

UN ROADMAP FOR PEACE

Yemen rebels begin Hodeida withdrawal

AFP, Hodeida

Yemeni rebels have begun to withdraw from the port of Hodeida, the country's key aid lifeline, under an agreement reached in Sweden earlier this month, a UN official said yesterday.

The official, who requested anonymity, said the Huthi rebels began to pull back from the Red Sea port at midnight (2100 GMT Friday).

The rebel withdrawal from the port, which is the point of entry for food aid to some 14 million Yemenis UN agencies say are on the brink of famine, is a key part of a ceasefire that went into effect on December 18.

Pro-government forces are also supposed to pull back from parts of the city they recaptured in an offensive they launched with the backing of a Saudi-led coalition on June 13.

The UN Security Council last week unanimously approved a resolution authorising the deployment of observers to oversee a hard-won truce for Hodeida that was agreed by the Saudi-backed government and the rebels in Sweden this month.

In addition to the withdrawal of fighters from Hodeida, the agreement included a planned prisoner swap involving some 15,000 detainees.

The two sides have agreed to meet again in late January for more talks to define the framework for negotiations on a comprehensive peace settlement.

More than 22 million Yemeni people -- three quarters of the population -- now depend on humanitarian assistance to survive.



The pictures show a South American migrant is being detained by US forces as he tried to enter illegally from Mexico into the US. Thousands of anxious migrants waited at US-Mexico border yesterday after US President Donald Trump threatened on Friday to close the southern US border with Mexico unless he gets the money he wants for a wall. Photos were taken on Friday. PHOTO: REUTERS



NEWSIN brief

Canadian teacher freed in China

AFP, Ottawa

A Canadian teacher arrested in China for administrative reasons -- a case officially unrelated to the ongoing diplomatic row between Beijing and Ottawa -- has been freed, authorities said Friday. China has arrested two more Canadians on suspicion of "harm to national security" after Ottawa arrested Huawei's chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou in Vancouver for violation sanctions on Iran.

Strong quake strikes off Philippines

REUTERS, Manila

A strong earthquake of 6.9 magnitude struck off the southern Philippine island of Mindanao yesterday, raising fears of dangerous tsunami waves across the region but after about two hours, the tsunami warning was withdrawn. Residents of the southern Philippines said the earthquake lasted about a minute and people rushed out of buildings but there had been no major damage.

4 terrorists killed in Indian Kashmir

NDTV ONLINE

4 terrorists have been shot dead by security forces during an encounter in Jammu and Kashmir's Pulwama district yesterday morning, police said. The encounter happened when the suspected terrorists fired on security forces which had launched a cordon and search operation based on specific information from intelligence agencies.

BITS OF HISTORY (DECEMBER 29)

1940: German aircraft dropped thousands of incendiary bombs on London's city centre, causing the most damaging blaze since the Great Fire of 1666.
1978: Spain's new democratic constitution, providing for a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary government, takes effect.
1996: Guatemala's government and leftist rebels signed a peace accord ending 36 years of war that cost at least 140,000 lives.

'We are not in crisis'

Claims new Saudi FM; observers say govt reshuffle aims at checking young crown prince's powers

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia's new foreign minister struck a note of defiance Friday in the face of international outrage over critic Jamal Khashoggi's murder, denying the kingdom was in crisis and that his predecessor had been demoted.

Ibrahim al-Assaf, a former veteran finance minister who was briefly detained last year in what Riyadh said was an anti-corruption sweep, replaced Adel al-Jubeir as foreign minister in a major government shake-up on Thursday ordered by King Salman.

The surprise reshuffle was seen partly as an attempt to elevate the kingdom's marginalised old guard, adding a veneer of checks and balances to the policy decisions of 33-year-old Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who faces intense global scrutiny over the October 2 murder of journalist Khashoggi.

But speaking to AFP in his first interview since his appointment, Assaf insisted the restructuring was motivated not by the Khashoggi affair, but

the need to make the government machinery more efficient.

"We are not going through a crisis, we are going through a transformation," assaf told AFP, referring to social and economic reforms spearheaded by the crown prince.



