

NEWSIN brief

Int'l tourists up 6% to 1.4b in 2018: UN

AFP, Madrid

The number of international tourist arrivals rose by 6 percent last year to 1.4 billion, according to an estimate published yesterday by the World Tourism Organization. The increase was driven by travel to southern Europe, the Middle East and Africa, said the Madrid-based UN body, citing economic growth and technological advances as boosting factors.

China's birth rate falls to lowest ever: report

AFP, Beijing

China's birth rate last year fell to its lowest since the founding of the People's Republic of China 70 years ago, official data showed yesterday, with looser population controls failing to encourage couples to have more babies. The birth rate stood at 10.94 per thousand, the lowest since 1949 and down from 12.43 per thousand in 2017. The number of babies born in 2018 fell by two million to 15.23 million.



Kamala Harris joins US presidential race

AFP, Washington

US Senator Kamala Harris yesterday announced that she is running for president, joining an already-crowded field of Democrats who are making or considering bids to take on Donald Trump. After two terms as district attorney of San Francisco (2004-2011), she was twice elected as attorney general of California (2011-2017).

BITS OF HISTORY JANUARY 21

1924: Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin died of a brain haemorrhage.

1976: Two Anglo-French Concorde airliners took off simultaneously from Paris and London on the first scheduled passenger flights by a supersonic aircraft.



Syrian air defence batteries respond to Israeli missiles targeting Damascus yesterday. Israel struck what it said were Iranian targets in Syria in response to rocket fire it blamed on Iran, sparking concerns of an escalation. Story on page 16.

PHOTO:
AFP

Taliban-US Meet held in Qatar

AFP, Kabul

The Taliban said it met with US officials in Qatar yesterday, in the latest round of talks between the insurgents and Washington aimed at bringing an end to the 17-year war.

The US has not officially commented on the reported meeting, which follows the last confirmed talks between the two parties in the UAE in December.

"Following American acceptance of the agenda of ending the occupation of Afghanistan and preventing Afghanistan from being used against other countries in the future, talks with American representatives took place today in Doha, the capital of Qatar," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in a statement.

Taliban representatives have met several times with US officials in recent months, but last week threatened to suspend the fledgling process, lambasting Washington for changing the agenda of the talks and "unilaterally" adding new subjects.

No amnesty for 'Dreamers'

Trump clarifies govt shutdown concession, signals support in broader immigration deal

AGENCIES

President Donald Trump said on Sunday his proposed immigration deal to end a 30-day partial government shutdown would not lead to amnesty for "Dreamers," but appeared to signal support for amnesty as part of a broader immigration agreement.

In a morning Twitter storm, Trump also said he would not seek the removal of millions of illegal aliens living in the United States, while bashing House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi and her fellow Democrats for turning down his offer on Saturday.

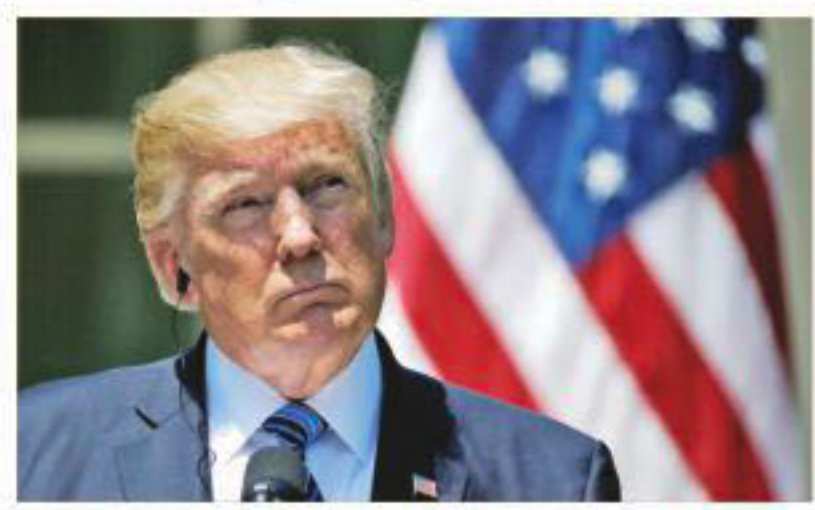
"Nancy Pelosi has behaved so irrationally & has gone so far to the left that she has now officially become a Radical Democrat," Trump tweeted. "She is so petrified of the 'lefties' in her party that she has lost control."

