

NEWSIN brief

Bali's Agung volcano erupts again

AFP, Jakarta

A volcano on the Indonesian holiday island of Bali erupted yesterday, belching ash high into the air and over nearby villages as officials warned tourists to keep clear of the area. Mount Agung has been erupting periodically since it rumbled back to life in 2017, when it grounded hundreds of flights and left 120,000 visitors stranded.

Australia strips IS suspect of citizenship

AFP, Sydney

Australia has stripped the citizenship of its most-wanted Islamic State suspect Neil Prakash for being a member of the jihadist group, the 12th dual-national to lose their passport over terrorism links. Prakash -- a senior recruiter for IS who has been linked to terror plots to kill Australians -- is currently facing charges in Turkey of joining the organisation.

Philippine storm death toll hits 22

AFP, Manila

At least 22 people died from a storm that swept through the central Philippine islands at the weekend, authorities said yesterday, with rescue operations under way in flood-inundated communities. The death toll rose from four a day after the storm brought heavy rain to the Bicol and Eastern Visayas regions, causing massive flooding and landslides, the government's office of civil defence said.

BITS OF HISTORY (DECEMBER 30)

- 1916:** Grigory Rasputin, the Siberian peasant, mystic, and favourite of Russian Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra, was killed.
- 1968:** Trygve Lie, Norwegian statesman and first secretary-general of the United Nations (1946-52), died.
- 1993:** Israel and the Vatican recognised each other.
- 2006:** Saddam Hussein was hanged for crimes against humanity.



Voters queue in order to cast their ballot for the DR Congo's general elections at the College St Raphael polling station in Kinshasa, yesterday. DR Congo voters went to the polls in elections that will shape the future of their vast, troubled country, amid fears that violence could overshadow the ballot.

PHOTO: AFP

Afghanistan delays presidential polls

Election body says election to be delayed 3 months to July 20

REUTERS, Kabul

Afghanistan's presidential election will be postponed by three months to July 20 to give authorities more time to organise the ballot, election authorities announced yesterday, following mounting speculation of a delay.

The announcement follows heavy criticism of October's chaotic parliamentary election, which saw problems ranging from roadside bomb attacks to malfunctioning biometric voter verification equipment, incomplete voter lists and huge delays at polling sites.

The timing of the election has also been complicated by talks under way between US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and representatives of the Taliban aimed at launching a full peace process to end the war in Afghanistan.

The election was originally scheduled for April 20 but Gula Jan Abdul Bade Sayad, chairman of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) said mounting problems had forced a delay.

"April will be very difficult because of the harsh winter and transporting election materials, security, and the budget issues", Sayad told a news conference in Kabul.

"To better prepare for the vote, we have decided to hold the election in July next year," he added.

President Ashraf Ghani had previously insisted that the election would go ahead on time but Shahhussain Murtazawi, a spokesman for the presidential palace said the government welcomed the decision by the IEC.

Big progress being made

Says Trump after discussing possible trade deal with Xi

AGENCIES

US President Donald Trump said on Twitter that he had a "long and very good call" with Chinese President Xi Jinping and that a possible trade deal between the United States and China was progressing well.

As a partial shutdown of the US government entered its eighth day, with no quick end in sight, the Republican president was in Washington, sending out tweets attacking Democrats and talking up possibly improved relations with China.

The two nations have been in a trade war for much of 2018, shaking world financial markets as the flow of hundreds of billions of dollars worth of goods between the world's two largest economies has been disrupted by tariffs.

Trump and Xi agreed to a ceasefire in the trade war, deciding to hold off on imposing more tariffs for 90 days starting December 1 while they negotiate a deal to end the dispute following months of escalating tensions.

"Just had a long and very good call with President Xi of China," Trump wrote on Saturday. "Deal is moving along very well. If made, it will be very comprehensive, covering all sub-

jects, areas and points of dispute. Big progress being made!"

Chinese state media also said Xi and Trump spoke on Saturday, and quoted Xi as saying that teams from both countries have been working to implement a consensus reached with Trump, reported Reuters.

"I hope that the two teams will meet each other half way, work hard, and strive to reach an agreement that is mutually beneficial and beneficial to the world as soon as possible," Xi said, according to the state-run Xinhua news agency.

China's foreign ministry said yesterday the two countries' relationship had endured storms before, but that strong ties were important for the economies of both nations and for ensuring global stability and peace. Ministry spokesman Lu Kang said that Sino-US ties now "stand at a historic new

starting point" and that the two sides should respect each other's sovereignty, security and development interest and appropriately manage differences.

"Both sides should stick to rationally and objectively viewing the other side's strategic intentions, strengthen strategic communication and promote strategic mutual trust to prevent strategic misjudgements," he said in a statement.

SINO-US TIES



"I hope that the two teams will meet each other half way": Xi



Two nations have been in a trade war for much of 2018

Brexit '50-50' if May's deal voted down

Warns senior British minister

AFP, London

Britain's chances of leaving the European Union are only "50-50" if MPs reject Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit deal, a senior minister warned yesterday.

