

NEWSIN brief

6 Syrians killed in US-led strike on IS

AFP, Beirut

Four children were among at least six civilians killed in a US-led air strike on the Islamic State group's embattled enclave in eastern Syria, a monitor said yesterday. The Friday strike on the Euphrates Valley village of Baghouz killed 10 IS fighters as well as the six civilians, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Sudan issues warrants against 38 reporters

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Sudan's State Security Prosecution has issued arrest warrants for 38 journalists and activists on charges of "incitement" and spreading "false news", local media reported. The state prosecutor's order comes as Sudan marks one month since protests against the deterioration of living conditions first began on December 19. According to government statistics, 25 people have been killed so far.

New migrant caravan enters Mexico

AFP, Ciudad Hidalgo

Hundreds of Central Americans entered Mexico illegally as the latest migrant caravan trying to reach the United States began crossing the Mexican-Guatemalan border en masse Friday. The latest caravan is smaller than the one that swelled to 7,000 migrants late last year, leading Trump to warn of an "invasion" by "hardened criminals" and send thousands of troops to the US-Mexican border.

BITS OF HISTORY (JANUARY 19)

1966: Indira Gandhi was elected prime minister of India in succession to Lal Shastri who died on January 11. Shastri had succeeded Gandhi's father, Jawaharlal Nehru.

1991: At least three Iraqi SCUD missiles hit Tel Aviv.

1997: Yasser Arafat returns to Hebron after more than 30 years and joins some 25,000 people celebrating after Israel handed over control of the West Bank city.



Pelosi: Trump endangering US troops, lawmakers

REUTERS, Washington

US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on Friday accused President Donald Trump of putting American troops and civilians working in Afghanistan in danger by publicizing a planned congressional trip to the war-torn country, as tensions between the leaders spiked on the 28th day of a partial government shutdown.

Trump later on Friday signaled he would turn his attention from the fight over congressional travel back to the budget standoff that has left hundreds of thousands of federal workers without paychecks, posting on Twitter that he would make a "major announcement" on Saturday at 3pm EST (2000 GMT) on the "humanitarian crisis" on the country's southern border and on the partial shutdown.

The White House rejected Pelosi's charge of endangering troops and civilians.

The Republican Trump administration, which on Thursday had blocked Democrat Pelosi from making the trip to Afghanistan, on Friday slapped a blanket ban on all US congressional travel on government-owned or operated aircraft while the shutdown continues.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders said the administration was just trying to keep Pelosi in town so that negotiations could take place to try to end the partial shutdown, at four weeks already the longest in US history.

Trump on Thursday had blocked Pelosi from using a military plane for a congressional trip with other high-ranking Democrats to NATO headquarters in Brussels and then Afghanistan.

Pelosi's office then was prepared to fly commercially - an idea Trump himself raised - but on Friday morning announced the trip was being postponed because the administration had leaked details that could endanger the trip or the troops the speaker had planned to visit. A White House official denied this.



Mexican soldiers stand guard near a fire after a leaking gas pipeline triggered a blaze in Tlahuelilpan, Hidalgo state, on Friday. Inset, People gather at the site of the ruptured pipeline before the tragedy. PHOTO: REUTERS

ILLEGAL FUEL EXTRACTION FROM PIPELINE 66 killed, 76 hurt in Mexico blaze

REUTERS, Tlahuelilpan

The death toll from the explosion of a pipeline ruptured by suspected fuel thieves in central Mexico has risen to 66, the governor of the state of Hidalgo said yesterday.

At a news conference with Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, Hidalgo Governor Omar Fayad said 76 people had also been injured in Friday evening's explosion, which happened as people tried to fill containers with fuel.

Dozens of burned bodies lay in the charred field where the blast occurred in the municipality of Tlahuelilpan as forensic experts inspected and photographed the remains. Soldiers and other military personnel surrounded the cordoned-off area.

The field was littered with half-burned shoes and clothes as well as with buckets and drums used by people to collect fuel. Relatives of victims stood huddled together, some crying.

Lopez Obrador pledged to step up his government's drive to stamp out fuel theft, which has cost the country billions of dollars in the last few years.

Video footage showed residents scrambling to fill containers from the burst pipe and badly burned victims, raising questions about the management of an issue Lopez Obrador has made a top priority since taking office on Dec 1. Obrador launched a crackdown on fuel theft on Dec 27 and ordered pipelines to be closed temporarily to stop illegal taps.

Video on social media of people filling buckets from the pipeline during daylight hours in the presence of the armed forces prompted questions about why authorities had not acted.

The government said soldiers reached the scene after Pemex detected the illegal tap, but could not secure the area in time.

