

Chile to host 2019 UN climate summit

Chile will take the place of Brazil in hosting next year's UN climate summit, delegates at crunch talks in Poland were informed on Friday. Brazil last month pulled out as host of the COP25 summit, set for late 2019, claiming that holding the negotiations would be too expensive.

'Toxic' meal kills 11 at Indian temple

Eleven people have died after eating rice that had likely been contaminated with a toxic substance at a Hindu temple ceremony, a health official said yesterday. Another 29 people were critically ill and undergoing emergency treatment across various hospitals in Mysore, a city in the state of Karnataka. The patients were being treated for vomiting, diarrhoea and respiratory distress, Prasad added.



Trump names acting chief of staff

Donald Trump announced Friday that his budget director Mick Mulvaney will step in as acting chief of staff to replace John Kelly. Kelly agreed to stay on until at least January 2 to avoid leaving the president in the lurch. A senior administration official said "there's no time limit" to Mulvaney's stint.

BITS OF HISTORY (DECEMBER 15)

1939: The film "Gone With the Wind" had its world premiere in Atlanta.
1964: Canada's parliament adopted a new national flag with a red maple leaf on a white background.
1966: Walt Disney, American animator who created Mickey Mouse, died.



US, Canada promise due process for Huawei CFO

The United States and Canada on Friday promised a fair judicial process for a Chinese executive arrested in Vancouver on a US request, as they appealed to Beijing to free two Canadians held in apparent retaliation.

Foreign ministers and defense chiefs of the neighbors met in the US capital as Canada increasingly looks like collateral damage in a simmering US-China trade war, with Beijing at the same time working to ease trade tensions with Washington.

Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland said authorities were acting "scrupulously" in the detention of Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of Huawei whom Washington wants extradited for allegedly violating US sanctions on Iran.

China, however, has said that Canada and the US overstepped their authority and that Meng broke no laws. Canada's fears of repercussions have turned out to be well-founded, as China has since detained two Canadians on suspicion of "harm to national security" -- a phrase often used by Beijing when alleging espionage.

Meng, who stands accused of misleading US investors on Huawei's operations in Iran, is out on bail of Can\$10 million.



A protester wearing a yellow vest waves the French national flag during a demonstration against rising costs of living blamed on high taxes on the Champs-Elysees in Paris, yesterday. Inset, Tear gas floats in the air during clashes with police at a demonstration by the "yellow vests" movement in Nantes.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

FRENCH PROTESTS Calmer scenes on decisive weekend

Groups of defiant "yellow vest" demonstrators faced off with tens of thousands of police around France yesterday, but their numbers appeared lower on a fifth and decisive weekend for the anti-government movement.

President Emmanuel Macron, facing the biggest crisis of his presidency, announced a series of concessions on Monday to defuse the "yellow vest" explosive crisis, which swelled up from rural and small-town France last month. He is hoping the package of tax and minimum wage measures for low-income workers coupled with a terror attack on Tuesday night in Strasbourg and bitter winter weather, will bring calm to the country.

By lunchtime, crowds in Paris were much smaller than last Saturday and there were no reports of serious violence from regional France after a month of clashes and disruption.

Police had arrested around 60 people in the capital by 11:00am compared with 500 at the same time last weekend, according to figures released by the local government.

Outside Paris, groups of "yellow vests" continued to occupy roundabouts to slow down traffic, and there were jams on the A6, A7, A61 and A64 motorways in southern France.

Authorities reported the seventh death linked to the demonstrations in a fatal road accident Friday evening near the France-Belgium border caused by a blockade.

More than 1,400 people have been injured since the protests began on November 17.

Until this week, a clear majority of French people had backed the protests, which sprung up initially over tax hikes on transport fuel before snowballing into wider opposition to Macron's pro-business agenda and style of governing.

But two polls published on Tuesday -- in the wake of Macron's concessions -- suggested the country was now split broadly 50-50 on whether the protests should continue.

In a bid to end the protests, Macron announced a package of measures on Monday estimated by economists to cost up to 15 billion euros (\$17 billion).

He cancelled planned fuel tax hikes, offered a rise in the minimum wage, tax relief for pensioners and tax-free overtime for workers in 2019.

