

NEWSIN brief

US sanctions top Kim aides

AFP, Washington
The US on Monday imposed sanctions on three North Korean officials as it called the regime's human rights record among the world's worst, in an abrupt shift from President Donald Trump's efforts to woo the regime. In actions required by Congress, the Trump administration said it would seize any US assets of Choe Ryong Hae, described as the right-hand man of leader Kim Jong Un, and two others over their roles in suppression of freedom of speech.

Militants kill four cops in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar
Suspected rebels attacked a police post in Indian-administered Kashmir yesterday killing four officers, police said, two days after soldiers killed two teenage rebels in the restive territory. In the latest incident of the region's bloodiest year since 2009, the assailants mounted a surprise attack in Zainpora village in Kashmir valley and stole four rifles. Militant group JEM claimed responsibility.

12 killed in attack on Afghan forces

AFP, Kabul
At least 12 people were killed, including 8 civilians, after a suicide bomber targeted a convoy of security forces in Kabul early yesterday, officials said, in the latest bloody Taliban-claimed attack in the Afghan capital. The blast took place in Paghman district in western Kabul.

1 killed in West Bank

AFP, Hebron
A Palestinian was shot dead by Israeli forces yesterday near the flashpoint city of Hebron in the south of the occupied West Bank, Palestinian officials said. Israeli police said a man was shot after his car "drove towards border police" at a checkpoint.

Noose tightens around May

EU rules out renegotiation as May tours Europe in desperate bid to save Brexit deal

AGENCIES
Embattled British Prime Minister Theresa May embarked on a tour of European capitals yesterday in a desperate bid to salvage her Brexit deal, a day after delaying a parliamentary vote on the text to avoid a crushing defeat.
May had breakfast with Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte in The Hague before heading to Berlin for lunch with Chancellor Angela Merkel, and was then to travel on to Brussels.
She is seeking "reassurances" over provisions in the EU withdrawal agreement concerning



possible. There is no room whatsoever for renegotiation but of course there is room, if used intelligently, to give further clarification and further interpretations."
MPs in the House of Commons were due to vote on the deal on Tuesday night, but May deferred it on Monday, admitting she expected to lose by a "significant margin".
Her spokesman yesterday said the vote would be rescheduled before January 21 -- just months before Britain leaves the EU on March 29.

New Brexit vote in parliament by Jan 21
Conservative rebels say May must go

Northern Ireland, which she hopes could persuade her rebellious Conservative party to support it.
European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker said ahead of meeting May that he was "surprised" at being asked for more talks.
"The deal we have achieved is the best deal possible, it's the only deal

EU President Donald Tusk, who was also to meet May in Brussels, has called a meeting of the other 27 EU leaders on Thursday to discuss the latest Brexit developments.
They and May were already due to attend a European Council summit on Thursday and Friday, which the British prime minister is expected to use to further press her case.
May faces strong opposition from her own Conservative MPs and parliamentary allies over a clause in

the Brexit deal designed to keep open the border with Ireland.
The so-called backstop risks tying Britain into a customs union with the EU for years after it leaves the bloc -- far from the clean break that eurosceptics want.
"I have heard those concerns and I will now do everything I possibly can to secure further assurances," May told mutinous MPs on Monday, after pulling the vote.
But it is far from clear what she can achieve.
Even if no deal is secured, Britain is still on course to leave the EU on March 29 -- a scenario the government has warned will be hugely damaging to the economy.
May's decision also drew outrage from MPs, who demanded the right to vote on the Brexit deal.
Opposition Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn is facing calls to table a no-confidence vote in the prime minister, but is holding off for now as the party believes May is likely to win.
Eurosceptic MPs in May's Conservative party also repeated calls for her to be replaced, with one warning it was time to "govern or quit".

No room for graft

Singapore charges forklift drivers over Sg\$1 bribes

AFP, Singapore
Two forklift drivers were charged in Singapore yesterday with accepting Sg\$1 (72 US cent) bribes and are facing fines of up to Sg\$100,000 and jail time, highlighting the city-state's tough anti-corruption stance.
The Chinese men are accused of accepting the small kickbacks from drivers on several occasions in exchange for not delaying the collection or return of containers onto their trucks, Singapore's graft-fighting agency said.
Chen Ziliang, 47, and Zhao Yucun, 43, are alleged to have committed the offences over several years at a shipping container depot in the affluent port city, which is a global trading hub.
"Bribes of any amount or any kind will not be tolerated," the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau said in a statement.
Anyone found guilty of corruption faces a fine of up to Sg\$100,000 (\$72,000) and a maximum jail term of five years, the agency said.
Singapore, a thriving business hub and financial centre, has consistently ranked in surveys as among the least corrupt countries in the world.
Its government ministers are the world's best-paid politicians, with salaries starting at Sg\$1.1 million, in what authorities argue is partly a bid to deter corruption.

