

EBOLA EPIDEMIC
1,008 killed in DR Congo

AFP, Kinshasa

More than 1,000 people have now died of Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo, authorities said, as aid workers warned that the highly contagious virus combined with insecurity in the restive region was creating a "deeply worrying situation".

The current outbreak is the second deadliest on record, after an epidemic killed more than 11,300 people in West Africa in 2014-2016.

"In total, there have been 1,008 deaths (942 confirmed and 66 probable)," the health ministry said in a daily update late Friday.

The central African country declared a 10th outbreak of Ebola in 40 years last August centred in the city of Beni in North Kivu province before the virus spread into the neighbouring Ituri region.

Gaza ceasefire falters again

2 days of rocket fires, air strikes kill 5 Palestinians as tension flares

AFP, Gaza City

Gaza militants yesterday fired a barrage of dozens of rockets at Israel, which responded with strikes that killed a Palestinian, officials said, as a fragile ceasefire again faltered.

Israel said around 90 rockets were fired from the Palestinian enclave and its air defences intercepted dozens of them.

The army said it had targeted two rocket launchers in Gaza with an air strike in response and its tanks had hit a number of military posts used by Hamas, the Islamist movement that rules the territory.

A Gazan security source said that a series of Israeli strikes hit at least three separate areas of the Gaza Strip and that three "resistance fighters" were wounded.

The Gazan health ministry reported one person killed and several wounded. No casualties had been reported on the Israeli side.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was planning to hold consultations with security chiefs, a spokesman said.

The escalation follows the most violent clashes along the Gaza border



Smoke billows from buildings in Gaza following an airstrike by Israel in response to rockets fired by Palestinian militants. PHOTO: AFP

in weeks on Friday. Four Palestinians, including two Hamas militants, were killed after two Israeli soldiers were wounded in a shooting during weekly protests on the border.

Israel and Palestinian militants in the blockaded Gaza Strip have fought three wars since 2008 and fears remain of a fourth.

A ceasefire between Israel and Hamas brokered by Egypt and the

United Nations had led to relative calm around Israel's April 9 general election.

But on Tuesday, Israel reduced the offshore fishing limit it imposes for vessels operating out of Gaza after a rocket was fired from the territory by Palestinian militants.

On Thursday, Israel said its aircraft struck a Hamas military compound after balloons carrying firebombs and

explosives were launched across the border.

Palestinians in Gaza have frequently fitted balloons with firebombs in a bid to damage Israeli property and have in the past succeeded in setting fire to large areas of farmland.

Following the air strike, the Israeli military said two rockets were launched from Gaza toward Israel, setting off sirens in parts of the south.

With the ceasefire at risk, a Hamas delegation led by its Gaza head Yahya Sinwar left the enclave for Cairo on Thursday for talks with Egyptian officials on the truce.

The ceasefire has seen Israel allow Qatar provide millions of dollars in aid to Gaza to pay salaries and to finance fuel purchases to ease a severe electricity shortage.

Palestinians have participated in regular demonstrations and clashes along the Gaza border for more than a year, calling on Israel to ease its crippling blockade of the enclave.

At least 270 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire since the protests began in March 2018, the majority along the border. Two Israeli soldiers have been killed in that period.



Japan's new emperor urges world peace in first speech

Japan's 126th Emperor Naruhito urged Japan to work together for world peace as he made his first public appearance yesterday in front of a cheering, flag-waving crowd of tens of thousands. "I sincerely wish that our country, hand-in-hand with foreign countries, seeks world peace and further development," said the 59-year-old Naruhito, who ascended the Chrysanthemum Throne Wednesday.

US okays \$6b in arms sales to Gulf allies Bahrain, UAE

The US State Department has approved a possible \$6 billion worth of weapons sales to Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates in three separate packages, the Pentagon said on Friday after notifying Congress of the certification. In one of the notifications sent to Congress on Friday, Bahrain could potentially buy various Patriot missile systems and related support and equipment for an estimated cost of \$2.48 billion. Bahrain was also given the nod for various weapons to support its F-16 Block 70/F-16V aircraft fleet for an estimated cost of \$750 million. United Arab Emirates was given potential approval for \$2.73 billion worth of Patriot missiles and related equipments.



