

NEWS IN brief

Rebels breach Myanmar ceasefire in army attack

Myanmar's army yesterday accused rebels of attacking and killing "some" of its soldiers, the first skirmish acknowledged by the military in the wake of a rare ceasefire with ethnic armed groups. The military announced last week it would suspend "all military movements" in the troubled northern and eastern regions for four months, a move observers say is unprecedented.

278 skeletons found at Lanka mass grave

Some 278 skeletons have been found at one of the biggest mass graves uncovered in Sri Lanka since the end of civil war almost a decade ago, an investigator said yesterday. Dozens of women and children as well as men were buried at the site in Mannar where Tamil guerrillas fought during the conflict.

Three men convicted of killing five in UK blast

A British court yesterday convicted three men for a supermarket blast in Leicester, central England this year that killed five people in an attempted insurance scam. The court found Aram Kurd, who was renting the shop, and friends Arkan Ali and Hawkar Hassan guilty of murder after they plotted to destroy the business and claim insurance on it.

BITS OF HISTORY (DECEMBER 28)

- 1923:** Alexandre Gustave Eiffel, the French engineer who built the tower in Paris that bears his name, died aged 91.
- 1974:** An earthquake of magnitude 5.5 destroyed villages in the Karakoram mountains in Pakistan, leaving 5,200 dead and more than 16,000 injured.
- 2011:** Funeral procession for late North Korean leader Kim Jong-il.



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi (R) greets Bhutan's Prime Minister Lotay Tshering (L) during a ceremonial reception at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi yesterday. Modi announced Rs 4,500 crore financial assistance to Bhutan for its 12th five-year plan after holding wide-ranging talks with Tshering.

N KOREA DEFECTOR HACK

Personal data of 1,000 leaked

The personal information of nearly 1,000 North Koreans who defected to South Korea has been leaked after unknown hackers got access to a resettlement agency's database, the South Korean Unification Ministry said yesterday. The ministry said it discovered last week that the names, birth dates and addresses of 997 defectors had been stolen through a computer infected with malicious software at an agency called the Hana centre, in the southern city of Gumi. "The malware was planted through emails sent by an internal address," a ministry official told reporters on condition of anonymity, due to the sensitivity of the issue, referring to a Hana centre email account. The Hana centre is among 25 institutes the ministry run around the country to help some 32,000 defectors adjust to life in the richer, democratic South by providing jobs, medical and legal support. Defectors, most of whom risked their lives to flee poverty and political oppression, are a source of shame for North Korea. Its state media often denounces them as "human scum" and accuses South Korean spies of kidnapping some of them. The ministry official declined to say if North Korea was believed to have been behind the hack, or what the motive might have been, saying a police investigation was under way to determine who did it. North Korean hackers have in the past been accused of cyberattacks on South Korean state agencies and businesses. North Korea stole classified documents from the South's defence ministry and a shipbuilder last year, while a cryptocurrency exchange filed for bankruptcy following a cyberattack linked to the North.

Assad's net tightens

Regime forces enter Manbij in new alliance with Kurds; Russia welcomes advance; UAE reopens Damascus embassy

Syrian troops deployed in support of Kurdish forces around a strategic northern city yesterday, in a shift of alliances hastened by last week's announcement of a US military withdrawal.

Nearly eight years into Syria's deadly conflict, the move marked another key step in President Bashar al-Assad's Russian-backed drive to reassert control over the country.

Buoyed by its military victories, the regime is also making progress in efforts to break its diplomatic isolation, with Thursday's reopening of the Emirati embassy in Damascus.

The Syrian army announced that it had raised the flag in Manbij, a strategic city close to the Turkish border where Kurds forces have been deployed since 2016 and where US-led coalition forces are also stationed.

A military spokesman said in a televised announcement that the army would be bent on "crushing terrorism and defeating all invaders and occupiers". More than 300 government forces deployed in the Manbij

area, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Russia hailed as "positive" the Syrian army's entry into Manbij. The Kurds issued a statement welcoming the regime advance, a pragmatic shift in alliances that will dash their aspirations for autonomy but could help cut their losses after a US pullout they resent as a betrayal.

