

NEWS IN brief

12 children injured in blast at Kashmir school

At least 12 students were injured in an explosion at a school in Indian-controlled Kashmir yesterday, police said, though the cause of the blast was not immediately clear. The Indian part of Kashmir has been plagued by separatist violence for years, with clashes between security forces and militants killing more than 100 civilians over the past year.

Skopje notifies UN of name change

The Macedonian government said yesterday it had officially informed the United Nations of the country's new name following its historic agreement with neighbouring Greece. Skopje and Athens buried a 27-year dispute in agreeing in June last year to rename Macedonia as North Macedonia.

78 detainees escape Haiti prison: police

At least six people have died in nearly weeklong protests demanding that President Jovenel Moise resign in Haiti, which saw fresh tensions and a major prison break Tuesday. All 78 detainees at the prison in Aquin, a city of around 100,000 on the south coast of the country's Tiburon Peninsula, escaped around midday.

BITS OF HISTORY (FEBRUARY 13)

- 1945:** Nazi-occupied Budapest fell to the Russians during World War Two after a 50-day siege in which 50,000 Germans were killed.
- 1955:** Israel acquires four Dead Sea Scrolls.
- 1990:** Roaring crowds gave Nelson Mandela a hero's welcome when he returned to the black township of Soweto after being released from prison and pledged to end "the dark hell of apartheid" in South Africa.



A member of the Kurdish women's protection units (YPJ), part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), walks alongside women waiting with children fleeing the battered Islamic State-held holdout of Baghouz in the eastern Syrian province of Deir Ezzor, before they move to a nearby SDF-held area on Tuesday. Inset, a fighter of SDF keeps watch near veiled women standing on a field after they fled from the Baghouz area. PHOTO: AFP

Not happy with border deal

Trump grudgingly walks back his threat to shut govt

President Donald Trump indicated Tuesday that he will walk back his threat to shut the government even if he does not get all the money he has demanded for building a wall along the US-Mexican border.

Although Trump left enough wiggle room to keep the country guessing, he appeared to be edging toward accepting a deal struck in Congress that would give him significantly less money for the much-maligned barrier.

"I can't say I'm happy, I can't say I'm thrilled," Trump said. But he also told a cabinet meeting in the White House: "I don't think you're going to see a shutdown."

He was responding to a deal struck by Republican and Democratic lawmakers to offer nearly \$1.4 billion for wall construction, as well as other border security measures.

This was far less than the \$5.7 billion Trump wanted, but it was presented as a workable deal to satisfy both sides and allow Trump to shelve his threat to shut down large portions of the government on Friday.

Trump said he would manage to "add" to the congressional funds, though he did not explain how.

Lawmakers, including from his own Republican Party, pressured Trump to take what was on the table.

Senator Richard Shelby, the top Republican negotiator, called it "a pretty good deal."

Late Tuesday, Trump tweeted to thank Republicans for their work "dealing with the Radical Left on Border Security."

"Not an easy task, but the Wall is being built and will be a great achievement and contributor toward life and safety within our Country!," he said.

Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy said the compromise would be voted on and likely passed, ready for Trump's signature.

"The deal is the way it's going to be written, and it will be filed, I suspect, tomorrow night," he said.

The funds would finance 55 miles (88.5 kilometers) of new walls along the border.

Hundreds of miles of barriers already run along the US-Mexican border, but Trump says far more are needed to bring what he often calls an "invasion" of migrant criminals under control.

Democrats say Trump vastly exaggerates the crime problem and uses the issue to whip up his right-wing voter base.

In December, Trump tried to pressure Congress into approving the \$5.7 billion by refusing to sign off on funding large parts of government that have nothing to do with the wall, putting 800,000 jobs, from FBI agents to airport security, on hold for five weeks.

The Democrats refused to budge and Trump was forced into an embarrassing retreat, allowing new negotiations to open with a new deadline of this Friday.

Fellow Republicans urge Trump's support

Trump says he would manage to 'add' to congressional funds



Too many working poor: UN

AFP, Geneva

The global unemployment rate inched down last year, the UN said yesterday, warning though that jobs often failed to guarantee decent living, with some 700 million workers wallowing in poverty.

Unemployment around the world fell last year to 5.0 percent - from 5.1 percent in 2017 - for the first time dropping to the level seen before the global financial crisis hit in 2008, the International Labour Organization said.

But in its flagship "World Employment and Social Outlook" trends report, the ILO also raised serious red flags about the health of the planet's job market.

