

NEWS IN brief

China to suspend extra tariffs on US cars, parts

China yesterday announced it will suspend extra tariffs added to US-made cars and auto parts for three months starting on January 1 as part of the trade war truce with the United States. Beijing raised tariffs on American-made cars and auto parts this summer by 25 percent in retaliation for US tariffs on \$50 billion of Chinese goods.

13 feared dead in Indian illegal mine

At least 13 miners were feared dead after being trapped by flooding in an illegal "rat hole" coal mine site in remote northeastern India, police said yesterday. Dozens of emergency workers were pumping water out of a large trench that was flooded early Thursday near a river in mineral-rich Meghalaya state. Despite a court ban, locals illegally extract coal using dangerous so-called rat hole mines.

SDF expels IS from east Syria hub

Kurdish-led forces seized the Islamic State's main hub of Hajin, the largest settlement in what is the last pocket of territory controlled by IS, yesterday. US President Donald Trump this week predicted the jihadist group would be fully defeated within a month.

BITS OF HISTORY (DECEMBER 14)

- 1911:** Norwegian Roald Amundsen and four others became the first men to reach the South Pole.
- 1918:** Women in Britain voted for the first time in a general election.
- 1939:** The League of Nations expelled the Soviet Union for aggression against Finland.
- 1995:** Leaders from former Yugoslavia signed a Bosnian peace treaty in Paris, ending Europe's worst conflict since World War.



A Palestinian uses a sling to hurl stones during clashes with Israeli troops near Ramallah, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Inset, A Palestinian woman shields her injured husband as Palestinian security forces try to disperse a rally of Hamas supporters in Hebron. Israeli forces kept up a manhunt yesterday for a Palestinian who shot dead two soldiers in the occupied West Bank. The Israeli military said it arrested 40 people. Pictures were taken yesterday.



RAFALE DEAL CASE

India's top court backs PM Modi

India's top court yesterday dismissed calls for an investigation into a French military jet deal that was threatening to damage Prime Minister Narendra Modi ahead of elections next year. Critics had accused Modi of using the 2016 multi-billion dollar accord between India and French aircraft manufacturer Dassault for Rafale aircraft to favour a key billionaire backer. In an eagerly awaited judgement on a slew of petitions brought by activists and politicians, India's Supreme Court refused to intervene, saying it had "no doubt in the process".

"We do not find any substantial material on record to show that this is a case of commercial favouritism to any party by the Indian government," the three-judge bench said.

Dassault initially won the contract to supply 126 jets to India in 2012, with 18 to be built in France and the rest in India in collaboration with the state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited.

However, during a visit to France in 2015 Modi scrapped the deal, signed under the previous government led by the Congress party, and ordered instead 36 jets -- all to be built in France -- for an estimated \$9.4 billion.

Under Indian defence procurement rules, foreign companies winning contracts must reinvest half the total value in joint ventures or purchases with Indian firms.

But the new agreement, formally signed in 2016, raised eyebrows because Dassault chose as its local partner Reliance. Former French president Francois Hollande added fuel to the fire in September when he said that Modi had pushed for Reliance to be on board.

No-deal Brexit more likely

May set to return home after EU summit 'humiliation'

AGENCIES
Once again, the EU has sent Theresa May home with nothing. European Union leaders rejected outright the British Prime Minister's last-ditch attempt to save her embattled Brexit deal, all but killing any hope of a parliamentary breakthrough in London and delivering a devastating blow to her authority. After being forced to pull a vote on her deal in the House of Commons, May pleaded with EU leaders to bolt on legal assurances that would assuage lawmakers furious over a crucial element, the so-called Irish backstop.



EU says 'no' to renegotiation, steps up planning for no-deal
May's opponents say she has failed; calls grow for second referendum

But after an apparently lackluster presentation by May, EU leaders rejected the demands and instead stepped up plans for a no-deal Brexit. In a late-night press conference, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker was withering. "Our UK friends need to say what they want, rather than asking what we want," he told reporters. While he said May had been "fighting hard and bravely," he expressed doubt that any deal would get through the British Parliament in its current form.

May's allies at home said the summit was a useful start, but the opposition Labour Party said May had failed and called to parliamentary vote on the deal that she postponed on Monday, fearing a heavy defeat, to be held next week. Events of the past few months have solidified May's reputation as a political survivor. But the decision to call off the Brexit vote in parliament, followed by a no-confidence vote in which a third of her MPs registered their disapproval of her leadership, May is seriously weakened. There's less than 70 days before the March 29 Brexit deadline, and precious little time to negotiate a new deal should the current one be voted down, even if the EU wanted to. Labour and other opposition parties have pledged to call for a vote of no-confidence in the government, should May's vote be defeated. That could lead to a general election. Amid the impasse, former Prime Minister Tony Blair yesterday said that Britain and the European Union should prepare for a second Brexit referendum because parliament will probably fail to agree on a divorce deal and the public will need to break the deadlock.

Guatemalan girl, 7, dies in US custody

She had reportedly not eaten or consumed water for several days

A seven-year-old Guatemalan girl died in American custody after being detained by US border police in New Mexico, The Washington Post reported on Thursday. The girl who illegally crossed the border from Mexico along with her father and dozens of others died last week of "dehydration and shock," the newspaper reported, citing US Customs and Border Protection. She had "reportedly had not eaten or consumed water for several days," the CBP told the Post, who said she began having seizures more than eight hours after being detained. Emergency responders had measured her body temperature at 105.7 degrees (41 centigrade), the Post said. She died after being flown to hospital. The name of the girl and her father have not been released. The father is in El Paso, Texas awaiting a meeting with Guatemalan consular officials, the Post said, quoting CBP, which said it is investigating the incident. President Donald Trump has made hard-line immigration policies a central plank of his presidency, drawing fire from critics who accuse him of demonizing migrants for political gain. Much attention has been focused on caravans of thousands of Central Americans who have made their way to Tijuana, Mexico, just south from San Diego, California in a challenge to Trump, who criticised them as posing an "invasion". But migrants fleeing poverty and gang violence also continue to cross over in New Mexico, Texas and Arizona after enduring dangerous treks through Mexico.

