

NEWSIN brief

Okinawa votes against US military base move

AFP, Okinawa
Voters on the Japanese island of Okinawa have rejected the relocation of a controversial US military base, according to exit polls from a non-binding referendum cited by local media yesterday. With 42 percent of ballots counted, some 72 percent had voted against the move with 19 percent in favour, the Asahi Shimbun newspaper said.

Emergency-hit Sudan gets new PM

AFP, Khartoum
Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir swore in a new premier yesterday as riot police confronted hundreds of demonstrators calling on the veteran leader to resign after he imposed a state of emergency across the country. Bashir declared a year-long emergency on Friday after a deadly crackdown failed to suppress weeks of protests against his three-decade rule.

16 killed in Nigeria polls violence

AFP, Lagos
Sixteen people were killed on Saturday in electoral violence across Nigeria during presidential and parliamentary elections, a network of civil society organisations said. Results from 120,000 polling stations in 36 states were expected to trickle in to the capital Abuja yesterday after being collated at the state and local levels.

BITS OF HISTORY (FEBRUARY 24)

2002: For the first time in 74 years of the Oscars, two black film stars won the awards for Best Actor and Best Actress: Denzel Washington for "Training Day" and Halle Berry for "Monster's Ball".
2004: Earthquake hits Morocco kills at least 220 people.
2008: Raul Castro was named president of Cuba, ending his brother Fidel's 49-year rule but keeping the country on a communist path.



A demonstrator gestures in front of Venezuelan national policemen standing guard at the Simon Bolivar international bridge, in Cucuta, on Saturday.

May seeks more time on Brexit

Promises vote on deal by March 12

REUTERS, Sharm El-sheikh
British Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday promised to offer lawmakers a vote on her Brexit deal by March 12, the latest delay in her attempt to win approval for a plan to ensure Britain's orderly departure from the European Union.
As the United Kingdom's labyrinthine Brexit crisis goes down to the wire, May is making a last-ditch effort to get changes to the divorce package but lawmakers may try on Wednesday to grab control of Brexit in a series of parliamentary votes.
After the British parliament voted 432-202 against her deal in January, the worst defeat in modern British history, May promised to seek changes that would allow lawmakers to ratify the agreement and thus avoid a potentially disorderly exit.
On her way to Egypt for an EU-Arab League summit, May said further meetings in Brussels on securing changes to the deal ruled out a so-called meaningful vote in parliament this week.
Instead, the new 'high noon' for Brexit, May and the British parliament will be on March 12, just 17 days before Britain is due to leave on March 29.
"We won't bring a meaningful vote to parliament this week but we will ensure that that happens by the 12th of March," May told reporters on board her plane.
"It is still within our grasp to leave the European Union with a deal on the 29th of March and that is what we are working to do."
In Sharm El-Sheikh, May will try to win backing of EU's leaders to ease increasing frustration in Europe over Brexit impasse.

Maduro's days are numbered

Says Pompeo as Guaido asks US to use 'all options' to oust regime

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo yesterday expressed confidence that embattled Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's "days are numbered," amid a violent impasse over humanitarian aid.

"Predictions are difficult. Picking exact days is difficult," Pompeo said on CNN's "State of the Union." "I'm confident that the Venezuelan people will ensure that Maduro's days are numbered."

Pompeo's remarks came a day after a US-supported, opposition-led effort to bring humanitarian supplies into the country was repelled by Venezuelan border troops firing tear gas and rubber bullets killing two and injuring dozens of protesters.

Maduro, vowing to "never bow down" at a rally in Caracas, severed relations with neighboring Colombia for supporting the opposition bid.

Pompeo blamed armed Maduro loyalists known as "collectivos" for most of the violence at border crossings.

"We hope the military will take that role back in protecting their citizens from these tragedies. If that happens, I

think good things will happen," he said.

The military command has pledged absolute loyalty to Maduro, although some officers and soldiers have deserted, heeding opposition appeals that they switch sides.

Pompeo said the United States,

Guaido on Saturday said he will propose Washington to consider "all options" to oust Maduro.

"Today's events force me to make a decision: to formally propose to the international community that we must have all options open to secure the freedom of our country," Guaido said on Twitter.

The United States has been the top foreign backer of Guaido, who invoked Venezuela's constitution to assume an interim presidency last month and is now recognized by most Western nations as the OPEC nation's legitimate leader.

President Donald Trump has in the past said military intervention in Venezuela was "an option," though Guaido made no reference to it on Saturday. China, Russia support Maduro and warned against any force to oust his regime.

Maduro denies his oil-rich nation has any need of aid and accuses Guaido of being a coup-mongering puppet for Trump. Washington has warned it could seek to impose tough new sanctions on Venezuela at Monday's summit if Maduro blocked the aid shipments.



