

INDONESIA TSUNAMI

Crowd screams as band swept away

REUTERS, Jakarta

Partygoers screamed as tsunami waves smashed into a beachside concert in Indonesia, sending band members tumbling off a collapsing stage, dramatic video footage showed yesterday.

Some 200 employees of state electricity utility Perusahaan Listrik Negara (PLN) and family members had gathered at the Tanjung Lesung beach for an end-of-year party when the tsunami struck on Saturday night.

Video footage shared on social media showed partygoers enjoying the music and then screaming as the waves crashed into the stage and band members were swept away. Reuters was not able to immediately verify the video.

"Underwater I could only pray 'Jesus Christ help!', " Zack, a crew member of the rock band Seventeen, said in an Instagram post describing how he struggled in the water.

"In the final seconds I almost ran out of breath," he said, adding he survived by clinging to part of the collapsed stage.

At least 168 people were killed and hundreds injured by the tsunami, triggered by an underwater landslide after the eruption of the Anak Krakatau volcano, and the death toll is expected to climb.

Among the dead were four members of Seventeen - bassist M. Ayal "Bani" Purbani, road manager Oki Wijaya, guitarist Herman Sikumbang and crew member Ujang, the band said.

The band's drummer was missing.

"Lost Bani and our road manager Oki," lead singer Riefian "Ifan" Fajarsyah told followers in a tearful recorded video message on his Instagram account.



(Clockwise from left) Damaged buildings and debris are seen in Carita yesterday, after the area was hit by a tsunami on Saturday night following an eruption of the Anak Krakatoa volcano. A damaged jetty is seen in Carita. Rescuers place the bodies of victims at a makeshift mortuary in Carita.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

Afghan leader replaces top security chiefs

AFP, Kabul

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani yesterday replaced two of the country's top security chiefs with staunch anti-Taliban officials, in a major shake-up days after US President Donald Trump's decision to slash troop numbers in the country. Amrullah Saleh and Assadullah Khaled have been appointed to the critical posts of interior minister and defence minister, respectively.

Libya migrant rescue ship seeks Xmas port

AFP, Rome

A civilian ship with 33 migrants aboard rescued off the Libyan coast yesterday appealed for a European port to take them to before the weather turns at Christmas. German NGO ship Sea Watch 3 rescued the migrants, including four women and six children, when they were in difficulty attempting the perilous journey across the Mediterranean on Saturday.

Macron calls for order after attack on police

AFP, Paris

French President Emmanuel Macron yesterday called for "order" after a sixth weekend of "yellow vest" anti-government protests marked by dwindling participation and a violent attack on police in Paris. Speaking during a visit to the central African state of Chad, Macron said: "There must be order now, calm and harmony. Our country needs it."

Egypt security forces kill 14 militants in Sinai

AFP, Cairo

Egyptian security forces have killed 14 Islamist militants in an exchange of fire in the country's turbulent northern Sinai region, the interior ministry said yesterday. The militants were under surveillance ahead of security forces raiding their hideout in the town of El-Arish, the ministry said in a statement. An exchange of fire lasting several hours killed eight militants, the ministry said without detailing when the raid took place. The other six attempted to flee but were killed in a police chase.

BITS OF HISTORY (DECEMBER 23)

1948: Hideki Tojo, the Japanese general who was prime minister when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor to begin its war against the United States, was hanged as a war criminal.

1950: Pope Pius XII announced that Saint Peter's tomb had been found under the Vatican.

2007: World's first twin panda birth in winter season.

2016: United Nations Security Council adopts Resolution 2334 condemning Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories.

US govt shutdown set to last through Xmas

AFP, Washington

A partial US government shutdown that entered its second day yesterday was set to stretch through Christmas, after Congress adjourned for the weekend with no deal in sight to end an impasse over funding for President Donald Trump's wall on the US-Mexico border.

Due to the shutdown -- in which several key US agencies ceased operations at 12:01 am (0501 GMT) Saturday -- Trump said he would remain in Washington over Christmas instead of going to Florida.

"I am in the White House, working hard," the Republican president tweeted. "We are negotiating with the Democrats on desperately needed Border Security (Gangs, Drugs, Human Trafficking & more) but it could be a long stay."

