

## Flash floods kill 17 in Afghanistan

REUTERS, Heart

Heavy rains caused flash floods in western Afghanistan that killed at least 17 people, destroying homes and sweeping through makeshift shelters that housed displaced families, a government official said yesterday. Two days of flooding that started on Thursday killed 12 people in Jawzjan and two in Badghis, provinces that border Turkmenistan. Two others were killed in Herat and another in Sar-e-Pul province.

## Myanmar seizes largest crystal meth haul this yr

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar authorities seized more than 1,700 kilogrammes of crystal meth worth nearly \$29 million in a multi-state operation this week, the biggest haul of 2019 in a country widely believed to be the world's largest methamphetamine producer. Authorities have been nabbing larger hauls in recent months of ice and lower quality meth pills, known in the region as "yaba", which experts say are produced in Myanmar's conflict-ridden eastern Shan State.

## Taliban kill nine cops in checkpoint assault

AFP, Ghazni

Nine Afghan policemen were killed when Taliban fighters stormed their checkpoints and launched a follow-up ambush in the eastern Afghanistan city of Ghazni, officials said yesterday. The assault began early Friday when the Taliban attacked two adjacent checkpoints, Ghazni police spokesman Ahmad Khan Seerat told AFP. The Taliban then ambushed a group of police rushing to the scene, killing the head of the local police, Seerat added.



## GAZA-ISRAEL BORDER PROTEST

(From top, anti-clockwise) Palestinian protesters flee from tear gas fumes during clashes with Israeli forces near the border with Israel east of Gaza City; a Palestinian amputee with another man walks to join the protests; a Palestinian protester uses a slingshot to hurl a rock towards Israeli forces; and paramedics carry away a wounded Palestinian. Tens of thousands of Gazans gathered at the Israeli border yesterday to mark a year since protests and clashes erupted there, testing a fragile truce only 10 days ahead of an Israeli general election. A 17-year-old Palestinian was killed by Israeli fire, the Gazan health ministry said, while 59 were wounded, including 13 from live fire.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS



## Thai king revokes royal decorations of Thaksin

Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn has revoked royal decorations that had been awarded to ousted former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a document published yesterday in the royal gazette showed. The king's order came less than a week after a disputed election in which a pro-Thaksin political party is seeking to form a "democratic front" against a party that wants to keep the leader of a 2014 military coup in power. The royal gazette document said the king's action was due to Thaksin's guilty sentence in a corruption case in 2008 and his fleeing the country, which was "highly inappropriate behavior", the document said.



## Slovakia set to elect first female president

Riding a wave of public fury over corruption, liberal lawyer Zuzana Caputova looked set to win Slovakia's presidential election yesterday, bucking a trend that has seen populist, anti-European Union politicians make gains across the continent. Corruption and change have been the main themes ahead of the runoff vote. Caputova, pro-European Union political novice who would become Slovakia's first female president, won the election's first round two weeks ago with 40.6 percent of the vote, ahead of European Commissioner Maros Sefcovic on 18.7 percent. Caputova campaigned to end what she calls the capture of the state "by people pulling strings from behind", a message that opinion polls show resonates with younger, educated voters. Slovakia's president yields little day-to-day power but appoints prime ministers and can veto appointments of senior prosecutors and judges.



## Trump may close border with Mexico 'next week'

President Donald Trump on Friday again accused Mexico of failing to curb the flow of migrants illegally entering the US, and threatened to close the border "next week" unless something changes. "If Mexico doesn't immediately stop ALL illegal immigration coming into the United States through our Southern Border, I will be CLOSING the Border, or large sections of the Border, next week," he said. "This would be so easy for Mexico to do, but they just take our money and 'talk,'" he added. Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said he did not want to be drawn into a confrontation on the issue. Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard answered Trump's tweets with one of his own, saying his country "does not act based on threats."

SOURCE: REUTERS, AFP

## May seeks fourth Brexit vote

Say reports; cabinet source hints general election 'a strong prospect'

AGENCIES

British Prime Minister Theresa May is expected to bring her EU withdrawal bill back to Parliament for a fourth vote, according to reports in UK media.