Trump sees impeachment as a 'real possibility': CNN

CNN ONLINE
President Donald Trump has expressed concern that he could be impeached when Democrats take over the House, a source close to the President told CNN Monday. The source said Trump sees impeachment as a "real possibility."
But Trump isn't certain it will happen, the source added.
A separate source close to the White House told CNN that aides inside the West Wing believe "the only issue that may stick" in the impeachment process is the campaign finance violations tied to former Trump attorney Michael Cohen's payouts to Trump's alleged mistresses.
Prosecutors endorsed the allegation in a sentencing document for Cohen on Friday, in which they said Cohen should receive a "substantial sentence" for the crimes he committed, which included campaign finance violations for the payments to the two women, tax fraud and lying to Congress.



Impeachment talk has ratcheted up in recent days following a blockbuster filing from prosecutors in the Southern District of New York. In that filing, prosecutors directly alleged for the first time that Cohen was being directed by Trump when he broke the law during the 2016 presidential campaign.
Democrats are suggesting Trump committed an impeachable offense and could be sent to prison when his term in the White House is over. The incoming chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, Rep Jerry Nadler, said Sunday the allegations, if proven, would constitute "impeachable offenses."
Democratic Sen Chris Coons said Monday Trump could be indicted after he leaves office.
White House officials, at the moment, still don't believe special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into possible collusion will result in impeachment. Officials are also comforted by their belief that the campaign finance issue is not seen as enough to galvanize bipartisan support for impeachment.

Saudi, US snub unsettles talks

AFP, Katowice
The refusal of the United States and Saudi Arabia and Russia to embrace a landmark environmental report has unsettled UN talks to breathe life back into the Paris climate pact, negotiators and observers said.
It may also signal more direct involvement of Donald Trump's White House, they said, in the nitty-gritty of the troubled negotiations, which depend on painstaking consensus building.
A US side event Monday promoting coal, gas and nuclear energy, led by special advisor to the president Preston Wells Griffith, reinforced that impression.
"Alarmism should not silence realism," Griffith said. "We strongly believe that no country should have to sacrifice economic prosperity or energy security in pursuit of environmental sustainability."
Meanwhile, Carbon Action Tracker (CAT) yesterday



US, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Kuwait reject key climate report

Climate policies put world on track for 3.3C warming: study
reported that average world temperatures are on track to exceed 3.3C by 2100.
A bloc of 44 small island nations -- many facing an existential threat from storm surges engorged by rising seas -- called on the UN climate body to "welcome" a UN report on limiting global warming to 1.5C (2.7F) above pre-industrial levels.
Earth's average surface temperature has already risen by about 1C.
The motion quickly garnered "an avalanche of support" from more than 100 developed and developing countries, including the European Union, said Rueanna Hayne, a delegate from Saint Kitts and Nevis.
Unveiled in October, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) "special report" concluded that CO2 emissions must drop a quarter within 12 years to stay under 2C, and by nearly half to cap warming at 1.5C, seen as a safer guardrail against catastrophic extreme weather.
The United States disagreed with the motion. Kuwait, Russia and Saudi Arabia voiced similar reservations, and proposed that the UN climate body simply "note" the report, and not "welcome" it.
The issue -- unresolved -- was shelved.
Reaction at the 12-day talks, scheduled to run through Friday, was fast and furious.
"Saudi Arabia, Russia, Kuwait and especially the United States are rogue nations," said Christian Aid international climate lead Mohamed Adow.
Diplomats also slammed the US position.
"Denial doesn't change the reality that climate change is already happening and is even worse than we feared," said Hussain Rasheed Hassan, Maldives' environment minister and head of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS).

INDIAN STATE ELECTIONS

Farmers, youth, Dalits oust BJP

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

The defeat of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in assembly elections in the three Indian heartland states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan was the most severe since the party assumed power on the back of a landslide victory in parliamentary polls in May, 2014.
While BJP had been in power in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh for the last 15 years having won three successive assembly polls, the desert state of Rajasthan lived up to its billing as a political "revolving door" because it has not returned any incumbent party for more than one five-year term since 1993.
Three key reasons are responsible for the BJP's loss in the three key states -- (1) farmers' anger over sharply falling prices of foodgrains, rising input costs and drought (2) the Modi government's "failure" to deliver on the promises of jobs for the youth and (3) growing resentment among the Dalits. The Congress has successfully tapped into the discontent among the three important segments of the electorate -- farmers, youth and Dalits -- that led to the downfall of the BJP governments in these states.

Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan have a large agrarian population and the BJP's drubbing could be interpreted as farm, youth and Dalit unrest. The farmers' resentment mounted in Madhya Pradesh when nine of them were killed in police firing last year while protesting the agrarian crisis.