Australia recognises west Jerusalem as Israel capital

Army razes home of Palestinian attacker in night-long raid

AFP, Sydney

Australia now recognises west Jerusalem as Israel's capital, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said yesterday, but a contentious embassy shift from Tel Aviv will not occur until a peace settlement is achieved.

Canberra became one of just a few governments around the world to follow US President Donald Trump's lead and recognise the contested city as Israel's capital, but Morrison also committed to recognising a future state of Palestine with east Jerusalem as its capital.

Both Israel and the Palestinians claim Jerusalem as their capital.

Most foreign nations avoided moving embassies there to prevent inflaming peace talks on the city's final status -- until Trump unilaterally moved the US embassy there earlier this year.

"We look forward to moving our embassy to west Jerusalem when practical, in support of and after final status of determination," Morrison said, adding that

work on a new site for the embassy was under way.

The political development came as Israeli troops demolished the home of a Palestinian accused of the May killing of a soldier yesterday, completing a night-long incursion into the Palestinian-controlled city of Ramallah.

The raid on the West Bank city where Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas has his headquarters comes as Israeli forces search for the perpetrator of a Thursday shooting attack that killed two Israeli soldiers.

The incursion late Friday triggered clashes with angry residents following a week of rising tensions.

Inside the camp, soldiers demolished the home of Islam Abu Hamid, who was arrested in June for the soldier's killing. The family house was completely destroyed in a controlled explosion, AFP correspondents at the scene said.

Israel regularly demolishes the homes of Palestinians who carry out attacks against Israelis.



Obamacare unconstitutional

Rules US judge; Democrats vow to appeal

AFP, Washington

A federal judge in Texas has ruled that the US health care law known as Obamacare is unconstitutional -- a ruling that opposition Democrats quickly vowed to appeal.

US District Judge Reed O'Connor's ruling came on the eve of the Saturday deadline to sign up for 2019 coverage in the federal health care program, known officially as the Affordable Care Act.

The White House said it expects the case to be appealed to the Supreme Court. "Pending the appeal process, the law remains in place," it said in a statement.

At the US Supreme Court, five justices in the nine-judge court who voted to uphold Obamacare in a separate case in 2012 are still on the bench.

Conservative Republicans have long opposed President Barack Obama's landmark healthcare plan which he signed into law in 2010.

President Donald Trump made abolishing the program one of his main campaign pledges.

The Texas-based judge said that the full Obamacare program was unconstitutional because in last year's tax overhaul, Congress eliminated a penalty for people who failed to sign up for the program if they did not already have their own health insurance.

Angry Democrats vowed to fight back as they blamed Republicans for what they see as a debacle that will leave millions of Americans without healthcare.

US 'in no hurry' over N Korea talks: Trump

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump played down hopes Friday for any imminent deal to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear arsenal.

"Many people have asked how we are doing in our negotiations with North Korea -- I always reply by saying we are in no hurry," he tweeted.

But Trump also expressed optimism, saying North Korea's economy has "wonderful potential" and that its leader Kim Jong Un "sees it better than anyone and will fully take advantage of it for his people."

A historic summit between Trump and Kim in June opened up dialogue on denuclearization of the Korean peninsula between the two countries after months of military threats.

A second summit is expected to be held next year, but Trump faces criticism given that North Korea has taken few concrete steps to abandon its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

The Security Council has slapped a series of tough economic sanctions on Pyongyang over its nuclear tests and ballistic missile firings.

The United States maintains that UN sanctions will remain in place until North Korea has fully scrapped its weapons programs.



Local school children join Greta Thunberg's initiative on climate strike during the COP24 UN Climate Change Conference 2018 in Katowice, Poland, on Friday. Last October, the world's leading climate scientists warned that there is only 12 years left for global warming to be kept to a maximum of 1.5C, beyond which even half a degree will significantly worsen the risks of drought, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people.

'Auspicious' yr for Rakhine!

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's president said Saturday it had been an "auspicious" year for Rakhine state, the violence-scarred territory and epicenter of the Rohingya crisis.

