

NEWSIN brief

Several dead in Brazil school shooting

AFP, Sao Paulo
A shooting at a school near Sao Paulo yesterday left several people dead, police sources said, with initial reports putting the death toll as high as eight. Brazilian television channel Globo and website UO1 said eight people had died, including five children, a teacher and two teenagers believed to be the shooters. UO1 said 17 people were also injured in the shooting.

China study links air pollution to diabetes

AFP, Hong Kong
Long-term exposure to harmful smog particles increases the risk of diabetes, a new study in China has shown, providing evidence for a link between the country's air pollution and the disease. China is facing the largest diabetes problem in the world with around 11 percent of its population suffering from the metabolic illness.

Floods kill 66 in Mozambique

AFP, Maputo
At least 66 people have been killed and 141,000 affected after heavy rains deluged central and northern Mozambique, the government has said as it appealed for funds to manage the crisis. The floods in one of Africa's poorest countries have already destroyed 5,756 homes.

China offers Venezuela help to restore power

AFP, Beijing
China yesterday offered to help Venezuela as it faces a crippling multi-day power blackout that President Nicolas Maduro has blamed on the United States. Power has been restored to some areas in Venezuela since the weekend, but the supply has been intermittent and often drops out.



The crowd reacts as Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido climbs on top of a vehicle to address them in Caracas, Venezuela. Guaido yesterday vowed to oust President Nicolas Maduro "very soon," as US said new sanctions are on the way to hit the regime. PHOTO: REUTERS

NIGERIA BUILDING COLLAPSE

100 school kids feared trapped

REUTERS, Lagos
An unknown number of people died and up to 100 children were among those feared trapped after a four-storey building containing a primary school collapsed in Nigeria's commercial capital Lagos yesterday.
Workers on top of the rubble shovelled debris away as thousands of people swarmed around the site to watch, many of them angry or hysterical, with police, ambulances, Red Cross workers, fire trucks and a fork lift in their midst.
Residents said around 100 children had attended the school, which was on the top levels of the building, and that eight had been rescued so far.
A Reuters reporter saw a boy of 10 being pulled from the rubble, covered in dust but with no visible injuries, and the crowd erupted into cheers as another child was pulled out.
Lagos Governor Akinwunmi Ambode visited the site and offered commiserations to bereaved families, but did not say how many had died.
A spokesman for the National Emergency Management Agency's southwest region said many people including children were believed to be trapped.
The Lagos emergency management agency said 10 people had been recovered alive so far.
Ambode said the school had been set up illegally and that buildings in the area were undergoing integrity testing.
The building was in the Ita-faji area of Lagos island, the original heart of the lagoon city before it expanded onto the mainland. Local resident Yomi Olaniyi, 42, said four buildings had collapsed in the area in the past few years.

3,000 fighters surrender

SDF thwarts suicide bomb attack as jihadists near defeat

AFP, Baghouz
US-backed forces said yesterday the Islamic State group was living its "final moments" after thunderous shelling on its last scrap of land in eastern Syria prompted 3,000 jihadists to surrender.
But the die-hard IS fighters who stayed to defend the remnants of their "caliphate" struck back with a wave of suicide bombings, according to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).
"There were suicide vest attacks by a group of bombers who tried to blow themselves up amidst our forces. Our forces targeted and killed them before they reached our positions," Mustafa Bali, a spokesman for the SDF media office, said.
IS once ruled over millions in a swathe of Syria and Iraq, but it has since lost all that territory except for a riverside slither in the village of Baghouz near the Iraqi border.
Thousands of men and women have poured out of the pocket in recent weeks, hampering an advance by the US-backed SDF, which has paused its offensive multiple times to allow evacuations.
Supported by air strikes by the US-led coalition against the

jihadists, the SDF resumed artillery shelling on Sunday after warning holdout IS fighters their time to surrender was up.
For three nights in a row, the Kurdish-led SDF unleashed a deluge of fire on jihadist outposts, engulfing their makeshift encampment in a ravaging blaze.
"IS's final moments have started," SDF official Jiaker Amed told AFP.

FINAL OFFENSIVE ON LAST IS HIDEOUT IN SYRIA



Clashes continued yesterday morning as the SDF worked to thwart an IS counterattack launched in the early hours of the day, he said.
The official said the Kurd-led force was pounding jihadists with heavy artillery to hamper the offensive, which IS launched from several fronts following fierce clashes on Tuesday night.
"We are still countering the assault until this very moment," he said.

