will hear the appeal later this month of two Reuters journalists jailed for their reporting on the Rohingya crisis, a lawyer said yesterday.
 Wa Lone, 32, and Kyaw Soe Oo, 28, were found guilty under a state secrets act in September after exposing the extrajudicial killing of 10 Rohingya men during a brutal military crackdown in Myanmar's western Rakhine state last year.
 The pair -- who have been held behind bars for nearly a year since their arrest last December -- were sentenced to seven years in jail, a verdict that drew widespread condemnation, including from US Vice President Mike Pence.
 Lawyer Than Zaw Aung told AFP the date for the appeal hearing has been set for December 24 at the Yangon regional court.
 "It is difficult to say how long the appeal can take," he said, estimating that it would run for "at least two weeks", but could stretch to months.
 "We are hoping for their unconditional release."
 The reporters will remain in prison during the appeal process.
 The pair were investigating the massacre of 10 Rohingya men by security forces in Inn Din village, an atrocity that the military later admitted in a rare acknowledgement of wrongdoing.
 Myanmar's civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi has remained defiant in the face of criticism and insisted the case upheld the rule of law -- further tarnishing her image as a democracy icon after her silence over the military's actions against the Rohingya Muslims.