UK PM makes no change to demands in talks with EU

REUTERS, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May made no change to her demands in talks with European Union leaders despite her Brexit plan being defeated by British lawmakers earlier this week, the Telegraph newspaper reported on Friday.

May's demands continued to focus around either a legally binding time-limit for the Irish 'backstop'; a right for Britain to unilaterally withdraw, or a commitment to a trade deal finalisation before 2021 to prevent the backstop from coming into force, the report said, citing unnamed EU diplomatic sources.

The backstop is an insurance policy designed to prevent the return of border checks on the frontier between EU-member Ireland and Northern Ireland.

May repeated her demands in talks with Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron and Irish leader Leo Varadkar, the paper reported.

BREXIT DEADLOCK

Former British PM Major urges May to drop red lines

Merkel says all have responsibility to avoid chaos

May's deal for Britain to leave the EU was defeated earlier this week by 230 votes.

However, Merkel yesterday said she would do all she could to make sure Britain leaves the European Union with an agreement and, striking a conciliatory tone, she felt a responsibility to get an orderly solution.

She said even after Brexit, Britain should be an important partner.

Meanwhile, former British PM John Major yesterday urged Theresa May to drop her "red lines" on Brexit or allow parliament to find a way forward to avoid a damaging no-deal departure from the EU in March.

Major said he compromised on key decisions on the Northern Irish peace process and the first Gulf War while prime minister between 1990 and 1997, and May should do the same after her Brexit plan was rejected by a huge majority in parliament.

May is due to tell parliament on Monday how she intends to proceed on Brexit. Lawmakers may then propose alternatives to see if any could command majority support.

Modi govt past expiry date

Says Mamata as half a million attend rally against ruling party

AFP, Kolkata

India's opposition parties drew half a million supporters to Kolkata's streets yesterday for the largest show of force yet against Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a national election looms.

Police in the eastern city said 500,000 people turned out for the massive "Unite India" rally, which saw leaders from across the opposition spectrum rail against Modi and his ruling Hindu nationalist party.

Speeches were beamed on 20 giant screens to a sea of spectators waving the national tricolour flag and the banners of India's myriad opposition movements. Police said 5,000 officers were on standby for security.

"The Modi government is past its expiry date," said Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal state, from an enormous raised platform.

Her government, which organised the rally, had suggested four million would attend but Kolkata Police Chief Rajeev Kumar said 500,000 showed up.

Modi, who was inspecting military hardware in Gujarat state yesterday, accused the opposition of acting in self interest.

"The alliance is not against me, it's against India," he said, as quoted by the Hindustan Times newspaper.

The rally comes as hundreds of millions of Indians prepare to go to polls expected in April and May, the world's largest democratic exercise.

Modi -- the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader who won a landslide victory in 2014 -- is seeking another term, and remains hugely popular.

But he faces rising discontent over unemployment and economic inequality. The BJP suffered a rare reverse in December when it lost three key state elections to Congress, the main opposition party.

Its leader, Rahul Gandhi, did not attend the rally but sent party representatives. His mother Sonia Gandhi, the party's former president, said it was "an important attempt to galvanise leaders to fight the Modi government".

Speakers from India's myriad state, regional and caste-based parties urged voters from the pulpit to unite against the prime minister and his BJP.

"Narendra Modi is a publicity PM, we need a performing PM," said Chandrababu Naidu, chief minister of the southern state of Andhra Pradesh.

HD Deve Gowda, who was briefly prime minister in the 1990s, said regional parties were powerful but "cannot save India without uniting".

The opposition has not allied in a formal bloc, but some state outfits have joined forces as the election draws nearer.

Indian opposition gathers in Kolkata for 'Unite India' rally

Modi calls alliance not against him, but India

ELECTION IN AFGHANISTAN Hekmatyar enters presidential race

REUTERS, Kabul

A former warlord accused of historic war crimes entered Afghanistan's presidential race yesterday in a new challenge to President Ashraf Ghani who allowed him to return from exile two decades he was forced out by the Taliban.

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, whose fighters killed thousands in Kabul during the bloody civil war of the 1990s, has remained a divisive figure since his return from exile in 2016.

His decision to contest the presidential polls in July is seen by analysts as the ex-warlord's attempt to legitimise his Hizb-i-Islami party. The faction has been blamed for atrocities committed during Afghanistan's brutal civil war, which led many Afghans to welcome the emergence of the Taliban in 1996 in the hope the hardline Islamist group would restore law and order.

In 2003, the US State Department listed him as a terrorist, accusing him of taking part in and supporting attacks by al-Qaeda and the Taliban. But Washington later welcomed Ghani's decision to sign a peace deal with Hekmatyar.

