

NEWS IN brief

N Korea's Kim unlikely to visit Seoul this year

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is unlikely to visit Seoul in the final three weeks of this year, South Korean TV channel YTN said yesterday. There had been speculation about whether Kim would visit Seoul before the end of the year after Kim and Moon Jae-in agreed to the trip during their September summit.

NZ PM apologises over backpacker's murder

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern yesterday choked back tears while offering a heartfelt apology to the family of murdered British backpacker Grace Millane, as the man accused of killing the young traveller made his first court appearance. Ardern said there was a collective feeling of shame in the South Pacific nation over the fate of Millane.

Taj Mahal ticket price hiked for Indians

AFP, New Delhi

Authorities have hiked fivefold ticket prices for Indian visitors to the Taj Mahal, in the latest attempt to lower tourist numbers and reduce damage at the country's top tourist site. Indians make up the majority of the Taj Mahal's 10,000-15,000 average daily visitors.

BITS OF HISTORY (DECEMBER 10)

1995: Israeli soldiers quit the West Bank town of Tulikarm and a first contingent of PLO police moved in to Hebron as part of a handover to Palestinian rule.

1996: President Nelson Mandela signed into law a new constitution for South Africa, legally entrenching racial equality and consigning apartheid to history's dustbin.

1998: The International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia sentenced a former Bosnian Croat paramilitary commander to 10 years in prison, a judgment that was the first to deal exclusively with rape as a war crime.



Activists burn portraits of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte during a rally to commemorate the 70th International Human Rights Day near the Presidential Palace in Manila yesterday.

YELLOW VEST PROTEST

Macron set to offer fresh concessions

French President Emmanuel Macron was expected to offer fresh concessions to try to end the "yellow vest" protests that have rocked the country and taken a heavy toll on the economy.

Macron was set to address the nation at 1900 GMT yesterday after three weeks of anti-government demonstrations which again turned violent Saturday in Paris and other cities.

The stakes are high for the 40-year-old centrist, who has not spoken publicly about the unrest in over a week, leaving it to his government to try to tamp down the anger -- much of it aimed at the president himself.

Macron is facing a "moment of truth," the Parisian newspaper said in its leading headline yesterday, warning that if he fails to appease the anger, "France will enter a dangerous period of political instability."

On the economic front, the protesters' nationwide campaign of road blockades, coupled with the looting and vandalism seen during weekend protests in Paris and other cities, has dealt a heavy blow to the retail and hospitality sector.

France's central bank yesterday halved its fourth-quarter growth forecast to just 0.2 percent from 0.4 percent -- far below the 0.8 percent growth needed to meet the government's full-year target of 1.7 percent.

"We can't recover this," Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said on RTL radio yesterday. "That's the reality, for businesses, shop owners whose stores were damaged, vandalised or looted on Saturday."

Le Maire added that he was in favour of accelerating tax cuts in response to the protests -- one of the demands voiced during the past month.

UN adopts migration pact

Leaders from more than 150 nations agree accord spurned by US, other countries; Catholic Church welcomes deal

AFP, Marrakesh

A United Nations conference adopted a migration pact in front of leaders and representatives from around 150 countries in Morocco yesterday, despite a string of withdrawals driven by anti-immigrant populism.

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration -- finalised at the UN in July after 18 months of talks -- was formally approved with the bang of a gavel in Marrakesh at the start of a two-day conference.

But the United States and 15 other countries either opted out or expressed concerns, with some claiming the pact infringes national sovereignty.

Billed as the first international document on managing migration, it lays out 23 objectives to open up legal migration and discourage illegal border crossings, as the number of people on the move globally has surged to more than 250 million.

Describing it as a "roadmap to prevent suffering and chaos" in UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres sought to dispel what he called a number of myths around the pact, including claims that it will allow the UN to impose migration policies on member states.

The pact "is not legally binding", he said. "It is a framework for international co-operation... that specifically reaffirms the principle of state sovereignty."

"We must not succumb to fear and false narratives", he told an audience that included German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Panama's President Juan Carlos Varela and Greek Premier Alexis Tsipras.

He also said developed countries needed more migration due to their declining birth rates and aging populations.

Merkel launched an impassioned defence of the pact and multilateralism, saying her country "through Nazism brought incredible pain to humanity".

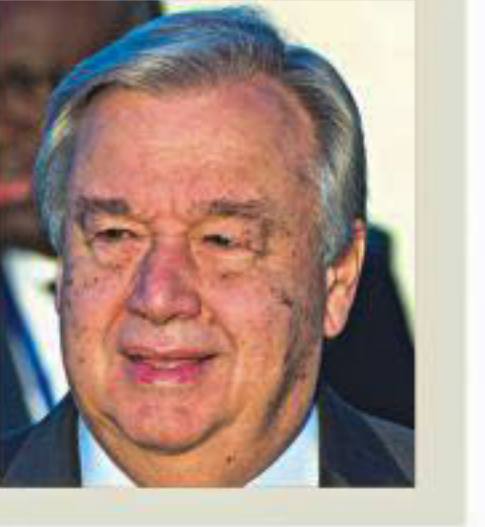
On Friday, the US hit out at the pact, labelling it "an effort by the United Nations to advance global governance at the expense of the sovereign right of states".

