

# US backs Israel 100pc

## Says Trump after Gaza escalation; Palestinians report truce with Israel as violence ebbs

President Donald Trump assured Israel on Sunday that it has Washington's full support after the Jewish state led waves of retaliatory strikes in the Gaza Strip in response to Palestinian rockets.

"Once again, Israel faces a barrage of deadly rocket attacks by terrorist groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad. We support Israel 100% in its defense of its citizens," Trump tweeted.

"To the Gazan people - these terrorist acts against Israel will bring you nothing but more misery. END the violence and work towards peace - it can happen!"

Palestinian leaders in Gaza announced a ceasefire with Israel yesterday to end a deadly two-day escalation in violence that threatened to widen into a fourth war between them since 2008.

An Israeli military spokeswoman declined to comment on the deal, but there appeared to have been no rocket fire or Israeli strikes in the hours after it was due to take effect, an AFP correspondent in Gaza said.

Israel also lifted restrictions on civilian movements in communities around the Gaza border on yesterday morning.

Egypt brokered the agreement to cease

hostilities from 4:30 am, an official from the strip's Islamist rulers Hamas and another from its allied group Islamic Jihad said on condition of anonymity.

An Egyptian official also confirmed the deal on condition of anonymity.

It came after the most serious flare-up in violence between Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza since a 2014 war.

The escalation began Saturday with massive rocket fire from Gaza, drawing waves of Israeli retaliatory strikes, and continued throughout Sunday.

At least 25 Palestinians, including at least nine militants, were killed.

Four Israelis civilians were also killed.

The flare-up came as Hamas sought further steps from Israel toward easing its blockade under a previous ceasefire brokered by Egypt and the United Nations.

Israel at the same time faced pressure to restore calm and put an end to the rockets hitting communities in the country's south.

It commemorates the country's Memorial and Independence Days later this week and is due to host the Eurovision song contest in Tel Aviv from May 14-18, which is expected to draw thousands to Israel.



An Israeli soldier walks in front of Merkava tanks, stationed near the border with the Gaza Strip in southern Israel yesterday after the latest round of fighting erupted three days ago. Inset, a relative of a Palestinian man, who was killed in an Israeli air strike, mourns during his funeral in the southern Gaza Strip.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

# A million species at risk of extinction

## Warns landmark UN report

Relentless pursuit of economic growth, twinned with the impact of climate change, has put an "unprecedented" one million species at risk of extinction, scientists said yesterday in a landmark UN report on the damage done by modern civilisation to the natural world.

Only a wide-ranging transformation of the global economic and financial system could pull ecosystems that are vital to the future of human communities worldwide back from the brink of collapse, concluded the report, which was endorsed by 130 countries, including the United States, Russia and China.

"The essential, interconnected web of life on Earth is getting smaller and increasingly frayed," said Professor Josef Settele, who co-chaired the study, launched in Paris yesterday by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

"This loss is a direct result of human activity and constitutes a direct threat to human well-being in all regions of the world." Known as Global Assessment, the report found that up to one million of Earth's estimated eight million plant, insect and animal species are at risk of extinction, many within decades.

The authors identified industrial farming and fishing as major drivers - with the current rate of species extinction tens to hundreds of times higher than the average over the last 10 million years.

# 'Russia must get out'

## Says Pompeo as Venezuela crisis deepens; Lavrov calls on US to 'abandon its irresponsible plans'

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pressed Sunday for Russia to get out of Venezuela, while his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, called on Washington to "abandon its irresponsible plans" in the crisis-ravaged country.

The push and shove set the stage for a Pompeo meeting with Lavrov in Finland this week, and belied the conciliatory tone taken by US President Donald Trump on Friday after what he said was "a very good conversation" with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The top level contacts follow the failure of a US-backed uprising on Tuesday aimed at ousting Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro, which Pompeo has blamed on Russia.

Diosdado Cabello, the head of the Constituent Assembly, said the powerful pro-Maduro body would strip legislative immunity from opposition lawmakers who backed the uprising.

Pompeo has said Maduro had been ready to flee to Havana but the Russians,

who had flown military advisers to Caracas to shore up his socialist government, talked him out of it.

"The Russians must get out," Pompeo told ABC television's "This Week."

