

NEWS IN brief

Yemen gov't, rebels meet aboard UN ship

AFP, Dubai
The head of the UN mission in Yemen launched talks between the government and Huthi rebels aboard a boat in the Red Sea yesterday aimed at shoring up a ceasefire, a government official said. Retired Dutch General Patrick Cammaert chaired the meeting aboard a UN vessel docked off the coast of the flashpoint city of Hodeida after the rebels refused to hold talks in government-held areas.



Opposition activists pour into the streets to back Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido's calls for early elections, in Caracas.
Inset, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro (L) waves at the crowd during a gathering to mark the 20th anniversary of the rise of power of the late Hugo Chavez, the leftist firebrand who installed a socialist government, in Caracas. Pictures were taken on Saturday.



PHOTO: AFP

Toll in Brazil dam disaster hits 121

AFP, Brumadinho
The toll from a dam collapse last week at a mine in southeast Brazil has risen to 121 dead and 226 missing, according to officials yesterday. The emergency service for the state of Minas Gerais, where the January 25 disaster occurred near the town of Brumadinho, said the search was ongoing for bodies.

Egypt kills 8 jihadists in desert air strikes

AFP, Cairo
Egypt's military said Saturday it had killed eight jihadists in air strikes in the Western Desert, as it leads a major campaign against the Islamic State group. Egypt launched an operation dubbed "Sinai 2018" a year ago, in a bid to dislodge IS from the north-eastern Sinai Peninsula and other parts of the country, including the Western Desert bordering Libya.

Maduro proposes early polls

Guaido, US call on military to switch side as rival rallies rock country

AGENCIES
Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro proposed early parliamentary elections on Saturday, seeking to shore up his crumbling rule after a senior general defected to the opposition and tens of thousands thronged the streets in protest at his government.
As domestic and international pressure on Maduro to step down mounts, a senior air force general disavowed him in a video that circulated earlier on Saturday, expressing his allegiance to parliament head and self-proclaimed interim president Juan Guaido.
The military's support is crucial for Maduro, who is deeply unpopular, largely due to an unprecedented economic crisis that has prompted an exodus of millions. Maduro claims he is victim of a coup directed by the United States.
In a speech to supporters, Maduro said the powerful government-controlled Constituent Assembly would debate calling elections this year for the National Assembly parliament, which is opposition-controlled.
Guaido has called for a new, fair presidential election after the disputed vote won by Maduro last year.
"You want elections? You want early elections? We are going to have parliamentary elections," Maduro told a pro-government rally in Caracas, held to commemorate the 20th anniversary of a general who sided with Guaido.
At an opposition rally in Caracas, Guaido told his supporters he expected more to follow the general's example. The previously little-known 35-year old industrial engineer has offered the military and public officials amnesty if they defect.
Humanitarian aid from an "international coalition" would soon flow into Venezuela, which is facing rampant hunger and medicine shortages, from collection points in Brazil, Colombia and a Caribbean island, Guaido said.
It is unclear whether Maduro's government, which denies the country is suffering a humanitarian crisis, will let any foreign aid through.
US, Canada and several Latin American nations have recognized Guaido as the legitimate head-of-state. Some European Union member states are expected to officially recognize Guaido next week, while others will likely take a more cautious stance of support. Maduro still has the backing of Russia and China.



late socialist leader Hugo Chavez's first inauguration as president.
While small rebellions against Maduro have broken out in Venezuela's armed forces in recent months, there has been no large scale military uprising against him.
A top White House official called on Venezuela's military to follow the lead

Bids to disarm Iran will backfire

Revolutionary Guards warn Europe

AFP, Tehran
The deputy chief of Iran's Revolutionary Guards has warned Europe against forcing the Islamic Republic into boosting the range of its missiles by trying to halt their development.
"If the Europeans, or anyone else, want to conspire to disarm Iran of missiles, we will be forced to make a strategic leap," the guards' deputy commander Brigadier-General Hossein Salami said on state TV on Saturday.
"All that hear me today, come to terms with the new reality of Iran's missile might: there are no obstacles or technical limitations to us increasing (their) range," he added.
The Islamic Republic develops its missile technology according to a "defensive strategy" which changes according to need, he said.
Earlier Saturday, Iran announced the "successful test" of a new cruise missile with a range of over 1,350 kilometres (840 miles), coinciding with the anniversary of the country's 1979 Islamic Revolution.
Defence Minister Amir Hatami said the Hoveizeh cruise missile had successfully hit its targets, calling it the "long arm of the Islamic Republic of Iran".
Iran reined in most of its nuclear programme under a landmark 2015 deal with major powers, but has kept up development of its ballistic missile technology.

