

Pentagon chief makes surprise Baghdad visit

AFP, Baghdad
Acting Pentagon chief Patrick Shanahan arrived in Baghdad yesterday on an unannounced visit for talks on the sensitive issue of a continued troop presence following withdrawal from neighbouring Syria. Shanahan is keen to reassure Iraqi leaders after President Donald Trump angered many by saying he wanted to keep troops at the Al-Asad airbase, northwest of Baghdad, to keep an eye on Iran. The acting defence secretary, who flew in from Afghanistan on his foreign tour since taking office last month, is due to hold talks with Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi and top military advisers and commanders. Trump's comments about Iran, in an interview with CBS television aired on February 3, drew a stern rebuff from President Barham Saleh, who said the use of Iraq as a base against a third country violated its constitution. They also sparked renewed calls for a US



Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighters stand guard as a convoy of trucks transports civilians fleeing the battered Islamic State-held holdout of Baghouz in the eastern Syrian province of Deir Ezzor on Monday. Inset, Women and children fleeing from the last IS group's tiny pocket sit in the back of a truck near Baghouz. US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighters battled a fierce jihadist fightback on Monday, as they pushed to retake a last morsel of territory from the Islamic State group. PHOTO: AFP

Turkey orders arrest of 1,112 over Gulen link

REUTERS, Istanbul
Turkey yesterday launched one of its largest operations against alleged supporters of the US-based Muslim cleric accused of leading an attempted coup in 2016, ordering the arrest of 1,112 people, state media reported. The operation, related to alleged cheating in police examinations, showed authorities were not letting up on their crackdown two-and-a-half years after rogue soldiers used warplanes, helicopters and tanks in a bid to seize power. More than 250 people were killed in the failed putsch, in which preacher Fethullah Gulen, a former ally of President Tayyip Erdogan, has denied involvement. Gulen has lived in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania since 1999. More than 77,000 people have been jailed pending trial since the putsch and widespread arrests are still routine. Authorities have suspended or sacked 150,000 civil servants and military personnel.

May asks MPs for more time

Tells them to hold their nerve as she seeks to renegotiate deal with EU

AFP, London
Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday asked MPs to give her more time to try and revive her Brexit deal with the EU in what the opposition said was a ploy to "run down the clock". May updated parliament following meetings in Belfast, Brussels, and Dublin despite EU leaders' insistence that they will not renegotiate the deal they had already struck with her. Deal or no deal, Britain is due to leave the European Union on March 29 and a disorderly exit could cause chaos. "The talks are at a crucial stage. We now all need to hold our nerve to get the changes this house requires and deliver Brexit on time," May told lawmakers. "Having secured an agreement with the EU for further talks, we now need some time to complete that process," she said. The announcement was seen by political commentators as an attempt to defuse any parliamentary rebellion in a series of votes on May's Brexit

strategy to be held on Thursday. May has promised that parliament would have another chance to vote, on February 27, on what to do if no agreement is reached. MPs last month overwhelmingly rejected the deal struck between May and Brussels for Britain's exit from the EU. Ever since, the premier has been trying to secure changes to the accord that would satisfy parliament's lower House of Commons. Pro-Brexit MPs in May's Conservative Party are unhappy particularly with a so-called backstop provision intended to keep the border with Ireland free-flowing. Some fear it could leave Britain trapped in EU trade rules indefinitely with no withdrawal mechanism. Main opposition Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn said May had come to parliament Tuesday with "excuses and delays" and accused her of trying to "play chicken with people's livelihoods". "It appears the prime minister has just one real tactic: to run down the clock hoping members of this

house are blackmailed into supporting a deeply flawed deal," he said. "This is an irresponsible act. She's playing for time and playing with people's jobs." Commons Leader Andrea Leadsom said the onus was on the EU to show flexibility.

