

UN truce monitoring
chief visits Hodeida

AFP, Hodeida

The head of the United Nations team tasked with monitoring a fragile ceasefire in the flashpoint city of Hodeida on Monday visited its lifeline docks, a port official said. Retired Dutch general Patrick Cammaert called on Saudi-backed government forces and Iran-linked Houthi rebels to respect the hard-won truce.

Pakistan FM in China to
talk about Afghanistan

AFP, Beijing

The US decision to pull nearly half its troops from restive Afghanistan was high on the agenda at a meeting between the Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi yesterday. The minister reaffirmed that the conflict has no military solution.

Erdogan invites
Trump to Turkey

AFP, Ankara

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sent more troops to Syria's border on Monday ahead of an imminent US withdrawal, as the White House announced he had invited Donald Trump to Ankara. Unlike several other allies of the US, Turkey has praised Trump's decision to withdraw 2,000 of his ground forces from Syria, a country where it will now have a freer rein to target Kurdish fighters.

BITS OF HISTORY
(DECEMBER 25)

1926 - Emperor Hirohito acceded to the Japanese throne on the death of his father Taisho. Hirohito died in 1989.
1977 - Charlie Chaplin, British-born US star of silent comedy films, died.
1991 - Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev resigned, ceding power in Russia to Boris Yeltsin and marking the end of the Soviet Union.
2003 - One hundred and thirty-eight people were killed when a Boeing 727 bound for Beirut clipped a building after takeoff in Benin's capital, Cotonou and crashed into the Atlantic.

Kevin Spacey to
be charged with
sexual assault

AFP, New York

Oscar-winning US actor Kevin Spacey is facing a felony charge for alleged sexual assault of a teenager in a restaurant in 2016, prosecutors said on Monday.

Spacey will be arraigned at Nantucket District Court on January 7 on a charge of indecent assault and battery, according to the district attorney of Cape and Islands, Massachusetts.

Prosecutors did not name the alleged victim of the July 2016 incident but former Boston-based television news anchor Heather Unruh told a news conference last year that police were investigating a complaint by her son against the "House of Cards" and "American Beauty" star.

Unruh told reporters the 59-year-old had sexually assaulted her son on the holiday island of Nantucket after plying him with alcohol late at night in a bar in July 2016.

Unruh described her son at the time as a "star-struck, straight" 18-year-old.

"Kevin Spacey bought him drink after drink after drink, and when my son was drunk, Spacey made his move and sexually assaulted him," Unruh told the news conference in Boston.

Spacey was considered one of the finest actors of his generation. His career has nosedived following allegations of sexual misconduct by more than a dozen men in the United States and Britain.



Rescuers recover a body on the beach in Tanjung Lesung, Banten province, Indonesia, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Panic persists; toll hits 429

Rescuers use drones, dogs to find victims; 1450 injured; 154 missing

AFP, Carita

A small Christmas service was held near a stretch of Indonesia's tsunami-struck coastline yesterday, as panicked residents in one coastal town tried to flee after rumours spread that another deadly wave was about to smash into the coast.

It turned out to be a false alarm, but widespread fears about a repeat disaster -- and warnings that clean water and medicine supplies were running low -- rippled across the region as the death toll from Saturday's volcano-triggered disaster topped 400.

Thousands more have been displaced, with many left homeless after houses were flattened by the killer wave.

The powerful tsunami struck at night and without warning, sweeping over popular beaches on southern Sumatra and the western edge of Java and inundating tourist hotels and coastal settlements.

The latest death toll stood at 429, with 1,485 people injured and another 154 still missing.

Experts have warned that more deadly waves could slam the stricken region now covered by mountains of overturned cars, boats, furniture and other debris.

Many evacuees are too afraid to go home.

Authorities are using sniffer dogs to



try to find any survivors and victims' bodies, while they have turned to drones to survey the devastated coastline.

In shattered Way Muli village on Sumatra, Udin Ahok was coming to grips with the horrible choice he was forced to make: save his wife or his

mother and baby.

When the tsunami slammed into his house, the panicked Ahok fought to reach his sleeping 70-year-old mother and one-year-old son but then he saw his wife about to drown in the swirling waters. He plucked her to safety.