UAE TRIP

Pope to hold dialogue with Muslims

AL JAZEERA ONLINE
Pope Francis starts a three-day visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) yesterday, the first for a leader of the Roman Catholic Church in the Arabian Peninsula.
The pontiff will attend the Global Conference on Human Fraternity at the behest of the UAE's leadership, which has proclaimed 2019 the "Year of Tolerance", a move scorned by human rights activists.
Along with Saudi Arabia, the UAE is heavily involved in the war in Yemen - dubbed the world's worst humanitarian crisis - and has a problematic human rights record. The UAE has also imposed an air, land, and sea blockade on Qatar, which has severely affected relations among Gulf countries over the past two years.
Whether Pope Francis will address these issues is not clear, but expectations run high that the pope may do so in private talks with the UAE's leadership.
The international gathering of religious scholars is aimed at promoting tolerance and peace between the two faiths, said the Muslim Council of Elders organising the event.
Pope Francis is also expected to meet with the Grand Imam Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyib, Head of Al Azhar, one of the highest religious authorities in the Muslim world.



Tomorrow, the pope will deliver a mass to about 135,000 worshippers in Abu Dhabi.
"I thank the friend and dear brother the Grand Imam Sheikh al-Tayyib and those who have organised this meeting for the will and courage to affirm that faith in God unites and does not divide us," said Pope Francis in a video message to the Emirati people.
"I thank God for this opportunity to write, in your land, a new page in the history of the interreligious dialogue, to confirm that we are brothers despite being different," the pope added.
Dialogue with Islam is one of the main features of Francis' pontificate, following in the path of some of his predecessors. Pope Paul VI made the first pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1964, and Pope Jean Paul II was the first pope to set foot in a mosque in 2001.

UK PM to seek 'pragmatic Brexit solution' with EU

Report says Queen to be evacuated in case of unrest

AFP, London
British Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday said she would be "armed with a fresh mandate and new ideas" when she meets European Union negotiators over her Brexit deal.
EU officials have insisted that the deal is not open for renegotiation.
But May wrote in the Sunday Telegraph that she would be "battling for Britain and Northern Ireland" in her efforts to get rid of the agreement's unpopular backstop provision.
The backstop is intended to ensure there is no return to a hard border with Ireland, but Brexit supporters fear it will keep Britain tied to the EU's customs rules.
MPs voted last week to send May back to Brussels to renegotiate the clause, suggesting her deal would then be able to pass after

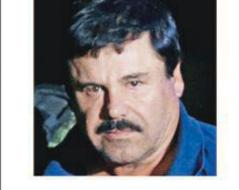
it was roundly rejected in parliament last month.
"When I return to Brussels I will be battling for Britain and Northern Ireland, I will be armed with a fresh mandate, new ideas and a renewed determination to agree a pragmatic solution," May added.
May has promised MPs that she will bring any revised deal back to be voted on by MPs on February 13.
Meanwhile, British officials have revived Cold War emergency plans to relocate the royal family should there be riots in London if Britain suffers a disruptive departure from the European Union next month, two Sunday newspapers reported.
The Mail on Sunday also said it had learnt of plans to move the royal family, including Queen Elizabeth, to safe locations away from London.



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi gestures during a public rally in Jammu in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir yesterday. The Indian PM yesterday inaugurated several developmental projects in education and healthcare sectors in the state ahead of general election.

'El Chapo drugged, raped teenage girls'

AFP, New York
A witness in the trial of Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman told the US government the Mexican drug kingpin drugged and raped girls as young as 13, according to court documents unsealed Saturday.
Longtime associate Alex Cifuentes told authorities a woman would send Guzman photos of young girls to choose from, with a fee of \$5,000 per girl.
Cifuentes used this service himself three or four times, having sex with girls as young as 15-years-old, the government said in the documents, adding he "witnessed the defendant do the same on multiple occasions, with girls as young as 13 years old."
The former Sinaloa cartel leader, 61, would allegedly sometimes drug the girls with "a powdery substance" with Cifuentes' help before raping them.
But Cifuentes, who lived with Guzman in 2007 and



2008, did not mention any of this in four days of testimony during the trial, which ended on Thursday after three months of hearings.
On Monday, the jury will begin deliberating whether Guzman is guilty of trafficking hundreds of tons of drugs into the US. He faces a life sentence if convicted.
The documents were published following a legal claim by US media, which throughout the trial fought the secrecy surrounding the case.
Cifuentes, 50, was arrested in Mexico in 2013 then deported from Colombia to the US. Currently in prison, he is cooperating with the government in exchange for a reduced sentence.