The Dreamers, which refers to undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children, are protected from deportation under the Deferred Action for Childhood

Arrivals (DACA) program.

DACA was put in place under former President Barack Obama. The Trump administration said in September 2017 it would rescind DACA but it remains in effect under court order.

Trump did not make clear what he was referring to regarding the 11 mil-



lion people mentioned in his tweet. About 12 million people are living in the United States illegally, according to US Department of Homeland Security estimates.

"No, Amnesty is not a part of my offer. It is a 3-year extension of DACA. Amnesty will be used only on a much

bigger deal, whether on immigration or something else," Trump said on Twitter.

"Likewise there will be no big push to remove the 11,000,000 plus people who are here illegally-but be careful Nancy!"

About one-quarter of the US government shut down on December 22 over Trump's demand for \$5.7 billion to fund a wall along the border with Mexico, which Democrats have refused to consider. Some 800,000 federal workers have been ordered to stay home or work without pay during the shutdown.

On Sunday, a day after Trump's DACA proposal, there appeared to be signs of movement, even as Democrats insisted the government should reopen before proceeding with talks over border security, reported Reuters.

"What the president proposed yesterday - increasing border security, looking at TPS, looking at the Dreamers - I'll use that as a starting point. But you've got to start by reopening the government," US Senator Mark Warner said on NBC's "Meet the Press."

MUSLIM AUTONOMY IN MINDANAO

Philippines holds referendum

REUTERS, Manila

Minority Muslims in the Philippines casted votes yesterday in a long-awaited referendum on autonomy, the culmination of a peace process to end decades of separatist conflict in a region plagued by poverty, banditry and Islamist militancy.

Some 2.8 million people in Mindanao, the country's volatile southernmost region, were asked if they backed a plan by separatists and the government to create a self-administered area known as Bangsamoro, (nation of Moros), referring to the name Spanish colonialists gave to the area's Muslim inhabitants.

The ballot was largely peaceful and turnout was large, according to election authorities, with a result expected within four days when a manual vote count is completed.

Overwhelming approval is expected for a plan that would grant executive, legislative and fiscal powers to a region hamstrung by decades of conflict that made it one of Asia's

poorest and most at risk of infiltration by radical groups.

The government will oversee defence, security, foreign and monetary policy, and appoint a transition authority led by the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which is expected to dominate the new setup after a 2022 election.

"It's a historic chapter in our long, long journey towards our right to self-determination, it's history in the making,"

Mohagher Iqbal, the MILF's top peace negotiator, told Reuters by telephone.

"Our hope is this will bring justice. Violent extremism won't thrive if there are no longer grievances with the government, it will have no support if there is no legitimacy."

"This will be a very, very important and hard won victory," he said.

A victory would also be a boost for President Rodrigo Duterte, who remains hugely popular but has yet to make significant inroads towards delivering on his ambitious policy agenda.

Plan aims to tackle poverty, curb rise of militancy

Strong turnout, result due within 4 days



WHO'S LIST OF 10 GLOBAL HEALTH THREATS

From climate change to superbugs, the World Health Organization has laid out 10 big threats to our global health in 2019. And unless these threats get addressed, millions of lives will be in jeopardy.

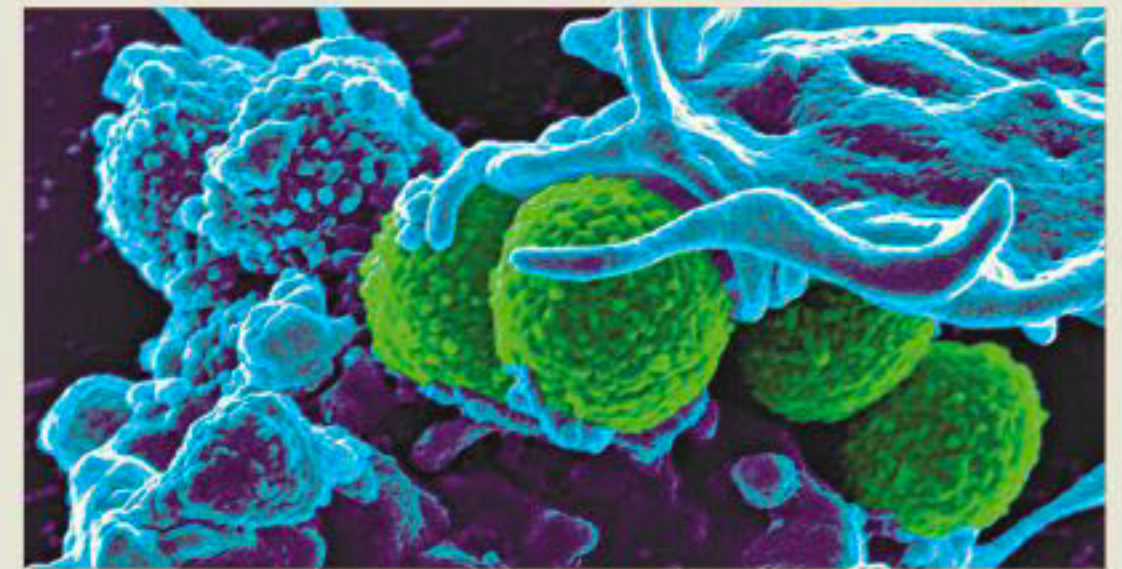
NOT VACCINATING WHEN YOU CAN: One of the most controversial recent health topics in the US is now an international concern. "Vaccine hesitancy -- the reluctance or refusal to vaccinate despite the availability of vaccines -- threatens to reverse progress made in tackling vaccine-preventable diseases," WHO said. It cited the recent 30% global increase in cases of measles -- a disease that had been nearly wiped out in some countries.

