

NEWSIN brief

'Yellow vest' protest numbers fall sharply

French "yellow vests" turned out in small numbers for a sixth Saturday of nationwide demonstrations. Three weeks ago the protests in Paris turned into some of the worst unrest seen in the capital since 1968. Cars were set on fire, bank and insurance offices' windows smashed and street furniture vandalized.

2 arrests over London airport drone chaos

Two people have been arrested in connection with the "criminal use of drones" at London's Gatwick Airport, police said yesterday, after three days of disruption affected tens of thousands of passengers during the pre-Christmas getaway. A Gatwick spokesman said the airport planned to run a full schedule of 757 flights carrying 124,484 passengers yesterday.

2018 hottest year for a century in France

2018 was the hottest year in France since modern records began in 1900, the French meteorological service said Friday. The average temperature of 14 degrees centigrade (57.2 Fahrenheit) was 1.4 degrees above the average recorded between 1981 and 2010, it said in a statement.

BITS OF HISTORY (DECEMBER 22)

- 1989:** Samuel Beckett, reclusive Irish writer whose works shaped contemporary theatre, died.
- 1989:** Berlin's Brandenburg Gate re-opens after nearly 30 years, with crowds flooding across the former border point between East and West Germany.
- 1989:** Romanian communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was overthrown in a revolution after 24 years of headline rule.
- 1993:** South Africa's white parliament buried apartheid, voting 237 to 45 to adopt an interim constitution leading to majority rule and the country's first all-race election.

Trump's foreign policy in spotlight

After President Donald Trump's stunning decision to withdraw from Syria and slash troop numbers in Afghanistan, Washington's allies and US lawmakers scrambled Friday to figure out what America's foreign policy now is.

Trump's historic moves run counter to years of US doctrine in the Middle East and Afghanistan, and set the stage for a cascading series of events that could well result in yet more bloodshed across a scarred region.

While many Americans -- and not just his supporters -- lauded Trump's decision, fed up after years of costly and spiraling conflicts, politicians of every stripe were tripping over each other to get in their condemnation.

"Reducing the American presence in Afghanistan and removing our presence in Syria will reverse... progress, encourage our adversaries, and make America less safe," said Republican Congressman Mac Thornberry, a Trump ally who heads the House Armed Services Committee.

US MILITARY WITHDRAWALS

Erdogan vows to clear Syria of Kurd militants, IS

Iran says US troop presence in Syria 'wrong' from start



A fighter from the Kurdish women's protection unit (YPJ) reacts to camera on Friday. PHOTO: AFP

In the Pentagon, no one seemed to know what comes next.

"We are referring all questions to the White House," one spokeswoman said, when asked about the momentous Afghanistan withdrawal.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis resigned Thursday after telling Trump he could not abide the Syria decision, which leaves vulnerable to a Turkish attack thousands of Kurdish fighters the Pentagon has spent years training and arming to fight the Islamic State group.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban welcomed

Trump's partial pull out, with a spokesman saying the group was "more than happy."

Bill Roggio, an Afghanistan expert and senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, told AFP the Trump administration's Middle East policy is in disarray.

"I do not know what its policy is, specifically with respect to what was known as the War on Terror," he said.

Trump campaigned on a pledge of "America First" and vowed to limit US engagement overseas, so his action on Afghanistan and Syria aren't bolts from the blue, and many observers were pleased with

his actions.

His withdrawal from Syria abruptly ends American influence in the war-ravaged country and gives the Turks an opening to attack US-backed Kurds.

Trump reportedly made the decision during a phone call last week with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

After continuous persuasion from Erdogan, Trump was convinced.

"You know what? It's yours," Trump said of Syria according to The Washington Post. "I'm leaving."

Erdogan on Friday vowed to drive out Kurdish militia and jihadists from Syria in an operation in 'coming months.'

By ceding Syria, Trump is also yanking a keystone of his own administration's foreign policy: to push back against Iran, which supports President Bashar al-Assad and is seeking to expand regional influence.

Iran yesterday pounced on the withdrawal decision saying the US presence in Syria had been "wrong and illogical" from the start.

"This is a huge strategic mistake that I hope the president will reconsider," Jack Keane, a retired general, told Fox News. Keane has been one of the names in the Washington rumor mill to replace Mattis.