Liam Fox, the international trade secretary and a vocal Brexit campaigner during the 2016 referendum, warned colleagues planning on voting against May that her plan was the only way to be "100 percent certain" that Britain would leave.

"If we were not to vote for that, I'm not sure I would give it much more than 50-50," he told The Sunday Times.

May's government is trying to persuade a sceptical British parliament to endorse a broad withdrawal deal she struck with European leaders last month.

But the bill's passage is far from certain, with May having to pull an initial vote with a crushing defeat looking, rescheduling it for the week beginning January 14.

Pro-Brexit supporters are particularly concerned about the deal's so-called "backstop" provision, which could keep Britain locked in a customs union with the EU in order to avoid a "hard" border between British province Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

But Fox urged his colleagues to "put their own pride behind them" and take what was on offer.



A girl from Salvador, part of the Central American migrants hoping to reach the United States, looks through the US-Mexico border fence in Playas de Tijuana, Baja California State, Mexico, on Saturday. El Salvador insisted Saturday that it is taking steps to curb illegal migration to the United States, a day after US President Donald Trump threatened to cut off aid to nations in Central America's Northern Triangle -- Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.

PHOTO: AFP

Kim seeks more Korea talks

N Korean leader sends rare letter to Moon to discuss denuclearisation next year; South welcomes initiative

AFP, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un vowed to meet the South's President Moon Jae-in "frequently" next year to discuss denuclearisation of the peninsula in a rare letter sent to Seoul, Moon's office said yesterday.

The leader of the isolated North met with Moon three times this year -- twice at the border truce village of Panmunjom and once in the North's capital Pyongyang -- as a reconciliatory push gathered pace.

During Moon's visit to Pyongyang in September, Kim promised to pay a return visit to the South's capital Seoul "at an earliest date," sparking speculation he may visit by the end of this year.

But the much-anticipated trip has not yet materialised, which left the young ruler feeling "much regret," according to Kim's letter sent to mark the end of the year, Moon's spokesman said.

The North's leader "expressed a strong determination to visit Seoul while watching future situation," Kim Eui-kyeom told reporters.

Kim Jong Un also "expressed an intention to meet with Moon frequently



in 2019" to pursue peace and "solve the issue of denuclearising the peninsula together," the spokesman said.

The official did not elaborate on how the letter was delivered.

Moon welcomed the latest message, saying Kim had also expressed "active

intention to carry out agreements" made in his previous summits with the US and the South, without elaborating further.

"I welcome chairman Kim's intention to solve together the issue of denuclearisation...by meeting frequently even next year," Moon said in a statement.

The two neighbours technically remain at war after the 1950-53 Korean War ended with a ceasefire instead of a peace treaty.

Moon -- a dovish former human rights lawyer -- has advocated dialogue to push the impoverished but nuclear-armed North toward denuclearisation.

Cross-border ties improved markedly in 2018 as Kim made a series of reconciliatory gestures -- including a historic summit with US President Donald Trump in June in Singapore.

But progress in pushing the North to give up its atomic arsenal has stalled as Washington and Pyongyang accuse each other of dragging their feet and acting in bad faith.

'Kill, instead of complaining'

India university VC causes uproar with brutal solution to disputes

REUTERS, New Delhi

A top official at a Indian state-run university urged his students to "murder" fellow students if confronted instead of complaining to him, amid a wave of violence being reported from across the state where the school is based.

"If you're a student of this University, never come crying to me," said Raja Ram Yadav, vice-chancellor of Purvanchal University, in a speech, video from Reuters partner ANI showed.

Adding: "If you ever get into a fight, beat them, if possible murder them, we'll take care of it later."

Yadav was speaking on Friday at a college event in Ghazipur in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state. In the same city a police officer was stoned to death during violent protests on Saturday, though there is no indication of a link with Yadav's remarks.

Uttar Pradesh is notorious for communal tensions and crime, and has been plagued by incidents of mob violence in recent weeks.

Duterte under fire for saying he 'touched' maid

AFP, Manila

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte drew outrage yesterday after saying he "touched" his maid when he was a teenager, with women's rights groups accusing him of attempted rape and encouraging sexual abuse.

Duterte frequently sparks uproar with his comments on women, including rape jokes and boasting about adultery.

In his latest remarks, Duterte recounted a confession he had with a priest in high school, detailing how he had entered the room of his maid while she was sleeping.

"I lifted the blanket... I tried to touch what was inside the panty," Duterte said in a speech late Saturday.

"I was touching. She woke up. So I left the room."



Duterte recounted telling the priest that he had then returned to the maid's room and again tried to molest her.

Women's rights political party Gabriela denounced Duterte's "repulsive" comments and called for him to resign, saying he had confessed to attempted rape.

Responding to the criticism, Duterte's spokesman said Sunday that the president had "made up" and "added and spliced" the story.

"He has made up a laughable anecdote to dramatise the fact of sexual abuse that was inflicted on him and his fellow students when they were in high school," said Salvador Panelo.