"I'm going to meet with Foreign Minister Lavrov in recent days. It's very clear, we want the Russians out, we want the Iranians out,



said: "I didn't see the full context of those quotes."

In Moscow, Lavrov met with Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza and pushed back against Washington.

"We call on the Americans, and all those supporting them, to abandon their irresponsible plans and to act exclusively within the boundaries of international law," Lavrov said.

"We are ready for all scenarios. The first is diplomacy, dialogue, peace," Arreaza told a press conference.

Washington has given full-throated backing to opposition leader Juan Guaido, who tried but ultimately failed to ignite the anti-Maduro military uprising.

Guaido, who is recognized by more than 50 countries including the US as Venezuela's legitimate interim president, acknowledged that he fell short.

"Maybe because we still need more soldiers, and maybe we need more officials of the regime to be willing to support it, to back the constitution," Guaido told The Washington Post. "I think the variables are obvious at this point."



# Trump's ex-lawyer Michael Cohen heads to US prison

After dramatic appeals and testimony in Congress, Donald Trump's one-time personal lawyer Michael Cohen was due to report to jail yesterday to serve a sentence he deems unjust because he was simply following his boss's orders. The long time Trump admirer who once said he was ready to "take a bullet" for Trump is awaited at the federal prison in Otisville, New York by 2:00 pm (1800 GMT). He was sentenced to three years in prison in December, after admitting to having paid hush money during the 2016 election to two women who said they had had affairs with Trump -- in violation of electoral laws -- having committed tax fraud, and having lied to Congress.



# Indian judges' panel clears CJ of sexual harassment

India's Supreme Court yesterday said a panel of its judges had dismissed a complaint of sexual harassment made against Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi by a former court employee, as it lacked substance. The case involving India's most powerful judge is the most high-profile in a wave of allegations of sexual harassment that have been made public by women since last year as the #metoo movement has swept the country. The 35-year-old woman said Gogoi had made unwanted sexual advances when she worked in an office at his home last year, and that she and her family were victimised after she spurned his advances. Gogoi denied the allegations and a panel of judges cleared him of any wrongdoing. "The in-house committee found no substance in the allegations contained in the complaint," the Supreme Court's secretary general said in a brief statement.

# Libya's Haftar orders troops to fight harder

Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar, who launched an offensive against Tripoli last month, has urged his troops to teach unity government forces an "even harder lesson," as the Islamic fasting month of Ramadan begins. Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) launched an assault on April 4 aimed at ousting the internationally recognised government from the capital. That set off another deadly escalation in a country mired in violence since the fall of dictator Moamer Gaddafi in 2011. In a message late Sunday, Haftar urged his troops to "uproot" opposing forces from "our beloved country." "Officers and soldiers of our armed forces and affiliates, I greet you during these glorious days and call on you to inflict on the enemy, with your force and determination, an even harder and bigger lesson than before," Haftar wrote in a message. SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

# NEWSIN brief

## Puigdemont allowed to run for EU polls

Catalonia's former president Carles Puigdemont, who fled Spain in 2017 after a secession attempt, can contest EU polls this month, a Madrid court said yesterday, overturning a decision by the electoral board. A court spokesman said Puigdemont would be able to run, as would Toni Comin and Clara Ponsati, who were in the regional government during the secession bid and fled. They had also been excluded.

## Tanker explosion kills 55 in Niger

Fifty-five people died in Niger's capital Niamey overnight when an overturned tanker truck exploded as crowds tried to collect spilt fuel, authorities and witnesses said yesterday. The blast on the RN1 route near Niamey's international airport left the burnt truck's wreckage, motorbikes and debris scattered over the road.

## Brunei won't enforce gay sex death penalty

Brunei's sultan has announced death by stoning for gay sex and adultery will not be enforced after a global backlash, but critics yesterday called for harsh sharia laws to be abandoned entirely. In a speech late Sunday, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah said a moratorium on capital punishment that already applies to Brunei's regular criminal code would also extend to its new sharia code, which includes death by stoning for various crimes.

# US sends carrier to warn Iran

The United States is sending an aircraft carrier strike group and a bomber task force to the Middle East in a "clear and unmistakable" message to Iran, National Security Advisor John Bolton said Sunday.

