

NEWSIN brief

Afghan team joins Taliban talks in UAE

AFP, Kabul
An Afghan peace negotiations team has arrived in Abu Dhabi, an official said yesterday, a day after talks attended by US and Taliban representatives were held in the city aimed at ending the 17-year conflict. International players and Kabul are trying to bring the Taliban to the table as military measures have been largely futile.

8 killed in Mumbai hospital fire

AFP, Mumbai
A three-month-old baby was among eight people killed in a fire at a Mumbai hospital, officials said yesterday. The blaze broke out around 4:00pm on Monday on the fourth floor of a government-run ESIC Kamgar hospital in the northern suburb of Andheri. Another 140 people, including patients, doctors and nurses were rescued and were being treated at hospitals across the city. The cause of the fire is not known yet.

1,934 jailed for life since Turkey coup

AFP, Ankara
Some 1,934 people have been sentenced to life in prison since the July 2016 attempted overthrow of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkish state media Anadolu reported yesterday. Of these, 978 people were jailed for life, while 956 were sentenced to aggravated life imprisonment, which carries harsher conditions than normal life imprisonment convictions.

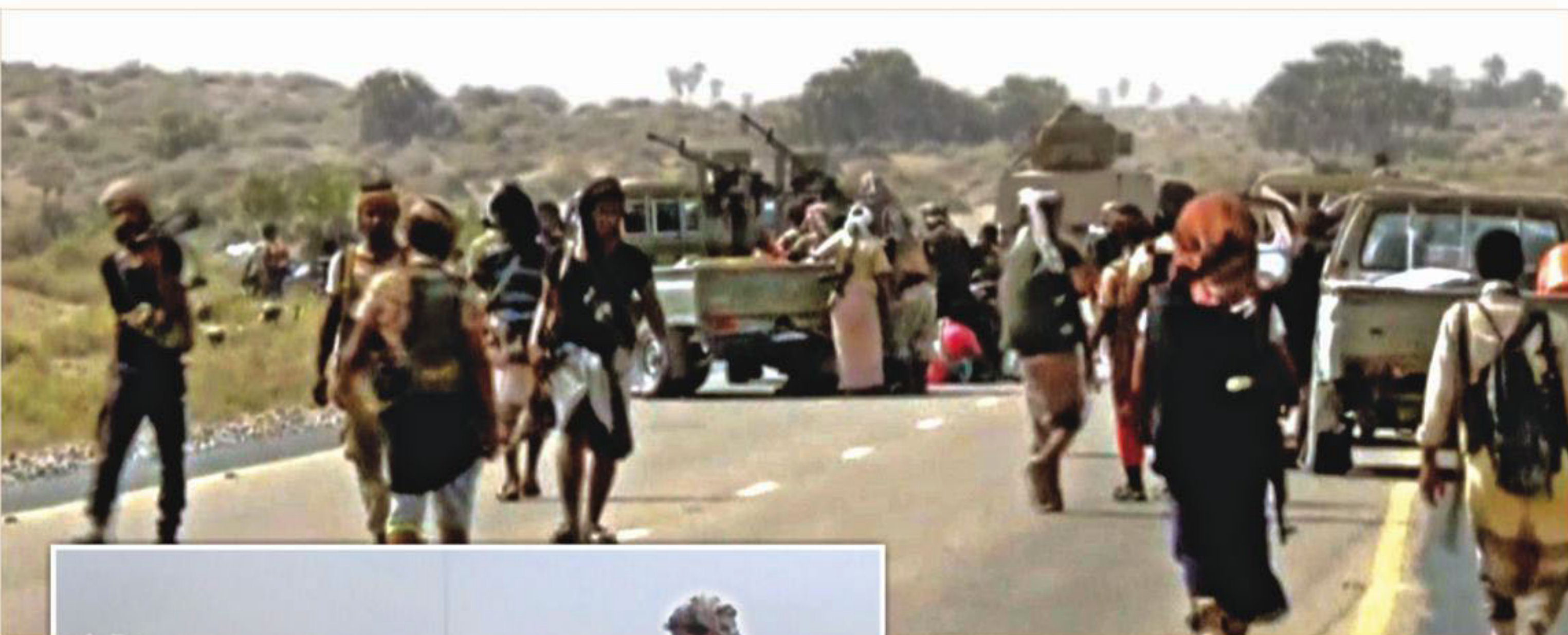


Suu Kyi stripped of S Korean honour

AFP, Seoul
One of South Korean largest human rights groups will strip Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi of its 2004 Gwangju prize because of her "indifference" to the atrocities against the Rohingya minority, organisers said yesterday. "Her indifference to the atrocities against the Rohingya runs against the values the award stands," spokesman Cho Jin-tae of the May 18 Memorial Foundation told AFP.

Thousands flee cyclone in India

AFP, New Delhi
A powerful cyclone left one person dead and forced thousands to flee their homes on India's east coast, officials said yesterday. Cyclone Phethai packed winds up to 90 kilometres (55 miles) per hour, felling thousands of trees and electricity pylons, and bringing heavy rains to the coastal areas of Andhra Pradesh after making landfall on Monday.



YEMEN CEASEFIRE

Yemeni government fighters gather around armoured vehicles during clashes with Houthis rebels in Hodeidah, Yemen. *Inset*, Shots are being fired from a vehicle. Despite skirmishes, the flashpoint city of Hodeida was calm yesterday after a UN-brokered ceasefire started at midnight, pro-government sources and residents said. Pictures were taken yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Gender equality at work 202 yrs off

AFP, Geneva

Women may be shouting louder than ever for equal treatment and pay, but a report out yesterday indicates it will take centuries to achieve gender parity in workplaces around the globe.