Trump has dug in on his demand for \$5 billion for construction of the border wall, a signature campaign promise and part of his effort to reduce illegal immigration. Democrats are staunchly opposed, and the

Chaos to continue as Senate adjourns with no deal in sight

absence of a deal meant federal funds for dozens of agencies lapsed at midnight Friday.

The House of Representatives and the Senate held sessions on Saturday, but both chambers adjourned without agreement, and no votes were expected until Thursday.

Visitors to the capital's park-like National Mall, home to attractions including war memorials and the towering Washington Monument, criticised the shutdown which added to an air of chaos in a capital still reeling from Defense Secretary Jim Mattis's resignation last week over Trump policies.

The uncertainty also helped pushed Wall Street into another rout on Friday, ending its worst week in a decade.

"Oh I think it's ridiculous. It's unnecessary," Philip Gibbs, a retired business professor from South Virginia, said of the shutdown.

Jeffrey Grignon, a Wisconsin healthcare worker, said the politicians "need to stop acting like children" and do the work they were elected to do.

Myanmar cop found killed in Rakhine state

AFP, Yangon

The bullet-riddled body of a Myanmar policeman was found in northern Rakhine state, government media said yesterday, as tensions rise in the hotspot where the Rohingya crisis erupted last year.

The western territory is a tinderbox of ethnic and religious divisions and security forces have clashed with both Rohingya insurgents and much better armed Rakhine fighters from the mostly Buddhist Arakan Army.

Private Aung Kyaw Thet went missing in action after an ambush last week by unknown assailants in Maungdaw township near the border with Bangladesh.

His body was found two days ago with "gunshot wounds in his face, arm and leg near a hill inside the other country," according to government-backed Global New Light of Myanmar.

US slams UN discounts for wealthy nations

AFP, United Nations

The United States on Saturday denounced at the United Nations a system of discounts for the peacekeeping assessments of wealthy nations, and confirmed Washington will pay no more than 25 percent.

The comments came a day after UN member states failed to reach a deal to make up for a \$220 million budget black hole left by Washington's downsizing of its peacekeeping contributions.

The discounts demonstrate an "urgent need to reform," said Cherith Norman Chalet, the US Ambassador for UN Management and Reform, referring to countries whose "per capita income is more than twice the average of the organization's membership."

She did not identify those countries.

Her comments came during the adoption of a resolution renewing until 2021 contributions to the UN operating budget, which is \$5.4 billion for 2018-19, and to the peacekeeping budget of \$6.6 billion annually.

The United States is the largest contribu-

PEACEKEEPING FUND

tor, whose share is 22 percent of the operating budget and 28 percent for peacekeeping.

President Donald Trump announced in September, however, that Washington would pay no more than 25 percent for Blue Helmet operations.

Washington has been trying to convince several countries to reduce their discounts in order to cover the \$220 million annually which Washington no longer wants to pay.

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.

"These discounts are without justification and have no basis in any methodology and should be eliminated," Chalet said.

"Nearly half of member states receive an 80 percent discount to their assessments on the peacekeeping scale."

Diplomats said that, in their quest for a better sharing of the financial burden, the US had approached Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Singapore, Brunei, Brazil, Mexico and India.

Netanyahu 'a cold-blooded killer': Turkey

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Turkey has hit out at Israel's "lawless occupation" of Palestinian territory after the Israeli prime minister accused Turkey of "massacres" against Kurds in a new war of words.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu labelled Benjamin Netanyahu "a cold-blooded killer of modern times", in a Tweet yesterday, adding that the prime minister was "responsible for massacres of thousands of innocent Palestinians".

Relations between Turkey and Israel have been tense this year over multiple issues including a controversial law passed by the Israeli parliament in July which defined the country as the nation-state of the Jewish people.

Netanyahu said President Recep Tayyip Erdogan "should not preach to



Israel" after the Turkish leader warned young Turks on Saturday: "Do not kick the enemy you have brought down to the ground. You are not a Jew in Israel."

Netanyahu said Erdogan was "the occupier of northern Cyprus, whose army massacred women and children in Kurdish villages, inside and outside Turkey" in a tweet late on Saturday.