Boeing 737 skids off runway into Florida river; 21 hurt

A Boeing jetliner with 143 people aboard from the US outpost at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, slid off a runway into a shallow river in Jacksonville, Florida, on Friday while attempting to land at a military base there during a thunderstorm, injuring 21 people. There were no reports of fatalities or critical injuries. The plane was not submerged. A passenger on board the plane, attorney Cheryl Bormann, told CNN in an interview that the flight, which had been four hours late in departing, made a "really hard landing" in Jacksonville amid thunder and lightning.

Kejriwal slapped at roadshow

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal was today slapped by a man during a roadshow in Moti Nagar area. Mr Kejriwal, the Aam Aadmi Party chief, was standing on an open vehicle, canvassing in the New Delhi constituency, when an unidentified man jumped up and attacked him. The man, wearing a red shirt, was pulled off the vehicle by Kejriwal's supporters. He was rescued by the police from the AAP workers, who thrashed him, news agency ANI reported. The man has been detained and is being questioned by the police. The AAP has alleged that it was an "opposition sponsored attack".

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS, NDTV

Trump urges caution

CNN Online

After US expectations were dashed this week for a transition of power in Venezuela, President Donald Trump is urging caution among senior advisers moving forward and expressing frustration that some aides are more openly teasing military intervention, according to officials familiar with the matter.

After a phone call with President Vladimir Putin on Friday, Trump also downplayed Russia's involvement in Venezuela, contradicting claims from top Trump administration officials that Moscow continues to prop up the regime there. He termed the talks "very positive".

It amounted to, at times, a picture of a President at odds with the officials who this week have called vociferously for a change in power in Caracas and have consistently declined to rule out a US military intervention.

Trump has become frustrated this week

CALLS FOR US MILITARY INTERVENTION IN VENEZUELA



as national security adviser John Bolton and others openly teased military options and has told friends that if Bolton had his way he'd already be at war in multiple places.

Trump has long stated that "all options are on the table" when it comes to Venezuela, where embattled President Nicolas Maduro is clinging to power despite street protests and withering US sanctions. But aides have appeared to lean further into military options in recent days as an uprising led by opposition leader Juan Guaido, whom the US recognizes as the country's legitimate president, has failed to topple him.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told a Fox News interviewer that "military action is possible. If that's what's required,

that's what the United States will do." And Bolton has pressed the Pentagon for military options and told an interviewer this week the US would not allow Guaido be mistreated.

But Trump, who has until now given Bolton wide leeway to manage the situation in Venezuela, appeared more cautious this week, privately expressing concern over how solid Guaido's plans are to take power and win support from Venezuela's military.

The President's skepticism was sparked after the military uprising that Guaido and some US officials were counting on failed to gain steam — leading him to ask to questions about the reliability of US intelligence that suggested senior members of Maduro's inner circle were preparing to defect.

MORE TERROR ATTACK THREATS

Lankan Catholics turn to TV mass

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Catholic Church will televise a private Sunday mass after cancelling regular services over fears of a repeat of Easter suicide bombings that killed 257 people, a spokesman said.

Father Edmund Tillakaratne said public masses were suspended for a second week, but a service conducted by Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith will be broadcast on national television.

"It will be like last Sunday when we had a service at Archbishop's chapel and telecast it live," Tillakaratne said.

Ranjith, who is also archbishop of Colombo, said Thursday that a "reliable foreign source" had alerted him to possible attacks this weekend, leading him to cancel Sunday services for the second week.

Official sources said the Thewatte National Basilica, just outside Colombo, was the suspected target, and the military deployed hundreds of troops to search the area.

The government is going ahead with plans to reopen public schools tomorrow, but the Church said Catholic schools will remain shut "until further notice".

Sri Lankan authorities had advance warnings from Indian intelligence of the impending Easter attacks but police and security forces failed to act, leading to Sri Lanka's worst single suicide attack against civilians.



Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn (C) sits on throne during his coronation inside the Grand Palace in Bangkok; Thailand's king appoints his Queen Suthida during the coronation; Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha performs a ritual during the ceremony. PHOTO: AFP



N Korea fires short-range projectiles as talks stall

AFP, Seoul

North Korea launched several unidentified projectiles into the sea yesterday, the South Korean military said, in what could be Pyongyang's first short-range missile launch for more than a year as it seeks to put pressure on Washington with nuclear talks deadlocked.

The US and North Korea have been at loggerheads since the collapse of a summit between Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump in February, when the two sides clashed over sanctions and the extent of Pyongyang's concessions on its atomic arsenal.

North Korea "fired a number of short-range projectiles" from Hodo peninsula near the east coast town of Wonsan in a northeast direction from 9:06 am (0006 GMT) to 09:27 am, the South's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement.

The projectiles travelled from 70 to 200 kilometres (45 to 125 miles) towards the East Sea, also known as the Sea of Japan, the JCS added.

In an earlier statement, it had said

Pyongyang had launched an unidentified short-range missile. The last North Korean missile launch was in November 2017.

The latest firing comes just a day after South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha said Pyongyang should show "visible, concrete and substantial" denuclearisation action if it wants sanctions relief.

That issue was also at the centre of the February talks in Hanoi, where North Korea demanded immediate sanctions relief, but the two sides disagreed on what Pyongyang should give up in return.

Earlier this week, North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui warned Washington of an "unwanted outcome" if it did not adjust its stance on economic sanctions.

Saturday's launch "does not violate Kim Jong Un's self-imposed missile-testing moratorium", which "only applied to intercontinental-range ballistic missiles", said North Korea analyst Ankit Panda.

The South's presidential Blue House said it was monitoring the situation and "closely sharing information with the United States".

CORONATION OF THAI KING

A SACRED UMBRELLA AND THE ROYAL REGALIA

A 7-kilogram crown, a pair of pointed slippers and an ornate nine-tiered umbrella — these are just some of the extravagant artifacts that featured in rituals marking the coronation of Thailand's new king yesterday.

The elaborate items, which form part of the "royal regalia," played a crucial ceremonial role as King Maha Vajiralongkorn formally ascends the throne more than two years after his father's death.

Although the country's monarchy can be traced back to the 13th century, many of its current coronation rites were established during the reign of Rama I, who founded the Chakra dynasty — the present era — in 1782. Also dating back to this period are a collection of sacred objects that will be presented to the new king.

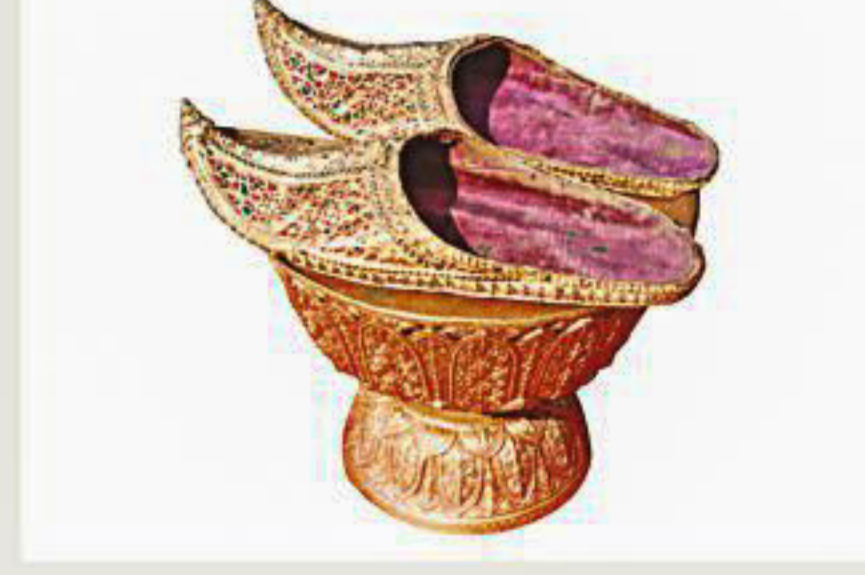
After the new king is "purified" with holy water, gathered from Bangkok and each of Thailand's 76 provinces, he will be presented with the royal items in the main throne room of the Grand Palace, an opulent complex on the banks of the Chao Phraya River.