His mother and baby were found dead under mountains of debris.

"I didn't have time to save my mother and son," the weeping 46-year-old told AFP from a shelter in one of the stricken region's hardest-hit areas.

"I regret it so much. I can only hope they've been given a place in God's hands."

Officials say the evidence suggested that an eruption of the rumbling Anak Krakatoa volcano, which sits in the middle of the Strait, caused a section of the crater to collapse and slide into the ocean, triggering the tsunami. Anak Krakatoa is an island that emerged around 1928 in the crater left by Krakatoa, whose massive 1883 eruption killed at least 36,000 people.

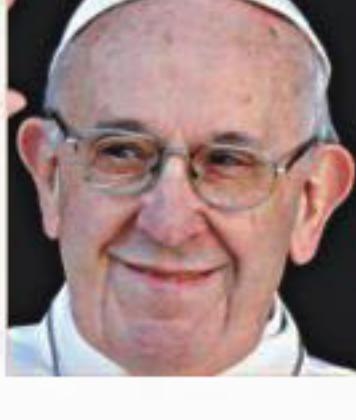
CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

See differences as asset, not danger: Pope Francis

REUTERS, Vatican City

Francis, the first pope from Latin America, alluded to polarisation over migration, saying God wanted "love, acceptance, respect for this poor humanity of ours, which we all share in a great variety of races, languages, and cultures".

"Our differences, then, are not a detriment or a danger; they are a source of richness," he said.



Francis, the head of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics, had earlier used his mass on Monday night to urge people to curb "insatiable greed".

Francis, 82, called for the resumption of dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians to "undertake a journey of peace that can put an end to a conflict that for over 70 years has lacerated the land chosen by the Lord to show his face of love".

He urged the international community to work for a political solution in Syria and said he hoped a true brokered in Yemen's civil war could bring relief to a population exhausted by violence and famine.

SOCIAL MEDIA REGULATION

Indian govt begins public consultations

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Amidst a debate over Indian government's move to give sweeping powers to security agencies to intercept the contents on computers, the Electronics and Information Technology Ministry has announced that it has begun public consultations on draft amendment to rules regulating internet and social media companies like Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook aimed at checking fake news and rumours.

However, the move has evoked fresh protests from social activists and opposition parties.

Congress accused the BJP-led government of "violating" the privacy of individuals and turning India into a "surveillance state." It said if the draft amendment to the rules relating to regulation of social media platforms were approved it will lead to a huge expansion of the government's power over common citizens reminiscent of "eerie dictatorship."

The Ministry said in a statement on Monday that consultations have begun on the draft Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines) Rules of 2018 to replace the rules notified in seven years ago.

The consultation process was initiated with inter-ministerial consultations and thereafter with other stakeholders, including major social media platforms/ messaging services platforms like Facebook, Google, Twitter, Yahoo, WhatsApp and associations representing intermediaries," said the ministry.

The timeline of submission of comments by the public has been set for January 15 next year.

Attackers hit Libya
foreign ministry

Senior civil servant among 3 killed

AFP, Tripoli

Suicide attackers stormed the Libyan foreign ministry in the capital Tripoli yesterday, killing at least three people including a senior civil servant, the authorities said.

Ten other people were wounded in what the foreign ministry said was a suicide attack carried out by "terrorists".

A car bomb exploded near the ministry, prompting security forces to rush to the scene, said special forces spokesman Tarak al-Dawass, accusing the Islamic State jihadist group (IS) of responsibility. There was no immediate claim of responsibility.

A suicide bomber then blew himself up on the second floor of the building while a second attacker died when the suitcase he was carrying exploded, he said.

A third assailant, who was unarmed and wearing a bullet-proof vest, was killed by security forces outside, Dawass added.

At least three people were killed and 10 wounded, according to the health ministry.

A civil servant who headed a department in the foreign ministry was among the dead, security sources said.

Torn apart by power struggles and undermined by chronic insecurity, Libya has become a haven for jihadists since the ouster and killing of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.



Smoke rises from the site of the headquarters of Libya's foreign ministry after suicide attackers hit in Tripoli, yesterday.