VENEZUELA CRISIS

which recognizes opposition leader Juan Guaido as the country's interim president, remains committed to bringing in aid.
"We're aimed at a singular mission - ensuring the Venezuelan people get the democracy they so richly deserve and the Cubans and the Russians who have been driving this country into the ground for years and years and years no longer hold sway," he said.

SECOND DENUCLEARISATION SUMMIT WITH US

N Korea warns US sceptics as Kim heads for Vietnam

REUTERS, Hanoi

North Korea yesterday warned President Donald Trump not to listen to US critics who were disrupting efforts to improve ties, as its leader, Kim Jong Un, made his way across China by train to a second summit with Trump in Vietnam.

The two leaders will meet in Hanoi on Wednesday and Thursday, eight months after their historic summit in Singapore, the first between a sitting US president and a North Korean leader, where they pledged to work toward the complete denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula.

But their vaguely worded agreement has produced few results and US Democratic senators and US security officials have warned Trump against cutting a deal that would do little to curb North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

The North's KCNA state news agency said such opposition was aimed at derailing the talks.

The Trump administration has pressed the North to give up its nuclear weapons programme, which, combined with its missile capabilities, pose a threat to the United States, before it can expect any concessions.

But a week before his second summit with Kim, Trump signalled a possible softening of that stance, saying he would love to be able to remove sanctions if there was meaningful progress on denuclearisation.

Trump also said he was in no rush and had no pressing schedule for North Korea's denuclearisation, hinting at a more gradual, reciprocal approach, long favoured by Pyongyang. The North also wants security guarantees and a formal end of the 1950-1953 Korean War, which ended in a truce, not a treaty.

KCNA, referring to US fears of the North's weapons, said if this week's talks ended without results, "the US people will never be cleared of the security threats that threw them into panic".



PHOTO: AFP



Emperor urges Japan to be open to outside

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's Emperor Akihito urged his country to be open to the outside world at a ceremony marking 30 years of his reign yesterday, ahead of his abdication later this year.

Akihito will abdicate from the Chrysanthemum Throne on April 30, making way for Crown Prince Naruhito to replace him the following day.

"Our country has cultivated its own culture as an island nation," he said at the ceremony in Tokyo.

"As the world has been globalised, I think we are now required to be more open to the outside, establish our own position with wisdom and build relations with other countries sincerely," he said.

Akihito also described his difficulties defining his role as emperor in the post-war era, and said he hoped his successors would think carefully about their symbolic status.

"Since I was enthroned as emperor, I have spent time pondering how I am supposed to be as a symbol," the 85-year-old emperor said, describing the process as "endlessly long".

The status of the emperor is sensitive in Japan given its 20th-century history of war waged in the name of Akihito's father Hirohito, who died in 1989.

Akihito has keenly embraced the more modern role as a symbol of the state -- imposed after World War II ended. Previous emperors including his father were treated as semi-divine.

China has 'right' to detain Uighurs

Suggests Saudi crown prince

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Saudi Arabia supports China's right to carry out so-called anti-extremism drives that have seen hundreds of thousands of Uighur Muslims detained in re-education camps, its crown prince has suggested.

Mohammed bin Salman indicated during an economic summit that he would not challenge Beijing's actions in Xinjiang province, where up to 1 million Muslims and people from ethnic minority groups are thought have been detained.

"We respect and support China's rights to take counter-terrorism and de-extremism measures to safeguard national security," Bin Salman was reported as saying by the state-run Xinhua news agency on Friday.

"We stand ready to strengthen cooperation with China," he said added during a summit with premier Xi Jinping as the pair cemented a \$10b (£7.7b) deal for a refining and petrochemical complex in China.

It came during Bin Salman's tour of Asia that has already seen promises of huge investment in Pakistan and India.

Inmates in internment camps have allegedly been forced to consume pork and alcohol, and made to denounce their religion. Beijing says the camps are designed for deradicalisation.

India toughens J&K crackdown

More detained, movement curbed; Modi vows to wipe out terrorists

AGENCIES

Indian authorities have detained hundreds of separatist leaders and Muslim activists in an escalating crackdown in disputed Kashmir with the region remaining on high alert following a suicide bomb attack.

Police said about 400 arrests had been made over the weekend in late-night raids aimed at weakening support for groups resisting Indian rule in the Himalayan territory also claimed in full by Pakistan.

The sweeps follow the February 14 attack on an Indian convoy in Pulwama district which killed 40 soldiers and was claimed by Pakistan-based Islamist group Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM).

Separatists call for strike after more than 160 detained
Potential legal ruling on Article 370 next week could worsen situation
Fresh gunfight kills 1 cop, 1 militant



Indian Central Reserve Police Force personnel check bags of scooterists in Srinagar, yesterday.

The attack has pushed India and Pakistan into a fresh round of sabre-rattling as thousands of extra paramilitary troops are deployed to Kashmir.