"This royal ceremony has been passed along for several hundred years, and mostly we have stuck to its original form," said royal historian, Mom Rajawongse Suriyavudh Sukhasvasti, over the phone.

"Records from the Sukhothai era (1238-1428) mention presenting the royal regalia (to the new king), just like in the present day."



with diamonds and precious stones. Officially known as the Crown of Victory, the 7.3-kilogram (16-pound) headpiece — more than seven times heavier than Queen Elizabeth II's Imperial State Crown — has a multi-tiered, conical shape similar to those used by other royal families in southeast Asia. The item dates back to the 18th century. In previous generations, the crown would never be worn, and was instead placed next to the king during the coronation. But contact with Europe's royal houses has seen the item's role — and symbolic importance — gradually evolve. Since King Rama IV's coronation in 1851, the crown has been worn by monarchs during the ceremony (although they never do so again). The Crown of Victory was yesterday handed to King Vajiralongkorn by the chief Brahmin, a leading religious figure overseeing the



coronation rites — though he will be expected to place the crown upon his own head. Unlike in some European monarchies, however, the physical crowning does not mark the definitive moment of the ritual. In fact, the coronation is only considered complete when the new king is presented with the royal nine-tiered umbrella. Considered the "most important" of the sacred objects by the country's Ministry of Culture, the soaring, layered umbrella will hang permanently above the king's throne thereafter. Only King Vajiralongkorn will be permitted to sit beneath it, as its nine-tiered structure is reserved for crowned monarchs (royals of lower ranking may sit beneath umbrellas with fewer tiers). Each year, on the anniversary of his coronation, the new king will be expected to make offerings to the sacred item.

There are, in reality, seven of the royal nine-tiered umbrellas. Most of them are kept above the various thrones of the Grand Palace, where the other sacred items are also permanently housed. The umbrellas represent the protection the king will offer the Thai people, serving as "a symbol that the king has power and prestige all over the country."

OFFERING SACRED ITEMS

Similar symbolism underpins the other items featured in the ceremony. Suriyavudh points to a golden fan, shaped like a tamarind pod, and the royal scepter, which was originally a wooden staff before being remade in gold in the 19th century. "The royal fan is a symbol that he will ease the suffering of the people," he explained. "The scepter is a symbol that he can be reliable for all walks of life." Other items of the royal regalia, which will be handed to the king after he accepts the nine-tiered umbrella, include the Sword of Victory, which features a 25-inch blade and a jeweled sheath and hilt, and the royal slippers. Made from enameled gold and inlaid with diamonds, the pointed slippers will be placed directly onto the king's feet by the chief Brahmin. The current items of regalia — most of which were created under the orders of Rama I — may be no more than 250 years old, but it's believed that similar items were used in coronations in the historic kingdoms of Siam dating back almost seven centuries. SOURCE: CNN

DEBACLE AT LOCAL ELECTION

Pressure mounts for Brexit compromise

AFP, London

Britain's two biggest parties yesterday said there was renewed impetus to find a compromise on Brexit after taking a battering in local elections from voters exasperated by the impasse.

Prime Minister Theresa May's governing centre-right Conservatives had a disastrous result, losing more than a thousand seats in the English local authority polls.

But the left-wing Labour main opposition led by Jeremy Corbyn failed to capitalise, and even managed to lose seats.

Instead, two pro-EU parties profited: the centrist, Liberal Democrats were up 676 and the left-wing Greens added 185. Independents meanwhile gained 242.

Yet, in a sign of the frustration among pro-Brexit supporters, many voters boasted on social media of how they spoiled their ballots, writing "Brexit betrayal" and "traitors" on their voting slips.

Corbyn told ITV there was clearly a "huge impetus... that an arrangement has to be made, a deal has to be done; parliament has to resolve this issue".

With the divorce deal hanging in the balance, Britain's exit date from the EU has been pushed back twice from the original March 29 to October 31. Britain's voted in June 2016 in favour of leaving the bloc.