Deborah Greenfield, ILO's deputy director-general, told journalists in Geneva that the decline in global unemployment "is projected to stall", amid "uncertainty on many fronts," and a "deteriorating economic outlook".

300,000 will die if aid doesn't enter

Venezuela's opposition leader Guaido tells tens of thousands of supporters, vows to bring in aid next week

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela's opposition leader Juan Guaido told tens of thousands of supporters on Tuesday that desperately-needed humanitarian aid would be brought into the country on February 23, despite opposition from President Nicolas Maduro.

"It's sure that the humanitarian aid will enter Venezuela because the usurper will have no choice but to leave Venezuela," said self-proclaimed acting president Guaido.

US aid has been piling up in Colombia at the border with crisis-hit Venezuela but until now the bridge border crossing has been barricaded by the military, under Maduro's orders.

"We have almost 300,000 Venezuelans who will die if the aid doesn't enter. There are almost two million at health risk," said Guaido, recognized by 50 countries after declaring himself as Venezuela's interim leader.

Taking his authority from the constitution, National Assembly leader Guaido considers Maduro "illegitimate" following his reelection last year in a poll widely viewed as fraudulent.

Guaido is trying to force the socialist leader from power so he can set up a transitional government and hold new presidential elections.

Venezuelans have faced shortages of basic necessities such as food and medicine as the economy collapsed under Maduro. Some 2.3 million Venezuelans have fled since 2015, as hyperinflation rendered salaries and savings worthless.

Maduro denies there is a humanitarian emergency and



Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido speaks during a rally in eastern Caracas on Tuesday. PHOTO: AFP

has branded the crisis a "political show" and pretext for a US-led invasion.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned the US "against all interference in Venezuela's domestic affairs including the use of force threatened by Washington and which is in violation of international law."

"It's not the first time Venezuela is going to be liberated from a tyrant," said Guaido.

"Here is a direct order to the armed forces: allow in the humanitarian aid once and for all (and) end the repression."

The fate of tons of aid piling up in Colombian collection centers at the border with Venezuela has become central to the power struggle between Guaido and Maduro, who is backed by the powerful armed forces.

"The military are the ones keeping Maduro in power. call on them to reflect and take the side of the people suffering from hunger," said Maria Ballera, 75.

Guaido had called the Youth Day demonstrations across the country in part to honor 40 people killed in anti-government rallies last month.

While waiting for him to speak in eastern Caracas, his supporters chanted: "Freedom!"

US seeks to increase pressure on Iran

REUTERS, Warsaw

Foreign ministers and senior officials from 60 nations gathered in the Polish capital Warsaw yesterday where the United States hopes to ratchet up pressure against Iran despite concerns among major European countries about heightened tensions with Tehran.

The absence of foreign ministers from major European powers, Germany and France, highlights festering tensions with the European Union over US President Donald Trump's decision last year to withdraw from a 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and re-impose sanctions.

EU policy chief, Federica Mogherini, who was a key player in the Iran nuclear deal, will also not attend the two-day conference due to scheduling issues, an EU official said, although US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will travel to Brussels on Friday to meet with her.

Pompeo, who will be joined by US Vice President Mike Pence in Warsaw, played

WARSAW MEETING

Pompeo predicts 'real progress' at meeting on Middle East

ICC rules Iran bid to recover funds frozen in US can proceed

down the absence of leading European ministers at the event during a brief stop in the Slovak capital Bratislava on Tuesday, before he headed to Warsaw.

"Some countries are having their foreign ministers come. Other countries are not. That's their choice," he told a news conference.

"We think we will make real progress. We think there'll be dozens of nations there seriously working towards a better, more stable Middle East, and I'm hoping by the time we leave on Thursday we'll have achieved that," he added.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said yesterday that the 60-nation conference was "dead on arrival".

Meanwhile, the International Court of Justice (ICC) yesterday ruled that a bid by Iran to recover \$2 billion in frozen assets that the United States says must be paid to victims of attacks blamed on Tehran, can proceed.



An anti-Brexit activists fixes an EU flag to a pole as demonstrators protest outside of the Houses of Parliament in London yesterday. The British government denied it was secretly plotting to bounce MPs into a last-minute choice just days before Brexit between a re-jigged deal or a lengthy delay. PHOTO: AFP

Russia moves to split from global internet

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Russian legislators have given tentative approval to a draft legislation that could cut off Russia from the global internet.

The bill, co-authored by Andrei Lugovoi - one of the main suspects in the 2006 murder of Kremlin critic Alexander Litvinenko in the UK - passed its first reading in the lower house of parliament on Tuesday by 334 votes to 47.