DRUG-RESISTANT SUPERBUGS: There's a dark side to the incredible success of antibiotics, antivirals and antimalarials: Overuse of such treatments have led to drug-resistant superbugs. "Antimicrobial resistance threatens to send us back to a time when we were unable to easily treat infections such as pneumonia, tuberculosis, gonorrhea, and salmonellosis," said WHO.

AIR POLLUTION AND CLIMATE CHANGE: Polluted air kills 7 million people every year and about 90% of people now breathe it, WHO said. "Microscopic pollutants in the air can penetrate respiratory and circulatory systems, damaging the lungs, heart and brain, killing 7 million people prematurely every year from diseases such as cancer, stroke, heart and lung disease," the agency said. The UN agency said between 2030 and 2050, "climate change is expected to cause 250,000 additional deaths per year, from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhea and heat stress."

ANOTHER GLOBAL FLU PANDEMIC: WHO said it believes the world "will face another influenza pandemic -- the only thing we don't know is when it will hit and how severe it will be." WHO said it's constantly monitoring the circulation of flu viruses to detect potential pandemic strains.

CRISES IN VULNERABLE PLACES: Over 1.6 billion people -- more than 1/5 of the world's population -- live in areas of sustained crises such as drought, famine, conflict and displacement, WHO said.



HIGH-THREAT PATHOGENS LIKE EBOLA: Just when we thought Ebola was mostly under control, two separate Ebola outbreaks ravaged parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo last year. In addition to Ebola, scientists are prioritizing on several other hemorrhagic fevers, Zika, Nipah, Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), WHO said.

NON-TRANSMISSIBLE DISEASES: While there are plenty of fears about contagious diseases, more than 70% of all deaths worldwide are from non-transmissible diseases such as cancer, diabetes and heart disease.

DENGUE: Something as simple as a mosquito bite can turn deadly in cases of dengue, which "has been a growing threat for decades," WHO said. "An estimated 40% of the world is at risk of dengue fever, and there are around 390 million infections a year," it added. Dengue causes flu-like symptoms and can kill up to 20% of those with severe cases, the agency said.

WEAK PRIMARY HEALTH CARE: While those with good insurance often take health care for granted, the lack of adequate primary care is rampant in many parts of the world.

HIV: About 22 million people are currently getting treated for HIV, WHO said. "However, the epidemic continues to rage with nearly a million people every year dying of HIV/AIDS," WHO said. About 37 million people around the world are living with HIV, the agency said. SOURCE: CNN

Women's unpaid work worth 43 times the annual income of Apple

PTI, Davos

Unpaid work done by women across the globe amounts to a staggering USD 10 trillion a year, which is 43 times the annual turnover of the world's biggest company Apple, an Oxfam study said yesterday.

In India, the unpaid work done by women looking after their homes and children is worth 3.1 per cent of the country's GDP. Women spend 312 minutes per day in urban areas and 291 minutes per day in rural areas on such unpaid care work, it added.

In comparison, men spend only 29 minutes in urban and 32 minutes in rural areas on unpaid care work.

The report, released by the international rights group before the start of the World Economic Forum (WEF) Annual Meeting in this Swiss ski resort town, also said women and girls are hardest hit by rising



economic inequality.