"In response to a number of troubling and escalatory indications and warnings, the United States is deploying the USS Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group and a bomber task force to the US Central Command region," Bolton said in a statement.

The deployment is aimed at sending "a clear and unmistakable message to the Iranian regime that any attack on United States interests or on those of our allies will be met with unrelenting force," Bolton said.

"The United States is not seeking war with the Iranian regime, but we are fully prepared to respond to any attack, whether by proxy, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or regular Iranian forces."

The USS Abraham Lincoln has previously been deployed to the Gulf, including during the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.



Thailand's newly crowned King Maha Vajiralongkorn, Queen Suthida, Princess Bajrakitiyabha, Prince Dipangkorn and Princess Sirivannavari Nariratana are seen at the balcony of Suddhaisavarya Prasad Hall at the Grand Palace where King grants a public audience to receive the good wishes of the people in Bangkok, Thailand yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# 'Kept waiting for call back'

## Modi accuses Mamata of politics over cyclone Fani

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday accused West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee of playing politics over the cyclone Fani issue. PM Modi, who was addressing a poll rally in Bengal's Tamluk, said he tried to contact the Bengal CM twice, but she didn't respond.

"Speedbreaker didi has tried to play politics even on cyclone. Tried to talk to her twice but she didn't talk to me, such is her arrogance. I kept waiting for her to call back," PM Modi said. He had conducted a survey on cyclone-hit areas in Odisha earlier in the day and praised CM Naveen Patnaik for relief and rescue operations.

Mamata Banerjee later responded to the swipe. The chief minister said she could not take the call because she was away in Kharagpur. "I don't want to share dais with expiry PM as elections are on," she told an election rally, according to news agency PTI.

On Sunday, a controversy had erupted with the Bengal administration alleging that the prime minister had bypassed the state chief minister

and had called governor Keshari Nath Tripathi asking him to prepare a report on the damage that had been inflicted by Cyclone Fani in the state.

"Attention has been drawn to reports in a section of the media, that the Trinamool Congress has expressed its displeasure at Prime Minister Modi speaking only to West Bengal Governor Keshari Nath Tripathi, about the post-Fani situation in the state.

"Apparently, Trinamool leaders have claimed that the Prime Minister had called up Odisha CM Naveen Patnaik, but did not phone West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee. The above claim is incorrect," sources said.

Sources said that two attempts had been made on Saturday morning by the prime minister's staff to connect him to the West Bengal CM on phone.

"The first time, the staff who were attempting to place the call, were told that the West Bengal CM is on tour, and that the call would be returned. On the second occasion too, the staff attempting to place the call were told by the CM's office, that the call will be returned."



# Fresh tension grips Lanka

## Christian-Muslim clashes rock Easter attacks town; three injured; Catholic Church appeals for calm

Sri Lanka's Roman Catholic Church appealed for calm and an alcohol ban yesterday after clashes between Christians and Muslims in a town scarred by the Easter suicide attacks.

Hundreds of security forces entered Negombo to impose a curfew after dozens of Muslim-owned shops, homes and vehicles were attacked.

St Sebastian's church in the town 40 kilometres (25 miles) north of capital Colombo was one of three churches and three hotels hit by jihadist suicide bombers on April 21 killing 257 people.

"I appeal to all Catholic and Christian brothers and sisters not to hurt even a single Muslim person because they are our brothers, because they are part of our religious culture," said Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, archbishop of Colombo.

"Therefore please avoid hurting them and try to create a better spirit of understanding and

good relations between all the communities of Sri Lanka," he said in a video message to the country.

The cardinal visited Negombo, held talks with clerics at a mosque and appealed to the government to shut bars in the Catholic-dominated town known as "Little Rome", said his spokesman Father Edmund Tilakaratne.

"As a temporary measure, the cardinal asked the government to order the ban on liquor sales in Negombo area," Tilakaratne told AFP.

In another televised appeal, Ranjith appealed to Christians, Buddhists and Muslims to show restraint.

A top police officer said two arrests were made after the latest clashes and more suspects had been identified through CCTV footage.

The officer said all will be prosecuted under emergency laws approved after the Easter attacks.

"At least three people were injured in the clashes," the officer told AFP.