The World Economic Forum (WEF) report said there had been some improvements in wage equality this year compared to 2017, when the global gender gap widened for the first time in a decade.

But it warned that these were offset by declining representation of women in politics, coupled with greater inequality in their access to health and education.

At current rates, the global gender gap across a range of areas will not close for another 108 years, while it is expected to take 202 years to close the workplace gap, WEF found.

The Geneva-based organisation's annual report tracked disparities between the sexes in 149 countries across four areas: education, health, economic opportunity and political empowerment.

After years of advances in education, health and political representation, women registered setbacks in all three areas this year, WEF said.

Overall, the Nordic countries once again dominated the top of the table: men and women were most equal in Iceland, followed by Norway, Sweden and Finland.

Syria, Iraq, Pakistan and finally Yemen showed the biggest overall gender gaps of the countries surveyed.

Don't dictate to us President Xi pledges 'unswerving' reforms, but on own terms

AFP, Beijing

President Xi Jinping yesterday warned that no one can "dictate" China's economic development path as the Communist Party marked 40 years of its historic "reform and opening up" policy amid a stern challenge from the United States.

In a speech at the grandiose Great Hall of the People, Xi vowed to press ahead with economic reforms but made clear that Beijing will not deviate from its one-party system or take orders from any other country.

Without directly referring to the United States, Xi said China "poses no threat" to any country but warned that it would not be pushed around.

"No one is in a position to dictate to the Chinese people what should or should not be done," China's most powerful leader since Mao Zedong told the party faithful.

"We must resolutely reform what should and can be changed, we must resolutely not reform what shouldn't and can't be changed."

While Xi promised more reforms, he did not offer any specifics. The US and Europe have long complained of lingering obstacles to fully entering China's massive market while Chinese companies enjoy the benefits of open Western economies abroad.

"We actively promote the construction of an open world economy, build a



community of human destiny, promote the transformation of the global governance system, clearly oppose hegemonism and power politics," Xi said, referencing Chinese geopolitical ambitions.

"China is increasingly approaching the centre of the world stage and becoming a recognised builder of

world peace, a contributor to global development, and a defender of the international order."

