

Nigeria delays vote at the last minute

AFP, Abuja

Nigerians hoping to cast their ballots in elections set for yesterday were instead turned away from polling stations after the electoral commission's snap decision to delay the vote by a week. Many voters were caught unawares by the early morning announcement and arrived at polling places to find the doors barred and staff absent. The vote delay was caused by delay in delivery of election materials, including ballot papers, to voting centres. Presidential and parliamentary elections are now set for February 23, and governorship and state assembly elections have been pushed back to March 9, officials said.

15 Egypt soldiers dead or wounded in attack

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's army yesterday said seven suspected jihadists were "eliminated" and 15 soldiers killed or wounded in an attack in the Sinai Peninsula, where troops are fighting the Islamic State group. Security forces responded to the attack on a checkpoint in restive North Sinai with an "exchange of fire", army spokesman Tamer el-Refai said in a statement.

Manafort faces up to 24 years in jail

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump's former campaign chief Paul Manafort faces up to 24 years in prison after being found to have violated his plea deal with Special Counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation, a court document filed Friday said. Earlier this month, a judge agreed with prosecutors that Manafort had "intentionally" lied to investigators about his contacts with a suspected Russian operative, Konstantin Kilimnik, in 2016 and 2017 -- despite having pledged to cooperate as part of his September plea agreement.



An Indian student holds a poster during a procession to pay tribute to the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) troopers in Chennai yesterday, following an attack on a CRPF convoy in Kashmir. Inset, Protesters burn a Pakistani flag in New Delhi. Thousands across several Indian cities yesterday attended rallies and staged protests over the killing of 41 soldiers by militants. Story on page 16. PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

ATTACK ON REVOLUTIONARY GUARDS

Pakistan to 'pay high price': Iran

REUTERS, Dubai

Iran yesterday warned neighbouring Pakistan it would "pay a heavy price" for allegedly harbouring militants who killed 27 of its elite Revolutionary Guards in a suicide bombing near the border earlier this week, state television reported.

Revolutionary Guards chief Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari also accused Tehran's regional rival Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates of supporting militant Sunni groups that attack Iranian forces, saying they could face "reprisal operations."

Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE deny backing such militants.

"Why do Pakistan's army and security body ... give refuge to these anti-revolutionary groups? Pakistan will no doubt pay a high price," Jafari said in remarks live on state television.

Jafari was addressing a large crowd gathered for the funeral of the victims of Wednesday's suicide bombing, which took place in a southeastern region where security forces are facing a rise in attacks by militants from the country's Sunni Muslim minority.

The Sunni group Jaish al Adl (Army of Justice), which says it seeks greater rights and better living conditions for the ethnic minority Baluchis, claimed responsibility for the attack.

Iran says militant groups operate from safe havens in Pakistan and have repeatedly called on the neighbouring country to crack down on them.

Jafari's remarks came amid heightening regional tensions after Israel and the Gulf Arab states attended a summit in the Polish capital Warsaw this week where the United States hoped to ratchet up pressure against Iran.

IS's defeat in 'few days'

Say Kurd-led forces; claim militants cornered to half a square km

AFP, Omar Oil Field

Kurdish-led forces yesterday said they were holding up the announcement of final victory over the Islamic State group for "a few days" because the large number of civilians remaining on the battlefield had forced a delay.

US President Donald Trump had said Friday that he expected the eradication of the "caliphate" that IS proclaimed in 2014 to be announced within 24 hours.

But spokesmen for the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) said the surprise discovery of so many civilians still inside the jihadists' last enclave had forced commanders to slow the advance.

IS is now reduced to a tiny pocket of half a square kilometre (a fifth of a square mile) where its fighters and civilians still under their control are holed up in tunnels, the assault's overall commander Jia Furat told a news conference.

"In a very short time, not longer than a few days, we will officially announce the end of IS's existence," Furat said.

Advancing SDF fighters have been

met by "large numbers" of civilians, to the surprise of commanders who had thought the exodus of recent days had emptied the remaining IS pocket of all but diehard fighters, SDF spokesmen said.

"We weren't expecting this number, otherwise we wouldn't have resumed

WAR AGAINST IS IN SYRIA

Civilians prompt delay in assault on last IS enclave

US will 'hunt down' IS even after jihadists' defeat in Syria

US pullout from Syria risks boosting Russia, Iran influence

the campaign four days ago. This is why it's been delayed," Afrin said.

IS still has thousands of fighters and sleeper cells scattered across several countries, but the speck of terrain around the village of Baghouz is all that's left of the group's self-declared "caliphate" that in 2014 spanned an

area the size of Britain and administered millions of people.