It was the first country to disavow the negotiations late last year, and since then Australia, Austria, the Czech Republic, Dominican Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia have pulled out of the process.

The pact has been welcomed by the Catholic Church as an important step towards addressing migrants' needs and reducing their vulnerability.

Developed countries need more migration due to their declining birth rates: Guterres

UN deal lays out 23 objectives to open up legal migration



Lanka's ousted PM sets deadline to end crisis

Vows to bring supporters to capital next week

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's ousted prime minister yesterday promised to bring tens of thousands of supporters to the capital next week for a massive demonstration unless President Maithripala Sirisena reinstated him imminently.

Ranil Wickremesinghe, whose dismissal in October plunged Sri Lanka into crisis, said he still commanded the support of parliament and Sirisena had until Friday to recognise that.

Sri Lanka has been trapped in a bitter power feud since Sirisena replaced Wickremesinghe with Mahinda Rajapakse, a controversial former strongman leader.

Parliament has twice voted against Rajapakse but Sirisena has refused to reinstate his former ally Wickremesinghe -- even if he has the numbers on the floor.

The country's Supreme Court is ruling this week on whether Sirisena's sacking of parliament in November was unconstitutional.

Wickremesinghe -- who is confident of a ruling against Sirisena -- said tens of thousands

of the party faithful would rally in Colombo if the president did not heed the court.

"After the court ruling, we will launch our 'People Power' campaign to force the president to end the crisis," he said in a statement.

Wickremesinghe has cobbled together a majority in parliament, which has twice voted against Rajapakse.

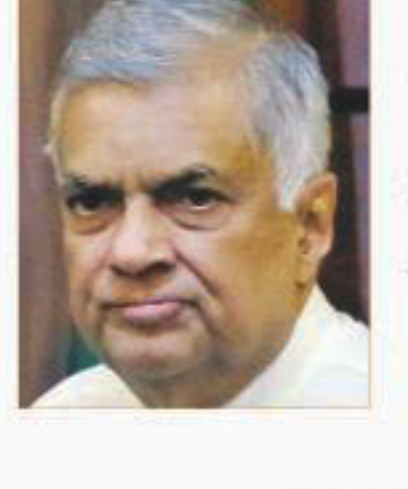
A court of appeal last week also stripped Rajapakse and his cabinet of their authority until he could prove his right to hold office.

The war-era strongman, backed by the president, has ignored parliament, and has named a cabinet and assumed the duties of prime minister.

But the 225-member legislature has blocked his office from spending any funds, worsening the acrimony between the factions.

The chamber has witnessed violence in recent weeks as the power struggle dragged on, with brawls between warring sides.

Last week, Wickremesinghe likened Sirisena to Hitler, his strongest comment yet directed at his former ally.



China slams 'inhumane' treatment of Huawei CFO

Distances Meng's arrest from US trade talks

AGENCIES

China yesterday ratcheted up its protest over the arrest of an executive of telecom giant Huawei on a US warrant in Canada, calling reports of her treatment "inhumane" as she seeks her release on bail for health reasons.

China's latest tirade over the case came as Meng Wanzhou, the daughter of the company's founder, was set to face a Canadian court's decision on bail later yesterday in Vancouver.

Meng's arrest on December 1 has infuriated Beijing, rocking stock markets and raising tensions amid a truce in the US-China trade war.

A Chinese vice foreign minister summoned the US and Canadian ambassadors at the weekend, demanding that the US withdraw its arrest warrant and warning Canada that it faces "grave consequences".

Meng, 46, faces US fraud charges related to alleged sanctions-breaking dealings with Iran, reported AFP.



In a 55-page sworn affidavit, Meng said she has suffered from severe hypertension for years and has been treated in a Canadian hospital since her arrest.

"I continue to feel unwell and I am worried about my health deteriorating while I am incarcerated," the document read.

Meng said that she has had "numerous health problems" during her life, including surgery for thyroid cancer in 2011.

"I wish to remain in Vancouver to contest my extradition and I will contest the allegations at trial in the US if I am ultimately surrendered," she said.

Meanwhile, Chinese state media yesterday denounced Meng's arrest, but did not link it to talks to resolve a trade dispute with the United States, reported Reuters.

"At present, it seems there has been a fragile adherence in China and the United States to not link the two," the influential Global Times newspaper said in a commen-



Maya Merhi (C) plays with her friends in a refugee camp at Serjilla in northwestern Syria next to Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey on Sunday. Eight-year-old Maya, born with no legs due to a congenital condition, had to struggle around the Syrian camp on artificial limbs made of plastic tubing and tin cans. Today, the girl can walk thanks to her new prosthetics after undergoing treatment in Turkey.