The commemoration of the reforms enacted under late paramount leader Deng Xiaoping on December 18, 1978, came as China is locked in diplomatic spats and a bruising trade war with the United States. The rivals have agreed to a 90-day truce as they seek to negotiate a solution.

China's reforms pulled hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and turned the country into the world's second biggest economy.

Yesterday's ceremony included the awarding of medals to more than 100 individuals whom the party recognised as key contributors to the country's development.

Deng's reforms broke with Maoist-style collectivisation that left the nation impoverished and backward.

The poverty rate among the rural population dropped to 3.1 percent last year from 97.5 percent 40 years ago. China now boasts the most dollar billionaires in the world with 620.

UK steps up 'no-deal' Brexit preparations

AFP, London

British ministers met yesterday to intensify plans for leaving the European Union without a deal -- a prospect that is becoming more likely as Prime Minister Theresa May plays for time with just 101 days to go until Brexit.

The opposition Labour Party meanwhile faced refusal over its request for a no-confidence motion in May and growing pressure to table a binding vote against the government.

May on Monday said the government was preparing for a no-deal Brexit and "the cabinet will be discussing the next phase in ensuring we are ready for that scenario".

She will be refereeing between ministers who want the government to step up preparations for a no-deal scenario and those that want parliament to have a final say in a series of votes on potential options for Brexit.

One option is the prime minister's own Brexit deal, but that is hanging by a thread after she was forced to pull a vote on it last week in the face of huge opposition from within her Conservative Party.

Opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn on Monday tabled a non-binding no-confidence vote in May after she told MPs they will get another chance to vote on her deal in the week beginning January 14.

But Downing Street was reported on Tuesday to be blocking the motion from being debated.

Labour had the option of tabling a binding motion but faced defeat after Conservative Brexit hardliners and the Democratic Unionist Party, which props up her government, both said they would back May.

Britain is set to leave the European Union on March 29 next year, but after 18 months of tortuous negotiations appears no closer to formalising a divorce deal.

PM's deal unlikely to
pass parliament

Corbyn slams May for pushing
Brexit vote into Jan, launches
non-binding no-confidence motion

Pacifist Japan eyes aircraft carriers

AFP, Tokyo

Japan will get its first aircraft carriers since World War II and buy dozens of fighter jets under a new defence plan approved yesterday that is intended to counter China's growing military power.

The new five-year defence plan calls for the upgrade of two existing helicopter carriers so that they can launch fighters, and is the latest in a series of steps under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to boost Japan's military.

Abe's government argues the efforts are necessary given growing defence challenges in the region, including tensions with North Korea, and particularly "strong concerns" about the expansion of China's military footprint. But the move is controversial, with critics arguing it shifts Tokyo further away from its commitment to strictly defensive capabilities under Japan's post-World War II pacifist constitution.

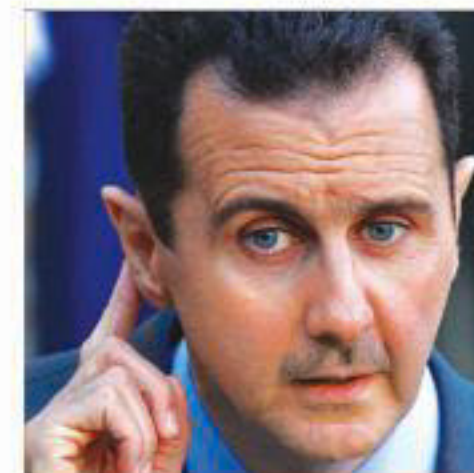
The five-year plan approved yesterday assumes record defence spending of 27.47 trillion yen (\$244 billion) through March 2024.

In a separate plan also endorsed by the cabinet, Japan said it would buy 42 F-35s over the next decade, with the F-35B variant widely considered the likeliest candidate. It also plans over the same period to buy 105 F-35As, a variant of the advanced jet which performs conventional takeoffs.



