

NEWSIN brief

Toll from Israel's Syria strikes rises to 21

AFP, Beirut

The death toll from Israel's latest bombardment of military targets in Syria rose from 11 to 21, a war monitor said yesterday, adding that most of those killed were Iranian. The strikes carried out late Sunday and early Monday hit several positions and assets held by Iran and its allies in Syria.

20 feared dead from ship fires off Crimea

AFP, Moscow

Up to 20 people were presumed dead off Russian-annexed Crimea after a fire engulfed two fuel ships, authorities said yesterday. The blaze broke out when one vessel was transferring fuel to the other on Monday, driving both crews to jump into the icy waters of the Black Sea. Russian authorities rescued 12 people and recovered 10 bodies.

Moscow court denies 'US spy's' bail request

AFP, Moscow

A Moscow court yesterday denied bail to a US former Marine who was arrested in Russia on espionage charges last month. Paul Whelan, 48, was taken into custody on December 28 by the Russian FSB security service, who said he was caught "while carrying out an act of espionage". Analysts have speculated that Whelan was arrested to pave the way for a possible spy swap with a Russian agent arrested abroad, possibly Maria Butina.

Bali blast cleric may get early release

AFP, Jakarta

Plans to free a radical cleric linked to the deadly Bali bombings are under review, Indonesia has said, after the surprise decision drew sharp criticism. Abu Bakar Bashir, once synonymous with militant Islam in Indonesia, was tied to a terror network behind the 2002 attacks that killed more than 200 people, mostly foreign tourists.

BITS OF HISTORY JANUARY 22

1901: Britain's Queen Victoria died after reigning for 63 years.

1972: In Brussels, the Treaty of Accession to the EEC was signed by Britain, Denmark, Ireland and Norway, effective January 1, 1973.

2009: President Barack Obama ordered the closing of Guantanamo prison in Cuba.



Japan Princess Mako's wedding back on track

AFP, Tokyo

The boyfriend of Japan's Princess Mako insisted yesterday his family had no financial difficulties hanging over them, after reports of an unpaid loan apparently forced a postponement to a fairytale wedding between the two college sweethearts. Kei Komuro and Mako, the eldest granddaughter of Emperor Akihito, had been scheduled to become formally engaged in a traditional Japanese court ceremony last year before a royal wedding planned in late 2018.

But the marriage was dramatically called off last February amid reports Komuro's family had run into financial difficulties, with his mother failing to repay a four-million-yen (\$36,000) loan from a former fiancée of hers. Komuro said that when his mother and her fiancée split up in 2012, the man had said the money he had offered them during the engagement did not need to be repaid.

But he changed his tune the year after, according to Komuro, demanding the money back in a letter in August 2013.



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe walk during their meeting at the Kremlin in Moscow, yesterday. The leaders were meeting for talks over a disputed island chain that has long prevented agreement on a peace treaty to formally end World War II.

BARRING TRANSGENDERS FROM MILITARY US supreme court allows Trump plan

REUTERS, Washington

The US Supreme Court yesterday handed President Donald Trump a victory on his policy barring many transgender people from the military, allowing it to go into effect by lifting lower court rulings that had blocked the plan on constitutional grounds.

The decision, with the court's five conservative justices prevailing over its four liberals, granted the Trump administration's request to lift injunctions issued by federal judges against the policy while a challenge to its legality continues in lower courts. The liberal justices favoured keeping the injunctions in place.

The justices, however, refused the administration's request for them to decide the merits of the legal fight even before a California-based federal appeals court already considering the matter is given a chance to rule.

Attorneys representing transgender people already in the military or hoping to join condemned the court's action.

House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat, said the Republican president's "ban on trans-Americans serving in our nation's military was purpose-built to humiliate brave men & women seeking to serve their country," adding that it was "deeply concerning" that the high court had allowed it to proceed.

Trump in 2017 announced a plan to ban transgender people from the military, moving to reverse a policy announced a year earlier under Democratic former President Barack Obama allowing them for the first time to serve openly and receive medical care to transition genders.

Turkey plans int'l probe

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Turkey has said it is planning to launch an international investigation into the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and will take further steps in the coming days.

Speaking at a youth meeting in Istanbul on Monday, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Saudi Arabia has not shared with Turkey any information from its own probe regarding the Washington Post writer's murder.