Successful offensives in Iraq and Syria have shattered the proto-state, which lost its key cities one after the other and has since late 2017 been confined to its traditional heartland in the Euphrates Valley.

Meanwhile, US Vice President Mike Pence yesterday vowed at a security conference in the German city of Munich that Washington would continue to fight IS remnants even after a military pullout.

"The United States will continue to work with all our allies to hunt down the remnants of ISIS wherever and whenever they rear their ugly heads," Pence said, using an alternative acronym for IS, but providing no further details.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said Washington's plan to swiftly pull its soldiers out of Syria risks allowing Russia and Iran to boost their role in the region.

A US withdrawal risks leaving Syria's Kurds exposed to a long-threatened attack by neighbouring Turkey, who views Kurdish fighters as "terrorists".

India, Pakistan in UN court for death row 'spy' case

AFP, The Hague

India will ask the UN's top court Monday to order Pakistan to take an alleged Indian spy off death row, in a case that could stoke fresh tensions after a deadly attack in Kashmir.

Kulbhushan Sudhir Jadhav was arrested in the restive southwestern Pakistani province of Baluchistan in March 2016 on charges of espionage and sentenced to death by a military court.

The International Court of Justice urgently ordered Pakistan in 2017 to stay the execution of Jadhav, pending hearings on the broader Indian case that take place this week in The Hague.

The rare foray into the international courts for the nuclear-armed rivals could be another flashpoint after Thursday's suicide bombing in Indian-administered Kashmir that killed 41 troops.

New Delhi's lawyers will present their arguments on Monday to the court, which was set up after World War II to resolve international disputes, followed by Pakistan's on Tuesday.

Jadhav, a former Indian navy officer, was accused of working for the Indian intelli-

gence services in the province bordering Afghanistan, where Islamabad has long accused India of backing separatist rebels.

After a closed trial he was sentenced to death by a Pakistani military court on April 10, 2017, on charges of "espionage, sabotage and terrorism".

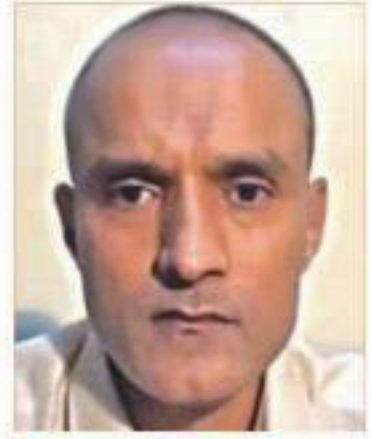
India insists Jadhav was not a spy, and that he was kidnapped in Pakistan. New Delhi in court documents is asking that the ICJ order Islamabad to annul the sentence.

It accused Islamabad of violating the Vienna Convention by failing to provide him with consular access, as well as breaking human rights law.

The ICJ's decision will likely come months after this week's hearings.

The death row spy case comes as the troubled ties between India and Pakistan risked taking a dangerous new turn following the bombing near Srinagar.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi warned that Pakistan would pay a "heavy price" after local media reported that the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed Islamist group claimed responsibility.



GUN VIOLENCE IN US

Sacked man kills five co-workers

AFP, Chicago

A US man being fired from his job shot dead five co-workers at a factory on the outskirts of Chicago and wounded five police officers before being gunned down, in the country's latest mass shooting.

The gunfire took place at 1:24 pm (1924 GMT) at the Henry Pratt Company in Aurora, Illinois, a suburb 40 miles (65 kilometers) west of Chicago, the country's third-largest city.

Police named the suspect as Gary Martin, 45, of Aurora. He was a 15-year employee of the company and "information that we have indicates that he was being terminated today," said Aurora Police Chief Kristen Ziman.

The shooting came the day after Nancy Pelosi, the powerful speaker of the House of Representatives, said gun violence is a "national emergency" far more real than the one President Donald Trump ultimately declared Friday to build his wall at the Mexican border.

Police Chief Ziman did not have further details about why Martin was being fired, whether the killing was pre-meditated, or whether the victims were involved in his dismissal.

In a tweet, President Trump praised the "great job by law enforcement in Aurora, Illinois" and sent "heartfelt condolences to all of the victims and their families. America is with you!"



People gather during a protest against US President Donald Trump's declaration of a national emergency to build a border wall, outside Trump International Hotel & Tower in Manhattan, New York, on Friday. PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

NATIONAL EMERGENCY OVER BORDER WALL

Trump's move faces legal hurdles

REUTERS, Washington

Democratic lawmakers, states and others mulling legal challenges to President Donald Trump's national emergency declaration to obtain funds to build a US-Mexico border wall face an uphill and probably losing battle in a showdown likely to be decided by the conservative-majority Supreme Court, legal experts said.