Meanwhile, British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt yesterday criticised Trump's view of the world after the US president's announcement of a withdrawal of American troops from the fight against the Islamic State group in Syria.

"President Trump makes a speciality of talking in very black and white terms about what's happening in the world," Hunt told BBC Radio 4's Today programme.

"We have made massive progress in the war against Daesh (Arabic acronym for IS), but it's not over and, although they have lost nearly all the territory they held, they still hold some territory and there is still some real risk," he said.

"We have to continue to be vigilant," he added.

Turkey yesterday said Kurdish militia "does not have the right" to appeal to Damascus for help to counter a threatened Turkish offensive in the north.

AFP, Beirut

WAR IN SYRIA

UK FM slams Trump's decision to pullout US troops from Syria

Kurds have no right to appeal to Damascus for help: Turkey



Build wall or 'entirely' close US-Mexico border

Says Trump as govt shutdown drags on

President Donald Trump yesterday threatened to seal off the US-Mexico border "entirely" if Congress does not approve billions of dollars in funding for a wall.

In a burst of early morning tweets the president said the alternative to funding his hugely controversial wall project would be total separation from Mexico -- including making US car companies pull out their factories based on the other side of the frontier.

The threat yet again upped the ante in a political row that has led to a partial shutdown of the US government and seems set to dominate the start to the third year of Trump's presidency.

"We will be forced to close the Southern Border entirely if the Obstructionist Democrats do not give us the money to finish the Wall & also change the ridiculous immigration laws that our Country is saddled with," Trump tweeted.

With the border shut, Trump said he would take US-Mexican relations back to

the days before the NAFTA agreement opened free trade across Canada, Mexico and the United States.

That would "bring our car industry back into the United States where it belongs," he said.

Trump wants \$5 billion in funding for a wall along the more than 2,000-mile border, which he says is currently too porous to stop illegal immigration and which he says has become a magnet for criminals, drugs and even terrorists.

Opponents -- especially in the Democratic party but also some in Trump's Republican party -- say that a physical wall is impractical and that the idea is being used as a political tool to whip up xenophobia in Trump's right-wing voter base.

Both sides have dug in. Democrats refuse to approve funding and the president -- who has made hardline immigration policies a centerpiece of his presidency -- has retaliated by refusing to sign off on a wider spending bill, leaving some 800,000 federal employees without pay.

AFP, Washington



Australia swelters in extreme heatwave

Australia's vast continent is sizzling through extreme heatwave conditions this week, with temperatures reaching record highs and emergency services on high alert for bushfires.

The mercury is up to 16 degree Celsius (29 degrees Fahrenheit) higher than usual for this time of the year for southern Australia, with numerous towns setting new December records, the Bureau of Meteorology said yesterday.

"Heatwave conditions are being experienced across large parts of the country," the weather bureau said, adding that the sizzling temperatures spanned the southern parts of four states and the Northern Territory. Tiny Marble Bar in Western Australia state, which bills itself as the nation's hottest town, recorded a peak of 49.3 degree Celsius (121 degrees Fahrenheit) on Thursday, it added.

Major cities across the country are also affected, with the thermometer pushing

Mercury rises up to 16 degrees Celsius higher than usual

Emergency services on high alert for bushfires

towards 40 degree Celsius and the heat set to linger into the new year. In Sydney, thousands of people flocked to beaches to cool down, while the state's health service issued a warning for poor quality air as ozone levels rise with the hot weather.

"This is all because of a high-pressure system coming off the Tasman sea that is slow moving and has set up a pattern over several days," Bureau of Meteorology duty forecaster Nick Neynens told Fairfax Media.

"It's a very stable situation with not a lot changing, meaning everywhere is pretty much going to be hot and we don't see a strong change coming yet."

Emergency services have issued fire bans and warnings and called on people to stay out of the extreme heat.

A southerly wind change will start to bring cooler wind conditions in southern Australia, the weather bureau's meteorologist Sarah Fitton said yesterday.



NGO Proactiva Open Arms' rescue boat is seen docked with 311 African migrants rescued in central Mediterranean Sea, at the Center for Temporary Assistance to Foreigners (CATE) in the port of Algeciras, in Campamento, Spain yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Angelina Jolie hints at move into politics

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION, London

Angelina Jolie hinted yesterday she could one day enter politics, as she urged global leaders to do more to help refugees and women in conflict.