Khashoggi, a critic of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, was killed by a Saudi hit squad on October 2 shortly after he entered his country's consulate in Istanbul. He was dismembered inside the building in what Turkey called a "premeditated murder" orchestrated by the Saudi government.

Saudi officials have countered that claim, insisting Khashoggi died in a "rogue operation" after initially claiming he had left the consulate before vanishing.

Cavusoglu said his country's investigation had forced Saudi

Arabia to recognise the assassination of Khashoggi, and accused Western countries of trying to cover up the crime.

"We see how those, who speak of freedom of press in the world, cover this thing up when they see money," Cavusoglu said.

"Now we have made preparations for an international probe in the coming days. We will take the necessary steps," he added, saying Turkey is well aware of the difficulties in shedding light on the murder.

Despite a joint investigation with Saudi officials looking at their consulate in Istanbul, the consul's residence and several other locations, the whereabouts of Khashoggi's remains are still unknown.

Ankara has repeatedly asserted the order was issued by the highest levels of the Saudi government and that the Saudi hitmen did not act on their own. Turkey also demanded that Saudi Arabia extradite those accused of carrying out the murder to be tried in Turkish courts.

KHASHOGGI MURDER



France, Germany deepen ties amid crisis in EU

AFP, Aachen

France and Germany yesterday signed a new friendship treaty to deepen their alliance at a time of crisis for the EU, drawing fire from the far right which President Emmanuel Macron slapped down for "spreading lies" about the pact.

Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel inked the accord to deepen ties as Britain prepares to leave the European Union and tensions rise with populist leaders.

The treaty pledges stronger political, economic and defence ties and restates their commitment to the European Union.

The document has come under attack from the far right, which accuses the pair of signing away national sovereignty.

The leader of France's National Rally, Marine Le Pen, accused Macron of "an act that borders on treason".

And a co-chief of Germany's far-right AfD party, Alexander Gauland, charged that Paris

and Berlin were seeking to create a "super EU".

"We as populists insist that one first takes care of one's own country," said Gauland. "We don't want Macron to renovate his country with German money."

Macron condemned the allegations, saying that "those who forget the value of French-German reconciliation are making themselves accomplices of the crimes of the past".

"Those who... spread lies are hurting the same people they are pretending to defend by seeking to repeat our history."

Macron said the treaty "shows that our friendship between France and Germany, our common project and our ambition for Europe are what really protect us, and what allow us really to take back control of our lives and to build our destiny".

Yesterday's signing ceremony took place in the German city of Aachen, on the Dutch and Belgian borders -- a place rich in European symbolism as the seat of power of Charlemagne, the 9th-century European emperor.

Treaty pledges political, economic, defence ties

Far right parties in both countries criticise the pact

POSSIBILITY OF NEW BREXIT REFERENDUM

Labour pushes for House vote

REUTERS, London

British opposition Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn yesterday moved a step closer to paving the way for another referendum on European Union membership by trying to use parliament to grab control of Brexit from Prime Minister Theresa May.

With the clock ticking down to March 29, the date set in law for Brexit, the United Kingdom is in the deepest political crisis in half a century as it grapples with how, or even whether, to exit the European project it joined in 1973.

Since May's divorce deal with the EU was rejected by 432-202 lawmakers last week, the biggest defeat in modern British history, lawmakers have been trying to plot a course out of the crisis, yet no option has the majority support of parliament.

Labour put forward an amendment seeking to force the government to give parliament time to consider and vote on options to prevent a "no deal" exit including a customs union with the EU, and "a public vote on a deal".

"It is time for Labour's alternative plan to take centre stage, while keeping all options on the table, including the option of a public vote," said Corbyn, who put his name to the amendment.

It was the first time the Labour leadership had put forward in parliament the possibility of a second vote, which was welcomed by some opponents of Brexit.

However, the party said it did not mean it supported another referendum and lawmakers cautioned that the amendment would not garner the support of parliament.

Clarity from London is some way off: lawmakers have so far put forward six

EU says no Brexit deal means hard Irish border

Germany says Britain should hold a second referendum

amendments with proposals for a delay to Brexit, a new vote and even for parliament to grab control of the process. They will vote on the next steps on Jan 29.