After being rebuffed by the US Congress in his request for \$5.7 billion to help build the wall that was a signature 2016 campaign promise, Trump on Friday invoked emergency powers given to the president under a 1976 law. The move, according to the White House, enables Trump to bypass lawmakers and redirect money already appropriated by Congress for other purposes and use it for wall construction.

Peter Shane, a professor at Ohio State University's Moritz College of Law, said challenges to the emergency declaration could end up as a replay of

the legal battle against Trump's travel ban targeting people from several Muslim-majority nations. The Supreme Court last year upheld the travel ban after lower courts had ruled against Trump, with the justices giving the president deference on immigration and national security issues.



Trump has painted illegal immigration and drug trafficking across the border as a national security threat.

Democrats, state attorneys general and at least one advocacy group have vowed to take the Republican president to court over the declaration.

"I'll sign the final papers as soon as I get into the Oval Office and we'll have a national emergency and then we'll be sued," Trump said at the White House.

The National Emergencies Act of 1976 has been invoked dozens of times by presidents without a single successful legal challenge. Congress never defined a national emergency in the law.

The legal experts said Trump's declaration could be challenged on at least two fronts: that there is no genuine emergency and that Trump's action overstepped his powers because under the US Constitution Congress has authority over federal appropriations, not the president.

The Supreme Court has a 5-4 conservative majority.

"The handwriting is on the wall here," said Steven Schwinn, a professor at the John Marshall Law School in Chicago. "The Supreme Court is almost certain to uphold President Trump's emergency."

Disarmament efforts must include China

Says German chancellor

AFP, Munich

China must be involved in international disarmament efforts, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said yesterday, amid rising concern about Beijing's missile arsenal and the suspension of a key US-Russia arms treaty.

"Disarmament is something that concerns us all and where we would of course be glad if such talks were held not just between the United States, Europe and Russia but also with China," said Merkel.

The United States began pulling out of a landmark Cold War missile control agreement with Russia, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, this month in response to Moscow's deployment of the 9M729 missile, prompting Russia to announce its own withdrawal.

While pointing the finger at each other, both Washington and Moscow have also voiced concern that the INF -- a bilateral treaty between the US and Russia -- does nothing to constrain rapidly growing military power China.

According to a new report by the Institute for Strategic Studies, up to 95 percent of China's arsenal of ballistic and cruise missiles would be in breach of the INF if Beijing were party to it.

Given this, "it is difficult to envision a scenario under which China would today enter a regime such as the INF Treaty," the report said.

Vatican defrocks US ex-cardinal for sex abuses

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis has defrocked a former cardinal in a first for the Roman Catholic church over accusations American Theodore McCarrick sexually abused a teenager 50 years ago, a Vatican statement said yesterday.

McCarrick, 88, who resigned from the Vatican's College of Cardinals in July, is the first cardinal ever to be defrocked for sex abuse.

He was found guilty in January by a Vatican court for sexually abusing a teenager, a decision confirmed by the pope in February, with "no further recourse", according to the statement.

It said McCarrick was guilty of "sins against the Sixth Commandment with minors and with adults, with the aggravating factor of the abuse of power".

The announcement marks a spectacular fall from grace for the once influential cardinal and comes ahead of a Vatican conference from February 21-24 bringing together bishops from around the world to discuss protecting children within the Church.

Sex abuse scandals around the globe, and most recently in the United States and Chile, have shaken the church, with Pope Francis promising a policy of "zero tolerance" even for high-ranking church members.

McCarrick, former archbishop emeritus of Washington, was barred from practising as a priest in July last year, after which he resigned his honorary title of cardinal. He currently lives in Kansas.

McCarrick was known for having sex with adult seminarians before he was accused of sexually abusing at least one teenager.



Turkey has not revealed all about Khashoggi killing: Erdogan

AFP, Ankara

Turkey has not yet revealed all the information it has discovered about the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Friday.

"We haven't given all the elements we have at our disposal," the Turkish head of state said during an interview with the A-Haber television channel.

After weeks of denial, Saudi Arabia admitted that Khashoggi had been killed on October 2 after entering the consulate to obtain the paperwork necessary for his upcoming marriage to Turkish woman Hatice Cengiz.

Turkey has said the journalist was killed by a team of 15 Saudis who strangled him, and Ankara has repeatedly asked Riyadh to identify the local who allegedly helped them dispose of the body, which has not been found.

Riyadh has arrested a number of senior Saudi officials allegedly involved in the murder.

Khashoggi, Washington Post contributor, was a fierce critic of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who denies any involvement in the murder.

Ankara "is determined to bring this case before international justice," said Erdogan, calling on the United States to weigh in this case.