"This could be their final attack."
An SDF fighter in Baghouz said IS was using "many suicide bombers" in its counterattack, which it launched after daybreak under cover of a sandstorm.
Inside Baghouz, the crackle and thud of gunfire and shelling rang out from the encampment as plumes of thick black smoke rose over the bombed-out IS bastion.

How much Brexit delay can EU allow?

The European Union expects British Prime Minister Theresa May to request a Brexit delay beyond March 29 after the divided UK parliament voted down her divorce agreement with the bloc for the second time on Tuesday. Parliament is expected to reject a no-deal Brexit in another vote scheduled for later yesterday. Today, it will then vote on whether to ask the EU for a delay to Brexit. Any such delay beyond March 29 would need to be agreed unanimously by the other 27 national EU leaders. They will discuss the matter for the first time together at a summit in Brussels on March 21. The bloc said Britain must make up its mind on how long an extension it would want and what for exactly. It insists there will be no more negotiations of their troubled divorce package - including a declaration on their future ties - during any extension. Here are the main schools of thought on extending the Brexit negotiating period known as Article 50:

NO EXTENSION: Probably the least likely scenario at this stage as it would lead to an abrupt no-deal divorce on March 29 and the EU would not want to take any blame for the ensuing economic disruptions. But proponents of this route say Brexit has hijacked the EU's agenda and distracted the bloc from dealing with key challenges for too long and that the deepening acrimony should end now.

SHORT EXTENSION: An extension of up to eight weeks has so far emerged as the most likely scenario, with a firm deadline around the EU-wide parliamentary elections due May 24-26. European Commission head Jean-Claude Juncker said on Monday Britain needs to be out on May 23 at the latest, or else it would be under legal obligation to organise European Parliament elections on its soil. Britain does not want to do that and the bloc does not trust it would, potentially opening another legal row between the two. Few in the bloc, however, believe that a short delay would break the persistent deadlock in Britain, which reflects how the cabinet, parliament and nation are divided over Brexit. The bloc wants Britain to present a specific roadmap to approving the troubled divorce deal during any extension. But many diplomats and officials in the EU political hub Brussels admit the

bloc would not really be in a position to refuse such a request and would grant a short delay regardless, albeit reluctantly.

LONG EXTENSION: A complicated option because it could open the way to legal challenges of the legitimacy of the European Parliament, or even the executive European Commission that the new chamber is due to pick by the end of the year, after May's European elections. But it is not entirely ruled out either. EU talk of a long extension - through the rest of this year or even until the end of 2020 - was in part aimed at putting pressure on the headline eurosceptics on the hardline eurosceptics in May's Conservative Party to back her deal, or risk Brexit potentially never materialising at all. Advocates within the EU say a long delay could open the way to a second referendum or a national election that could end Brexit. Or it could give Britain time to change its mind on May's negotiating red lines and decide to seek a closer relationship with the EU after Brexit, such as the customs union proposed by the opposition Labour Party. It could also mean letting a contingent of eurosceptic UK lawmakers into the bloc's new parliament and potentially having them stay the whole, five-year term, giving them a say on EU affairs even after Britain might have left. SOURCE: REUTERS



\$25M US COLLEGE ENTRANCE SCAM

Hollywood stars, CEOs among dozens charged

AFP, New York
"Desperate Housewives" star Felicity Huffman and fellow Hollywood actress Lori Loughlin were among dozens indicted Tuesday in a multi-million dollar scam to help children of the American elite cheat their way into top universities.
The accused, who also include chief executives, financiers, the chairman of a prominent law firm, a winemaker and fashion designer, allegedly cheated on admissions tests and arranged for bribes to get their children into prestigious schools including Yale, Stanford, Georgetown and the University of Southern California, federal prosecutors said.
They paid a bogus charity run by Californian William Singer more than \$25 million over seven years both to arrange for people to fix SAT and ACT entrance exams for their children, and also to bribe university sports coaches to recruit their children, even when the children were not qualified to play at that level.
The case sparked outrage across the country, especially among parents who stress about the intense competition for places in universities and, more broadly, about privileged behaviour among the richest Americans.
In all, 50 people were charged: 33 parents who paid to give their kids undesired entry into high-end college life; 13 university sports coaches and test organization operators; and Singer and three others who operated the fraudulent scheme.
Thirteen of those accused, including Huffman, were arrested and slated for arraignment late Tuesday in Los Angeles. Others appeared in courts in Boston, New York, Connecticut and elsewhere. Loughlin was not arrested because she was in Canada.
None of the universities or the companies who run the tests were implicated, and none of the students involved were charged.