He went on to warn that Trump was repeating the "mistakes" of president Barack Obama, who for years drew withering criticism from Republicans for pulling US troops out of Iraq, only to see the emergence of IS.



HODEIDA CEASEFIRE UN monitors arrive in tense Yemen

AFP, Aden

A United Nations team arrived in Yemen yesterday to monitor a fragile ceasefire in the rebel-held city of Hodeida, the latest push to secure peace in the devastated country.

It comes a day after the UN Security Council unanimously approved a resolution authorising the deployment of observers to Hodeida, a lifeline port city which serves as the entry point for the majority of imports to war-torn Yemen.

The team led by Patrick Cammaert, a retired Dutch general, was seen by an AFP journalist landing in Aden where the internationally-recognised government is based.

Cammaert was welcomed on arrival by Saghir bin Aziz, a general who heads the government team in a joint committee -- with Huthi rebels -- which is tasked with organising the withdrawal of troops from Hodeida.

After meeting with leaders in Aden, Cammaert is due to travel to the rebel-held capital Sanaa and onwards to Hodeida, a Yemeni official said.

Hodeida is held by Yemen's Huthi rebels and has been subjected to an offensive by pro-government forces, backed by a military coalition led by Saudi Arabia.

A halt to fighting in the strategic port city follows intense diplomatic efforts which culminated in peace talks last week in Sweden, where the warring parties agreed to the truce which came into force on Tuesday.

The Security Council resolution which approved the observer mission also endorsed those prior negotiations.

MILITANT ATTACK IN SOMALIA Blasts kill 13 near presidential palace

REUTERS, Mogadishu

At least 13 people were killed and 17 wounded in a car bomb attack claimed by al-Qaeda-linked group al Shabaab close to the president's residence in the Somali capital Mogadishu, police said yesterday.

A second explosion followed nearby. Al Shabaab, in comments broadcast on its Radio Andalusi, claimed responsibility for both blasts and said the second was also a car bomb.

"The death toll has risen to 13 people including civilians and soldiers. Seventeen others were injured. The casualties are from the two blasts," Major Mohamed Hussein, a police officer, told Reuters.

Among those killed were a journalist, two security personnel and a driver working for local station Universal TV, whose car was passing the checkpoint at which the first blast went off, another reporter working for the station said.

Police had earlier said the first car bomb at the checkpoint killed five, mostly soldiers. A Reuters witness at the scene of the second blast said he saw at least two bodies.

Ahmed Abdi, another police officer, said the first car bomb exploded at a checkpoint some 400 metres from the president's residence.

Al Shabaab carries out frequent attacks in Mogadishu. Its members want to dislodge the government and impose its rule based on its own strict interpretation of Islam's sharia law.



Relatives of 16-year-old Palestinian Mohamed al-Jahjuh mourn by his body during his funeral in Gaza City, yesterday. Al-Jahjuh is among the four who died on Friday by Israeli fire during protests and clashes along the Gaza border with Israel. PHOTO: AFP

LYNCHING OF MUSLIM CATTLE TRADERS Eight men get life sentence in India

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Latehar, Jharkhand - Imtiaz Khan, a 12-year-old schoolboy, and Majloom Ansari, a 32-year-old cattle trader, were abducted, beaten and hanged from a tree in Latehar in the Indian state of Jharkhand in March 2016.

The two had been walking with their oxen they planned to sell at a cattle fair, some 40km away, when they were intercepted by members of a Hindu "cow protection committee" in the next village and fatally attacked.

They were beaten with sticks and axes, and hanged from a tree with the same nylon ropes they used for their cattle.

Now, more than two years later, a Latehar district court has held eight people guilty of murder and has sentenced them to life imprisonment.

Friday's ruling is only the second such conviction in a series of lynchings by Hindu cow vigilantes across India in the last few years.

India's Hindu majority regards cows as holy and their slaughter is banned in most Indian states. According to data analytics site India Spend, almost 80 cases of cow-related violence took place between 2012 and 2017, mainly targeting Muslims, who comprise some 14 percent of India's 1.3 billion people.

UN fails to reach deal on budget as US pulls plug

AFP, United Nations

United Nations member states failed to come up with a deal Friday to make up for a \$220 million budget black hole left by the United States downsizing its contribution to peacekeeping operations, diplomats said.