In 2016, President Ghani's government granted immunity to Hekmatyar but the former warlord has been critical of his administration and the parliamentary election process in 2018.



A supporter holds a cut-out of Mamata Banerjee, Chief Minister of the state of West Bengal, during "United India" rally attended by the leaders of India's main opposition parties ahead of the general election, in Kolkata, India, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

US-Saudi can't move on until crown prince 'dealt with'

Says key senator

REUTERS, Ankara

Republican US Senator Lindsey Graham yesterday said the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia cannot move forward until Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is "dealt with", without being more specific.

Speaking in Ankara a day after meeting with Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan, Graham also said Congress will reintroduce sanctions against those involved in the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

"The relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia cannot move forward until Crown Prince

New US missile strategy will unleash arms race in space

Says Russia, calls US plan 're-launch of Reagan-era Star Wars plan'

REUTERS, Moscow

Russia said on Friday the new US missile defence strategy would unleash a dangerous arms race in space and amounts to a re-launch of the Cold War-era "Star Wars" programme.

US President Donald Trump on Thursday unveiled a plan that envisages developing space-based sensors to detect incoming enemy missiles and exploring space-based weapons to shoot down missiles before they can threaten US soil.

A statement issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry condemned the strategy as irresponsible and an act of confrontation, but made no mention of Moscow reciprocating with new plans to develop its own nuclear capability.

Instead, the ministry called on Washington to think again, backtrack from its plans and engage in talks with Moscow to find agreement on how to manage the world's nuclear missile arsenal.

"The strategy, de facto, gives the green light to the prospect of basing missile strike capabilities in space," the statement said.

"The implementation of these ideas will inevitably lead to the start of an arms race in space, which will have the most negative consequences for international security and stability," it said.

"We would like to call on the US administration to think again and walk away from this irresponsible attempt to re-launch, on a new and more high-tech basis, the still-remembered Reagan-era 'Star Wars' program."

The revamped US missile strategy cited concerns about the burgeoning capabilities of Iran, Russia, China and North Korea and said this required a review of US capability.

In its statement about the new U.S. strategy, the Foreign Ministry said: "It is openly confrontational in character, and once again demonstrates that Washington is trying to secure for itself unrivalled military supremacy in the world."



POLITICAL UNREST OVER FUEL PRICE HIKE Zimbabwe shuts down social media

CNN ONLINE

Zimbabweans spent most of Friday without internet after the government ordered the country's biggest mobile operator to shut down service again.

After several hours, networks were restored, but social media platforms remained blocked, Econet Wireless said in a notice to its customers.

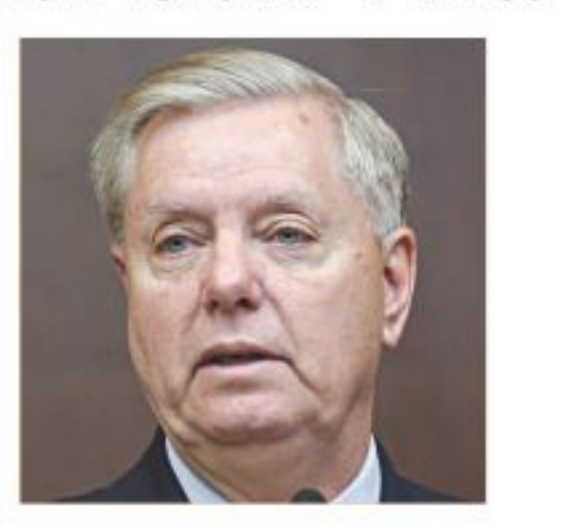
It meant that people in Zimbabwe have not been able to access any social media sites such as WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook throughout the week.

The shutdown comes as the military was accused of committing human rights abuses during a brutal crackdown on protests this week over a massive hike in gas prices.

A spokeswoman for UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency, Ravina Shamdasani, expressed concern Friday over reports of "excessive use of force, including live ammunition" by security forces, and called on the government to "find ways of engaging with the population about their legitimate grievances."

The United States embassy in Harare also criticised the "disproportionate use of force" in a statement on Thursday, saying it was "alarmed by credible reports that security forces were targeting and beating political activists and labour leaders."

Days of deadly protests were triggered by President Emmerson Mnangagwa's announcement of a 150% increase in fuel prices.



Mohammed bin Salman is dealt with," Graham said.

Khashoggi was a prominent Saudi journalist and US resident who wrote opinion columns for the Washington Post. He was killed in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October.

Saudi officials have said the crown prince knew nothing of the killing.

The Senate voted in December to move ahead with a resolution to end US military support for the Saudi-led coalition in the war in Yemen, and lawmakers vowed to push for sanctions against the kingdom in the new year.