Separatist groups whose leaders were rounded up called for a general strike yesterday across Kashmir over what they called a "reign of repression".

India has accused Pakistan of supporting the attack -- a claim rejected by the Islamabad government -- and there have been widespread calls for Prime Minister

Narendra Modi to order a reprisal strike.

Modi has promised a "jaw-breaking response", spiking tensions in Kashmir where many fear a military strike against Pakistan is possible. Islamabad has warned it would respond with "full force" if attacked.

Modi, in a monthly radio broadcast yesterday, said that the army had vowed to destroy the militants and those who helped them.

After the attack, India dropped trade

privileges for Pakistan and is preparing to send as many as 10,000 more troops to the contested area, according to a home ministry letter seen by Reuters.

A statement issued by the governor's office yesterday said the additional troops deployment is part of preparation for the upcoming general elections.

Kashmir is likely to be a key election issue, distracting from concerns about how Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party have managed the economy.

India's Supreme Court will hear a case next week seeking to drop a constitutional provision, Article 370, that bars non-residents from moving to the state of Jammu and Kashmir that encompasses the Muslim-majority region.

If passed, it could further escalate tension there.

There was also at least one military operation during the day. Troops cordoned off Turigam, a village in South Kashmir's Kulgam district, and in a subsequent gun battle with JeM militants, one police officer and one militant died, a police source said. At least two other militants were trapped inside the village, the source said.

SEXUAL ABUSE CRISIS IN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Pope's 'tepid promises' leave victims disappointed

REUTERS, Vatican City

Pope Francis, ending a landmark conference on sexual abuse of children by clergy, called yesterday for an "all-out battle" against a crime he said should be "erased from the face of the earth".

The pope promised that guidelines used by national bishops conferences to prevent abuse and punish perpetrators will be reviewed and strengthened. He also said the Church legal definition of minor will be raised from the current age of 14 in order to "expand protection" of young people.

But advocates for victims expressed deep disappointment, saying Francis merely repeated old promises and offered few new concrete proposals.

Francis vowed that the Roman Catholic Church would "spare no effort" to bring

abusers to justice and will not cover up or underestimate abuse as he spoke at the end of a Mass in the frescoed Sala Regia of Vatican's Apostolic Palace.

However, Francis dedicated much of the first part of a speech lasting more than half an hour to statistics from the United Nations and other organisations showing that most sexual abuse of children takes place in families.

"We are thus facing a universal problem, tragically present almost everywhere and affecting everyone," he said.

Anne Barrett-Doyle of the US-based clergy abuse tracking group bishopaccountability.org, called it a "stunning letdown" that did not sufficiently address the grief and outrage of the faithful. "As the world's Catholics cry out for concrete change, the Pope instead provides tepid promises, all of which we've heard before," she said in a statement.



PHOTO: AFP

Death toll hits 156 in India liquor tragedy

AFP, Guwahati

At least 58 more workers have died in northeastern India after drinking toxic liquor, police said yesterday, taking the death toll from the latest mass alcohol poisoning beyond 150.

The deaths in Assam state came less than two weeks after tainted liquor killed around 100 people in the northern states of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

At least 200 others were still receiving treatment in hospitals across Assam.

Police said people started falling sick after consuming a batch of illegally produced liquor late Thursday. The victims, who include many women, worked at local tea estates in the region.

Civilian deaths in Afghan war hit record in 2018

AFP, Kabul

More civilians were killed in the Afghan war in 2018 than during any other year on record after nearly two decades of fighting, according to a UN report released yesterday.

Civilian deaths jumped by 11 percent from 2017 with 3,804 people killed and another 7,189 wounded, according to the UN figures, as suicide attacks and bombings wreaked havoc across the war-torn country.

The report's release comes a day before the US and the Taliban hold their next round of talks aimed at ending the conflict, raising tentative hopes for peace along with fears that an American withdrawal could spark an even bloodier civil war.

The talks in Doha follow years of escalating violence in Afghanistan. According to the UN, at least 32,000 civilians have been killed and another 60,000 wounded in the last decade when the organisation began compiling the data.

The uptick in violence in 2018 coincides with a significant increase in the number of deaths caused by the "deliberate targeting of civilians", according to the report, mostly stemming from suicide attacks by insurgents allied with the Taliban or Islamic State (IS).

"It is time to put an end to this human misery and tragedy," said Tadamichi Yamamoto, the head of the UN mission in Afghanistan.

"The best way to halt the killings and maiming of civilians is to stop the fighting," he said.

At least 65 suicide attacks were recorded in 2018 -- the majority hitting Kabul -- with militants responsible for the death of more than 2,200 civilians across the country.

An increase in air strikes by US and Afghan forces also led to more civilian deaths in 2018, with more than 500 civilians killed by "aerial operations for the first time on record", the report noted.

UN report says 3,804 killed, 7,189 injured
US, Taliban to resume peace talks today