'He knows the truth'

Ex-lawyer Cohen says Trump knew election-eve hush-money payments were wrong

Stephanopoulos on the program "Good Morning America." ABC released excerpts of the interview ahead of its full airing. "First of all, nothing at the Trump Organization was ever done unless it was run through Mr. Trump. He directed me to make the payments, he directed me to become involved in these matters," Cohen said. "He knows the truth. I know the truth. Others know the truth," Cohen added. "And here is the truth: People of the United States of America, people of the world, don't believe what he is saying. The man doesn't tell the truth. And it is sad that I should take responsibility for his dirty deeds," said Cohen. Asked if he believed Trump was telling the truth about Russia's meddling in the US election, Cohen said "no" but he declined to comment further.



French high school students demonstrate in Paris, yesterday, to protest against different education reforms including the overhauls and stricter university entrance requirements.

Jared Kushner Trump's next chief of staff!

Donald Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner is on the short-list of potential candidates for the president's next chief of staff, US media said Thursday. Kushner, an influential White House adviser and husband of Trump's daughter Ivanka, met with the Republican leader to discuss the job, according to the Huffington Post, which first reported the story. "I am not aware that he is under consideration but, as I think all of us here would recognize, he would be great in any role that the president chooses to put him in," White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders said of the news, which was also reported by CBS. The president has been searching in vain for a new chief of staff after announcing that John Kelly, a retired general he had reportedly fallen out with, was to leave by the end of the year. Nick Ayres, the 36-year-old chief of staff to Vice President Mike Pence, had been touted as favorite to get the job, but announced he was taking himself out of the running, dealing a blow to the president. Mark Meadows, a North Carolina Republican who heads the hard-right Freedom Caucus in the House of Representatives, showed more interest -- but also ultimately withdrew his candidacy.



Nations still worlds apart

UN climate summit set for tense finale amid warnings, alarms

Nations at UN climate talks were haggling yesterday over the world's plan to avert disaster as host Poland dumped a draft decision text on delegates just hours before the summit was due to end. Negotiators told AFP that delegates from nearly 200 nations were still far apart on several crunch issues -- from how the future fight against climate change is funded, to the levels of help given to countries already experiencing its effects. Ministers at the COP24 talks must agree on a common rule book to make good on promises made by countries in the landmark 2015 Paris accord, which vowed to limit global temperature rises to "well below" two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit). But with the starkest warnings yet from scientists highlighting the need to drastically slash fossil fuel emissions within the coming decades in order to meet the safer cap of 1.5C warming, delegates were urged to act now or condemn at-risk nations to disaster. One negotiator told AFP there were "several areas of concern" surrounding the draft decision text released overnight by Poland. A major sticking point remains finance. Developing nations say they cannot afford to make their economies greener without reliable, transparent funding from richer nations. Developed nations -- responsible for the lion's share of historic greenhouse gas emissions -- were accused of seeking to shirk funding promises made in Paris. The draft text gave short shrift to another red-line issue for poor countries exposed to the ravages brought on by global warming: so-called "loss and damage". The term Loss and damage denotes impacts of climate-related stressors that occur despite efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climatic changes. "It is extremely concerning that loss and damage has been relegated to a footnote in the current draft," Mark Lutes, delegation lead for WWF. Xie Zhenhua, China's top climate negotiator, said his country -- the world's largest carbon emitter -- "will do what we can" to get a deal but warned everyone might not like it. The expectation is that talks will go deep into overtime, with a number of key issues still unresolved.



US lashes out at 'predatory' China, Russia in Africa

US national security interests, Bolton said at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank.

The United States lashed out Thursday at "predatory" Chinese and Russian involvement in Africa as it announced a leaner footprint on the continent that insists on accountability in trade and peacekeeping. In a speech billed as unveiling a new US strategy on Africa, national security advisor John Bolton echoed Trump's "America First" philosophy, showing a distrust of international institutions and a sense of stark competition with rival powers. Bolton denounced China for its aggressive quest for natural resources and its rising military and maritime presence -- warning that the balance of power in the Horn of Africa could shift to Beijing -- and accused Russia of using the continent to seek past imperial glory. "The predatory practices pursued by China and Russia stunt economic growth in Africa, threaten the financial independence of African nations, inhibit opportunities for US investment, interfere with US military operations and pose a significant threat to US national security interests," Bolton said at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank. He said that China used "bribes, opaque agreements and the strategic use of debt to hold states in Africa captive to Beijing's wishes and demands." China has found ready partners in part by promising not to interfere in internal affairs. Abe Denmark, a former assistant secretary of defense now at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, called Bolton's approach on China "particularly self-defeating" and said it may drive more African nations toward Beijing. Bolton also told African governments to expect a tighter-fisted approach to aid, with an end to "indiscriminate assistance across the entire continent." He announced an initiative called "Prosper Africa" to boost US private sector investment across the continent with a goal of offering "high-quality, transparent, inclusive" trade.