A diver wearing a Santa Claus costume swims in a large fish tank during an underwater performance at Sunshine Aquarium in Tokyo, Japan, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Syria's Assad can stay: US

AFP, Washington

The United States said Monday it was no longer seeking to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad but renewed warnings it would not fund reconstruction unless the regime is "fundamentally different."

James Jeffrey, the US special representative in Syria, said that Assad needed to compromise as he had not yet won the brutal seven-year civil war, estimating that some 100,000 armed opposition fighters remained in Syria.

"We want to see a regime that is fundamentally different. It's not regime change -- we're not trying to get rid of Assad," Jeffrey said at the Atlantic Council, a Washington think tank.

Estimating that Syria would need \$300-400 billion to rebuild, Jeffrey warned that Western powers and international financial institutions would not commit funds without a change of course.

Former president Barack Obama had called for Assad to go, although he doubted the wisdom of a robust US intervention in the complex Syrian war and kept a narrow military goal of defeating the IS extremist group.

President Donald Trump's administration has acknowledged, if rarely so explicitly, that Assad is likely to stay.

But Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned in October that the United States would not provide "one single dollar" for Syria's reconstruction if Iran stays.

Sri Lankan crisis far from over

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

At the time of his stunning election victory in 2015, Sri Lanka's President Maithripala Sirisena claimed he would have been buried "six feet under the earth" had he lost that vote to incumbent Mahinda Rajapaksa. Yet, almost four years later, Sirisena was administering the prime minister's oath to his predecessor.

The October 26 move plunged the South Asian country into a protracted political crisis, with the sacked Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who had helped Sirisena win the presidency, crying foul and refusing to step down.

For the next few weeks, Sri Lanka held its breath as tens of thousands rallied around the deposed leader, protesting against Sirisena's "unconstitutional power grab", and the ruling United National Party (UNP) fought successfully to prevent Rajapaksa obtaining a parliamentary majority.

Sirisena, however, remained defiant. The "stubborn" and "arrogant" Wickremesinghe, he said, was not only "highly corrupt", but had also failed to investigate an assassination plot against him. "I will not stay on in office for even an hour if Ranil Wickremesinghe becomes prime minister," he reportedly said.

And when it became clear Rajapaksa did not

have the parliamentary backing to form a government, Sirisena dissolved the 225-member House and called snap elections nearly two years ahead of schedule.

Once again, the president's moves prompted allegations of constitutional violations and the Supreme Court stayed that decree. The restored parliament immediately passed two no-confidence motions against Rajapaksa. Still, Sirisena refused to back down.



Then, on Sunday, nearly two months after he triggered the turmoil, Sirisena, humiliated by a series of court interventions, walked back on his vow and reinstated the deposed prime minister.

The country breathed a sigh of relief and tens of thousands of green-clad UNP supporters turned out to celebrate in the capital, Colombo.

"The return of a constitutionally-sanctioned government in Sri Lanka, and the ultimate defeat of a slow-moving coup, was a major victory for the

country's embattled democracy," said Alan Keenan, Sri Lanka project director at the International Crisis Group.

"But Sri Lanka's struggles are far from over," he said. That's because the three key players in the conflict - Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and Rajapaksa - remain at loggerheads amid enduring differences.

Soon after submitting resignation, Rajapaksa vowed to thwart Wickremesinghe's reform agenda. Sirisena, too, appeared unrepentant. In a statement hours after Wickremesinghe's reinstatement, he said his opinion on the newly returned prime minister has not changed. He said he only invited the deposed leader to form a government because he "respects parliament traditions and democracy".

However, given the breakdown in relations, it is hard to see how Sirisena and Wickremesinghe could work together again, said Asanga Welikala, a Sri Lankan law professor at the University of Edinburgh.

Describing Sirisena's decision to reinstate the deposed prime minister and Rajapaksa's resignation as a "tactical retreat", Welikala said the pair will now "go back to politics as usual". Their strategy until the next general elections, due in late 2020, will be to "create chaos" and "derail the UNP government", he said.