Oxfam said inequality has a "female face" in India, where women are less likely to have paid work when compared to men, while even among the richest there are only 9 women in the country's 119-member billionaires club.

The paid work women do bring them fewer earnings as compared to

men due to the existing wage gap and therefore households that rely primarily on female earners tend to be poorer, it said, referring to the country's gender pay gap at 34 per cent.

The Oxfam study also referred to India's poor 108th ranking on the WEF's Global Gender Gap Index of 2018, saying it was 10 notches less than in 2006 and far below the global

New missile system does not breach INF treaty

Says Russia as US demands destruction of the it

REUTERS, Geneva/Brussels

Russia has recognised the existence of a cruise missile system that has prompted Washington to say it will quit the 1987 INF disarmament treaty, but has denied that it violates the pact, US officials and Nato diplomats said yesterday.

Two weeks before the planned US withdrawal from the treaty, which keeps nuclear-capable missiles out of Europe, Washington's disarmament ambassador in Geneva said there was still time for Russia to destroy the system.

But after a session of the UN-sponsored Conference on Disarmament, Russian diplomat Alexander Deyneko told Reuters: "We shall not yield to any ultimatums like to liquidate or to eliminate (a) missile that doesn't fall within the range of the treaty prohibitions."

US Ambassador Robert Wood said the

system was a "potent and direct threat to Europe and Asia" as it had a range of 500 to 1,500 km (310-930 miles), contravening a treaty that is designed to prevent attacks at short notice.

"Russia must verifiably destroy all SSC-8 missiles, launchers and associated equipment in order to come back into compliance with the INF Treaty," Wood said.

If the impasse continues, US would start withdrawing from the pact on Feb 2, potentially allowing Washington to develop its own medium-range missiles. The United States will still have six months to formally complete its withdrawal, however.

Meanwhile, the European Union yesterday sanctioned the heads of Russia's military intelligence and two of their officers blamed for poisoning a former Russian double agent in Britain last year, a decision Moscow dismissed as groundless.

Moscow slams groundless move as EU sanctions UK nerve agent attack suspects

Tokyo metro offers free food to ease crowding

AFP, Tokyo

One of Tokyo's most crowded subway lines is hoping the way to reach their customers' hearts is through their stomachs, and offering free food to ease rush hour congestion.

Around 7.2 million people use Tokyo's mammoth metro system every day, with some lines suffering notorious crowding during commuting hours.

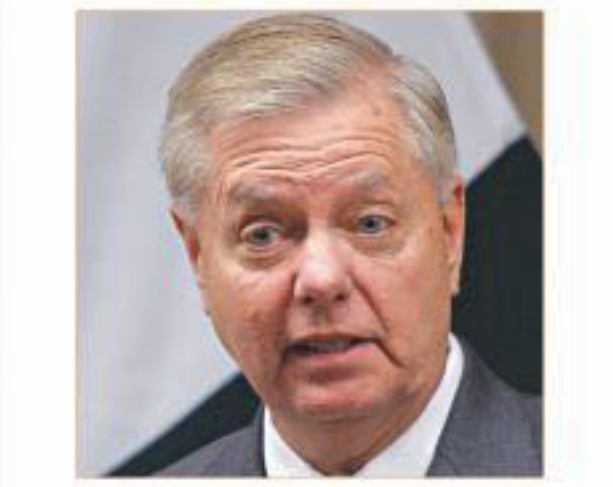
Among the worst affected is the Tozai line, which is now trying to entice users to take trains before the worst of the morning rush hour starts.

If it can convince at least 2,000 commuters to take earlier trains over the next two weeks, Tokyo Metro -- the company operating the line -- will offer each of the early birds free tempura.

And if 2,500 people complete the challenge to ride into work earlier every day over the period, they will each get a free bowl of soba.

If over 3,000 commuters get on board, they'll get a combo -- soba and tempura -- for their trouble.

The offer of free noodles comes as the Tokyo Metropolitan Government launched its own initiative over the next two weeks to encourage commuting outside of peak hours.



Pakistan dozens of times in recent years.

Khan, who came to power after a general election last year, has long stated his support for a peace agreement in Afghanistan to end hostilities there.

Trump would be "far more enthusiastic about the region than he is today" if he met Khan, said Graham, who held talks with the prime minister earlier on Sunday.

"With Prime Minister Khan we have a unique opportunity to change our relationship," he said.

The relationship, he said, was previously "transactional", but should be replaced with a "strategic partnership".