In the assembly polls dominated more by local issues and grievances, the BJP faced heavy anti-incumbency compounded by a widespread perception of corruption, inaccessibility and ministers and the large gaps between several welfare schemes for farmers and their implementation on the ground. The hugely unpopular demonetisation drive (scrapping of high-value currency notes of Rs 1000 and Rs 500) in November 2016 that badly hit the industries and a nationwide uniform goods and services tax (GST) also played a crucial role.
On the other hand, the assembly elections in the three heartland states were a crucial test for Congress President Rahul Gandhi and the results will undoubtedly cement his position as the top leader of the 133-year-old party to take on the BJP in a straight contest in the coming parliamentary polls. The win will also enhance 48-year-old's image as the main leader of an anti-BJP front in dealing with the more experienced, firebrand and ambitious politicians of regional parties like Mamata Banerjee, Mayawati and Sharad Pawar and some others.



Mobile gendarmes stand next to burning tyres as they try to remove a blockade of "Yellow Vests" protesters, yesterday, in Aimagues, near Montpellier, southern France.

PHOTO: AFP

'We can't continue like this'

French govt defends Macron's concessions; protesters defiant

AFP, Paris
Emmanuel Macron's government yesterday defended a financial relief package to quell the "yellow vest" revolt over taxes and living standards, hoping to end protests which have spiralled into violence in Paris and other cities.
Over 21 million people watched a visibly contrite Macron declare a "state of economic and social emergency" in a televised address Monday, promising billions of euros in aid for the lowest earners.
It was a stark retreat for the 40-year-old former investment banker, who until now had vigorously argued his tax policies and economic reforms were the only way to prepare France for the challenges of the 21st century.
The new measures, including a 100-euro jump in the minimum wage next year, are expected to cost

up to 11 billion euros (\$12.5 billion) -- and are likely to put France on a collision course with Brussels.
The government had already scrapped fuel tax increases set for January -- a core demand of the yellow vests -- which will cost a further 4.5 billion euros.
The country's deficit is likely to exceed the EU's mandated 3.0 percent of GDP limit at least "temporarily," Richard Ferrand, the parliament president from Macron's Republic on the Move party, told RTL radio.
Having "a stable France" is the priority as the protests expose deep social divisions while taking a heavy economic toll, Ferrand said, adding: "We can't continue like this."
Even so, the measures might not mollify enough protesters to call off road blockades and weekly demonstrations in Paris which

have seen fierce clashes with police and extensive burning and looting over the past two Saturdays.
Although some "yellow vests" were open to Macron's olive branches, others said they were not ready to call a halt to the protests.
"YELLOW VESTS' PROTESTS"



television after Macron's speech showed 54 percent wanting the "yellow vest" protests to halt, compared with 46 percent in favour of further action.
Prime Minister Edouard Philippe was to present the fine print of Macron's proposals to lawmakers yesterday.
Amid the protests, Macron's ratings have sunk, with a recent poll showing just 23 percent approved his actions.
Some protesters were quick to dismiss Macron's loosening of government purse strings, vowing to hold a fifth straight Saturday of protests in the capital this weekend.
"It's just window dressing for the media, some trivial measures, it almost seems like a provocation," said Thierry, a 55-year-old bicycle mechanic at a roundabout blockade in the southern town of Le Boulou.
The "yellow vest" movement which erupted via social media in October has enjoyed broad public support, but recent surveys suggest it may be waning.
An OpinionWay poll for LCI

Russia now 2nd-largest global arms producer

CNN ONLINE

Russia's arms industry has become the second-largest in the world, knocking the UK into third place, according to a new report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).
Russian companies in the SIPRI Top 100, an index of the largest arms-producing and military services companies in the world, made 9.5% of total arms sales in 2017.
The US ranks first, with 57% of total arms sales, and the UK was pushed into third with 9.0%.
SIPRI Top 100 contains 10 Russian companies that increased arms sales by a collective 8.5% in 2017 to \$37.7 billion.
"Russian companies have experienced significant growth in their arms sales since 2011," Siemon Wezeman, a senior researcher at SIPRI, said in a press release. "This is in line with Russia's increased spending on arms procurement to modernise its armed forces."
Russia ramped up investment in defense as part of an effort to update outdated military systems by 2025.
But Russian arms exports remain high and several newly enlarged companies have made it into the top 100, said Wezeman.
There are 42 US arms companies listed in the Top 100 -- they saw collective sales growth of 2.0%, to \$226.6 billion.
"US companies directly benefit from the US Department of Defense's ongoing demand for weapons," said Aude Fleurant, director of SIPRI's Arms Transfers and Military Expenditure Programme, in a press release.
Lockheed Martin maintained its position as the world's largest arms producer, with sales of \$44.9 billion in 2017, according to the report.