

NEWS IN brief

Maldives applies to rejoin C'wealth

AFP, Colombo
The Maldives has applied to rejoin the Commonwealth, reversing a policy of isolation under autocratic leader Abdulla Yameen who suffered a shock defeat in September. His successor, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, wrote to the 53-member bloc on Friday seeking readmission two years after Yameen pulled the atoll nation out of it, the president's office yesterday.

India, China to resume joint military drill

PTI, Beijing
India and China will resume their joint military drills after a one-year gap tomorrow in the southwest Chinese city of Chengdu to improve capabilities in fighting terrorism and promote mutual understanding, officials said on Sunday. The relations between India and China strained after both the sides were locked in a 73-day standoff in Doklam in the Sikkim sector of the border in 2017.

7 officials killed in Sudan chopper crash

REUTERS, Khartoum
At least seven local government officials were killed in a helicopter crash in Sudan's eastern al-Qadiriya state yesterday, state news agency SUNA reported. The state's governor and three security officials were among the dead. A number of people were also injured in the incident, SUNA said. It was not immediately clear what caused the crash.

BITS OF HISTORY (DECEMBER 09)

- 1917:** Turkish troops surrendered Jerusalem to British forces led by Viscount Allenby.
- 1987:** The first riots of the Palestinian uprising, erupted on the Gaza Strip.
- 1994:** The British government and Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Irish Republican Army, held their first formal talks for more than 70 years.



Supporters of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), a Hindu nationalist organisation, shout religious slogans during "Dharma Sabha" or a religious congregation organised by the VHP in New Delhi, yesterday. Thousands of Hindu monks and activists linked to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist party gathered in the Indian capital to urge the government to build a temple at the ruins of Babri Mosque in Ayodhya.

Brexit defeat could topple UK govt

Warns PM ahead of parliament vote
AFP, London

Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday warned that parliament's rejection of her Brexit deal could leave Britain in the European Union and bring the opposition Labour Party to power. The embattled leader's message came with her government fearing a heavy defeat tomorrow of the draft withdrawal agreement she signed with Brussels last month. Media reports said May is under pressure from her cabinet to delay the vote and fly to Brussels to secure more concessions ahead of a planned summit with 27 fellow EU leaders on Thursday and Friday. But Brexit Secretary Stephen Barclay told the BBC: "The vote is going ahead." May is facing her biggest crisis since coming to power in month after the nation voted by a 52-48 margin in June 2016 to leave the world's largest single market after 46 years. Her comments on Sunday are aimed at tamping down the headline Conservative Party revolt led by the likes of her former foreign minister Boris Johnson. But Johnson used a column in the Sun yesterday to argue that "the best way to get a great deal is to prepare for no deal" by rejecting May's draft. The European Court of Justice could inject still more drama into the Brexit endgame when it rules today whether Britain can unilaterally halt its split from the bloc. The ECJ could also decide Brexit can only be postponed or suspended by unanimous agreement of the other 27 nations. May has rejected the idea of putting the brakes on Brexit.

US 'can't give Saudi a pass' Crises cloud GCC meet

Says Nikki Haley; NYT says Kushner offered advice to Saudi crown prince after journalist's death

Qatar emir to skip summit with Gulf rivals in Riyadh; US urges Saudi to mend fences with Doha

AL JAZEERA, CNN
Nikki Haley, the outgoing US ambassador to the UN, has said the United States should not give Saudi Arabia a pass for the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Haley, who will leave her position at the end of the year, made her statements in an interview with US publication The Atlantic.

letting this slide. But Haley refused to point at Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman despite reports US intelligence agencies have linked the de facto ruler of the country directly to the murder of Khashoggi. Following the murder, Trump has

the Khashoggi murder. "It could very well be that the crown prince had knowledge of this tragic event — maybe he did and maybe he didn't," Trump said in a much criticised statement. His comments, however, were disputed by US Senators who said there was "zero chance" MBS was not involved in the Khashoggi killing after they received a briefing on the case by CIA chief Gina Haspel.

AFP, Riyadh

Qatar said its emir will skip a summit of Arab Gulf leaders in Saudi Arabia, which has spearheaded a boycott of the small but energy-flush neighbour and sparked a major regional diplomatic row. Riyadh was hosting the annual gathering yesterday as crises brew over the 18-month-old dispute with Doha, the war in Yemen and the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul.

Doha -- which announced this month it was quitting the Saudi-dominated OPEC oil cartel -- denies the allegations, but the dispute has dragged on. "Qatar has burned all the bridges enabling it to take back" its place within the GCC, Bahraini Foreign Minister Sheikh Khaled bin Ahmad Al-Khalifa said.

"You have Saudi government officials that did this in a Saudi consulate. We can't give them a pass, because that's not who America is," Haley said in the interview.

