

NEWS IN brief

US Senate rebukes Trump over Syria

AFP, Washington
The Republican leader of the US Senate, Mitch McConnell, has delivered a rare rebuke of Donald Trump in legislation Thursday that questions the president's decision to pull US troops out of Syria. The amendment to a broader Middle East Policy bill easily passed a preliminary procedural vote Thursday 68 to 23, with substantial support from both Democrats and Republicans.

Two Indian pilots die in Mirage crash

AFP, New Delhi
Two Indian Air Force pilots were killed yesterday when their French-built Mirage 2000 aircraft crashed minutes after take-off. The single-engine jet fighter aircraft manufactured by Dassault Aviation was on a test flight after an upgrade carried out by India's Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL). India had signed a \$2.4 billion deal with France in 2011 to upgrade 51 Mirage 2000 fighters.

Facebook takes down Iran propaganda pages

AFP, San Francisco
Facebook said Thursday it took down 783 pages, groups and accounts from Iran that were part of a vast manipulation campaign operating in more than 20 countries. The pages were part of a campaign to promote Iranian interests in various countries by creating fake Facebook or Instagram identities as residents of those nations.

BITS OF HISTORY (FEBRUARY 1)

- 1946:** Norwegian statesman Trygve Lie was elected the first secretary-general of the United Nations.
- 1992:** US President George Bush and Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed the Camp David declaration stating that their countries no longer regarded each other as adversaries.
- 2004:** Hundreds killed in Hajj pilgrimage stampede.



LAST OF YELLOW BUTTERFLIES GONE

Mourners hold paper cutouts of yellow butterflies, symbols of sexual slavery victims, during a funeral ceremony of former South Korean "comfort woman" Kim Bok-dong, who was forced to serve as a sex slave for Japanese troops during World War II, near the Japanese embassy in Seoul, yesterday. Kim Bok-dong was a symbolic figure for weekly rallies in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul that started in 1992, demanding a full, heart-felt apology from Tokyo, which hasn't come yet. PHOTO: AFP

US Midwest warms up from arctic chill

REUTERS, Chicago
The polar vortex that locked the US Midwest in sub-zero weather and led to the deaths of at least 21 people will give way to milder, snow-melting temperatures this weekend. Temperatures should reach the mid 40s to low 50s Fahrenheit through the weekend and Monday, forecasters said, after a record-breaking cold snap that stopped postal service and shuttered schools and businesses. The polar vortex is an icy cap of air that usually swirls over the North Pole. Changing air currents caused it to slip down through Canada and into the US Midwest this week. "The cold air isn't pushing off anywhere, it's just sort of evaporating," said Brian Hurley, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service's Weather Prediction Center in College Park, Maryland. "So we're going from 21 below zero (Fahrenheit) in Chicago Thursday morning to near 50 above on Monday, he said. "It'll feel like a heat wave." Temperatures in the Upper Midwest will reach well above zero F (minus 18 C) on Friday, with highs making it into the teens and low 20s. By Saturday, highs will be in the 30s and even low 40s. The central Plains will be in the low 60s, nearly 20 to 25 degrees above normal, the weather service said. More than 40 cold-temperature records were broken Thursday, the coldest morning since the polar vortex moved in late on Tuesday. The mass of arctic air had clung to a swath of the U.S. from Iowa and the Dakotas across the Great Lakes region and into Maine for days. The coldest recorded temperature was minus 56 in Cotton, Minnesota, on Thursday, the weather service said.

US offers aid, ties Seeks full account of Pyongyang's weapons, facilities

AFP, Washington
A US negotiator called Thursday on North Korea to provide a detailed account of its weapons to seal a peace deal, saying President Donald Trump was ready to offer a future that includes diplomatic relations and economic aid. Trump is set to hold a second summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in around a month and said Thursday that he would announce the exact date and venue early next week. "I think most of you know where the location is. I don't think it's a great secret," he told reporters at the White House. Vietnam has offered to host the talks. "We've made tremendous progress with North Korea," said Trump, whose June summit with Kim in Singapore was the first ever between leaders of the two countries that never formally ended the Korean War. The meeting produced a document in which Kim pledged to work toward the "denuclearization of the Korean peninsula." As skeptics voice worry that Trump is overly eager to make a legacy-

building deal and enjoy the spotlight of meeting the reclusive leader again, the US special representative on North Korea, Stephen Biegun, said the administration is "clear-eyed" and prepared for contingencies if talks fail. Biegun painted an upbeat picture at ending decades of hostility despite repeated failures in the past, saying giving up its nuclear weapons. "Before the process of denuclearization can be final, we must have a complete understanding of the full extent of the North Korean WMD and missile programs through a comprehensive declaration," Biegun said. "We must reach agreement on expert access and monitoring mechanisms of key sites to international standards, and ultimately ensure the removal or destruction of stockpiles of fissile material, weapons, missiles, launchers and other weapons of mass destruction," he said. "We are not going to invade North Korea. We are not seeking to topple the regime," he added. He also said that the United States had no intention to pull its 28,500 troops out of South Korea. With Trump known both for his impulsiveness and his criticism of US defense alliances, observers have wondered whether the nearly seven-decade US troop presence could up for debate. The United States and South Korea remain at loggerheads on a new agreement on how much Seoul contributes to maintain the troops.