Asked whether she was moving towards a political career, the Hollywood star, an envoy for the UN refugee agency who has also campaigned on sexual violence against women, said she would "go where I'm needed".

"If you asked me 20 years ago, I would've laughed," she said in an interview with British broadcaster the BBC. "I don't know if I'm fit for politics, but then I've also joked that I don't know if I have a skeleton left in my closet."

Jolie said her work with the United Nations and other organisations enabled her to "get a lot done without a title", but did not rule



India to send crew on space mission

AFP, New Delhi

India will send a three-member team into space for up to a week when it launches its first manned mission expected in 2022, the government announced yesterday.

Indian ministers approved a budget of \$1.4 billion to provide technology and infrastructure for the programme, according to a government statement.

It said the cabinet had approved financing to launch an Indian-developed craft in a "low earth orbit" for a mission duration ranging from one orbital period to a maximum of seven days.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced in August that India will launch a manned space flight by 2022 with at least one astronaut.

India plans to undertake two unmanned and one manned flights as part of its Gaganyaan (Sky-Vehicle) Programme, the statement said.

The country has invested heavily in its space programme in the past decade, stepping up its rivalry with China.

The Indian Space Research Organisation also announced in July that it planned to send an unmanned mission to the moon in 2019.

Tighter measures to fight terror in EU take effect

AFP, Brussels

Tighter measures to fight crime and terrorism in the European Union took effect yesterday as the 28-nation bloc seeks to improve security by sharing information more efficiently.

New rules that strengthen the Schengen Information System (SIS) should help border guards and law enforcement agencies, and provide more protection for missing children and disabled adults, the European Commission said in a statement.

Member states are now "obliged to create a SIS alert for all cases related to terrorist offences," decreasing the chances that suspects fall through the cracks.

By the end of next year, Europol will also be informed of all SIS terrorism alerts, casting a net across Europe as a whole.

"We are closing a critical security gap today in the EU," migration commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos said in the statement.

"Member states will have an obligation to introduce terrorism alerts into the reinforced Schengen Information System. Anyone posing a threat should not go unnoticed anymore," he added.

EU security commissioner Julian King said the bloc sought "to strengthen information sharing and make our information systems work together more effectively."

The new rules would also respect strengthened EU personal data protection regulations, the statement said.

French jihadist Medhi Nemmouche, 33, is an example of the threat the tighter rules are supposed to protect against.

In May 2014, he killed four people at the Brussels Jewish Museum despite having been listed on the SIS in December 2012.

German border agents recorded his return from Syria via several intermediate stops in March 2014 and notified France, but Nemmouche was nonetheless able to make his way to Belgium and carry out the attack.

Member states now obliged to create alert for all terror cases

Indonesia trims tsunami toll

Hikes injury tally to 7,000

AFP, Jakarta

The number of people evacuated after Indonesia's deadly tsunami has nearly doubled to some 40,000 while more than 7,000 were injured in the disaster, officials said yesterday, as they trimmed the official death toll.

Authorities said 426 people had been killed -- down from a previous tally of 430 -- with double-counting by different districts blamed for the change. Two dozen people remain missing almost a week after the disaster.

The fresh figures come a day after Indonesia's disaster agency raised the danger alert level for an erupting volcano that sparked the killer tsunami at the weekend.

They have also warned that fresh activity at the crater threatened to trigger another deadly wave.

Previously, the number of displaced -- including many left homeless -- stood at 22,000 but that figure has now jumped to just over 40,000, according to the latest tally. Some 7,202 people suffered injuries, jumping from 1,495, while nearly 1,300 homes were destroyed as the waves crashed into the coastlines of western Java island and south Sumatra, authorities said.

out a future switch. "I honestly will do whatever I think can really make change and right now, I am able to work with a UN agency ... to do a lot of work directly with the people in need," she said. "I'm also able to work with governments and I'm also able to work with militaries. And so I sit in a very interesting place of being able to get a lot done without a title and without it being about myself or my policies. So for now I'll sit quiet." The Oscar-winning actor has in recent years visited refugee camps to highlight the plight of those uprooted by war.