IMPASSE OVER BREXIT TALKS



"It would be an extraordinary outcome if the thing that the backstop is seeking to avoid, which is a hard border in Northern Ireland, if the EU were so determined to be completely intransigent about it that they actually incur the very thing that they're seeking to avoid by pushing

the UK into a position where we leave without a deal," she told BBC radio. If no transition deal is in place when Britain leaves the EU, it could trigger economic shockwaves around the continent. Brexit Secretary Stephen Barclay and David Lidington, May's de facto deputy, met members of the European Parliament in Strasbourg Tuesday while British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt was in Paris as part of a diplomatic offensive. Hunt said he had "open and thoughtful discussions" with French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian. Meanwhile, students supporting a second referendum urged Corbyn to "get off the fence" on Brexit, in a stunt in his north London constituency. Many of Labour's younger, newer supporters who propelled the veteran socialist to the party leadership want to stay in the EU -- but many of the seats Labour holds in parliament are in pro-Brexit hotbeds.

Mexican drug lord 'El Chapo' convicted in US court

REUTERS, New York
The world's most infamous cartel boss Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, who rose from poverty in rural Mexico to amass billions of dollars, was found guilty in a US court yesterday of smuggling tons of drugs to the United States over a violent, colorful decades-long career. Jurors in federal court in Brooklyn found Guzman, 61, head of the Sinaloa Cartel, guilty on all 10 counts brought by US prosecutors. Richard Donoghue, the US Attorney for the Eastern District of New York said he expected Guzman to receive life without parole when sentenced on June 25. "It is a sentence from which there is no escape and no return," Donoghue told reporters. One of the major figures in drug wars that have cost the lives of around 200,000 people in Mexico since 2006, Guzman became an almost legendary criminal figure. He staged two dramatic escapes from Mexican high-security prisons and cultivated a "Robin Hood" image among the poor in his home state of Sinaloa. Guzman sat and showed no emotion while the verdict was read. Once the jury left the room, he and his wife Emma Coronel, put their hands to their hearts and gave each other the thumbs up sign. His wife shed tears.



NEW US MIDDLE EAST VISION

Washington's push gets little traction

AFP, Warsaw
The United States is seeking this week in Warsaw to rally the world behind a vision of the Middle East that includes maximum pressure on Iran and strong backing of Israel, but it is winning little fresh support. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo last month announced the two-day conference starting today, saying that foreign ministers from around the world would come to Poland to take up the "destabilising influence" of Iran in the Middle East. US Vice President Mike Pence will address the conference, whose co-host is Pompeo. Even though the meeting takes place in the European Union, major European powers are sending low-level representation with the exception of British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt, who signalled that he primarily wants to address the humanitarian crisis triggered by the Saudi-led offensive in Yemen. EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini said she had previous commitments and Pompeo instead will have breakfast with her in Brussels on his way home. Even host Poland -- which is eager for strong relations with the United States in the face of a resurgent Russia -- has stressed that it still joins the European Union in backing a 2015 deal negotiated by former US president Barack Obama to ease sanctions on Iran in return for curbs on its nuclear programme. The United States is also expected to offer hints of its proposals for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Trump's son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner, who has been putting final touches on a "deal of the century" for the Middle East, will make a rare speaking appearance tomorrow. Kushner, whose family is close to Netanyahu, is not expected to unveil the proposal until after the April 9 election in Israel. The Trump administration faces an uphill climb in selling any deal to the Palestinian Authority, which remains livid over Trump's landmark 2017 decision to recognise Jerusalem -- claimed by both peoples -- as Israel's capital. The Palestinian government -- which has labelled the Warsaw conference an "American conspiracy" -- has refused talks with the United States until it starts what it calls a more balanced policy. Iran was not invited to Warsaw and summoned the Polish ambassador to protest. But in a show of diplomatic clout, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani will travel during the US-led conference to Russia, which declined to attend in Warsaw. In the Black Sea resort of Sochi, Rouhani will meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Syria, where Trump is pushing out US troops. "I doubt Washington will succeed in achieving this objective, because while many in Europe share US concerns with regards to Iran's regional activities and ballistic missiles programme, they don't agree with Washington's one-sided and maximalist view that Iran is the source of all evil in the region," said Ali Vaez, director of the Iran project at the International Crisis Group think tank.