Downing Street refused to comment on the prospects of a fourth vote when contacted by CNN, but Conservative Party Chairman Brandon Lewis did not rule out the possibility in an interview on BBC Radio 4's Today program on Saturday.

Lewis said MPs must consider possible next steps given that the updated Brexit deadline of April 12 is approaching.

"Parliament will continue this process on Monday and we need to look at all the options," he said.

May's proposals have already been voted down three times in a bitterly divided Parliament, although the scale of each defeat has been falling. Friday marked the latest loss, by a margin of 58 votes, as the Brexit saga rumbles on amid a deepening political crisis.

Meanwhile, UK's Independent newspaper yesterday reported that the country is veering towards a new general election after MPs voted down May's Brexit deal.

Ministers told The Independent a new election was a clear possibility featuring in the prime minister's

thinking, with her likely to have one final attempt to push her deal through next week.

In a statement directly after her deal was defeated, May indicated that the parliamentary process was running out of road.

"I fear we are reaching the limits of this process in



this House," she said.

However she indicated that the government would allow the process of "indicative votes" -- outside the control of ministers -- to continue next week.

The idea of a fourth vote has caused outrage in some quarters, including The Guardian.

The newspaper claimed that a fourth vote would be

"madness" and proposed that the deal should be subject to a "three strikes and out" rule.

On the other hand, The Sun said MPs who voted against the deal had "betrayed Brexit."

The Daily Telegraph newspaper said May should step down immediately after negotiating a temporary extension to Britain's European Union membership.

"She must now see - or must be told - that while she can meet with the EU to negotiate an extension for Brexit, that is the natural end of the road. She must then bow out, for the sake of Brexit, for her party and for democracy itself," the newspaper said in an editorial column.

And pro-Brexit demonstrations around the Houses of Parliament in central London on Friday resulted in five arrests, as several groups of protesters converged, on the day that the UK was originally meant to leave the European Union.

Marchers carried placards, bearing slogans including "No deal is better than a bad deal," "Every nation has the right to self-determination" and "Leave means Leave."

May called a snap general election two years ago and ended up losing her Conservative majority. To hold another one would represent a big risk, but bookmakers Betfair say an election before Brexit takes place is odds on.

## Mueller's Russia probe report to be released by mid-April

AFP, Washington

The US attorney general said Friday that he will release a redacted version by mid-April of the report on the two-year Russia election meddling probe, which had cast a cloud over Donald Trump's presidency.

Attorney General Bill Barr, in a letter to the chairmen of the House and Senate judiciary committees, said he was currently redacting sensitive material from the eagerly awaited report, which Trump has hailed as completely clearing him of allegations of collusion with Russia and obstruction of justice.

Special Counsel Robert Mueller, a former FBI director who headed the probe, was assisting with the task, he said.

"Our progress is such that I anticipate that we will be in a position to release the report by mid-April, if not sooner," Barr said.

The attorney general said the report was nearly 400 pages long excluding tables and



Bill Barr

appendices and "sets forth the Special Counsel's findings, his analysis and the reasons for his conclusions."

Barr, who released the "principal conclusions" of the report last week, has been under heavy pressure from Democrats to release the full report.

"I share your desire to ensure that Congress and the public have the opportunity to read the Special Counsel's report," the attorney general told the Senate and House judiciary committee chairmen.

"Everyone will soon be able to read it on their own," Barr said.

Representative Jerry Nadler, a Democrat who heads the House Judiciary Committee, responded to Barr's letter by saying he wanted the "full and complete Mueller report, without redactions" by April 2.

Barr said the report would not be submitted to the White House for review and Trump had deferred to him to deal with any parts over which he could invoke executive privilege.



## VENEZUELA CRISIS

Caracas, major cities hit by new blackout

AFP, Caracas

A new blackout hit Caracas and other major Venezuelan cities on Friday, the third major electricity outage in the crisis-plagued country this month.

The blackout began around 7:10pm, leaving the capital as well as cities including Maracaibo, Valencia, Maracay and San Cristobal without electricity, according to users on social media networks.