DENUCLEARISATION OF N KOREA

US lifts UN freeze on North Korea aid
Trump-Kim summit details to be announced next week

that Trump "is unconstrained by the assumptions of his predecessors." Preparing the summit, the State Department said Biegun would head tomorrow to South Korea and also meet his North Korean counterpart. Biegun said the United States would ask North Korea for negotiations on verifying that the totalitarian state is

US, China hail major progress in trade talks

Trump expects to meet Xi to try to seal deal
AFP, Washington
The United States and China said their trade war negotiations resulted in major progress as the clock ticks on a March deadline to avert a massive escalation of tariffs that could bruise the global economy. US President Donald Trump hailed "tremendous progress" and welcomed a "beautiful" letter from his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping, who said he hoped for further cooperation. Beijing's official Xinhua news agency yesterday said that US and Chinese negotiators made "important progress" during two days of "candid, specific and fruitful" discussions in Washington. Although the latest round of talks ended with positive words, the White House emphasized the two sides still faced the "hard deadline" of March 1 to avoid another sharp escalation in their trade war. Economists say that prospect -- which would mean more than doubling US tariffs on \$200 billion in Chinese goods -- would be a body blow to the global economy. US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin will travel to China in mid-February for the next round of talks, according to Xinhua, and Trump said he would meet Xi after that to close the deal. Last year, Washington and Beijing imposed tariffs on more than \$360 billion in two-way trade, after Trump initiated the trade war because of complaints over unfair trade practices. US duty rates on \$200 billion in Chinese goods are due to rise to 25 percent from 10 percent if no agreement is reached by March 1. Trump said he did not think he would need to extend the deadline. "I think when President Xi and I meet, every point will be agreed to," Trump added.



REPORT ON MILITARY CRACKDOWN ON ROHINGYAS

Reuters reporters launch last appeal

AFP, Yangon
Lawyers for two Reuters journalists jailed for seven years in Myanmar on charges linked to their reporting of the Rohingya crisis lodged an appeal yesterday with the Supreme Court -- a last chance of a reprieve through the legal system. Reporters Wa Lone, 32, and Kyaw Soe Oo, 28, both Myanmar nationals, were arrested in Yangon in December 2017 and later jailed for violating the Official Secrets Act. Reuters says the charge was trumped up to muzzle their reporting into a massacre of Rohingya men. The two were convicted of possessing classified information regarding security operations in Rakhine state, from where hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas fled during an army-led crackdown the United Nations has described as "ethnic cleansing". But their sentence provoked outcry over media freedom in Myanmar with calls echoing across the world for their immediate release. In January Yangon's High Court rejected their initial appeal leaving their fate in the hands of judges at the Supreme Court. "Our petition asks that the Supreme Court finally provide justice to Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, reverse the lower courts' errors, and order the release of our journalists," a statement from Reuters said.



Iranian girls show their hands with a slogan reading in Farsi: "Ready to sacrifice myself for the leader" at the tomb of Iran's late founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in Tehran, yesterday. On February 1 each year, the "Dahe-ye Fajr" (10 days of Dawn) celebrations begin in Iran to mark the anniversary of Khomeini's return in 1979 after the pro-Western shah fled Iran following widespread demonstrations. The celebrations culminate on 11 February which marks the fall of 2,500 years of monarchy in Iran. PHOTO: AFP

'Trump is serious' Taliban say on Afghan talks

AFP, Kabul
US President Donald Trump is serious about getting out of Afghanistan, the Taliban told AFP yesterday, outlining the "Islamic system" comprising "all Afghans" that the group says it hopes to establish under any peace deal. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid spoke to AFP via WhatsApp a day after the US said talks with the militants are "on the right path", fuelling speculation of a breakthrough in the 17-year conflict. The US president's apparent eagerness to pull troops out has weighed on the negotiations, which culminated with six straight days of meetings in Qatar last week. "It appears that Trump is serious," the Taliban spokesman continued. The Taliban took over Afghanistan in 1996, imposing their brutal interpretation of Shariah law on the country until they were toppled in the US invasion of 2001. They have since fought an insurgency demanding foreign troops leave and an Islamic state be established. Mujahid said a foreign withdrawal was the first goal. "Secondly, we want the establishment of an Islamic system," he continued, dampening tentative hopes among Afghans that the insurgents would agree to participate in the existing democratic system built since 2001. He said they would establish such a system through "negotiations with different political sides, even if they have so far been under the umbrella of the invaders". Such a system would be based on the principle of shura, or council, with Islamic experts making decisions and "representatives of people and scholars" contributing. Mujahid said the next round of talks with the US will again take place in Doha starting February 25.