Catalan regional police forces Mossos d'Esquadra escort a man holding a sign reading "We would do it again" as they begin to disperse students blocking a street in Barcelona to protest against the trial of former Catalan separatist leaders, yesterday. Twelve former Catalan leaders go on trial at Spain's Supreme Court for their role in a failed 2017 bid to break away from Spain. PHOTO: AFP

Trump undecided on deal to avert another shutdown

REUTERS, Washington
President Donald Trump has not yet decided whether to back a deal hammered out by congressional negotiators to avert another partial government shutdown, the White House said yesterday, putting the future of the agreement that contains funds for US-Mexican border security but not his promised wall in doubt. Democratic and Republican negotiators reached the tentative deal on Monday night on border security provisions and money to keep several government agencies including the Department of Homeland Security funded through Sept 30, the end of the current fiscal year. Temporary funding for about a quarter of the government is due to expire on Friday. Trump, who triggered a 35-day partial government shutdown with his December demand for \$5.7 billion to help build the border wall, has not yet made up his mind on the deal, said a White House official,

speaking on condition of anonymity. Republican Senator Richard Shelby on Monday said the House-Senate committee set up last month at the end of the previous shutdown had an agreement in principle to pay for border security programs. A final agreement is expected by late yesterday. The funding legislation would need to be passed in the House and Senate and signed by Trump. Trump's long-promised wall was a cornerstone of his presidential campaign. He had said it would be paid for by Mexico and not by U.S. taxpayers. Congressional sources said the agreement includes \$1.37 billion for new fencing along 55 miles (90 km) of the southern border but only with currently used designs, such as "steel bollard" fencing. It will also address immigrant detention beds. Trump has threatened to declare a "national emergency" if Congress does not give him wall money.

US CEOs call for laws to protect 'Dreamers'

AFP, Washington
More than 100 corporate leaders and other prominent figures on Monday called on US lawmakers to protect immigrants brought illegally to the United States as children. In an open letter to Congress, the heads of General Motors, Facebook, Coca Cola, Apple, Amazon, Google, AT&T and Microsoft, among others, said these immigrants, known as "Dreamers," were a boon to the US economy and a dedicated workforce. "These are our friends, neighbors and co-workers and they should not have to wait for court cases to be decided to determine their fate when Congress can act now," the executives said in the letter, which appeared a full-page ad in The New York Times on Monday. In a campaign lasting nearly 20 years, activists have pressed for lawmakers to pass legislation, known as the DREAM Act, that would make the "Dreamers" legal US residents, and create a path to citizenship. Former president Barack Obama allowed more than 700,000 Dreamers to apply for protection from deportation, and to work legally if they met certain conditions. But President Donald Trump moved to cancel that policy in 2017, although it remains in effect under court order.

ANTI-SEMITISM ROW

US lawmaker apologises over Israel tweet

AFP, Washington
Ilhan Omar, one of the first two Muslim women in the US Congress, "unequivocally" apologised Monday after suggesting US support for Israel is fueled by money from a pro-Israel lobby group. The Minnesota freshman has faced criticism for weeks over her positions on the Jewish state, but it boiled over late Sunday after she reacted to a Republican critic in a tweet. "It's all about the Benjamins baby," Omar replied, referring to American \$100 bills featuring the likeness of Benjamin Franklin. When a user asked who Omar believes is paying US politicians to support Israel, the former Somali refugee tweeted a one-word response -- "AIPAC!" -- referring to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. The exchanges triggered an uproar, with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi castigating Omar and demanding an "immediate" apology for using "anti-Semitic tropes" in her tweet, and several Democrats and Republicans assailing their colleague for her language. Omar obliged, issuing a statement acknowledging that anti-Semitism is "real" and expressing gratitude to colleagues "who are educating me on the painful history of anti-Semitic tropes."