A heated debate preceded the vote with many legislators from minority parties criticising it as too costly and argued that it was not written by experts.

Authors of the initiative say Russia must ensure the security of its networks after US President Donald Trump unveiled Washington's new cybersecurity strategy last year, which threatened to respond to any cyber attack both offensively and defensively.

Russia's new bill proposes creating a centre to "ensure and control the routing of internet traffic" and requires that Internet Service Providers (ISPs) install "technical measures to withstand threats".

It also mandates regular "drills" to test whether Russia's internet can function in an isolated mode.

Taking questions on the floor, the authors were unable to estimate the long-term costs, what threats it would repel or even how it would work. They, however, said expert opinions could be incorporated into the bill for its second hearing.

One of the authors dismissed all criticism, citing the scale of the potential threat from Washington.

"This isn't kindergarten!" shouted Lugovoi. "All of the websites in Syria" have been turned off by the US before, he claimed.

Post-box love for lonely Britons

AFP, London

Big-hearted Britons have penned thousands of uplifting messages to be delivered to single seniors on Valentine's Day in a project aimed at alleviating loneliness.

The letters and cards were written in recent weeks and left in ten models of old-fashioned red post-boxes set up in locations across London and several other cities.

Red Letter Days, a gift experience company which came up with the idea, will dispatch the messages to needy elderly recipients in selected care homes during today.

"I said: 'You are loved, you are appreciated, you are cherished,'" Shivane Pattni, a 26-year-old marketing manager, told AFP after scribbling a note at a box in her central London workplace on Tuesday.

"I think it's great," she added. "It's nice that someone's thinking of them."

The scheme is being run with the help of shared-office provider WeWork, which is hosting seven of the boxes in the lobbies of some of its locations.

Gorbachev slams US over exit from key arms treaty

AFP, Moscow

The last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev issued a stinging criticism of Washington yesterday, accusing it of misleading the world over its exit from a key arms treaty and seeking to gain military superiority at the expense of international security.

This month US President Donald Trump ripped up a key arms control agreement, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, that Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan brokered in 1987.

Russian President Vladimir Putin quickly followed suit, tasking his government with developing new ground-based missiles and banning his ministers from initiating any future talks to salvage the agreement.

Gorbachev said that according to the treaty the country exiting it should notify the global community of "exceptional circumstances" that prompted it to do so.

In a column published by Vedomosti lib-

eral daily, Gorbachev asked if Washington, the world's biggest military spender, had been able to "explain itself to the international community" and the UN Security Council.

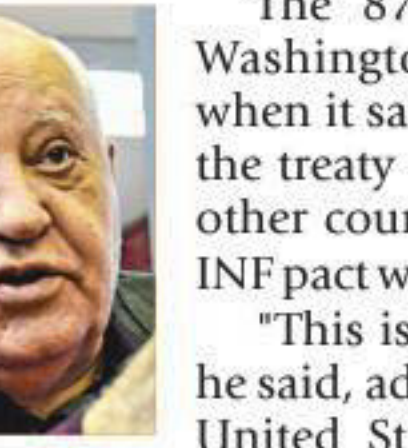
"No, this has not been done," Gorbachev said, adding that instead the United States preferred to accuse Russia of violating the agreement.

The 87-year-old also claimed Washington misled the world when it said it needed to abandon the treaty also because China and other countries not bound by the INF pact were stockpiling missiles.

"This is not convincing either," he said, adding that Russia and the United States still controlled 90 percent of all nuclear weapons.

"Behind the US decision to exit the treaty are not the reasons the US leaders are citing but something completely different," said Gorbachev.

It is, he said, "a desire by the United States to free itself of any constraints in the arms sphere (and) gain absolute military superiority."



Maldives seeks whistleblowers

AFP, Colombo

The Maldivian government yesterday urged its citizens to support its anti-corruption drive after it launched a website to help trace millions of dollars reportedly stolen during the former regime.

The whistleblower site went live on Tuesday, days after the government sought international help to find millions of dollars allegedly siphoned off by former president Abdulla Yameen, who faces embezzlement and money laundering charges.

Launching the portal, President Mohamed Ibrahim Solih called on government employees and ordinary citizens to anonymously lodge reports of corruption, an official in his office told AFP.

"The campaign is to assure the community that his administration will not tolerate corruption at any level," the official said.

Users were encouraged to access the whistleblower site through proxy servers to ensure anonymity.

Maldivian police have said their investigations found evidence linking Yameen and his justice minister Azima Shakoor to the theft of state funds and money laundering.

ANTI-CORRUPTION DRIVE