KHASHOGGI MURDER



refused to call out the Saudi leadership for its alleged involvement in the murder, despite US intelligence agencies reportedly presenting him with evidence of it. Last month, Trump said that the truth may never come out regarding

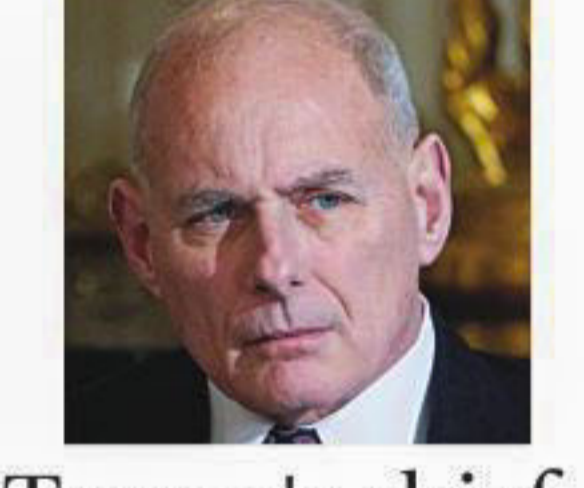
Meanwhile, CNN on Saturday reported citing The New York Times that Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser, Jared Kushner, advised Prince Salman "about how to weather the storm" following the death of Khashoggi. Kushner and US national security adviser John Bolton had called bin Salman nearly a week after Khashoggi went missing from the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, and amid an investigation into the journalist's disappearance, CNN reported in October.

The regional powerhouse had invited Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani to attend the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council talks, but the foreign ministry in Doha said he will not go. Instead Qatar will be represented by the minister of state for foreign affairs, Sultan al-Muraikhi, it said.

The GCC was formed in 1981 at the height of the Iraq-Iran war and two years after the Islamic revolution in Tehran sparked concern in Sunni-led Gulf states, many of which have sizable Shia populations, including in Bahrain.

GCC secretary general Abdullah al-Zayani has said the 39th summit in Riyadh would review ties with Iran after the US reimposed an oil embargo and other sanctions on Tehran.

The US has increased pressure on Riyadh to mend fences with Qatar as Washington wants Gulf states to present a united front against Iran. No major announcements were expected to come out of yesterday's summit.



Trump's chief of staff leaving at year's end

AFP, Washington
US President Donald Trump on Saturday announced his chief of staff John Kelly will soon be leaving the administration, the latest key personnel move at a time of mounting pressure from the Russia election-meddling probe that comes amid increased focus on preparing for the 2020 elections. Kelly, a retired Marine Corps general, was long rumored to be on the way out, amid reports that his relationship with the volatile Trump had deteriorated to such an extent they were no longer on speaking terms. Some Democrats suggested that Trump timed the announcement to distract from troubling legal filings Friday from the special counsel investigating Russian meddling. Prosecutors said Trump had directed his lawyer Michael Cohen to make illegal payments to two women to silence allegations of sexual affairs. The Kelly news reportedly was originally scheduled for Monday before the president made the impromptu announcement, speaking to reporters on the White House lawn. "John Kelly will be leaving at the end of the year," Trump said before heading to Philadelphia for the annual Army-Navy football game. "I appreciate his service very much." He said a replacement -- possibly an interim appointment -- would be named "over the next day or two."

Do not interfere in our politics

France tells Trump; Macron to address nation to quell unrest

AGENCIES
The French government yesterday urged Donald Trump not to interfere in French politics after the US president posted tweets about the protests rocking the country and attacked the Paris climate agreement.

Burned-out cars dotted the streets in several neighbourhoods yesterday morning as cleaners swept up the broken glass from smashed shop windows and bus stops. Nationwide, more than 1,700 people were detained -- over 1,000 of them in Paris as police vowed "zero tolerance" for anarchists.



A car burns during Saturday's protest in Paris. PHOTO: REUTERS

The news came after calls mounted for President Emmanuel Macron to bring an end to the "yellow vest" crisis gripping France as authorities in Paris and elsewhere counted the cost of another day of violent protests and looting. Authorities said the anti-Macron riots in Paris had been less violent than a week ago, with fewer injured -- but city hall said the physical damage was far worse as the protests were spread out across the capital.

What began as demonstrations against fuel tax hikes have ballooned into a mass movement over rising living costs and accusations that Macron, an ex-banker, only looks out for the rich.

Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said the unrest was creating a "catastrophe" for the French economy, with nationwide roadblocks playing havoc with the traffic and putting off tourists from visiting Paris. Macron is expected to address nation soon.