Solution to world's energy crisis!

What if one day all buildings could be equipped with windows and facades that satisfy the structure's every energy need, whether rain or shine?
That sustainability dream is today one step closer to becoming a reality thanks to Polish physicist and businesswoman Olga Malinkiewicz.
The 36-year-old has developed a novel inkjet processing method for perovskites -- a new generation of cheaper solar cells -- that makes it possible to produce solar panels under lower temperatures, thus sharply reducing costs.
Indeed, perovskite technology is on track to revolutionise access to solar power for all, given its surprising physical properties, some experts say.
"In our opinion, perovskite solar cells have the potential to address the world energy poverty," said Mohammad Khaja Nazeeruddin, a professor at Switzerland's Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne, an institution on the cutting-edge of solar energy research.
Solar panels coated with the mineral are light, flexible, efficient, inexpensive and come in varying hues and degrees of transparency.
They can easily be fixed to almost any surface -- be it laptop, car, drone, spacecraft or building -- to produce electricity, including in the shade or indoors.
Though the excitement is new, perovskite has been known to science since at least the 1830s, when it was first identified by German mineralogist Gustav Rose while prospecting in the Ural mountains and named after Russian mineralogist Lev Perovski.
In the following decades, synthesising the atomic structure of perovskite became easier.
But it was not until 2009 that Japanese researcher Tsutomu Miyasaka discovered that perovskites can be used to form photovoltaic solar cells.
Initially the process was complicated and required ultra high temperatures, so only materials that could withstand extreme heat -- like glass -- could be coated with perovskite cells.
This is where Malinkiewicz comes in.
In 2013, while still a PhD student at the University of Valencia in Spain, she figured out a way to coat flexible foil with perovskites using an evaporation method.
Later, she developed an inkjet printing procedure that lowered production costs enough to make mass production economically feasible.
Her discovery quickly earned her an article in the journal Nature and media attention, as well as the Photonics21 Student Innovation award in a competition organised by the European Commission.
She went on to cofound the company Saule Technologies -- named after the Baltic goddess of the sun -- along with two Polish businessmen.
They had to assemble all their laboratory equipment from scratch, before multimillionaire Japanese investor Hideo Sawada came on board.
The company now has an ultra-modern laboratory with an international team of young experts and is building an industrial-scale production site.
A standard panel of around 1.3 square metres, at a projected cost of 50 euros (\$57), would supply a day's worth of energy to an office workstation, according to current estimates.
Malinkiewicz insists that the initial cost of her products will be comparable to conventional solar panels.
"The potential of the technology is clearly enormous," Assaad Razzouk, the CEO of Singapore-based Sindicatum Renewable Energy, a developer and operator of clean energy projects in Asia, told AFP.
"Just think of all the buildings one could retrofit worldwide!"



SOURCE: AFP

India protests at US detention of several Indian students

REUTERS, New Delhi
India on Saturday said it had lodged a protest with the United States government after several Indian students were detained there in connection with their enrolment in a fake university, following an undercover operation by US agents.
US authorities this week said eight individuals who exploited the country's student visa system had been indicted. They had helped foreign nationals illegally remain in the US by enrolling them into a metro Detroit private university, which was actually being operated by US agents themselves.
The recruiters helped the students to fraudulently obtain immigration documents from the school in a bid to deceive authorities, the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement said. The foreign students, however, had no intention of attending school, it added.
Though the US government did not disclose nationalities of those involved, the Indian foreign ministry on Saturday said "several Indian students" had been detained. Indian media said more than 100 students had been detained in the United States.
The Indian government had issued a rare "demarche" to the US Embassy in New Delhi, telling it that Indian officials needed immediate consular access to the detainees.
"We underlined that students, who may have been duped into enrolling in the 'University', should be treated differently from those recruiters who have duped them," India's foreign ministry said in a statement.
The Indian government also urged the United States to release the students from detention at the earliest, without resorting to deportation against their will.
The United States agency had said that the defendants in the case "intended to help shield and hide" the students from United States immigration authorities for money.
China, India and South Korea together sent 56.1 percent of all international students in the United States in 2017-18, a survey showed last year.