More than 720,000 Rohingya have fled the western state since August 2017 after the military conducted "clearance operations," sending a stream of refugees to neighbouring Bangladesh with accounts of rape, arson and mass killings -- acts that UN investigators say amounts to "genocide" by the military generals. Another 120,000 of the stateless minority, who are largely reviled by ethnic Rakhine and have garnered little sympathy among the Myanmar public, have been forced to live in displacement camps in the region with bleak conditions and a dire lack of food.

But Myanmar President Win Myint painted a different reality in a statement Saturday when he congratulated the "ethnic brothers and sisters" on the 44th anniversary of the Rakhine State Day.

With no natural disasters, "we can say that 2018 has been an auspicious year", he

wrote in Myanmar's state-run newspaper. Rakhine, one of the poorest states in the country, is also the site of planned economic zones, he said, and the government is working to provide "24 hour electricity" to certain townships.

He also praised a pact signed between Myanmar and Bangladesh to repatriate the Rohingya refugees and the arrangements made to receive "those displaced people who have gone over to the Bangladesh side".

The process which was repeatedly delayed was supposed to finally commence last month but it fell flat when not a single Rohingya took up the offer of repatriation, with many on the returnee list going into hiding. "I wish to urge all Rakhine ethnic nationals and citizens to participate... (in the) transformation of Rakhine State into a beautiful and happy state," Win Myint said at the end of his statement.

Win Myint was appointed to his position by Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has faced international condemnation for her handling of the Rohingya crisis.



11 killed as gunfight sparks protests in Indian Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Seven civilians were killed as Indian troops fired on protesters yesterday after a gunfight left three armed rebels and a soldier dead in the disputed region of Kashmir, police and hospital officials said.

The fighting erupted soon after troops laid siege to a house in the southern Pulwama area in Indian-administered Kashmir where the militants were hiding, a police officer said.

Three armed militants -- including a former soldier who had joined the rebels -- then jumped out of the house into an orchard to fight the soldiers and were killed. The fighting also left a soldier of the Indian army dead, senior police officer Swayam Prakash Pani told AFP.

While the gunfight was in progress, hundreds of villagers poured out on to the streets in freezing cold and marched towards the orchard, shouting slogans in support of the militants and throwing stones at the troops, witnesses said.

"It was mayhem. Six protesters died in the ensuing firing by soldiers," a police officer told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Hospital officials said a seventh man died later of gunshot wounds.

Dozens of protesters were also injured in the clashes with government forces, another police officer said.

Authorities suspended mobile internet services in many areas of the restive territory, including in the main city of Srinagar. A large number of students also held protests against the killings.

Yesterday's bloodshed capped the deadliest year in the region since 2009, with nearly 550 killed so far including some 150 civilians, according to a monitoring group.

Popular support for the rebels and their cause has increased since the killing of a charismatic militant leader in 2016. Villagers, sometimes in their thousands, have been swarming sites of gun battles with government forces to help militants escape from military cordons.

MNF president sworn in as Mizoram CM

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Former top insurgent leader and Mizo National Front (MNF) president Zoramthanga, who won the recent assembly poll on the promise of a complete ban on liquor, was sworn in yesterday as Mizoram's new chief minister heading a 12-member ministry.

Zoramthanga, 74, was administered the oath of office and secrecy by Governor K Rajasekharaiah during a ceremony at Raj Bhavan in Aizawl, the capital city of Mizoram.

He took oath in Mizo language. This is his third stint as chief minister of the state, having led the MNF government in Mizoram in 1998 and 2003.

Along with Zoramthanga, 11 others -- five cabinet ministers and six ministers of state -- were also sworn in.

Chairman of Mizoram Kohhran Hruaitute Committee (MKHC), a conglomerate of 16 major churches in the state, Rev R Lalmingthanga, read out from the Bible and offered prayers during the ceremony.



The MNF came to power toppling the decade-long rule of the Congress party in Mizoram after capturing 26 of the 40 seats in the state assembly elections.

The main election plank of Zoramthanga this time in the Christian-majority state was the ban on liquor which he claimed in an interview has killed 6,000 people, including 500 policemen, in Mizoram in the last three years.

Zoramthanga was associated with the militant outfit MNF under the leadership of Laldenga in 1960s and 1970s. The Mizo insurgency ended in 1986 with the signing of the peace deal between Rajiv Gandhi and Laldenga. When Mizoram was born as a state in 1987, MNF became an over-ground political party.