Assaf, 69, inherits the ministry after a series of combative foreign policy moves by the crown prince, who along with regional allies imposed a blockade on neighbouring Qatar, launched a military campaign in Yemen and engaged in a bitter diplomatic row with Canada.

When asked whether his biggest foreign policy challenge was to repair the kingdom's tarnished reputation,

Assaf replied: "I wouldn't say 'repair' because the relationship between my country and a vast majority of countries in the world is in excellent shape."

A seasoned bureaucrat, Assaf was briefly held in Riyadh's Ritz-Carlton hotel last year along with hundreds of elite princes and businessmen, in what the government called a crackdown on corruption.

His reappointment to a cabinet role indicates the government is seeking to slowly "rehabilitate" the experienced old guard, widely seen to be sidelined by the young prince, observers say.

"King Salman is seeking to bolster his son by appointing seasoned technocrats like Assaf who are not from MBS's inner circle, indirectly reinstating an internal system of checks and balances that was swept away in (MBS's) drive to consolidate power," said Becca Wasser.

"Adding experienced government hands from an older generation, will serve to check some of MBS's impulses," the policy analyst at the US-

Winter storms batter large swaths of US

Cause travel chaos; 6 killed

AFP, Chicago

At least six deaths were attributed to severe weather in the US as heavy snow and high winds snarled air and ground transportation during a busy holiday travel period.

More than 500 flight cancellations and 5,700 delays were reported Friday as the winter storm blanketed areas from the north central plains and the Midwest with eight to 12 inches (20-30 centimeters) of snow.

As much snow, if not more, was forecast to fall in the coming days in the southwestern state of New Mexico, along with a deluge of rain in some southern and eastern states -- ruining New Year travel plans for thousands of Americans.

Millions more in the South were warned of potential flooding from heavy rains.

More than 6,500 flights were delayed and some 800 more were canceled on Thursday, according to the flight tracking website FlightAware.

Numerous roads were closed Thursday in the Dakotas, Minnesota, Kansas and Iowa. Ground crews worked to clear affected areas, but many remained packed with snow and ice Friday.

The South Dakota Department of Transportation said advisories warning against travel remained in effect.

The weather service predicted the treacherous conditions would continue through the weekend across the country.



Cambodian leader derides 'democracy'

AFP, Phnom Penh

Cambodia's strongman leader Hun Sen lashed out at Western governments for pushing "democracy and human rights" on his country in a speech yesterday.

The 66-year-old prime minister has ruled

Cambodia for over three decades. His administration was renewed for another five years in July following elections critics condemned as a sham.

But Hun Sen remained defiant yesterday as he inaugurated a monument with carvings showcasing his government's achievements.

"Don't make war by using what is called democracy and human rights, in which democratic countries used to make the mistake of supporting Lon Nol's coup," he said in a speech to thousands of officials.

Lon Nol's US-backed regime was ousted by the ultra-Maoist Khmer Rouge in 1975, jumpstarting four years of horror. Hun Sen was a former Khmer Rouge cadre who defected and had a role in toppling the genocidal regime in 1979, although the US later sought to keep the ousted Khmer Rouge at the table in the United Nations.

"You as a democratic country ... supported Pol Pot, who used to kill people with no regards for respecting human rights," Hun Sen said, without naming the US.

Cambodia's government dissolved the main opposition party and jailed its leader ahead of July elections in which it won every seat in parliament, transforming the nation into a one-party state.



An Egyptian drives a horse-drawn cart at the Giza pyramids necropolis near Cairo, yesterday. Inset, Police officers inspect a scene of a tourist bus blast in Giza. Three Vietnamese tourists and an Egyptian guide were killed when a roadside bomb blast hit their tour bus on Friday less than 4 km from Egypt's world-famous Giza pyramids. PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

VVIP CHOPPER CASE IN INDIA

'Middleman' names Sonia Gandhi, Rahul

NDTV ONLINE

Christian Michel, the alleged middleman in the AgustaWestland VVIP chopper case, has named Congress's Sonia Gandhi while in custody, the Enforcement Directorate informed a court in Delhi yesterday.

The agency's lawyer also told the court that Christian Michel spoke about "the son of the Italian lady" and how he is going to become "the next prime minister of the country", the reference being to Congress president Rahul Gandhi.