The United States had paid around 28 percent of the UN peacekeeping budget before President Donald Trump announced in September that Washington would pay no more than 25 percent. That three percent shortfall represents around \$220 million.

The UN operating budget for 2018-19 is around \$5.4 billion, and the US pays around a fifth of that. The separate peacekeeping budget is in excess of \$6.6 billion -- cut last year by \$600 million under US pressure.

Peacekeeping financing is determined by a complicated formula that takes into account a country's wealth, its standing as a permanent Security Council member and other factors.

China's strong economy has meant that its share of the peacekeeping budget has grown significantly to 15 percent, but other

'It's yours, ... I'm leaving'

Phone call that set Mattis's resignation in motion

NDTV ONLINE

When he spoke to President Donald Trump on the telephone a week ago Friday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's agenda had not changed from when they met two weeks earlier at the Group of 20 summit in Argentina.

He repeated his inability to understand why the United States was still arming and supporting Syrian Kurdish fighters to conduct a ground war against the Islamic State. To Turkey, which shared a 500-mile long border with Syria, they were a national security threat, allied with Turkish Kurds that even the United States considered terrorists.



The Islamic State, according to Trump himself, had been defeated, Erdogan said. Turkey's military was strong and could take of any remaining militant pockets. Why did some 2,000 U.S. troops still need to be there?

"You know what? It's yours," Trump said of Syria. "I'm leaving."

The call, shorthanded in more or less the same words by several senior administration officials, set off events that, even by the whirlwind standards of Washington in the Trump years, have been cataclysmic. They ended, for the moment at least, with Thursday's resignation of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis.

For Trump it was an assertion of presidential prerogative that he had repeatedly been constrained from exercising. It came at a time when he was feeling a loss of control over a range of issues, from the special counsel's Russia investigation to the falling stock market and a threatened government shutdown.

In the days after the Friday call with Erdogan, Trump's senior national security team tried, and failed, to get him to reconsider, saying it was the worst possible moment for such an abrupt action.

On Thursday afternoon, before keeping a previously scheduled appointment with Trump, Mattis sat in his Pentagon office and watched a video lasting one minute and 19 seconds that the president had posted of himself on Twitter the night before. "We have won against ISIS," the Islamic State, he said. "We've beaten them badly, and now it's time for our troops to come back home."

At 3:30, Mattis departed the building for the brief ride to the White House, his resignation letter in hand. It had been written for a long time, at least in his head, a "fill in the blank" missive about his broad differences with Trump, in which Syria had finally filled the empty space.

Before he left, he had ordered copies of the letter to be made for distribution to senior staff and the media.



Allow Assange to leave Ecuador embassy freely

UN tells UK

REUTERS, Geneva

UN rights experts called on British authorities on Friday to allow WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to leave the Ecuador embassy in London without fear of arrest or extradition.

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention reiterated its finding published in February 2016 that Assange had been de facto unlawfully held with-out charge in the embassy, where he has now been holed up for more than six years.

He initially took asylum to avoid being extradited to Sweden, where authorities wanted to question him as part of a sexual assault investigation. That investigation was dropped.

Assange, whose website published thousands of classified US government documents, denied the Sweden allegations, saying the charge was a ploy that would eventually take him to the United States where prosecutors are preparing to pursue a criminal case against him.

Britain says Assange will be arrested for skipping bail if he leaves the embassy, but that any sentence would not exceed six months, if convicted. It had no immediate comment on the experts' call, but in June, foreign office minister Alan Duncan said Assange would be treated humanely and properly.



People carry the body of a suspected militant for burial in Dadasara village in south Kashmir's Tral, yesterday. Indian soldiers yesterday killed six militants from a group believed to be an affiliate of al-Qaeda in Indian-administered Kashmir during a brief firefight, officials said, sparking clashes between protesters and police. PHOTO: REUTERS

23 killed in Nepal student bus crash

AFP, Kathmandu

Twenty-three people died in western Nepal when a bus carrying school students and teachers back from a botanical field trip plunged into a gorge, police said.

The students were aged mostly between 16 and 20. Two teachers and the driver also died in the accident early evening on Friday in a remote area.

The vehicle was carrying 37 people, with 22 killed at the scene and another in a nearby hospital. Fourteen people were treated for injuries.

Police blamed speeding for the accident.

Road accidents are relatively common in Nepal because of poor roads, badly maintained vehicles and reckless driving.