Thailand's Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha performs a traditional dance with performers at Khon Kaen railway station during a visit ahead of the general election in Khon Kaen Province, Thailand, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

SEXUAL ABUSE

Top cardinal jailed for six years

AFP, Melbourne
Disgraced Australian Cardinal George Pell was sentenced yesterday to six years in prison for the "brazen" sexual abuse of two choirboys, in what the judge lambasted as a "grave" abuse of power.
The former Vatican number three -- who managed church finances and helped elect two popes -- was sentenced in a Melbourne court on five counts, including oral rape and molestation of boys in 1996-1997.
Judge Peter Kidd, his remarks broadcast live on television, said the 77-year-old was guilty of "appalling offending" and "breath-takingly arrogant" attacks that took advantage of his position of authority over the boys, then aged 13.

INDIAN GENERAL ELECTION 2019

Modi in 29-tweet pre-election blitz

AFP, New Delhi
Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched an early-morning Twitter blitz yesterday calling directly on Bollywood and sports stars and others to urge Indians to vote in the country's upcoming mammoth elections.
In 29 rapid-fire tweets, Modi tagged cricketers Virat Kohli, Mahendra Singh Dhoni and Bollywood actors Ranveer Singh and Vicky Kaushal, asking them to inspire others to exercise their franchise in the world's largest democracy.
"Dear @msdhoni, @imvkohli and @ImRo45. You are always setting outstanding records on the cricketing field but this time, do inspire the (1.3 billion) people of India to set a new record of high voter turnout in the upcoming elections," one message ran.
"When this happens, democracy will be the winner!"
Modi, who has a massive 46.3 million followers on Twitter, also reached out to his political rivals, including Rahul Gandhi who heads the centre-left Congress party.
"A high turnout augurs well for our democratic fabric," he said in his tweet marked to Gandhi.



Rahul woos women with jobs promises

REUTERS, New Delhi
India's main opposition Congress party will reserve a third of federal government jobs for women if it comes into power, its chief Rahul Gandhi said yesterday, in a sign women's rights are rising up the political agenda for next month's election.
Over the last week, two powerful parties from eastern India said they would field women in a third of parliamentary races, putting pressure on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other big parties to follow suit.
India ranks at 149 out of 193 countries - worse than neighbouring Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Pakistan - for the percentage of women in national parliaments, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union.
Federal government jobs in India are already subject to numerous quotas.
Gandhi also said that Congress would pass the Women's Reservation Bill this year if it came to power. The bill, which reserves 33 percent of the seats in national and state assemblies for women, has been on hold for two decades.



US to ground all Boeing 737 MAX 8 jets

CNN
President Trump, speaking yesterday afternoon at the White House, announced that the US would be issuing an "emergency order to ground all 737 Max 8 and the 737 Max 9, and planes associated with that line."
He added that both the FAA and Boeing were "in agreement with the action," and any planes currently in the air would continue to their destination where they will be grounded.
"Pilots have been notified, airlines have been all notified. Airlines are agreeing with this. The safety of the American people and all people is our paramount concern," the president said.
Trump said he spoke with a number of airlines as well, including American Airlines, before grounding the Boeing 737 Max aircraft.
He said he also worked closely with Canada and other countries. Trump said this was the best decision, "psychologically and in other ways."
The president said the FAA will be making an announcement within half an hour.
Air Canada, until this afternoon was one of a few carriers still flying the Boeing 737 Max, said it would follow Transport Canada's safety notice that bans the plane from Canadian airspace and work to rebook its passengers on other available aircraft.
In an earlier report, it was that the Federal Aviation Administration saw no need to ground the Boeing 737 Max 8 fleet as it believed the aircraft was operating as intended, according to a person familiar with the FAA deliberations.
"All of the data available tells us this airplane is performing to its certifications," said the person, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the non-public deliberations.
Following the crash minutes after flight of the new Ethiopian Airlines 737 MAX 8 minutes, making it the secondly deadline Boeing 737 in less than five months, governments worldwide banned the aircraft.
The US had earlier said there was "no basis" to grounding the aircraft, only to backtrack later on.