Selfless Musk releases all Tesla patents

AFP, San Francisco
Elon Musk announced Thursday he had released all of the electric carmaker Tesla's patents, as part of an effort to fight climate change. In a blog post, the colorful billionaire founder of Tesla promised the company "will not initiate patent lawsuits against anyone who, in good faith, wants to use our technology." It was a remarkable move in an industry where the smallest idea or seed of invention is carefully guarded to protect its monetary value. And it in fact came on the same day US prosecutors charged a Chinese national with stealing secrets from Apple's self-driving vehicle project. "Tesla Motors was created to accelerate the advent of sustainable transport," Musk said. "If we clear a path to the creation of compelling electric vehicles, but then lay intellectual property landmines behind us to inhibit others, we are acting in a manner contrary to that goal." In fact Musk said he was now skeptical of patents which too often only served "to stifle progress" and helped enrich giant corporations and lawyers rather than inventors. With car production continuing at 100 million a year "it is impossible for Tesla to build electric cars fast enough to address the carbon crisis," Musk said.

Rare oarfish sightings raise quake-tsunami fear in Japan

CNN ONLINE
Fears of an incoming natural disaster in Japan are swirling online after sightings of a deep-water fish believed to be a harbinger of earthquakes and tsunamis. On Friday, two oarfish were discovered after being caught in fishing nets off the northern prefecture of Toyama, bringing the total found this season to seven. Earlier this week, a 3.2 meter (10.5 foot) oarfish washed up on the shore of Toyama Bay, while a 4-meter (13 foot) long oarfish was tangled in a fishing net off the port of Imizu. The elusive oarfish live between 200 and 1,000 meters (650 to 3,200 feet) deep and are characterized by silvery skin and red fins. Traditionally known as "Ryugu no tsukai" in Japanese, or the "Messenger from the Sea God's Palace," legend has it that they beach themselves on shores ahead of underwater earthquakes. But scientists dispute such claims. "There is no scientific evidence at all for the theory that oarfish appear around big quakes. But we cannot 100% deny the possibility," Uozu Aquarium keeper Kazusa Saiba told CNN. "It could be that global warming might have an impact on the appearance of oarfish or a reason we're just not aware of." While he doubted the theory's validity, Saiba said one possible scientific explanation could be that subtle changes in the earth's crust at the bottom of the sea ahead of an earthquake "might cause the current to stir and push creatures at the bottom to the surface."



US suspends INF treaty

Says Pompeo as Europe frets about new US-Russia arms race
REUTERS, Washington

The United States will suspend compliance with the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Russia today and formally withdraw in six months if Moscow does not end its alleged violation of the pact, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said yesterday. The United States would reconsider its withdrawal if Russia, which denies violating the landmark 1987 arms control pact, came into compliance with the treaty, which bans either side from stationing short- and intermediate-range, land-based missiles in Europe. "Russia has refused to take any steps to return (to) real and verifiable compliance," Pompeo told reporters at the State Department. "We will provide Russia and the other treaty parties with formal notice that the United States is withdrawing from the INF treaty, effective in six months. "If Russia does not return to full and verifiable compliance with the treaty within this six-month period by verifiably destroying its INF-violating missiles, their launchers, and associated equipment, the treaty will terminate." The United States alleges a new Russian cruise

missile violates the pact. The missile, the Novator 9M729, is known as the SSC-8 by Nato. Russia says the missile's range puts it outside the treaty, and has accused the United States of inventing a false pretext to exit a treaty that it wants to leave anyway so it can develop new missiles. Russia also has rejected a US demand to destroy the new missile. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters yesterday that the United States had been unwilling to discuss the issue. Some experts believe the collapse of the INF treaty could undermine other arms control agreements and speed an erosion of the global system designed to block the spread of nuclear arms. European officials are especially worried about the treaty's possible collapse, fearful that Europe could again become an arena for nuclear-armed, intermediate-range missile buildups by the United States and Russia. Speaking before Pompeo's announcement, German Chancellor Angela Merkel emphasized the importance of using the six-month window to keep talking. "It is clear to us that Russia has violated this treaty ...," she said. "The important thing is to keep the window for dialogue open."