Erdogan's spokesperson and chief adviser Ibrahim Kalin lambasted Netanyahu, who he said "should end the lawless occupation of Palestinian lands and the brutal oppression of Palestinian people" instead of "begging President Erdogan not to speak out the truth".

TRUMP'S SYRIA DECISION

US envoy to anti-IS coalition resigns

AFP, Washington

Brett McGurk, the US special envoy to the anti-Islamic State group coalition, has resigned, a State Department official said Saturday, capping a chaotic week that saw the departure of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Donald Trump's stunning decision to pull troops from Syria.

McGurk's resignation, effective December 31, comes on the heels of Mattis's decision to quit the Trump administration over key disagreements with the US president, notably the Syria withdrawal.

Just last week McGurk, a Barack Obama appointee whom Trump kept on, said "nobody is declaring a mission accomplished" in the battle against IS -- just days before the president blindsided politicians and allies with his announcement of victory against the jihadist movement.

Trump on Saturday said that the jihadist group "is largely defeated."

"When I became President, ISIS was going wild," the president tweeted. "Now ISIS is largely defeated and other local countries, including Turkey, should be able to easily take care of whatever remains. We're coming home!"

Trump later took aim at McGurk on Twitter, referring to him as a "grandstander" who was quitting just before his time was up.



People react as they stand by the wing of a drone the Houthis say they brought down near the northwestern city of Saada, Yemen yesterday. The head of the UN team tasked with monitoring a fragile ceasefire in Yemen's port city of Hodeida arrived in Sanaa.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Heisei era is 'free of war'

Japanese Emperor Akihito takes deep comfort in rare emotional speech ahead of abdication, prays for peace

AFP, Tokyo

In a rare emotional address ahead of his abdication next year, Japanese Emperor Akihito said he took "deep comfort" that his long reign had been one of peace as he remembered the "countless lives" lost in World War II.

Akihito, in a pre-recorded speech to mark his 85th birthday yesterday, also paid tribute to the Japanese people and Empress Michiko, the first commoner to join the tradition-bound imperial family who has been at his side for 60 years.

His voice trembling as he discussed the legacy of World War II, the emperor pointed to the "countless lives" lost in the conflict, which was fought under the name of his father Hirohito, who died in 1989.

Akihito also reiterated the importance of "accurately" teaching history to young people.

"I have believed it is important not to forget that countless lives were lost in World War II and that the peace and prosperity of post-war Japan was built upon the numerous sacrifices

and tireless efforts made by the Japanese people, and to pass on this history accurately to those born after the war," he said.

"It gives me deep comfort that the Heisei Era (his reign) is coming to an end, free of war in Japan," he said.

During his reign, the soft-spoken Akihito has used his speeches and travels to express his strong pacifist views, which

are sharply at odds with the aggressive expansionism Japan pursued under his father's rule.

His insistence on remembering history is in sharp contrast with conservative ideologues who have attempted to gloss over Japan's wartime record.

The widely adored emperor will next year become the first Japanese royal to abdicate in more than two centuries.

His eldest son Crown Prince Naruhito will ascend the Chrysanthemum throne on May 1.

Akihito said his reign had been a quest to determine the role of the emperor as a "symbol of the state" under Japan's pacifist post-war constitution, in contrast to his father Hirohito who was regarded as semi-divine.



Trump discussed firing Fed chief

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump has privately discussed the possibility of firing Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell, a move that could roil already volatile financial markets, two sources familiar with situation said on Saturday.

The sources added that they do not expect Trump to dismiss the US central bank chief, despite the president's public and private objections to the Fed's interest rate-hiking campaign and his repeated criticisms of Powell, whom he appointed.

US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, however, tweeted late Saturday that Trump had told him that never suggested dismissing the Fed chief.

"I never suggested firing Chairman Jay Powell, nor do I believe I have the right to do so," Mnuchin quoted Trump as telling him.

The White House and a Fed spokeswoman declined to comment.

An attempt to remove the Fed chairman would be unprecedented and seen as an attack on the US central bank's independence, which is meant to insulate it from political considerations. It would be on potentially shaky legal ground, and would probably hit financial markets around the globe hard.