Beyond the intrigues of British politics, the future of Brexit remains deeply unpredictable with options ranging from a disorderly exit that would spook investors across the world to a new referendum that could reverse the whole process.

May on Monday proposed tweaking her

deal, a bid to win over rebel Conservative lawmakers and the Northern Irish party which props up her government, but Labour said May was in denial about the crushing defeat of her plans.

She refused to rule out a no-deal Brexit, warning that another referendum would strengthen the hand of those seeking to break up the UK and could damage social cohesion by undermining faith in democracy.

With May's Brexit policy in tatters, lawmakers in the British parliament are trying to wrest control of Brexit, though there is no clear majority for an alternative to May's deal.

The European Commission's chief spokesman yesterday said Northern Ireland will automatically have a "hard border" with its southern neighbour if Britain leaves the EU without a withdrawal agreement.

The remark to reporters by Margaritis Schinas reflected the European Union position that Ireland, like other member states, would have to enforce EU customs and other checks on imports from Britain after Brexit in the absence of a special deal.

And German Justice Minister Katarina Barley yesterday said she was disappointed by Theresa May's plan to break a deadlock over Brexit and suggested Britain hold a second referendum.



French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel sign a French-German friendship treaty yesterday in the town hall of Aachen, western Germany.

PHOTO: AFP

GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS

World to miss 2020 deadline

AFP, Paris

The world is on course to miss its "best chance" of preventing runaway climate change by ensuring global greenhouse gas emissions peak in 2020, researchers warned yesterday.

Even as Earth is buffeted by superstorms, droughts and flooding made worse by rising seas, and as greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise globally, an analysis by the World Resources Institute showed that current efforts to limit temperature increases are falling well short.

In 2017, experts identified six key milestones that mankind must hit by 2020 if the Paris climate goal of limiting global temperature rises to 1.5 Celsius (2.7 Fahrenheit) is to have a fighting chance of being met.

They include radical changes to how we get our electricity, and to how goods and services are distributed worldwide.

Chief among these are an immedi-



ate phasing out of fossil fuels, including a total halt to new coal power plant construction within two years, as well as an end to dirty energy subsidies.

The WRI yesterday said that achieving the 2020 goals was Earth's "best chance" of honouring the Paris deal goals.

Some progress has been made in renewable energy and green finance, it said, but headway was deemed "insufficient" across a host of sectors.

Renewables such as wind and solar now account for roughly 25 percent of global electricity production, not too far from the 2020 goal of 30 percent.

But the world remains seriously off course when it comes to the phasing out of greenhouse gas-producing fossil fuels. The Mission 2020 campaign says no new coal-fired power plants should be constructed after the end of next year, and advises that all existing coal power stations should be in the process of being retired by then.

While the pace of expansion has slowed, the world is still seeing a net gain in coal capacity. More than 28 gigawatts of coal power was retired from the global grid last year -- but 65 gigawatts was added.

Fossil fuel subsidies must also be entirely eliminated by 2020 to stay on track to the Paris goals, it said.

The subsidies have declined from \$443 billion in 2010 to \$373 billion in 2015, but major economies are yet to make good on their commitments to phase out the funding.

BID TO CURB WHATSAPP RUMOURS Users now can only forward message to 5

REUTERS, Jakarta

Facebook Inc's WhatsApp is limiting worldwide the number of times a user can forward a message to five, starting on Monday, as the popular messaging service looks to fight "misinformation and rumors", company executives said on Monday.

Previously, a WhatsApp user could forward a message to 20 individuals or groups. The limit of five is in expansion of a measure WhatsApp put in place in India in July after the spread of rumors on social media led to killings and lynching attempts.

"We're imposing a limit of five messages all over the world as of today," Victoria Grand, vice president for policy and communications at WhatsApp, said at an event in the Indonesian capital.

WhatsApp, which has around 1.5 billion users, has been trying to find ways to stop misuse of the app, following global concern that the platform was being used to spread fake news, manipulated photos, videos without context, and audio hoaxes, with no way to monitor their origin or full reach.

The messaging service became part of the political battleground in Brazil's presidential election last October, with far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro facing claims of using the app to spread falsehoods related to his main opponent. Bolsonaro, who ended up coasting to victory, has denied the charges.