It is the third time since March 7 that a major power outage has hit Venezuela — worsening the already-dire economic and living conditions in a country that is witnessing a major political showdown between President Nicolas Maduro and opposition chief Juan Guaido.

Maduro has blamed the previous outages on sabotage, but experts have said that infrastructure crumbling from years of neglect is a more likely culprit than outside interference.

Earlier on Friday, the Red Cross said it would begin impartially distributing aid in Venezuela in two weeks, brushing aside the threat of political interference amid the Maduro-Guaido power struggle.

Malnutrition and disease are on the rise as living conditions plummet in the oil-producing Latin American nation, which is spiraling ever deeper into economic chaos during a protracted political crisis.

The United States — which considers Guaido interim president along with some 50 other countries — welcomed the announcement as a "real opportunity."

Meanwhile, in a boost to Maduro, a Chinese plane loaded with 65 tons of medical aid landed in Caracas on Friday. His government celebrated it as a victory over US sanctions, which the socialist leader blames for the economic crisis.

## 'Libya model' crushed summit

Reuters report reveals why Trump-Kim meet ended abruptly in Hanoi

REUTERS, Washington

On the day that their talks in Hanoi collapsed last month, US President Donald Trump handed North Korean leader Kim Jong Un a piece of paper that included a blunt call for the transfer of Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and bomb fuel to the United States, according to the document seen by Reuters.

Trump gave Kim both Korean and English-language versions of the US position at Hanoi's Metropole hotel on Feb 28, according to a source familiar with the discussions, speaking on condition of anonymity. It was the first time that Trump himself had explicitly defined what he meant by denuclearization directly to Kim, the source said.

A lunch between the two leaders was canceled the same day. While neither side has presented a complete account of why the summit collapsed, the document may help explain it.

The document's existence was first mentioned by White House national security adviser John Bolton in television interviews he gave after the two-day summit. Bolton did not disclose in those



rejected repeatedly. It probably would have been seen by Kim as insulting and provocative, analysts said.

Trump had previously distanced himself in public comments from Bolton's approach and said a "Libya model" would be employed only if a deal could not be reached.

After the summit, a North Korean official accused Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo of "gangster-like" demands, saying Pyongyang was considering suspending talks with the United States and may rethink its self-imposed ban on missile and nuclear tests.

The English version of the document, seen by Reuters, called for "fully dismantling North Korea's nuclear infrastructure, chemical and biological warfare program and related dual-use capabilities; and ballistic missiles, launchers, and associated facilities."

The first summit between Trump and Kim, which took place in Singapore in June 2018, was almost called off after the North Koreans rejected Bolton's repeated demands for it to follow a denuclearization model under which components of Libya's nuclear program were shipped to the United States in 2004.

Seven years after a denuclearization agreement was reached between the United States and Libya's leader, Muammar Gaddafi, the United States took part in a Nato-led military operation against his government and he was overthrown by rebels and killed.

## DEATH PENALTY FOR GAY SEX AND ADULTERY

Clooney urges boycott of Brunei-owned hotels

AFP, Washington

American actor George Clooney has called for a boycott of nine Brunei-owned hotels over the sultanate's imposition of the death penalty for gay sex and adultery.

"Every single time we stay at or take meetings at or dine at any of these nine hotels, we are putting money directly into the pockets of men who choose to stone and whip to death their own citizens for being gay or accused of adultery," Clooney wrote on the website Deadline Hollywood.

"I've learned over years of dealing with murderous regimes that you can't shame them. But you can shame the banks, the financiers and the institutions that do business with them and choose to look the other way," he added.

Brunei is an absolute monarchy which has been ruled for 51 years by Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah. The former British protectorate on Borneo island is surrounded by Malaysia.

The nine hotels mentioned by Clooney are located in the US, Britain, France and Italy.

Brunei will implement the harsh new penal code — which also mandates amputation of a hand and foot for theft — starting next Wednesday.

Homosexuality is already illegal in the sultanate, but it will now become a capital offence. The law only applies to Muslims.