Christian Michel, arrested by the Enforcement Directorate over money laundering charges in the AgustaWestland VVIP chopper scam after he was extradited from the UAE earlier this



month, was produced in Delhi's Patiala House Court after seven days in the probe agency's custody.

In September 2015, the Indian authorities had issued an arrest warrant against Michel and had applied a Red Corner Notice through Interpol, against him.

The CBI has alleged there was an estimated loss of 398.21 million Euros in the deal that was signed on February 8, 2010 for the supply of VVIP choppers worth 556.262 million Euros. The Enforcement Directorate, in its charge sheet filed against Christian Michel in June 2016, had alleged that he received 30 million Euros from AgustaWestland.

Indonesian tsunami volcano lost two-thirds of its height

AFP, Pandeglang

The Indonesian volcano which caused a tsunami that killed more than 400 people last week lost more than two-thirds of its height following the eruption which triggered the killer waves.

A section of Anak Krakatoa's crater collapsed after an eruption and slid into the ocean, generating the tsunami last Saturday night.

A visual analysis by the Indonesian volcanology agency found the volcano has lost more than two-thirds of its height, an official said yesterday.

Anak Krakatoa which used to stand 338 metres (1,109 feet) high was now just 110 metres tall.

The agency estimated the volcano lost between 150 and 180 million cubic metres of material as massive amounts of rock and ash have been slowly sliding into the sea following a series of eruptions. Before and after satellite images taken by Japan's space agency showed that a two square kilometre chunk of the volcanic island had collapsed into the water.

The volcano was a new island that emerged around 1928 in the crater left by Krakatoa, whose massive 1883 eruption killed at least 36,000 people.

Authorities said at least 426 people were killed and 23 missing in the disaster. Some 7,202 people suffered injuries and nearly 1,300 homes were destroyed after the waves crashed into the coastlines of western Java island and south Sumatra. More than 40,000 people have been evacuated for fear of another tsunami as Anak Krakatoa continues to rumble.



AFTERMATH OF TRUMP'S TROOPS WITHDRAWAL FROM SYRIA

Let YPG keep US weapons

Recommend commanders; move likely to anger Turkey

REUTERS, Washington

US commanders planning for the withdrawal of US troops from Syria are recommending that Kurdish fighters battling Islamic State be allowed to keep US-supplied weapons, four US officials said, a move that would likely anger Nato ally Turkey.

Three of the officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the recommendations were part of discussions on a draft plan by the US military. It is unclear what the Pentagon will ultimately recommend to the White House.

Discussions are still at an early stage inside the Pentagon and no decision has yet been made, the officials said. The plan will then be presented to the White House in the coming days with US President Donald Trump making the final decision.

Trump last week abruptly ordered a complete withdrawal of US troops from Syria, drawing widespread criticism and prompting Defense Secretary Jim Mattis' resignation.

The US officials said Trump's announcement has upset US commanders, who view his decision as a betrayal of the Kurdish YPG militia, which has led the

fight to eradicate Islamic State from northeastern Syria.

Ankara views the YPG as an extension of a Kurdish insurgency inside Turkey and threatened to launch an offensive against the YPG.

The proposal to leave US-supplied weapons with the YPG, which could include anti-tank missiles, armored vehicles and mortars, would reassure Kurdish allies that they were not being abandoned.

But Turkey wants the United States to take the weapons back, so the commanders' recommendation, if confirmed, could complicate Trump's plan to allow Turkey to finish off the fight against Islamic State inside Syria.

The Pentagon keeps records of the weapons it has supplied to the YPG and their chain of custody.

Meanwhile, Russia and Turkey yesterday agreed to coordinate ground operations in Syria after last week's shock announcement of a US military withdrawal, Moscow's top diplomat said.

"Of course we paid special attention to new circumstances which appeared in connection with the announced US military pullout," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said after talks with Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu in Moscow.

Death Anniversary



Today is the 8th death anniversary of Professor Dr Bazlul Mobin Chowdhury, the founder vice-chancellor of Independent University Bangladesh (IUB). Relatives, friends and well-wishers are requested to pray for the salvation of the departed soul.