Overwhelmingly made up of people from rural and small-town France, the movement nonetheless includes protesters of various political stripes whose goals range from lower taxes to Macron's resignation. And the topic became cross-atlantic yesterday. "We do not take domestic American politics into account and we want that to be reciprocated," Jean-Yves Le Drian told LCI television. "I say this to Donald Trump and the French president says it too: leave our nation be." Trump had on Saturday posted two tweets referring to the anti-government protests. "Very sad day & night in Paris. Maybe it's time to end the ridiculous and extremely expensive Paris Agreement and return money back to the people in the form of

lower taxes?" he suggested. Trump had earlier posted: "The Paris Agreement isn't working out so well for Paris. Protests and riots all over France. People do not want to pay large sums of money, much to third world countries (that are questionably run), in order to maybe protect the environment. Chanting 'We Want Trump!' Love France."

YELLOW VESTS PROTESTS
Minister warns of economic 'catastrophe'
More than 1,700 arrested; mass destruction reported

'Time for Witch Hunt to END!'

Trump calls for Russia collusion probe to wrap up

REUTERS, Washington
US President Donald Trump on Saturday renewed his call to end a federal probe into Russian election meddling, describing the investigation as a "witch hunt" a day after US prosecutors detailed a previously unknown attempt by a Russian to help his 2016 presidential election campaign.

He repeated that contention later as he left the White House for the annual Army-Navy game in Philadelphia, saying, "We're very happy with what we are reading, because there was no collusion whatsoever."

core to its investigation that he obtained by virtue of his regular contact" with Trump's real estate company during the 2016 campaign.



"Time for the Witch Hunt to END!" Trump said in a message on Twitter. His tweet also quoted television host Geraldo Rivera, a Trump friend, dismissing any claim of collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia as "collusion illusion". It was the president's second tweet of the day about Special Counsel Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election and whether Trump's campaign colluded with Russia. Russia denies meddling allegations.

Democrats and other Trump critics fear that newly appointed acting Attorney General Matthew Whitaker, a Trump loyalist, could fire Mueller or undermine the investigation by cutting off its funding. Prominent Republicans in Congress insist that there is no danger of interference.

In his court filing on Friday, Mueller said Cohen told them he was approached in November 2015 by an unnamed Russian claiming to be a "trusted person" in the Russian Federation". The filing said the contact occurred during discussions about a possible hotel bearing Trump's name in Moscow.

"After two years and millions of pages of documents (and a cost of over \$30 million) no collusion!" Trump tweeted earlier on Saturday.

Moreover, Mueller said in one filing that Trump's former lawyer, Michael Cohen, had provided his office with "useful information concerning certain discrete Russia-related matters

WAR IN YEMEN

US help to Saudi-led coalition to continue

REUTERS, Abu Dhabi
The United States wants to continue support to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen's war and will remain engaged in efforts to combat Iranian influence and Islamist militancy in the Arab state, a State Department official said yesterday. Since the Oct 2 murder of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi at the kingdom's Istanbul consulate, the US administration has come under pressure at home over the nearly four-year-old conflict. The Senate last month voted to advance a resolution to end US military support, which includes arms sales and intelligence sharing, for the Western-backed Sunni Muslim coalition that intervened in 2015 against the Iranian-aligned Houthis to restore the internationally recognised government. "There are pressures in our system... to either withdraw from the conflict or discontinue our support of the coalition, which we are strongly opposed to on the administration side," said Timothy Lenderking, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Arabian Gulf Affairs. "We do believe that the support for the coalition is necessary. It sends a wrong message if we discontinue our support," he told a security forum in the United Arab Emirates. The United States last month halted US refuelling of aircraft from the coalition, which has been blamed for air strikes that have killed thousands of civilians in Yemen. The US official's reassurances of continued support comes as Sweden hosts the first UN-led peace talks in two years between the warring parties and as Gulf Arab leaders hold an annual summit in Riyadh yesterday, expected to discuss the war.

It's okay to make u-turns on promises

Says Mahathir
THE STAR ONLINE

It is okay for leaders to backtrack from their initial promises because even angels make mistakes some times, says Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad amidst criticisms over several "u-turns" in government policies lately.

Mahathir said sometimes people made mistakes and had to backtrack when they realise it would be wiser to do so. "Sometimes, we go the wrong way, we turn around but only if necessary. We are not perfect people. "Although most of us are angels, angels make mistakes. So, when angels make mistakes, they turn around," he said after the presidential council meeting here on Saturday. Dr Mahathir was responding to several reports, one of which is the suspension of



The National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPN) loan instalment scheme that was supposed to take effect on Jan 1. On the suspension, Mahathir said the government's decision came about following a public outcry. "There were many opinions from many people. Prior to the announcement, they didn't express it (their opinion). So, when we announced it, many people weren't happy. If we were to ask the opinions of the 33 million Malaysians, it would be quite a challenge. So, if they react negatively, we take that into consideration," he said, adding that a decision should be announced soon.