US sanctions to hit Iran's growth

Says Rouhani as he reveals budget

REUTERS, Dubai

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani yesterday presented a \$47 billion state budget with increased spending on lower income groups, saying US sanctions would affect people's lives and economic growth but not bring the government to its knees.

US President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of a multilateral nuclear deal with Iran in May and reimposed sanctions on it, including on its vital oil industry.

"America's goal is to bring Iran's Islamic system to its knees... and it will fail in this, but sanctions will no doubt affect people's lives, and the country's development and economic growth," Rouhani told parliament in a speech carried live on state television.

He gave the value of the nominally balanced draft budget, excluding the spending of state enterprises, at about 4,700 trillion rials for the next Iranian year, which starts on March 21.

That figure is up from about 3,700 trillion rials he had proposed for this year, but the new budget is effectively worth about half of this year's because of the weakening of Iran's currency.

Under the unofficial exchange rate used on the free market, the budget is worth about \$47 billion.

Rouhani said state employees and pensioners would get a 20 percent pay rise next year, and the budget included \$14 billion at a subsidised rate less than half of the market to provide cheap basic goods such as food and medicine, up from \$13 billion in this year's budget.

PM Modi opens India's
longest railroad bridge

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's longest railroad bridge across the Brahmaputra river was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday marking a strategic connectivity project that will facilitate faster movement of civilians as well as defence personnel between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh bordering China.

Modi flagged off the first train over the separate rail bridge that covers a distance of five km as Modi termed the inauguration of the project as a "historic" day for the north eastern India.

The foundation stone for Assam's Bogibeel bridge was laid in January, 1997 and work on the project began in 2002 when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was Prime Minister but it was only yesterday that the double decker rail-and-road bridge opened to traffic linking Assam's Dibrugarh and Dhemaji districts with

Arunchal Pradesh, reducing the travel time between the two points by four hours and help avoid a 170-km detour.

The bridge, which has a serviceable period of 120 years, has strategic significance for India's defence and has been built strong enough to stand the weight of military tanks.



The three-lane road bridge can support the landing of fighter jets. The Bogibeel Bridge is India's only fully-welded bridge for which European codes and welding standards were followed. The 4.9 km-long bridge was constructed at an estimated cost of Rs 5,900 crore.

Hijacked bus
ploughs into
pedestrians
8 killed in China

AFP, Beijing

At least eight people were killed and 22 injured after a hijacked bus crashed into pedestrians in east China's Fujian province yesterday afternoon, state media reported.

A hijacker carrying a knife has been detained and is being investigated by local police, state television CGTN reported.

The incident happened at about 3:20pm in the city of Longyan, the local Minxi Ribao newspaper reported. A policeman was among the five confirmed dead.

The hijacker had attacked a female passenger before taking control of the bus, Duowei reported.

'I am all alone (poor
me) in White House'
Trump launches salvo of tweets as Democrats
accuses him of 'plunging country into chaos'

AGENCIES

Democratic leaders accused an isolated President Donald Trump on Monday of sowing Christmas "chaos" after the stock market plummeted and the US government shutdown hit a third day.

"It's Christmas Eve and President Trump is plunging the country into chaos," Nancy Pelosi, who takes over next month as House speaker, and Chuck Schumer, the top Democrat in the Republican-led Senate, said in a joint statement.

In his third straight day holed up inside the White House during the partial federal government shutdown that he initiated over his demand to construct a border wall, President Donald Trump barked out his frustrations on Twitter: Democrats are hypocrites! The

media makes up stories! Senators are wrong on foreign policy - and so is Defense Secretary Jim Mattis!

Trump said war-ravaged Syria would be rebuilt not by the United States but by Saudi Arabia.

As the stock market closed out its worst December since 1931, the president placed sole blame for the staggering sell-off on the Federal Reserve, likening the central bank to a golfer who "can't putt."

That was all before noon. And then, at 12:32pm, came Trump's 10th tweet of the day, a plaintive complaint from a president who craves constant interaction and praise: "I am all alone (poor me) in the White House waiting for the Democrats to come back and make a deal on desperately needed Border Security," he wrote.

The timeline of submission of comments by the public has been set for January 15 next year.