COP24 SUMMIT

US, Saudi rank last on curbing climate change

AFP, Katowice

The United States and Saudi Arabia rank last when it comes to curbing climate change among the 56 nations accounting for 90 percent of planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions, researchers said yesterday.

A large number of laggards means the world is dangerously off-track when it comes to slashing the carbon pollution that has already amplified droughts, flooding and deadly heatwaves worldwide, they reported on the margins of UN climate talks in Katowice, Poland.

"Only a few countries have started to implement strategies to limit global warming well below 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit)," the cornerstone target of the 2015 Paris climate treaty, according to NewClimate Institute and Germanwatch, an NGO.

Most governments "lack the political will to phase out fossil fuels with the necessary speed."

Global emissions of carbon dioxide (CO2), which accounts for 80 percent of global warming, will climb nearly three percent in 2018, scientists confirmed last week.

After holding steady from 2014 through 2016 -- raising hopes that humanity had turned a corner on climate change -- carbon pollution started to climb again last year, driven by increased use of oil, gas and coal.

Sweden and Morocco scored highest in the annual ranking, the survey showed, with Britain, India, Norway, Portugal and the European Union as a whole in the top tranche as well.

Other nations at the bottom of the list included Iran, South Korea, Australia, Canada, Russia, Turkey and Japan.

Heavy screen time impacts kids' brains

AFP, Washington

Researchers have found "different patterns" in brain scans among children who record heavy smart device and video game use, according to initial data from a major ongoing US study.

The first wave of information from the \$300 million National Institute of Health (NIH) study is showing that those nine and 10-year-old kids spending more than seven hours a day using such devices show signs of premature thinning of the cortex.

"We don't know if it's being caused by the screen time. We don't know yet if it's a bad thing," said Gaya Dowling, an NIH doctor working on the project, explaining the preliminary findings in an interview with the CBS news program 60 Minutes.

"What we can say is that this is what the brains look like of kids who spend a lot of time on screens. And it's not just one pattern," Dowling said.

The NIH data reported on CBS also showed that kids who spend more than two hours a day on screens score worse on language and reasoning tests.

The study -- which involves scanning the brains of 4,500 children -- eventually aims to show whether screen time is addictive.

Indian state polls could halt PM's winning streak

REUTERS, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is staring at election losses in big heartland states, polls show, suggesting that farm distress and a lack of jobs for growing numbers of young people could prove stumbling blocks for his re-election bid in May.

India counts votes today from five states that chose new assemblies over the past month, but exit polls show Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) could lose the three most important races, while it has little presence in two smaller states dominated by regional parties.

The loss would be the biggest for Modi's Hindu nationalists since they swept to power in 2014 general elections, followed by wins over the past four years in 22 of India's 29 states, on promises of thousands of jobs and a doubling in farm income.

Politicians view state polls, though they

are usually decided by regional issues, as a pointer to the mood of the BJP's traditional voting base, ahead of a general election that must be held by May.

"The results will set the tone for the 2019 election," said Sachin Pilot, a leader of the main opposition Congress party.

Congress is tipped to win in the western state of Rajasthan, scrape through in the central state of Chhattisgarh and is locked in a photo finish with the BJP in neighbouring Madhya Pradesh. Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh are among India's biggest states.

"The BJP has made a lot of tall claims about income, jobs etc," Pilot added. "They came out with 28 slogans, 'Swachh Bharat' ('Clean India'), 'Make in India' and such, but how many were implemented?"

Modi remains the frontrunner for the general election, however, trailed in personal ratings by his main challenger, Congress president Rahul Gandhi.

Farm distress, lack of jobs could prove fatal for Modi's re-election bid in May: exit polls

'I can't breathe'

Audio tape reveals Saudi journo Khashoggi's last words

AFP, Washington

Jamal Khashoggi's final words were "I can't breathe," CNN said Sunday, citing a source who has read the transcript of an audio tape of the final moments before the journalist's murder.

The source told the US network the transcript made clear the killing was premeditated, and suggests several phone calls were made to give briefings on the progress.

CNN said Turkish officials believe those calls were made to top officials in Riyadh.

Khashoggi, a Saudi contributor to The Washington Post, was killed shortly after entering the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul on October 2.

The transcript of the gruesome recording includes descriptions of Khashoggi struggling against his murderers, CNN said, and references sounds of the dissident journalist's body "being dismembered by a saw."

The original transcript was prepared by Turkish intelligence services, and CNN said its source read a translation version and was briefed on the probe into the journalist's death.

Saudi Arabia's foreign minister on Sunday meanwhile rejected demands to extradite suspects connected to the murder of Khashoggi as sought by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.